

Slavery: not just a thing of the past

By **Pierre Lafollie M.Afr**

When the White Fathers arrived in the north of Zambia in 1891 they discovered that the slave trade was still thriving in spite of having been abolished by many countries. Their reports, together with other witnesses coming from different parts of Africa, prompted their founder, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, to launch an antislavery campaign whose 125th anniversary is being celebrated this year. But the fight is far from over since slavery is still with us

The White Fathers in Northern Zambia

When Brazil abolished slavery in 1888, it was the last Western country to do so. Thus, when the first Missionaries of Africa (popularly known as the White Fathers) settled in July 1891 at Mambwe Mwela, along today's Tanzania - Zambia border, the Western slave trade had ended since its market, essentially across the Atlantic, had disappeared and the slaves had already been freed. In this corner of Africa though, the missionaries arrived in a country devastated by a still active campaign of slave raiding.

They were coming from Mponda, in Malawi, where they had been prevented to carry out their missionary activity due to the adverse social and political climate they had encountered. The missionaries were welcomed by Chief Mwene Mambwe (Chief Nsokolo) and his people who saw them as protection against slaving raids by Bemba warriors from which they had fled. So the missionaries had to fortify their enclosure which became a refuge for the surrounding population. Inside there was a school for freed slaves, boys and girls, probably the first in Zambia. Soon free children joined it. Meantime the Bemba threat continued to the point that between March and May 1893, the British lent 20 guns and 600 rounds of ammunition to deter aggression.

The missionaries had settled about half-way along the Stevenson road linking the Protestant missions in Malawi with those on Lake Tanganyika. That road crossed an important slave trader's route, coming from what is now Shaba all the way to the Tanzanian coast. A newer route for trading slaves and ivory with the Bemba went from Mwamba's to Chitimukulu's and Makasa's territories before joining the older route. The slaves were taken to Zanzibar and to the various ports of the Indian Ocean to be smuggled by dhows to the various slave markets in the Middle and Far East.

The missionaries were seen as an inconvenient presence and small Bemba armed units tried to intimidate them but failed. As a matter of fact, the White Fathers convinced themselves that the sickness which had forced them to stop at Mambwe Mwela had been providential: the place was ideal to make contacts with *"those terrible Bemba"* *. Chiefs Chilangwa and then Makasa were approached and eventually Kayambi was founded on 12th July 1895.

Chief ChitiMukulu did not approve and in reprisal he raided a village in Makasa's territory and did *"kill eight men and take 440 to 500 women"* *. But the missionaries stayed and within a month they had already redeemed four slaves. On 4th August the mission diary states cautiously: *"the situation seems to be safe"* *. Actually it was still tense, so much so that the new mission was also surrounded by a protective wall with firing slits. Slave raiding was still going on, and on 27th October the mission was visited by some warriors of Chief Chilangwa, boasting about their exploits a fortnight before when they had raided Lambya villages: *"We did not take many people, we preferred to kill them – meaning the men. (We) did take many women and 47 heads of cattle"* *. The missionaries offered to redeem all survivors. In the meantime the school had moved from Mambwe to Kayambi and on 4th September 1896 they received four boys and six girls rescued from a Swahili caravan intercepted near Nakonde by the British.

Antislavery efforts

For most of the 19th century the British navy had been trying to stop slave trading, at first mostly on the Atlantic Ocean, then on the East coast of Africa. Pressure was put on the Sultan of Zanzibar to stop his involvement in the trade – to no avail. Actually the trade had increased, with the cunning Sultan been able to do as he wished on the continent until 1890 when it started becoming increasingly difficult: the British Navy patrolled Zanzibar and the coastline while German troops controlled the mainland – strange bedfellows cooperating in the name of the new anti-slavery campaign.

From the middle of the 19th century, more and more Europeans had undertaken to explore the African interior, till then largely unknown to the Western world. They were soon joined by Christian missionaries of various denominations. Colonialists would soon follow. What those visitors witnessed they told in books and newspapers articles and an increasingly literate and politically conscious European public discovered what the slave traders had hitherto successfully kept hidden from them. The horrors of the slave raiding and the brutal march to the coast became public domain. This, compounded with the horror stories of the slave trade across the Atlantic, had a shocking impact which played a decisive role in pushing Western governments to abolish slavery in their territories. But the slave trade went on elsewhere, especially in Africa, and so when socially conscious Pope Leo XIII wanted to celebrate the abolition of slavery in the last Catholic nation to do so, Brazil, a French prelate, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie proposed to use the occasion to raise an outcry that would force Western governments to see to the abolition of the slave trade in the rest of the world too. The Pope agreed and entrusted him with the job.

Lavigerie's antislavery campaign

The Cardinal left his other commitments and threw himself wholly in the campaign. Not only had he read the works of great explorers like Livingstone and Stanley but, as bishop of Algiers, he heard echoes of the trans-Sahara slave trade and, as founder of the White Fathers and the White Sisters, he was receiving firsthand accounts of what was happening in the African interior. His missionaries saw slave markets, met slave caravans, had slaves offered to them for sale. They could redeem but a few for lack of money and also to avoid encouraging a trade they wanted abolished. Actually the routes they followed were those of the slave caravans, littered with the corpses of those who had collapsed on the way to the coast. Even at the end of the 19th century, they could revisit places they had first crossed ten years earlier, prosperous at that time and now utterly devastated by the slave raiders. They recorded all they saw and thoroughly reported it to the Cardinal.

An excellent public speaker, he set about arousing public opinion. He talked in churches and in secular halls. He wrote for the press. He did not just address the Catholics or the Christians but all people of good will, because, as he wrote: *"I am a man, and nothing human is foreign to me"*. At a time of great tension between the Church and the secularists, his approach surprised many and most of the secular press approved and reprinted his message: what he said in the church of St Sulpice's in Paris on July 1st 1888, was reprinted by the Times in London.

In London he spoke in Prince's Hall, in the presence of many non Catholic personalities representing different denominations. There, in the country of the first anti-slavery society, the ground was better prepared, but there too public opinion had been under the impression that the job was by then almost done. He also spoke in Rome and in Brussels. Public opinion was successfully aroused and the governments had to follow suit.

The Cardinal even proposed a radical solution: an armed international force to protect the populations. That did not go down well, for it threatened colonial ambitions, particularly those of Leopold I of Belgium. Eventually national anti-slavery societies were formed in most Western European countries. They

cooperated to put an end to slave raiding and trading. Officially, at least! For slavery is not yet dead; – simply, it has taken new forms.

* Quotes from Kayambi mission diaries

Do you:

...have a maid brought from the village, working for you without just pay, denied education, holidays or contact with friends?

...encourage or allow students and pupils to “pay” for better marks with sexual favours?

...deprive your dependents of food, freedom of movement or education?

...give work, money or food to children in the streets, at traffic lights or at the market, making street life profitable and rewarding?

...take your child out of school to make him/her herd cattle, work in the field or in the fishing camps?

...remain silent and indifferent to domestic violence against women and children?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, then YOU too own a slave!

This is the second article of the series: “Let us break the chains”

Next week article will be on the plight of street children in Lusaka. For comments, inquiries and contributions write to: antislavery2013@gmail.com

