

## **Some of the Eritrean Catholic Church's public interventions during the last two decades**

The numerous reactions to the latest pastoral letter by the four Catholic Bishops of Eritrea has prompted *Assenna* to explore the previous public interventions of the same institution for the period of over two decades since independence. Result: besides the three full-fledged pastoral letters of 1991, 2001, 2014, there have been at least seven other public documents, the knowledge of which can help *Assenna's* readers to place the last pastoral letter in its proper historical context. We have gathered that all such documents were issued both in Tigrigna and English and, besides being duly and directly delivered to the government authorities, were published in print and widely distributed. Here below is a selection, which to some extent responds to some of the questions raised lately by web article writers and commentators.

**1.- ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND PROSELYTISM. A section from: *The Catholic Church's response to proclamation n. 73/1995 issued by the government of Eritrea to clarify and legally regulate the activities of the religions and religious institution, Asmara, 15 July 1995.***

Freedom from psychological pressure and immunity from external coercion in one person's or in one community's choice and practice of religion is one of the most genuine expressions of human dignity: *"This right of the human person to religious freedom must be given such recognition in the constitutional order of society as will make it a civil right"* (Vat. Coun. II, *Dignitatis Humanae* 2).

Therefore, full rights must be granted to any person or group of whatsoever religious orientation, provided that they: (a) do not represent a threat to the psychological or physical integrity of the persons involved; (b) do not use, promote or propagate violence in any way, in any of its forms, for whatsoever reason; (c) do not utilize dishonest means, unworthy persuasion, overt or covert forms of black-mail to attract people to their creed: this is what we mean by *proselytism*.

In connection with the latter point, we as Catholics fully concur with the condemnation of all forms of proselytism, as expressed in the Proclamation. In one of the major documents of the Catholic Church we read: *"Religious communities have further the right not to be prevented from publicly teaching and bearing witness to their beliefs by spoken or written word. However, in spreading religious belief and in introducing religious practices everybody must, at all times, avoid any action which seems to suggest coercion or dishonest or unworthy persuasion, especially when dealing with the uneducated and the poor. Such a manner of acting must be considered an abuse of one's own right and an infringement of the rights of others"* (*Ibid.* 4).

In the same vein, in our pastoral letter we have written: *"We are ready to co-operate in any project what-so-ever that intends to promote the wellbeing of the whole person. We are motivated in this task not by earthly ambitions, nor by desire for prestige, nor by any concern to proselytize, but, we repeat, only by the desire to serve"* (Pastoral Letter, *Peace and Progress. A Renewed Spirit for a New Eritrea*, 1991, 5).

Availing herself of the universal principle of religious freedom, the Catholic Church in Eritrea wishes to publicly teach and bear witness to her beliefs by spoken and written word. In doing so, she has no intention whatsoever to act in competition with, or in antagonism to, other churches or religions. She wishes to announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a spirit of deep respect for the freedom that every person has to follow and practice a religion of his/her own choice, and to join the Catholic Church if this happens to be his/her free choice. In the conviction that only through mutual acquaintance and understanding can a better society be built, the Church sustains dialogue – based on equality, truth, trust and mutual respect – with other religions. In turn, she requests and expects the same respect and understanding for herself.

**2. AN APPEAL FOR PEACE during the third round of the 1998-2000 war, 21 May 2000.** See also *L'Osservatore Romano*, 21 May 2000.

After two years of changing fortunes, of hopes and disillusionments, of more or less bloody confrontations, the war that opposes Ethiopia and Eritrea has, in the last few days, entered its perhaps most tragic stage. With the fading away of the last ray of hope linked to the mediation attempts, sadly the weapons have been given the final word.

War has once again revealed itself to be that “*useless slaughter*” which the Holy Father John Paul II has repeatedly denounced and condemned. Once again, at the expense of an impoverished and innocent population, the wisdom of an axiom is being sadly confirmed: “*If humanity does not put an end to war, war will put an end to humanity!*”

Entire areas turned into one single battlefield, unceasing bombardments on towns and villages, populations on the move to unknown outlets, thousands of dead and wounded citizens... this, in brief, is the terrifying scenery that the territory is offering to the observer today. The amount and the proportions of human casualties and material losses still remain to be assessed. However, a quick glance around the horizon seems to reveal that the heap of rubble being recorded in this war might become comparable to that accumulated in the previous thirty years long war.

An anguished question is taunting the consciences of all of us: what has gone wrong in the attempts that were made to avert this insane rush to the arms? This, however, is not the moment to linger on reciprocal recriminations or attributions of responsibilities. It is the grave responsibility of everyone who could have done something to prevent this war - and did not do so - to ask him/herself: why has this been allowed to occur? Which interests have prevailed in the way the whole issue was handled?

