Making saints in Africa

by Philip Jenkins in the April 13, 2016 issue

People attend the beatification of Tshimangadzo Benedict Daswa at Tshitanini Village in Sibasa, Limpopo, South Africa, on September 14, 2015. Some rights reserved by GovernmentZA.

Since earliest times, churches have recognized holy individuals as saints. Through the Middle Ages, Christian communities identified and venerated their own local spiritual heroes. In modern times, the Roman Catholic Church formalized and centralized its process of canonization.

The saints recognized in a given era commonly represent a particular theme or cause, or perhaps a region that the church wishes to emphasize or honor. Tracking the saints canonized at any given time conveys a good sense of the church's changing needs and values, the ideals that it holds out to the faithful. By their saints shall you know them.

In this area as in so much else, the African continent is currently the scene of intense activity. African Catholicism is growing apace, so that within a decade, at least one sixth of the world's believers will be Africans, and that proportion will rise sharply.

Yet the continent is profoundly underrepresented in its number of canonized saints, and rising churches are struggling to achieve proper recognition. Just last September, Pope Francis beatified Tshimangadzo (Benedict) Daswa, who will likely become the first native saint of southern Africa. We are entering a prolific age of African

saint-making.

The circumstances in which these saints lived and died often recall ancient eras of the Christian story and themes that we might have thought long forgotten. Yet in acknowledging these figures as saints, the church is presenting them and their deeds as highly relevant examples to modern Catholics. The causes for which they suffered and died still drive ordinary believers.

Those causes include the need to resist a still-vibrant paganism. Africa's best-known saints of modern times are the Ugandan martyrs—Catholic and Anglican believers slaughtered in the 1880s for resisting the commands of the brutal pagan king Mwanza in a story that reads like something out of Eusebius. Those memories of martyrdom remain strong in the Ugandan churches and were much recalled in more recent struggles.

When the regime of Idi Amin murdered Anglican archbishop Janani Luwum in 1977, believers commonly presented that story as the natural sequel to the events of Mwanza's time. Although Anglican churches lack the formal procedures of the Vatican, Archbishop Luwum is formally recognized as a martyr, commemorated with a statue at Westminster Abbey.

The Ugandan martyrs' shrine at Namugongo is a thriving center for devotion and pilgrimage, as are other centers recalling heroic resistance against pagan persecutions. With its bloody history of religious repression, Madagascar has plenty of candidates for canonization. The most impressive is the indomitable aristocratic woman Victoire Rasoamanarivo, who fought to keep her mission alive in the 1880s after the pagan regime expelled all missionaries.

One cherished Anglican saint is Bernard Mizeki, martyred in 1896 in what is now Zimbabwe after a career evangelizing among the Shona people.

In a brilliant study, Boston University scholar Dana Robert compares Bernard's life and career with that of another isolated evangelist in an overwhelmingly pagan world, the fifth-century British believer known as Saint Patrick. As Robert shows, the parallels between the two stories are many—and provocative.

Although stories of fortitude in the face of persecution sometimes threaten to sound alike, one Roman Catholic case does stand out as distinctive. A popular Congolese role model is Blessed Isidore Bakanja, who died in 1909 after savage beatings

inflicted by his employers. In this case, though, the perpetrators were neither pagan nor Muslim, but rather were secular and anticlerical Belgian colonialists, who loathed Isidore's determined efforts to share his Catholic faith and to wear the scapular that showed his devotion to the Virgin Mary. The notion of aggressively secular Europeans confronting pious Christian Africans has a quite modern feel.

The newly beatified Benedict Daswa perfectly exemplifies this idea of the modern church harking back to ancient debates and conditions.

A baby boomer, born in 1946, Benedict converted to Catholic Christianity in his teens and went on to become a teacher and school principal. When his area was hit by dreadful storms, local elders wanted to hire a *sangoma*, a witch-finder, to seek out the people whose evil magic had caused the disaster. Benedict refused to pay the tax required for this purpose, insisting that the events were natural phenomena

For defying community beliefs about magic and the occult, he was ambushed, tortured, and murdered. Though that battle between worldviews may sound ancient, it occurred in 1990.