

MISSIONARY BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF TUTZING

PRIORY NDANDA

SEPTEMBER 14, 1908 – SEPTEMBER 14, 2008

Ndanda Priory has not been started out of the air. It has grown out of the sacrifice of the first Missionary Benedictine Sisters, who gave their lives in East Africa with readiness.

The Congregation of the Mission Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing was founded with the arrival of four young ladies who joined the group of monks of Fr. Andreas Amrheim in Reichenbach Germany September 24, 1885. Both groups, Sisters and monks moved later to St. Ottilien. The Sisters moved to Tutzing in 1905.

The first Mission of this Congregation was East Africa, a German colony at that time. Four Sisters joined the group of six monks to start their journey to this mission in 1887, November 11. The Sisters were Sr. Martha Wansing, Sr. Lioba Ellwanger, Sr. Benedikta Sivering and Sr. Raphaela Kamphaus. They went first to Rome, made their first vows in the Chapel of Campo Santo on November 21, attended Holy Mass together with Pope Leo XIII. and then joined the audience with the Pope during which the little Terese Martin of Lisieux, later the "Patroness of the Mission" made her petition to the Pope to obtain the permission to enter the Carmel at the age of fifteen.

After these great events the Sisters continued their journey together with the monks by ship. The Sisters wore a red belt to remind them always that they should be ready to shed their blood for their holy faith, namely be ready to become martyrs. This soon became a reality.

On their journey they were directly confronted by the misery of slave trade at Jiddah, at that time the largest slave market of Arabia. They arrived in Zanzibar on January 22, 1888, where they stayed for two months. There again they witnessed the pitiable situation of the slaves, which upset them.

After the monks had built a small house for them on the mainland at Pugu the Sisters followed them and arrived there on March 17, 1888. Their mission work was praying, treating the sick, preaching the gospel, ransoming slaves, and educating them and others. The missionaries themselves were suffering much from tropical diseases like Malaria, diarrhoea etc. Br. Wendelin died already two months after his arrival at the age of 18 and Sr. Lioba five months after her arrival at the age of 24. Sr. Raphaela left for health reasons. The Mission was not yet one year old when it was completely destroyed, during the Arab uprising, on January 13, 1889. Sr. Martha, Br. Petrus and Br. Benedict were killed. On leaving for Africa Sr. Martha had written to her family:

"With joyful resoluteness I accepted the red cincture which should ever remind me of my readiness to shed my blood for my holy faith". How soon was that realized! Sr. Benedikta and two Brothers were led away as prisoners and kept for two months.

The bloodshed and destruction of Pugu did not paralyze the young Christians in Germany, but enkindled new vocations who came with enthusiasm. Soon after the destruction, six young ladies joined the Congregation in April 1889. Among them Sr. Birgitta Korff, the first General Prioress of the Congregation, Sr. Marcella, who died at Nyangao 1903 and Sr. Bernadine the foundress of Ndanda Priory.

Already one year after the destruction of Pugu new missionaries came to East Africa to start a new mission at Dar es Salaam. Soon Pugu became a place of pilgrimage for the Missionary Benedictines. Already in 1891 Sr. Marcella and in 1894 Sr. Birgitta Korff, the future Mother General, prayed at the graves in Pugu to ask for God's grace for their mission work. Again the Gospel was preached, slaves ransomed and children educated. The Sisters took care of the sick and the children. They opened a hospital beside St. Joseph's church. The house is still there in good condition, but now used for secular offices. Mission stations in the country were opened. Among them Peramiho, Lukuledi and Nyangao. The Mission was flourishing in spite of so many difficulties like tropical diseases and cultural conditions. But in 1905 another bloodshed awaited them. Bishop Cassian Spiss, two Brothers and two new missionary Sisters, Sr. Felicitas Hiltner and Sr. Cordula Ebert, were killed on their way to Peramiho near Liwale at Mikukuyumbu on August 14, 1905 by the rebels of the Maji-Maji uprising. These two Sisters had just arrived from Europe. They did not reach their destination, Peramiho, but were killed already on their way. It is written that Sr. Felicitas had sometimes at home asked the poor whom she had helped to pray for her to obtain the grace of martyrdom. How soon was this realized! Their remains were placed in a zinc casket and given their final resting place in a vault near Mary's altar in the Cathedral of St. Joseph at Dar es Salaam on December 28, 1905.

