

THE CHURCH IN ETHIOPIA TODAY

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THE triumphal re-entry of the Emperor Haile Selassie I into his capital of Addis Ababa on May 5, 1941, marked the beginning of a new era for the Catholic Church in Ethiopia. As in many countries today in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, the Church in Ethiopia has to prove that it is truly a supranational and independent body, notwithstanding its spiritual allegiance to the Holy Sec. The Italian missionaries who followed in the wake of Mussolini's armies in 1935 could not but help to identify the Catholic faith with the Italian religion in the eyes of the invaded Abyssinians, and not least because French Catholic missionaries who had laboured for years in this territory were politely but firmly shown the way out of the country during the Duce's occupation. As could be predicted, the return of the Negus and the allied armies led to the expulsion of the Italian missionaries from Ethiopia. Not a single one was allowed to remain and the Apostolic Delegate, Mgr Castellani, himself an Italian Franciscan, was conducted out of the country by English officers. To this day, no Italian missionary is allowed inside the Emperor's dominions.

A knowledge of the history of Christianity in Ethiopia, essential for an understanding of the situation today, can be briefly summarized. The Church was established in the fourth century by St Frumentius who was consecrated first Bishop of Aksum by the great Doctor of the Church, St Athanasius of Alexandria. The Church in Ethiopia unhappily fell away into the monophysite heresy, gradually cutting all links with Rome and Constantinople but maintaining important relations with what became the dissident Coptic Church of Alexandria. The national Church of Ethiopia, comprising about seven and a half million adherents, remains monophysite in doctrine to this day, although it can be reasonably argued that Ethiopian monophysitism is more nominal than real. Ethiopia did little more in this respect than follow Alexandria into heresy. Dominicans in the fourteenth century endeavoured to heal the breach with Rome and the schism was repudiated by the Abyssinian delegation at the Council of Florence

in 1441. However, the Ethiopian representatives were murdered in Egypt on their way home.

Since the sixteenth century, Catholic missionary activities in Ethiopia have been spectacular but shortlived, with little lasting success until the mid-nineteenth century. Fr Pacz, S.J., obtained a formal submission to Rome of the Emperor Susenyos and the Ethiopian Church in 1626, but the Emperor's successor Fasil destroyed this unity with the Holy See and banished all Catholic missionaries from his Kingdom. Only in 1846 were conditions such that an apostolic vicariate could be set up and confided to the Lazarist Fathers under the direction of Mgr Justin de Jacobis, beatified by Pius XII in 1939. Blessed Justin de Jacobis's most noted convert was a former dissident Ethiopian monk who died a martyr in 1855 and was beatified as Blessed Ghebre-Michael by Pius XI in 1926. The other great name amongst Catholic missionaries of this time was Mgr Massaia, a Capuchin eventually raised to the dignity of Cardinal. For twenty years there was much suffering and persecution for Catholics during the reign of the Emperor John IV, but his death in 1889 and the ascent of Menelik to the throne brought a period of relative peace and security for Ethiopian Catholics.

During the reign of Haile Selassie, both the national Church and the Catholic Church in Ethiopia have undergone significant changes. Until quite recently, it could be maintained that many of the clergy of the Ethiopian Coptic Church were ignorant and uneducated, but the reforming zeal of the Negus and his extensive educational programme is rapidly altering this state of affairs. Furthermore, one recent event has greatly enhanced the dignity and increased the pride of the dissident clergy in their national Church. For until recently, ever since Frumentius was consecrated by Athanasius, the Head or Abuna of the Ethiopian Coptic Church has always been an Egyptian consecrated by the Patriarch of Alexandria. In 1951, however, an Ethiopian, Archbishop Basilios, was enthroned as Abuna of the dissident Ethiopian Church. Further independence of Alexandria was demonstrated in the same year when the Abuna Basilios consecrated his own bishops, a privilege formerly accorded exclusively to the same Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria.

At a time, therefore, when the national Ethiopian Church has cut its links with Egypt, the Catholic Church in Abyssinia is

asserting the spiritual dependence of all Christians upon Rome. The number of Catholics in Abyssinia proper and Eritrea, incorporated under the Ethiopian crown in 1952, is small. There are about 42,000 Catholics in Ethiopia, roughly equally divided between the Latin and the Ethiopian Rites. In Eritrea, there are a further 50,000 Catholics of the Ethiopian Rite. From the point of view of ecclesiastical administration, three Catholic bishops are responsible for this vast territory. Abuna Jacob Ghebre-Jesus, Apostolic Exarch of Asmara, is Bishop of Eritrea for the Ethiopian Rite. Abuna Haile-Mariam Cahsay, Apostolic Exarch of Addis Ababa, has authority over all Ethiopian Rite priests working in those territories of Ethiopia which are under the jurisdiction of the Sacred Oriental Congregation, whilst Bishop Urbain Person, a French Capuchin, is responsible for the territories of Ethiopia roughly south of Addis Ababa, except the province of Shoa, which are dependent upon Propaganda Fide. There are a limited number of foreign missionaries, all of whom are Frenchmen. They consist of about twelve Capuchins, six Lazarists and four de la Salle Brothers.

