

Commemorating Blessed Isidore Bakanja's centenary of martyrdom

Carmelite Tertiary Maureen Pickman gave the following excellent presentation on the life and death of Blessed Isidore Bakanja, 'Martyr of the Carmelite Brown Scapular', at the York Carmelite Spirituality Group's February 2010 'Celebration of Lay Carmel'.

Isidore Bakanja was beatified by Pope John Paul II in April 1994. His cause for beatification had been supported by the Carmelite Order, because as a wearer of the Order's brown scapular he was part of our extended Carmelite Family. Isidore Bakanja was one of the many Africans who suffered at the hands of the Europeans who 'colonised' Africa in the late 19th century. Mostly they remain nameless and their stories go unheard, but this one young man's story has been told and I think it speaks for those other, nameless ones.

The Context of the 'Belgian Congo'

In 1885, in what became known as 'The scramble for Africa', the European nations met in Berlin to divide up the great continent between them. The whole of the Congo Basin came under Belgian control, ruled by King Leopold II. When in the 1890s ivory was overtaken by rubber as the most valuable Congo product, a small group of companies enjoyed an absolute commercial monopoly on the extraction and export of rubber which was to be found in rubber vines growing wild all over the Congo. One of these companies, the Société Anonyme Belge, or SAB, was to feature in Isidore Bakanja's story.

Little is known of Bakanja's early life

Bakanja was his African name, Isidore was added later when he became a Christian. We know he was born in the Belgian Congo (previously Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo) around 1889 (the exact date is not known). He was born into a fishing community on the banks of the River Botato. As a child Bakanja would have helped his mother with farming (in much of Africa it was the women who were the farmers) and his father and the other men of the village with fishing. His life was, to our modern eyes, a simple one and he would not have been taught to read or write. Nevertheless Bakanja's early life would have been culturally very rich; it has been a feature of our Eurocentric outlook to dismiss as 'primitive' cultures that we do not understand.

Bakanja's encounter with Christ's message

In 1904, when he was about 16, Bakanja decided to leave his village and seek his fortune, initially working as a stone mason for a state-owned construction company. He was assistant to the headman, Linganga, who was to have a great influence on Bakanja. For one thing Linganga was a Christian – the first that Bakanja had encountered. Linganga himself had only been baptised a year or so before Bakanja met him, part of a growing number of African workers who made up a 2,000 strong Christian Community based around a farm-chapel at Boloko Wa Nsimba and ministered to by Cistercian (Trappist) Missionaries.

Bakanja began taking instruction soon after his arrival and he was baptised on 6th May 1906, adopting two clear marks of his new Christian identity: the Christian name 'Isidore'; and the Carmelite brown scapular, known to him as 'Bonkoto Malia' which means 'the habit of

Mary'. It is interesting that the Trappist missionaries in the Congo encouraged all their converts to wear the scapular and to take it very seriously, telling them that the scapular and the rosary were the means by which they could show their Christian faith to others. It seems Bakanja took this lesson very much to heart.

Bakanja was confirmed on 25th November 1906 and received Holy Communion for the first time on 8th August 1907 (before the Second Vatican Council, Confirmation and First Communion were often delayed). By all accounts Bakanja was a serious, good natured young man who took his faith very seriously.

No earthly home

Soon after this, Bakanja returned to his village for a short while but then set out again. It's not clear exactly why but it has been suggested that he missed being part of a Christian community. Certainly there would not have been any other Christians in his village. This time Bakanja got a position of 'house-boy' (general domestic servant) for an agent of a large white-owned rubber-producing company, the Société Anonyme Belge (SAB). He found the ways of the white men bewildering but the work was much less arduous than cutting stone. His boss, a Belgian called Reynders, seemed a fair-minded sort and Bakanja was initially quite content in his new post.

Unfamiliar territory

In 1908 however, Reynders moved to take a new position further up river at a place called Ikili. Before going, Bakanja was warned by his fellow workers that the whites there didn't like Christians, but he trusted Reynders and brushed off these concerns. We often think of 'the whites' as bringing Christianity to Africa, though there had been Christians in North Africa since the days of the early Church. We often also think of Europeans as favourable to Christianity, but this was in the early 1900s, only just over a century after the French Revolution when Christians had been killed because the Church was seen by some as repressive and backward. A number of colonisers in Africa hated the Church for the opposite reasons; Christian missionaries preached that all were equal in God's eyes and worthy of respect as God's children, which undermined the system of virtual slavery that existed to make the colonialists rich.

