



## THE INTRODUCTION AND EXPANSION OF THE CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY IN WOLAITA: FROM FOUNDATION TO PRESENT, 1930-2020

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the beginning and expansion of the Catholic Christianity in Wolaita and its contribution to the well-being of the Wolaita society. The study examines the introduction of the faith to Wolaita and its expansion to the whole areas of Wolaita zone through gospel preaching and socio-economic activities. The article presents that the introduction of the faith is related with the effort of Capuchin missionaries from Canada and Italy, Marche Province and local Wolaita individual believers and ministers. Since the introduction of the religion, the Church has involved in many development works and has played significant role for the improvement of the life of mainly the poor people throughout the Wolaita zone. To analyze the introduction, expansion and its contribution for the development of the society, the researchers have consulted documents, written sources and information gathered through deep interview from knowledgeable informants and stakeholders. Finally, the primary and secondary sources gathered through the above tools have been analyzed systematically and interpreted using historical data analysis method of content analysis and descriptive techniques.

**Keywords:** Catholic Christianity, missionaries, introduction, expansion, wellbeing/development, Wolaita zone

### INTRODUCTION

Literature reveals that the word Catholic is derived from the Greek term, *katholikos*, meaning "universal," and from the adverbial phrase, *kath' holou*, meaning "on the whole" (WillieF, 2001;

Richard McBrien, 1994). St. Ignatius of Antioch first used the term in his letter to the Smyrnæans, people lived in a port city on the Aegean coast of western Asia Minor on the site of the present-day Turkish city of Izmir. The Catholic Church found in all over the world is run under the Roman Catholic Church (Estlin, 2005; Richard McBrien, 1994).

The Roman Catholicism tends to be more legalistic in the structures of church life and in its approach to the sacraments. The church organized itself according to the claims of apostolicity, especially the claims of Apostle Peter that was the great of religious authority (Mary W, 1989). Roman Catholic Church comprises those particular Churches, headed by bishops, in communion with the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, as its highest authority in matters of faith, morality and Church governance (Ron Rhodes, 1984; Mark Menzies, 2015).

The Catholic missionaries had tried to introduce their version of Christianity into Ethiopia some hundred years ago. The beginning of the early Catholic missionary activity or the First Jesuit Mission activity in Ethiopia is related to the Portuguese Catholic force that came to Ethiopia in the 16th century. This force came to help the highland Christian state of Ethiopia under the command ship of Christopher da Gama; son of the great explorer Vasco da Gama, against the Muslim invading army of Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Alghazi or commonly called Ahmed Gragn (World Vision-East Africa, 2013).

Although such efforts remained unsuccessful, the Catholic missionaries continued their attempt to introduce their faith into Ethiopia. In 1603, Rome sent Petro Paez to Ethiopia for the same purpose. He was a man of farsightedness and ability. He did not waste his time by involving in debates; instead, he opened school and offered vocational and theological trainings to children. Emperor ZaDengel attracted by the works of Paez and captivated to convert to Catholicism. However, his interest brought riot and he was assassinated (Abba Antonios Alberto, 1998).

In the time of Suseneyos (1607-32), ZaDengel's successor, Paez continued his work. Suseneyos and his brother *Ras* Seal Chrestos were captivated and converted to Catholicism (Abba Antonios Alberto, 1998). However, popular insurrection erupted throughout the country and began bitter civil war to preserve the Catholic faith. Nevertheless, because of the death of many people, Suseneyos issued an edict in 1632 granting freedom to return to the traditional non-Caledonian or Orthodox faith. His son and successor Emperor Fasilades (1632-67) evacuated the Catholic missionaries from Ethiopia (World Vision-East Africa, 2013).

Despite the imperial opposition of Catholicism and the execution of Catholic missionaries, who were arrested after entering the country, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, monks of Capuchin and Franciscan orders made repeated attempts to enter Ethiopia and preach Catholicism. However, until the half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all these attempts failed. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic presence in the country revived and got foothold in the northern provinces of the country. Particularly after the appointment of De Jacobis as Patriarch of the northern provinces of Eritrea, Begemeder and Tigray by Pope Gregory of XVI on May 10, 1839, consolidated the position of the Church in Ethiopia (Abba Antonios Alberto, 1998).

Mostly Catholic missionaries speeded their activities of expansion in Ethiopia during the period of fascist Italian occupation of Ethiopia. The present day ecclesiastical form of the Catholic Church of Ethiopia was established on 9 April 1961, when the metropolitan see introduced at Addis Ababa with support of Dioceses or *Hagerse beketo* of Asmara and Adigrate (Willie F, 2001).

