

# **BLESSED GHEBRE-MICHAEL**

*his search for truth*

- Ghebre-Michael was a disciple of St. Justin de Jacobis for many years. He is the only African among the beatified and canonized of the Vincentian Family.



- The prefix Ghebre means "the servant of" and is always followed by the name of a saint; this combination is a very common form of name in Ethiopia and Eritrea. "Ghebre" cannot be separated from "Michael" and used as if it were a first name.



- Ghebre-Michael was born about 1790. He was not a born Catholic- he was Ethiopian Orthodox. At an early age he lost one eye in an accident, and in his culture that rendered him unfit for most types of work.



- He received some education and then entered a monastery, where he showed himself to be a gifted student. He was not, however, preparing for ordination to the priesthood. Most Ethiopian monks were not priests.



- His great interest was the history of monasticism. He saw, from his own experience, that there had been a great lowering of standards in Ethiopian monasteries. Through research he came to see that the real problem was the poor theological formation of the monks. He decided that he would have to go to Jerusalem to continue his research.



- Ghebre-Michael joined a group that was traveling to Jerusalem, and Justin de Jacobis was part of that group. The group went to Alexandria, then to Rome, and then to Jerusalem on their way back to Ethiopia. It was on this journey that Ghebre-Michael first came into contact with Justin.



- His initial reaction was the typical Orthodox one of suspicion and mistrust, simply because he was a Catholic priest. However, as he lived in his company day after day on the journey he gradually came to admire Justin for his obvious holiness, his prayer and his way of dealing with people and situations.





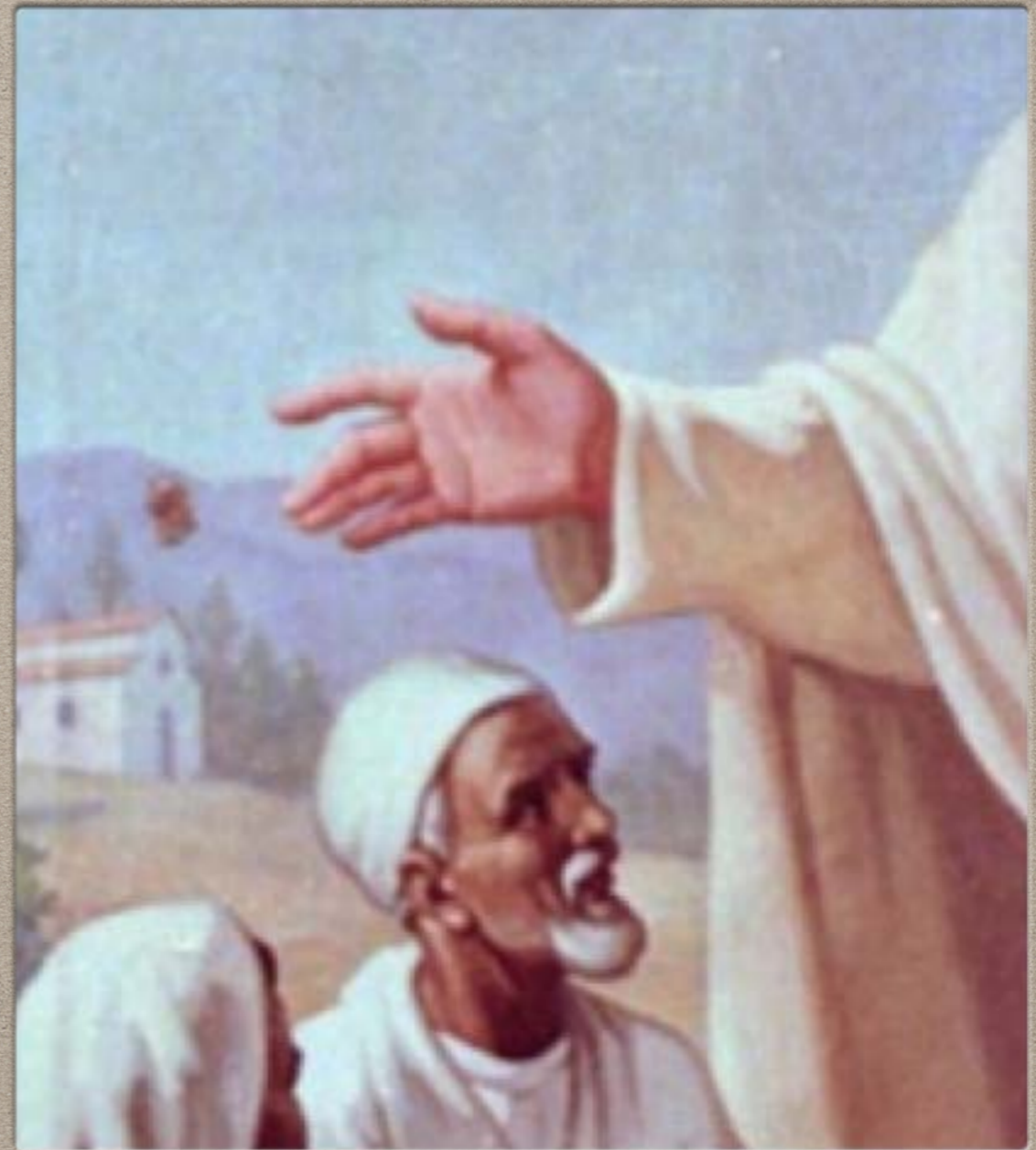
- In his search for theological truth Ghebre-Michael had found that many Orthodox monks and priests became his opponents or even enemies. Because of this Justin advised him to separate himself from the main group for the return journey, and to travel home by a different route, alone. He took this advice. This was in mid-1843.



