

The Story of the Ugandan Martyrs

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Today is the Feast of St. Charles Lwanga and Companions, also known as the Ugandan Martyrs (or the African Martyrs). The story is not particularly well known in the United States, but in Africa the martyrs are an important part of the Catholic (and Anglican) tradition. During my time with the Jesuit Refugee Service in Kenya in the early 1990s, I was surprised to run into so many men named “Kizito.” When I finally asked someone what the name meant (thinking I would hear a definition of a Swahili word) I was greeted with a wondering stare. “Is it possible, Brother,” said this man, “that you do not know Kizito?”

Let us pray for the church in Uganda, in East Africa, and in Africa.

Christian missionaries, both Catholic and Anglican, arrived in the interior of Africa during the late nineteenth century. The first of the Catholic missions was established by the White Fathers, a missionary society founded by the French cardinal Charles Lavigerie, the archbishop of Algiers and Carthage. (The White Fathers took their name not from the color of their skin but from the color of their long tunic.) As early as 1878, when he was asked by Pope Leo XIII to take charge of the missions in equatorial Africa, Lavigerie began a series of annual caravan journeys to central Africa as part of the Catholic evangelization of the area. The next year, a Catholic mission was founded in what is now Uganda.

The largest and most powerful of the local ethnic groups was the Baganda, a group in which European missionaries took particular interest. Edward Rice (a friend, incidentally, of Thomas Merton) offers an overview of the importance of the region and the Baganda people in his book *Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton*, a biography of the Victorian explorer and linguist. Rice recounts that the Baganda were among the richest and most advanced tribes in central Africa. Moreover, they “bore a certain patina of civilization that was to astound Europeans later, with well-organized bureaucracies, statesmanship of a superior order, finely developed arts and architecture, and unusual handicrafts.” Yet the civilization also had a dark side, according to Rice, with both rulers and subjects having the reputation of being “unnaturally cruel.”

Mutesa, the ruler of the Baganda, exemplified this cruel streak. When he took the throne in 1860, to ensure his own political survival he buried his brothers alive—all sixty of them. Yet he adopted a more or less benign approach to the Christian missionaries. (Butler’s *Lives of the Saints* calls him a “not unfriendly ruler.”) In essence, Mutesa allowed his subjects to choose among any of the faiths being imported into his kingdom—Catholic, Protestant, or Muslim. In turn, each group attempted to assert its influence on the king’s court through the conversion of high-ranking officials. Mutesa, however, pointedly did not choose any one creed. In 1884 he died, still adhering to the local traditional religions.

Conversion to Christianity among the Baganda meant a rejection of the traditional religions. It also implied a setting aside of some of the traditional ways of life, an adherence to a new set of moral and religious standards, and, often, the establishment of a new set of alliances, based on religious belief. As a result, the group of new

believers (called *abasomi*, or readers) came to be regarded with suspicion by other Baganda as a dangerous rebel faction. During the reign of Mutesa, however, these suspicions were kept under check.

With the accession of his son, Mwanga, the situation altered dramatically. As a young man, Mwanga had shown some favor to the Christian missionaries, but his attitude changed as soon as he took the throne. According to tradition, the *kabaka* was the center of all authority and power in the kingdom, and he could use his subjects as he wished. But the presence of the missionaries was severely diminishing his authority among the converts. Mwanga was also a practicing pedophile, and upon discovering that the young men who had converted to Christianity were beginning to reject his sexual advances, he grew enraged. As a result, the king sought to eliminate Christianity from his kingdom and began a violent persecution of the missionaries and the new Christians.

In January of 1885, Mwanga had three Baganda Anglicans— Joseph Rugarama, Mark Kakumba, and Noah Serwanga— dismembered and their bodies burned. In October of that same year the newly arrived Anglican bishop, James Hannington, was murdered along with his caravan on their way to the region. In response, Joseph Mukasa, a senior adviser to the *kabaka* and a recent Catholic convert, reproached Mwanga for executing Bishop Hannington without having offered him the customary opportunity to defend himself. Mwanga, furious at what he saw as Mukasa's insolence, had him beheaded on November 15, 1885. Mukasa became the first of the black Catholic martyrs on the continent.