As pastors of part of a population that has been made to pay the brunt of a war it never wanted, we limit ourselves to only one remark: a delay of even one day might mean the extermination of an entire population and the devastation of the whole territory. The fact that, once the hostilities were resumed, those responsible to intervene confined their efforts to measures of limited effectiveness or, still worse, considered all possibilities exhausted, is something we find hard to understand and, even less, to justify. Hence our anguished appeal: let anyone who has the power to do so stop this useless slaughter; let silence be imposed on the weapons of death, let rationality prevail over violence. Without delay. Tomorrow it might be too late, irretrievably late.

We extend this appeal to all those who, at the international level, have institutional responsibilities and concrete possibilities to act. We call on all institutions, groups and individuals who care about the fate of men, women and children being condemned to extinction by violence, hunger and hardships. Let everyone do whatever is in his/her possibilities. The sorrowful stare of thousands of innocent children should be sufficient not to allow anyone of us to sleep a peaceful night before something is done to put an end to the tragedy.

As we anxiously wait for the international community to move and act, in this hour, one of the darkest in our recent history, we see in our people, as vivid as ever, a great sense of trust in the Lord: He is the one who holds the destiny of all peoples in his hands. In tune with this, with confidence we cry to Him: give us your peace, that peace that the world cannot give, but which is the only true and lasting peace. May the Virgin Mother Kidane Mehret, patron of our country, support and sustain our imploration.

**3. RECONCILIATION AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING. A Recommendation to the People and Government of Eritrea on the occasion of the [forced] transfer of the university students to the military service in Wi'a [where two of them died as a result].** See *Berhan*, Catholic monthly newspaper, August 2001.

We, the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, have deemed it to be part of our responsibilities, as pastors of the people of God that is in Eritrea, to declare our care for, and concern about, the

current situation of the Country, and thus voice our wishes and recommendations to the people and, particularly, to the Government authorities.

In a pastoral letter we issued last May, we stated: “... *In the civil, political and government spheres...we strongly urge our government officials and political leaders to develop a spirit of dialogue and sharing among themselves and – at the same time – with the general public, (and) the other parties...so that our nation may truly feel itself to be one family*” (*God Loves this Country* 37). Once again, we feel the need to repeat the same recommendation. If we are to view this country as one family and, within it, our political authorities as loving and caring stewards of an extended family, then let them treasure dialogue and mutual understanding. This is not only a better choice, but in fact the single best means to attain the true good of the people entrusted to their care.

In our aforementioned letter we added: “*We need to develop a global spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation*” (*Ibid.* 16). More and more daily experiences are confirming the truth of this statement. “*Our society needs to coordinate a thorough-going program of reconciliation and forgiveness...and every view-point should be represented. If the slogan one people-one heart is to become a reality, we must reject any intentionally divisive terminology along with an “us and them” mentality*), as “*No town, no household divided against itself can last*” (*Mt 12:25; Lk 11:17*) (*Ibid.* 17). It is normal that there should be differences of views and ideas. To be able to work out such differences and bring them to working conclusions should be as much normal.

Therefore:

1. We recommend you [the government] to take at heart the needs of this people that has suffered so much, to find viable solutions to existing differences in ways that will not allow one to prevail over the other. This will be possible if everyone is truly concerned about the needs and the sufferings of the people in that spirit of humility that shuns arrogance and seeks peaceful ways and means for the solution of all problems. Along with that we urge all to turn to God with imploring prayer for both the people and the government authorities so that we all may live in peace.

2. We are aware of the regrettable events that have been faced by the university students in the last few days. When it was established by the Catholic Church, this institution of higher education was meant to educate and prepare young people to achieve an authentic and integral cultural maturity that would allow them, in turn, to become educators and edifiers of their country. Never should experiences of the kind that disturb the peace of their mind and freeze their legitimate aspirations be allowed to happen.

We extend our heartfelt sympathies and condolences to the families and companions of young **Yirga Josieph** and **Yemane Tekiè** whose life has been cut short in its prime. We pray that the Lord may welcome them in his kingdom. Our recommendation to the government authorities is to be able to understand that young people are naturally prone to dialectical attitudes. They need to be listened to attentively and patiently, and wisely be helped to understand the reasons of the other party. This is all the more indispensable as they are the ones who will take up the responsibility of their country in the not far future.

As the university aims to be a storehouse of wisdom and knowledge, we do not see why workable solutions to existing problems could not be found in a constructive dialogue with parents and experienced citizens.

