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# Catholic missionaries in Africa: the White Fathers in the Belgian Congo 1950-1955

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CATHOLIC MISSIONARIES IN AFRICA:  
THE WHITE FATHERS AND THE BELGIAN CONGO 1950-1955

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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in

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## Abstract

Catholic missionaries played an important role in the colonial scramble in Africa and the subsequent years. They served as educators and medical support for the state in many cases. The state relied on missionaries to staff schools, educate the population, and aid in the civilization of the Africans. In the Belgian Congo, Catholic missionaries - specifically the Society of Missionaries of Africa or White Fathers - played an especially important role as agents of evangelization and European civilization. The Belgian state relied heavily (and provided subsidies) on missionaries to educate the native people. Through education and medical help, missionaries fostered conversions and attempted to establish a native Church in Africa.

Using mission diaries, personal correspondence, annual reports, and personal interviews (conducted in fall 2008), as well as secondary sources, I will attempt to construct a picture of the White Fathers and their experiences during the colonial period and subsequent decades, but with special focus on the years 1950-1955. I will examine the White Fathers as an institution and look at the relationships within the Society and those among the Society, the Belgian regime, and private companies. Through personal interviews with missionaries stationed in the Belgian Congo and Burundi during the 1950s, I will look at these individuals' experiences and lives to better understand the Society as a whole and its role in imperial Africa.

Though there are few secondary sources about the White Fathers in Africa, the primary sources I accessed in Rome and Brussels were very rich. While there are some drawbacks to using oral interviews as primary sources, I believe the interviews provided invaluable data about the daily lives of Catholic missionaries in the field in Congo.

## New Imperialism and Missions

Culture offers a certain perception of reality to which people subscribe creatively. In this activity of invention, they are influenced historically by an intercultural process that can be both local and global. Missionary evangelization is such a process.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The “scramble for Africa” saw its climax at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. During this time the Society of Missionaries of Africa (commonly called the White Fathers because of their white robes) laid the groundwork for their missionary movement in Africa. Over the next decades, the White Fathers would establish a system of schools and seminaries to educate the population and create a native Church in Africa. This thesis aims to investigate Belgian Catholic missionary life in the Congo, and more specifically the White Fathers, from 1950-1955. I will argue that the state, the Catholic missions, and the private corporations worked in cooperation. In many instances, the missionaries were on the payroll of the state and of the companies, and they relied mostly on the state and private companies for funding and subsidies to establish school systems, thus fostering conversions. I will show that the missionaries dealt with a wide array of “human resources” issues as they managed mission stations, personnel, and the native population around them. The leadership in Algiers and the mission superiors on the ground bore the most burdens in dealing with staffing issues, morality problems, and logistics like food, supplies, and transportation. I

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<sup>1</sup> Aylward Shorter. *Cross and Flag: The “White Fathers” during the Colonial Scramble (1892-1914)* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 153.

will argue that when looking at the unique personalities of individual missionaries (through personal interviews), we will see several patterns emerge. I will show that these men shared the idea of delivering European civilization through Christianization, but contributed to the perpetuation of the colonial regime. While these men (now in their eighties) loved the Congolese people, they also believed that independence came too early. The people were not ready. Thus everyone (Europeans and Congolese) paid a price in the form of instability and violence.

What was the White Fathers' distinctly religious mission, and what did they hope to accomplish? How did their preconceived ideas about African religions inform their actions? I will explore the way in which the ideas of Charles-Martial-Allemand Lavigerie – founder of the White Fathers - and his theory of assimilation were or were not realized in the field. What type of relationships did the White Fathers have with other Catholic and Protestant missions, within the Society (between the leadership in Rome and missionaries in the field), the colonial administration, big business, and the Congolese themselves? To paint a clear picture of the White Fathers' experiences in the Belgian Congo and to understand their motivations, I will examine White Fathers' personal mission diaries and correspondence, Belgian colonial administration documents, as well as other primary and secondary sources. Additionally, I will draw evidence and details from personal interviews with five White Fathers that I conducted in the fall of 2008.

As I set out to research the White Fathers, I was both disappointed and encouraged by the current historiography. There are two important books (written by a White Father) on the Society's experiences during the colonial scramble and the First World War. There are also some biographies written about Cardinal Lavigerie (in French and English), but there is not

much detailed information available about the Fathers during the period I was interested in. I was disappointed because I realized I would have to piece together a story without a lot to go on, but I was excited at the prospect of contributing new and unique material to this field. In putting together a larger picture of the colonial scramble and missions up to and during the 1950s, I was fortunate to consult works like Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*, Adrian Hasting's *The Church in Africa*, and Aylward Shorter's two books on the White Fathers during the colonial scramble and the First World War. While the secondary sources were fairly limited, I found rich material in the Society's archive in Rome and in the form of personal interviews with White Fathers (stationed in Congo during the period of interest) now living in Belgium. Through these secondary sources, personal correspondence, mission diaries, annual reports, and personal interviews, I was able to weave together a story. I will first, however, explore the history of the missionary movement in colonial Africa.

### New Imperialism and the Scramble for Africa

“When Europeans began imagining Africa beyond the Sahara, the continent they pictured was a dreamscape, a site for fantasies of the fearsome and the supernatural.”<sup>2</sup> Much of Europe's hope in Africa was to find a source of raw materials to fuel the Industrial Revolution.<sup>3</sup>

Tremendous growth in European capitalism allowed the major European imperial nations (Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) to grasp a firm foothold in pre-industrial Africa.<sup>4</sup> By the 1880s, European imperialists commenced the intense competition for African territories and resources in what became known as the “scramble for Africa.” Some

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<sup>2</sup> Adam Hochschild. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Hochschild, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Basil Davidson, *Africa in History: Themes and Outlines*. (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 242.



historians date the opening of the scramble as Britain's seizure of the Suez Canal in 1869. Others point to Belgian King Leopold II's carving out of an enormous central African colony for himself in 1884 as the moment that precipitated all of the political and diplomatic maneuverings. The broad limits of the European states' expansion were defined among themselves (without any African representation) at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. The Berlin Conference laid down the rules that governed the European conquest of Africa for the next fifteen years. This situation was unusual because international conferences were usually held to sort out the aftermath of a war, almost never to settle problems before they led to war. But all of the major powers had reasons to attend, especially France, Britain, and Germany. Although many issues were at stake, the most important was the future of the Congo River basin.

For Africans, the quality of life under colonial regimes depended on their mode of rule. European colonial powers utilized various methods of control, depending on the strength, wealth, and specific political tradition of the new regime. These methods gradually evolved into two main categories: direct and indirect rule. Influenced mainly by their colonial experience in India, the British favored indirect rule. They sought African leaders to act as intermediaries between the indigenous peoples and colonial government. In contrast, the French opted for direct rule. Indigenous resistance to French colonization produced bloody and long-sustained struggles, and the French reacted with harsh and sometimes cruel repression. The French destroyed existing local structures and centralized all authority with French administrators.

Using these and other methods, the imperial powers partitioned Africa, particularly in the 1890s. Treaties formalized frontier boundaries among the imperial powers that for a long time were represented by nothing more than lines on a map. After the European powers had settled potential boundary issues, they went about the task of "penetration and subjugation" of African lands and people. Thus if the years 1880-1900 constituted a period of European

invasions and the establishment of a European presence, the decades between 1900-1920 were a period of pacification during which colonial regimes were installed.<sup>5</sup>

Not all Africans quietly submitted to European colonial invasion. The British in the lands behind Lagos and the Gold Coast, and the French too encountered strong indigenous peoples willing to fight for their independence. Their resistance, as in many other places, failed because of inferior equipment, military organization, as well as internal disunity. Imperial conquest was also carried out by more peaceful means. Basil Davidson argues that these means included an effective process of “infiltration” advanced by “treaties of protection” between European nations and African chiefs. These chiefs could seldom understand the motivations of their new European “protectors.”

According to W.R. Crocker, “the powers with colonies cannot escape having some main intention about the way they run them. It is this intention that forms their colonial policy. The way they cope with these peculiarly African material and moral problems...is determined, directly or indirectly, clearly or vaguely, by it. Colonial policy thus amounts to saying what kind of Africa they have in mind.”<sup>6</sup> The Belgian government (making Belgium a great nation and global competitor) and corporations wanted cheap raw materials and the Catholic Church wanted new souls. They both had a different agenda in Congo but both agendas went hand in hand. The Catholic missionaries were a useful tool in the hands of the Belgian regime, and they worked closely together on all levels. There was an official separation between the Church and the state, and they had differing opinions on some matters, but they could both use each other, a win-win

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<sup>5</sup> Davidson, 243-244.

<sup>6</sup> W.R. Crocker, *On Governing Colonies, Being an Outline of the Real Issues and a Comparison of the British, French and Belgian Approach to Them* (London: G. Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1947), 58.

situation.<sup>7</sup> The Belgian colonial government was highly centralized by British standards; it was less centralized than the French form of imperialism, but could still be considered a form of direct rule. These differences between direct and indirect rule were less apparent to the ruled peoples than to European colonial theorists thousands of miles away.<sup>8</sup> Both direct and indirect modes of rule tended to subvert existing local authority and distort village leadership structures.

The First World War was the last act in the colonial scramble.<sup>9</sup> It stripped away Germany's four colonies and guaranteed that German would not be among the languages used in modern Africa. Apart from some continued use of German in Namibia, the languages of modern Africa became English, French, and Portuguese. The scramble thus superimposed a European language map on Africa. This partitioning of Africa by language influenced the development of cultural, literary, and political traditions through the varying systems of education and administration imposed in different regions. With Britain and France in control of Germany's former colonies in the form of Mandated Territories,<sup>10</sup> the post-war era saw the continued transformation of African societies. Most colonies were supposed to pay for themselves. Davidson has labeled the central years of European imperialism (1920-1945) as a "hand-to-mouth administration." As a result, many people were driven into farming labor under semi-slave conditions, most notably in South Africa. Gradually the European regimes' power (regimes geared for industrial production and private profit) had an occupying effect. According

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Van Uffelen. <petervanuffelen@skynet.be> "Question for you." 8 October 2009. Personal email (8 October 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Davidson, 243-246.

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Hastings. *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 490.

<sup>10</sup> Following the end of the Great War in 1918, certain colonies and territories were taken from the defeated nations and placed under the administration of one or more of the victorious nations. These areas were called mandated territories. The League of Nations supervised the governing countries in the administration of the territories. The League expected the governing countries to improve living conditions in the territories and to prepare the people for self government.

to Davidson, “Little by little Africans were gripped by the economic system of their rulers.”<sup>11</sup> Methods of rule shaped by the search for profit undermined local subsistence economies where money had little value.

In *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*, Adrian Hastings contends that the nature of mission-colonial administration relationships in the early colonial period varied, from unquestioned loyalty to dissent. The determining factor in these relationships was whether the mission had arrived prior to colonial rule. Missions that were in place before colonial authority arrived and which developed good rapport with local African authorities tended to play a more independent role with respect to the colonial administrations. They were also more critical of colonial governance. These missions enjoyed a status within colonial society as something other than a dependent on the administration.<sup>12</sup>

In the post-war period, the mission churches’ fortunes varied. In some cases, Hastings argues, missions were not able to continue to function because their country of origin or form of Christianity or both did not please the new political leaders.<sup>13</sup> The First World War may, however, have helped alleviate the black-white strain that had been mounting in previous years. Many mission churches were left without missionaries. In some cases African teachers stepped into their places, most of them hastily ordained by white clergy before the white clergy departed. In many cases Africans converted to Christianity during these years without prompting by the Church. In areas where the mission church had a scarce following, the church often disappeared. However, in areas where the mission church had established moderate support, the church grew

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<sup>11</sup> Davidson, 256-257.

<sup>12</sup> Hastings, 428.

<sup>13</sup> Hastings, 402-403.

stronger after the war. Additionally, the influenza epidemic of 1918 encouraged conversions and decreased tension within the church. Thus it could be argued that war proved to be an agent for the spread of Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

By depriving Germany of its African colonies, the First World War ensured that English, French, and Portuguese would be the modern languages of Africa. This outcome meant, however, more than just a new European language map. New systems of education, administration, political practices, and culture would be imposed. Missions were also greatly affected by these new post-war boundaries. In some cases missions were harassed or discontinued because their country of origin or brand of Christianity did not please the new regime. Adrian Hastings argues that the formation and established identity of colonial states, and the post-colonial nationalism that formed as a result, was the nineteenth century's most decisive legacy. European imperialism and the "scramble for Africa" are broad and complex topics that cannot be covered completely here. I provide a general background to create a larger context in which to view the establishment and development of missions during this time.

### Leopold's Congo

In his widely-read *King Leopold's Ghost*, Adam Hochschild describes a Belgian king who coveted other European nations' colonies and set out to obtain one for himself under the guise of humanitarianism. In his insatiable quest for power, Leopold realized that there was a large portion of central sub-Saharan Africa that was not colonized at the time. In 1867 he established the International African Association and sold it to the world as a humanitarian group that would civilize and provide aid to the Congolese around the Congo River area. Using clever political maneuvering, Leopold managed to convince the United States, France, and Germany to

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<sup>14</sup> Hastings, 490.

recognize the Congo Free State as his personal colony in 1884. Leopold was able to maintain control of his colony due to superior technology, including the machine gun, repeating rifle, breech loading rifle, the steamboat, and better medicines.

Leopold used forced labor to obtain wild rubber from the vines found throughout Congolese rain forests. Workers had quotas, and those who did not meet them risked losing their hands and heads. The colonial administration's abuses outraged missionaries and led to protests, but it was Edmund Morel, a British businessman, who first noticed suspicious documentation and practices while working for the Elder Dempster Shipping Line. Morel played a key role in bringing the atrocities in the Congo to the world's attention. Pressures against Leopold and his cruel practices mounted, and in 1908 – a year before his death – the Belgian government stripped the Congo from him. Despite immediate improvements, including both a shift in the rubber industry from wild to cultivated rubber, and the substitution of punitive taxes for severed hands and heads, life in the Congo did not change significantly.

From the outset, missionaries provided the vanguard of European colonization in the Congo. The first Protestant mission group, the British Missionary Society (BMS), to arrive in the Congo came in 1878 and soon found itself threatened by Portuguese sovereignty over the Lower Congo region. The BMS found a natural ally in Leopold, whose promise of a humanitarian state was very attractive. Leopold, however, soon came to view British Protestant missionaries as a threat to his enterprise. To solidify control over his new state, he encouraged Belgian Catholic missionary orders to come. He assumed that as Belgians and as Catholics, they would be easier to manipulate and control. He also hoped they would attract his other countrymen and establish a Belgian presence in the Congo. Hochschild notes, "Leopold subsidized the Catholics lavishly and sometimes used his financial power to deploy priests,

almost as if they were soldiers, to areas where he wanted to strengthen his influence.”<sup>15</sup> In many British and French colonies, the close cooperation between the missions and the state waned as the number and power of viable secular colonial administrations grew. This was not, however, the case in the Congo, where Catholic missions in particular retained and increased their political might in the 1920s and 1930s. Leopold had used the Catholic missions to cement and extend his power in the Congo.<sup>16</sup>

The Catholic missions continued to play an important role under the Belgian regime. Pius XI, Pope from 1922-1939, became known as the Pope of the Missions because of the massive increase in Roman Catholic concern over the Church in non-European countries which occurred during his reign. The missionary exhibition in Rome in 1925, the appointment of the first Indian, Japanese, and Chinese bishops, as well as a pressure on the Church in Europe and America to play a more active role in missionary work, were all proof of this new priority. Well-established mission societies experienced an influx of new members.

The number of Catholic missions was mounting quickly, and each mission had at least three Fathers. In the Lupala area, for instance, which had previously been a Protestant preserve, White Father missions were founded at Lufube (1930), Kabunda (1932), Mapula (1933), Twingi (1938) and Kasaba (1942). The Catholics were there in more and more places to recruit, train, and supervise their catechists. Consequently, Catholic missionaries moved somewhat out of pastoral work and committed more time to education and the establishment of primary institutions. (It is worth noting that in the Belgian Congo, Catholic schools received state

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<sup>15</sup> Hochschild, 134.

<sup>16</sup> Marvin D. Markowitz. “The Missions and Political Development in the Congo,” *Journal of the International African Institute*, 40, 3 (1970): 234, 236-237.

subsidies,<sup>17</sup> something that was denied to Protestant missions. This blatant and systemic discrimination led to rivalries between Catholic and Protestant missions over control of Congolese education.) Because mission schooling was closely tied with the rate of conversion, Protestants were at an obvious disadvantage. Yet in some ways it helped Protestant missions win African fervor because the Congolese viewed them as separate from the colonial arm of power, in a way Catholics were not.

### The Congo under Belgian Rule: The Triumvirate

Under the Belgian regime, a triumvirate of colonial administration, private corporations, and the Roman Catholic missions, controlled the colony. The source of colonial law was the king's, but the Parliament had substantial power to interfere. The *Grand Conseil*, which consisted of fourteen members chosen for their expert knowledge in colonial matters, had to be consulted on all decrees. The Governor-General had more power than his French counterpart, but less than a British Governor. There was also a Colonial Inspectorate, but its power was much less than the French Inspectorate. Within the colony was a body of Europeans called the Commission for the Protection of Natives designed to protect native interests in the colony. The Roman Catholic hierarchy dominated this committee.<sup>18</sup> In conjunction with the Catholic party (*Parti Social Chrétien*), the Catholic missions exerted great leverage in political affairs of the state. For example, they helped force the resignation of Governor-General Lippens,<sup>19</sup> whom they felt was hostile to their interests. They also gained a monopoly over educational subsidies (freezing out the Protestants for nearly a quarter of a century), and

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<sup>17</sup> Established by the Concordat of 1908, which placed Catholic missions in a highly privileged position.