The great hope for the Catholic Church in Ethiopia and Eritrea, however, lies in an Abyssinian Catholic clergy ordained in the Ethiopian Rite. In 1955, there were in Ethiopia forty-five secular priests and one Lazarist Father, and in Eritrea, there were one hundred and ten secular priests, ten Capuchins and twelve Cistercian monks, all of the Ethiopian Rite. These Ethiopian Catholic clergy enjoy complete liberty of movement throughout the imperial territory, and in general can be said to enjoy the respect and confidence of the Emperor himself.

No diplomatic relations exist as yet between the Vatican and Addis Ababa although a Belgian Jesuit, Mgr Monnens, acted, until his death last October, as special envoy from the Holy See in the Ethiopian capital. It was noted with satisfaction that for the eightieth birthday celebrations of His Holiness, the Emperor Haile Selassie chose two Ethiopian Catholic priests of the Ethiopian Rite as ambassadors.

The key to the future of the Catholic Church in Ethiopia lies in education. There has been a phenomenal growth in education since the expulsion of the Italians in 1941, when, because of the war, there was scarcely a school for Ethiopians left open in the whole of the country. By 1953, there were 508 government

schools and there has been no relaxation in educational building since. For the direction of the Tafari Makonnen School, founded by the Emperor and bearing his own name, Haile Selassie himself chose the Canadian Jesuits, although these sons of St Ignatius are not allowed to engage in missionary work or to wear clerical dress. It was a favourable comment on how well these Jesuits carried out their task that the Emperor again chose the same Canadian Jesuits to direct the first University College in Abyssinia, opened in Addis Ababa in February, 1951. The President of the University College is the Jesuit Superior in Addis Ababa, Fr Lucien Matte, S.J.

These nominations to such important educational posts reflect the high regard in which Catholic teachers are held by the authorities. The discipline and thoroughness of Catholic teaching is much envied by others who strive to imitate it. Such a situation offers a glorious opportunity for the spread of the Catholic Faith. Ethiopian youth flocks to any new school opened by Catholics, and the burden of their administration falls largely on the shoulders of the all-too-few Ethiopian clergy.

At the present moment there are in this country, as guests of the Dominicans, four Catholic priests of the Ethiopian Rite. They come to us from the Pontifical Ethiopian College in Rome to study various subjects at Cambridge, although perhaps their primary aim is to perfect their English, for English since the liberation of Ethiopia has become the first foreign language in use in the country.

Since the Second World War, the Oriental Rites of the Catholic Church have become more familiar to English Catholics, mainly because of the influx of Byzantine Rite refugees from Eastern Europe. Rare indeed is the opportunity to hear the Ethiopic Liturgy and few Englishmen have the ability to understand the liturgical language of Ge'ez. But translations of the oriental liturgies are available, and a study of the Ethiopic Mass is rewarding. It is noteworthy above all for its vigorous assertion of the Real Presence. After the Consecration, the priest says: 'This is verily the holy Body of our Lord and our God and our Saviour Jcsus Christ. . . . This is verily the Precious Blood of our Lord. . . . This is verily the Body and Blood of Emanuel our God. I believe and will always confess that this is the Body and Blood of our Lord and our God and our Saviour Jesus Christ which he

took from our Lady. . . .’ These uncompromising words are spoken by all Ethiopian clergy, both Catholic and Coptic. It is not too much to hope in these apocalyptic days, when the national feuds and political intrigues of the past are being rapidly forgotten in the light of modern world events, that such a vital belief in the Real Presence, coupled with fervent devotion to the Blessed Virgin, will lead the ancient Ethiopian Church back to unity with Rome. It is certainly not too much to pray for.

NOTICE

The text of the Medieval Disputation on ‘The Purpose of Punishment’ held at the Aquinas Centre, St Dominic’s Priory, N.W.5, and broadcast on the Third Programme of the B.B.C., on March 14th, will appear in the May issue of BLACKFRIARS.