Among those now in obvious danger was the head of the royal pages, Charles Lwanga, who had been instructed in Christianity by the White Fathers and who was now Mukasa's successor in guiding the young converts. The day of Joseph Mukasa's death, Lwanga went to the Catholic mission with other catechumens (those who were receiving religious instruction), and together with them he was baptized by Siméon Lourdel, one of the White Fathers. Among the pages was Kizito, age fourteen.

Their saga is retold by a current-day White Father, Aylward Shorter, of the Catholic University of East Africa, in Nairobi. (Today this order has reverted back to its official name, Missionaries of Africa.) According to Fr. Shorter, the next day the pages were summoned into the royal court by the enraged *kabaka*. The king had learned that one of the young pages in his court, Mwafu, had been receiving religious instruction from another page, Denis Sebuggwawo. The king demanded that the pages confess their allegiance. All but three of the Catholic and Anglican pages did so. Mwanga, apparently baffled by this solidarity, put off their executions. At one point Charles Lwanga—echoing the stance of another, earlier, martyr, St. Thomas More—stated his allegiance to the kingdom of Buganda, declaring his willingness to lay down his life for the king. He would not, however, abjure his faith.

In February, a fire in the royal palace impelled Mwanga to move his court to a lodge on the banks of Lake Victoria. While there, Charles Lwanga protected several of the pages against the king's violent sexual advances. Mwanga by this point had already obtained the consent from his chiefs to kill the Baganda Christians. Around this time, Lwanga secretly baptized five of the catechumens.

On May 26, the pages were called into the royal courtyard to hear their fate. From this point on, the story of the Ugandan martyrs closely resembles those of the early Christians. Fr. Lourdel, who had repeatedly pleaded for an audience with the king, was an unwilling witness. All of the men declared that they were prepared to remain

Christians until death. In the end, Mwanga decreed that all of them—sixteen Catholics and ten Anglicans—be marched to Namugongo, eight miles away, where they would be burned. On their way to execution, bound by ropes and shackles, they were marched past Fr. Lourdel, who would later attest to their remarkably calm disposition.

They were marched to Namugongo, where, bound with ropes, shackles, iron rings, and slave yokes, they waited for one week. During that time the martyrs prayed and sang hymns; the Catholics among them recited morning and evening prayers, grace before and after meals, as well as the Angelus and the rosary, in preparation for their deaths. On June 3, before the execution of the rest of the young men, Charles Lwanga was put to death by the king's men. He was wrapped tightly in a reed mat, a yoke was hung on his neck, and he was thrown onto a pyre. Taunting his executioners, Charles is said to have shouted, "You are burning me, but it is as if you are pouring water over my body!" Before he died he cried out, "*Katonda*," or "My God."

His companions were killed in the same gruesome fashion. Aylward Shorter writes, "As the flames rose, their voices could be heard praying and encouraging one another." The last words of the young Kizito were "Good-bye, friends. We are on our way."

In all, forty-five Christians were martyred at Namugongo: twenty-two Catholics and twenty-three Anglicans.

Again the story brings to mind the tales of the early Christian martyrs and recalls a quote from the third-century Christian writer Tertullian: "As often as we are mown down by you, the more we grow in numbers; the blood of Christians is the seed." For after the White Fathers were expelled from the region, the Baganda Christians continued with the process of evangelization, translating the catechism into Luganda, offering secret instruction in the faith, and encouraging one another to persevere. Upon their return after Mwanga's death, the White Fathers discovered five hundred Christians and more than a thousand catechumens awaiting further instruction.

In 1964, Pope Paul VI canonized all twenty-two of the Catholic martyrs. Five years later, as the first pope to visit sub-Saharan Africa, he laid the foundation stone of the shrine to be built in Namugongo in honor of St. Charles Lwanga and his companions. The shrine was completed in 1975, on June 3, now the feast day of the Ugandan martyrs.