<sup>18</sup> Crocker, 92-93.

<sup>19</sup> Maurice Eugène Auguste Lippens was Governor General of the Belgian Congo from 1921-1923.



frequently convinced colonial administrators to do their bidding. Thus the Catholic missions were a force to be reckoned with in the Congo. As long as the alliance with the state appeared to help with their own objectives of evangelization and conversion, they supported it.

Major corporations played a large role in the economic development of the Belgian Congo. The biggest of these corporations was the *Société Générale de la Belgique*. It encompassed banks, insurance, shipping, airlines, plantations, urban property, mines (UMHK was a subsidiary), as well as millions of acres of land. The fact that the Belgian government was a shareholder in many of the subsidiaries (taking over many of Leopold's interests in them) may have been a safeguard against potential corruption in the large private companies. Another safeguard was the power of the Belgian parliament. W.R. Crocker, who wrote *On Governing Colonies*, argues that "controlled big business was the most efficient way of developing the economic resources of the Congo."<sup>20</sup>

Concerns about the immorality of single men, depopulation, and infant mortality emerged in the early 1920s in the Copperbelt. The role of colonial government and corporations in the Congo deeply affected Congolese life. The colonial regime and corporations made greater efforts to regularize native life according to a European model to create docile citizens, tax payers, wage earners, as well as increase productivity and profits. Nancy Rose Hunt, for example, examines colonial efforts to alter infant feeding and to distribute milk to mothers and infants in the Belgian Congo. She demonstrates how these colonial efforts were tied to a discourse that viewed African birth spacing customs as harmful and inferior compared with Western practices. The Belgian Congo, she argues, intervened more in maternal and infant health than any other colonial regime in sub-Saharan Africa. European colonial women were the

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<sup>20</sup> Crocker, 65.

first to organize maternal and infant health programs, *gouttes de lait* (drops of milk). There was a growing awareness that a drastic decline in the population and a substantial growth in infertility had occurred since colonial conquest. Depopulation and a low birthrate became a primary theme in burgeoning colonial demographic literature. The crisis culminated in 1924 with the release of a report to the *Congrès Colonial National* on the Congolese “social question.” The report found that the native population was threatened by excessive mortality and minimal natality among those leaving their villages for wage work, sleeping sickness, and frequent infant mortality. It detailed the immorality of African social customs (as seen by Europeans at this time), including polygamy and prostitution. As a result, social welfare programs were developed to help combat these issues and teach African women Western skills, especially proper child rearing. Sister orders of the Catholic missionaries (like the White Sisters) tended to village womens’ maternal needs and often toured with mining representatives to pick up pregnant women from surrounding villages and bring them to the maternity wards for physical checkup and care. This system was very well organized. The mine donated food and supplies to the maternity hospital. European women were also called in to play an active part in these programs. Thus these programs enabled the colonial presence of European women.<sup>21</sup>

The need for African labor was acutely felt at the same time that approximately fifty percent of the babies were dying in the camps of UMHK. Two solutions proposed included African labor stabilization and infant and maternal health programs. By 1924 UMHK operated a *goutte de lait* to encourage births and reduce infant mortality. Weekly visits, gifts in kind, birth gifts, and rations for mothers during the first six months of pregnancy and the first year of

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<sup>21</sup> Hunt, Nancy Rose. “Le bébé en brousse: European Women, African Birth Spacing, and Colonial Intervention in Breast Feeding in the Belgian Congo,” *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997: 288-290, 296.

nursing were part of the program. The medical staff also encouraged the launch of *Oeuvre de Protection de l'Enfance Noir* (OPEN) program. Its specific aim was to reduce infant mortality, which was attributed to maternal ignorance, and to increase the birthrate. In short, colonialism invaded some of the most intimate aspects of women's lives, including the birthing process, breast feeding, weaning, dietary choices, and sexual activity. In the case of UMHK, African women's and children's time, space and bodies became regularized. Women had daily schedules. Children were fed and bathed within new colonial public spaces. Even private space was controlled and monitored to ensure hygiene and particular sleeping arrangements. Crocker argues that UMHK provided their workers with the most complete medical facilities found anywhere in Africa.<sup>22</sup> Yet how Africans interpreted and countered colonial efforts to structure and intervene into their lives remains up for debate. Needless to say, these initiatives had a profound effect on many Congolese people.<sup>23</sup>

### Protestant Resentment

Protestant missions resented the limitations placed on their missions by large concessionary companies in the Belgian Congo. They believed that the colonial government approved these limitations, and concluded that the collaboration between Catholic missions and big business (namely the *Société Générale de la Belgique*) formed an economic-religious monopoly over the entire colony. The Protestants accused the colonial administration of being “humiliatingly subordinate [to big business and the Catholics] instead of standing aloof as the impartial arbitrator in matters temporal and religious as it should.” Marvin Markowitz argues that while these claims may have been somewhat exaggerated, large companies did in fact

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<sup>22</sup> Crocker, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Hunt, 298-308.

collaborate with Catholic missions, and the administration acquiesced in this policy. This collaboration worked to the detriment of Protestant missions.<sup>24</sup>

Catholic missions handled the education of Congolese children residing in company compounds. There were restrictions placed on Protestant evangelization, worship, and meetings on company property. The Congo Protestant Council (CPC) expressed concern that some mining and agricultural firms prohibited Protestant Congolese evangelists from doing their work on the compound. The *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga* (UMHK) and *Huileries du Congo Belge (Unilever)* (HBC) were named in the charges. UMHK adopted a policy of close cooperation with Catholic missions in Katanga, and the policy seemed to have been carried out with approval from the colonial administration. Thus schools on the company compound were staffed by Catholic missionaries. The Protestants even received a communication from the Governor of Katanga stating that the government and UMHK had in fact agreed upon the policy, and Protestant chapels were prohibited within a five-hundred-meter limit of the company compound. For Protestant missionaries, however, HBC's policy of giving Catholic missions control of education on its compounds was a greater setback than UMHK's policy. Protestants had hoped that because HBC was a British firm, it would adopt a more favorable policy toward them, but that was not to be. They rejected the idea of complaining to the Commission for the Protection of Natives because Catholic missionaries dominated it. Markowitz argues that big business' favoritism with Catholic missions signified the unique position of power and influence

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<sup>24</sup> Marvin D. Markowitz, *Cross and Sword: The Political Role of Christian Missions in the Belgian Congo, 1908-1960* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1973), 42.

Catholic missions enjoyed in the Congo. Big business knew the Catholics had close ties with the metropole, and recognized it would be advantageous to work with them.<sup>25</sup>

Within the Belgian Congo, then, the triumvirate of colonial administration, big private companies, and Catholic missions had a close and mutually beneficial relationship. Some Catholic missions used little less than force to convert Africans and conform them to the Church's vision of morality. According to Hastings, nowhere else in Africa in the 1930s and 1940s was so much force used in conversion as was used in the Belgian Congo by Catholic missions. Catholic missions used their privileged status within the colonial system to aggressively convert people. They compelled "children to attend school, converts to attend the catechumenate, and everyone to conform to the moral law as interpreted by themselves."<sup>26</sup> According to Crocker, Catholic missionaries often intervened in intimate Congolese social customs, including marriage and burial of the dead, which they considered immoral. For example, in the case of polygamous marriages, Catholic missionaries "refuse the status of marriage to all but the first wife; the others they, in effect, divorce." Priests frequently took it upon themselves to find a husband or wife for a convert, and they "terrorized" those who "relapsed" into polygamy. Thus parental control over children was fragmented, women lost their traditional security, and family life was disrupted. Material needs such as schools and hospitals, were sometimes used as a "weapon for proselytization." For instance, a priest would tell a local community that if they contributed a sum of money, he would give them a school or hospital.

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<sup>25</sup> Markowitz, *Cross and Sword*, 45-46.

<sup>26</sup> Hastings, 559-563.

Not all Catholic missionaries should be implicated here, but it is clear that some Catholics and Protestants were guilty of these offenses.<sup>27</sup>

The missions' work in education produced a class of Congolese *évolués*.<sup>28</sup> The missions not only ran a vast system of lower schools, but supported movements to establish secondary and university education. However, their educational efforts sometimes clashed with colonial administrators, who feared an educated indigenous population. Mission seminaries produced Congolese clergy, and also future Congolese political leaders, including Joseph Kasavubu.<sup>29</sup> Yet the missions, while injecting strength into the Congolese polity, also contributed to its weakness. Catholic missionary actions often promoted ethnic and parochial nationalism. They tended to see themselves as bearers of justice and moral values. Armed with their sense of cultural superiority, they often attacked basic elements of Congolese culture. As a result, they helped fragment the traditional structure of local Congolese societies, but provided no substitute for the social and personal integration that had been destroyed. They acted as instruments of social change and modernization (civilizers), but attempted to retain their positions within the status quo.<sup>30</sup> All Catholic missionaries were, however, not the same. As we will see, Lavigerie preached assimilation of his missionaries among the indigenous peoples and adequate catechist training, such as the delay of baptism until adulthood, to ensure the person fully understood his or her commitment to the Church. As early as the Leopoldian days, French was declared the official language of the Congo. This included the official language policy for

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<sup>27</sup> Crocker, 49-50.

<sup>28</sup> *Évolué* is a French term (literally, *evolved* or *developed*) used in the colonial era to refer to native Africans who had "evolved" through education or assimilation and accepted European values and patterns of behavior.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Kasavubu was a statesman and first president of the independent Congo republic from 1960 to 1965. Shortly after independence in 1960, he ousted the Congo's first premier, Patrice Lumumba, after the breakdown of order in the country.

<sup>30</sup> Markowitz, "The Missions and Political Development," 165-167.

schools and government affairs. Yet many officials did not speak French themselves, state-subsidized Catholic schools did not propagate French all the time, and the colonial administration did not financially support Protestant schools that did use French. During Leopold's rule, his policy of Belgianization was inhibited by his desire to obtain manpower and resources to manage the Congo Free State. Because Leopold's own people were not interested in his venture, he was forced to employ people from other nationalities in the colony. Belgians never represented more than 60 percent of Europeans in the Congo during this period.<sup>31</sup> Thus imposing French as the official language of the colony was not practical.

Catholic teachers did not enforce the government's Francophone efforts because education in French did not reinforce their aims, namely to create a Christian society in Africa. With the exception of the White Fathers, Catholic missionaries saw little merit in literacy during this period. In the Lower Congo, only the Jesuits saw a need to prepare skilled workers, but not for employment outside the mission. The Catholic missionaries did not propagate the use of any major European language. Even the White Fathers, who began to train African clergy in the 1890s, moved directly from Swahili to Latin. French proved to be an unnecessary intermediary. Belgian Catholic missionaries spoke Flemish and Afrikaans and, like Protestants, used French poorly as a second language. Some Belgian missionaries were, however, reluctant to propagate French because of the continual linguistic-cultural conflict in Belgium between the Flemish and French-speaking Walloons.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Barbara A. Yates. "The Origins of Language Policy in Zaire," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 18, 2 (1980): 258-260.

<sup>32</sup> Yates, 262-263.

While missionary goals were to convert as many indigenous people as possible, it was clearly impractical to learn all of the different African languages and dialects. Most Catholics, who were more interested in a mass audience for conversion, chose one of the regional languages (Kikongo, Swahili, Tshiluba, or Lingala), while the Protestants, who focused more on the individual conversion, preferred the vernacular spoken by the majority of people located near each mission post. Protestant proselytization focused on the local population. Thus one of the first tasks of a Protestant missionary was to translate the Scriptures into the local vernacular. Catholic missionaries paid more attention to local languages at the beginning of the twentieth century in an effort to compete with their Protestant neighbors. As mobility increased due to economic and technological innovations, such as the railway between Matadi and Leopoldville in 1898, Catholic missionaries focused more on proselytizing in the local languages with the assistance of native catechists.<sup>33</sup> Native catechists played an important role in the spread of Christianity in Africa.

### The Nationalist Challenge and Swift Road to Independence

The Second World War accelerated the disintegration of traditional society which had begun with the European colonial invasion in the 1880s. The whole black population in Africa was mobilized to produce what the Allied powers needed for victory. This mobilization for production in mines and plantations was coupled with the decline of indigenous rural economy. This decline drove many people to the cities for work. By the mid-1950s, there was hardly a city in Africa that had not tripled or quadrupled its population since 1939. Davidson contends that nothing like this had been seen since the British Industrial Revolution. Commenting on life in African urban centers, a Royal Commission on East Africa observed in 1955 that “the evils

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<sup>33</sup> Yates, 268-270.



associated with the absence of family life, drunkenness, prostitution, and venereal disease are rife in the towns with large African populations...” Some statistics showed that alcohol import rates in French West Africa were fifteen times higher than they had been in 1938, and the French colonies were not unique. As these patterns continued, it became apparent, Davidson argues, that much of Africa was in a state of social and economic disintegration. None of the old colonial solutions would work. Conditions could not be reversed.<sup>34</sup> Events in Africa had reached a boiling point, and that boiling point manifested itself as nationalism.

There were struggles for national independence within regions drawn by the colonial regimes after the war. Previous demands for emancipation and equality transformed into nationalism. African political figures demanded more than respect for Africans; they wanted autonomy and independence. They took advantage of the outcomes of the Second World War. If India could be free, why not Africa? More radical political parties began to sprout up in Africa, and trade unionism now played a bigger role in the effectiveness of these national movements. Gradually the nationalist zeal spread beyond the educated minority and gained a mass following.<sup>35</sup> Nationalism soon outpaced the few concessions British and French colonial governors were willing to give. By the end of the 1950s, the European imperial regimes realized that the run-away train that was African nationalism would not be stopped with anything short of drastic political change. The Belgian Congo, however, was a unique case.<sup>36</sup>

The Belgian government assumed it had plenty of time to prepare everything to hand over rule to the Congolese. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. Before the Second World War, there is no real indication that the Belgian government had given any serious

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<sup>34</sup> Davidson, 279-280.

<sup>35</sup> Davidson, 281.

<sup>36</sup> Davidson, 282-288.

thought to a Congolese existence outside of the colonial framework. The Belgian government anticipated a slow, gradual approach to independence, with emphasis on a process done within the parameters of Belgian law on local organizations, a top-down process. In 1956, Governor-General Petillon<sup>37</sup> delivered a speech to the council where he criticized Europeans in the Congo for being snobs and holding fast to a conquering attitude.<sup>38</sup> He held high hopes for the idea of a Belgo-Congolese community, which served as transitional goal between the intolerable prospect of total severance between the Congo and Belgium and the impossibility of continued domination over the Congo as a colony.<sup>39</sup>

By 1957, it became increasingly clear that Belgian assumptions about a gradual decolonization process that would take place in the distant future were wrong. The sands of time were not limitless. Africans refused to be clay molded by the hands of their European colonizer. The tides of nationalism would not be reversed at this point. The Belgian idea of a Belgo-Congolese community (initially conceived as a relationship between a rider and a horse) would not mesh with Congolese visions of their future. It could not be viable if both parties were to be given the opportunity to structure the relationship. Until 1959 the debate on terminal goals took place virtually in a vacuum, within the confines of the European ruler community. Following the Leopoldville riots<sup>40</sup> of that same year, there was a real effort on the Belgian side to negotiate

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<sup>37</sup> Léon Antoine Marie Pétillon was a Belgian civil servant and Governor-General of the Belgian Congo from 1952-1958.

<sup>38</sup> Paul McStallworth. "The Congolese and Self-Determination," *The Journal of Negro History*, 43, 2 (1958): 107.

<sup>39</sup> Crawford Young. "The End of the Belgian Congo," *The End of the European Empire, Decolonization after World War II* (Lexington, Massachusetts, Toronto, and London: D.C. Heath and Company), 1975: 184.

<sup>40</sup> Riots erupted in Leopoldville in 1959 after the Abako (Alliance des Ba-Kongo, the powerful cultural-political association of the Bakongo party) was banned. 42 people were killed.

with the future African leadership. *Time Magazine* in the summer of 1960 reported “the riots frightened the Belgians into handing over independence to the Congolese with almost disorderly haste.”<sup>41</sup> The Leopoldville riots profoundly changed the character of the dialogue between Belgium and the Congo. The Belgian government finally saw the light. By 1956 Antoine Van Bilsen’s proposal of a thirty-year plan to create a sustainable Congolese regime<sup>42</sup> was repudiated by nearly all sectors of metropolitan and colonial opinion. Three years later, King Baudouin promised independence “without fatal delays.”<sup>43</sup> Independence came to the Congo in 1960.

At the time, there was virtually nothing prepared. There were only a handful of Congolese university graduates, and not a single one had any substantial administrative experience. More importantly, no Congolese national party had had more than a few months to prepare to take over the country. Without a single Congolese officer, the Belgian *Force Publique*<sup>44</sup> mutinied immediately. The newly independent administration collapsed under these

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<sup>41</sup> “Taking Over,” *Time Magazine* (Summer 1960).  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,869527,00.html?iid=chix-sphere> (accessed April 15, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Antoine Van Bilsen, a Belgian professor, proposed a 30-year plan for creating a self-sufficient independent state out of the Belgian Congo in 1955. The timetable called for a gradual change over 30 years. He estimated it would take that long to create an educated African elite to govern the new Congo state.

<sup>43</sup> Young, 195-196.

