

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CATHOLICISM IN AFRICA

from New Testament times to 1847

African Catholicism has its roots in the first century. Mark the evangelist (*aka* John Mark) was associated with Saint Paul and Barnabas (who was Mark's cousin) and wrote the gospel bearing his name around 60 - 65 AD. The unnamed Ethiopian eunuch of the Acts of the Apostles (8: 27 - 30) was baptized by Philip. Simon of Cyrene who helped Jesus carry his cross was African, as was Simon (Simeon) Niger who was a teacher and associated with the church of Antioch.

Several of the Church Fathers were African: Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, and Augustine (the son of Saint Monica). Perpetua, Felicity, Maurice (with his military regiment), and other Africans of the early church obtained sainthood through martyrdom. Africa gave the church three popes: Victor I, Melchiades (who is also a martyr), and Gelasius I. North Africa was the residence of many patristic era figures until the Muslim conquest of the region. Their invasion spurred a significant Catholic community to emigrate to North Africa from southern Spain.

During the Chalcedonian schism of the 5th century, most of eastern African Christianity separated from Catholicism including Ethiopia, Nubia, Makuria, and Andalusia, all of which were converted to Christianity during the Byzantine Empire (approximately 500 - 548 AD). Unfortunately, with the beginning of the Middle Passage, most African Catholics of West Africa (especially from the Kongo region) ended up enslaved in America. The Portuguese entered the Kongo, converted many to Catholicism, engaged in trade, and eventually in the slave trade within Africa – almost a century before there was any contact with America.

Estevanico was the first Black Catholic in America; he was from Morocco. He survived a shipwreck and, in 1528, led survivors inland to the territory that would become Texas. On the ship he learned linguistics and medical skills from the Spanish clergy. In America he lived among the indigenous people for eight years before being killed in 1539. Estevanico traversed the future state's busiest slave ports, including Galveston, where, eventually, emancipation would be announced.

Peter Claver was a Black Catholic from Verdu, Spain and became the patron of enslaved peoples. Some slaves who were Catholic before becoming enslaved may have been instrumental in converting their owners; others may have been converted by their owners. Catholicism flourished in Africa from biblical times, as is reflected in the New Testament record on apostolic incursion in sub-Saharan Africa. The major source of Black Catholics in the United States was Louisiana. The French had baptized slaves as early as 1699.

South African history of the Catholic Church began on December 8, 1847 with the arrival of Bartholomew Diaz at Walvis Bay which he called Santa Maria de Conceicao. The first Mass was celebrated the same year on an island he named the Island of the Holy Cross, off Port Elizabeth. Vasco de Gama landed there ten years later on his way to India and named it *Tierra de Natal* on Christmas day. Both explorers had brought missionaries with them.

Sometime between 1652 and 1795 the Dutch East India Company banned Catholicism in South Africa. Occasionally priests traveling on Portuguese and French vessels were allowed. This ban remained between 1795 and 1802 under British rule. The Dutch came to power again in 1804 and allowed religious tolerance. But two years later the British returned to rule again, prohibiting religious tolerance and expelling priests and religious.

In 1837 Pope Gregory XVI appointed Bishop Raymond Griffith as the first bishop of South Africa. In 1847 the Eastern Cape Vicariate was established at the Cape of Good Hope; Bishop Aidan Devereux was its first Vicar Apostolic.