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Early Roman Catholic Christians' Mission in Nairobi: A Historical Study

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Abstract

The paper was motivated by these questions, how did Roman Catholic Mission start in Kenya? How is the Catholic Church in Nairobi impacting the people? Is there any positive link between Catholic Christianity and the indigenous people? Thus, the paper tries to answer these questions. The paper will help readers, Catholic Christians and all Christians at large to know that early Catholic mission had greatly contributed to the people of Nairobi and that it requires the support of all Christians to carry on this mission. The paper established that despite all of the challenges Catholic Church in Nairobi, it has been able to establish more schools and hospitals for the growth and development of the people in Nairobi.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Nairobi, Indigenous, History

Introduction

Nairobi is the capital city of Kenya. It is a city with a population of 10 million with 360, 000 square miles of land.¹ The earliest reported Christians presence in Nairobi was that of the Portuguese explorers. The most prominent among them was Vasco Da Gama who arrived in East Africa in 1498. Vasco Da Gama did a tremendous work in the Eastern part of Africa to be specific Nairobi. Available statistics indicates that between 1597 and 1740, Portuguese missionaries left Kenya Coast because there was no African Christians who lived there.² The early Catholic Christians came to settle at the coast of Kenya around 19th and 20th centuries.³ In this wise, the Holy Ghost Fathers were the first Catholic missionaries on Kenya soil. They first dwelt at the East Africa areas like Bagamoyo and Tanzania.⁴ They spread their message to the interior and stations like Bura in 1891, Nairobi in 1891, Bogonko in 1902 and Kikuyu in 1904.⁵ Here, among the various centers Nairobi became the headquarters.

In 1907, the unity and cooperation among Christians especially Roman Catholic began.⁶ During this movement Rev. John Jamieson Wills was the forefront of this effort in a very focused manner. Here, the initial plan was to come together to pray and do counseling. Thus, another idea came to hold five days conference at the Eastern part of Kenya. In 1912, all the Churches in Kenya met Nairobi to discuss how the Churches could improve.⁷ The conference included Churches like Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Roman Catholic Church. During the conference, the important points discussed were; the relationship between Christians and the traditional rulers, the natives and the traditionalists.⁸ The meeting also

¹ Thompson Rowling, *African Christians in Europe* (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 1978), 10.

² Shewmaker Stan, *A History of Christianity* (United State of America: William Carey Library, 1970), 7

³ Martin West, *Bishops and Prophets* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1975), 49.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Frederick B. Welbourn, *East African Christianity* (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1965), 7.

⁶ Henry K. Kisumu, *The Development of Kenya Christianity* (Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1973), 19.

⁷ Jones V. Taylor, *The Growth of Churches in Africa* (London: Oxford Press, 1961), 30.

⁸ Zachariah M. Nthamburi, *The Africa Church at the Crossroad* (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 1954), 81.

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brought about the discussion of child development and the effective educational system. Among other things they agreed were the translation of language, building cordial relationship as missionaries and resolving competitive conflicts as Christian groups.⁹ Another doctrinal issues like Seventh day Sabbath and baptism by immersion were brought up by Seventh-day Adventist Church and Baptist groups (Africa Inland Mission, Baptist Church) respectively.¹⁰

At the end of the conference a number of conclusions were reached and some were very detailed as the resolutions were passed.¹¹ In the area of language, efforts were made to translate the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and the hymns which were in current usage in the various mission working in Western Kenya.¹² More importantly, with the regard to education three decisions were made.¹³ In the first place, the conference took steps to appoint two of its members to represent the constituent groups from Western Kenya on the Missionary Education Board for Kenya.¹⁴ Secondly, it was that "Kiswahili" be used in schools for advanced education, but the wider issue of a common language in schools was forwarded to the Missionary Education Board for discussion and decisions.¹⁵ Thirdly, it was strongly recommended that boarding schools should be established for boys and girls respectively, but situated at different stations. The implication here is that, for those who were interested in becoming Christians, they have to commit themselves in abandoning certain practices and should be embraced orders as spelt out.¹⁶ Here, before admission to Church membership, one has to undergo two years of instructions in the basics of the Christian faith, together with evaluation and scrutiny of their lives and character. The second wave of early Christian Missionaries was the Portuguese pioneers who arrived at East Africa to evangelize in the sixteenth century.¹⁷ When the early Christian Missionaries came to East Africa, they were confronted with two major religious forces; African religions and Islam.¹⁸ In the areas they settled it was African religions that held together the social and political fabric than Islamic religion. Here, they were warmly accepted by the people despite the fact that they had been with their smaller gods for long time.

