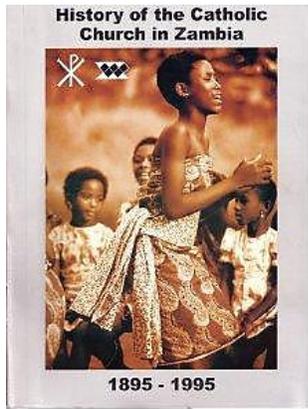


History of the beginning of the Catholic Church in Zambia in Chipata, Eastern Province.

Meeting of all Priests of Chipata Diocese April 2-5, 2017 at the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the Catholic Church in Zambia.

Fr. Jean-Luc Guiller, M.Afr 04/04/ 2017



On the page one of the "[History of the Catholic Church in Zambia](#)" by Fr. [Hugo Hinfelaar](#), in 2004, we read: "1891 is often considered the year when the Catholic Church was established in our part of Africa now called Zambia when the Missionaries of Africa settled near Mambwe Mwela. But the people of Zambia had been in contact with Catholic Christendom from the beginning of the eighteen century onwards. (...)"



The Portuguese-speaking Dominical Missionaries had arrived around 1730 in a market place known as Feira by the Portuguese, situated at the confluence of the Luangwa River and the

Zambezi River, near the District Centre of present day Luangwa. (...)

By then, the Chiti mukulu dynasty had been established in Bembaland which had had some contact with Christianity. Their Paramount Chiefs claimed to have come from Kasai in the Congo with some of the sacred relics of Catholic Portuguese origin. (...)

Some Catholic Christians came from India. We know that after Jesus's departure some of his apostles went to India to bring the Good News of Jesus, the most well-known of them being St Thomas. A place in India became well-known for its Catholics: Goa. This is how, in the 18th century, some Dominican Friars from Goa came to Mozambique as missionaries. Some Catholic priests would come to administer the sacraments and teach catechism. (...)

In 1754, still from India, some resident parish priests came to Mozambique to be in charge of the station of Zumbo. A certain Fr. Pedro, from Goa, became very well known. People would say of him that he had planted the tree of the Holy Gospel. All this very near what is now Zambia, and certainly at times in Zambia. One day, Fr Pedro even met somebody in authority called Mazombwe, whom he wanted to stay with. Fr Pedro was also a medicine man. He died in 1751. His funeral attracted many people, apparently thousands of Cewa, Nsenga, Bisa, and Kunda people. (...)

When the well-known Protestant missionary explorer Livingstone passed where Fr. Pedro had been he still found the remnants of his church and a broken bell. (...)

At the beginning of the 1880s, the Jesuit missionaries opened a small mission among the valley Tonga at Mwembe and visited the Litunga, Lewanika, King of the Lozi at Lealui. However, because of a lot of setbacks, sicknesses and deaths, they abandoned their project a few years after. (...)

Another example around 1798: On the "Danger Hill" road, north of Mpika, a monument has been erected in remembrance of the journey of the Portuguese explorer Jose Maria Delacerda el Almaida. On a board we read this: Was Dr in mathematics, some time he was the royal astronomer in Lisbon, Portugal, Governor of a region in Mozambique and leader of an expedition to cross Africa. Later he also established a chain of fortified trading posts between Mozambique and Angola. He had set out from [Tete](#) with a large party including nine Europeans to reach the town of Chief Kazembe, a very well-known Chief at the south of lake

Mweru. But he fell sick and died of exhaustion. His diary gives us the first accurate account of the country and its people of the Eastern part of "Northern Rhodesia in Zambia. The expedition returned to Tete under a Father Pinto. (...)

In the Bangweolo there is the mention of a very gentle person, Luchere Nganga, from Brazil, who went to many places helping people to forget about their differences and jealousies. One day he disappeared after having said, it seems, that another one, apparently a missionary (or several of them) would come in the future dressed in white."

Now let us see the position of [Cardinal Lavigerie](#), Bishop of Algiers and founder of the Missionaries of Africa in 1868, and of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Africa in 1869, first called "The Agricultural and Hospital Sisters". Little by little, Lavigerie was getting ready to send his Missionaries in Central Africa.

In 1878, a group of three set out for Central Africa by a long way which they thought safe, accompanied by guides apparently very cooperative. But, in a desert, they killed the three Missionaries. Three more Missionaries followed another new way and were also killed. It was clear that another way to go to Central Africa would need to be found. This is what was planned for 1889.

Cardinal Lavigerie sent four Missionaries to the South of Malawi. These were: Fr. [Adolphe Lechaptois](#), Fr. Valentin Heutebize, a Brother builder Antoine Verkuelen and Fr. Joseph Mercui. They were sent to a place where they could probably meet some Portuguese Christians. They arrived at Mponda on 28th December 1889, but at a time when there were some troubles between two groups of colonisers: the English and the Portuguese. The area had just been declared a "British Protectorate". The newly arrived Missionaries were in a dilemma.

