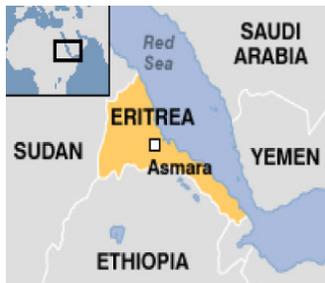


## Brief History of the Catholic Eparchy of Keren Eritrea



Eritrea is located on the Horn of Africa. It is bordered by the Red Sea on the east, Djibouti on the south-east, Ethiopia in the south, and the Sudan on the west. Eritrea has an area of 125,750 Km<sup>2</sup>, over 350 islands and a coastline of over 1,258Km. It is a country of ancient religious and cultural traditions, and was part of the cradle of christianity beginning in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century Christianity was the official religion of these parts of Africa. A few centuries later Islam was introduced. Eritrea, due its location on the Red Sea coast has seen many invaders and occupiers throughout its history including the Arabs, Turks, Italians, British and Ethiopians. Eritrea won its independence from Ethiopia, after a 30 year brutal war, in 1991. Eritrea's population today is about 4.5 million. Eritrea has nine ethnic groups and about as many languages.

The Catholic Eparchy of Keren covers the entire current civil administrative region of Anseba, parts of the northern Red Sea region also known as Sahil. The inhabitants of Sahil, historically, were christians; however, due to its remoteness from Christian centres, and lack of priests it lost its churches.

St. Justin de Jacobis C.M., founder of modern Eritrean and Ethiopian Catholicism in an exploratory journey, first visited the region in 1843 and again in 1844 whereby he intended to put his mission centre. He found the region completely abandoned of clergy, except the monks of Tsada A'mba and Debre Sina who asked him to stay with them for helping.

Nevertheless, the Catholic missionaries first walked through Keren in a 50 days exploratory excursion (from July 28, 1851 to September 15, 1851) which took them from Massawa through Mensa'i, Keren, Betjuk, Habab in Sahil, and back to Massawa. During this excursion Fr. Giovanni Stella witnessed there were churches in Keren and Megharieh still frequented by the people without an officiating priests.

Stella returned to Keren in 1852 with two priests, Abba Welda Gherima and Abune Markos to bless the first chapel he built. First time Fr. Stella and his companions did not settle permanently in Keren. Then in 1854 Fr. Stella came back to Keren, where he found the people were abducted and taken to Kassala in the Sudan. He followed the abductors to Kassala and through the help of British

diplomatic office succeeded to rescue the people and brought them back to Keren and he settled with them there.

When Mgr. Biancheri was consecrated Co-adjutor bishop in Halay; he made a pastoral visit to Keren in October 1854. He intended to erect a mission lead by white missionaries separate from that Abyssinian Vicariate lead by Abyssinian clergy. St. De Jacobis agreed to the opinion and in his letter of June 29, 1858 clearly stated that Bogos was designated by the Sacred Congregation to be the seat of the for the second Vicariate to be formed; however, because of changes in situations was postponed until 1996. Keren At that time was jungle with leopards and lions. In 1858 Br. Filipini rebuilt the Church of St. Michael which was before built by Stella in 1854.

At this time the region of Keren was engulfed with internal fratricide feuds and invasions from neighbouring powers. Therefore, Fr. Stella was very heavily involved in mediations and diplomatic activities. Therefore, he was not always available in his mission; and as such he was not able to do some headway with his mission, except winning the trust of the people for the church because the rescue he did from abduction.

Fr. Picard replaced Stella in 1867 in Keren and his main task became establishing the [seminary which was transferred from Massawa to Keren in 1869](#) and the [seat of the Abyssinian Vicariate that was also moved to Keren in 1870](#). The master pastoral plan of Fr. Picard was of multiphase and long term oriented one.

1. First, as the seat of the Abyssinian Vicariate it became a leaping spring and during the persecution it turned to be a refuge. For instance, in 1879 when there was sever persecution of the Catholic Church in the whole of Ethiopia, even Mgr. Taurine, co-adjutor bishop of Oromo Vicariate, survived only by taking refuge in Keren.
2. Keren as the seat of the Abyssinian Vicariate, served the whole circumscription until 1894 of the dismembering of the Ethiopian Vicariate. The Apostolic Prefecture of Eritrea was transferred to Asmara in 1911.
3. The seminary in Keren served the whole Eritrea and northern Ethiopia until 1894 and exclusively the whole of Eritrea until 1951 when its part was transferred to Asmara. The minor seminary still is alive and well today, in its original place in Keren.

