



ካብ ሳባዕኩምሲ ፤ ተቆጻጸዩ እምበር !!!

A few words on The "Pastoral Letter" by the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea

by Ghirmay Yeibio

By the end of May 2014, alarmed by the increased exodus of Eritreans and concerned by the Mediterranean and Sinai tragedies, four Bishops of the Eritrean Catholic Church¹ from inside Eritrea have issued a "pastoral letter"² when the nation was marking the 23rd anniversary of the country's independence. The letter is entitled "Where is your brother?" and tries to address the crisis of emigration in the country.

The pastoral letter by the four Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, can be called more of a "letter of Lamentation" which describes the situation in which the nation finds itself. It raises many questions without answering them and is full of ambiguity, regarding the cause of the current individual, family and national crisis they presented in their letter. Hence, the letter skirts around the problem without seriously examining the cause which brought about this pitiful situation.

While commendable in being the first of its kind to come out of one of the established churches of Eritrea, nonetheless it remains still a letter of Lamentation only and does not propose a solution to the problem. It appears to emphasize on collective blame rather than finger-pointing at the Asmara regime which is the solely responsible of the social and political crisis in the nation. It blames no one in particular and everyone in General.

These men of cloth could have been as bold as the GOD they serve and whose words "Where is your brother?" they used for a title, but unfortunately fell short of condemning the current Asmara government and the seeds of dictatorship brought in the name of GHEDLI that has been sown and bloomed on the shoulders of the Eritrean people; which actually is the root cause of all the problems in Eritrea today.

The title of the letter is taken from the fourth chapter of the first book of the Holy Bible "Genesis 4" in which the Lord GOD asks Cain the son of Adam where his brother Abel is. The context in which the LORD GOD said the phrase "Where is your brother" is better understood by looking into Genesis 4 : 8 - 12.

"Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let's go out to the field.' While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' 'I don't know,' he replied. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' The Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.' So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden." ³

"ቃየል ድማ ንሓወ አቤል ተዛረቦ። ኩነ ሽአ፡ አብ መሮር ከለዉ፡ ቃየል ንሓወ አቤል ተንሰአ፡ ቀተሎ ድማ ። እግዚአብሔር ከአ ንቃየል፡ "አቤል ሓውካ፡ አበይ አሎ፡ በሎ"። ንሱ ድማ፡ አይፈልጥን፡ አነዶ ሓላው ሓወይ እየ፡ በለ። ንሱ ሽአ፡ እንታይ ጌርካ ኢኻ፡ ድምጹ ደም ሓውካ ኻብ ምድሪ ናባይ ይጠርቦ አሎ። ሕጂ ድማ ንሰኻ ካብዛ ንደም ሓውካ ኻብ ኢድካ ኸትቅበል አፋ ዝኸፈተት ምድሪ ርጉም ኩን፡ ንምድሪ ምስ እትሓርሳ መሊሳ ሓይላ አይክትህበካን እያ፡ አብ ምድሪ ኩብላልን ቀባሕባሓይን ኩን፡ በሎ ። ቃየል ድማ ካብ ቅድሚ እግዚአብሔር ወጸ፡ አብ ምድሪ ኖድ ከአ፡ አብ ምብራቕ ኤድን ተቐመጠ ።⁴

There are a number of things we notice when we read this verse. When the LORD asked the question "Where is your brother Abel?",

1. Abel was already dead and the LORD was not asking the question to know the whereabouts of Abel but was well aware that Abel was murdered by his brother Cain.
2. The LORD used the question as a precursor to tell Cain that the blood of his brother Abel was crying to him for vengeance.
3. The LORD came and spoke those words to Cain to give him the punishment that he so justly deserved. The LORD was speaking to Cain about the consequences of murdering his brother Abel.