In the study area, Wolaita, the Catholic faith introduced by the missionary Paschal de Luchun, under the patronages of the Capuchin Order in 1930. During the time of the Italians occupation of Ethiopia, the Italians forced Paschal de Luchun to leave Wolaita in 1937 because he had French connection and base. His works and evangelical ministries were taken over by the Italians until they were defeated and the Ethiopian patriots expelled their priests in 1941. After liberation of Ethiopia from Italian occupation, the Catholic faith practices and expansion continued in a new order by preaching the word and using their socio-economic works (E. Paul Balisky, 2009). This article attempts to assess and analyze this introduction and expansion of the Catholic Christian religion in Wolaita zone and their development activities.

The Apostolic Vicariate of Sodo is one of the 13 canonical jurisdictions (two Dioceses, two Eparchies, eight Vicariates and one Apostolic Prefecture are found in Ethiopian Catholic Church) of the Ethiopian Catholic Church. The seat of the Vicariate of Sodo is also the capital of Wolaita zone. The zone is located in the southwest central part of Ethiopia. Wolaita is organized in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Regional State (SNNPRS). The zone presently comprises some twenty *woredas* and is located 380 kilometers south of Addis Ababa (Wondimu Shuba, 2011:1; Abesha Shirko, 2011:4). Today in the Apostolic Vicariate of Sodo Catholic Church there are three zones, two special *woredas*, twenty-eight prefectures and fourteen regular catechisms. The Catholic faith is detailed in the catechism of the Church (Rodrigo M, 2008).

## **OBJECTIVES**

The principal objective of this study is to reconstruct the history of the introduction and expansion of the Wolaita Catholic Church and its socio-economic works.

### **SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES ARE**

- To narrate the beginning, expansion and challenges of the Catholic faith in Wolaita zone
- To describe the spiritual and administrative activities and structures of the church
- To examine the contribution of the church for the wellbeing of the society

## **SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The study is an overview, concentrated on the history of the beginning and expansion of the Wolaita Catholic Church, and briefly assesses the major development works of the Church while expanding in Wolaita zone. The work is limited to major process of establishment, expansion and main socio-economic works of the Church since its establishment to the present time.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study explores about the introduction and expansion of the Wolaita Catholic Church and its contribution to the well-being of the society. As a result, purposive sampling technique employed to select some fifteen key and knowledgeable informants from different sectors and stakeholders. In addition, documents and written materials have been used to get primary and secondary data. Data collection tools such as fieldwork, in-depth interview to obtain information from key informants and observation utilized. The data collected are interpreted and analyzed using historical data analysis methods such as content analysis and descriptive analysis.

## **DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS**

Before introduction of the Christian faiths in Wolaita area, there were many traditional religion practices or worship of many gods and goddesses. Orthodox Christianity had already laid foothold in the area before the incorporation of the region to the Empire of Ethiopia in the time of *Abune Teklehaymanot* evangelization work during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, Orthodox faith

got strength and many followers following the conquest of Wolaita by Emperor Menelik in 1894. The two other sects of Christianity, Protestantism and Catholicism introduced to Wolaita in the same century and consecutive years, which is 1928 and 1930 respectively.

However, Hailegebriel Melaku quoting Guston J. Vanderheyem points out that at the conquest Menelik had been surprised when he found some Catholics in Wolaita. Because according to the writer, Emperor Menelik assumed that all Wolaita were traditional religion followers and Muslims. Hailegebriel points out that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were some Catholics in Wolaita who came from the surroundings of Wolaita (Hailegebriel, 2019). Francis Paschal de Luchon (1874-1950) whom the people in the area called him *Abba* Paschal and considered him the first missionary and founder of the Catholic religion in Wolaita, had found a Catholic man called Asnake on his arrival at Dubbo, the first center of Catholic faith. *Abba* Paschal is given the title “Apostle of Wolaita” (*Mons. D. Marinozzi*) which many followers of the religion maintain he deserves (Hailegebriel, 2019).

Many of the Catholic missionary activity in Wolaita were led by Capuchin Catholic order from Canada and from France. Sources indicate that before Paschal’s arrival in Wolaita he ministered in different countries. He entered Wolaita on 13 August 1930 via Wasera and served in the area until 1937 when the Italians expelled him saying he had French relation and base. *Abba* Paschal started his ministry in Wolaita by baptizing first two sick babies who died later after few days. Then, in 1932, he formally baptized his first three followers or catechumens at Tunto. The names of the new converters were Nadja Kumal, Gacho Timamo and Tadesse Gebremedhin. Later, these first believers lived in a boarding school (Hailegebriel, 2019).