The early Christians came to East Africa to give both

physical and spiritual needs to the people of Nairobi.¹⁹ Here, some Churches like Roman Catholic and Presbyterians denoted foods, clothing, money and other spiritual needs. Around this period civilization substituted Western cultures for African culture.²⁰ Some missionaries destroyed traditional ritual places in an attempt to be persuaded and paved way to Christian evangelism.²¹ The implication here is that during this era many Africans wanted to be Christians especially the chiefs.

The early Catholic Christians were to evangelize and seek the welfare of the people. The questions are: how did Roman Catholic Mission start in Kenya? How is the Catholic Church in Nairobi impacting the people? Is there any positive link between Catholic Christianity and the indigenous people? Thus, the paper tries to answer these questions.

Again, the paper will reveal a brief history of early Christians in general; history of Roman Catholic Christians in Nairobi and the mission of Catholic Church will be taken into consideration. The paper will help the readers, Catholic Christians and all Christians at large to know that early Catholic mission has great contributions to the people of Nairobi and that it requires the support of the Christians to carry out this mission.

The source of information which serves as methodology includes primary and secondary materials. They are published and unpublished books, interviews; articles, personal observations and the internet are the source of data for the paper. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section deals with a history of early Christians in general. The second section tackles a brief history of early Catholic Christians, the third section is about the Church and mission of early Roman Catholic Christians, and the final section deals with conclusion.

A History of Early Roman Catholic Christians in Nairobi

This section will deal with a history of early Roman Catholic Christians in Nairobi. The section tries to attain this objective.

Roman Catholic Church is one of the oldest Churches in Nairobi. The mission enterprise started 1844 by Reverend J.J Willis and E.J. Rees in Nairobi. When the Catholic missionaries came to Nairobi, they settled on the coastal part of Kenya.²² In Nairobi, Swahili was the main language spoken by the natives when the Catholic missionaries came there around eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the same period of nineteenth century AD while early Roman Catholic missionaries expanding their membership through evangelism and around this time some Portuguese traders ruined the Swahili states and their trade through military invaders.²³ The reason was that while the military men attacked the states, the Roman Catholic Christians showed a brotherly love to them and this influenced some of them to become Catholics.

⁹ John N. Mugambi, *Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers, 1995), 67.

¹⁰ Peterson Hermon, *Religion Development and African Identity* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies Press, 1987), 51.

¹¹ Brown. D. Barrette, *Kenya Church Handbook* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishers, 1973), 65.

¹² Ibid. 67.

¹³ Jerry I. Mbiti, *African Religious and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publisher, 1993), 29.

¹⁴ Ibid. 30.

¹⁵ Ibid. 31.

¹⁶ William Baron, *Modern Nationalism and Religion* (New York: Harper Publishers, 1950), 72.

¹⁷ Adrian Hastings, *The Church and Mission in Modern Africa* (London: Burns Oates, 1967), 60.

¹⁸ Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall Press, 1976), 4.

¹⁹ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1922), 224.

²⁰ Ibid. 225.

²¹ Eric Kinyanjui, *The Rise and Persecution of the Prophets* (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishing, 1948), 18.

²² Joseph Baur, *The Catholic Church in Kenya* (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications, 1990), 86.

²³ Stephen Bogonko, *Two Thousand Years of Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1992), 59.

Another important significant event that marked the success of early Roman Catholic missionary enterprise in Nairobi was the slave trade.²⁴ In nineteenth century, Kenya and for that matter Nairobi recorded the highest number of slave trade as far as other parts of East African Countries were concerned.²⁵ Here, Roman Catholic Christians donated food, clothing and money to some of the indigenous people and this attracted many of the natives to become Catholic Christians.

In the early nineteenth century in Nairobi, some of the Roman Catholic priests predicted the events to come and what would happen in one's life.²⁶ Thus, these priests were spiritual figures and intellectuals in the society at that time.²⁷ They were also special people who could understand and interpret a long term historical events than any other prophets or priests in Nairobi. With this, many citizens in Nairobi at that time forsook their lesser gods thereby developing interest in Roman Catholicism and their priests. Hence, most Kenyans in Nairobi became Catholics. Again, some of the early Catholic missionaries worked very hard and as a result some of them were ordained as priests in Nairobi.²⁸ In the light of this, some of the Kenyans who were Catholics decided to become priests and this help them to get more people to accomplish the missionary work in Nairobi. For instance, H.E. Scott, C.E. Hurlburt, Lee H. Downing, R.H. Walker, J.W Arthur, Marcus Fallon and W.R Hotchkiss were the most outstanding Catholic missionaries who contributed immensely to the development and growth of Roman Catholicism in Nairobi in the later part of nineteenth century AD²⁹.

