

## INTRODUCTION

### *From Historical Memory to Ecclesiological Investigations*

The intent of this study is to guard and cherish the memory of Catholic Christians in west central Africa who, from the mid-seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century, were known as “Slaves of the Church.” The Slaves of the Church were enslaved to the Capuchins (a religious order in the Catholic Church) and were often also referred to in the literature as “slaves of the mission” and “people of the church.”<sup>1</sup> When the Capuchins started ministering in the Kongo-Angola region in 1645, west central Africa was a dark, trying, and turbulent zone overcast by intensive slave raiding and the pernicious transatlantic slave trade. Ironically, during this same period, the Slaves of the Church were becoming prominent pastoral assistants in the zones of Italian Capuchin ministrations. Without them, church-becoming would have been impossible.

Church-becoming between 1645 and 1835 was different from the ancient Kongo Catholicism founded in 1491—150 years before the Kongo king invited the Capuchins to minister in Kongo-Angola. The ancient Kongo Catholicism was lay-driven. The *maestri*—translator-interpreter-catechists drawn principally from the nobility—supervised the Church. However, by the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the descendants of the Slaves of the Church became the visible embodiment of this church. Spiritan missionaries (of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit), who replaced the Capuchins, testified to this in 1876. The Slaves of the Church they encountered in Saint Antoine, the principal city of Soyo (a powerful province in the northwest

2 of the Kongo kingdom), demonstrated through their Catholic performance the dynamic Kongo witness to the faith. The two religious congregations, Capuchins and Spiritans, that ministered in west central and eastern Africa contributed positively, through evangelism, to church-becoming—but also negatively, through representation, to the imaging of the slaves, Black people, and Africans as inferior.

This study opens with a consideration of how the representation of Africa and Africans in European Enlightenment literature normalized the characterization of Black people and Africans as infrahuman. The egg of this prejudicial imaging or representation was laid in the racialized dirt- and filth-infested transatlantic henhouse (the Middle Passage) and hatched in the cornfields and minefields of the Americas. Thereafter, Euro-Americans' chauvinistic attitudes characterizing Black people, and Africans, as infrahuman prevailed. The transmission of this deep-seated prejudice through the best of the Enlightenment literary icons, including liberal authors such as Diderot and Voltaire, makes understandable the racialized scripts performed in encounters between southern European traders, priests, missionaries (male and female), and Africans (the nobility, the freeborn, and the slave).<sup>2</sup> In chapter 1, I use Andrew Curran's concept of representation to reconsider how the history of African slaves in the Americas shaped the prejudicial evaluation of Kongo Catholicism in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This prejudicial evaluation totally ignored the shape, or structure, of the ancient Kongo church that is foundational to the discussion of Slaves of the Church.

In chapter 2, I retrace the history of Kongo Catholicism in greater detail. Kongo became Catholic in 1491 (before Columbus traveled to the Americas in 1492), following the conversion of Nguzu a Nkuwu, the Kongo king, who was baptized as King João I, taking the name of his Portuguese counterpart. From the time of the longest-reigning evangelistic emperor-theologian, Mvemba a Nzinga (Afonso I, r. 1509–43), the Kongo erected the sociopolitical, religious, spiritual, theological, and ecclesiastical infrastructure on which later configurations depended. A shortage of ordained clergy being endemic, Catholicism evolved to become lay-driven. The driving force of church-becoming was literacy (the centerpiece of modernization) and creative, imaginative developments in liturgy and theology. The construction of the principal church, Nossa Senhora da Vitória (Our Lady of Victory), within the precincts of the ancestral burial ground in the capital (Mbanza Kongo, San Salvador) eternalized Kongo theological vocabulary, as did the 1624 Kongo catechism. Without the narrative of this ancient church,

it would not be possible to understand how the Slaves of the Church provide access to ecclesiological investigations from the underside of history. Capuchin priests, welcomed to the Kongo capital in 1645, were dedicated emissaries of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (hereafter Propaganda Fide), “bringing the sacraments of salvation” to a Catholic country “committed to strengthening the link with Rome.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Spiritan pastoral visitation to the Kongo (Soyo, 1876) was a ministry of reinforcements, bringing, especially, the sacrament of baptism to a lay-led church.

As I show in chapter 3, continuing the historical narrative, Soyo was renowned as a powerful coastal Catholic province of ancient Kongo. The preferred province of residence for the Capuchins, it was as expansive as the seventeenth-century Italian state of Milan.<sup>5</sup> However, the area focus of this study goes beyond the province of Soyo and the Kongo capital. Comments and reflections on church-becoming will be drawn from all six provinces of the Kongo kingdom—Soyo, Mbata, Mpangu, Mbamba, Mpemba, and Nsundi<sup>6</sup>—and the surrounding regions under Kongo influence, the Mbundu and Ndongo kingdoms.<sup>7</sup> The six provinces are all located within modern-day Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The fact that the Capuchins set up administrative headquarters in Luanda (a Portuguese settlement), away from the Kongo capital, created the potential for conflict with both Kongo and Portugal. Luanda, first given to Portugal by the Kongo, was later forcibly occupied by Portugal and became the center of Portuguese colonization in west central Africa. The tense relationship led to conflict and insecurity, which, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, called for the added services of the Slaves of the Church as ministerial “helpers” (cf. 1 Cor. 12:8) and even as *vigilantes* (security guards) for the Capuchins.