<sup>44</sup> A Belgian colonial army used since the Congo Free State days. Since Belgium annexed the Congo in 1908, it was used mainly for pacification.

and other pressures, and the Congo's most promising new leader, Patrice Lumumba, was assassinated in 1961.<sup>45</sup> Years of chaos ensued.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the decolonization process, the mission churches remained virtually intact, but they were in a precarious position relative to the new African state. The mission churches wanted to give the new Congolese government the benefit of the doubt, but the new Congolese leaders became irritated if the missionaries did or said anything vaguely political. While there were of course exceptions, many white missionaries had accepted the colonial land scramble and settler racism, or at the very least made use of the broader context of imperial rule. Following independence, these same white missionaries could now be seen as meddling neocolonialists. Backlash was coming. On the larger African scene, some of the worst church-state conflicts occurred in those regimes that had adopted Marxism-Leninism as a national ideology. There were several instances of sweeping nationalizations of schools, churches, and hospitals. Nevertheless, the mission churches managed to weather the storm of independence and stayed remarkably intact.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> In a *Washington Post* article written in July 2002, Dr. Steven R. Weissman, staff director of the U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee on Africa from 1986 to 1991, claimed he had studied classified documents that reveal significant U.S. responsibility in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, who was mistakenly seen by the Eisenhower administration as an "African Fidel Castro." The documents show that the key Congolese leaders (namely then-president Joseph Kasavubu and military man Mobutu) responsible for Lumumba's downfall were funneled money and arms by the U.S. to fight pro-Lumumba forces and help select and finance an anti-Lumumba government in a covert CIA plan called "Project Wizard." Nearly three weeks after Lumumba's death, more money came to the people who helped arranged his assassination. Furthermore, Weissman says the documents show that plans and payments were approved by the highest levels of the Eisenhower administration. In February 2002 Belgium issued a 1000-page report acknowledging responsibility in the events that led to Lumumba's death. The U.S. has never admitted any responsibility for involvement in these events.

<sup>46</sup> Davidson, 288.

<sup>47</sup> David Maxwell. "Post-Colonial Christianity in Africa," *The Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianities, 1914-2000*. Cambridge: University Press, 2006: 406-407.

## The White Fathers

One might be tempted to analyze that word charity with many theological subtleties. But in fact, on the lips and in the heart of Lavigerie, the man of direct and urgent action, it was quite uncomplicated. It belonged on his escutcheon because it was a word of command, a battle-cry, a commitment, a purpose in life. And, like a stirring heraldic devise, it stood for a cause; the very practical and paradoxically restless cause of the peace of Christ that must spread like a crackling, tenacious fire...<sup>48</sup>

The society of White Fathers, founded by Cardinal Lavigerie in Algiers in 1868, is officially known as the Society of Missionaries in Africa. Lavigerie was born in Bayonne in 1825. He entered the priesthood in 1849 and quickly became a university lecturer at the Sorbonne and director of the association called *Écoles L'Orient*, a charitable organization dedicated to welfare work in the Middle East. In 1867 he was appointed Bishop of Algiers. Africa claimed his life's mission for his remaining twenty-five years. He actually founded two missionary bodies, the White Fathers and its sister society, the White Sisters. The Holy See made him Apostolic Delegate for the Sudan, the Sahara and Equatorial Africa. Thus Lavigerie became entrusted with the opening up of the missions in vast and (at the time) newly discovered (at least by Europeans) regions of the African continent. He still, however, maintained close ties with Rome, and in 1867, Leo XIII made him a cardinal. Lavigerie died in 1892.<sup>49</sup>

Lavigerie's method for training his missionaries was composed of several simple but important aspects. First, mission recruits were to rely on prayer. They must put God first and rely on Him for answers and guidance. He wrote to his missionaries to say he supposed that the

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<sup>48</sup> William Burrige, *Destiny Africa: Cardinal Lavigerie and the Making of the White Fathers*, (London: G. Chapman, 1966), 140-141.

<sup>49</sup> Burrige, 1-2.

first thing they had to do was to provide themselves with some sort of chapel where they could observe the Blessed Sacrament. He argued that this was the first phase of missionary approach and a high priority: “The missionaries must above all be convinced of their powerlessness and their nothingness. They must turn constantly to God, for without grace they will achieve nothing...” Second, they were to lead and to teach by example. He understood the intense curiosity with which missionaries would be met the first time they encountered African peoples. Thus the missionaries had to make the right first impression. By teaching through example, Lavigerie hoped that the Africans would see what type of men the missionaries were. Little by little they would understand that a life of charity and prayer was a life of God. By no means did this dictate a life apart from Africans. Lavigerie intended his people to establish maximum intercommunication with the Africans. This intercommunication was essential to the missionary task.

Finally, Lavigerie’s most important order to his missionaries was adaptation. Regarding settling into African village societies, he instructed the missionaries to eat their food, wear their dress and speak their language. This principle of adaptation is perhaps the foremost of the missionary principles to which he referred when he told his White Fathers that they had specific objectives and methods that were jointly the *raison d’être* of their society.<sup>50</sup> Adaptation diminished the strangeness of the missionaries and allowed for a tone of respect, not condescension, when dealing with the natives. He encouraged his men to learn the history and customs of the village societies. Many missionaries recorded their observations in mission diaries. According to White Father historian Aylward Shorter, missionary understanding of African culture was dynamic and grew more objective over time as missionaries desired to know more about these cultures. “External habits” (food, clothing, sleeping arrangements, and

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<sup>50</sup> Burridge, 101-104.

language) were for Lavigerie vital for his missionaries to adopt and safeguard. This idea was frequently turned on its head because of most missionaries' disapproval (especially in the beginning) of African cultural and religious practices. The Fathers began from a position of ignorance concerning African culture and religion. As more and more missionaries came to the field, and the more ethnic groups were engaged, the more this ignorance was dispelled. The Fathers arrived in Africa with a distinct sense of cultural superiority. Because European superior technology had developed within a Christian civilization, it was hard for them to come to grips with the notion that Africans (who were technologically inferior) could possibly be their intellectual, spiritual, or moral equals. Shorter argues that "Everything that was unfamiliar to them as Europeans became an object of derision and distaste – even of demonization."<sup>51</sup> The Fathers exhibited, however, a genuine love for the Africans (while often couched in terms of condescension and pity). This love helped them cope with their initial culture shock and became a primary force in their appreciation for African culture and thought.<sup>52</sup> Missionaries came prepared to love Africans, and in most cases this sentiment triumphed over their prejudices and ignorance.<sup>53</sup> Some missionaries like White Father Bishop Victor Roelens (whom will be discussed later) never quite made that leap.

Another unique aspect of Lavigerie's missionary approach was the delay of baptism until adulthood. He wanted converts to truly understand and absorb the teaching of Christ and what it meant to be a Christian and live a Christian life. He did not rush people into conversion; rather, he took his time so that the potential convert understood the decision he or she was making and in this way, the decision would be informed. This delay was calculated to create

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<sup>51</sup> Aylward Shorter. *Cross and Flag: The "White Fathers" during the Colonial Scramble (1892-1914)*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 153-154.

<sup>52</sup> Shorter, 154-155.

<sup>53</sup> Shorter, 157.

black laymen deeply attached to the Church and zealous for the salvation of other Africans. Lavigerie knew that it would ultimately be Africans who fully implanted the Church in Africa.

### Conclusion

The rest of this thesis aims to discover the specific role of the White Fathers in the Belgian Congo from 1950-1955. I will examine how their preconceived ideas about African religion prior to arriving in Africa informed their actions. Additionally, I will look at how Lavigerie's emphasis on assimilationist theory was realized "on the ground" in the Congo as well as the impact it had on the White Fathers' relationships with other Catholic missions, the leadership in Algiers (later Rome), the colonial regime, and the Congolese people. By analyzing mission diaries and other primary sources, I will see what they believed their distinctly religious cause was and how they attempted to achieve it. The goal of this thesis is to determine patterns and relationships to better understand the place of the White Fathers in the history of imperial Africa



## The Institution of White Fathers

If you knew the satisfaction of performing a duty, as well as the gratitude to God which the missionary must always feel in being chosen for so noble and sacred a calling, you would feel no hesitation in embracing it.<sup>54</sup>

We have explored the “scramble for Africa” and missionary settlement in the Belgian Congo during the regime of Leopold II and after the colony was taken over by the Belgian state. We have seen the collaboration between Church and state and the way that relationship benefitted both parties. Now we will look at the Society of Missionaries of Africa as an institution. I will examine the different pieces of that institution to determine how it functioned as a whole. What brought the White Fathers to Africa and what evangelization methods did they employ? Were their methods similar or dissimilar to strategies used by other Catholic missionary groups? We will look at the actual vicariates in the White Father settlement area and explore the issues on the ground, including personnel and education, morality, and the threat of neighbouring Protestants and Muslims, examine the conflict between black priests and white priests, as well as profile a pioneering bishop who worked to advance native rights and a bishop who was a caricature of the European superiority complex. My goal in this chapter is to understand the relationships between different levels of the Society and between the Society and its constituents. By understanding these relationships, I aim to paint a clearer picture of the White Fathers as an institution.

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<sup>54</sup> Quote by David Livingstone. <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/msquotes.html>.

## Background and Evangelization

The period 1892-1914 was the apex of the “Scramble for Africa,” and during this period the White Fathers laid down the foundations of their mission. The first White Father missions were established in northern Algeria. In 1878 the society founded its first missions in the Rift Valley lakes region of East Africa, and later the Society expanded its work to West Africa. In 1892 Lavignerie died, leaving the Society in turmoil. The Fathers’ mission in Uganda was all but lost, a small group of missionaries weakly held on to a handful of posts in the Great Lakes area, and Tuareg tribesmen blocked the advance across the Sahara. Over the course of the following fifteen years, Africa was rocked by successive waves of colonial aggression and anti-colonial resistance. Despite virulent epidemics and widespread violence, the Fathers held fast to their position in central Africa and penetrated French Sudan. When things settled down, the Fathers were forced to confront British, German, and Belgian colonial administrations that were suspicious of their mainly French (at the time) nationality. Additionally, the British and Germans were more favorable to Protestant missionaries. They faced anticlericalism in French Sudan which impeded social and educational progress. The Fathers surpassed these handicaps, however, and went on to transform African society and establish the foundations for a native Catholic hierarchy.<sup>55</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the White Fathers were undoubtedly among the best-trained missionaries in Africa. In *Cross and Flag in Africa: The White Fathers during the Colonial Scramble (1892-1914)*, Aylward Shorter contends that the crucial factor in the training of the White Fathers was that the spiritual and theological formation of future missionaries took place in North Africa, at Algiers and Carthage.

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<sup>55</sup> Shorter, xxi.

They were formed in Africa for a uniquely African mission. While the content of the teaching in the novitiate and scholasticate was not that different from courses given in seminaries elsewhere, it was unique because it took place in a missionary environment. This fact was important because young priests left the seminary with knowledge of Arabic (which stressed the importance of linguistics), an acquaintance with Islam (which prepared them for a culture other than their own), and they had cultivated a lifestyle among the poor. Additionally, they were already accustomed to community life and understood the value of it. The new recruits were more prepared than their missionary counterparts who came from individualistic bourgeois societies in Europe and were parachuted into Africa. According to Shorter, they “already belonged to Africa, and were prepared for a dialogue of life with African people.”<sup>56</sup> Oftentimes the White Fathers utilized a “top-down” method of evangelization. To develop a “Christian Kingdom” in Africa, the White Fathers converted kings and important people in court in hopes that the new belief system would trickle down to the people, or be mandated by the king or chief.<sup>57</sup> The White Fathers felt it was easier to evangelize societies of this kind. (The area had received favorable publicity from David Livingstone and Henry Morton Stanley.)<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the Lacustrine area attracted the White Fathers because they believed the natives there exhibited a more advanced technology and socio-political organization; they were ripe for social change. This fact was believed to be especially true of Buganda.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Shorter, 117.

<sup>57</sup> Aylward Shorter. <Aylward@aylwardshorter.com> “Contact.” 24 March 2009. Personal email (7 August 2009).

<sup>58</sup> Aylward Shorter. <Aylward@aylwardshorter.com> “Contact.” 24 March 2009. Personal email (7 August 2009).

<sup>59</sup> Aylward Shorter. <Aylward@aylwardshorter.com> “Questions – White Fathers in Congo.” 2 September 2009. Personal email (2 September 2009).

The White Fathers primarily settled in Eastern Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. This area made up the Great Lakes and Lacustrine Kingdoms culture region, and a great deal was shared historically and culturally among the peoples there. Social organization centered on a divine king in both the great unitary kingdoms and the smaller multi-chiefdom societies. Beliefs and ritual practices were shared. Ki-Swahili served as a vehicular language. The whole area was affected by the slave trade and slave wars, and this was an important factor that attracted Lavigerie and the early White Fathers, for whom counteracting the slave trade had been a declared purpose.

Ministry to the sick and dying was an important objective of the White Fathers and was also tightly linked to evangelization. Lavigerie saw it as an “apostolate of compassion that continued the mission of Jesus himself.” In Kabylia (Algeria) for example, thousands of people came each year for treatment at missionary dispensaries. This fact was also true in equatorial Africa and French Sudan, even when the dispensary was nothing more than a box in the superior’s office containing simple medications and remedies. From the late nineteenth century to the First World War, Africans experienced an increase in imported diseases and epidemics on a large scale. There was a giant leap at this time when the White Sisters arrived in Africa in the 1890s to run hospitals, dispensaries, leprosaria, and hospices. In order to combat epidemics, the White Fathers collaborated with the medical arms of the colonial regimes. Many mission stations became vaccination points for measles, small-pox, and sleeping sickness. Missionaries suffered from the same illnesses, and they viewed this as a partnership in adversity between themselves and their constituents. As one missionary in Uganda wrote in 1908, “As our founder foresaw, medical treatment is an evangelization.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Shorter, 113-115.

Prior to the late 1920s, the White Fathers were interested in education as an adjunct of evangelization. This changed when the Vatican encouraged missionaries to participate in the educational policies of the colonial administrations.<sup>61</sup> Regarding African education, a White Father stationed at Buhonga (Unyanyembe) in 1906 wrote, “We do not want to create scholars, but educated people, formed for Christianity, for a serious life and for reflection.” But education proved to be an important evangelization tool for the White Fathers. Catechetical instruction (although mostly oral) relied on written aids in the form of small books, such as catechisms, prayer books, and Bible stories. To be baptized one had to be literate. After baptism literacy was enhanced by writing, math, and other subjects which strengthened the new Christians’ religious commitment to a moral life and good values. Thus the “lynchpin” of evangelization in White Father vicariates was the catechist and the village school. Bishop Victor Roelens wrote in 1905, “Every place in which there is a school becomes Christian.”<sup>62</sup>

A secondary goal of mission education was to provide secular education to the professionals needed by the colonial administration and corporations in the colonies. In a personal interview with White Father Rene de Laet, he described how his mission station, located near Kilo Moto in Belgian Congo, educated the mine workers in the 1950s. In addition to education and evangelization, they were charged with social services and support in the hospital. All of these tasks, as well as necessary personnel and resources, were in their hands and completely subsidized by Kilo Moto.<sup>63</sup> It is important to note that in many cases the Catholic missions were dependent on private companies as surrogate states. In instances where missions were located near company compounds, the companies subsidized mission schools and

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<sup>61</sup> Aylward Shorter. <Aylward@aylwardshorter.com> “Contact.” 24 March 2009. Personal email (7 August 2009).

<sup>62</sup> Shorter, 198.

<sup>63</sup> Rene De Laet. Personal interview. 10/12/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

projects in much the same way as the colonial state did. Because the companies held the purse strings, they wielded a lot of power, and missionaries were less likely to criticize company practices and abuses. In other words, it was easier in some cases to turn a blind eye in order to keep the missionaries' overall goals of evangelization and education alive and running.

Seminaries were perhaps the most serious contribution toward post-primary education in Africa. The Catholic seminary tradition was modeled after the White Fathers' own seminaries and sophisticates in North Africa and Europe. The prototype for all seminaries in Africa was, however, St. Anne's Jerusalem which was the first "diocesan" seminary founded by the White Fathers. While the seminaries were often criticized for their length and large numbers of dropouts, these dropouts did help bring about an educated Catholic laity which was of great importance to the evangelization of the Church.<sup>64</sup>

In 1906 the thirteenth General Chapter of the White Fathers gave considerable thought to increasing the numbers of mission schools. It also reversed Lavigerie's policy of not teaching Africans European languages. At this time the colonial governments were requesting that the official language of the imperial nation be taught in the schools. The schools were to be set up to train young people for low-level administrative positions with the colonial administrations. The White Father mission schools were supervised by the missionaries who also served as teachers. In Upper Congo, Roelens' goal in the mission schools was to teach religious education and carry out a "moral surveillance." Schools were a protection from what he saw as the negative influences of African life. Likewise in an entry from a mission diary from the station at Kibangula in 1952, one White Father expresses his frustration with what he deems the perversions of young Congolese marriage and sexual habits.

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<sup>64</sup> Shorter, 199-200.

In fact, there is absolute certainty that there is perversion amongst a relatively large number of boys and girls beginning at a young age...Here's this case: Girl x linked to boy y before her marriage, was instructed regularly at the boarding school, then was married after having been questioned several times on the subject of her future husband – whether she loved him, wanted to marry him. After her affirmations, after being baptized, and after the publication of marriage bans, she was married to her husband, but for several months, she did not want to know [have sexual relations with] her husband, but during all that time she had evil liaisons with her “darling in sin”. It would be delusion, an ill-starred illusion to say: We will pray a lot for the boys and girls of Mikembwe and wait for the new generation(s) to improve... Here boys and girls, from a very young age, “drink” of iniquity like they would drink water.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, De Laet describes how difficult it was to keep converts in line with Christian morals even after baptism.<sup>66</sup> Thus many people went back to old customs and ways of life.