The seminary buildings and St. Michael's church, which were built in 1869 and 1873-5 respectively, are still serving today. The master pastoral plan of Fr. Picard

and his colleagues, that started to bear fruits by serving people who were abandoned due to lack of education and pastoral service. By 1887 entire villages were becoming catholic and the seminary was able to produce priests who could serve the new parishes. The operation of the Catholic mission in Keren at first was restricted to evangelisation activities in the vicinities of Keren until 1887. Beginning in 1887 it started to found parishes outside Keren. Until 1890, parishes outside Keren were limited because people were concentrated around Keren for security reasons. With the Italian occupation of Keren; stability and peace, people of Keren started to migrate to areas such as Bogu, Glas, and Ashera. Hence, in short three year period i.e. 1916-1919 as many as 40 chapels outside Keren were established. These included: the villages of Jufa, Tselale, Bosa, Behaimanot Kew, Mahre Kew, A'shalla, Gubene, Enkimetri first, Enkimetri second, Ferdighi, Ashedira, etc...

## **A brief History**

**Vincentian Missionaries (1851-1894).** Christianity was introduced to Eritrea in the fourth century. As this part of Africa was under the Patriarchate of Alexandria, it was separated from the Catholic Church with the separation of Alexandria. After a long separation, in the second half of the 18th century, the present Catholic Church in Eritrea was re-connected with the universal Catholic Church with the courageous and tireless work of the Vincentian missionaries.



**St. Justin de Jacobis.** The primary Vincentian Evangelists to what was then known as Abyssinia , which includes today's Eritrea and Ethiopia is St. Justin de Jacobis. This great apostle Justin was born in San Fele near Naples, Italy on October 9, 1800. He joined the Congregation of St. Vincent in 1818 in Naples and was ordained a priest on June 12, 1824 at the Cathedral in Brindisi, Italy.

At the invitation of Cardinal Philippe Franzoni, on May 24, 1839, at the age of 38 Fr. Justin received the mandate to establish a Mission in Abyssinia. The Saintly Fr. Justin learned the local language, culture and traditions. He worked tirelessly evangelizing and serving the people of Abyssinia for 20 years and laid the foundation for the local Catholic Church. After much suffering and persecutions he died of a tropical fever on the side of a road near Halai in the Valley of Alighedien July 31, 1860. He was beatified June 25, 1939 by Pius XII and was canonized October 26, 1975 by Paul VI.

The first missionaries who came during this time found communities of Christians without pastors, but with firm faith and Christian traditions. St. Justin

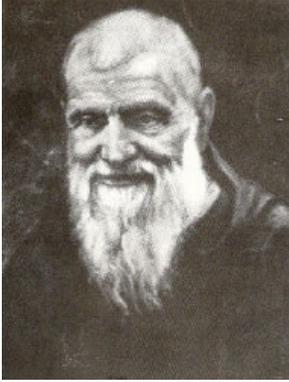
de Jacobis, the first Apostolic Vicar of Abyssinia, appointed Mons. Bianchieri (1860-1864) his coadjutor and Apostolic Vicar to the Keren area.

It was Mons. Bianchieri who proposed to St. Justin de Jacobis that Keren should be the center to a new ecclesiastical circumscription. St. Justin de Jacobis without hesitation accepted and approved of the idea as "God inspired". The successor of Mons. Bianchieri, Mons. L. Bell (1866-1868) strengthened his predecessor's works by adding new parishes in various villages and forming native priests to carry out and help in the pastoral care of Catholics. From 1869-1888 Mons. M. Touvier took over the charge of the young Catholic community with more apostolic zeal.

