

A VISIT TO A CITY CHURCH in Ethiopia

(Fr. Paul Verghese)

St. Stephen's is not actually a parish church.

It is the chapel of His Imperial Majesty, near to his residence, the Jubilee Palace. Quite untypical of rural Ethiopia, where the round village church built of mud stucco and covered with a corrugated iron roof dominates the much smaller huts with thatched roofs. St. Stephen's is a modern semi-byzantine structure, elegant and rich, a stark contrast with the priests and the people who worship there. Sparse in iconography, the glistening marble and the rich carpeting yet speak of aristocracy and affluence.

The service is supposed to start at 7 a.m. I was there five minutes ahead of time, only to find that the public celebration had just begun three minutes ago. The church is far from full. The congregation has more women than men, a large number of little girls under twelve with their mothers, but hardly any young men or women of university age. There are a few men, mostly old and semi-literate, with a generous sprinkling of debteras, the white-turbaned scribes, copyists, choristers and teachers of the ancient church schools.

The clean but unstarched white clothes of the men and women evenly blend with the austere marble interior of the 20th century Ethiopian Church. There are only three small pictures in the place where traditionally the Byzantine ikonostasis should be. In the centre is a rather gruesome Italian paper-print, framed in glass, of the head of the suffering Christ, the kind that is sold for a song in the picture framer's shop. On one side is another print, again Italian, of the martyrdom of St. Stephen, and on the other St. George. The brown frayed curtains

overhanging the three doors of the sanctuary are also of very cheap material, in stark contrast with the colourful and expensive Persian carpets on the marble floor. The cupola on the top is left bare, without the usual Pantocrator that dominates the ceiling of a Byzantine church.

The people have taken off their shoes, but carried them inside the church, leaving them on the floor near where they stand. Without the carpets, the cold marble floor could easily freeze the soles of one's feet, especially at this early hour when the atmospheric temperature is about 5° centigrade.

As I enter in my priestly robes, a young priest who is in charge of the seating (or standing) welcomes me forward and beckons me to a chair among a group of other priests and elderly gentleman. I bow to those who recognize me or whom I recognize, and take my place in front of my chair. The young priest offers me a prayer-stick, a T-shaped wooden staff about 4½ feet long ^{with} a cross-bar about four inches long. This is to help support my weight during the long hours I have to stand. I notice that not more than 20 sticks are distributed, to the elite among the hundreds of ~~ex~~ during ordinary people who have only the soles of their feet and the bones of their legs and back to support their upright frame.

The curtain of the sanctuary is now drawn away, and there are three priests and two deacons around the altar. All are clad in white, very simple ordinary material with a blue border and one blue cross on the back the priests have white "crowns", also in white with blue border. In other churches I have seen more ornate and colourful damask, but here the primitive simplicity is still maintained.

The liturgy of the Catechumens has begun.

This had been preceded by the recital of the six psalms, prayers for the cleansing of the celebrants and of the eucharistic vessels, the prayers of vesting of the priests, the pro-thesis or setting forth of the bread and wine for the eucharist, prayers of oblation and intercession, all of which together have already taken at least forty minutes.

The liturgy of the catechumens was originally a service of proclamation of the word for baptized and unbaptized alike. But now there are no "unbelievers" or unbaptized. There are only those who were born in Christian homes and have been baptized as children. Not even 5 per cent of the surrounding community is in Church. Usually the Emperor is present at this Imperial Chapel every Sunday. Today, however, Emperor Haile Sellassie has gone away to the neighbouring town of Debre Zeit for the week-end. If the Emperor were here, there would be at least his personal retinue and a few high officials of the Government present.

One begins to reflect on the future of this church which has held this nation together for the last sixteen centuries. When the rest of Africa so easily came under the colonial Yoke, Ethiopia alone had successfully resisted, until the Italian Fascist occupation of 1935. The Church had, as in Czarist and pre-czarist Russia since the 11th century, always provided the focus of loyalty and unity. The church had taught the Ethiopians to read and write and to develop a form of literate culture, when the rest of Africa was largely illiterate and without any written history or literary tradition. Will the church continue to fulfill a similar role in the Ethiopia of the future?

Judging by the congregation in this city church this morning, I have my doubts. The educated youth and elite of the country are largely alienated from the church. The church seems too archaic to meet their needs. The educated are caught in the dilemma between nostalgia and irrelevance. There is not even a single bishop ^{in the whole church} with a university education, and even among the priests the university trained can be counted on the fingers of your hands.

