

St. Charles Lwanga and Companions

BIRTH DATE UNKNOWN; DIED 1886 OR 1887

MARTYRS

FEAST DAY: JUNE 3

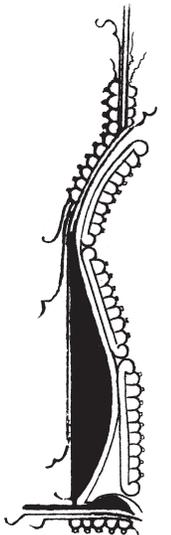
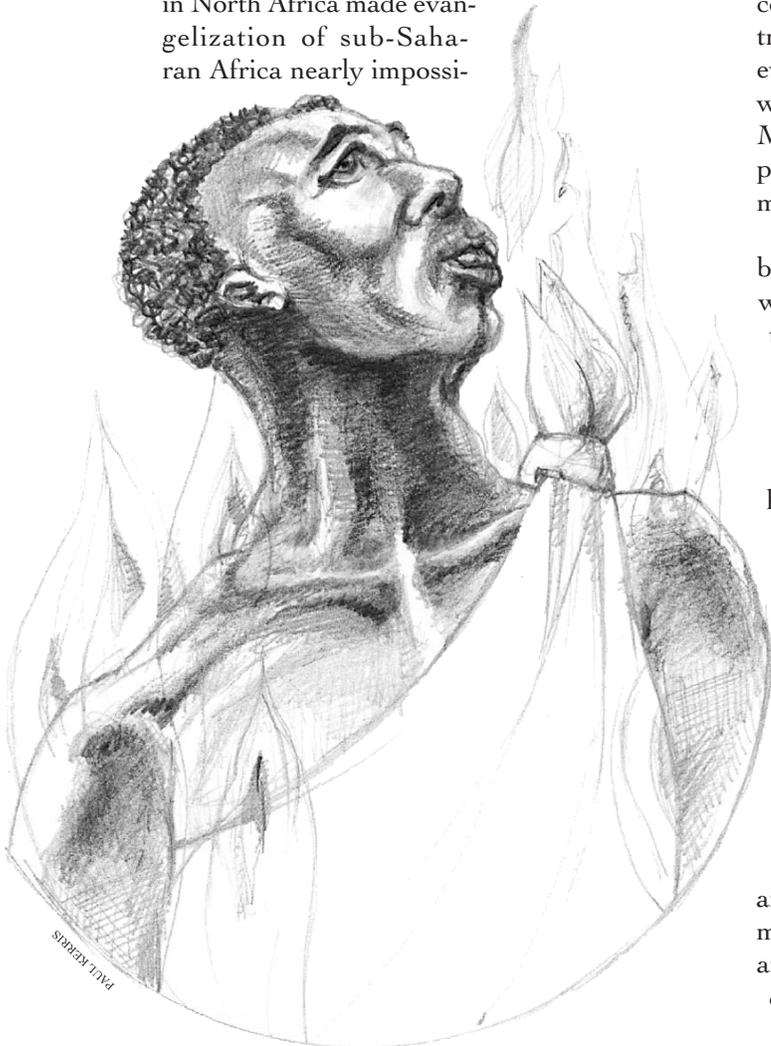
THE GOSPEL has been brought to Africa from the very first days of the Church. An Ethiopian traveling in Judea is described as having been baptized in the Acts of the Apostles (see Acts 8:26-38), and North Africa was Christian until it was overwhelmed by Islam in the seventh century. From then until the invention of oceangoing ships, the presence of Islam in North Africa made evangelization of sub-Saharan Africa nearly impossi-

ble, although efforts were briefly successful. Evangelization up to the mid-nineteenth century also was largely a failure due to the scandal of Christians engaged in the slave trade and the equally scandalous administration of lands colonized by European nations.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Catholic and Anglican missionaries began to evangelize Buganda, part of modern Uganda in eastern Africa. Its king expelled the missionaries in 1882, but in 1885 his son and successor Mwanga invited them back. They happily discovered that their original converts were living truly Christian lives and were reaching out to evangelize everyone around them. Christianity was thus spreading rapidly. This produced in Mwanga and his closest advisors a panic that his power, which had been total, might be undermined by a group that seemed not to fear him.

Mwanga's first victims were an Anglican bishop and six other Anglican missionaries whom he murdered because they sought entry to his kingdom. Twenty-six-year-old Joseph Mkasa, Mwanga's majordomo and a Catholic, sought unsuccessfully to prevent the murders, at which point Mwanga concluded that Joseph himself was a threat, especially since he was a leading catechist and had taken on the role of protecting the king's pages who had become Christian, hiding or sending away those whom the king wanted in order to use them sexually. Mwanga ordered Joseph to be burned alive, but the assigned executioner instead beheaded him and then burned the body. Joseph's last message to the king was one of both forgiveness and a call to repentance from his debauched way of life.

Charles Lwanga succeeded to Joseph's post and role as protector of the pages. A catechumen himself, he also catechized the pages. He and other catechumens, likely soon to face execution themselves, were baptized by the White





Fathers — and then freely went back to their positions at court. Some months after the execution of Joseph, the king called for one of his pages and discovered that all of the Christian ones were missing. When he discovered that they had been receiving instruction in the faith from the page Denis Ssebuggwawo, he sent for Denis and murdered him by a thrust of his spear. Nevertheless, the Christian pages did not flee — they did not want to be seen as disloyal to their monarch.

The king having shut everyone in his compound, Charles quickly baptized five of the pages he had been instructing, including the youngest, thirteen-year-old Kizito. All the pages were summoned and the Christians were ordered to identify themselves. Led by Charles, fifteen boys and young men (some Catholic, some Anglican) obeyed the order, not quaking with fear but filled with joy. One of the king's own bodyguards then made themselves part of the group. When asked if they intended to adhere to their faith, they all said they would, until death. The king then sentenced them to die and sent them out, together with other prisoners also scheduled for execution. A Catholic missionary priest who witnessed the group as it was led to the place of execution some miles away saw that they showed courage, happiness, and

resignation to what they faced, even the youngest of them. Along the way several members of the group were martyred, including some who joined the original group as it was taken to the place of execution.

The rest were bound and imprisoned for a week, during which some non-Christian prisoners, amazingly, began instruction as well. Most of the martyrs were first wrapped in a reed mat, then placed on a burning pyre. The mat's purpose was to lengthen the time the victim would suffer before dying. Among the martyrs was one youngster whose own father was the chief executioner. He had his son killed by a blow so that he would not suffer burning to death. As the martyrs died, they called on Jesus' name. With his last breath, Charles evangelized an executioner who subsequently became a catechumen.

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Altogether, twenty-two Catholic martyrs who died on May 26 and June 3, 1886 and on January 27, 1887, became the protomartyrs of Uganda. The Ugandan martyrs showed exceptional fortitude and loyalty to their Christian beliefs. *“God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control”* (2 Tm 1:7). The heroic witness of these martyrs is one of the reasons why sub-Saharan Africa has nearly one hundred twenty million Catholics today. Saints change the world.

