

The EOTC at a Crossroads - Teklu Abate

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During the last two millennia, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) survived countless challenges that tremored its integrity and identity. The most serious and most embarrassing of all the challenges is the split of the Holy Synod into two competing factions twenty years ago. The division challenges the very integrity of the church and is in direct contradiction with what the Gospel, its canons, and traditions say.



Aksum Tsion church, Google picture

Churches abroad are divided into those which belong to the synod in Ethiopia and those which acknowledge the synod abroad. And there are several churches in Europe and North America that declare their 'independence' from the two synods- these are often called the neutral churches. The clergy and even ordinary Christians, who by accident or necessity belong to any of the three groups, consider each other 'different' and hence, there is no collaboration and unity among them. Even preachers, who are supposed to make the Gospel their only topic and method, do not do their jobs in churches which belong to the other synod. For all these and other complications, the two synods do not seem to have the moral and spiritual strength to preach for unity, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, and generally salvation.

Reconciliation Efforts

To work toward bringing reconciliation and unity between the two synods, some Christians take the initiative and form a committee. They tried their best to bring together representatives of the synods in different occasions but without success. The two synods come up with preconditions for negotiation and reconciliation, some of which are irrelevant to the noble cause- unity. Mainly because of the extremely rigid and egoistic nature of the preconditions put forward, previous reconciliation efforts ended in fiasco.

But then comes a major moment that reconfigures the overall set up. The sudden death of the late patriarch Abune Paulos, who was at the epicenter of the division of the synod, seemed to usher new possibilities and hopes. Several considered his death as a direct intervention of God to defend the church. During the initial days following his death, nearly everyone thought that the

two synods are in good shapes to create unity once and for all. Also the news that the now acting patriarch in Ethiopia, Abune Natnael, and Abune Merkorios, the patriarch in exile, talked about possible reinstating of the latter adds to the optimism. The core assumption is that the 4th EOTC patriarch, Abune Merkorios, would be allowed to assume the position. This optimism was/is shared by the Synod abroad and at least some bishops in Ethiopia.

This October, the two Synods made their first annual conventions after the death of Abune Paulos and passed major resolutions, among which some somehow cast a degree of doubt about possible unity. The Synod in Ethiopia is drafting regulations and laws that among others would govern election of patriarchs. They indicated that following the development and endorsement of the laws, a new patriarch would be elected. They also indicated that Abune Merkorios would be allowed to assume the patriarchate position with limited power. The point is that he would be entitled to enjoy all the privileges saved for any patriarch on the condition that he is not involved in decision making and external relations. The Synod would be headed by an acting (elect) bishop. This sends shockwaves to the synod in America, who in their resolution explained the unfairness and groundlessness of the decision passed by the Synod in Ethiopia. They clearly showed that they are ready for making the peace deal a reality provided that EOTC acknowledges Abune Merkorios as the legal patriarch with full power.

What would happen?

According to church teachings, only God chooses a patriarch. This does not however mean that there is nothing the synod and the entire church community could do about it. In fact, choice of a patriarch is a much elaborated process that requires significant humanly contributions. Putting the God factor at constant, as it is not amenable to humanly pursuits such as expositions like this, one could identify possible scenarios that explain the trajectory EOTC is likely to take after some weeks. Based on the resolutions passed by the two synods in their extraordinary meetings last October, one could expect either of the following scenarios to happen.

Scenario 1: Reconciliation between the Synods Possible

The two synods would make genuine reconciliation between them. This could be made possible if and only if both synods consider the Gospel and EOTC traditions as the only preconditions for agreement. That means, they must live God's words- to forgive, reconcile, make sacrifices, and bring unity. If this argument holds water, there are two options on table. One, Abune Merkorios would be acknowledged as EOTC patriarch with full power. This would be the master card that could unlock every other door- problem. The church would start enjoying its unity and strength once again and would stand as tall and graceful as before. This option is the ideal solution toward which the two synods must work.

Option two could be that EOTC acknowledges Abune Merkorios as the patriarch but with limited power and role. That means, he would be offered all the privileges available to any patriarch but would not preside over the synod. In a way, he would pass the rest of his life as a senior figure committed to prayers. If this agreement is reached, it would bring lasting peace and unity as option one could do. The problem with option two is twofold, however. One, putting a powerless

patriarch and choosing an acting one is inconsistent with the church's historical tradition. Two, it could leave bad signal to the future as well; that any future patriarch could easily be relieved of his position, for whatever reason, and another one could be assigned. This would leave a dark spot on the church's tradition of choosing and dealing with patriarchs.

In general, EOTC would have unity and grace if the two synods work toward reaching scenario 1 at any cost. This scenario must also be supported by all unity-loving Ethiopians and other people. If it is not tenable for whatever reason, the ugly scenario will happen.