### The Spiritans

When studying the settlement and evangelization methods of the White Fathers, it is important to observe what similar missionary institutions were doing, to understand the differences and similarities with the White Fathers and their methods. As an international (but mostly French) missionary society, the Holy Ghost Fathers (Spiritans) are a comparable example because the Spiritans' settlement patterns, and conversation tactics were similar to the White Fathers. Additionally, they competed with the White Fathers for converts. In 1848 Francis

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<sup>65</sup> Diary of the White Father Mission of Saint Paul at Kibangula (Belgian Congo), January, 1952: 78. Archives of the White Fathers, Rome, Italy.

<sup>66</sup> Rene De Laet. Personal interview. 10/12/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

Libermann (a converted Jew) joined the Holy Ghost Fathers. Six years earlier, he had founded a society devoted to Mary and served emancipated slaves in the French colonies. Because both orders shared many of the same objectives, the Pope asked Libermann to integrate his order into the older Congregation of the Holy Ghost. The purpose of the missions, according to Libermann, was to permanently implant the kingdom of God in Africa. Libermann dedicated his people to the “planting of a new branch destined to take root and thus safeguard the future of a whole people.” Libermann’s campaign for the establishment of indigenous Churches meant the formation of an indigenous clergy and hierarchy rooted in the country. The formation of an African clergy was the only way that the Gospel could be widely diffused and the Church solidly established. As a result, within a few years of their arrival, his missionaries opened seminaries wherever they were stationed.<sup>67</sup>

Henry J. Koren claims that the Holy Ghost Fathers were the first to convert systematically under Libermann’s “vivifying impulse.” The Spiritans regarded themselves, however, as pioneers only in the evangelization of black Africans. He argues that Lavigerie had not even entered the senior seminary when Libermann’s first expedition set foot in Africa. Furthermore, Koren contends that the Holy Ghost Fathers did not cling to the coastal areas, as is a misconception about them, rather they penetrated inland. There were four starting points for the drive inland, including Senegal and Upper Guinea to Western Sudan; Zanzibar to East Equatorial Africa; Landana on the west coast to the equator to West Equatorial Africa; and from Walvis Bay in South Africa to Bechuanaland. Koren argues that it was wiser for Libermann to

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<sup>67</sup> Henry J. Koren., C.S.Sp., S.T.D., *The Holy Ghost Fathers: A History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost*. (New York, N.Y.: Ad Press, Ltd., 1958) 166-167.



“practice restraint” because partial attempts at penetration constantly had to be given up as expensive failures. Later following a French caravan of troops, the Spiritans arrived at the interior in some areas of Africa. The typical Spiritan method was to establish a few central missions to educate children in the ways of a Christian life and then use these youths to establish more advanced Christian villages further inland.<sup>68</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, the Holy Ghost Fathers competed with Lavigerie and his White Fathers for territories in interior Africa. In 1878 because of his prestige, Lavigerie was able to undertake (by authorization of the *Propaganda Fide*<sup>69</sup>) evangelization of areas of Nyanza and Tanganyika Lakes. Thus the Holy Ghost Fathers were cut off from the interior. By 1885 however, they had reached the spot that would later be called Coquilhatville. In that same year, the Pope settled a territory competition between the Holy Ghost Fathers and the White Fathers in favor of the former and created the Vicariate of the French Congo. The vicariate stretched from the western coast of Africa to the borders of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The Holy Ghost Fathers went to work setting up new mission stations. For Koren this is evidence that the Spiritans were not limiting themselves to coastal areas. “If it had not been for the fact that Cardinal Lavigerie’s vicariates restricted them to the coast in East Africa, they would most likely have realized their dream of joining hands with their confreres who were penetrating from the West.”<sup>70</sup>

Like the White Fathers, Libermann stressed the importation of European “civilization” as a preparation for the establishment of indigenous Churches in Africa. “To raise people from a state of crude savagery to a supernatural Christian life it was necessary first to teach them to be human, for the life of grace is built on the substructure of man’s natural abilities and

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<sup>68</sup> Koren, 166-167.

<sup>69</sup> *Propaganda Fide* is the Congregation whose task it was to organize all the missionary activity of the Church.

<sup>70</sup> Koren, 452-453.

achievements.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, as Spiritan Bishop Carrie states, “We will first of all make human beings of these poor savages and only then Christians.”<sup>72</sup> The Holy Ghost Fathers paid attention to what would be conducive to their civilization mission and thus indirectly serving the supreme purpose of their labors. The foundations for a truly African Church included economic activity, educational endeavors, charitable enterprises, and scientific work. This principle of economic activity was motivated by two parts: the value of work as a factor in moral training and the material and financial advantages flowing from it.

Charitable enterprises were crucial in furthering God’s work on earth. Charitable work also engendered the missionaries to the local peoples by winning their confidence and making evangelization an easier task. The missionaries aimed to win people over with their kind works, especially in hospitals.<sup>73</sup> The Holy Ghost Fathers used medicine as a way to warm people up for conversion. This aspect was especially true when they treated children. This method helped in their consolidation of Catholic influence even before 1900. While it was costly (infrastructure, medicines, and supplies), it was worth it in the end because of the number of converts they made. One aspect that implied the recognition of the power of European medicine was when local people went to the missionaries instead of the local sorcerer for treatment. While this challenged the traditional role of the sorcerer in village society and diminished his power, it did not eradicate his role completely. It did something, however, to deal a blow to the status and prestige he enjoyed.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Koren, 454.

<sup>72</sup> Koren, 454.

<sup>73</sup> Koren, 462-464.

<sup>74</sup> Felix K. Ekechi. “The Holy Ghost Fathers in Eastern Nigeria, 1885-1920: Observations on Missionary Strategy,” *African Studies Review*, 15, 2 (1972): 224.

Scientific work included geography, natural history, and linguistics. The missionaries were pressed to learn the languages of their areas where they were stationed. In Eastern Nigeria for example, the Holy Ghost Fathers taught in English, and this won people over. Africans saw English as a vehicle to better education and to better jobs. The *Church Mission Society (CMS)* in this area was reluctant to use English. Thus the Spiritans were able to dominate in this area even though the Protestants had arrived thirty years earlier.<sup>75</sup> Education was the surest way for the Holy Ghost Fathers to establish themselves firmly in the country. In “The Holy Ghost Fathers in Eastern Nigeria, 1885-1920: Observations on Missionary Strategy,” Felix K. Ekechi argues that the Spiritans’ aggressive education policy was to evangelize and teach the Christian way of life, but also to outdo the Protestants and expand their influence in Africa.<sup>76</sup> In addition, at mission stations, the priests established a Catholic press and youth organizations where they held theaters, plays, and music engagements.<sup>77</sup>

In winning over converts, the Holy Ghost Fathers favored a direct approach. They often used singing and dancing to get the message across. Africans’ love of music and dancing constituted a powerful attraction. Koren explains that once the priests realized this, they quickly availed themselves of it to drive their lessons home. The duration of the catechumenate (period between potential convert’s application and his or her baptism) was not set in stone. Rather it was governed by the vicariate apostolic appointed by the Pope. The motherhouse warned, however, against too short and extreme a time (which produced many baptisms but few true

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<sup>75</sup> P.B. Clarke. “The Methods and Ideology of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Eastern Nigeria 1885-1905,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 6, 2 (1974): 100.

<sup>76</sup> Ekechi, 235.

<sup>77</sup> Koren, 472-474.

Christians) and too long a time (at which point the process was rendered useless). In addition, the catechist had to pass an exam before baptism.<sup>78</sup>

Like the White Fathers, the Holy Ghost Fathers actively collaborated with the colonial regimes. This arrangement benefited both parties. On the whole, the states were unable to find lay people willing to come to Africa and “expose their families to an untimely death by mysterious tropical diseases.” The missionaries were unable to pursue their goal of civilization and evangelization on a large scale without government funding. Therefore, close collaboration was practiced in British, Belgian, and Portuguese colonies. The one exception was France because anti-clericalism gave little support to mission schools. In colonies where collaboration was active, according to Koren, “everybody profited from the arrangement- the missionaries, the civil authorities, and most of all the backward people who were the object of their attention.”<sup>79</sup>

The primary objective of both the White Fathers and the Holy Ghost Fathers was the creation of an African Church and clergy to spread Christianity on the ground in Africa. Both societies utilized mission schools as their primary vehicle for evangelization. Evangelization meant not only spreading the word of God; it also meant the importation of Western European culture to Africa. To be civilized was to be Christian, and to be Christian was to be civilized. Both societies participated in and propagated a paternalistic system that was part of the institution of colonialism. The White Fathers and the Holy Ghost Fathers actively collaborated with the colonial governments to achieve their goals, and through this collaboration, they went about the task of spreading Christianity and civilization in a systematic fashion throughout Africa.

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<sup>78</sup> Koren, 477-480.

<sup>79</sup> Koren, 501-502.

## The Vicariates

As the White Fathers settled in central Africa, they divided up the areas of Eastern Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi into vicariates (later dioceses). Each vicariate dealt with a variety of issues, including staffing and education, Christianity and native morality, and the threat of Protestants and Muslims. Not all vicariates dealt with all of these issues. The vicariates housed a varying number of mission stations with multiple personnel, but some vicariates were more rural than others.

In the vicariate of Baudoinville the Fathers believed that the rapid evolution of the country fed a materialistic spirit and brought temptations to the native Christians. They felt that the natives would not be able to resist unless their faith was strengthened by strict religious instruction. Thus the leaders in the vicariate reorganized catechism instruction. This reorganization resulted in a more fervent group of catechumens. Catechism teachers handled catechist instruction, and the chapel schools especially depended on these teachers because the priests could only pass by a few times per year. The passion and zeal of these catechism teachers was important for the progress of the mission. The White Fathers had to deal with turnover, as each year a certain number of catechism teachers left the mission for more lucrative jobs.<sup>80</sup> To combat this problem, the Fathers greatly increased the teachers' salaries (especially those who were certified) in order to compete with better paying jobs elsewhere. With increased salaries came the assumption that the Fathers could be more demanding of the teachers' work. In the end, however, the Fathers thought that with better wages came better results. Some teachers had

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<sup>80</sup> The text does not explain where they found more lucrative jobs, but I assume they went to work with the state or corporations.

even asked to be allowed to come back.<sup>81</sup> In Kabgayi (Rwanda) the missions suffered from a substantial lack of missionaries. Their brothers were overburdened, and they desired to see an increase in brothers. Almost half of the missions of the vicariate of Kabgayi (sixteen out of thirty three) remained in the hands of native clergy who nonetheless embraced their large share of responsibilities with “zeal and devotedness.”<sup>82</sup>

Catholicism and the threat of Protestants and Muslims oftentimes went hand in hand. In the vicariate of Costermansville the religious practices of the native Christians were “good without being excellent” especially due to Christian matrimonial practices which drove some people away. The Fathers in Costermansville lobbied to occupy all of the territory (especially the region of the north) where thousands of Banyarwandas were settling. The Protestants were making a strong effort to win over converts, and they were succeeding where there was no Catholic presence.<sup>83</sup> Kabgayi also competed with Protestants and Muslims for converts. Based on figures provided by the Belgian administration, the Fathers estimated that Kabgayi housed a little over one million and a half inhabitants. Of that figure, about five hundred thousand were under the direct influence of the Catholic Church as Christians or catechumens. The Muslims numbered around six thousand, but their number did not appear to be noticeably increasing. This fact did not, however, prevent Muslims from being “fatal” to the Church’s moral standard. The Fathers called Islamic groups “abscesses on the flanks of our populations.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Society of Missionaries of Africa. Annual Report. Volume 43, 1952-1953. Fourth Part. Africa – Belgium. Accessed at the White Father archive in Rome. pp 257-258 (corresponding translated page numbers).

<sup>82</sup> Annual report, 269-270.

<sup>83</sup> Annual report, 263-264.

<sup>84</sup> Annual report, 275.

In the vicariate of Kasongo, Islam was first introduced by slave traders in 1860. By 1952 there were fifty thousand Muslims among the Bulabas, Banobangos, Wazimbés, and Wabembés. The Fathers were not distressed, however, due to a cluster of six thousand Christians (from a population of twenty three thousand) and the mission in Mingana regaining the majority of the chiefdom of Wazimba from Islam. The Fathers contended that without outside help from the Muslims of Tanganyika, Islam would not sustain itself as a major force in this region forever. The Fathers, however, did not hesitate to attack the Muslim threat head on with direct propaganda. Many of the native youth were susceptible to the Church's influence, but on the other hand, Protestant influence had surpassed the Fathers' efforts in the past due to past misfortunes. Massanzé (later called Ubembe), for example, remained abandoned by the White Fathers from 1905-1948. After the First World War, English Protestants established four missions there, and their native pastors were in nearly all of the villages. Likewise the region of the Waregas remained neglected by the White Fathers for a long time despite the insistence from the natives for the Fathers to come to their territory. For three decades the Protestants rooted themselves in these regions, building eight missions (to the five White Father stations), but the Protestant success in the region of the Waregas was not nearly that of Ubembe because some of the Waregas still claimed some Catholic missions. Nonetheless for the Fathers in Kasongo, both Protestantism and Islam posed threats to their Catholic influence and constituted a "serious menace for the religious future of the vicariate... they are both a source of trouble, Islam by its nature itself, and Protestantism by the whimsical interpretation of the Bible, which allows one to find in the Holy books all the elements of a false Messiah... the black Protestants arrive very easily to the point of waiting for a Messiah of their own race...to deliver them and reign over the world."<sup>85</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Annual report, 290-291.

In the vicariate of Kabgayi, it was difficult to obtain reliable statistics from Protestant denominations in the area, thus the Fathers estimated about thirty thousand Protestant followers. They did not get the impression that the Protestants successfully established a strong presence. Several of the young native Catholics went to the Protestants for guidance and access to higher education (thanks to the Protestant schools) and received the message that all religions were equal. The Fathers were not keen on this propaganda. “It’s in sowing those germs of religious indifference that they do us harm.” Concerning those still adhering to traditional religion, they numbered about nine hundred fifty thousand. The Fathers determined it was due to their own lack of resources that prevented them from reaching this population with any real success.<sup>86</sup> Some of the mine workers in the vicariate of Lake Albert were already Protestant at the time they were hired. In the mines the missions were not authorized to set up in the camps, rather they built next to the camps. The Fathers did not have much reason to fear the influence of the Protestants on those already converted because it was rare for a Protestant to convert to Catholicism.<sup>87</sup>

Some of the problems concerning Christianity manifested themselves in marriage customs and family life. In Kabgayi eighty seven percent of families were in good standing (following the rules) and thirteen percent were not. Many superiors abhorred the fickleness with which married people separated, treating the sacrament casually. One of the reasons for this “evil” was because the civil authority did not protect the marriages. In areas where the dowry was not very great, young people entered into marriage hardly realizing the seriousness of the responsibilities and commitment involved. Thus they married without really knowing one

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<sup>86</sup> Annual report, 276.

<sup>87</sup> Annual report, 307.



another. To combat this problem, the Fathers rigorously instructed the parents of these young people about the seriousness and dignity of the Christian home and family. The Fathers believed this instruction would result in a slow transition in their way of thinking, but they thought it would gather strength of its own accord without waiting for help from an intervention by the civil authority.

At the major seminary at Baudoinville, the Fathers struggled with the parents of black seminarians. Some parents wanted their sons to find well-paying jobs in urban centers rather than becoming priests. The Fathers complained that a good number of seminarians wrestled against their parents' wills to accomplish their calling. Some students preferred to skip vacations, fearing what it meant to their vocations. They all knew they could get jobs with good pay with the state or companies, but they wanted nothing to do with that.<sup>88</sup>

In the vicariate of Ngozi (Rwanda), the issue of Christianity had maintained itself well overall, however there was a "dark point" for the future of this Christianity concerning the conversion of the three hundred fifty thousand natives that still observed traditional religion: the Christian chiefs. While the Fathers were grateful to have Christian chiefs to influence the people, they lamented some of the chiefs returning to old ways, including polygamy and sorcery. In some cases an important chief (not living according to the Fathers' moral standard) surrounded himself with baptized sub-chiefs whose conduct was not "edifying." With such examples, the movement of conversions slowed down in some families, and Christian homes were less reluctant to break marriage bonds. In Ngozi the distances to the missions were fairly short, and the Fathers assured the natives that assistance at Sunday service (at the central mission

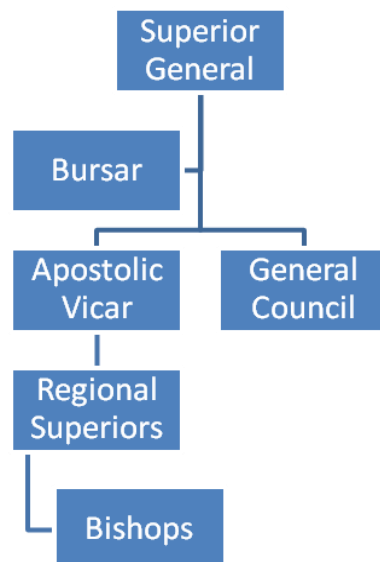
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<sup>88</sup> Annual report, 314.

branches) was obligatory under “pain of grave sin.”<sup>89</sup> Thus the Fathers went to dramatic lengths to ensure attendance at services.

