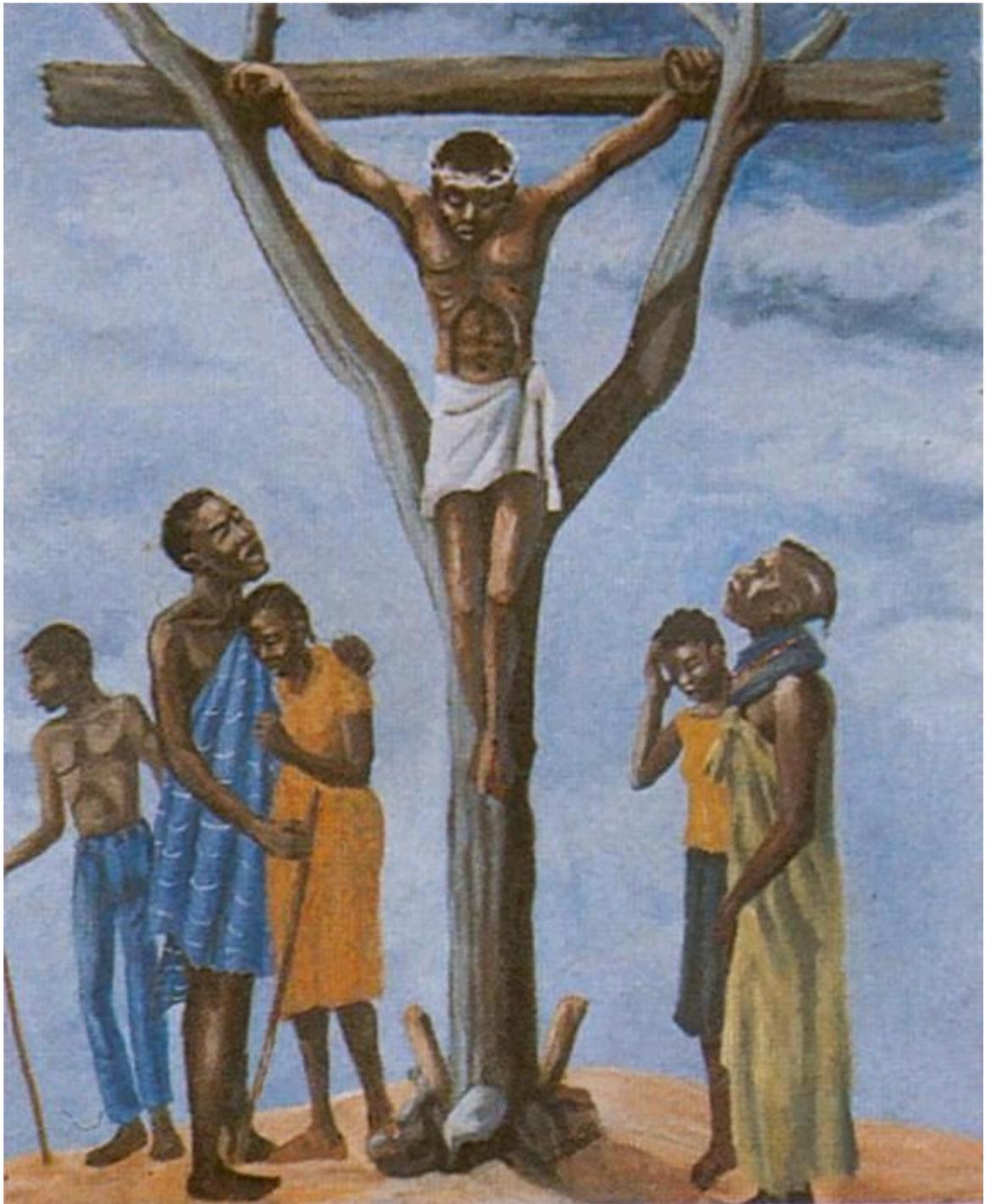


Bishop Joseph Wittebols, witness of the  
love of God in the heart of Africa



# Bishop Joseph Wittebols (1912-1964)

first apostolic vicar and bishop of the diocese of Wamba



On November 26, 1964, in the courtyard of the Wamba prison, Bishop Wittebols, the first apostolic vicar and bishop of the diocese of Wamba, after a long martyrdom, fell under the blows of the rebels together with seven Belgian missionaries and confreres. And thus, in the full vigor of his years, the beautiful figure of a missionary bishop was taken away. As the title of his book said "Total Self-gift", it became realized in his person.

Born on April 12, 1912 in Etterbeek (district of Brussels), Joseph Wittebols entered into Dehonian religious life in the novitiate (1931-1932) of Brugelette (Belgium). This was followed by a program in philosophy at the Scholasticate of Our Lady of the Congo in Louvain, and by theology at the Jesuits. He took great care in following his religious and priestly formation, and he neglected nothing that he believed could prepare him for his future apostolate. In addition to a great upbringing, he had a profound common sense, a healthy right judgment, total self-denial, a great ability to work and a tenacity that nothing could discourage. And he had an acute awareness of his responsibilities. All of this helped him to prepare for his apostolate.