Under the title "ዋሕዚ ስደት"⁵ (Mass flight from the Country) the bishops enumerate various reasons for the exodus of Eritreans and they even dared to say that "ጸጊባን ካብ ዝዕንድራ ኣብታይሲ ፣ ካልኣት ዓንዲረን ኢለን ዝዕንድራ ይበዝሓ". Seriously? In all fairness, Can these bishops, as servants and messengers of God tell The Eritrean mother 'Helen' who perished at Lampedusa with her three young children 'Esrom, Delina and Bilen' and the pregnant mother who gave birth to a still born child in the womb of the Mediterranean while dying, that they were ካልኣት ዓንዲረን ኢለን ዝዕንድራ ? These women were taking their young children as far away from Eritrea as possible, to a far off land of liberty and freedom where their children, born and unborn, could live in peace and dignity.

They could have been a bit more sensitive when saying this about the unfortunate and desperate refugees. Granted that there are some economic immigrants or fake refugees amongst them, who after arriving at a safe place of asylum turn around and become main actors in the Festivals and Events of the Eritrean regime. These are insignificant in number and are not even worth mentioning. Some of them are also suffering from a traumatic bonding, a psychological phenomenon known as the "Stockholm syndrome". Nonetheless such refugees are a very small minority of the whole and they do not merit any mention.

They further blame parents of Eritrea as "አብ ወጻኢ ሃገራት ካብ ዚነብሩ ስዱዳን ብዝተረኸቦ ረብሓን ጠቐምን ዝሰድዑን ዝሰስዑን ወለዲ" they also blame the refugees as "ዝዓበዩ ዝነኣሱ፣ ወጻኢ እንተኸድኩ ፕራሕዮ ዚሓልፈለይ ዚብል ዕዉር ኣረኣእያ ብምምዕባል፣" This is real harsh, and is far from the truth. Any parent, unless as a last resort, would not want his child to undertake such a risky journey. No parent would want his child to abandon him, particularly in his declining years. I am sure our esteemed bishops could have done better.

The English Version reads as follows;

"We must acknowledge frankly that the attraction of a better standard of living abroad has ended up creating unrealistic hopes and unrealizable illusions that in their turn induce our youth and their parents to an indiscriminate use of options as for example unplanned, ill prepared and even false marriages. There are also those who allow themselves to be seduced by the hope of a permanently subsidised life abroad and refusing to look for any kind of alternative at home."⁶

Does not this sound Identical to the Eritrean government's labelling of the political refugees as "economic migrants" ? (ፖለቲካዊ ስደተኛታት ዘይኮኑ ፣ ዶላር ደሊዮም ዝኹዱ እዮም ::)

Honestly, is there any other 'alternative at home' as they put it, except indefinite military service ? Is there a private sector in the Eritrean Economy where these refugees could work in ? How did these esteemed bishops arrive at such a conclusion? What are they afraid of or who are they trying to make happy by being so ambiguous? If it is out of fear, then, Is not the God of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob whom they serve, stronger than HGDEF and the Asmara government ? Isn't their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the one who conquered death and rose from the dead ?

Eritrea where the dignity of its people has been erased and destroyed and where its people are reduced to being privately owned slaves and serfs of the government, what other options do Eritreans have except to abandon their ancestral land and flee to far off lands ? And how can such people be blamed equally with the government who made Eritrea a living hell. How can they judge both the perpetrator of the injustice and the victims equally and indiscriminately? With all due respect my dear bishops, the overwhelming majority of refugees are leaving Eritrea because their ancestral land has become an inhabitable place; a Dante's inferno; courtesy of HGDEF and GHEDLI.

We have come a long way from the times whereby we ask "Where is thy brother". We should be aware of the fact that "Eritrea like Abel is dead" and that we have reached the stage where we should say "the blood of your brother is crying out for vengeance and justice". The blood of the Eritrean people who perished in every corner inside the country and all over the globe; from the various prisons and dungeons within Eritrea; from the womb of the Mediterranean sea; from the Sinai and Sahara Deserts; "is crying out to the LORD for justice". The blood of innocent victims which flowed unabated for the last 50 years is asking for judgement from the LORD. And I am sure that our esteemed Bishops would not miss this fact.

