

BLESSED CYPRIAN MICHAEL IWENE TANSI (1903-1964)

Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, the first blessed of Nigeria, was born in 1903 in Igboezunu, on the edge of the forest, near the ancient city of Aguleri in southern Nigeria, located in what is now the Diocese of Onitsha. Only a few years before, in 1890, the Alsatian Catholic missionaries had brought the first announcement of the faith to the region; they were soon followed by Irish missionaries who belonged to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

His parents, peasants, were pagans who practiced the traditional religion of the Igbo people. In 1909, at only six years old, little Iwene was sent by his parents to the town of Aguleri. There, in the Christian neighborhood called Nduka, he lived in the house of a maternal aunt whose son, Robert Orekie, a Christian, was a teacher in the mission school. At the age of nine, he was baptized and was given the name of Michael. His peers described him as a studious boy who demanded very much of himself. He had a strong influence on his companions, who were fascinated by his decisive and precocious personality, both on human and religious levels, and by his profound piety.

In 1913, Michael moved to Onitsha, where he enrolled in Holy Trinity Primary School and in 1919, he obtained the diploma that enabled him to teach. In 1924, he assumed the post of principal of St. Joseph School. He felt the call of God to the priestly life, and in 1925, at the age of 22, resolutely overcoming the opposition of family members, entered the newly established St. Paul Seminary in Igbariam, becoming the first indigenous vocation of the area. By 1932, the confidence he had inspired in his

superiors was so great that he was entrusted with the role of treasurer of the Training College. On December 19, 1937, he was ordained a priest by the missionary Bishop Charles Heerey, C.S.Sp. in the Cathedral of Onitsha.

Michael demonstrated his exceptional gifts throughout the first twelve years of his priesthood, which has been confirmed by the many testimonies of those who witnessed his zeal and his complete abandonment to God. Michael's first assignment was in the parish of Nnewi. Elisabeth Isichei, in her precious book *Totally for God: The Life of Michael Iwene Tansi*, summarizes his strongest pastoral characteristics: "personal asceticism, great capacity for commitment and physical resistance, goodness towards the sick and the poor, concern for the sanctity of marriage and the spiritual formation of women, as well as personal charisma."

In 1940, he bravely managed to dispel a superstitious myth about land that had been given to the missionaries, which was known as "the cursed forest." It was expected that anyone who entered would die or otherwise contract some kind of terrible disease. The first thing that Fr. Michael did was travel through the forest, sprinkling it with holy water. When he emerged unscathed, the people took courage and cut down the forest. The next step was to build a church and a school, a rectory and houses of welcome. They were rudimentary buildings, but he helped build them himself, offering a concrete example of being a tireless worker. Seeing a priest working so hard prompted many people to help him, and his example inspired others to undertake similar endeavors throughout the region.

As for women, he cared about their dignity and put forth much effort to protect their virginity. To do so, he organized houses in his parishes which accommodated young women so as to prepare them for marriage and to deter them from living with their future husband before marriage. The Legions of Mary that he established assisted him in every village of the parish by informing him of sick people who wanted to be baptized, promoting the morality of the inhabitants, and preparing the catechumens. He committed himself to the building of schools and to making sure that there

were qualified teachers. He built houses in which to welcome the oldest students, one for boys and one for girls. He attended to a good number of orphans, and he made sure that each of them received a suitable education.

Fr. Michael seemed to have a special gift to encourage priestly vocations; at least seventy priests came from his parishes. He was a good preacher. People were touched by what he said and remembered his teaching. He was critical of some pagan customs and superstitions and, even when he could not completely eradicate them, he still managed to weaken their hold on his parishioners.

Amid the whirlwind of pastoral activities, he perceived the beauty of the contemplative life. During a retreat day with the clergy, Archbishop Charles Heerey expressed the wish that a few of his priests embrace a monastic experience, in order to bring the seed of contemplative life into the diocese. Father Tansi, without hesitating, declared himself ready to put his bishop's proposal into action, along with the assistant priest at his parish, Fr. Clement Ulogu. In July 1949, contacts were made with the Cistercian Abbey of Mount Saint Bernard in Leicester, England, which agreed to welcome the two priests. Michael arrived at Mount Saint Bernard on July 3, 1950, accompanied by Archbishop Heerey.

Under the action of the Spirit, the man who had been an authentic pioneer and "manager" in the young missionary church of the diocese of Onitsha made himself a humble and docile monk in his new way of life. He embraced the austerity and silence of everyday Trappist life, where no one except the novice master, Fr. Gregory Wareing, had any idea of the magnificent work he had done as a priest. One of the memories shared by those who knew him at Mount Saint Bernard is the image of him praying in the chapel of the Madonna, with his head bent to one side, as if he were listening to his Lord speaking to him.

The original idea with which the two Nigerians had entered the community was to receive formation in monastic life, with the aim of then bringing it to Nigeria, but the difficulty of making a foundation with only

two people soon became clear. Eventually they freely asked to be admitted to profession at Mount Saint Bernard and to wait until the community was able to send a group. In 1963, the monastic community decided to establish a foundation in Africa, but in Cameroon rather than Nigeria. This disappointed Fr. Michael, but he accepted it as God's will.

When the group for the foundation in Cameroon was appointed, Fr. Michael was chosen as the novice master, because he seemed to be the right person to form the future African vocations. The first four founders left Mount Saint Bernard on October 28, 1963, to prepare the buildings for the rest of the group's arrival, scheduled for the spring of the following year. But God's plan for Fr. Michael was different, and it was made manifest in a very short time.

In January 1964, he was struck with acute pain in one of his legs, which swelled enormously. The doctor diagnosed thrombosis and proposed hospitalization. Urgently admitted to the Royal Infirmary in Leicester, he was diagnosed with an aortic aneurysm. During the night he got worse, and on the morning of January 20, 1964, in a spirit of total poverty and detachment, Fr. Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi took the last step of his long journey of faith and love in silence.

On January 22, 1986, twenty-two years after his death, with great solemnity before a gathering of faithful from all parts of Nigeria, the process of his canonization was opened in the Cathedral of Onitsha. By that time, a few monastic communities of contemplative life had already begun to flourish in the area. The remains of Fr. Michael were exhumed in 1988 and returned to Onitsha. During the reburial Mass, a miracle occurred when the bishop allowed seventeen-year-old Philomina Emeka, who had been suffering from inoperable tumors, to approach and touch Fr. Michael's coffin, and she was immediately healed. The miracle led to his beatification celebrated by Pope St. John Paul II on March 22, 1998.