

The EOTC Patriarchate: A Cause for Division - Teklu Abate

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The division of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) into two competing synods has a single cause: the way the most infamous patriarch, the late Abune Paulos, was instated as leader of the church twenty years ago. The then members of the synod did not oppose the political maneuvering made and several even praised the move. That effectively divided the top leadership of the church that survived countless challenges before. For the last two decades, the two synods invested a lot of their time and resources to 'fight and kill' each other, which in the end unfavorably checked the church's growth and development.



The synod in exile, Google picture

Three reconciliation efforts were made so far, all ended in fiasco. Some argued that the third one, which took place in Dallas, was relatively smooth, peaceful, and promising. The signs such folks identified include the fact that delegates of the two synods shared prayers and meals together, that they showed respect to each other, and that both sides agreed to further negotiate in January 2013. Had the parties been secular, these signs could have been dubbed significant. But we are talking about bishops who reached or are supposed to reach the highest level of spirituality and wisdom. In principle, they should not have allowed the division of the synod in the first place. Or at least, they should have solved the problem in just one negotiation. Unfortunately, it seems that they want to make "reconciliation" their annual agenda.

Reconciliation Failed?

In my previous post, <http://tekluabate.blogspot.no/2012/11/eotcthe-two-synods.html>, I, based on some clues and cues available then, indicated that the 3rd reconciliation effort would

be no different than the previous ones. And that unfortunately seems materialized now. The synod in Addis disgraced itself by making perhaps the most offensive, immature, and upsetting decision ever. There is this time around ample evidence which testifies to the fact that reconciliation was never genuinely sought after in the first place. All the talks and media bravados seemed to show a false political gesture made to simply 'please' the public.



The synod in Ethiopia, Google picture

The synod delegated four members for the peace talks in Dallas. Astonishingly, the Addis Ababa synod deliberately sent bold signals which showed the lack of interest and readiness thereof to embrace peace and unity. One, they first distributed the rumors that a law that supports patriarch choice was being formulated. Two, they in one way or another indicated that they would soon elect nominating committee that would oversee choice of a patriarch. Three, the Acting Patriarch Abune Natanael emphatically told VOA that Abune Merkorios could not assume his position as patriarch. And he talked of the possibility of offering Abune Merkorios cars, houses, and other utilities and facilities if he wishes to enter the country.



The EOTC Patriarchate, Google picture

This was the most devastating news to the reconciliation committee and the entire Christian community and unity lovers. How on earth a father of such position and age came up with these childish, egoistic, amoral, and ice-cold speeches? Abune Natanael initially worked hard to ease the tensions between the two synods and to even allow

Abune Merkorios to serve the church while residing in Addis. Lately, the bishop clearly and publicly appeared dismissive, dictatorial, and cruel in his interviews. In a way, his talk sent shockwaves to the entire church community and powerfully signaled the beginning of the end of peace and unity talks.

The Landmark

While we were regurgitating Abune Natanael's incapacitating talks, two more developments that seemed to mark the impossibility of unity emerged. One, a bylaw that governs patriarch choice is now ratified. The law left no room for God to intervene during election of patriarchs- voting will be used to choose a leader from beginning to end. This leaves pretty good space for manipulating elections for whatever reasons. Two, the most severe blow to the reconciliation and unity effort was made a day before: a nominating committee of 13 personalities was elected. The committee will identify, in just less than two months, potential candidates who would bid for the church's highest office. What else could herald the complete failure of the peace talks than this one? Nothing. But am not still advising the peace committee to quit their jobs. Just keep going!

The synod did not even wait for the words/reports of the peace delegation sent to Dallas. Nor they incorporated the views of the delegation committee members into the bylaws and in the selection of nominating committee members. Interesting is that one of the delegates, Abune Athanasios, made it clear that the decision made by the Synod in Addis is simply unbelievable and vowed to oppose it in the strongest measures available.

These are the facts on the ground so far. They all point to a direction- to choose a patriarch. To me, the synod has slammed its doors against some of the most sought virtues, peace and unity. It is up to the entire church community to knock at their doors. If they prefer to fall into a deep sleep, God would open the doors against their will.