The missionary Paschal de Luchon made his center at three different places: at Lalla, about some twenty kilometers away northeast of Sodo town, at Dubbo on the vicinities of Areka town and third one at Afama on the Omo River bank, thirty kilometers west of Areka town. In the above centers, the missionary Paschal opened schools and began spiritual works (E. Paul Balisky, 2009).

When he opened school at Dubbo in June 1933, he had around fifty students. In the next year on 1 April 1934, he officially inaugurated and blessed the first church at Dubbo. This church building, however, destroyed in 1942 and later rebuilt again in a new form (E. Paul Balisky, 2009). Besides, the missionary Paschal tried to preach in the local language and printed Wolaita vocabulary, grammar, stories and Catholic catechism which is in a book form that summarized

the basic principles of Catholic faith. Moreover, *Abba* Paschal preached the Catholic faith throughout Wolaita and established churches at Lalla, Aciura, Afama, Mokonissa, Angadda, Chero, Cutto, Uaggia, Gurmo, Borkoshe, Gale, Uance, Anedenna, Taba, Embeccio, Uebo, Koscia, Uebo-Koiscia, Ofa in Wolaita areas (Hailegebriel, 2019).

**Fig. 1: Abba Francis Paschal de Luchon (29 December 1874-9 April 1950), Founding Father of Wolaita Catholic Mission**



Source: Wolaita Sodo Catholic Church, 2020

During the occupation period of the Italians, many things changed in the Catholic Church ministry. Paul Balisky maintains that the Roman Catholic Church got a new chance to expand their missionary service. After Paschal de Luchon left Wolaita, his various ministries were taken over by Italian Capuchin priests mainly from Venice. During this time (1937-1941), the Italians

organizing a group of militia and their soldiers, controlled the district, harassed the traditional religious leaders of the society, and witnessed rapid growth of the Catholic community. P. Balisky records that by 1940, the Wolaita Catholic community grew to 20,000 followers. However, this number dropped off considerably following the expulsion of the Italian priests and soldiers in 1941 (E. Paul Balisky, 2009).

**Fig.2: The First Catholic Church and Capuchin Missionaries Residence of Dubbo, Wolaita**



Source: Wolaita Sodo Catholic Church

Bishop Kidanemariam, bishop of Addis Ababa appointed the young priest *Abba Woldetinsae* who died at age of 33 head of the Dubbo mission in November 1943. He purchased the present actual plot of land at Dubbo. This appointment introduced Ethiopians service and leadership in Wolaita for the first time. *Weizero Mamite Tona*, daughter of King Tona (1890-1894), was one of the first women Catholics in Wolaita. She had played significant role for the expansion of the religion in Wolaita. *Mamite* formally married in Catholic Church in 1939. She protected the missionaries and gave her land for the building of churches and missions<sup>i</sup>.

From 1967 to present, many groups of Catholic missionaries from Marche province (Marche Capuchins) have arrived in Wolaita and performed remarkable activities in the spiritual and development works. Starting from Mons *Domenico Marinozzi* who was appointed administrator of Apostolic Prefecture of Sodo–Hosanna in 1977 it is possible to mention the name of several

Marche Capuchin ministers in Wolaita. Mons. Rodrigo Mejia who succeeded M.D. Marinozzi, Cherubino Merli, Franco Salvi, Gilberto Bittarelli, Angelo Antolini, Evaristo Subisati, Tommaso Bellesi, Mario Valenti, Anastasio Artegiani, Gino Binanti, Marco Branchini and Simone Chiatti were some of most renowned and remembered missionaries<sup>ii</sup>.

The Marche Capuchin priests constructed many churches and increased the number of parishes, which were only four before 1967 to 20 in Wolaita now. They built schools, kindergartens, vocational training college and other infrastructures. The number of the Catholic community increased through time and according to 2017 Catholic Directory, the total number of Catholic religion followers found in Sodo Vicariate is 191,658, which makes the largest dominion in Ethiopia (Hailegebriel, 2019).

On the other hand, one of our informants *Abba Gebre*, states that *Abba Paschal* and *Ato Woldemichael Lamango*, who was vice secretary of the Dubbo mission, had contributed a lot for establishment of Catholic Church in Dubbo. They preached from house to house enduring the challenges from *Sharechewa* (traditional religion leaders) and the society (*Abba Gebre*, 2008).

Moreover, Balisky states that from 1937-1941 there was strong conflict between *Sharechewa* and Catholic missionaries. Quoting Remo Chiatty, Paul Balisky puts the following:

Father Gervasio Scoffonis reported as having shaved thirty magicians; he went with his boys from his school to different areas and, having broken into the palisades of those people, took them by force and cut their hair with scissors. As a result, he was regarded as a most powerful man because, without being harmed, he destroyed the power of his competitors (E. Paul Balisky, 2009).

