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## THE CLARETIAN MISSIONARIES OF ANNOBON [Equatorial Guinea]

### ARTICLE

#### INTRODUCTION

The Claretian Mission of Annobon owes its origin to the apostolic fervor of the Missionaries of St. Antonio Maria Claret, who was born to evangelize. It dates back to November 13th, 1883 when the Claretians first arrived in Santa Isabel, today renamed Bioko. A project of exploration of the country's geographical features not only helped them to discover its hidden depths but also, as a primitive mission, in the conversion to Christianity of the inhabitants. By extending their missionary activity along the River Muni into the continental part of the country served by Elobey Grande and Elobey Chico, Corisco and Cabo San Juan, they opened the door for their arrival among the natives of the equatorial forest; not only those but also the inhabitants of the island of Annobon, which was also the property of the Spanish Crown.

#### HISTORY

The island of Annobon was discovered by Portuguese sailors Juan de Santarem and Pedro de Escobar on the first day of January 1471, and given the name Anno-bo, which means Good Year. It was without any human population. Much later, after it was bought by Luis de Almeida for 400,000 crowns, families originally from Angola and Sao Tome arrived, and by encamping in its northern part gave origins to the village of Palea, which Claretian Missionaries would much later rename Antonio de Palea. By not returning to their countries of origin,

these first inhabitants of the island became its new tribe, named GUE-AMBO.

Though it is blessed with a great exuberance of plants typical of the forests of this region, the growth of fruit trees and slender cobias, as well as the beautiful beaches which edge this island in the Atlantic, have made its panorama a very popular tourist attraction.

The language of its inhabitants is FADAMBO, which is characterized by rhyming musical consonants that make it very difficult to understand except by natives or close friends. The population is a nomadic, wandering people who, at certain periods of the year, immigrate to the towns of Agandji or San Pedro, Awala or Sta Cruz and Mebana or San Antonio of the South, to dedicate themselves to the culture or to the artisan fishing which is their primordial occupation.

The island has a total population of about 3,000 inhabitants, mostly children and elderly people. The young people emigrate to Malabo and Spain in search of work. The inhabitants are usually characterized as having a great love for their island and they always hope to have a small house there when they retire or are too old to work.

By the signing of the Treaty of Pardo on May 24th, 1778, the island became the property of the Spanish Crown, which took possession on September 28th, 1778 in the form of an expedition of mixed nationalities, Spaniards, with Primo de Riveras in the front and Portuguese under the command of Friar Luis Cayetano de Castro.

## **THE EVANGELIZATION OF ANNOBON**

The evangelization of Annobon was not initiated by the Claretian Missionaries: during their stay on the island before Spain took possession, the chaplains of the Portuguese ships made sure there were catechesis as well as baptisms and even blessed some weddings. Just as in all the surrounding territories, the work of the

evangelists of Annobon had mixed results and was sometimes affected by political issues, this emphasized by P. Thomas Pujadas:

"In 1569, King Sebastian, after being raised to the throne of Portugal, was seriously worried about the spread of the Catholic faith, especially in the continent of Africa, for whose conversion he promoted a Crusade in which he died. It is logical to suppose that, not only would these missions be sustained but fortified. In 1580, after uniting into one the crowns of both Spain and Portugal, Philip II subsequently continued these religious endeavors in the Spanish-Portuguese Empire. This is why on a precise date of 1592 a grant of funds was sent to an African priest in Annobon.

In 1645, 1646 and 1647 Spanish and Italian capuchins while making their way to the Congo, visited the island and brought strength to the Catholic faithful in Annobon. This would prove helpful later when they were dominated by the Dutch. Nevertheless, it is not possible to avoid the fact that, with the lack of priests and the necessary religious culture, its Catholicism became bound up with absurd beliefs founded on frauds and impregnated with forms of paganism. "

Before the arrival of the Claretian Missionaries, and speaking generally about the second half of the XVII - XIX century, without continuous evangelization in the towns the Catholic communities diminished into groups, choosing their own leaders as sacristans to celebrate the Latin cult in a deformed way. This practice persists to this present day.

The Claretian missionary activity in Annobon began on August 19th, 1885 with Padre Joaquin Juanola as its expeditionary leader. Padre Frivolous had told the missionaries this was their destiny, just as he'd written to Padre Clotet:

"The inhabitants are a race who is more religious, simpler and more likeable than the people of Cam. With them I hope to share a great love for our Catholic faith, to the exclusion of all others. They recite the Litanies of the Saints in Latin and rigorously observe the

ceremonies and practices taught to them by the Portuguese Catholic Missionaries."

Since 1885 Claretian Missionaries have maintained their presence on this island, accompanying its inhabitants even in the most difficult moments of its socio-religious history in Equatorial Guinea. Sometimes, because of the shortage of personnel, there has only been one missionary there, as was the case with Padre Segú, whose mortal remains now lie under the beautiful coconut palms that grow in the borders around this island, and Padre Jose Palacios, etc.

Because of its isolation, its lack of mass media and elementary infrastructure, all which are necessary to guarantee the health and safety of its population, no other religious Congregation has accepted the prophetic risk to establish its missionaries in Annobon. Frequently, there is a great scarcity of manufactured products like salt, oil, cigarettes, wine, even though it enchants them, and medication etc.

At the moment two Claretian Missionaries work on the island of Annobon: Pedro NKOGO {the prophet} and Francisco Bacale Garcia. Their missionary activity is centered on Sunday Masses; the catechesis; ministering to the sick; Masses for the disabled, of which there are many on the island as a consequence of poliomyelitis, etc. Both missionaries teach religion in the public schools as well as typing and pharmacy, this for the preparing of analgesics to a population that lacks any basic knowledge about drugs or medicines.

Today, Annobon continues to be a field that needs missionaries at its vanguard, burning to bring the Gospel to all its towns.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since the end of the XV century, Annobon has benefited from the spiritual devotion of the Portuguese because of the commercial value of timber operations offering work there, which caused many

natives to transfer to the island from the surrounding Portuguese colonies, like Angola and Sao Tome. However, the desert, which was the eventual result of this exploitation of the forest, caused a reduction in commercial interest, bringing with it a lack of spiritual devotion by the inhabitants. In this situation, the practice of Catholic devotions underwent a transformation involving the restoration of priests and sacristans which continues to this present day.

It is an island whose inhabitants suffer great limitations in their fight for survival, because without the assistance of the mass media, supply and demand for manufactured products is minimal. Health and education lack purpose and determination. Today, Annobon appears not only to be in need of evangelization, but also humanitarian support to bring positive changes to the standard of life for its inhabitants. The Claretian Missionaries of Equatorial Guinea have made an evangelization and humanitarian - aid project for this island one of their priorities.

**WE NEED MISSIONARIES FOR ANNOBON!**

Fr. Juan Esono Oyono CMF

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# CALLED TO EVANGELIZE

We thank you, Father,  
because you have called us to evangelize  
like our founder, Saint Anthony Mary Claret.  
Enkindle in our hearts  
an intense love for you and your children.

Send us your Spirit  
so that our mission may be guided by your will  
and our community may become a sign of communion,  
a place of love and freedom, justice and peace.

Help us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus,  
that we might live as his true disciples  
and as sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary  
be always in the world Gospel witnesses  
and messengers of the Kingdom.  
Amen.

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