Blessed are those persecuted in the name of Jesus

The manager of the new estate at Ikili, André Van Cauter, was notorious for his brutality and his unpredictable rages. He had recently burned down an entire village because the villagers had not fulfilled their quota of rubber collection. Although slavery had officially been abolished, the workers were treated as virtual slaves and kept down by savage brutality. Productivity and profit were all that mattered to the colonial 'masters' and falling behind with quotas could result in villagers being killed and their hands being cut off, preserved and displayed to prove that 'proper measures' had been taken as a warning to others.

So Bakanja found himself in a lawless place, ruled by a ruthless, barbaric man from Europe. And what is more, Van Cauter was violently anti-Christian, turning the respectful address for a priest in his native Belgium – 'Mon Père' (Father) – into a mocking catch-phrase. In fact the Africans at Ikili didn't understand what Van Cauter was talking about when he said 'Mon Père' since they had, up to the point of Bakanja's arrival, never encountered a Christian.

A labourer in God's vineyard

Bakanja's habit of prayer intrigued his fellow workers who soon began asking if he would teach them about the Gospel, the words of his prayers, and allow them to join him in prayer. This absolutely incensed his new employer; Van Cauter flew into one of his wild rages and forbade Bakanja to pray either alone or with others.

Bakanja's suffering begins

Things came to a head one day when Bakanja was serving at table for Van Cauter and the Belgian saw that Bakanja was wearing his brown scapular under his shirt. He demanded Bakanja take it off, and when the young man refused Van Cauter had Bakanja stripped and flogged – 25 lashes – telling him that he would not have any of those 'Mon Père animals' on his estate.

It seems that even this show of brutality was not enough for Van Cauter. Something in Bakanja's dignified refusal to deny his faith roused the manager to unprecedented fury and a short while after this incident, after a day of drinking, Van Cauter ordered his men to find Bakanja and bring him to him.

Sharing the sufferings of Christ

When Bakanja again refused to take off his scapular, Van Cauter ripped the 'habit of Mary' from the young man's neck and threw it to his dogs. Van Cauter then had some of his men hold Bakanja face down on the ground and ordered first one, then another, to beat him mercilessly using a specially designed whip which had nails in the end. Although reluctant, the men knew if they did not do as they were told they would suffer the same fate, and rather than stand up to injustice they beat Bakanja until the flesh left his bones. Throughout his ordeal Van Cauter kicked him, stamped on his flayed body, and constantly abused him for his adherence to his Christian faith.

When Van Cauter's men literally had no more strength left to beat him, Bakanja was dragged into a makeshift prison (actually the hut used for smoking the rubber). Here Bakanja was left in agony until, quite by chance, an inspector from the company arrived and Van Cauter, terrified that he would be found out for his vicious behaviour, went to the hut and dragged Bakanja out, ordering him to walk through the bush to a nearby town. With his dreadful wounds Bakanja could not even stand, barely able to drag himself along. As soon as Van Cauter was out of sight, Bakanja hid himself in the bush where he was later discovered by the inspector, an upright, humane man named Dorpinhaus.

Forgiveness from the heart

On hearing Bakanja's story Dorpinhaus had his staff pick him up and place him on his boat to take him to a place of safety in Isongu. Despite having his wounds tended and receiving the best of care, Bakanja finally died of his wounds on 15th August (the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption) 1909. Bakanja was in no doubt that it was because of his faith in Jesus that he had been killed: 'Tell the people that I have been attacked because I am a Christian.' He went to his death with forgiveness in his heart, saying: 'If the white man beat me that's his problem, not mine. If I die, I'll pray for him in heaven.' Bakanja's friends brought a rough stretcher and took him to the cemetery where they buried him with his scapular around his neck and his rosary still clutched in his hand, as it had been at the moment of his death.

Reflection on this witness to God's love

The Church in the Congo marked 2009, the centenary of Bakanja's martyrdom, with great celebration and thanksgiving for his witness to God's love. What impressed me when reading Bakanja's story was the absolute simplicity of his faith in Christ. When in agony from his wounds he took comfort in knowing that Jesus had himself suffered similar brutal treatment. He had been told the scapular was a mark of his Christian faith and so to him, to remove it would be to deny his relationship with God. And this he refused to do, even though it meant terrible suffering and an agonising death. A simple man with a simple, uncompromising and generous faith, Isidore Bakanja is truly an inspiration to us all.

Further reading

Jean Olwen Maynard, *Isidore Bakanja – Young Martyr of the Congo*, (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2001).

Raymond Boisvert, FIC, and James Conlon, AA, *Bakanja*, (Pauline media).



*In 2008 the British Province of Carmelites
commissioned from Sister Petra Clare
an icon of Blessed Isidore Bakanja
for the National Shrine of Saint Jude at Faversham in Kent.
The icon depicts Isidore as a labourer,
wearing the brown scapular.
One hand is open in a gesture of blessing and peace.
The other holds a cross made from a palm,
the symbols of the martyr.*