The Catholic local community had played also important role in the expansion of the mission by providing food, water, shelter, land and other necessary materials for the priests and missionaries. They also served in transporting building materials to different areas where the churches were built and giving free labor services (Temesgen, 2006; Daniel W, 2008).

During the time of the *Derg* military government, local administrators also challenged the Church. For instance, *Abba Rafaello Del Debole* who had been church administrator during the period faced strong opposition from the society. He had been commanded by the *Derg* governor to take soldiers up to battlefield in northern Ethiopia with his car otherwise, he was urged to leave



the area. When he forcefully served the government, the society also opposed him for his support rendered to the government. Another challenge posed to the church was from local property owners who wanted the domination of their Orthodox Christianity for their advantages<sup>iii</sup>.

**Fig.3: Capuchin Father Missionaries from Marche Province that worked a lot and involved highly in socio-economic works and spiritual services in Wolaita**



Source: Wolaita Catholic Development Coordination Office, Sodo

### **BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC WORKS OF THE CHURCH**

Since the establishment, the Catholic Church has involved in various developmental activities mainly in terms of education, agriculture and health. The Church carried out the developmental activities side by side with the spiritual services. Yet, in 1982 independent development coordination office known as the Ethiopian Catholic Church Social and Development Commission Coordinating Office of Sodo(SCO) was established which became responsible to coordinate the developmental works of the Church in WolaitaDiocean\Hageresbket. The Coordination Office has currently about six departments that focus in various aspects or specializations that are related in community development. These are Education and Training,

Health, Food Security and Emergency, Women Development and Social Rehabilitation. Recently Water Development is getting out as one department and widening its services in the community<sup>iv</sup>. The Church has executed several developmental projects and social services for the community. It has continued its services and currently the Church is organizing and leading many socio-economic works.

The Church has constructed one hospital at Areka town in 1993 which is Called Dubo hospital by a cost of 80,796,896 (eighty million seven hundred ninety six thousand and eight hundred ninety six birr)<sup>v</sup>. This hospital is rendering service for Wolaita and for the surrounding peoples from Dawro, Hadya and Kambata zones. The organization has also two health centers at Damot Gale *woreda* and Mokonisa and another clinic at Bukema in SodoZuriaworeda. All the health institutions of the Church have link with the government health sector offices from *woreda* up to zonal and *kilil* levels and receive technical, material and to some extent budgetary support from the government to run the projects<sup>vi</sup>.

In the women development aspect, the church administered two women job-training centers (one at Sodo and one at Bedesa). In the food security sector, many big food security projects are undertaken in many *woredas* of the zone where there is acute drought and food shortage problem. In social rehabilitation sector one town known as Smiling Children Town, which is located at Sodo, is giving service as child rehabilitating center for children<sup>vii</sup>.

Moreover, the Church is one of the largest development partners of the Wolaita zone and the South Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State. Even until the coming of the Charter Fund from America, which is supported by the American government that came to the Regional State to involve in developmental works in 2011, the Catholic Church was the first partner that provides the largest amount of budget to accomplish works in community development. For instance, the Church has allocated around 140,000,000 Birr for the 2014 fiscal year to accomplish its community socio-economic works<sup>viii</sup>.

The source of finance is foreign downers. Some of their major partners and downers are-

- 1) European Union that supports currently SAFE (Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security Enhancement Projects in Wolaita zone)
- 2) Meserer-Germany currently supporting some *woredas* (districts) development projects
- 3) Caritas-Belgium is supporting food security projects

4) Lues Fund-Spain which is supporting drought rehabilitating projects in the zone

5) AMREF Health Africa– supported health projects in the zone *woredas*<sup>ix</sup>. The Ethiopian Catholic Church Social and Development Commission Coordinating Office of Sodom (SCO) is involving as said above in agriculture and food security sector in Wolaita zone. The office attempts to make its development activities compatible with the government agriculture and food security plans and programs. The food security projects are aimed to make the poorest of the poor people of the region to get food either by purchasing or by production through farming<sup>x</sup>.

The office before planning and implementing any project makes need assessment, collect information from the government respective offices and US AID reports, and then embark to planning and implementation. The target groups of the agriculture development and food security projects are the poorest of the poor in the zone and selected *woredas*. The poorest of the poor are selected in cooperation with the community and most of the time they are those who have no any domestic animals such as sheep or goat or cattle, marginalized groups and women headed houses. These people are the first candidates to be enrolled in the projects. Whereas irrigation schemes and development of drinking water, projects are planned for the whole community in the selected *woredas* of the study area<sup>xi</sup>. By performing these and many other development works, the church has changed the life of many poorest people of the zone without any discrimination in religion, ethnicity or any other aspects.