In sixteenth century AD, Vasco Da Gama came to Nairobi together with a renowned Roman Catholic Bishop called Saint Francis Xavier.³⁰ The main purpose for coming to Nairobi was to spread the gospel. When they reached Nairobi, they found their ministry very difficult because Islamic Religion had already gained root as far back fourteenth century. Despite all these challenges, they were successful in their missionary enterprise.³¹

Between seventeenth and eighteenth century, a great navigator by the name David Livingstone came to Nairobi and for that matter Kenya as a whole for an exploration.³² In the course of his exploration Livingstone developed interest in the missionary work. In the light of this, he

started evangelizing the people in Nairobi where many people were converted into Christianity. Around this time, Livingstone's contemporary Bishop John Mackenzie was also spreading the gospel in Nairobi and other parts of East Africa.³³ Frankly speaking, in Nairobi, Mackenzie performed creditably well in his missionary work.

Again, two great missionaries John Dos Santos, a Kenyan evangelist and John Ludwig Krapf, a German national, came to evangelize in Nairobi during the early period in seventeenth century.³⁴ Here, these two missionaries were not successful in their ministries in Nairobi and hence they left for Uganda for effective and productive evangelism.³⁵ In Uganda, they embraced their culture and this made this the people also loved them and eventually accepted their Christianity. They preached to them through their local language.

In 1905, missionaries from the United State of America also came and develop interest in working in Nairobi. When they reached Nairobi, the people accepted them since they ministered to their needs by denoting food, clothing and shelter. On the strength of this, the people accepted the message.³⁶

Essentially enough, these great missionaries like Johann Rebmann and James Erhardt later formed an association called Church Missionary Society to unite Roman Catholic Church members in Nairobi.³⁷ It was also formed to bring all other Churches in Nairobi together for a common purpose. In real sense, the cooperation and unity among Roman Catholic Christians were not the best. It was clear that the missionaries were from different countries and this called for earlier unity among themselves and other Christians' denominations. With this common purpose, they were able to discharge their evangelistic activities well.

However, some of the Catholic missionaries were confined at the coast of Nairobi for fifty years.³⁸ The Christians then travelled into the interior of Nairobi to spread the God's message. From that period to 1910, the Roman Catholic Church had many Christians in Nairobi. Here, they gave physical needs to the people. This strategy helped Roman Catholic Church to establish more Churches in Nairobi.

Moreover, after the Catholic missionaries had finished settling in their respective centers they tried to bring togetherness among its members.³⁹ It was obvious that during this period that unity and cooperation among the early Catholic Christians became distinctive and important landmark in the history of Kenya and for that matter East Africa at large.

In the late nineteenth century, the early Catholic priests

²⁴ Emmanuel Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion* (London: Geoffrey Chapman Publications, 1981), 84.

²⁵ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 131.

²⁶ Barrett Ajiako, *Kenya Churches Handbook: The Development of Kenyan Christianity* (Kisumu: Evangel Publishing House, 1973), 104.

²⁷ Anderson Baro, *The Church in East Africa* (Nairobi: Evans Brothers Publishers, 1977), 189.

²⁸ Felix Boulaga, *Christianity without Fetish: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity* (New York: Orbis Publishing Press, 1981), 221.

²⁹ Lawson Magea, *Christian Ethics in Africa* (New York: Orbis Publications, 2002), 29.

³⁰ Joseph K. Mugambi, *Christianity and African Culture* (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 2002), 127.

³¹ Adrian Oteano, Hastings, *African Catholicism* (London: SCM, 1989), 90.

³² Henry G. Mungeam, *Selected Historical Documents* (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishing, 1990), 151.

³³ Paul T. Stedeford, *Our Work in East Africa* (London: Longman Press, 1911), 176.

³⁴ Axelson Eshiwani, *The Portuguese in East Africa* (Portugal: Witwatersrand Publications, 19600), 80.

³⁵ Oliver Temu, *British Protestants Mission* (London: Longmans, 1972), 81.

³⁶ Philip H. Reindof, *A New Day in Kenya* (London: World Dominion Press, 1936), 17.

³⁷ William Anderson, *The Church in East Africa* (Dodoma, Tanzania: Central Tanganyika Press, 1997), 145.

³⁸ Fowler S. Brunnelen and James H. Dyke, *Christian Schooling, Education for Freedom* (Transvaal Potchefstroom: University of Christian Higher Education Press, 1990), 162.