Great Britain's plan (ambition) was to be "at home" from Cape Town in the South to Kairo in the North. Hence the name of "Cairo Road" given to a street of Lusaka town in present Zambia. The Portuguese had another ambition: they had been in that part of Africa since the 16th century. They too felt at home over there. They wanted to link together for themselves the East of Central Africa, Mozambique, with the West: Congo and especially Angola.

However, in the meantime, the four Missionaries had started some activities, especially caring for the sick and organising a school for young people, which they very much enjoyed. But on the other hand the Missionaries were not at ease with the local Chief "Mponda" and some of his people.

A decision had to be taken: to go elsewhere. Lavigerie himself, from afar, had realised that the members of another denomination had been campaigning against the Catholic Missionaries, and Chief Mponda was disappointed because he had not received guns or whatever else from the Missionaries of Africa.



The new plan of Lavigerie was to ask the four Missionaries to go to Karema in Tanganyika (now Tanzania). So the four Missionaries left Mponda in June 1891 by boat towards Karonga on the shore of Lake Malawi. Then they were to travel by following the "Stevenson" Road up to Lake Tanganyika. With the help of an Englishman agent of the [African Lakes Company](#), they gathered a large group of men to protect them and help them carry their luggage. On their journey, men, women and children whose villages had been destroyed by the slave traders, joined them.

They were well received when passing through the village of Chief Mambwe. However, by then, the young Fr. Heurtebise had contracted a bad malaria. He was very sick and his companions were afraid that he would not survive. Providentially, they found a place called in Chimambwe “mwela”, meaning “wind”, because it is in a high place and with a cold weather. They settled in a shed built but then abandoned by the African Lake Company. In July 1891, because of the sickness of Fr. Heurtebise, they began to organise a place as if it was to become a Mission Post. Brother Anton began to build a house for the Missionaries and started a garden while Fr. Heurtebise, feeling better, started to instruct a number of people using the little they knew of Kiswahili, Chichewa and Chimambwe. That was a beginning of evangelisation in Zambia.



Mambwe-Mwela becomes a Mission.

During that time Fr. Lechaptois managed to travel as far as Karema (in Tanganyika) to inform the other missionaries of their intention of establishing a permanent Mission post at Mambwe-Mwela. He dedicated the new Mission to Mary, Our Lady of the Angels. Fr. Heurtebise, sick with malaria, was persuaded to go back home in France. Fr. Lechaptois was appointed Superior of the Missions in Tanganyika, where he would become a Bishop later. He was replaced in Mambwe- Mwela by Fr. Depaillat.

At the end of the rainy season, in May 1892, their new house was hit by lightning. The grass roof burned down. However, more and more visitors (traders, hunters, explorers) were coming to see them seeking accommodation for a night or two. Unfortunately, problems were developing in the area around Mambwe-Mwela, as the Mission was squeezed between the territory controlled by the British South Africa Company and the Tanganyika Territory.

During that period, a new Father, Achille van Oost, arrived and saw the difficult situation of this new Mission Post. He then began to look further South, in the Bemba country, for a new foundation. In January 1894 he succeeded in establishing a first contact, and then a second, with Chief Makasa, explaining to him that he was a God’s messenger. It impressed the Chief, who, in March 1895 offered him to settle to Kayambi. Unhappily, Fr. Achille van Host died on 20th April 1895. His grave is at Mambwe- Mwela. But the idea of building a Mission in Kayambi remained in spite of a fear that Chief Chiti Mukulu would not approve it. He accepted it.

In May 1895, Fr. Lechaptois, Bishop in Tanganyika, came to bring a successor to Fr. Van Host: Fr. Joseph Dupont who would be nicknamed “Motomoto”. Together they visited Chief Makasa. Fr. Dupont immediately took up the challenge of setting up the new foundation of Kayambi. But it was not a simple project, they would have to move with more than two hundred people (some of them orphans of parents killed in war) who lived with them at Mambwe- Mwela. Some others were young men and women who had been prisoners of war and were bought as slaves from various chiefs by the Arab slave traders, but who had been redeemed by the missionaries.

Two months later, in July 1895, the Missionaries, together with their people, started on their journey to Chief Makasa village first. The Chief was not very happy with so many people but Fr. Dupont showed his bravery and strength of character until Chief Makasa allowed them all to move to Kayambi. So, July 1895 became the date of birth of the first permanent Mission post of the Diocese of Chipata and even Zambia as a whole.

Development of the [Diocese of Chipata](#).