What to Do

Shall we Christians and all unity-lover Ethiopians keep silent? I believe in the power of a unified 'struggle'. I believe that all Christians must have a good say when it comes to EOTC's big affairs. I believe that well-spirited efforts at various levels would accrue good results. We have several weeks to go before they nominate and elect another tomato-loving patriarch. To me, all the following are the stakeholders who could bring down the 'wall' that stands between the two synods.

Synod Members

There are several great bishops who are fighting all the injustices taking place in the church. They should intensify their struggle by bringing to their side the so-called neutral bishops who prefer silence. They must also try to convince those bishops who support

choosing a patriarch now. They should stop collaborating with the nominating committee and spread the injustice made to all concerned people by all means available. Do not sign on minutes that facilitate, directly or indirectly, the nomination and election of a patriarch. Persuade potential candidates to stand for the unity of the church by rejecting their nominations. If the election campaign is unabated, make media announcements and leave for monasteries. Also crucial is for the peace and reconciliation delegation to stand united and to demand the synod to forsake their decision. If no result comes out, announce that to the public and retreat to our monasteries, to which you are near and dear.

Nominating Committee

The nominating committee must understand that their assignment will not ensure peace and unity- something upon which the church itself is founded. They must turn down their nominations and join the bishops that prioritize reconciliation. Do not let yourself be part of the untidy heap.

Church Leaders and Parish Councils

Leaders and parish councils of individual churches have a huge possibility to say “No” to this unjust decision. In a way, these are, and not synod members, closer and dearer to millions of Christians. They must reject invitations to collaborate with the nominating committee. They must criticize in formal letters and meetings the decision made by the synod and clearly show that they would not financially contribute to the patriarchate if peace and unity are not given priority. They should hold unity and peace as preconditions for financial support and accountability. They should bring together preachers and associations for this cause.

Spiritual Associations and Preachers

There are several associations within EOTC ‘premise’. This is the time when they and their members should stand in clear defense of peace and unity. They should not recognize the nominating committee and stop all sorts of support to the synod. Preachers also have a huge opportunity to talk to thousands of Christians on a daily basis. Out of sheer love for unity and peace, which the Gospel is all about, they must create awareness among the masses. Serve God’s words and not politically massaged words of some bishops.

Ordinary Christians

Actually, ordinary Christians have a final power, the power to either reject or accept the decision made. The problem is that nearly most Christians think that it is not being spiritual to discuss with and/or confront the elderly including synod members. Yes, we need to respect and collaborate with bishops at all times but now. If the bishops behave

wild, we must challenge them. If they compromise the church's mission and vision- peace and unity- we must hold them accountable. For the million Christians, there is no any critical time to 'fight' injustice than this one. There are a whole lot of strategies to use to oppose the decision.

- Continue individual and collective prayers
- Believe that opposing this decision is your God-given and constitutional right
- Believe that your say counts in the end
- Tell synod members in different ways/ media that the decision passed is not in the interest of the church and hence it will not be accepted
- Urge your parish councils to criticize the decision and to stop collaborating with the synod until they solve their problems
- To collect petitions that oppose the decision and deliver them to the synod
- Threaten not to pay anything to the churches until the synod brings unity
- Support, morally and financially, those bishops and other people who oppose the decision
- Make entirely peaceful demonstrations just around the patriarchate
- Do not listen to anybody who preaches the importance of the decision passed
- Do not question for a second your religion because of the synod's failure; leadership failure is not strictly speaking equal to institutional failure
- Look for ways of collaborating with Christians who belong to the synod abroad

The Media

Local and Diaspora media (websites, blogs, prints, and television and radio broadcasts) have a great role to play. They should facilitate information sharing on daily basis. Although the majority of Diaspora media are inaccessible to the average Ethiopian back home, they could still influence millions. However, care must be taken not to exploit the opportunity for political gains. The issue at hand is about EOTC unity and peace and the immediate and most appropriate people to be held accountable must be the synod members. They must defend the church from any kind of pressure from everywhere. The government must be the least important factor for us despite its interventionist role.

The Government

If I say that the government is not playing behind the scene, they would make mockeries and mockeries out of me. And I do not want to be such a person. Yes, we are having a government who is highly interventionist although it publicizes the independence of religion and government. My message to them is direct and simple. That your role at this point in time is one and only one- just to ensure the security and safety of all the bishops and the entire church community.