## Leadership

We have examined the issues that the missionaries on the ground experienced in the vicariates. Now we will look at the White Father leadership and its relationship with the missionaries in the field, as well as the different problems the leadership encountered as they carried out administrative duties. It is important to understand the various positions within the Society and what role they played. One way to illustrate the leadership within the Society is in an organizational chart. The Society was largely run like a non-profit organization. There was a director, middle managers, and a financial representative.



The Society's goal was to make the best use of its resources (people and money) to achieve its evangelical objectives and operate according to its mission statement. The Society worked with the colonial government to subsidize schools and hospitals. Most priests were on the state's

<sup>89</sup> Annual report, 310.

payroll acting as teachers and medical personnel and managing mission stations. Located at *Maison-Carrée* in Algiers (later moved to Rome after 1952), the Superior General ran the show. According to Shorter, missionaries did not consider that their leadership was “out of touch.” Superiors General such as Livinhac, Birraux, and Durrieu<sup>90</sup> all had extensive missionary experience in sub-Saharan Africa. Even Voillard (1922-1936), whose experience had been in North Africa, made an extensive tour of all the missions in equatorial Africa. Shorter contends that while there were occasional divergences of opinion, on the whole cooperation with the Superior General was good.<sup>91</sup> According to a personal conversation with White Father Stefaan Minnaert<sup>92</sup>, the Superior General ruled like a king until around 1996. Before then there was no real check on his power.

The Apostolic Vicar acted as the religious strongman and was considered the ecclesiastical superior within the Society. He worked with the General Council to make decisions concerning spiritual issues. The Bursar was very important because he held the purse strings. It is not entirely clear, however, whether he could refuse the Superior General’s financial requests. The Regional Superior played an important role in the lives of the missionaries, especially the mission superiors. He acted as the “rules guy,” enforcing regulations and policy. The Regional Superior<sup>93</sup> had a territory (much like a salesman) in the field in Africa. The *raison d’être* was to represent the Superior General to the local missionaries and carry out site visitations for him. He compiled reports based on his visitations and reported his findings to

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<sup>90</sup> After Lavigerie died in 1892, Léon Livinhac became superior general of the White Fathers. Joseph-Marie Birraux served as superior general of the White Fathers from 1936-1947, and Louis-Marie-Joseph Durrieu served as superior general of the White Fathers from 1947-1957.

<sup>91</sup> Aylward Shorter. <Aylward@aylwardshorter.com> “Questions – White Fathers in Congo.” 14 August 2009. Personal email (1 September 2009).

<sup>92</sup> Head Archivist of the White Father archive in Rome.

<sup>93</sup> “Regional Superior” is a misnomer. There were some nine or ten.

the Superior General, becoming his eyes and ears on the ground. During a personal interview with White Father priest Paul De Smet (stationed in Burundi in the 1950s) in Antwerp, he was asked about the role of the Regional Superior (at that time the Regional Superior of Eastern Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi was Father Hellemans). He described Hellemans as a cold man with a rigid personality. Father De Smet described his successor as warm and genial, the opposite of Hellemans. He gave the impression that the unique personality of the Regional Superior did much to change the nature of the position in the way he engaged with the missionaries on the ground.<sup>94</sup>

The leadership placed priests and brothers in certain geographic areas and mission stations based on skill set and personality, and transfers were made based on problems reported up the chain of command. In a letter from Father Van Volsem<sup>95</sup> (Assistant General to the Superior General Durrieu), he discussed the problems concerning the behavior of a missionary in the field.

The Reverend Father Parmentier, Superior, is a skillful builder, but terrible for the workers; one would call him a supervisor of a concentration camp. He hits them and kicks them when they call him; someone who works well with his arms and feet. He is very good at imposing punishments in francs. Christians say: Those priests like francs; they are thieves. That creates a lot of displeased persons and the workers leave. Father Superior causes people to hate and detest him, and people approach him almost trembling...Everywhere he will go, he will be labeled by the natives as a terrible man. Since he's been here as Superior, things have changed a lot under his dictatorship.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Paul De Smet. Personal interview. 10/19/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

<sup>95</sup> It is unclear who the letter is addressed to, but it appears to have been written to Hellemans (Regional Superior).

<sup>96</sup> Letter from Van Volsem (Assistant General to the Superior General). 22 December 1952. White Father Archives. Rome. Dossier 523. Hellemans papers.

Van Volsem goes further to explain that the other priests are unhappy about this situation, and they discuss it, but they are afraid of Father Parmentier. Van Volsem comments to the letter's recipient that this issue was not included in his report from the site visit to Kitwenge. Van Volsem wonders if there is some exaggeration to this story, but this is not the first time they have received complaints about Father Parmentier's "strong-handed methods."

There were also instances when a priest was not content in his position and appealed to his superiors. In a letter from Hellemans to Van Volsem in the fall of 1952, they discussed the case of Father De Laet.<sup>97</sup> Father De Laet appealed to his superiors about his assignment teaching at the Regional Seminary and was directed to Hellemans, but he refused saying he would not get any result from the Regional Superior. Hellemans confided to Van Volsem that De Laet's "state of health is not very brilliant" and had a tendency towards "neurasthenia." Hellemans complains that De Laet will "refuse or perform unwillingly tasks that are imposed on him... It's morbid insubordination." De Laet publicly refused his teaching assignment, and Hellemans was worried it would affect morale. "Monsignor Grauls tells me that Father Van Hoode raised some noise saying that, if Father De Laet wins his case, he, too, will ask to not be assigned to the Regional Seminary. Under these conditions, where do we go?"<sup>98</sup>

Not all personnel issues within the Society were so dramatic. In a letter to Hellemans in 1952, the placement of brothers was discussed. "...We cannot put Lucien-Jacques Luomono, because considering his character, it is certain that after one week he will quarrel with Mr. Rubhausen... we need to have there a brother who has a minimum of flexibility and good

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<sup>97</sup> I suspect this is the same Father De Laet from my personal interviews, but I cannot confirm this.

<sup>98</sup> Letter from Hellemans (Regional Superior) to Van Volsem (Assistant General to the Superior General). 14 October 1952. White Father Archives. Rome. Dossier 523. Hellemans papers.

judgment... He will therefore go to Kitega. There he'll be able to learn to build, because, in fact, he is a worker and he is not stupid, and in a vicariate, if things don't go well in a mission, he can always be put in another mission..."<sup>99</sup> Thus like all managers, the leadership frequently dealt with a wide array of human resources issues.

We have seen how the Fathers proselytized to the natives and a comparison to the Spiritans' methods. A closer look at the individual vicariates within the region the Fathers settled shows the Fathers dealt with a variety of issues, including personnel and education, Christianity and upholding the Catholic moral code, as well as the threat of Protestants and Muslims in some vicariates. We have seen how the Society's leadership operated and its members' relationships to missionaries in the field. Now I will examine the turmoil and tensions within the Society. What problems occurred internally? What solutions were proposed? Additionally, I will focus on a special missionary leader who played a pioneering role as a proponent of native and civil rights during a time when segregation and racism were the norm.

### Internal Strife

There was definitely internal strife (racial) within the Society in most White Father vicariates (especially Uganda and Upper Congo), however, this does not mean there was no cooperation between African priests and missionaries, or that all white missionaries were racist. The White Fathers even continued to run the seminaries until the late 1960s. Shorter argues that there were and are tensions with the African hierarchy. These issues were typical.<sup>100</sup> In the

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<sup>99</sup> Letter to Hellmans (Regional Superior). 4 July 1952. White Father Archives. Rome. Dossier 523. Hellemans papers. It is unclear who authored the letter, but I suspect it was Van Volsem.

<sup>100</sup> Aylward Shorter. <Aylward@aylwardshorter.com> "Contact." 24 March 2009. Personal emails (9 September 2009).

1950s the *ius commissionis*<sup>101</sup> was taken away from the White Fathers, and they were no longer in charge of the dioceses in which they worked. Instead local hierarchies were set up, and African bishops were appointed in the 1950s. Most bishops were, however, still White Fathers until the 1960s. There were not a large number of African White Fathers until it was decided to recruit them in the mid 1970s. Those that were had joined for the sake of community life and remained in their own countries (primarily Uganda). The Fathers' primary task was setting up a local diocesan clergy. There were rivalries, and the white priests felt some threat, but the main contention was between Regionals and Bishops. Some white priests questioned the effectiveness of native priests compared to themselves. One major factor was likely due to the fact that white missionaries had their own benefactors and supply sources back home in Europe, and the native clergy did not. According to Shorter, it is only since the start of the twenty-first century that African White Fathers hold power positions within the Society.<sup>102</sup> In a letter from Superior General Durrieu to Hellemans, Durrieu commented that Monsignor de Nyundo had visited *Maison Carrée*, and he was unsure what the Monsignor thought of the White Fathers' welcome. Durrieu insisted that they did everything they could. Monsignor declared that the White Fathers (leadership) did not have a favorable opinion of the relations between the white priests and the black priests. Durrieu argued that Monsignor was correct, and Monsignor advised them to remedy the situation. The solution appeared to involve creating a White Father mission at Nyundo and a mission of African priests at Birambo. This way the vicariate would be better entrusted to the secular African clergy, and it would permit the leadership to see how relations

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<sup>101</sup> The *ius commissionis*, established in 1929 by Cardinal W.M. van Rossum, ensured that the participation of orders and congregations in missionary work was organized institutionally. The practical execution of the rapidly expanding missionary work was entrusted to them entirely. The Propaganda Fide controlled their missionary activities through the vicar or prefect Apostolic, which had considerable influence within his own order or congregation, but was only answerable to the prefect of the Propaganda Fide.

<sup>102</sup> Aylward Shorter. <Aylward@aylwardshorter.com> "Questions – White Fathers in Congo." 14 August 2009. Personal email (9 September 2009).

progressed.<sup>103</sup> The native priests' major complaint was not being treated like the White Fathers.<sup>104</sup>

### Social Justice

There were extraordinary members, however, in the Society who pioneered native rights and equality and for whom racism was a dirty word. Bishop Richard Cleire (1900-1968) of Kasongo (which he founded) was such a pioneer. He was highly regarded for his stance on human and civil rights. The years of white backlash following Congolese independence (1960-1962) were a terrible trial to him, but he managed to get all of his missionaries to safety. He sympathized with the missionaries' suffering, but he thought the Congolese suffered more.<sup>105</sup> In Cleire's mind, beginning in 1945, colonization was only a temporary phase. The Congolese should be prepared to inherit and govern their own country by way of education and improving the caliber of the schools. He believed that the primary work of the missions was to procure (for all people) a more humane life and to prepare for the future by forming citizens capable of being good officials. Cleire is credited with coming up with the idea to create the University of the Congo to realize his dream. Thus Louvanium was in a way his child. As a strong proponent of social justice, he believed justice was handled poorly in Kivu by some colonists with "few

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<sup>103</sup> Letter to Hellmans (Regional Superior) from Durrieu (Superior General). 27 December 1952. White Father Archives. Rome. Dossier 523. Hellemans papers.

<sup>104</sup> Letter to Van Volsem (Assistant General) from Hellemans (Regional Superior). 27 December 1952. White Father Archives. Rome. Dossier 523. Hellemans papers.

<sup>105</sup> Aylward Shorter. <Aylward@aylwardshorter.com> "Contact." 24 March 2009. Personal email (9 September 2009).



scruples.” Cleire famously drafted an Easter letter of instruction in 1949 (aimed at the private companies) to help defend the cause of those he saw as disinherited.<sup>106</sup>

By conscience and before God, no one has the right to withhold the salary of his workers. All Christians know what Scripture says about that sin. It yells vengeance to heaven. It is unjust to impose by twisted ways, a work contract upon a man whose ignorance or weakness leaves him defenseless against the slyness of his employer. It is unjust to treat the workers in such a way that they end up revolting, deserting, or falling from exhaustion. It is unjust to prevent the workers from belonging to a professional association through which they would be able to legitimately defend their interests. It is unjust to impose on workers clauses in contracts that take away their rights as men and as Christians. It is unjust to take from poor peasants incapable of defending themselves the meager fields which they need to live, so that (the companies) profit from this.<sup>107</sup>

To speak out like Cleire took courage and created many enemies. When Cleire was assigned to the “start up” vicariate of Kasongo, there was some speculation that this was banishment in response to his Easter letter.<sup>108</sup> While the Superior General publicly declared the contrary, according to White Father Paul De Smet, this assignment was considered exile in a way.<sup>109</sup> In 1952 Durrieu wrote to Cleire to announce the transfer saying, “Lately, tongues have wagged and people have said a lot of things... They wanted to see in your being assigned to Kasongo a sort of blame for your pastoral letter on social issues... So let them not expect that [blame, reprimand]... I hope that all the gossip and indiscretions which have surrounded this division will cease completely.” Durrieu’s letter may have served as support for Cleire’s views, but he

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<sup>106</sup> “*Petit Echo*,” April 1969. 206-207. Archive of the White Fathers in Varsenare, Belgium (corresponding translated page numbers)..

<sup>107</sup> “*Petit Echo*,” 207.

<sup>108</sup> “*Petit Echo*,” 207.

<sup>109</sup> Paul De Smet. Personal interview. 10/19/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

never counted on it to defend himself.<sup>110</sup> Cleire appears to have been an anomaly among the White Fathers. While many other missionaries may have shared Cleire's beliefs on native rights, most missionaries did not protest current conditions on the ground or generally vocalize their criticisms to their superiors. Not only did Cleire pioneer a progressive way of thinking for his time, he acted on it.

### The Case of Victor Roelens

While Cleire proved to be something of an anomaly in the missionary system, there were others who stuck out for more negative reasons. One example is Bishop Victor Roelens. In 1891 Roelens was appointed to Upper Congo, and travelled to Lake Tanganyika with the tenth caravan of the White Fathers, reaching the lake in the following year. Upper Congo became a separate jurisdiction in 1893 with Roelens as administrator. When it became a Vicariate Apostolic in 1895, Roelens was appointed as its bishop. Roelens has been described as a man who was determined to see Africa in an unfavorable light. Shorter argues that Roelens saw his role as a reformer whose task was to strengthen the Africans' wills and teach them the good habits of white civilization as a foundation for lasting Christian conversion. He believed Africans were impulsive and lazy. They lacked real intellectual effort, instead being dominated by imagination. He thought they were incapable of logic, and their motivations were primarily fear, pride, and self-interest. What they needed, Roelens believed, was a gradualist program of reform based on a European model that would allow them to make use of their undeveloped faculties. Even then, however, he thought they would never achieve the "perfection of life that was found in the lower ranks of (European) society."<sup>111</sup> This idea was unattainable in a world of cultural inequality. How did Roelens fail to cross the gulf of culture shock and initial prejudices

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<sup>110</sup> "Petit Echo," 209-210.

<sup>111</sup> Shorter, 160.

most missionaries experienced? Shorter argues that this fact was due in part to the socio-cultural vacuum in Upper Congo when Roelens took over. The region was haunted by endemic disease, slave-raiding, and warfare. The positive aspects of African culture were not readily apparent. Roelens desired to dominate through civilization. He had basically created his own colonial regime in Upper Congo (a colony within a colony), and wanted to create a “purified Africanity” that remained subordinate to Europe. Clearly this was a far cry from Lavigerie’s teachings. While Cleire illustrates one extreme way of thinking, and Roelens another, most missionaries fell somewhere in the middle.<sup>112</sup>

### Conclusion

During the 1950s, the Society of Missionaries of Africa was a highly centralized institution. It mixed nationalities at every position and level, and this was likely unique in the Church at large. The first loyalty was, however, to the center of the Society and not to a European province of origin. That battle was finally won in the General Chapter of 1947.<sup>113</sup> Major influences on the White Fathers institution at the time included legalism, centralization, and emphasis on the role of the laity. The Society moved toward legalism, concerning the legislation of the minutiae of every day life as contained in the Directory of the Constitutions (abrogated in 1967). The leadership required all appointments to be centralized, enjoining that every missionary write to the Superior General. Each missionary kept a diary, and the mission superior compiled these and submitted them to the Superior General on an annual basis. The New Theology had some affect on seminary training. As a seminary student, White Father

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<sup>112</sup> Shorter, 160-161.

<sup>113</sup> Aylward Shorter. <Aylward@aylwardshorter.com> “Questions – White Fathers in Congo.” 14 August 2009. Personal email (7 August 2009).

Aylward Shorter recalls writing an essay in the 1950s inspired by Yves Congar<sup>114</sup> on the lay apostolate. Shorter argues that the apostolate of the laity was well established as a result of Catholic Action since the time of Pius XI (1922-1939). He goes further explaining that apart from lay movements like the Legion of Mary and Young Christian Workers, there were the (lay) catechists who played a substantial role in the evangelization of Africa and in running the local Church. Additionally, biblical studies began to take root in seminaries in place of neo-scholastic theology. In the wake of Vatican II, such ideas like “phasing out” and “moratorium” were important. In the 1950s, the White Fathers generally believed that their work would be completed (however naively) when they handed over the reigns to the native clergy. Vatican II proved that missionaries were still essential, but that they should play a larger role in the local Church to take on roles like primary evangelization.<sup>115</sup>

We have looked at the Society of Missionaries of Africa as an institution and have examined the various pieces of that institution to determine how it functioned as a whole. Now I will examine the Society’s individuals. Who were these men and what are their unique stories? What role did they play and what influence did they wield? By conducting personal interviews with some of these men, I aim to answer these questions and to draw a clearer picture of the White Fathers and their role in the Belgian Congo.