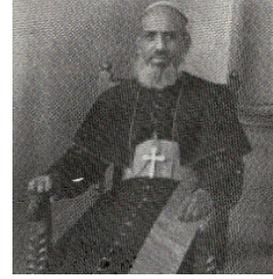
At this time Keren became the See of the prefecture Apostolic of Abyssinia. This gave a great boost to the expansion of the Catholic Church with ever more increasing membership and corresponding social and pastoral activities. Mons. Touvier achievement's include: transfer of the **seminary to Keren**, introduction of a printing press in the Geez character, promoting formation of local priests, increasing number of parishes, bringing of the Daughters of Charity in 1878 and instituting native religious sisters (Enatietat). The last of the Lazarist missionaries was Mons. J. Crouzet (1888-1894). His time, unfortunately was marked by severe drought, famine and locust, and progress in missionary activities was considerably reduced.

**Capuchin Missionaries (1894-1930).** As a result of the political reality of this period, the Vincentian Missionaries left Eritrea. Their legacy passed to the Franciscans, who readily took over the mission with enthusiasm. In place of the former Prefecture Apostolic of Abyssinia, a new Apostolic Prefecture of Eritrea, with Fr. Michele da Carbonara its spiritual leader was introduced officially and was elevated to a Vicariate. Mons. C. Carrara (1911-1925) became the first Apostolic Vicar of Eritrea. He embarked on evangelization, combating illiteracy and disease of Bogos, Mensa and Cunama areas of Eritrea. He also raised the standard of education in the seminary, and sent the first seminarians to Rome (to the Vatican) for higher studies.

It is noteworthy to mention that **Fr. Angelico da Nono**, one of the pioneer missionaries, rector of seminary and superior of the flourishing mission, proved to be an outstanding figure to earn the title, "**The Apostle of Bogos**". Thus, the Catholic Church was firmly and fairly established again. After 42 years the Apostolic Vicariate moved from Keren to Asmara in 1911. As a result the expansion of the Catholic Church in this region started somewhat to slow down, but an important turning point for the local church had been reached. The fundamental missionary work so far carried out successfully, provided the Holy See with sufficient reason to get on with the constitution of the local hierarchy.



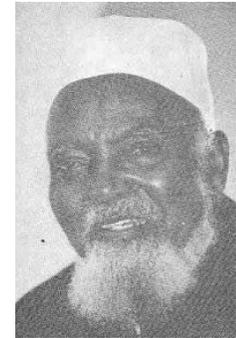
Therefore, in 1924, Cardinal Lèpiciér was commissioned as Apostolic Visitor, by Pope Pius XI. Within two months of careful examination, he reported, of the need for improved formation of clergy and creation of local hierarchy. Thus **Abune Kidanemariam Kasa** was elected and



appointed first Pro-Vicar and later Ordinary for the Catholics of Geez rite. In 1928, Mons. Celestinio Cattaneo had assigned Abba Zeregaber, parish priest of Keren, as Protopresbyter for the district of Bogos to act under the leadership of Abune Kidanemariam. In 1951 there was an upgrading of the Ordinariate to Exarchate with Abune Yacob Ghebreyesus its new leader. At this time a serious division arose and to solve this problem in 1956, Mons. Ludivico Mathias, as Apostolic Visitor, was entrusted with the delicate task of mediation and solving the controversy of that time.

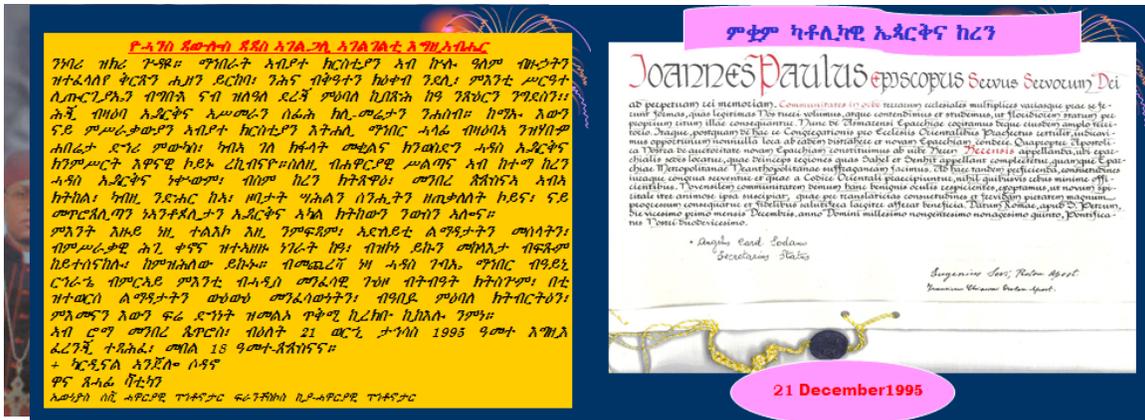


As a provisional solution, his mission came to the conclusion of designating two Vicar Delegates, Abune Abraha, for the Exarchate of Asmara and Abba Tesfaghiorghis Tigiar for Keren. During his short stay in office (1956-1962) the Vicar Delegate of Keren made significant efforts to restore the moral of the Catholics and enhance pastoral activities. In the mean