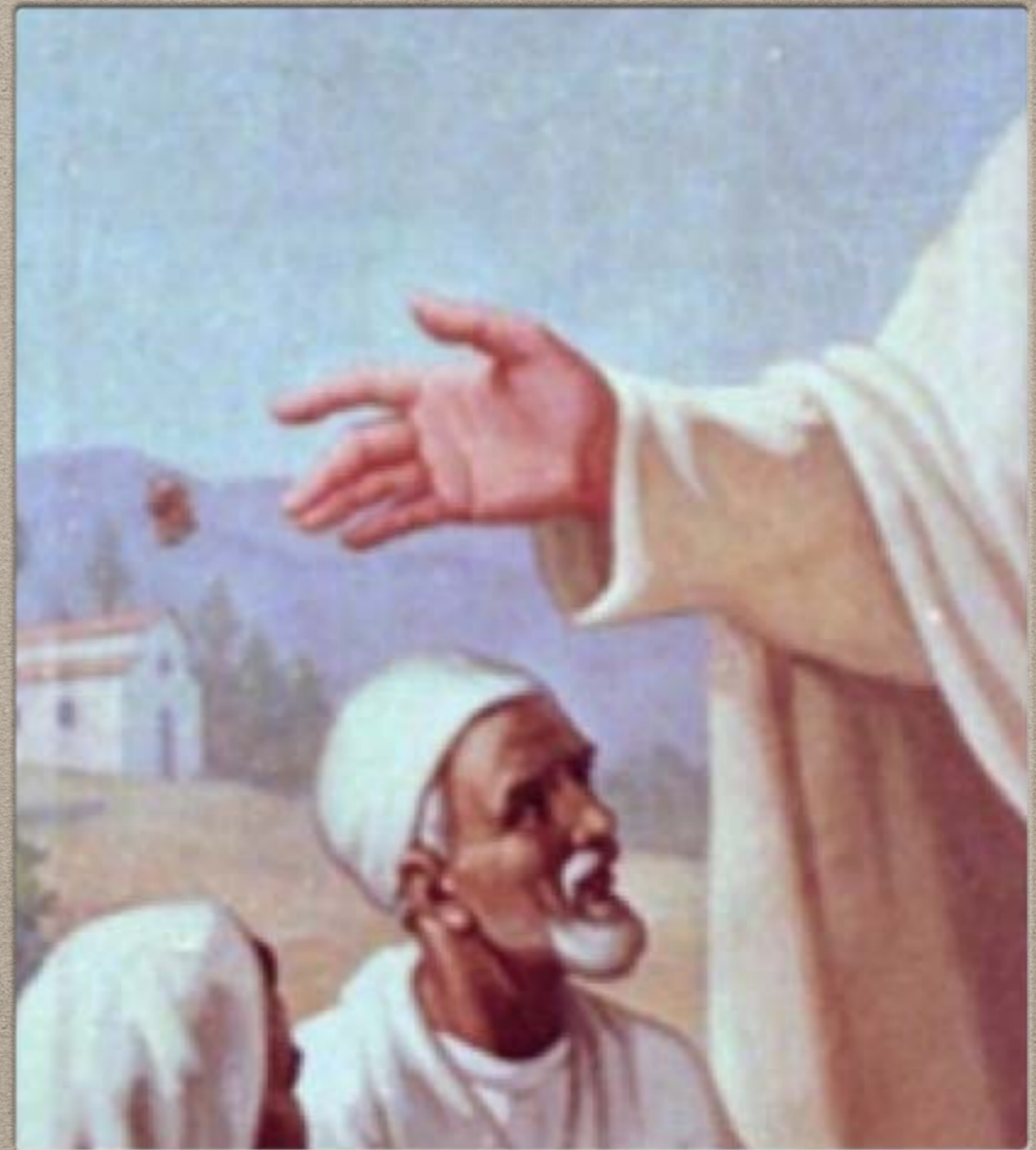
- They had just been given a most unsuitable new Ethiopian Orthodox bishop, who had been educated by Protestants. He would cause Justin and the Catholics a huge amount of trouble and be responsible for the death of Ghebre-Michael.