In education sector the church have made remarkable contribution since its establishment. In 1958, the school of Dubbo Catholic mission founded with the contribution of *Abba* Paschal. The school began with first cycle (1-4). After students completed this cycle they were sent to Dubo St.Marry School to learn (6-7) cycle with the help of the mission. Then the mission opened Junior Secondary School (7-8) in 1965/66. Presently the Church in Wolaita zone is giving educational service for over 8000 children and youths in 26 Kindergarten, 8 schools and 2 Vocational Training Centers. It became one of the most educational centers of mission schools in Wolaita zone. The schools are competitive at zonal and regional levels. The Church contributed its own share for the expansion of education in Wolaita beside other mission schools of Protestant and Adventist churches (Rodrigo M, 2008).

The Catholic mission schools had produced some of the famous persons of Ethiopia who contributed a lot for their country in different fields and administrative positions. For instance Dr. Petros Wolango, former Speaker of the House of Representatives (National Parliament of

Ethiopia), Haile Mariam Desalegn, former Prime Minister of Ethiopia attended their early education at Catholic mission schools<sup>xii</sup>.

One of the important features of the Wolaita Catholic Church socio-economic works and projects is that there is no free hand giving. In every project, the community or the beneficiaries are encouraged to participate or contribute their share by either their labor or saving capital according to their capacity. This makes them to learn and exercise work and develop self-confidence by making them non-dependent<sup>xiii</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Catholic Christian faith, which is one of the three big Christian religion sects, has currently significant followers in Ethiopia and the study area Wolaita. The religion introduced in Wolaita some ninety years ago, although few individual believers of the faith had existed in Wolaita before the mentioned years. Wolaita literature and tradition gives credit to missionary Paschal de Luchon for the introduction and beginning of the faith in Wolaita area in 1930. By 1934, *Abba* Paschal had already planted the first Catholic Church in Dubbo area in the present day Boloso Sore *woreda*.

Informants state that the Paschal de Luchon and his Ethiopian or Wolaitan associate *Ato* Woldemichael Lamango had played remarkable role in the beginning and expansion of the religion across Wolaita area. Missionary Paschal by founding three centers in Wolaita at Lalla, Dubbo and Afema expanded the faith throughout Wolaita and institutionalized the faith. During the brief Italian occupation period (1936-1941), the Italians colonial governors created fertile condition for the expansion of the religion. However, they expelled the founding Capuchin Catholic missionaries who had affiliation and base with France and replaced other Capuchin missionaries from Venice, Italy.

The expansion of the Church had relation with socio-economic works of the church along with the missionaries preaching of the faith to the community. The study further revealed that the church grew spiritually and physically in sound way after the coming of the Marche Capuchin missionaries since 1967. The Marche Capuchin missionaries such as Mons Domenico Marinozzi, Mons. Rodrigo Mejia, Angelo Antolini and others increased the number of chapels and strengthened the Catholic Christian communities. As said above, the spiritual service was reinforced with social services like building bridges, roads, schools, clinics, hospitals and other

services. The development works attracted the attention of the community and developed the positive attitude of the society towards the new Catholic faith in the area.

The study find out that the social service of the Church was furthers consolidated when the office that coordinated the social and development works was established in 1982 which is known as the Ethiopian Catholic Church Social and Development Commission Coordinating Office of Sodo(SCO). This development organization of the church worked a lot for the wellbeing and improvement of the life of the Wolaita people in areas of education, health and agriculture. Besides, in job creation for youths and fighting harmful practices, the church had played crucial role. The Church had various downers from across the world that support and sponsored the church's development works. In addition to the development work, the head quarter of the Roman Catholic Church that is located at Rome also gave substantial support for the spiritual works. Several infrastructures have been constructed in Wolaita zone and many projects have been conducted and are being conducted in the zone that have brought substantial changes and improvements in the lives of the society.

According to the findings of the study, the church faced many challenges at its infant age when was struggling to spread its faith. The challenges were from the society, traditional religion leaders, local property owners, the socialist government and others. The society first challenged the religion because the people had different views about whites and foreigners who brought the religion. The traditional religion leaders called *Sharechewa* opposed the religion since they feared that the people would abandoned their faith and convert to new religion.

However, gradually, the attitude of the people changed through time and accepted the faith. By enduring all these challenges, the church existed still today and expanded the number of followers and chapels. Currently the church had around two hundred thousand followers of the religion with over twenty parishes.

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