They appear to have a fair grasp of the problems ailing the nation today. Had it not been so, they would not have bothered to write such a lengthy pastoral letter on the issue. But somehow, they shy away from exposing the evil deeds of the Asmara regime to a full scale. They spoke in detail about the effect and not the cause of the problem. I don't know what they were trying to avoid by not laying the blame squarely on the Asmara regime and by extension on GHEDLI. And I cannot understand why they refrained from asking for justice for their flock.

After all whatever they said and implied in their letter, is enough to ignite the wrath of the Asmara government, why not go all the way? Saying more would not have aggravated Isayas and the regime more. Are they afraid ? Maybe. After all they are humans. I am also aware of the fact that they are speaking right from the belly of the beast and the risk they took is immense. But if they have to do it, they should do a job worthy of their vocation and calling. As the Tigrigna saying "ካብ ሳዕሳዕካ ተቆጸጸ". (If you are going to dance, then dance properly).

The Prophet Elijah, one of the boldest prophet of the Lord in the old Testament who performed many great miracles in his times and faced one of the wickedest kings of Israel 'Ahab' and his Idolatrous queen 'Jezebel' did exhibit at times extreme fear and depression. Despite the powers of the Lord that was working through him, he at times runaway and hid like a coward.

I absolutely understand that the authors of the pastoral letter are human beings that feel fear, uncertainty and doubt. But remember the God of Elijah is their God and he can answer their prayers by fire from above and show them his powers as he did to Elijah. The Lord did not abandon or condemn Elijah because he was afraid and at times doubted. No, he did not. He in fact rewarded Elijah for his boldness and courage by taking him up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Thus, Elijah never tasted death.⁷

The almighty GOD that they serve is much more mightier than Isayas or HGDEF and is able to deliver them from the jaws of the Eritrean Pharaoh. But they need to be bold and fearless and lay the blame where it belongs and not blanket blame everyone.

Men of faith and religious leaders are held to higher standards compared to their flock. They are judged as individuals who have dedicated their lives to serve an almighty creator who is 'an all able GOD' i.e. 'Elshadai'. The Christian God is a living God who liberates people and defends all those who are victims of injustice. He is the God of the poor and he frees the oppressed.

The evangelist Luke speaking of the Lord Jesus writes;

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*⁸

According to the Holy Christian Bible, many spiritual leaders have from time to time risen to take the cause of the people and championed the cause of liberty. They have confronted mighty Emperors and Kings and Pharaohs and voiced the grievance of their people. Some have led their people to liberty armed only with the word of the LORD that sent them, a shepherd's staff in their hand and an unwavering faith in the Almighty Creator that could deliver them from the mightiest worldly kings and authorities.

As the good book explains it;

*"Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for."*⁹

The standards by which religious leaders are measured is entirely different from the standard by which others are measured. Particularly when they start speaking, they should not waver nor be afraid from speaking the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The clergy must speak the message of God who summoned Moses; must speak on behalf of justice and become advocates of the oppressed without fear or reservation.

In the New Testament, the writer of the book of Hebrews in Chapter 11, tells us about the giants of faith like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Noah, Enoch, Daniel, Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, and numerous others;

*"Who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. who were tortured, refusing to be released Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground."*¹⁰

One shining example from these fathers of our Christian faith is MOSES who led his people to freedom and liberty from the bondage of slavery.

"By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible." ¹¹

Thus armed with faith and little else; Moses boldly stood in front of Pharaoh and declared; *"The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go." ¹²* What emboldened Moses was nothing else but the faith in his LORD and GOD who spoke to him at Horeb in Sinai, the mountain of God, saying;

"I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." ¹³

That was the type of determination the bishops should have exhibited when they wrote the pastoral letter. Like Moses, they should have stood in front of the pharaoh of Eritrea and told him "let our people go". Period. I am not being judgemental about these bishops who wrote the pastoral letter, but I am holding them to a higher standard, since their calling is of the highest order by the highest of the highest, the almighty GOD. But Alas they failed and kept on skirting the truth and ended up by blaming the people, the parents, the youth and the Government equally. They forgot about the anointing they had on their heads and the power of the Almighty that they could have tapped from.