³⁹ Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Maasai* (New York: Orbis Publications, 1982), 225.

involved more Africans' natives in the missionary work. The first black missionary came from South Africa by the name, Yohana Mbila. He worked extensively and efficiently in Nairobi to convert many people.⁴⁰

Mission of Early Roman Catholic Christians in Nairobi

This section deals with the mission of the early Roman Catholic Christians and its effects on the people of Nairobi. It also tries to search how missionary enterprise in Nairobi started and the areas it covered.

There are many spheres of the Church's existence in Nairobi in which cooperation and unity have been demonstrated. In addition to such spiritual spheres as evangelism and nurture, the Roman Catholic Church has forged togetherness in tackling every realm of man's life and well-being.⁴¹ This actually helped to improve the living condition of the Catholics as well as the nation at large.

More importantly, the theme of the mission among Christians is not only taken for granted in the Bible, but it is also deep seated therein. Moreover, the most important document used by the early Roman Catholic Christians for their mission is the "magisterium."⁴² The magisterium is the official and authoritative teaching of the Roman Catholic Church exercised by the bishops or the popes.⁴³ In other words, magisterium is a prudent dialogue which protects Catholics from negative influences that condition their way of life and fosters the assimilation of positive values such as belief in the Supreme Being who is eternal, creator, sustainer, judge and savior.

In this context, magisterium is an essential authoritative document which expresses a statement in Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi by Bishop Jean Marie Raoul Le Bas De Courmont.⁴⁴ Bishop Jean Marie Raoul Le Bas De Courmont was the first bishop in Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi in 1860.⁴⁵

A Brief History of Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi

The Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi was established by great Catholic Bishops like Saint Francis Xavier and Jean Marie Raoul Le Bas de Courmont on 26th February, 1860. It was initially called Apostolic prefecture of Zanguebar from the Diocese of Saint Denis De La. On 23rd November, 1883, the Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi was promoted as an Apostolic Vicariate of Zanguebar. In 1887, it was renamed as an Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Zanguebar. Again, on 21st December, 1906, it was called an Apostolic Vicariate of Zanzibar. Finally, on 25th March 1953, it was promoted as Metropolitan Archdiocese of Nairobi.⁴⁶

Special Churches: The seat of the Archbishop is a minor Basilica, the Cathedral of the Holy Family in Nairobi.

⁴⁰ Banana C. Sanko, *Come and Share: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Nairobi: Orbis Publications, 1991), 62.

⁴¹ Robert W. Strayer, *The Making of Mission communities in East Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 14.

⁴² Kingsley Gyekye, Catholic Secretariat and Conference of Directorate Data Centre, Nairobi, Kenya oral and written interview by the author, Nairobi, 22 June, 2017.

⁴³ Catholic Episcopal Conference, *Policy Document for Catholic Education* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications in Africa, 2000), 25.

⁴⁴ Kingsley Gyekye.

⁴⁵ Kingsley Gyekye.

⁴⁶ Episcopal Conference of Bishops, *Your Church and Education* (Nairobi: Catholic Secretariat Education Department, 1985), 45.

Thus, it has five dioceses: Kericho Diocese, Kitui Diocese, Machakos Diocese, Nakuru Diocese and Ngong Diocese.⁴⁷ The table below shows the stages in which Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi has gone through its leadership from past to present.⁴⁸

Church	Leader	Term	Title
Vicars Apostolic of Northern Zanguebar	Jean Marie Raoul Le Bas De Courmont	1860-1896	Bishop
Vicars Apostolic of Zanzibar	Emile Auguste Allgeyer	1896-1913	Bishop
Vicars Apostolic of Zanzibar	John Gerald Neville	1913-1930	Bishop
Metropolitan Archdiocese	John Joseph McCarthy	1930-1971	Archbishop
Metropolitan	Maurice Michael Otunga	1971-1997	Cardinal
Metropolitan	John Njue	2007 up to today	Cardinal

From the above table, it is obvious that the Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi has passed through administration of various leaders before its development has come to stage. Currently, it has five (5) dioceses and one (1) archdiocese with one hundred and eighty-two clergy (182) and a total membership of four million (4 million). It is well noted that the whole Catholic membership in Kenya is almost ten (10) million and this is one fourth of the total population in Kenya, approximately forty (40) million. In order to carry to do effective mission the below skills must be implemented, hence the need to discuss them.

Training: Training is very necessary thing every Church member has to receive periodically. In that, a well trained Church member can accomplish a lot for the Church. In this wise, Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi engages in leadership training to develop Church members in every six months.⁴⁹ This training involves teaching, counseling, and discipleship, mentoring, enterprising and evangelizing. With this, the Church members get the needed skills and knowledge to help the Church.