#### **4. CONSOLE MY PEOPLE. A message on the occasion of the announcement of the names of the citizens who died in the 1998-2000 war. June 2003.**

To the beloved people of Eritrea, we offer you anew the consoling Word of God as announced by the prophet Isaiah: "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated (Is 40:1-2)".

We are deeply aware of how much those who have sacrificed their lives in this last war while struggling for their country and people, for peace and security, for freedom and human dignity, against ignorance and servitude, will be missed by parents, children and spouses. The scale and the depth of the grief, into which the latter brothers and sisters are plunged, are before

our eyes and in our hearts. To that extent, it becomes difficult for anyone of us to even utter words of consolation. This, however, is not to mean that we can do away with our responsibilities by simply keeping the sorrow for ourselves. We first of all pray *“For those who have died, as we ask God to grant them that fullness of life and liberty for which they fought right up until the end, and which finds its completeness in God himself”* (Pastoral Letter, *Peace and Progress*, p1). The conviction that they have not died in vain should comfort us. With regard to these our children, brothers and sisters who altruistically have offered their lives and have been purified by the sacrifice of their own blood, with the Scripture we say: *“Their offspring will last for ever, their glory will not fade”* (Qo 44:13).

In this, the day when the names of the victims of the 1998-2000 war are being officially announced, and we are placed before an extremely stark and somber reality, we believe our thoughts should be guided by superior ideals and principles. St. Paul advises us: *“The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merciful Father and the God who gives every possible encouragement, he supports us in every hardship, so that we are able to come to the support of others”* (2 Cor 1:3-4). In circumstances such as the present, we should find our source of comfort, consolation and encouragement in none other than the God of our fathers. He is the One in whom we need to have an unshakable faith. Let us therefore intensify and strengthen this faith. It is only by relying on God, and on our Mother Mary Kidane Mehret, that we become able to go through such a trying and bitter time of sorrow. It is Christ himself who is telling us: *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You trust in God, trust also in me”* (Jn 14:1); and again: *“Peace I bequeath you, my own peace I give you, a peace which the world cannot give. This is my gift to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid”* (Jn 14:27).

As people of faith, we are also called to announce and practice peace and reconciliation in all moments and areas of our lives, and to forgive one another wholeheartedly. As for those who have left us offering their lives in this war, it would be most appropriate for all of us to let go of mutual accusations and attributions of responsibilities for what has happened. It is a matter of wisdom to see the present tragedy as the sad legacy that war, any war for that matter, is bound to bequeath. Let us therefore drop hatred and all bad feelings. If people have, so far, happened to harbor resentments with one another, now is the time for healing thorough forgiveness, in generosity of mind and heart. If we want to appease God’s wrath, we need to forgive one another, and do it for God’s sake as well as our departed dear ones’ sake. True, it remains legitimate to raise the question; *“Why has all of this been let to happen?”* The only thing we need to hold firm in this specific moment, however, is that these men and women have offered their tender age for the sake of their country and people. May the God who has kept them steadfast to their ideals, grace us with the gift of his consolation and strength. In order to become worthy of the bequest they have left us, and pay back our tribute of gratitude to them, we must ask God in prayer to help us to make the country for which they have died a land where people can live in peace and without fear, into a future freedom, justice and progress.

There are real and concrete ways we can demonstrate that our children, brothers and sisters have not died in vain, i.e. to see to it that their parents, spouses and children are duly remunerated both morally and financially; to correct our past mistake; and, more fundamentally, to re-build this nation on sound principles of justice and order.

As we endorse the programs of assistance to orphaned children, spouses and parents, we stress that by no means should such programs be monopolized by, or left only to, government initiatives. It is not sufficient. NGOs, the civil society and individual citizen must be given a fair chance to offer their share of contribution.

As for the immediate and remote future, let us remember this: only when war and the rumors of war will be eliminated forever, only when the nation and its neighbor-countries will live at peace with one another, only then will the seed sown with the death of the war-victims be said to have born its fruits. Let us fervently pray so that this very time may come soon; a time when the living will live a pacified and reconciled life, and the dead will really rest in peace, because their sacrifice will finally have produced freedom and peace, and their blood

will have engendered justice and legality. Then we shall truly say: "They have not died in vain".

Again, may the Lord give us his consolation, may He grant eternal life to the departed and prosperity to the living. May He bless us with abundant rains. May He bring back home those still away in the fields on duty, the exiles and the displaced. May the King of Peace - who said, "*I am the resurrection. Anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live, and whoever lives and believes in me, will never die*" (Jn 11:25-26) - proclaim definitely gone all wars and destructions. May He welcome into his kingdom our departed brothers and sisters, and console their families.