Bishop Dupont (Motomoto) was ever ready to advance the development where he was at ease, mostly at first in the Bemba area, just as the Abemba were also very at ease with Motomoto. In 1895 he was sent to Nyasa. (Nyasa was the name given by the Yao people to lake Malawi). Motomoto was consecrated Bishop on 15th August 1895 in Kayambi.

Regularly, at first, new Missionaries would arrive in the country, learn the language spoken where they were posted and get involved in the evangelisation of the people they were sent to, and work in the various activities needed.

In 1899, after some teaching in France, the French [Father Mathurin Guilleme](#) was sent first to Zanzibar to take charge of the 'procure' and receive the newcomers or those going on leave. There, with his own eyes, Fr. Guilleme saw the horrors of the slave trade. He used some funds of the Holy Childhood and of St Peter Claver to buy back some 1500 boys and girls, including from Congo. In 1899, Fr. Guilleme founded Chilonga. Later he was asked to replace Bishop Dupont who had gone to France for rest. While acting as Bishop, Fr. Guilleme founded Chiwamba, Mua, Kachebere, Nguludi and Kambwiri. These new foundations nicely gave life to the southern part of Nyasa.

On 24th February 1911, Fr. Guilleme was chosen to succeed Bishop Dupont. Something new and very appreciated by all, happened sometime later in January 1913: Bembaland called "Bangweolo" was entrusted to Fr. Étienne Larue, while the Southern part kept the name of "Apostolic Vicariate of Nyasa", under Mathurin Guilleme. All would be less under pressure. Fr. Guilleme was ordained Bishop in Baudouinville (Congo) on 18th June 1911. Nyasa had had five Mission stations and the new episcopal residence was Bembeke. Bishop Guilleme decided to found a station to the West of Kachebere: Mphangwe. Until that time the "Shire" in what is now Malawi was still served by the Apostolic Vicariate of Nyasa. Little by little it would be only in the hands of the Montfort Fathers, whom Bishop Dupont had called for, without really referring the matter to Rome. But it was finally recognised by Rome.

The First World War diminished the number of Missionaries since some were called as army chaplains. When the war was over, Bishop Guilleme was able to realise one of his dreams: to open a Mission in Sengaland: Minga Mission. He also founded more Missions in Nyasaland.

By the time Bishop Guilleme was 76 years old, he had the consolation of ordaining his successor, Father Oscar Julien. Bishop Guilleme died on 7th April 1942, at 82 years saying; "Into your hands I commend my spirit, ô Lord".

When Bishop Julien ("Juliere") started his work, his diocese was a new arrangement of various Vicariates. Bishop Julien had to get used as to which places or peoples of his Vicariate were in; Malawi or Zambia. Moreover, in the North of his Vicariate, the new "Mission sui Juris" of Luangwa was also a little in the same situation; they even had an "Itinerant Catechist school" to make it easier to serve all people. But being given the shape of his Vicariate, as soon as Bishop Julien took charge of it, he transferred his headquarters to Kachebere in order to be within easy reach of all his Missionaries scattered in the various parishes. Between Minga and Naviruli, after having bought a farm he opened Chassa Mission in May 1936. In 1935, he organised and held a synod to discuss Catholic Action, the foundation of a postulate for indigenous Brothers and a common policy to be followed in the different Missions. In fact, they realised that they somehow were in advance concerning Catholic action. Concerning a novitiate for indigenous Brothers, it was thought difficult, at such a point that after some time the effort did not have a happy ending. In 1944 he went home for a long rest. Rome accepted to release him.

On the 1st of July 1937, the Roman Congregation for the Propagation of Faith made a decree, establishing a new ecclesiastical unit made up of Lundazi District which until then had been part of the Luangwa *sui*

juris and the new Apostolic Prefecture of Fort Jameson as well as Petauke District which it received from the Vicariate of Nyasa. This territory was exactly what the Eastern Province of Zambia would be after independence.

Obviously, the rearrangement done for the new Apostolic Prefecture of Fort Jameson of which Monsignor Martin was made the Prefect in 1937, was a very significant arrangement. It was making it possible to have an easier and better unity between people having the same political boundaries, the same administrations or syllabuses in school, a greater unity between the different parishes. Though reluctant to accept his appointment at first, Monsignor Martin worked hard until 1947 to bring unity in his Prefecture and prepare for the future.

At the arrival of Bishop Firmin Courtemanche and later Bishop Medardo Mazombwe and nowadays Bishop George Lungu, and his Auxiliary Bishop Benjamin Phiri, the Diocese did not need big readjustments. But it was and still is the time for new Congregations or Societies to come and enrich the Diocese with their own charisma, the time also for new parishes, to give the chance to many faithful to gather nearer their homes,

History of the Catholic Church in Zambia, considering the whole country.

