

The First Baptisms in Uganda 1880

“Our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee”



Catechism Instructions at the Palace

The history of evangelization in general and that of Uganda in particular shows that the missionaries knew very well that if they could manage to convert the kings and the chiefs to Christianity, then conversion of their subjects would almost follow automatically. Hence whenever there was a chance to teach catechism to these leaders, the missionaries never missed that chance. In fact these chances, either in public or in less public audiences, were many. In the public it was rather in apologetic debates, with the Protestants and Muslims. Kabaka Muteesa himself showed interest in Christianity though this interest was at times more politically inspired than its spiritual value.

These religious instructions and debates at the King's court at Lubaga and later at Kasubi-Nabulagala had positive results in spite the fact that the king never converted to Christianity. Many of his pages (*abagalagala*) who later were either among the Martyrs, both Catholics and Protestants, or became the leaders of the young Christian community, had their first contact with Christianity through these audiences. For example, we read in Nabulagala diary:

“This morning Fr. Lourdel went to assist at the royal session. Muteesa told him that he wanted to learn how to pray the rosary.” (19th August 1879)

“Yesterday afternoon, around 4pm, the king asked Fr. Lourdel to teach him how to pray the rosary. The session went on late into the night, using the light from the two big fires, one in the audience room and the other in the courtyard. Muteesa learnt easily to make the sign of the cross, and to say the rosary. After that he asked Fr. Lourdel to teach him catechism. Fr. Lourdel took his book and explained to the king the catholic doctrine on heaven, purgatory, hell, the church, the forgiveness of sins, the destiny of pagans and children who die not baptised, etc. The King was very pleased with this doctrine and as the Father went on explaining to him a particular point, Muteesa explained it very clearly to the notables (chiefs) who were present. In a special way, the question of heaven pleased him more and he came back on it several times during the session. Talk to me more about heaven, he repeatedly asked him.” (21st August 1879).

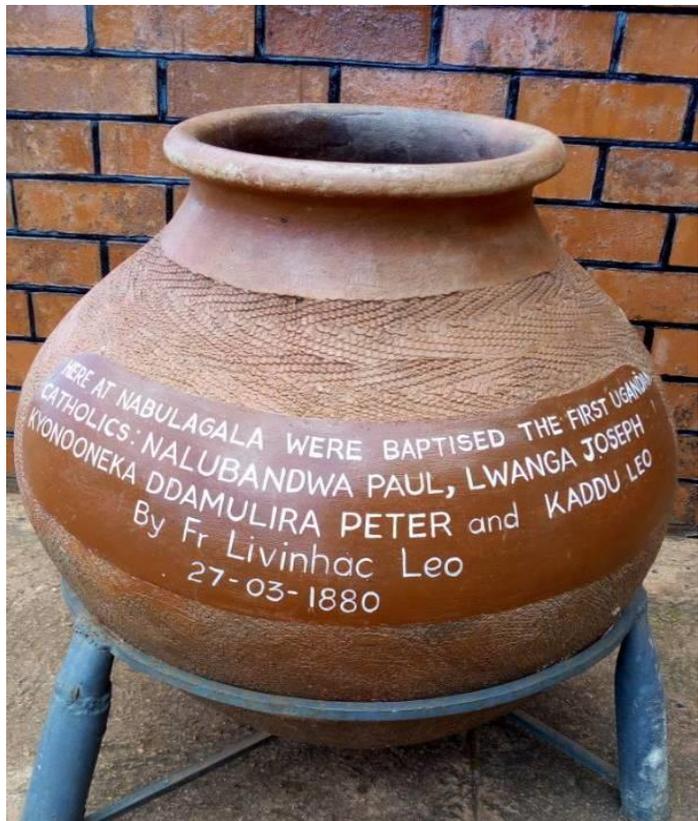
Catechism Instructions at Nabulagala Mission

The first catechumens to be reported in Nabulagala diary date from the 13th and 23th December 1879 as we read:

“Since some days, a number of children have been coming to us to be taught how to read; but we have told them that they must first learn how to know God, and then after they will learn how to read. Today, a man came who is really hungry for the truth. He told us that he had been going to the Muslims (*Wangwana*) and that according to their doctrine, when someone commits a crime, it is enough to make the ablutions to become innocent (to be forgiven); they must be lacking the truth.” (13th December; NB: This was Nalubandwa.)

“We have only one catechumen. The other two Muslims (*Wangwana*), who want to be instructed, rather want to learn how to read and will most likely go to the Protestant ministers who will give them the alphabet (tablets) and the books of the Bible.” (23rd December)

Many of the first catechumens had frequented either the Muslims or the Protestants or both. Their story reveals them as men who were seeking the truth, seeking God; or as the psalmist say: ‘*seeking the face of God*’ (Ps 27:8-9) , ‘*thirsting for God*’ (Ps 63: 1). Their story reveals in them the restlessness experienced by St. Augustine in his search for God: “*You have made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.*”



Celebration of the First Baptisms

The first baptisms were celebrated by Fr. Livinhac Leon in the night of Holy Saturday (Easter Vigil) 27th March 1880. They were four: Nalubandwa Paulo, Ddamulira Kyonooneka Peter, Lwanga Joseph and Kaddu Leo. This is how this historical event is narrated by Fr. Ludovic Girault in Nabulagala diary:

“At four in the morning (4.00am), the catechumens came to wake us up; we immediately woke up and after prayer, Fr. Livinhac started the ceremony of baptism which lasted for about one hour and half. Here are the names of those baptized: Joseph, Peter, Paul and Leon. They looked happy and well disposed. *“May the Divine Master bless these first fruits of our mission, make of them zealous Christians and convert their unfortunate brothers.”* After the baptism ceremony, Fr. Livinhac celebrated the Mass. Tomorrow morning the newly baptized, with the exception of Leon, will receive Confirmation and the Holy Communion. We are convinced that it is better not to make them wait but rather strengthen them as soon as possible for they seem to be best disposed now than later.” (NB: Leon was still a young boy who had been redeemed from slave traders)



Easter Sunday, 28th March 1879:

“At a quarter past five in the morning, Fr. Livinhac confirmed our newly baptized Christians. After the confirmation, Fr. Livinhac celebrated the Holy Mass and Joseph, Peter and Paul received the Holy Communion. While I was celebrating the 2nd Mass, Fr. Lourdel conducted the thanksgiving prayer for them after which he also celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of Mass. At eight o’clock, we offered breakfast to our catechumens.”

Who could doubt that God answered the prayer of Fr. Girault at the occasion of the first baptisms? Many conversions followed these first Ugandan Christians and their zeal and commitment was tested by the martyrdom of 22 Uganda Martyrs.

NB: First Protestant Baptisms in Uganda: Although the Protestant Missionaries arrived in Uganda two years (1877) before the Catholic Missionaries (1879), their first baptisms were administered two years after those of the Catholics. It was on the 18th March 1882 at Nateete and those baptised were: Mackay Sembera Kamumbe, Filipo Mukasa, Edward Mukasa, Yakobo Buzaabalyawo, Yakobo Takirambudde, Princess Nalumansi Kalaala, Princess Lakeri Namikka (daughter of Kabaka Ssuuna II). Note that Buzaabalyawo later became Catholic (15th November

1885) and martyr. Kalaala (daughter of Kabaka Muteesa I and sister of Kabaka Mwanga) also became Catholic (Easter Vigil 24th April 1886).

On that occasion, Fr. Leon Livinhac represented the Catholic Missionaries. Mackay's comment on this event is worth noting: *"May they not only be baptised with water, but also with the Holy Ghost. May they be the seed of the church in this land."*