Ordained a priest in Louvain on 11 July 1937 in the autumn of 1938, he boarded a ship in Antwerp (Belgium), bound for the African continent. In Stanleyville (Kisangani - Congo), the bishop gave him as his first field of apostolate to start a new school – from scratch! It was to become the Collège Sacré-Coeur. He was its founder and director until 1949. He was popular, drawing the esteem of all for his calm temperament, his optimism and his exquisite and caring benevolence, in particular towards his collaborators.

When on 24 March 1949, the apostolic vicariate of Wamba (which became a diocese in 1959) was erected, Joseph Wittebols became its first apostolic vicar. His episcopal consecration took place in the chapel of the Mission Prosecutor's Office in Brussels on June 16, 1949.

Under the guidance of such a dynamic, generous, enterprising and methodical pastor, who was also a fervent religious, an excellent pastor and an optimistic and self-giving leader, the apostolic vicariate of Wamba experienced a period of great prosperity. Bishop Wittebols made it his mission to make joy and optimism reign in all the communities entrusted to his care. He preached by example.

Sometimes Msgr. Wittebols has been called "the bishop of the nuns". In fact, he was very concerned about their material, spiritual and moral situation; he often preached their retreats. His reflections have been collected in two volumes: *The Total Donation* (1960) and *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1962). A few days after his death, he had the joy of witnessing, from heaven, the martyrdom of one of the nuns, Sister Anuarite, who died to remain faithful to her vow of virginity.

The declaration of independence of the Congo (1960), with the riots that followed, was fatal for the mission of Wamba: "currently the church is in danger, not only in the world, but especially in our country", where it is "despised and slandered with great hostility by those who, abandoning Christian wisdom, returned miserably to the doctrines, customs and institutions of paganism".

On August 15, 1964, the day of the Assumption of Mary, the rebels entered Wamba, immediately imposing a regime of terror. Day and night, there were hateful accusations, insults, threats. Searches became everyday experiences. The mass killings of indigenous leaders, public administrators and many of the most prominent men in the square in front of a crowd gathered by force, led Bishop Wittebols to the following reflection: "The spirit that animates them is absolutely not Bantu; it must be coming from abroad".

On 29 October Bishop Wittebols and the mission staff were forced to live, first in the hospital of the Palms and then in the mission itself, where they were guarded day and night by armed soldiers. Increasingly, for days and weeks, they had to endure brazen attacks, searches, torture inflicted on one or other of the brothers, outbursts of hatred, humiliations and harassment of all kinds. The totally forced inaction, the uncertainty of tomorrow, the collapse of his work and the absolute impossibility of averting evil, deeply saddened Bishop Wittebols. It is difficult to determine his inner dispositions during those dark hours, full of uncertainty. The bishop did not have the habit of complaining: he knew how to accept what happened to him. He did not become angry. During his imprisonment, humiliation, torture, where even his outward appearance bore the evident signs of the worst tortures, his great calm and dignified attitude impressed everyone, revealing at the same time his resignation and his total abandonment to the will of God.



# From the writings of Msgr. Joseph Wittébols

## Holy abandonment

"The attitude of total abandonment to the good will of the Father fully marked the life of Our Lord. This is what makes Jesus the only victim, without blemish, the only one pleasing to the Father, the only one capable of redeeming humanity by repairing the offense done to God. To be a victim he became human, and he gave witness to it all his life, from the initial *Ecce Venio* to the *Consummatum est* on the altar of the cross. It is also the disposition of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the co-redemptrix, whose life was totally guided by the desire to create with love the *Ecce Ancilla Domini* of the Annunciation". (La Donation total, 195).

## Obedience

"And, finally, our obedience must be total and complete. The obedience willed by God is not one that our superiors must snatch from us with exaggerated regard, or with turns of phrase, or with excessive insistence. No, to be truly supernatural, our obedience will be prompt and quick, without interminable discussions, and not because it cannot be done otherwise. It will be complete. We will not try to give the superiors only an appearance of satisfaction, while keeping an emergency exit so that we can go off on a tangent as soon as the opportunity arises. Jesus did not discuss his Father's wishes; in all things, in small and in big, he has always hastened to obey. 'My food, he said, is to do the will of my Father' (Jn 4:34)". (Ecce Ancilla Domini, 117).

## The total donation

"Whoever hears this call understands that his life will no longer have meaning if it is not given. And the word 'gift' here does not mean giving something, but giving oneself; and we do not give ourselves partially. We have not given of ourselves until we have given ourselves without reserve and without limit. A total self-gift to God". (La Donation total, 61).



# Prayer

We thank you merciful Father  
for calling your apostle and pastor  
Bishop Joseph Wittebols  
to the service of your Kingdom among the poor and needy,  
preaching your Gospel of Love.  
In the total self-gift of life  
he fulfilled his consecration to the Heart of Jesus.  
By professing Ecce Venio and Ecce Ancilla,  
he offered himself for the people entrusted to him.  
We ask you Father  
that the Church may be an instrument of reconciliation and peace,  
and that the seed scattered with the testimony of your servant,  
may stir up new signs of the civilization of Love.  
Because of his example and intercession,  
give us what today we ask of you with faith ...  
and may we too be always rooted in you  
and be strong witnesses of your name. Amen.

