



ALFA, THE SIN OF BEING CHRISTIAN

by Antonio Gaspari

The days of persecuting Christians are not over. Over the last 20 years in Sudan, the Muslim regime has killed nearly 2 million and displaced more than 4 million – a massacre the world has ignored. Inside the Vatican goes to the front lines and presents an in-depth report



Bishop Macram Max Gassis of El Obeid, Sudan, and his flock gather under what he calls his "cathedral of sycamore trees"

She was raped and became pregnant as a result; she was then accused by the Islamic courts of having an extramarital affair. The trial was conducted in a language she didn't speak; she did not have the right to representation, and they condemned her to "lapidation" — stoning.

This is not the plot of a Kafka story, but the life of an 18-year-old Sudanese girl, Abok Alfa Akok. Her only crime is that she is a woman, a Christian, and a member of the Dinka tribe, all of which in today's Sudan make her undesirable.

The news was reported by Human Rights Watch, and by *Misna*, agency of the Comboni Fathers.

There it would have remained, in obscure press reports and local papers were it not for Italian journalist Antonio Socci who used the story in an editorial for Italian daily *Il Giornale* (February 6) entitled, "If Killing A Christian Is Not A Crime." (see the final page of this report). That same day, the bishop of El Obeid, Macram Max Gassis, told Italian Daily, *Corriere Della Sera*, "The girl was raped. It happens often in Sudan. The Muslims have said very clearly that the Christians and animists of the South must lose their identity. Rape is not only tolerated but encouraged."

In a radio transmission the following day, Italian Cardinal Roberto Tucci, S.J.,

said: "It would be good to raise an international campaign of protest against what is happening in Sudan. Today, we speak of Afghanistan and of Palestine, and Sudan is often forgotten. For years in Sudan there has been a real persecution of the Muslim government against the people of the South, of the black-skinned, of the Christian and animist religions. At the end of the year 2000, the civil war, begun in 1983 between the Arab and Muslim North and the Christian and animist South, had taken the lives of two million people. Now *Sharia* law has been applied to a non-Muslim. It would be good to raise a campaign against what is happening. Why does the

which attendance is highest, they reported that the churches received close to 102,000 faithful.

It does not seem an exceptional figure.

KONDRUSIEWICZ: Judge for yourself: in Moscow there are 10 million inhabitants.

What are the numbers for the Catholic Church?

KONDRUSIEWICZ: We have some 600,000 faithful in the whole of Russia. More than 65,000 in Moscow alone, which together with St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad, is the city where the Catholic presence is most numerous.

From the statistical point of view, they are undoubtedly a minority.

KONDRUSIEWICZ: Yes, but this is not what worries us. It would be enough for us to be able to carry out pastoral activities, and we would like to do so without harming anyone, least of all our Orthodox brothers.

Isn't there a possibility to put an end to the arguments and to coexist at least in an atmosphere of reciprocal tolerance if not collaboration?

KONDRUSIEWICZ: For the time being, no. The decision to transform the apostolic administrations into dioceses has elicited great protests from the Orthodox side.

And yet, over the past few months, it seemed that the thaw had begun with the participation of the patriarchate's choir in the Mass at

St. Peter's for the Day of Peace, and especially the addresses of Metropolitan Pitirim and of two other important bishops in Assisi.

KONDRUSIEWICZ: In the preceding months we also had numerous positive contacts.

Instead, it seems we have returned to the situation of 10 years ago.

When the Pope created the apostolic administrations and we arrived in Moscow, there was the same climate of frost and mistrust.

Let's hope it will not be another 10 years before a return to normality.

KONDRUSIEWICZ: No, maybe three or four will be enough. Maybe less: three or four months ...



Sister Lucia's New Book Published

Vatican publishes book by last surviving Fatima visionary

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican has published a book by Carmelite Sister Lucia dos Santos (*photo*), the last surviving Fatima visionary, offering her meditations on the appeals contained in the Fatima message.

The book, which Sister Lucia completed in 1997, was approved for publication by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in mid-2000 and published early in 2001 in Portuguese.

The Vatican printing press released the Italian translation of the book, "The Appeals of the Message of Fatima," in late October. No date has been set for its English-language release.