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<sup>114</sup> A French Dominican priest, Congar’s work emphasized that the church is the mystical body of Christ, the people of God, and the sacrament of salvation. From this foundation, he revitalized many dimensions of ecclesiology, including the theology of ecclesial unity and catholicity. He reinvigorated the theology of ministry, gave laity a new sense of their importance in the life of the church, and engendered in the entire church a renewed sense of its mission to the world. He also made important contributions to the theology of tradition and to ecumenical dialogue.

<sup>115</sup> Aylward Shorter. <Aylward@aylwardshorter.com> “Contact.” 14 August 2009. Personal email (7 August 2009).

## Theology on the Ground

It is to you that I now come, O my beloved Africa. Seventeen years ago I sacrificed all to you, when, driven by a palpable force from God, I renounced everything to devote myself to your service... I have loved everything about Africa, her past, her future, her mountains, her clear sky, her sunshine, the great sweep of the deserts, the azure waves that bathe her coasts.<sup>116</sup>

In the spirit of their founder, the White Fathers dedicated their lives to the evangelization of Africa. In order to better understand their unique experiences in the Belgian Congo, I spent two weeks in Belgium interviewing White Fathers stationed in the Belgian Congo and Burundi during the 1950s. Some arrived earlier, and all stayed well into the 1970s and 1980s. Some were forced out because of hostile political situations on the ground, and others returned to Europe because of poor health after decades in the field. This chapter is based on those interviews conducted in the fall of 2008. My objective was to understand their lives “on the ground” and to discover these missionaries’ personal goals and experiences. The interviewees consisted of men from different levels of the Society’s internal hierarchy, and I believe their various vantage points provide a more complete picture of life as a White Father. Each man brought something different to the table. I met with five White Fathers living in various parts of Belgium (four priests and one brother). More than five decades had elapsed since the experiences I asked them to recall. These men spent decades in Africa. In one case, Brother Staf Van de Velde lived and worked in the Belgian Congo for forty-seven years. Their experiences spanned several distinct periods of history, and I was a little concerned this fact would prove problematic. The 1940s for example had little to do with what occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Not only was I asking these men to retrieve accurate details from their pasts, but to recall those

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<sup>116</sup> These are the words inscribed on Cardinal Lavigerie’s (founder of the White Fathers) funerary monument in Rome, which are taken from the spiritual testament he drew up in 1884 and from a collection of his own writings published in the same year.

details within the context of a specific window of time. For the most part, they were able to stay within the confines of my period of interest, but they would sometimes digress to events that occurred later in the 1970s or 1980s when the post-colonial reality of the Belgian Congo was a different world altogether. I found myself mentally noting certain memories and filing them away as part of another time. Thus writing an historical narrative based on memories more than fifty years old proved to be a tricky task. I took great care not to mix up general events which could seemingly have occurred in multiple decades, such as the baptism of a group of adults, the marriage ceremony of a young couple, or the routine visit of an administrative official.

The interviewees live in various White Father communal residences throughout Belgium. Three men live in Antwerp, and two live in Varsenare (near Brugge). Peter Van Uffelen (a native Belgian) served as translator. With the exception of one interview, which was done in English, all interviews were conducted in Flemish and translated into English. I recorded the interviews on a tape recorder. The interviewees had no problem with recording our sessions, and the tape recorder did not appear to limit their openness or candor. In fact I found them to be surprisingly uninhibited in describing their experiences and opinions. No subject (with the exception of one interviewee's imprisonment during the Simba Rebellion<sup>117</sup>) was off the table. I presented myself in a genuine and authentic fashion – as a young American student (and Catholic) eager to learn more about the Catholic Church in Africa, and more specifically the experiences of the White Fathers. I was there to listen and to learn. This approach served to disarm them, and I think allowed them to feel more comfortable divulging their pasts. There was one interviewee, however, for whom I was not quite prepared. (I was not given any background information prior to the interviews.) Father Jaak Seynaeve is highly educated and had been a professor of theology for over thirty years at Lovanium (later National University of Zaire). He

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<sup>117</sup> The Simba Rebellion was a 1964 rebellion in the former French Congo (Eastern Congo) which began as a result of alleged abuses by the Congolese central government.

came from a very affluent family in Belgium and was well connected in Belgian political circles. He was an obviously dominant personality, and I found *myself* being interviewed at times. Nonetheless, his interview proved to be one of the more interesting.

The missionaries I interviewed were all over the age of eighty, and one closer to ninety. I suspected they would be eager to tell me their life stories to set the record straight. Today the idea of a white missionary (although still in existence) in Africa seems archaic and may even have a negative connotation in certain circles. Later I will explore the idea of a post-colonial “identity crisis” of the white missionary in Africa. I hoped the interviewees would want to share their stories for posterity, and to help people outside of the Society understand what their lives were truly like and what they contributed to the Catholic missionary movement. As men of advanced age, this could be the last chance for their stories to be told. As it turned out, one missionary was in poor health, and one priest who had been on my original longer list of men to interview passed away just a few weeks after I returned home from Europe. Overall, however, the interviewees’ health and sharpness of mind was good. They prepared notes and timelines to reflect on as we talked. Brother Staf Van de Velde had even written a book that chronicled his life from childhood through his time in the Belgian Congo. He wrote it so that his family would have a record of his experiences. Without descendants, in death, these stories are for the most part lost. Their preparation was a relief to me as I began to listen.

While oral interviews are a useful way to preserve the historical past, there are some drawbacks, especially when interviewing the elderly. While the interviewees were lucid, there were instances when I found myself concerned about the information they gave me. For example, during my interview with Father Seynaeve (at the time he was eighty-eight years old), he often repeated the same story or thought. Following our interview during lunch, he repeated a

story he had told as if he had forgotten he had told it before. Father Seynaeve recalled stories about important historical figures he said he knew intimately. For example, he confided that he had been very close with Mobutu<sup>118</sup> and had baptized his second child, Pica. He met with Patrice Lumumba in prison the week before he was murdered. He admitted he had some influence in the Belgian Congo and had pushed for Mobutu to be the head of the new independent government. It seemed that Father Seynaeve had played a role in Belgo-Congolese politics, and at first this seemed like an exaggeration to me. What was this priest doing influencing high-level politics? But after some fact checking with a close friend of Father Seynaeve's (who happens to be a prominent priest in Baton Rouge and has traveled internationally with Father Seynaeve) and discussion with Dr. Jack Losso (a Congolese professor at LSU who attended the seminary in the Belgian Congo in the 1950s), I understood more fully the power that Catholic clergy wielded in the Belgian Congo in the 1950s.

Some errors in memory certainly occurred. When questioned about the White Father Regional Superior<sup>119</sup> Father Hellemans' replacement, Father Hoste, Father Paul De Smet told me that Father Hoste was not Father Hellemans' replacement; it was Father Van Hove. I made a mental note of this because I had just finished reading Father Hellemans' correspondence to Rome concerning the training of his replacement, Father Hoste. Father De Smet had prepared

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<sup>118</sup> Born Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, was the President of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Belgian Congo) for thirty-two years (1965–1997) after deposing Joseph Kasavubu. He formed a totalitarian regime in Zaire, which attempted to purge the country of all colonial cultural influence, and entered wars to challenge the rise of communism in other African countries. His mismanagement of his country's economy, and personal enrichment from its financial and natural resources, makes his name synonymous with kleptocracy in Africa.

<sup>119</sup> The Regional Superiors were stationed in Africa. In this case, the Regional Superior was in charge of the territory of Eastern Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi.



notes on dates and names to help him recall information during our interview. I believed this was nothing more than a simple error in his recollection of that detail.

My last concern was in the possibility of getting a revisionist history based on guilt or shame. What if the interviewees had been ashamed of past actions, or felt guilty about them, and therefore neglected to include certain experiences? Would they try to paint a rosy picture in which everyone got along in the Belgian Congo? After my first interview with Father Rene de Laet, this concern evaporated. Father de Laet was very candid about details that made the missionaries look complicit in a colonial system he admitted was “one-hundred percent paternalistic.”<sup>120</sup> He talked about the use of the *chicote* or whip by colonial officials to punish natives. He went on to explain that in certain circumstances, one almost did not have a choice but to use the whip to mete out punishments.

### General Themes and Patterns

Several general themes and patterns emerged from the interviews. The first common thread I noticed was that the missionaries’ primary goal in the Belgian Congo was to Christianize *and* to civilize. According to Father de Laet, they went to the Belgian Congo “to bring civilization, a civilization inspired by their Catholic faith. These two things were inseparable facts.”<sup>121</sup> The second theme was for one to know his or her place. This idea appeared to be the backbone of the social structures created on the mission stations. It applied to everyone. On the missions whites and blacks alike played their roles within the confines of color and gender. In effect everyone was expected to remain within his or her own station and not to question

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<sup>120</sup> Rene De Laet. Personal interview. 10/12/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

<sup>121</sup> Rene De Laet. Personal interview. 10/12/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

authority when doing God's work. As Brother Van de Velde put it when asked what he had accomplished in the Belgian Congo, "Of course one is a missionary, and the main point is that one does what his superiors tell him."<sup>122</sup> All of the interviewees shared a common commitment and love for the people of Africa. They talked about the joy and emotion the people brought to them. They devoted their entire lives to them. The missionaries were sympathetic to the natives because they were survivors. Father de Laet said that even today, white people could not imagine the level of poverty, the hundreds of thousands of refugees because of war. Despite everything, they survive. He said that if white people had to live in those circumstances, they would perish. Father Stefan Minnaert, head archivist at the White Father archive in Rome, concurred. During a long personal conversation on my last day at the archive, he explained his observations on Rwandans during his many years stationed there as a missionary. He argued that Rwandans are people who reason with emotion. Europeans are more interested in thinking intellectually. Rwandans are warm, loving, communal people. He discussed the importance of the clan in Rwanda. He explained that there are two types of relationships based on emotions – being in the clan (full embrace) and the other extreme (deference, fear, distrust, hate, or some combination of these). There is no such thing as "just friends" - something in between. He seemed to see this as a flaw in a way. To me it appeared he had been accepted into a clan and considered family at some point in time. While he cherished those relationships (and it obviously changed him at the core), he found it frustrating too because of his own nature as a so-called individualist European.<sup>123</sup> Perhaps he could never fully embrace those relationships because of that mentality. Both Father de Laet and Father Minnaert did not speak outside the perimeter of their experiences, and while one could classify these observations as classic

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<sup>122</sup> Staf Van de Velde. Personal interview. 10/12/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

<sup>123</sup> From a personal conversation with Father Stefan Minnaert, head archivist at the White Father archive in Rome. 10 October 2008.

Eurocentrism, they thought their beliefs justified based on their own personal experiences. For them, Africa was a place of extremes.

Another major subject discussed was the idea of Congolese self-rule and the timing of independence. The Fathers mostly believed that the Congolese would and should rule themselves one day, but that 1960 was not that day. It was too early, and the people were not ready. At the time they predicted disaster. Regarding Belgium's sudden granting of independence in 1960, Brother Van de Velde said, "Belgium wasn't interested in fighting a war there, and it was normal that they became independent, but that was all way too soon. They were not mature enough for it."<sup>124</sup> Father Seynaeve lamented the idea of Van Bilsen's Thirty-Year Plan. He wished that Van Bilsen's opinions and ideas had been more widely received at the time. But, after more than fifty years, he seemed torn on the role Belgium played in Congo's history. "Our political party should not have stepped in so much in Africa. In my opinion it is still the origin and the cause of many of the problems now in Africa. Why must the Belgian Congo be a replica or a copy of the political situation in Belgium? I don't see that. I would have liked that Africa could have developed in a completely independent way from local politics in all the European and American countries. It is a difficult matter."<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Staf Van de Velde. Personal interview. 10/12/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

<sup>125</sup> Jaak Seynaeve. Personal interview. 10/18/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

## Introductions and Arrival to the Belgian Congo

The first interview was conducted in Antwerp with Father Rene de Laet. When we arrived, he greeted us at the door and led us upstairs to a small library where the interview took place. Father De Laet was reserved and soft-spoken. Growing up in Mechelen, a small town



halfway between Antwerp and Brussels, he came from a large family of stout Catholic farmers. He attended a small seminary in Hoogstraten, and later after one year at the novitiate and four more years of theology, he signed a ten-year contract in the Belgian Congo. His first assignment was in Ituri (northeastern Congo in the province of Kisangani) thirty kilometers from the border with Uganda. His

explained that his first impression upon touching down on the airfield at Rumu was the cheerful reception of the natives at his arrival. He spent a short time in Ituri and was transferred to a jungle mission in Bunia (near the Babira tribe) where he became mission superior and later to Kilomine where he was responsible for the evangelization of the workers in the gold mines of Kilomoto.

As was with all White Fathers in the Belgian Congo, Father de Laet's first task was to learn the local language. In many instances this meant learning a new language every few years with each new assignment. They were given about six months to learn it, and in Father De Laet's case, the mission organized language education. Language education was not provided on every mission. At Kilomine there were several labor camps, sometimes with as many as two thousand workers in one camp. Thus he kept busy. He did routine parochial work and coordinated social services. Since the laborers received wages, the priests kept them busy in

their free time with cinemas, sports, education, and even acting- all in an effort to keep young Congolese men away from alcohol and other sins.

Among the group of interviewees, Father Jaak Seynaeve was in every respect exceptional. As a professor of theology in Leopoldville/Kinshasa (from 1956 when Lovanium was founded until 1987) for more than thirty years, Father Seynaeve was not technically a missionary “on the ground,” rather he was a missionary in the classroom. He did, however, play an important role in sculpting young Congolese minds and informing Belgo-Congolese politics. There is an interesting local connection, as Father Seynaeve taught philosophy and religious studies at LSU for about fifteen years after leaving the Congo. Father Seynaeve spoke flawless English, and it was clear from the beginning of the interview that he was a boisterous personality and a charming man.



Father Seynaeve was born in 1920 in Flanders. He came from an affluent family of textile people, and they also co-owned a small insurance company. He attended the White Father seminary in Buholt. After years of studying theology, he was ordained in 1944. He earned the equivalent of a doctorate in 1948 plus an additional certification in theology beyond the doctorate. In 1956 he went to the Belgian Congo to research African theology and determine where that question stood. He also recruited contributors. Upon arriving in the Belgian Congo, he was both surprised and not surprised by his first contact. Many missionaries returning to Europe told stories and relayed information, so in a way he knew what it would be like. But, he could never have been completely prepared for the initial culture shock. He

admitted that he was not really in tune with missionary life in the field, but he praised those missionaries working *dans la brousse* (in the bush). While he said that he thought the missionaries were given too much autonomy (by the state) in running schools and educating future Congolese leaders, he thought they did a heroic job in very difficult circumstances. People cannot every really understand what it was like there. Those missionaries, he said, had been in the field for years, and “it is easy to go to Africa and write an article about Africa having been only a short time.”<sup>126</sup> He learned that people who stay in Africa years stay because they love it. They love the people. It is home. Regarding the public’s modern-day perception of white missionaries in Africa and their legacy, he said, “We have too many journalists in Brussels, in London, in Paris, and in Washington that criticize the missionary work of that time. But, they never would have been in the field. They never have been working as the missionaries have been doing...And I think the human instrument is imperfect, but the way afterwards missionary activity has been criticized is not logical, is not justified.”<sup>127</sup>

I met Father Edgard Declercq at the White Father community residence in Varsenare,



near the coast. The residence is beautiful, set on a large piece of property with gardens and trees. They grow a lot of their own food. There is a small cemetery where many White Fathers are buried. They are all called martyrs. Father Declercq was a very pleasant and good-natured man. He was quite old, and his vision was poor. He told me he could only make out that I was female and young. He came from Roeselare (West Flanders) from a family of five children. His two youngest sisters

<sup>126</sup> Jaak Seynaeve. Personal interview. 10/18/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

<sup>127</sup> Jaak Seynaeve. Personal interview. 10/18/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

were also missionaries stationed in the Congo and Burundi. As a youth, he was a member of the Catholic Action movement. He credited his strict Catholic background and God-fearing parents for inspiring his vocation. He worked in Eastern Congo (Kivu) in the diocese of Kasongo. He informed me that this area was Tippu Tipp's headquarters.<sup>128</sup> He was asked to describe his circumstances. How did he live? He explained that the missionaries lived on an elevated area separate from the local population. According to him, they lived like "rich Belgians."<sup>129</sup> He arrived in Kasongo in 1958, and there were about twelve to thirteen other priests stationed there. The bishop of Kasongo was Monsignor Cleire. Father Declercq spent most of his time doing parish work and tending to the spiritual needs of the natives. Like Father de Laet, his first order of business was learning the local language. There was a large Muslim population near Kasongo, but there was little interaction between Muslims and the mission. There were also Norwegian Protestants nearby, but the relationship between the Catholics and Protestants was indifferent.

Since Father Declercq arrived in the Belgian Congo so near to independence, the majority of the time was spent discussing events during 1958-1960. When asked what his primary goal was in going to the Belgian Congo, he explained that he wanted to "conquer the world for Christ."<sup>130</sup> He confessed that this sounded naïve, but that was what he believed. He appeared to be a very passionate and zealous man even now. By 1958, events were already in motion, and he knew exactly what he was getting in to. Life on the ground was already unstable.

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<sup>128</sup> Tippu Tip was a Swahili-Zanzibari trader, notorious slaver, plantation owner and governor. Working for a succession of sultans of Zanzibar, he led many trading expeditions into east-central Africa, sometimes involving slave trade and ivory. He constructed profitable trading posts that reached deep into Central Africa.