- Ghebre-Michael's great dream was to convert the new bishop to his own way of thinking about theological truth, and in that way lead the whole country back to the truth.
- After a meeting with the new bishop he saw clearly that the bishop did not share his desire for theological truth; moreover he had a personal political agenda.



- The bishop saw that this monk was going to be a very dangerous opponent of his plans, and on one occasion some of the bishop's followers tried to poison Ghebre-Michael. This plan failed because the monk had known that this would be a possibility and so he always had the antidote to the usual poison used on such occasions.



- Since his meeting with the bishop was a total failure, Ghebre-Michael decided to seek another interview with Justin de Jacobis. The two men met in September 1843. The main point of the meeting was that the monk told Justin that he had made up his mind to become a Catholic. At this time, September 1843, thirty-seven Ethiopians had been received into the Catholic Church, with ten more under instruction.



- Justin and the monk had many discussions over a period of about six months, and they visited many monasteries together to study ancient manuscripts. Eventually, in February 1844 Justin received Ghebre-Michael into the Catholic Church. This led to about six other monks asking to be received as well.



- At this time, 1844, five years after his arrival, Justin decided to establish a permanent residence in the village of Guala. He sent Ghebre-Michael and two other converts there to assess its suitability as a Catholic headquarters. The local people gave them a good welcome. They arranged religion classes for the people, with Ghebre-Michael being the contact man for monks and priests who wished to discuss religious matters or to become Catholics.



- In the following years there was some persecution of Catholics, instigated by the new Orthodox bishop, and at one stage Ghebre-Michael was imprisoned for a few months.
- In 1850, six years after Ghebre-Michael's reception into the Church, Justin asked him to consider becoming a priest. As the suggestion came from Justin, Ghebre-Michael agreed with it. He was ordained a Catholic priest by Justin on 1 January 1851.