Church Administration: The Church should be run by the competent and efficient administration⁵⁰. In this wise, Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi engages youth and other mere workers in day to day administration of the Church. For instance, Catholic Church in Nairobi uses catechists, secretaries, treasurers, fathers and bishops in its administration. This normally assists the students and young ones to acquire requisite skills, knowledge and experience thereby improving the standard of the Church.

Vitican Aid: Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi receives huge sum of money from the Pope in the Vitican city of Rome every year.⁵¹ Therefore, through this donation the Church has been able to construct a basic and modern

⁴⁷ Episcopal Conference of Bishops, 46.

⁴⁸ Enoch Boss, Catechist of Metropolitan Cathedral, Nairobi, Kenya, interviewed by the author, Nairobi, 22 June, 2017.

⁴⁹ Benson Ondeiki, Catechist of Metropolitan Cathedral, Nairobi, Kenya, interviewed by the author, Nairobi, 22 June, 2017.

⁵⁰ Hazaria Oteano, Catholic Secretariat, Nairobi, Kenya, interviewed by the author, Nairobi, 22 June, 2017.

⁵¹ Wilson Otunga, Catechist of Holy Ghost Fathers Cathedral, Machakos, Nairobi, interviewed by the author, 22 June, 2017.

secondary school. This has helped to educate children within and outside the Church.

Evangelism: Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi takes evangelism very seriously and also a way of winning souls to increase Church membership.⁵² In the light of this, Catholic Church in Nairobi organizes three days public crusade every quarter. Thus, the public campaign has helped to increase the Church's membership to four (4) million.

However, the main objectives of Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi are; to spur evangelization and mission work of the Church, to provide pastoral care and spiritual growth among the members, to enhance family life, to promote education and health among priesthood and church members.⁵³ The main missionary groups who evangelize in Nairobi Roman Catholic Church are the holy ghost missionaries, the Jesuits, the consolata sisters, the assumption sisters, the Franciscan sisters, the St. Patrick and Augustinians. Thus, the available data indicates that from 1950 to 2010, these groups have converted one (1) million people into the Catholic Church in Nairobi.⁵⁴

Missionary Work in Nairobi Roman Catholic Church from 1953 to 2010

Date	Facilitator	Church	Number of Souls
1953	Archbishop Joseph McCarthy	Kericho Roman Catholic	2200
1957	Archbishop Raphael Ndingi	Kisumu Roman Catholic	800
1959	Archbishop Joseph McCarthy	Ngong Roman Catholic	1250
1963	Bishop John Gerald	Kissi Roman Catholic	420
1966	Archbishop Raphael Ndingi	Nyeri Roman Catholic	3015
1970	Bishop John Gerald	Nakuru Roman Catholic	981
1982	Cardinal Michael Otunga	Machakos	1783
2000	Bishop John Gerald	Lodwar Roman Catholic	1490

The above table discloses that the leaders in Nairobi Roman Catholic Church worked effectively through the unction of the Holy Spirit to win souls.

Thus, the proclamation of the gospel went hand in hand with social services, such as Education and Health Services. It is clear that at Kericho and Lodwar, College of Education and Nursing were established in 1963 and 1970 respectively. Currently, Roman Catholic Church in Nairobi has 2530 Basic Schools and 142 Senior High Schools.⁵⁵ It also has 10 Hospitals and 82 Clinics. Therefore, these social amenities have contributed immensely to the lives of the people in Nairobi.

Challenges

Despite the successes chalked by Nairobi Roman Catholic Christians, it still has some challenges. The challenges are shown below:

⁵² Benson Ondeiki.

⁵³ Wilson Otunga.

⁵⁴ Eugene Stock, *History of the Church Mission* (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishing, 1960), 58.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 159.

Low level of Education: In Nairobi Roman Catholic Church, many Church members do not have formal education. On the strength of this, it is normally difficult to get personnel to work in the various sectors of the Church.

Inadequate finance: The problem of finance has made the Church unable to carry out enough developmental projects.

Conclusion

The paper addressed a history of mission of early Roman Catholic Christians in Nairobi. Thus, the early Christian Missionaries started their missionary enterprise in Nairobi in 1844. The great evangelists who championed this course were Vasco Da Gama, David Livingston, E.J Rees, J.J Willis and John Jemieson.

Moreover, Roman Catholic Christians in Nairobi are strongly recognized, embraced and do foster good relationship with one another. The reason is that since the establishment of Nairobi Catholic Church, it has exhibited a strong spirit of cooperation and unity among its members, constituent Churches and other Christian groups. Occasionally, there have been interruptions and misunderstanding, yet peace and unity has been maintained from the past to present time. Despite all these differences, the Church has been able to establish more schools and hospitals for the growth and development of the people in Nairobi.

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