time, between the transitional years 1958-1962, Abune Asratemariam lead the Exarchate which, to a certain extent, enjoyed a relatively calm period. Finally, the long and painful process of fully establishing the local church culminated in the formal constitution of the Eparchy of Asmara, Abune Abraha being the first Eparch. In 1962, in place of the Vicar Delegate, the Eparch appointed an Eparchial Vicar for Keren, who carried out his responsibilities with the assistance of five more councilors, thus forming of the Western Eparchial Vicariate. Abune Zacharias Yohanes was designated auxiliary Bishop of the Eparchy of Asmara on March 11, 1981, then became Apostolic Administrator on December 9, 1982 and finally became the Eparch of Asmara July 17, 1984.

Today, we witness realization of the long cherished aspiration of our fore fathers, by the historic establishment of the [Eparchy of Keren](#) by the Apostolic constitution "[Communitates in Orbe](#)" of [21 December 1995](#) with its first Eparch, His Excellency Abune Tesfamairam Bedho succeeded by His Excellency Abune Kidane Yebio as the second Eparch.



The Eparchy of Keren covers the former Senhit and Sahil regions of Eritrea. The primary ethnic groups in the Eparchy of are: Blin, Tigre, Tigrigna and Rashaida. The most common languages are: Blin, Tigre, Tigrigna and Arabic.

### ኪዳኔ ኒ.ጊ.ገ.አ



"የቦጃ ምዕራፍ - Feed my sheep"  
 መከርታ ቅብዓተ ጳጳስና ዳግማዊ  
 ጳጳስ ኤጳርቅና ከረን  
 ብጹዕ አቡነ ኪዳኔ የዕብዮ  
 ከረን 02-03-2003 (ጳጳ. ጳ. ፲፱፻፺፩ ዓ.ም.)

As of February, 2013 the Eparchy of Keren runs 43 parishes, 52 chapels, 4 kindergarten, 20 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, 1 high school, 1 agricultural college, 2 orphanages, 7 women's promotion centers, 2 health centers and 5 health stations.

## Catholic Eparchy of Keren

### Historical dates

- 1844** - **St. Justino De Jacobis** visited the province of **Senhit**.
- August 23, 1851** - First Vincentian Missionaries Fr.Giovanni and Fr. Giuseppe Sapeto arrived at **Ferhen** and later to **Keren**.
- 1858** - A small church dedicated to St. Michael in Keren by **Fr. Stella**.
- 1873** - A Seminary at Keren was established by **St. Justino De Jacobis**

St. Justin de Jacobis, the first Apostolic Vicar of Abyssinia, appointed Mons. Bianchieri (1860-1864) his coadjutor and

apostolic Vicar to the **Keren** area.

- 1894** - 1894 Vincentian Missionaries were replaced by Cappuccins Friars
- 1930** - The first Eritrean **Bishop Abune Kidanemariam** was elected for the **Geez Rite** in Eritrea.
- 1956** - Apostolic Visitor Mons. Ludovico Mathias came to Eritrea and designated two Vicar Delegates: **Abba Abraha** for the Exarchate of Asmara, and **Abba Tesfaghiorghis Tigiar** for Keren.
- 1962** - The Vicar Delegate was supplanted by the Vicar General.
- 1991** - Eritrea became an independent state.
- Dec. 21, 1995** - Erection of the Eparchies of Keren and Barentu, detached from the Eparchy of Asmara.
- Feb. 4, 1996** - Consecration of Abune **Tesfamariam Bedho** 1<sup>st</sup> Eparchy of Keren.
- March 03, 2003** - Consecration and Installation of **Abune Kidane Yebio**, 2<sup>nd</sup> Eparchy of Keren.