In her introduction to the book, Sister Lucia said she wrote it to respond to the "many questions and requests" she receives in letters each day.

Although the book includes a chapter on the Fatima message's appeal for "devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary," it does not mention Mary's request that Russia and the world be consecrated to her, nor does it mention the polemics surrounding the consecration.

Pope John Paul II presided over the act of consecration in 1984, and Sister Lucia said it was done in the way Mary requested, but some Fatima devotees continue to insist that Mary's request was not fulfilled properly.

The book was completed before Pope John Paul ordered the publication last year of the so-called "third secret of Fatima," a part of the message kept secret for decades.

The "third secret" speaks of the suffering of the church and, specifically of the "bishop dressed in white," whom

Pope John Paul has said referred to himself.

Sister Lucia said the book is not an interpretation of the messages given by Our Lady of Fatima to her and her cousins Jacinta and Francisco Marto in 1917 because "that is the competence of the church."

The book opens with her description of her childhood and of learning about God and the Catholic faith from her parents and in the local parish.

She said the chapter was an attempt to respond to questions about environment that formed "the humble children through whom the Lord could realize his plans."

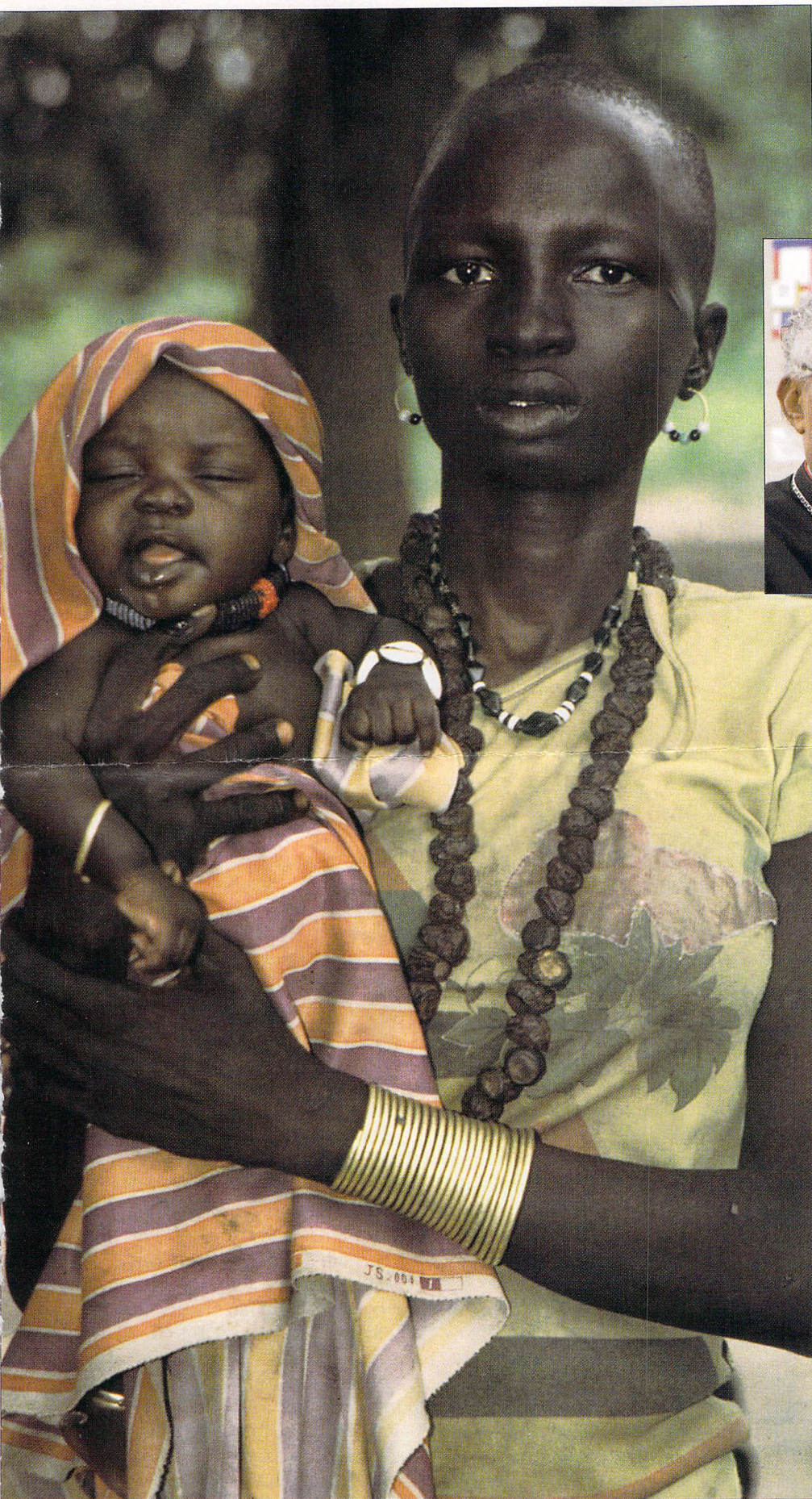
Sister Lucia said her mother and father taught her about "that other mother who, holding the baby Jesus in her arms, welcomed everyone with the same affection because she also was their mother and much more powerful, holy and beautiful than the one who on earth rocked their cradles."