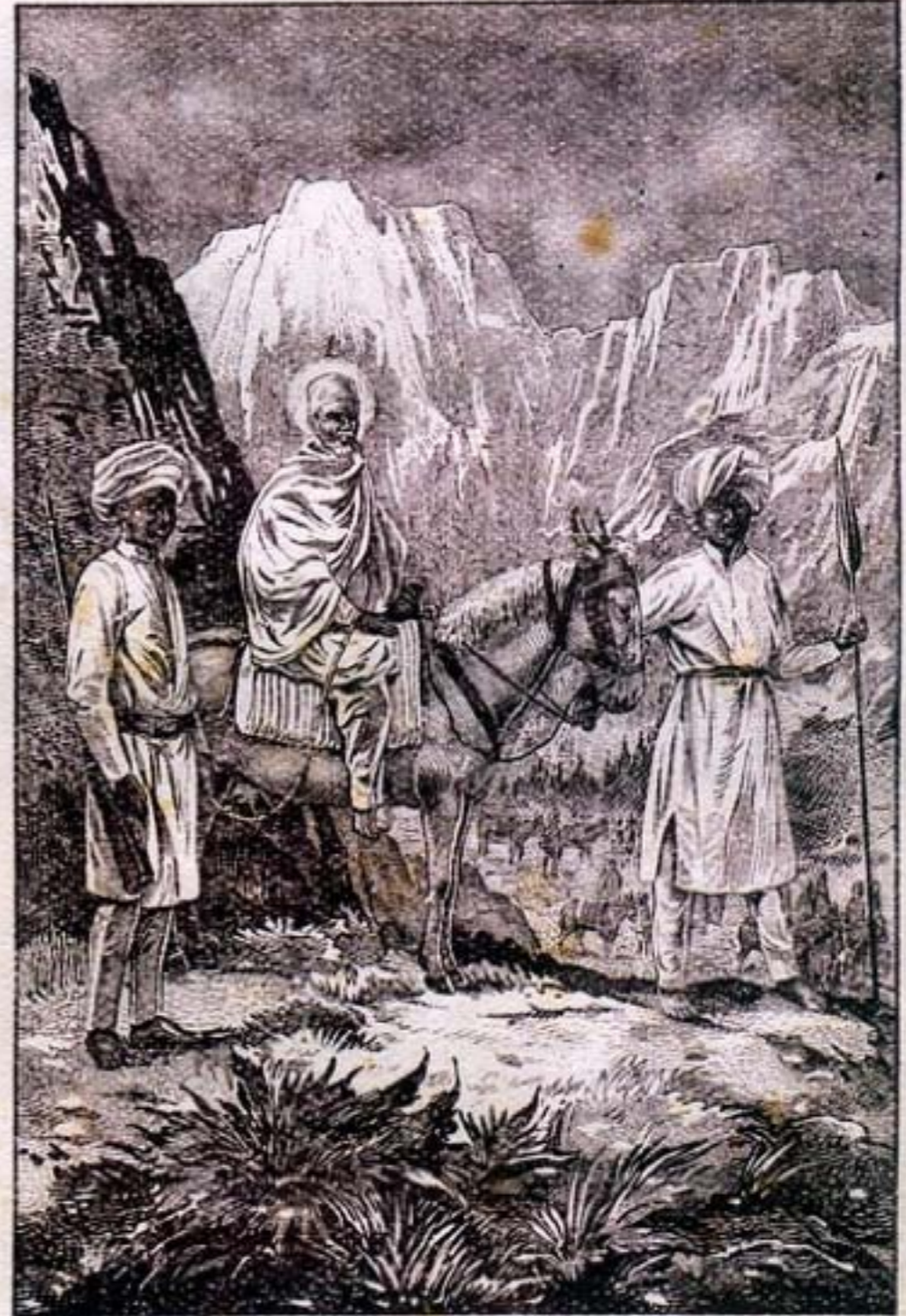




- In July of that year Justin, Ghebre-Michael and four other converts were arrested and imprisoned, Justin being kept separate from the others. The Ethiopians had their legs thrust through a hole in a log and kept there with wooden wedges. The prisoners were able to communicate with each other by writing. The purpose of this imprisonment and torture was to persuade the converts to renounce Catholicism.