St. Stephen's uses Amharic^{av}, the modern vernacular of the country. In most churches the eucharist is celebrated in Ge'ez or the ancient Ethiopic, which so few know today. The Emperor insists on the use of the vernacular, on the reading of the scriptures in Amharic, and on good Biblical preaching; but his insistence is obeyed only in his private churches like St. Stephen's and Trinity Cathedral.

I see the people prostrating. They are devout. Their piety goes deep. God is real to them. They are no mere spectators. They participate in the worship with the ardour of the pre-literate.

The priests and deacons are processing around the altar. The beginning of the public ministry of our Lord is being dramatically enacted. The assistant priest censes both the elements of bread and wine on the altar as well as the people who are assembled for worship

This is now followed by three lections from the New Testament, and then the procession of the gospel. There is a long preliminary dialogue before the reading of the gospel, and one is impressed with the fact that the original composers of the liturgy must have taken the gospel with the utmost seriousness and with a

joyous awareness of its importance as the annunciation of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is now read, clearly, in Amharic. The lesson today, from the 10th chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, is the Good Shepherd passage. The Book of the Gospels, covered with a rich silk cloth is now kissed by all the priests, and then brought to me also to kiss. A priest goes around the whole church allowing each man, woman and child to kiss the gospel. If only its content could also be made equally accessible to the people, what a change in lives we could have witnessed!

The Rector of the Chapel, a good-looking priest, who was not among the celebrants, preaches a sermon in Amharic. He is clear and has thought about the passage. He says Christ is our shepherd also, taking care of our bodies and souls. Christ will never leave us in time of trouble, but will protect us from the wolves. He refers to Old Testament passages where Yahweh is spoken of as the shepherd of Israel. The priest is a man trained in the traditional Ethiopian schools, with very little modern education, but it is obvious that he has consulted a concordance. By the standards of modern homiletics, the Sermon can hardly be called first rate. He has not given a historical exegesis, nor has he applied it to our lives with any more specificity than to say that Christ looks after us, both in this life and in the hereafter. Yet by the average standards of sermons I have heard ^{elsewhere} ~~elsewhere~~, I will give this sermon a pass mark.

As the intercessions begin again, the people stand. The church is now somewhat full. I notice a foreign couple, obviously German, among the congregation. I had seen them at the Hotel earlier,

speaking to each other in German. They are separated, the man standing with the men on the left hand side of the nave, and the lady with the women on the right. They too have been given prayer-sticks and are leaning on them. There are still very few young people. Amidst intricate Ethiopian chants, fully participated in by the people, the eucharistic liturgy proper begins with the chief celebrant washing his hands ceremonially in front of the altar.

The liturgy reaches its climax with the communion of the people. I see babies brought forward by their mothers. Some of them are but a few months old, others a year or two. The priest gives communion to the babies from the Chalice, with a spoon. The mother covers the mouth of the baby, immediately after the communion is taken, with a corner of her veil. The mothers themselves do not communicate. They are of all classes, some very poor and some quite rich, as is evident from their clothes. Then come the boys and girls. There are about a hundred of them who take communion, now from the Paten. All are under the age of twelve or thirteen. The custom is that children take communion regularly until they reach the age of puberty. I had understood that the Ethiopian believer does not take communion after the age of puberty until they are very old. The idea of it is that children are without sin and can therefore take communion. Sin must be conceived primarily in sexual terms.

I expected some of the older men and women to come to communion, but they do not. There is high reverence for the Eucharistic communion, and even the older men and women seem to be aware of their

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sinfulness and therefore unable to approach the Holy Elements.

After the final thanksgiving and benediction, the priests wash the holy vessels, and distribute the water with which they were washed to the people, in large kettles. All the people, young and old, now come forward to participate in this para-communion. Some bring their own glasses, receive the water in the glass, drink part of it, give it to their friends and relatives to drink, and with what is left in the glass they smear their faces and hands. I was reminded of the water of life that flows from Christ. But were these Ethiopian Christians thinking of it? I guess not. For them it is a bodily participation in the Eucharist, but at best only a substitute for true communion. I do not doubt that they receive the water with faith and that it conveys grace to them. A less favourable interpretation would be to regard all this as superstition. But then it may very well be an act of faith, though that faith may not be fully conscious or evangelically informed.

People greet each other now in a friendly and warm way. Some of the more devout ones come forward to the great door of the sanctuary and prostrate themselves with great piety on the steps of the sanctuary. They rise up, make another profound and devout bow and slowly begin to leave the church.

The celebrant priest comes westward and offers me his hands to kiss. These hands have been made holy by handling the holy body and blood of Christ, and I kiss them with reverence to my Lord whom these hands have served on the altar.

It is a different world of values and symbols
from that of the modern man, but who am I to judge these innocent
Christians by the sophisticated and intellectualist standards of
our modernity!