

SIMON MPECKE (1906-1975)

Simon Mpecke was born in 1906 in Log Batombé, in Cameroon. In 1914, at age 8, Mpecke attended the elementary school of the Catholic mission in Édéa. It was a mission opened by the Pallottine order during the period German colonization. At age 11, Mpecke finished elementary school. On August 14, 1918, at the age of 12, he was baptized in Édéa by Father Louis Chevrat, and the day after he made received his first Communion. Later he became a teacher, first in the schools of the savannah and later in the central mission of Édéa. In 1920, he obtained a diploma of indigenous teacher from the Catholic mission of Édéa and in 1923, he became the head teacher of the mission.

On August 8, 1924, Simon entered the small seminary of Yaoundé. In 1917, he transferred to the newly opened major seminary of Myolyé, where he did two years of philosophy and four years of theology, completing his studies in December 1935. On December 8 of that same year he was among the first natives of Cameroon to be ordained a priest. This priestly ordination was an important stage in the history of the Church of Cameroon and inaugurated a new era for the country.

As his first ministry, Simon was appointed to serve in the Ngovayang mission, where he took a firm stand against the practices of traditional religions in the region. In 1947, he was appointed to the parish of the New-Bell district in Douala and the following year he became its pastor. He provided strong leadership and increased participation in several lay organizations. He supported the activities of Catholic Action and the parish school, demonstrating great availability and abundant generosity. Also in 1947, by chance,

Father Simon read an article that described the life of pagan populations in northern Cameroon. From then onwards he began to experience a great fondness for these people. The establishment of the fraternity of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus in his parish brought him closer to the spirituality of Blessed Charles de Foucauld. In 1953, Father Simon Mpecke joined the Secular Institute of the Little Brothers of Jesus and left for a year of novitiate in Algeria. He was one of the international founders of the Priestly Union “Jesus Caritas” and became its first member in Cameroon and for a while he thought of living permanently with the Brothers.

On April 21, 1957, Pope Pius XII published the Encyclical *Fidei Donum*, which inspired Fr. Simon to leave his native land to be a *fidei donum* missionary priest in northern Cameroon. In February 1959, at the request of Bishop Plumey, Father Simon went to Tokombéré to establish a mission to reach the Kirdi, a name that means “the pagans.” By this time the majority of the population in Southern Cameroon were Bantu Christians, the north was populated mainly by Muslims of Sudanese origin.

Dr. Joseph Maggi, a Swiss doctor, had already established a small hospital in the village, in a place where there were only a few leaders of the French colonial administration and technicians who were introducing the cultivation of cotton. The beginnings of the Catholic Mission of Tokombéré were an exceptional missionary experience. The task was not easy because Fr. Simon was not member of a local tribe and was, therefore, perceived as a danger. However, the fact that he was African made things easier. From the beginning, teaching the Kirdi became his daily preoccupation. His legendary goodness soon earned him the nickname “Baba,” which means father, patriarch, sage, and guide at the same time. Everyone – men and women, adults and children, Kirdi and Muslims – began to spontaneously call him Baba. At Tokombéré, Baba Simon lived out God’s promise to Abraham – whose exodus and mission, allowed the birth of a people.

Faith and friendship with Jesus convinced him that only love for the whole person would save him from the spiritual evil of sin and ignorance,

and from the material evil of misery and ethnic and religious discrimination. For Baba, school was a lifeline and his school brought hope to make people blossom in their fight against ignorance, tyranny, and fear, which was Baba's way of fighting for human dignity. He decided to bring education "home," giving everyone the opportunity to attend the "school under the tree," a school in the midst of everything, in the very heart of the Kirdi's life.

He went on to establish Saint Joseph School in Tokombéré and obtained permission to open other schools in Bzeskawé, Rindrimé, and Baka. He created a boarding school for the boys and another for the girls, which was run by the Servants of Mary. Baba Simon taught the Kirdis to love Muslims as their blood brothers and did the same with the Muslims towards the Kirdis. Through the school, the health clinics, his commitment against injustice, and an appeal to universal brotherhood, Simon helped bring about a real improvement of the living conditions of the Kirdi populations, too long neglected by the rest of the country. His concern for a constant dialogue with the leaders of traditional religions makes him a prophetic precursor of interreligious dialogue called for by the Second Vatican Council. He loved to travel and the first reason that motivated him to do so was to find the necessary assistance for his work with the Kirdi, especially for the students, inside and outside the community. His efforts brought him to France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, and Israel. He shared the life of the Kirdi, their poverty, and their struggle against misery. His evangelization was imbued with prayer, love for the Church, and charity with respect to their traditions.

After an extended stay in France to seek treatment for a sickness, Baba Simon died on August 13, 1975. He was buried in Tokombéré.