<sup>129</sup> Edgard Declercq. Personal interview. 10/18/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

<sup>130</sup> Edgard Declercq. Personal interview. 10/18/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

I met Father Paul De Smet in a last-minute interview at the White Father residence in Antwerp. I had some unexpected free time before leaving Belgium to return home. He was gracious enough to meet us on short notice, and he took time to prepare brief notes and a timeline to jog his memory during the interview. Father De Smet seemed quite shy and reserved. Unlike the other interviewees, he required more leading and probing for information. He tended to answer only what was asked in a succinct and concise way. Aside from these attributes (which can make an interview more difficult), he was a friendly man who opened up more once a connection and understanding of the direction of the conversation was established. Father De Smet was born in Heverlee from a middle class family. He is one of ten children, nine of whom are still living. His family, like the other interviewees, was intensely Catholic, especially his father. He eventually attended school with the White Fathers in Madrid, the same school Brother Staf Van de Velde attended. After more schooling in Luxembourg, he was ordained in 1952. Father De Smet's degrees are all from the field of the sciences, and he appeared to be a very educated man. At different points, he taught physics, biology, and chemistry. When asked what called him to the priesthood, he explained that it had been a vocation he felt since childhood inspired by his contact with the White Fathers. He felt the calling from as young as ten years of age. He was assigned to Burundi in 1955 and performed mostly parish work. There were two other priests on the mission; one was in charge. They rotated their *safaris* so that someone was at the mission. They departed on a Tuesday and stayed away from the mission until Sunday. The catechists (who were unpaid) handled teaching responsibilities, as well as manual labor (working in the fields and building roads). The food grown in the fields sustained the children attending the boarding





school. He studied the language and customs of the people. Father De Smet (like the other *confreres* at his mission) had to take a language examination at the bishop's office to ensure he was fluent in the native tongue. If he failed, he had to repeat the test. Once he passed, he could begin working with the local people. He spent fifteen months in this position.

Brother Staf Van de Velde was one of the more engaging and enlightening interviews. He was a lively spark with an exuberant personality. It was obvious from the beginning that he loved Africa and had no regrets about devoting his life to the people of the Congo. When asked



what drew him to the missionary life, to the White Fathers, he answered that a calling was a mysterious thing, and it was not an easy decision. His devout Catholic parents and his exposure to the White Fathers as a child in his hometown mostly influenced him. Each Sunday a White Father would visit his parish and celebrate the Mass. They often talked about mission work with the congregation. He was active in the scouts and gospel crusaders as a youth, and frequently they would spend retreats at the seminary of the White Fathers. He remarked that the first photo he ever saw taken of his father was by the

White Fathers when his father did his daily tour delivering the mail. When asked why he chose to be a brother and not a priest, he explained that some of his family members had asked him the same thing, and he answered, "I didn't rather become a priest instead of a brother. I already hated going to confession, and as a priest I had to spend hours in the confessional. No, that wasn't something for me."<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Staf Van de Velde. "Mijn Leven Als Broeder-Missionaris." Autobiography, 1. Note page numbers cited are from corresponding translated pages.

By 1949 Brother Van de Velde departed for the mission in the Belgian Congo. His first assignment was in Bunia in the vicariate of Lake Albert, governed by Monsignor Matthijsen. Monsignor Matthijsen was already eager for replacements (to handle manual labor and material needs for the mission), and as they descended from the steps of the airplane, he was already rubbing his hands together as if to say now we can really start working. Brother Van de Velde said that his first big impression was that the Fathers and the brothers recognized each individual Congolese man and woman. They called them by name even though “they all had the same black color.”<sup>132</sup> He laughed and said that later his pupils (he taught carpentry) would say when parents picked up their children from the boarding school of the Sisters of Maria, “How can the parents recognize their children? They are all so white.”<sup>133</sup> It was apparent that this young man from a sheltered small town in Catholic Flanders was quite shell-shocked by his exotic new home, but eager to get to know the people and to get to work.

### Hierarchy inside the Missions

Based on interview material, one can understand at least in part the nature of the life and work of a missionary in the Belgian Congo in the 1950s. Within the White Fathers there is a distinct hierarchy, and a missionary’s role is mostly defined. On the missions priests attended to the spiritual needs of the people and performed pastoral duties. They said Mass, took confessions, performed marriages and baptisms. They evangelized in neighboring villages. The overall spiritual needs of the mission were in their care. The priests were well educated in subjects like philosophy and theology. They also ran the seminaries and managed the schools. In larger missions they served as inspectors (teaching was mostly done by catechists) and

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<sup>132</sup> Staf Van de Velde. “Mijn Leven Als Broeder-Missionaris.” Autobiography, 7.

<sup>133</sup> Staf Van de Velde. “Mijn Leven Als Broeder-Missionaris.” Autobiography, 7.

administrators of the schools. The brothers (not ordained) provided support for the material needs of the mission. They were craftsmen, builders, and carpenters. Many times a small number of brothers (and in some cases a single brother) would manage all of the various material needs of a mission. One day he might be repairing the chapel roof and the next laying bricks or building furniture for the school. Thus a brother wore many hats. For the most part, the roles of priests and brothers did not overlap, but on the ground they had to work together to maintain the mission and keep people nourished both bodily and spiritually. In effect the priests acted as upper management, and the brothers served as support staff.

The native priests (*abbés*) performed spiritual duties but under the guidance of the white priests. Tensions between white and black priests were common in the Belgian Congo, and especially prevalent in Rwanda. Native priests did not feel like they were treated equally to white priests (responsibility and autonomy). They felt that in the eyes of the Society's superiors there were "different weights and measures."<sup>134</sup> The Superior General's office did not have a favorable opinion of the relations between white priests and native priests, and according to correspondence on the subject, they were taking measures to remedy these issues.<sup>135</sup> According to the sources available, it is unclear what those remedies were. The native brothers performed manual labor under the management of the mission superior and the guidance of the white brothers. The white brothers and native brothers appeared to share more of a spirit of comradeship and equality (compared to white and native priests) in their tasks and among themselves. The white superiors saw the white brothers as more highly skilled than native brothers and relied on them primarily in maintaining the mission's infrastructure.

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<sup>134</sup> Letter from Hellemans (Regional Superior) to Van Volsem (Assistant General) 6 January 1952. White Father Archive. Rome. Dossier 523. Hellemans papers.

<sup>135</sup> Letter from Durrieu (Superior General) to Hellemans (Regional Superior). 27 December 1952. White Father Archives. Rome. Dossier 523. Hellemans papers.

Life on the missions was a lot like trying to run a small business. Various diaries from the early 1950s reveal that life was centered on the day-to-day effort to survive and flourish by raising the right crops, keeping the livestock healthy, maintaining accounting books, and ensuring schools and hospitals passed state inspections.<sup>136</sup> The Superior General required each missionary to keep a personal diary. The diaries were collected by the mission superior who compiled them into one book and submitted them to the Superior General's office at *Maison Carrée* in Algiers (later moved to Rome) at the end of the year. The mission diaries reflected the personality of the superior. While some diaries contain titillating information, such as harsh criticisms on native customs and life, they mostly include mundane accounts of the various comings and goings of mission personnel (obtaining supplies, traveling between missions, meeting with colonial administrators and natives) population statistics, notes on the weather, conversion legers, and general details on managing the schools and churches. For mission superiors, running a mission required skills beyond the ability to say Mass and baptize babies. They acted as operational managers, accountants, and negotiators - whatever was needed to ensure the missions functioned and thrived. The smaller missions required the superiors to have the largest skill set.

Regarding the White Fathers' own superiors, Father De Smet explained that the Regional General (at this time Hellemans) visited the mission once or twice a year. He spoke to everyone from the colonial officials to the houseboy at the mission. He provided the priests with his findings, and they knew what his report would entail before he left. Correspondence between Hellemans and the Superior General's office provides some clues, but Father De Smet explained that Hellemans was a small man and very strict (with a bit of a Napoleon complex it seemed).

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<sup>136</sup> At the Archives of the Society of Missionaries of Africa in Rome there is an important collection of diaries kept at each mission station from its foundation until about the 1960s.

He was not well liked and considered ultra conservative (even by Catholic standards!). He argued that Hellemans was not especially educated, but he was sent by the Society's leaders to ensure the missions followed protocols and guidelines set out by the Vatican and the Superior General.

### Daily Life and Work on the Missions

On missions near major mining corporations, the mission educated young people in primary schools, and at the end of the fourth year, the mining representatives came to recruit top students. Local traders from the area came as well to recruit students to work in the trade centers. All students resided on the mission and attended the boarding school. In the case of Kilomoto, the mining corporation subsidized all of it. I asked Father de Laet if Kilomoto had any influence on his missionary work, and he explained that a mixture of colonial and mining administrators policed the area. The work camps were like small cities, and the missionaries were responsible for all of the social services, but because Kilomoto paid the bills, they had considerable influence. (Those with the purse strings usually hold the power.) Mining representatives frequently visited the mission. Relations between the missionaries and the mining administrators were good overall, but there was some tension. When asked to give an example of what caused tension, he explained that friction usually occurred because of banal things like how to organize the company soccer teams. It is doubtful that soccer was the primary cause of tension, but I did not press the matter. Other social services included maternity services for pregnant women. There was a maternity hospital on site, and the White Sisters toured with mining representatives to pick up pregnant women from surrounding villages and bring them in for care. He explained that this system was very well organized. The mine donated food and supplies to the maternity hospital.

The work camps were organized in shifts. Shifts were highly regulated, and each day men began and ended their workday to the sound of a trumpet. The supervisor of each camp was a white man, and more educated employees came from the mission school. When asked what the consequences were for crimes at the labor camps, Father de Laet said if blacks were caught and convicted, they were jailed in an underground prison beneath the labor camps. He added that there were instances of blacks *and* whites being punished, but he never heard of the *chicote* being used on site. He knew of instances when colonial administrators whipped natives, but he assured me that this did not occur at the camps as far as he was aware.

When discussing natives outside of the mines, he explained that they were obligated (by force) to grow certain crops as per the direction of the colonial administration. It is uncertain whether Father de Laet agreed with the administration's use of force in the growing of certain crops, but he did present this idea as doing what was best for the people. He used an example of a white man who had forced the natives to grow manioc, and when Father de Laet returned to Congo in the 1970s, the people told him they were grateful for this because there had been a famine, and the manioc could stay in the ground two to three years. They could count on the manioc to sustain them during seasons when fairer weather crops like sweet potatoes and maize did not do well. The natives were so grateful to this white man that they named their children after him. This story reflected a common reaction during the interviews- the natives were forced to do certain things, and in the end it was for their own good. At least Father de Laet admitted that the system was completely paternalistic. But for the missionaries, it was a system that worked... and kept them in control.

Brother Van de Velde's first task, like the other interviewees, was to learn the local language. There was not, however, any formal language education for him. He was forced to

teach himself by conversing with the local people. He commented later that one of his superiors complained that the native students could not understand him. Brother Van de Velde explained that his superior spoke academic Swahili, not the local Swahili used in everyday language. He mused on why one would want to learn a language that was not useful in doing one's work. He stressed the importance of Cardinal Lavigerie's mandate to his missionaries as part of their constitution. The knowledge and study of the local language was an apostolic duty, and without knowledge of it, it was impossible to do apostolic work. He explained that he did his best to expand his knowledge of the local language so that he could associate with the locals outside of his job as well. Their community lived together with the native brothers, postulates, and novices in the same house. This situation was the exception to the rule. The mission's budget was very small, and they were always trying to make ends meet. Brother Van de Velde explained that the food was not always of good quality. The cook cut corners, and they did not have sugar with the buttermilk for example. But, overall, they made do.

From 1949-1952 Brother Van de Velde managed the joiners workshop of the diocese. There were ten other brothers on the mission. He explained that in 1951, the education was free to native students. After that, however, the state told the missionaries that free education was too paternalistic, and that the families must contribute something. The people were poor, however, and the transition was slow. When asked why the change in policy, he explained that in the beginning they had a grant to buy supplies and tools for education with financial support from the *Fond du Bienêtre des Indigenes* (F.B.E.I.) (foundation for the well being of the indigenous). The Congo aided Belgium during the Second World War by supplying copper and other raw materials for the war effort. Because of that contribution, *Fond du Bienêtre des Indigenes* was formed.

Brother Van de Velde was very involved with his native students. His talent as a master craftsman gave him an opportunity to spread his knowledge through hands-on teaching and interaction. Being a brother, however, his superiors did not always appreciate his expertise. He recalled that the school managed by the White Sisters was built using an F.B.E.I. grant. Thus the materials had to be of good quality because they would be inspected by delegates of that organization. In order for construction to stay on schedule, new woodworking and saw machines were ordered. To his surprise, not a single brother was consulted on this purchase. When all the woodworking machines arrived, however, there were no safety devices. The arrangements were made by the decision makers, and this situation reflected the pecking order on the mission. He commented that he was uncertain how he got through these tough times, and he could only assume he was aided by the divine spirit. He even conferred with another brother on the unreasonableness of some decisions, but he had to do what they (superiors) told him to do. The brothers were not, however, considered the lowest in the Society's social order. Brother Van de Velde recollected that the postulate master of the congregation of native brothers (a *confrere* of the White Fathers) sent him postulantes that wanted to become brothers and work in the joinery. The only task he could let them perform was stacking wood to be sawed. They only worked a couple of hours in the morning. They were considered a cheap source of labor, and he found this improper. He asked that they not be sent to him anymore. The superior thought he had a problem with the brothers, but of course that was not the case. Later he said the brothers told him that he was the only one who stood up for them. Interestingly, he described a retreat he attended several years later. There were seven Belgian brothers at the retreat, and Superior General Father Volker visited them. He made it clear that their founder, Cardinal Lavigerie,



insisted that the Fathers and the brothers all had the same calling: missionary.<sup>137</sup> What is preached is not always practiced.

Brother Van de Velde recalled the natives' fluency with carpentry tools and construction work. Even if they did not know the technical term for an instrument or piece of equipment, he argued that they would tell you in their own way. For example, when determining the right wood to use, a native might compare the tree trunk to his forearm and say the outside is soft (skin and flesh), and cannot be used except for the inner part, the bone, the center of the trunk. Despite the fact that some of the natives may not have been formally educated, Brother Van de Velde insisted they had practical knowledge and common sense. They knew how to work with the resources around them, and as a fellow craftsman and builder, he appreciated this local wisdom.<sup>138</sup>

#### Relations with the Natives

Father De Smet provided an interesting history of the main tribes in his area: the Tutsi, Hutus, and Batwa. Unlike the Belgian Congo that is made up of hundreds of different tribes, Burundi housed three main tribes that formed a clear caste system. At this time, he estimated the Tutsi made up fifteen percent of the population, the Hutus made up the majority with sixty-five percent, and the Batwa accounted for five percent. He explained something of their general societal structures and geographic details. The Tutsi clans, even as a minority, held the power. They dominated the region, but only with a few families. He described the Tutsi as shepherds, the Hutu as farmers, and the Batwa as hunter-gatherers. For example, the Tutsi owned a cow, and the Hutus maintained the cow milk and calves. Father De Smet likened this relationship to a

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<sup>137</sup> Staf Van de Velde. "Mijn Leven Als Broeder-Missionaris." Autobiography, 11-13, 21.

<sup>138</sup> Staf Van de Velde. "Mijn Leven Als Broeder-Missionaris." Autobiography, 11.

vassal in the medieval sense. In return for maintaining livestock and crops, the Tutsis (as natural leaders) protected the Hutu. These roles were based on ancient lineages and claims to the land. The Batwa mostly kept to themselves and lived on the fringe of society. Interestingly, he told me that the Burundians were much different from the Congolese. The Burundians were more closed off, where the Congolese were more spontaneous and gregarious. The Burundians had to trust you before opening up. When asked him if he experienced any culture shock upon first arriving in Africa, he nodded vigorously. While he had some conception of what to expect, there had been definite culture shock. Like the other interviewees, Father De Smet commented on the different ways Europeans and Africans thought, as he saw it. He explained that he believed Europeans are more rational and think in categories. Africans are more sentimental and personal, while Europeans are more business-minded. Like Father Declercq he managed the spiritual needs of the local population. The gospel, he said, was liberation for them (from superstition and sorcery) from their depressing belief systems. When asked if he witnessed any syncretism (blending of traditional and Catholic faiths), he explained that there was some of this, but mostly the traditionalists and native Christians remained separate. There was a population of traditionalists who had no contact with the mission.

The mission was built up on a hill provided by the colonial administration. As a rule, the mission must be a certain distance from the colonial administration offices. In this case it was one mile. The provincial governor and six to eight other officers resided there. There were no formal villages around; rather groups of clans populated the area surrounding the mission. He believed that the state did good things for the people. If there were legal disputes for example, the natives could rely on the state's system of laws and justice to appeal disputes between clans and family members. Father De Smet argued that everything was given to the people, financially and in the form of infrastructure. When asked if the missionaries preferred to work with one

tribe over another, he explained that the priests made no distinction between tribes. While the state preferred, however, to work with the Tutsi (more intelligent and used to commanding), he witnessed no friction between the state and the natives. Thus the state was a positive civilizer.