Two weeks later on August 29 the Nyangao Mission was destroyed. Four Sisters Sr. Bernardine, Sr. Avia, Sr. Helena, Sr. Walburga, Fr. Leo and Br. Cyprian had to flee. When their lives were in greatest danger one of the Sisters, Sr. Walburga, prayed "O beloved Jesus, I offer my life, save the others." Her offer was accepted by God and the others were saved. These were the ones who started the Mission of Ndanda except Sr. Avia who died on September 15 at Dar es Salaam. Now people are making pilgrimages to both places, Mikukuyumbu and Ng'awa near Nyangao.

One year after that event Fr. Leo and Br. Cyprian started Ndanda Mission on August 15, 1906. On September 14, 1908 Sr. Bernadine and Sr. Helena, being very much aware that they were saved for the future work in God's vineyard by the sacrifice of Sr. Walburga's life, started the Ndanda Priory with four more Sisters.

The Mission work was to preach the Gospel, to take care of the sick by home visiting, to educate children and youth especially girls and to do pastoral work in the parish. 1912 the Sisters took over the care of the leprosy patients at Mwena.

Their number increased over the years to more than 600. Huts were replaced by big houses. In recent years leprosy became treatable and the number of inpatients decreased. Sr. Lia Schwarzmüller worked there the longest, namely 55 years until she retired at the age of 95. The Leprosarium was closed on March 1, 2007 after 95 years, as it was not needed any more.

The first medical doctor of our Congregation Sr. Dr. Thecla Stinnesbeck, arrived at Ndanda in 1927 and started St. Benedict's Hospital which grew, over the years, up to 300 beds. She trained her Sisters and local people and started a Rural Medical Aid School and Midwifery training. She wrote 12 books in Swahili on different subjects for these trainings. With the staff trained by her she built up a health system with 21 dispensaries and two smaller hospitals, Mnero and Nyangao, in the whole area between the rivers of Ruvuma and Mbemkuru

Sr. Thecla was famous and widely known and appreciated for her excellent work in Tanzania. The hospital continued to develop and 45 years after her death is still famous together with its school for Diploma in Nursing. Mnero Hospital and most of the dispensaries were later handed over to the Congregation they had founded and to other Congregations or the government.

Much emphasis was put on the education of children, girls and women by opening kindergartens, domestic schools and a middle school. A teacher training college (TTC) was started for girls, but closed again in 1966. Because of these schools some women later obtained a higher education and even held high posts in the government. Our Sisters also taught in the Mission Secondary School at Ndanda which at first accepted only boys, but later on from 1966 girls as well. It was later nationalized.

The greatest success in the education of women was given by God, in the start of the Congregation of the African Benedictine Sisters of our Lady, Help of Christians, which has now about 200 Sisters and is active in 4 dioceses. In 1991 the Ndanda Prioory accepted the first Tanzanians into its international community. Their number is increasing steadily.

After the Maji-Maji uprising the mission work was disturbed twice for political reasons. During the First World War 1914 – 18 a military hospital was set up at Ndanda where our Sisters did the nursing care and were responsible for the kitchen. The year 1915 and the beginning of 1916 were very difficult times due to severe hunger because the harvest was requisitioned for the soldiers and there was no rain. The Mission could help in some way with food. The Sisters of the kitchen had a hard time to prepare proper and enough food for the soldiers. Many people in the area died of starvation. Finally in November 1917 all the missionaries had to leave the country by order of the English government. They were allowed to come back only in 1926. During these years many Christians gave up their faith and Islamism entered the area. The missionaries tried their best and later on many came back to the church.

The second interruption of the mission work occurred during World War II, when in 1942 all German Missionaries again had to leave and could only come back 1946. This time, the old Sisters, Nurses and cooks were allowed to stay.

New apostolates were started by the Sisters: In 1982 Family apostolate with Billings Ovulation Method. By now 2300 Billing teachers are trained for all the dioceses of Tanzania. Since 1998 one Sister (Theologian) teaches religion and “Education for Life” in Secondary Schools, first at Ndanda then in ten Schools at Mtwara. In 2005 involvement in the new catholic secondary school in Mtwara and an HIV/AIDS program at Ndanda was started.

All in all, throughout the hundred years the Sisters were evangelizing the people in Southeastern Tanzania through their prayers, sacrifices and religious life and by their activities in health and education and through their social and pastoral work. They founded the native Diocesan Congregation of the “African Benedictine Sisters of our Lady, Help of Christians. “Some of the very first Missionary Sisters gave their blood, together with the monks, and gave instigation for three places of pilgrimage in Tanzania - Pugu, Mikukyumbu and Ng’awa near Nyangao where people go to pray to obtain God’s grace and help. The relics of the murdered Bishop, two Brothers and two Sisters are kept in the vault in the Cathedral of St. Josef at Dar es Salaam.

Sr. Birgitta Schnell OSB