As good Shepherds of the Lord's flock, their letter could have included the genesis of the problem. As a good shepherd leads it's flock to good pasture, water and rest, their letter could have shown the way out of the quagmire and pointed the direction to better days. They could have boldly and truthfully included the cumulative effect of the destructive journey of GHEDLI in the last 50 years that has brought the nation to its knees.

They could have demanded for the release of prisoners of conscience, the release of parents imprisoned because their children have deserted, the release of all religious prisoners including their contemporary from the Orthodox church the deposed and imprisoned Patriarch Abuna Antonios". They could have spoken boldly about the blanket disrespect of fundamental human rights in Eritrea. They could have asked for the end of indefinite military service which is the main reason for the fleeing of Eritrean refugees in such alarming numbers and also unequivocally asked for a Democratic change in the country.

They could have been more bold and represented their flock as good shepherds and voiced the people's demands, whatever the consequence. Another opportunity lost. They had an opportunity of starting a cascade of protest from other spiritual leaders and the General public, but they squandered it by skirting around the problem. They chose to Lament the problem instead of forwarding concrete solution ideas.

It appears that we have collectively become a nation of 'Lamenters' instead of doers. A people afraid to admit and face our past mistakes, a nation afraid to face the skeletons in our closet. Sadly enough, we are all striving to salvage something from the unsalvageable GHEDLI history and journey.

Despite the above shortcomings, these bishops have been bold enough to present their assessment of the current problems in Eritrea. They deserve praise for their courage. I am just trying to show what they could have done; and probably accomplished; given their stature, position and the support they have from their church and the almighty. After all the Catholic Church is a force to reckon with in the world.

It is public knowledge that the evil regime in the country has been fuelling rivalry and division among the followers of the different religious institutions in the country. The Catholic Church as its sister Orthodox Church has been continuously targeted by the Asmara regime.

It is time now that all religious institutions in the country should follow the example of the Catholic bishops, but this time they should be more bold and straight forward in condemning the wilful oppression and other atrocities of the Eritrean government and voice the demands of their congregation and flock courageously and fearlessly.

The heads and clergy of all religious establishments have to stop being complacent. Complacency is particularly rampant in the Evangelical Churches of Eritrea commonly known as PENTES. The clergy should narrow their differences, and come up with an all-rounded voice, and a more powerful voice than the Eritrean Catholic Bishop's Pastoral Letter. It is time to follow in the footsteps of the prophets, Moses, Abraham, Elijah, John the Baptist, the Apostles and others.

It is time for Eritrean religious institutions to stand for change; a change for lasting peace and justice for the people of Eritrea !!!

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Foot Notes:-

¹ The four bishops are Mengisteab Tesfamariam, eparch of the capital Asmara; Tomas Osman, Eparch of Barentu; Kidane Yeibio, Eparch of Keren; and Fikre Mariam Hagos, Eparch of Segeneyti.

² A Pastoral letter, is usually an open letter addressed by a bishop to the clergy, laity and all people of good will. Pastoral letters generally contain instruction, consolation, or directions for behavior in particular circumstances.

³ Genesis 4: 8 - 12, 16 (New International Version).

⁴ ዘፍጥረት 4:8 -12, 16

⁵ Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea P. 11 (Tigrigna Version)

⁶ ERITREA: The Prophetic Voice of the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea. <http://amecea.blogspot.ca/2014/06/eritrea-nuncio-for-eritrea-appointed.html>

⁷ 1 Kings Chapters 17 , 18 , 19

⁸ Luke 4:18-19 (New International Version)

⁹ Hebrews 11: 1-2 (New International Version)

¹⁰ Hebrews 11: 33 - 38 (New International Version)

¹¹ Hebrews 11: 24 - 27 (New International Version)

¹² Exodus 9:1 (New International Version)

¹³ Exodus 3: 7 - 10 (New International Version).