The Jesuits Missionaries

After their first attempt to go as Missionaries especially in the West and South West of Zambia, they let a few years pass and they tried again. Fathers involved: Frs Prestige, Moreau and Torrend in particular.

The first place they chose to become a Mission was Chikuni, not far from Chisekesi in the north of it. They found plenty of land around near the Magoye River. The BSA (British South African Company) gave them a freehold contract.

Once the routine of evangelisation had started around Chikuni itself, they took the decision to continue northwards to possibly find another Mission place starting from the Ngwerere River. One day, the unbelievable happened. The team of walking Missionaries had with them a young man called Francis Borja, whom they had saved from raiders. As they walked their way forward on the road, some people walking in the other direction met them. Then they recognised in the first group their own son walking with the Missionaries. It was him indeed, what a joy for the parents (He was lost but now found!). What a surprise for all, a great sign of the Providence.

Then after the joyful encounter, the Missionaries went on walking and walking until they found a site fitting, according to their desires for a second foundation. The people called the place [Kasisi](#). It was about 230 km from Chikuni.

The group started building provisional shelters, preparing a place for a garden and making a small dam. It was Christmas time. Some people living there build a small chapel. Later they would build schools. Some other local people gave the Missionaries a dozen heifers and some oxen to start with. Not far away a certain place called "Rusangu" had already been taken by the 7th Day Adventist Church. The Providence was with them all.

On Kasisi and Chikuni, Frs Moreau and Torrend have always insisted on improving agriculture, especially by using cattle for ploughing. From long ago the Tongas are proud of their cattle, still more then because of the help it can give for development.

Other foundations within Zambia by the Missionaries of Africa in the Luapula: Lubwe: 1895-1905.

Some Missionaries of Africa were appointed to [Chilubi Island](#). People had heard about the good work they had done elsewhere. They were happy to receive them. One well-known Father was Fr. Foulon.

Straight away they started meeting the people around in the small or big islands in Lake Bangweolo. With the Montfort Fathers helping in Nyasa, some Missionaries of Africa had become free for the Bangweolo. So the Luapula Province was going forward. The building of Kapatu and Chibote was done at that time.

During the first decade of the 20th century, the Missionaries of Africa founded no fewer than seven mission stations. The Jesuit Missionaries did the following foundations: Katondwe, Kapoche and Ching'ombe near the Eastern Province. Eight White Sisters arrived in Zambia to start a convent in Kayambi. Other Sisters, of Notre-Dame of Namur, arrived at Chikuni.

But the First World War which started in 1914 made life difficult and some Fathers had to return to France as soldiers in the trenches. Some years after the end of the war, the ideology of the "Indirect Rule" was pushed through.

During the 1930s, a wave of Catholic Missionaries arrived in Northern Rhodesia. It has been an important decade of the history of the Missions: arrival of Franciscan Friars and some missionaries from Poland. Chikuni school became an educational Centre. Still during the 1930s, the Missionaries of Africa established themselves more than before in the North of Zambia, in town. The Conventual Franciscans came to Ndola. Seeing the "Barotse land" in need, the Capuchins arrived. Groups of Brothers and Sisters came for schools and other types of formation helpful for the development of the country.

Then, a bit too fast, came the Second World War which had some serious repercussions for the Missions because it meant cutting off both personnel and money. It was a time of great financial difficulties. However, it must be recognised that the two World wars have made things and people also change for the better. But the [Leshina Independent Church](#) was a dramatic experience.

With the coming back of peace, Christian life had started growing in towns. The formation of the local clergy, Priests and Sisters, was getting organised, putting into practice what Pope Pius XI had asked for in the past, the "plantare Ecclesia". Catechists and laity joined in, and the local hierarchy was taking its place. Little by little a Catholic Secretariat was being organised to guide both the clergy and the lay people. The coming of Independence, 1950-1964 and after, was a challenge to all. The growing Church could not let that time pass without getting involved in the development happening in the country and in planning for the future. The national Office of Social Education, started by Fr. [Calmettes](#), helped people to understand the numerous declarations.

Indeed, like the country as a whole, the Church also was "coming of age". Many were the topics which had to be talked about, one of them being for instance the "[Philosophy of Humanism](#)" launched by [President Kenneth Kaunda](#) or the "[Scientific Communism](#)".

Little by little, up to our modern times, themes for discussion have become "plenty". But many more also are the people who are able to discuss them, explain them and see what they mean for us in our modern life. In his book "[History of the Catholic Church in Zambia](#)" Fr Hinfelaar has recalled and presented many of the topics which make the life of modern Zambia and our Church more understandable and challenging! If you have the book, let us enjoy it and learn from it!

May God bless Zambia and its people!