The book continues as a type of catechism, using specific appeals from Our Lady of Fatima to explain how Catholics must pray continually, offer sacrifices to God, stop offending God, accept the reality of heaven and hell, pray the rosary each day and pursue holiness.

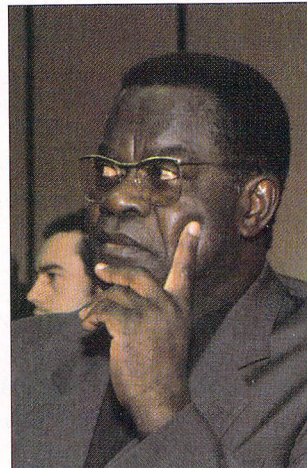
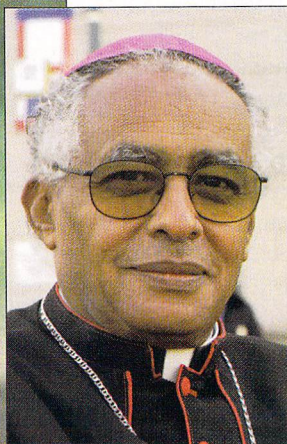
The second part of the book offers Sister Lucia's meditations on the Ten Commandments; the third part of the book focuses on the importance of praying the rosary and on the joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries remembered while reciting it.

Sister Lucia wrote that often she has been asked why Our Lady of Fatima asked for daily recitation of the rosary and not daily attendance at Mass.

"I am not absolutely certain about the reason because Our Lady did not explain it to us, and I did not think to ask her about it," she wrote. However, Sister Lucia said she thinks it is because "the rosary is accessible to everyone" at all times, whereas going to Mass daily could be more difficult for people who live far from a church or whose work or school schedules do not coincide with their parish Mass schedule. (*reported by Cindy Wooden, CNS*)



Right: Archbishop of Kisangani, Msgr. Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya
Below: Bishop Macram Max Gassis
Left: A woman and child at the Catholic Relief Services feeding center



UN not intervene? The United Nations Commission for Human Rights has taken an interest but maybe this action should be supported by a real international campaign that

sheds light on the Sudanese situation."

The archbishop of Kisangani (Congo), Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, president of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) said: "I find it an extreme injustice that a country which is a member of the UN Commission on Human Rights can punish an innocent person twice and in such a radical way. First of all, it is certain that the girl was raped and the law should defend her. The trial was held in a language she could not understand, and she did not have the right to defense — a right provided for by all laws which refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

Father Giovanni Battista Antonini, a Comboni missionary who worked in Sudan for 23 years, told the magazine *Tempi*: "The campaign in defense of Alfa is very important and should be followed very carefully because it is only the tip of the iceberg. In Kharthoum, we learn of human rights violations, but in the rest of the country it is very difficult. Members of the Dinka tribe are treated like dogs; to be a black woman, Christian or animist, is excuse enough to be violated and killed."

Christian Solidarity International recently reported the murder of Akuc Tong Kuan, a 9-year old child, and the wounding of five women as they received food at a UN distribution center.