As a careful consideration of the history reveals, the Slaves of the Church and Slaves of the Mission became fused in nineteenth-century Spiritan mission historiography. The Spiritan Slaves of the Mission were a colony in the Spiritan mission base in Landana, the principal city of Kaongo kingdom, north of the duchy of Soyo. Spiritans were officially assigned the mission in the Kongo region in 1865 by decree of the Vatican. In chapter 4, I show that in their ministry, they moved from purchasing or repurchasing children, child-slaves, to buying adult slaves called Slaves of the Mission, the cell (*noyau*) of their Christian villages. The strategy of purchasing or repurchasing child-slaves was approved by the supervisory organ of mission in the Catholic Church, the Propaganda Fide, and connects

4 the nineteenth-century Spiritan ministry in west central Africa with their mission in East Africa. Indeed, the normal mission strategy that Spiritan priest Charles Duparquet adopted in Landana beginning in 1873 had been theorized and prosecuted in East Africa by 1870, when Duparquet was an inspirational member of the Spiritan team in Zanzibar-Bagamoyo (1870–73). In East Africa—in coastal Zanzibar and Bagamoyo and expanding into the interior (Mhonda and Mandera)—Spiritans established agricultural settlements, the prime location of the “Christian villages” populated by their liberated slaves. The Christian village was the key to the planned evangelization and Christianization of the deep East African interior.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, it should not be surprising that *Memorializing the Unsung* fuses the study and evaluation of the Capuchin ministry in west central Africa (chapter 3) and the study and evaluation of the later Spiritan ministry in west central and eastern Africa (chapter 4). The involvement in ministry by these two powerful religious congregations was providential. They were drawn by their mission ideal to labor among Africans, ministering to the slaves and to Black people. Spiritan missionaries encountered, in 1876, the descendants of the Capuchin Slaves of the Church. Father Hippolyte Carrie, visiting and administering the sacraments to Catholics in the Soyo-Kongo church, was fascinated by their liturgy. The community had been sedulously practicing Catholicism after nearly a century of no regular pastoral visits. Duparquet (the narrator) insists, “They maintained their church with care and preserved with respect the sacred objects. One of them said the prayers and presided over the chanting of the hymns.”<sup>9</sup>

From supporting the ancient Kongo church, the Capuchin and Spiritan missionaries expanded their ministry to the implantation of Catholicism in west central and eastern Africa. However, despite their laudable evangelistic and humanitarian labor, there were lapses. Based on the ideals of their congregations, the evidence shows that they committed errors (as a group and as individuals) and even crimes (like active participation in the slave trade) that contradict the guiding principles and truth of the Gospel. They must be held accountable.

On the other hand, the performance of the slaves in pastoral ministry, a major contribution to church-becoming, portrays those considered infrahuman as agents of a new church and a new humanity. This study memorializes that performance.

Honoring the unsung Slaves of the Church and their firm rejection of the condition of slavery requires that one get a handle on the group called “slaves” in the west central and eastern African regions before and after

the explosion of the transatlantic slave trade. This helps situate challenges to the uses and abuses of the term “slave” in scripture and theology (e.g., Christ Jesus “taking the form of a slave”; Phil. 2:8). In west central Africa and the adjoining regions, slaves fall into the sociological category of those unable to show evidence of descent from or rootedness in the dominant landed matrilineal clan system. When an individual could neither prove descent from four clan chiefs nor secure their support—that is, from the clans (*kanda*) of the mother and the father, of the mother’s father and the father’s father<sup>10</sup>—that person was not considered freeborn. He or she was a slave, a classificatory child of the owner, the classificatory father. When this system butted into the terror of the transatlantic slave trade, which peaked in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the image of the “slave” was radically transformed, subjected to the racist, inhuman logic of the white man. West central Africans started living the unprecedented—an evil their ancestors could never have imagined. The Congolese capture the tragedy in a popular saying: “Bu bukala bambuta, ka bwa tumwene ko! Si nkondo nkadi” (What since the time of our ancestors has never been experienced [has never been seen] is here with us, the bitter fruit, the arrival of the white man).<sup>11</sup> The complicity of pastor-missionaries in the terror is unconscionable. The radical resistance of the slaves to their subhuman condition, in the name of humanity and Catholicism, sets a correcting course for the social reconstruction of reality, the reinvention of Catholicism.

Slaves of the Church and their descendants are memorialized and celebrated in this book with reason. Their “unsung” contribution to church-becoming and social engineering, their historic performance of freedom in west central and eastern Africa to the consternation of Catholic pastor-missionaries (or benefactor-masters), is being recovered. The slaves’ struggle to absolutize human dignity, to reject through flight and escape their social condition of captivity, enslavement, and dehumanization, demonstrates their unequivocal claim of the “freedom” for which “Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1). Chapter 5 highlights what we learn from the Slaves of the Church about human dignity, about freedom, and about the precedence of ethical performance over and against the correct profession of the Catholic religion and its liturgical celebration.

Finally, this study is different. In addition to its focus on ecclesiology, it contributes to political theology by learning from the slaves to challenge the language of “slave of God/Christ,” ensuring that the search for usable theological idioms does not compromise the priority of ethical performance, the priority of the human. From the underside of history, from the *Nobody*

6 of slavery, the Slaves of the Church demonstrate how the margin engages perceptions of sociality and takes steps to change sociality in the church and the world. *Memorializing the Unsung* enables us to redefine church-becoming, establish new sociality, and change Catholicism, Christianity, and the entire social world.