Scenario 2: Unsuccessful Reconciliation Efforts

Considering the current state of affairs, this seems the most likely outcome of the peace negotiations: no agreement would be reached between the two synods. This seems a pessimistic take of the issue but it is likely if one takes into account developments taking place on both sides. The synod abroad clearly indicated that for the peace deal to succeed, Abune Merkorios must be reinstated back to his position as patriarch with full power. The synod in Ethiopia indicated the possibility of electing an acting patriarch while keeping Abune Merkorios in non-decision making affairs. The synod in Ethiopia also made it clear that a new patriarch would be elected following the drafting and endorsement of the rule that governs patriarch choice. In a way, the two synods agreed to bring unity but are deeply divided when it comes to the means to achieve it. This scenario must be avoided at any cost, as it means a complete disgrace and an itching pain to EOTC and from which no one but anti-unity forces could benefit.

What to do?

What could we ordinary Christians do if the two synods shy away from unity and reconciliation? Should we assume that God does not wish to bring peace and unity to EOTC now? Should we consider that it is the synods only that have the mandate to rule over such affairs? Should we assume that we do not have the capacity and opportunity to contribute something? Or, should we take it that having two synods is a better way of spreading Christianity?

My answer to these questions is a big No!. I believe that God does not need a grace period to give peace and unity to His followers. I do firmly believe that members do and should have their own contributions when it comes to peace and solidarity. Trying to grow the church through splitting its synod is self-defeating and at best suicidal. Each and every member has the potential and opportunity to contribute to the church's peace and unity although the highest decision-making body- the synods- fail to do so. I believe that initiatives at a lower level could bring sizable changes over time. *Ordinary Christians could embark on a number of initiatives that aim at easing the tense relationships among the churches that belong to different synods.* For now, I would like to identify two general strategies that in the end are likely to create fruitful collaborations among churches.

Psycho-Cognitive Reconfiguration

The first thing one has to reconsider is his/her psychological and mental set up with respect to their role in the advancement of EOTC. The church is not an alien world; it is one of the most important social institutions that stand for service delivery and prosperity. That means, every member must have a role to play. We could for instance use our skills, competencies, knowledge, and/or resources to bring a working platform where the churches administered by the two synods meet and negotiate. We need to believe that failure of the leadership- the synods- to bring unity and peace does not imply the complete failure of the church as a religious institution. Leadership failure is not equal to institutional failure. Our religion is much more than the often squabbling bishops. Also believe that bishops are just humans who could make mistakes and who deserve our forgiveness.

Plus, the term *church* in EOTC has three meanings- the self as a conscious being, the unity between Christians, and the physical building which we usually call church. We are very much conscious of ourselves and we contribute a lot to the construction of church buildings. What we are not strong at is our unity. *It is this aspect of the church which is most unfavorably affected by the division of the synod.* We have to believe that we could relentlessly and systematically work toward mending our broken unity.

Trans-Synod Collaborations

Our efforts to create powerful alliances must transcend the legal mandates and boundaries of the two synods. We have to consider that their division must not cause division among ordinary believers. We Christians need to live and keep the teachings of the church which survived for over two thousand years now. We do not have to be limited and confused by the skirmishes of the two synods. We could work on a number of fronts to ensure *unity from below*.

We could for instance form a committee of some sort from churches administered by the two synods. The committee must be independent, autonomous, transparent, accountable, and exemplar in terms of member maturity and commitment to Christianity. The committee could facilitate different forums for inter-church collaboration and then unity. The following are just samples of engagement the committee could consider. Of course, it is possible to do these without forging a formal committee but having one might ensure sustainability, responsibility, and accountability.

- v Initiate and regularly run religious conferences, seminars, workshops, and/or events (such as epiphany) for Christians who acknowledge different synods. An excellent example could be the annual EOTC conference that takes place, by rotation, in different countries in Europe. The conference is known for bringing Christians (who are attending to churches that belong to the two synods) together for three consecutive days. This kind of arrangements helps to spread the Gospel easily while consolidating unity.
- v Serve Christians in non-partisan way. Preachers and other religious experts do not have to 'subscribe' to either synod. Work for God and not for failed leaderships.
- v Collaborate (financially, morally, and in kind) to build, buy, or renovate churches of both synods.
- v Jointly develop projects to sustainably support monasteries and the poor in Ethiopia
- v Collaborate to reach citizens of other countries with the Gospel.

Concluding Remarks

The core argument of this piece is to invite ordinary Christians to think and speak loud about the church's state of affairs. Making genuine reconciliation between the two synods is to the best expectation of Christians and all unity lovers. We need to contribute towards its realization. But we need to be pragmatist as well; we have to think of our roles if unity does not materialize. We have to believe in ourselves to bring modest peace and unity from below. We could enjoy and offer religious services regardless of the synod that administers a given church. We need to think that our religion transcends the artificial boundaries put forward by members of the two synods 20 years ago. Orthodox Christians who belonged to different synods could collaborate on a number of initiatives. The sorts of collaborations mentioned above do not in any way belittle our religious fathers. Nor they breach any EOTC tradition or canon or dogma. They are rather intended to 1) cement the already cracking relationships among believers, and 2) efficiently and effectively mobilize human and material resources to the church's advancement. We would benefit a lot if we focus on ideas like this than on people like the synods.