It was important to know what type of relationship (if any) the White Fathers had with local medicine men. I asked Father de Laet if he encountered any shaman or had issues with people consulting sorcerers. He explained that in the labor camps, if people wanted to consult a sorcerer, they went to the rural outlying villages. He told a story of a woman who had burned up her insides from alcohol – *arak* – and she died at the hospital. (He notes it was a Protestant hospital and states that the Protestants cooperated with the mines in many things – like the Catholics.) Her family went to the hospital to claim her remains and bury her in the village. They insisted that the American doctor do an autopsy to find the cause of death. The doctor assured the family that her cause of death was clear, and that an autopsy was not necessary. They took her body to the local sorcerer, and he determined she had been poisoned. The family went back to their village and inquired where she had drunk last before she died. They found out that the woman had been drinking last with the village's chief, and they beat him to death with clubs for her murder. This event occurred in 1953. This anecdote highlights a facet of the local belief system in that area at that time. Father de Laet said that the idea of dying from natural causes did not exist for these people. There had to be another party involved - an intermediary – he or she must have died due to the actions of someone else. As a result, the family had to visit a sorcerer to determine who caused that person's death. These pagan beliefs were a lucrative business for both the Catholic priests (a population to convert) and the shaman (who was paid for his services).

Brother Van de Velde spoke a lot about the entertainment available for the natives on the missions. Not only was Brother Van de Velde an incredible craftsman (he showed us pictures of his beautiful wood furniture), he was a playwright as well. He wrote many plays that were performed on the mission. He would take well-known biblical stories and insert local people into the storylines to make the plays relatable- something like the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors set in Bunia and starring a Congolese man. He laughed fondly as he recalled that the natives insisted on three elements in every play: a sorcerer, drums, and dancing. He prided himself on entertaining and educating through his plays. Once his superiors realized how popular they were (and what an effective medium), they told him what to write and used the plays as vehicles for their own evangelization. As a brother, he knew his place, and did what he was told. Even as a man in his late eighties, at the start of our interview, he explained that he would have to check with his superiors for permission to sign the release form.<sup>139</sup>

In 1952 Monsignor Matthijen asked Brother Van de Velde to helm a technical school. He embraced his role. He explained that the native students preferred to use the French language for technical terms. They said to him, “If we use them [Swahili words] no one will understand us.”<sup>140</sup> The father inspector insisted, however, that in the capital youths who completed their final exams had a tendency not to do manual labor anymore. Once they had some knowledge of French, they tried to get a job as a clerk or a *ndombe* in an office. They made better wages in the urban centers away from the mission. Thus he was not allowed to teach in French, and French lessons were not included in the school’s program. This policy allowed the White Fathers to keep a tight leash on their graduates and maintain their work force on the mission. At the end of

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<sup>139</sup> I asked each man to sign a release form authorizing The T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History to have free use of the tape transcripts. No one else had to ask permission to sign.

<sup>140</sup> Staf Van de Velde. “Mijn Leven Als Broeder-Missionaris.” Autobiography, 15.

the scholastic year, however, his pupils told him, “We have worked enough for the mission and now we will work for ourselves.” He found this argument logical, but his superiors disagreed. They did not understand. They demanded, “What kind of education have you given them so that they refuse to work on the mission?” Brother Van de Velde went further to explain that once the students completed their final exams, he was not allowed to give them their diploma and toolbox (supplied by the state). He protested and argued it was unfair to deny them what they earned. “Yes,” said the postulant master, “But if you give them a piece of paper they will depart.”<sup>141</sup> These anecdotes highlight the White Fathers’ attempt to keep their students and brothers under the mission’s thumb. In many cases, however, the missionaries worked hard to help their students excel.

### The White Fathers and Independence

Father Seynaeve’s experiences with the Congolese were very different from the other interviewees, but they are important to include in illustrating the varying roles of white priests in the Belgian Congo at this time and the power and influence they wielded. When Father Seynaeve was asked if the state had much influence on the running of the university, he commented that they were completely unshackled in their opinions and their work. An institution of higher learning’s autonomy is a precious thing. The state respected that. He had an important role in informing young seminarians and the elite of Congolese society. He was torn on how much influence they had. I think he looks back at the dismal situation (only a handful of university graduates) at independence with regret and disappointment- the Congolese were not ready to rule, and the Belgians had not prepared them.

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<sup>141</sup> Staf Van de Velde. “Mijn Leven Als Broeder-Missionaris.” Autobiography, 29.

Father Seynaeve delved into details regarding his relationship with Mobutu and his rise to power that is outside the purview of this thesis. They are, however, fascinating so I include his experiences and opinions. These details also help in understanding who Father Seynaeve was in the Congo. Living and working in Leopoldville (Kinshasa) in 1959, he said you could feel the vibrations of Congolese nationalism everywhere. It was subdued at the beginning, but then it came on like a fever. He credited the World Exposition in Brussels in 1958 for influencing some Congolese *évolués* and feeding the nationalist fervor with liberal and socialist ideas. Father Seynaeve confessed that he had pushed (his exact role in Mobutu's rise to power is unclear) for Mobutu to become the head of the government. He knew him well. "We have thrown money at him. And at the time when he did not know what was money. He came from a simple [background]. He was an open man. He was joyful. He was clever and smart. But yet, who of the Africans is able to withstand the money and all that is given to Africa? Even our Catholic bishops are not able to withstand the influence of the money."<sup>142</sup> With a jab at Mobutu's legacy and the corruption of some elements of the Church, Father Seynaeve appeared to reflect back on these things with dismay and disappointment. What might have been? He mentioned that due to his position as professor of a university, he was in an outstanding position to know a lot of people. He knew important African politicians not only in the Congo, but also in other countries like Ethiopia.

Father Seynaeve was asked to explain his relationship with Lumumba. Did he know him well? He cried, "Do not speak to me of Lumumba!"<sup>143</sup> Clearly this was a sore subject. I wanted to know more. He settled down and was quiet for a moment. Then he said calmly that

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<sup>142</sup> Jaak Seynaeve. Personal interview. 10/18/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

<sup>143</sup> Jaak Seynaeve. Personal interview. 10/18/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

Lumumba was a very ambitious and smart man. Belgian politicians had exploited him. He laughed softly and said he would tell me two things about Lumumba. Lumumba had a Belgian friend, a girl, who was an “outstanding communist.”<sup>144</sup> She had a lot of influence on him. Father Seynaeve recalled one day when he (Seynaeve) was playing tennis in the afternoon. Lumumba was in prison, but he turned up at the tennis field. He explained that those times were full of contradictions. He told me that he had even met with Lumumba the week before he died. When asked to share that conversation, Father Seynaeve said they told jokes. He seemed to slip back into time for a few moments as he thought about these events. He said that Lumumba had been unwise. He could have been a real leader of Africa, but he was too ambitious and he had no university education. He came, however, at an ideal moment in African history in which he could have become a “superman”<sup>145</sup> of Africa. Later in discussing my interview with Father Edgard Declercq, I will explore the Lumumba crisis (Lumumba’s assassination) and its violent impact on some of the White Fathers.

We returned to the subject of Mobutu and their relationship. He first met Mobutu when he was at a social school in Brussels. He knew Mobutu when he was a young man. Father Seynaeve explained that he had been a star coming up because he had been pushed by Belgians, and in his opinion, the best faction of Belgians in the Congo. Things began well, but after Mobutu became president, everything was different. The Belgian puppet was not so easily controlled. Thus Mobutu proved to be a disappointment.

He recalled an interesting anecdote from one Sunday when he was traveling north of Kinshasa. Mobutu owned a large farm and a small arbor. He arrived at this farm with a small

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<sup>144</sup> Jaak Seynaeve. Personal interview. 10/18/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

<sup>145</sup> Jaak Seynaeve. Personal interview. 10/18/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.

group of professors from the university. They did not enter through the main gates. Docked in the river was Mobutu's pleasure boat. They approached Bemba<sup>146</sup> who sported a revolver in his hand. Bemba instructed the professors to get away as soon as possible. Father Seynaeve speculated that Mobutu was on the boat with one of his mistresses. While the exact reason for their visit is unclear, the story is fascinating and illustrates the informal relationship he shared with an infamous Congolese dictator. Father Seynaeve said, "He is gone and at the end, he was a bad man. Must admit it. But we must at least try to understand how from the hopeful and young and promising man he became at the end what he has been."<sup>147</sup>

Towards the end of our interview, he began to talk about post-colonial Congo and the role of the white missionary. Father Seynaeve argued that most of the destruction (nationalization, military conflicts, economic turmoil) that has occurred was done out of ignorance. It was assumed that he was alluding to the small number of university graduates that inherited the new Congolese nation, and the fact that they had been ill prepared to run a country. How does one explain what he referred to as the mess in Africa now? Looking back, the white Catholic missionary, and especially the White Fathers, played (and still do to some extent) a pivotal role in the formation of Congolese education. How does one look back on one's role in such a history when the present-day situation is so dire? Where did it all go wrong? When asked if he felt there was still a role for the white missionary in the Congo, he explained that he believes they still have a role; they are still important. But, they must be more psychological and understanding now (versus being only focused on saving souls and implanting the Church's

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<sup>146</sup> I suspect this refers to Jean-Pierre Bemba who was born in Bokada, Nord-Ubangi Province. He is one of the richest men in the Congo, with an estimated fortune of several hundred million dollars. His businesses have included portable radios, aviation and private television stations. One of his sisters is married to Mobutu's son Nzanga, who was also a candidate in the 2006 presidential elections.

<sup>147</sup> Jaak Seyneave. Personal interview. 10/18/2008. Antwerp, Belgium.



version of morality). He lamented part of what the white missionary system produced. They educated many Congolese people who entered professions like medicine. In his opinion the majority of those people did not become responsible for their own people; they did not return to their own tribes or homes to use their skills gained through the missionary education system to give back. Everyone instead wanted to stay in the urban centers because of more opportunity and more luxury (electricity, communications, and comfort). As we ended our conversation on that note, it appeared that Father Seynaeve reflected on the larger missionary movement as both a success and a failure, a bittersweet thing.

Father Declercq explained that at first, in Kasongo, there was not large-scale rioting, rather a military buildup and a sense of a state of emergency. There was tension, however, and it was palpable. Of the other priests he worked with, Father Declercq was the first to be beaten by Congolese nationalists. His first beating occurred after he said Holy Communion. A group of Congolese came over and told him to move his motorbike because it was in their way. He told them that it was not in their way, and he refused to move it. He said they grabbed him and beat him within inches of his life. This occurred on many occasions. Many acts of violence against Catholic missionaries happened as a result of the Lumumba crisis. In opposition to Lumumba's political party MNC (*Movement National Congolais*), the Belgian Catholic political party organized the PNP (*Partie National Progress*). It was a Catholic anti-Lumumba, anti-Communist organization. Lumumba's people mocked it, calling it the *Parti Negre Payer* (paying for bribes). At the time, the local bishop dispatched a diocesan priest to go village to village propagating the PNP's message. Within three years, many members of the priest's entire family had been hunted down and murdered. Prior to the Lumumba crisis, Father Declercq was in prison (one of several times), and he told an amusing anecdote. The MNC broadcasted on Radio Bukavu that Father Declercq must stop preaching. Military people then arrested him on

MNC orders. He was imprisoned for ten days. They locked him in a broken-down combat vehicle. He explained that the MNC thought he was political, but he maintained that he was only doing God's work and spreading his message. After he was released, a Congolese soldier helped locate his personal possessions. Since his eyesight was so poor (but not poor from old age), he owned prescription eyeglasses. They could not find his eyeglasses anywhere, and as they walked passed an office, he saw a Congolese soldier sitting at the desk wearing his glasses. He laughed and explained that this was absurd- how could this man see out of those glasses? He wanted to look smart. I asked him if he witnessed widespread backlash against whites, not only toward priests. He said there was definite revenge on the whites, and he knew of many people being beaten. It was impossible for many White Sisters to remain. He assured me none that he knew of had been raped, but there were settler families (Greek and Cypriot) who had daughters and wives raped by Congolese soldiers. It was a violent time.

At the dawn of a new independent regime, Father Declercq argued that he saw the end of the white missionary. By 1964 even his own diocese had a replacement for the former white bishop. Father Declercq played the role of a middleman within the Society. He was a priest, but not a very important one. He was, however, by all accounts a fiery and zealous man. He went to the Congo during what he knew was a terribly unstable time. He told me he did not entirely heed the direction of his White Father superiors on the ground, but he minded the larger message of the Pope and the Vatican. In a way Father Declercq lived on his own terms. As we wrapped up our interview, Father Declercq told me he had been forced out of the Congo seven times. He had returned six times. The last time his superiors asked him not to return due to his health and advanced age. Despite all of the abuse he endured, he would go back, he insisted, even today.

Father De Smet explained that the mid-1950s was a period of large-scale conversions; the Church baptized thousands. Each parish contained twenty thousand Christians (and in some cases upwards of forty thousand). The Church was thriving. It was the age of the missionary. By the end of the 1950s, however, independence brought great change to Burundi. The Burundians looked next door to the Congo and wished for independence as well. The transition from Belgian to Burundian rule was chaotic and violent. Father De Smet agreed with the other interviewees when he argued that the Burundians were not ready for self rule, and that the state had not done enough (education and training of the native elites) to prepare them to administer a nation. I asked him about violence against Europeans, and he said he did not witness white backlash. He did witness, however, chaos in the temporary absence of authority. Many people stole and there were cases of natives poisoning each other. It was a time of great strife, and some people perished in this volatile time. At the end of our interview, I asked Father De Smet what his primary objective had been. Had he succeeded in Africa? He contended that the civilization and evangelization mission were one and the same. He had gone to Africa to be part of the Catholic movement and to play a role in the spreading of the gospel. He had done what he set out to do.

### Conclusion

By 1959, with independence around the corner, the vicariates of the Belgian Congo were upgraded to dioceses. Monsignor Matthijen was appointed bishop of the diocese of Bunia. Brother Van de Velde insisted that during his years in the Congo, he gave the best of himself. His experiences influenced his life and his work. As his world changed, his mission became a parish, and the White Fathers were asked not to use the name “White Fathers” anymore. The term could now be interpreted in a racist way. As a result the Society used their official name

“Missionaries of Africa” (MAFR). He explained that the Society had many black missionaries, and some in important positions. The 1950s were, however, the age of the white missionary. The Second World War brought change, and the world experienced a new openness that provided a launching pad for international missionary work. While each interviewee played a somewhat different role in the Belgian Congo, each man devoted his life to the people. They believed that they were bringing a better message, a message of civilization by way of Christianity. They felt they were making the world a better place for the natives and that their missionary work was a divine calling. The interviewees changed dramatically over the course of their decades in Africa, and their perspectives changed during those years. Perhaps in some cases they became more seasoned and resentful by the end. There was little left of the passionate young men who bravely set out to change the world. Like Father Declercq said, he was conquering the world for Christ, and while that may have seemed naïve, it was what he believed as he followed the missionary path. With independence, everything changed. The world in which the white missionary priest was a superman was over. The interviewees appeared to have both expected and dreaded this time. They knew it would (and should) happen eventually, but they all agreed that it was too early. The Congo was not ready to rule itself. The years after independence were difficult ones, as each man fought the European backlash and tried to reestablish his new role under a new regime. Thus they had to reinvent themselves. The Church and the missions survived, however, and the white missionary found a way to stay relevant. While the Church in Africa is made up and staffed by mostly Africans, the white missionary still exists and continues to do what he or she believes to be God’s work.

After examining the White Fathers as an institution, as well as individual people, we can make several conclusions. The missionaries had preconceived notions about Africa and the natives, and those ideas did influence their thinking and inform their actions. They believed they

were bringing a better life – civilization through Christianization. They loved the natives and dedicated decades of their lives to what they believed was the betterment of a continent.

Through Cardinal Lavigerie’s assimilationist theory, the missionaries integrated themselves into native life by learning the local language (many times this involved learning multiple languages) and immersing themselves into life with the people on the mission. They evangelized to those in outside villages and thus had contact outside of the missions. The White Fathers on the ground dealt with a wide variety of issues, including the threat (as they perceived it) of neighboring Protestants and Muslims. The relationships with these two groups ranged from indifference to disdain depending on the vicariate. Nonetheless, it is clear that they all competed for the salvation of African souls. The White Fathers collaborated closely with the Belgian state and the corporations. They received funding and subsidies to ensure the implementation of a successful educational system and thus conversions. This relationship was mutually exclusive as the state utilized the missionaries for teaching and medical support, and the missionaries were able to build churches and education institutions, provide medical care, and generally keep the missions running with food and supplies. Since the state held the purse strings, there was little criticism of the regime by missionaries, but that is not to say it never happened. The Society’s primary goal was to establish a native Church in Africa. Using Lavigerie’s theory of assimilation and backed by Belgian funding, they spent the latter part of the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century dedicating themselves to this task.

## References

### Primary Sources

#### Archives of the Society of Missionaries of Africa (Rome)

The Archives consist principally of correspondence, reports, and other papers coming from the founder of the White Fathers, Cardinal Lavigerie – until his death in 1892 – or generated by the central administration of the Society. There is also an important collection of the diaries kept at each mission station from its foundation until about the 1960s. Printed books in the Archives include the official publications of the Society and its provinces, theses written by *confrères*, their monographs on a great variety of subjects.

This archive was consulted in October 2008.

#### Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Brussels)

The collections of the Africa archive, which are divided into different pools of information, cover the period from 1885 to 1962. These lists tally with the departments of the Independent State of Congo and the former Ministry of Colonial or African Affairs or contain documents concerning an area linked Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. There is also a list comprising some 90 private bequests. The main topics covered are: political affairs, administrative affairs, judicial affairs, security, civil status, economic affairs, public works, mines, communication and telecommunications, education, religion, ethnography, history, and official documents from 1885 to 1962.

This archive was consulted in October 2008.

Five personal interviews were conducted in various White Father community residences throughout Belgium in October 2008. They were coordinated through the White Father office located in Brussels.

## Secondary Sources

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## Vita

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