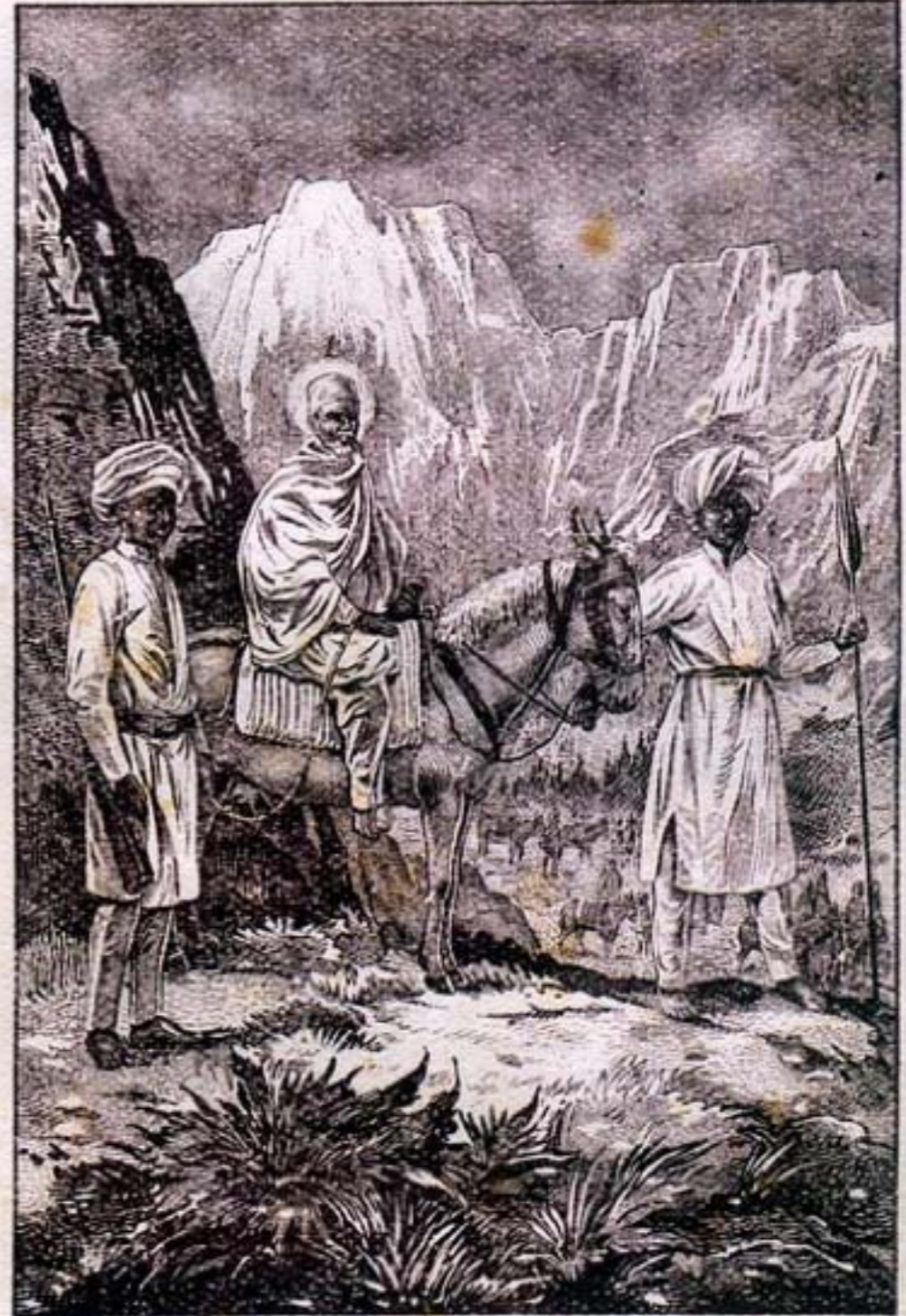


- A new emperor of Ethiopia was crowned in February 1855, and part of his policy was religious uniformity all over Ethiopia. This new ruler also tortured Ghebre-Michael in an attempt to get him to apostatize, but without success. The emperor kept him in chains and brought him along wherever he went.



*Le B<sup>x</sup> Abba Ghebrè-Michaël, suivant  
enchainé, les armées de Théodoros.*

- In May 1855 the British Consul visited the new emperor, and the emperor decided to put the monk on trial in the presence of the consul. Once again he refused to apostatize, and the court decided that he should be executed by being shot. The British Consul asked for his life to be spared, and the emperor agreed. However, he was still kept in chains and brought along with the emperor's army.



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- As a result of all the harsh treatment he died on 28 August 1855. He was buried where he died, at the side of the road under a cedar tree, but the exact spot has never been identified since.



- Ghebre-Michael was not actually a confrere. He had decided to become a Vincentian and a date was fixed for him to begin his internal seminary, but when the day arrived he was under arrest, and he died before he could carry out his intention. Still Justin called Ghebre-Michael a Vincentian "because in his heart he already belonged to the Congregation".



Source: [famvin.org/wiki/Ghebre\\_Michael](https://famvin.org/wiki/Ghebre_Michael)