FOREWORD

The purpose of this work is to present in fully documented but nonetheless readable fashion the history of one of the Church’s great clerical societies. Classified statistically among the ten largest, the Congregation of the Holy Ghost is also one of the oldest congregations (as opposed to orders) and ranks fourth among them in size. It began in 1703 and, after attaining a first period of bloom during which it served the Church nobly throughout the greater part of the eighteenth century, it came close to utter destruction in the French Revolution of 1792. Restored in 1804, but kept weak by recurrent persecution, criticized by all and vilified by many, it valiantly strove to continue its task in the first decades of the nineteenth century. This dark era ended and the tired society felt a burst of new life when the Venerable Francis Libermann and his confreres entered it in 1848. Since then the Congregation has enjoyed a period of steady growth and achievement.

Among its chief accomplishments in modern times, one may call attention to its introduction of a more human or, to use a currently fashionable term, a more existential form of spirituality; its powerful influence in eradicating the last traces of Gallicanism; and above all, its pioneering role in the systematic evangelization of Africa. While there were only a few stray Negro Catholics on the African continent when Bishop Edward Barron landed at Cape Palmas in 1841, there are now nearly twenty-four million, of whom some four million live in territories still served by Holy Ghost Fathers. In terms of human life, the price these missionaries paid was frightfully high, as one can readily see from the statistics and graph on page 282. The African landscape is dotted with more than a thousand graves in which Spiritans await the final resurrection among the peoples they have Christianized.

Although this book will be of particular interest to the seventy-five hundred members and aspirants of the Congregation and to their numerous friends, one ventures to hope that it may not be without appeal to the student of ecclesiastical history as well.

In preparing it for publication, the author decided to forego the more impressive but also more ponderous format of an extensive scholarly apparatus. He has attempted to find a happy mean between readability and over-documentation. To maintain full objectivity, however, he has employed marginal symbols which will
provide the more curious reader with a complete system of reference to the sources that were drawn upon.

It should be noted that this book is not intended as a panegyric or as a work of propaganda—its mere publication under the aegis of a university will sufficiently indicate its character in this respect. Rather, it is set forth as an unbiased study of two hundred and fifty years of history. Glorious achievements are recorded, it is true, but mistakes and failures are also candidly admitted. Praise and blame are distributed with equanimity wherever circumstances warrant comment. However, in regard to more recent events, the text is limited to a simple recital of facts and trends because history which is still partly in the making and for which records are not yet fully available does not readily lend itself to critical analysis.

For the African reader, the author wishes to point out that the term "native" has been used in its original etymological sense. As a matter of fact, the text contains reference to natives of European and American countries as well. Moreover, allusions to certain aspects of savage practices previously prevailing in Africa should require no apology in a historical work. Barbaric customs were equally prevalent in Europe and America at one time. In fact, the modern African can derive no little measure of satisfaction from the fact that the peoples of his continent have advanced more rapidly than Europe did in the early stages of its civilization.

A history whose material spans several centuries and covers much of the globe cannot be recorded without some margin of human error. While every effort has been made to reduce inaccuracies to what is hoped may be an infinitesimal degree by checking and rechecking the data against all available sources, lapsus linguæ et calami still remain a very real possibility. For that reason, the author wishes to assure his readers that their corrections and criticisms are actively solicited.

The geographical maps interspersed through the text have constituted a particularly difficult problem. Most mission districts and dioceses are developing so rapidly and population centers are so fluid in certain areas that current situations defy any attempt to indicate them fully.

There remains now only the pleasant duty of acknowledging a debt of gratitude to the many people who have aided in the preparation of this book. Although they are too numerous to be named individually, special mention must be made of the Very Reverend Vernon F. Gallagher, C.S.Sp., Ph.D., LL.D., J.U.D., President...
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October 2, 1957, the 248th anniversary of Father des Places’ death.