

# NAMUGONGO

If not barbaric, the word sounds primitive, and in the Philippines perhaps strange. In the future, however, Namugongo, Uganda will become familiar throughout the world, since, in the new calendar, the feast of the Martyrs of this place will be celebrated in the universal Church. Namugongo is where the largest number of noble martyrs died on June 3, 1886, burned over slow fire. Namugongo will climax Paul VI's visit to Uganda on August 2 for the consecration of the newly erected Basilica in honor of the martyrs. Thus, Namugongo, for centuries a place for ritual executions in a pagan nation, will become a sacred shrine for all Christian Africa.

Its history is second to none in Christian annals. It runs parallel to Nagasaki, Nanking, and other place of martyrdom like the Catacombs and Vatican Hill. For the glory that those noble African souls added to history even surpasses in many ways the deeds of the early Christian martyrs.

All the martyrs, of pure African extract, offered their unmixed African blood to the One, they, in faith, have most happily encountered. Of the twenty-two Catholic martyrs, all new converts in a mission of only five-years existence, four had been baptized by missionaries only three years before. The thirteen others, likewise baptized by their missionary pastors, had been Christians for only a year; and four, all teen-aged pages at the court of the Kabaka or king Mwanga, had to be hurriedly baptized by their companion Charles Lwanga, 25, head page in the court, the night before their king ordered them put in stocks to be sent to the ritual place of execution at Namugongo. One of them (Mukasa Kiriwawanvu) could not be baptized by water — the hands of his companions being in stocks — but having endured all the torments of his executioners died purified in the baptism of fire.

The youthfulness of the martyrs is significant. Only five of the martyrs were over thirty; eight over twenty; while the rest were all teen-agers the youngest being fourteen.

Noteworthy too, in these days of rampant hedonism was the motive of their execution ordered by a perverted young monarch. All were martyrs of chastity, a virtue which, in the Lord's expression, is rewarded by a mysterious vision of God. The virtue of

chastity requiring cleanness of heart was manifested by all these holy youngsters.

Likewise significant, especially to all lay Christian workers of today, was the fact that when the foreign missionaries left their mission after three years of Christian labor, the new converts and catechumens kept their faith alive and carried on the instruction of their mentors so much so that when the missionaries returned, they found huge numbers awaiting baptism, and, as from a cruel twist of faith, consequently, martyrdom. Cruel indeed, because of the mowner they died—fourteen of the martyrs were burned, while the rest were beheaded, hacked to pieces, speared, ravaged by dogs, and so forth.

The solemn canonization of these heavenly heroes took place amidst the splendor of St. Peter's, during the period of the II Vatican Council, with almost all of the bishops of the world and the representatives of the different non-Catholic denominations of separated brethren present during the Council as observers, attending. For the martyrs, so to say, were an ecumenical group since not only Catholics were burned in the pyre. Eleven of those who were ordered killed among the pages of the court of the young Kabaka were neophytes of the Protestant mission, and some recently-baptized Anglicans. Prompted by their faith in Christ, they valiantly joined their Catholic brothers when the enraged young king, pointing to one place in the hall, asked those who were Christians to cross the line. These brave young men, unaware of the centuries of religious rift in Europe, considered themselves real members of the true Church of Christ, and together with their Catholic friends treaded the same path leading to the same jail in Namugongo. Thus, the innocent blood of two Christian groups were mixed in a common holocaust burned by a common fire. It is for this reason that on the Pope's journey to Uganda, a special visit to the Shrine erected by our separated brethren to their own martyrs is in order.

The story of these martyrs has raised great admiration all over the world. Understandably, in no place has the enthusiasm and excitement risen to a considerable degree as it has in Africa, the new Continent that Christ is lovingly attracting to Him.

The visit of the Holy Father, we hope, will accelerate the pace towards the full realization of a "one fold, under one Shepherd" state in Africa. The story of these martyrs, we too hope, will serve as an inspiration for all in the Philippines, most especially to the members of the young generation and all lay workers in the vineyard of the Lord.

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