



# Spiritans in Ethiopia



**Happy Easter!** እንኳን ለብርሃኔ ትንሣኤው አደረሳችሁ!



**Cross Talk**

'Himself on the Wood there' says one,  
'is surely the Son of His Mother,  
a man done undoing what's done.'  
'He could be Himself', says another.  
Said she, 'He's Himself is my own,  
Himself only, born to be given,  
bled whitest, Bread of my bone,  
red liveliest Wine for all living.'

*Cyril Cusack, 1910-1993*

## Farewell and Welcome!

The Vicariate of Soddo in South West Ethiopia was set up as the prefecture of Soddo-Hosanna in 1940. It became a Vicariate in 1982. In 2010 it was divided into the Vicariates of Soddo and Hosanna. The Spiritans in Gamo Gofa were originally part of the Vicariate of Jimma, later headquartered in Nekemte. In December 1993 we became part of Soddo Hosanna, and now of Soddo.

The Vicariate of Soddo covers an area of 45,5000 km<sup>2</sup>, has a population of almost 5 million, of whom 130,00 are Catholic. The second bishop of Soddo, Most Rev. Rodrigo Mejía SJ born in Medellín, Colombia, was consecrated bishop of Soddo/

Hosanna in March 2007, taking over responsibility from Bishop Domenico Marinozzi OFM, Cap. On January 12, 2014 he in turn handed over responsibility to Bishop Tsegaye Keneni, a Diocesan priest, the first Ethiopian to head the Vicariate of Soddo. Bishop Tsegaye is a man of very broad experience, including nine years as Secretary General of the Ethiopian Catholic Secretariate.

We wish them both well, thanking Bishop Rodrigo for his wise and skilled leadership of the Vicariate during his seven year tenure, and we promise Bishop Tsegaye our prayers and support as he takes on this difficult post in the Lord's vineyard.

## “From One to more than Three Thousand!”

In December a surprising event took place in South Omo, in Dimeka Mariam Church compound. The Spiritans were invited to share their identity, history and motivations with Orthodox priests, preachers, diocesan office workers as to why we are working with their Church...! The initiative was taken by our employee Qesis (Priest) Meseret Assefa (right), who is working as pastoral worker in our joint Catholic/Orthodox first evangelisation program, as well as a nurse in our Health component of our Integrated Community-based Program in South Omo. The purpose was to



explain to new preachers and diocesan workers the common work of our two Churches.

We were actually a bit taken by surprise (we were told only two days before to go there, Martin Kelly, Paddy Moran and myself being in Arba Minch...) and did not know what to expect or prepare for...! What we may call a “habesha qetero”...! (an Ethiopian rendezvous)

Arriving on the eve of the event, we were told what they were expecting from us and we quickly shared the

## “From One to more than Three Thousand!”



Qesis Meseret Assefa addresses the Seminar

different interventions. I had to start with the history of the Congregation, especially our founders, Martin was to continue with the history of the coming of the Spiritans to South Omo and we finished with Paddy giving an overview of what we were doing in the present in both aspects: pastoral and development.

To present the history of our founders and the Congregation, I was given .... FIVE minutes ... a challenge that!

OK! I must say that it took me twenty minutes, I could not do in less ... if you can do in less than that, let me know how to do it!

nize the people and the well-known priests and peoples who were there at that time.

Then Paddy finished with the presentation of our current work. We were a bit waiting at that level for difficult questions like why the newcomers (Capuchins in Jinka and diocesan priests in Omorate) were not doing the same things as us here in Dimeka, especially in Omorate or Nyangatom were we continue to support them through the work of the preachers there. But if these facts were mentioned alright, there was no question about it.

Then on Sunday morning we all went in Shanko, a village 17 kms away where a small Church was built for the Hamar. All I can say is that we were very happy to see a Hamar community praying the Our Father and Hail Mary in their own language and praying under the direction of an Orthodox priest in their own cultural and traditional way. The presence and the happiness of the *Bete Kihnet* (diocesan office) shows how much things have evolved in the understanding of evangelization of the nomads in the Orthodox Church. And we should be very proud to have been instrumental in this work and change of mentality of our sister Church. We are really in the footsteps of our founders and I pray that they grow “*From one to more than three thousand*” more as we continue our Spiritan commitment there!

*Philippe Sidot CSSp*



Attentive listeners in Shanko

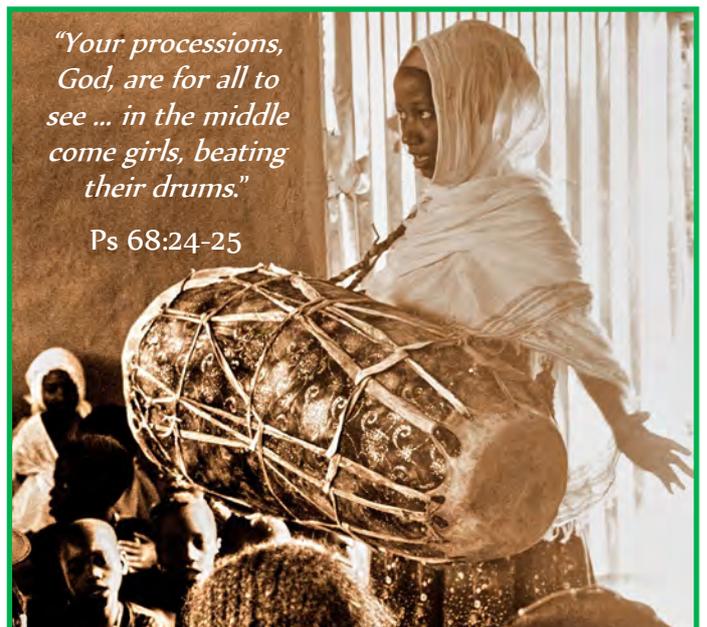
And the thing that they really got from it is quite surprising: “from one to more than three thousand”. They did not mind too much the history of leaving a wealthy life to be poor among the poor (it may be that is what they are doing themselves anyway) but for Galadewos (Claude) Poullart des Places, to leave his family, go far away, working only six years (three years as seminarian and three years as priest before dying...) and the Congregation flourishing (they passed over the story of Libermann apparently...) to become big with many missionaries all over the world... even to their own country and in South Omo! Wow !!!!!

For the rest of the day, they referred to this point: “Look at what this man did, there is hope, it is possible with the blessing of God; we can work here with the Hamar people! he started alone and now they are 3,000...!” We can do it, we must not be discouraged!

After Martin presented the history of our presence, they were amazed at the pictures of the beginnings in Dimeka shown with a video projector (Yes, even in Dimeka it is possible!) : the construction of their Church, the coming of the *Tabot* etc. it was a game to try to recog-

*“Your processions,  
God, are for all to  
see ... in the middle  
come girls, beating  
their drums.”*

Ps 68:24-25



## Exploration and Farewell— Final Rescue Trip

The Mercedes Unimog is versatile, being used in farming, forestry, military, fire-fighting, snow ploughing etc. The one we were able to lay hands on in 1978 had 24 forward gears – if I remember rightly – and I don't know how many reverse. But in the lowest forward gear it reached a top speed of 117 mph – metres per hour – again, if I remember rightly! It had permanent four-wheel-drive and very high clearance and seemed the answer to our prayers. But as often in life a very small thing can make a very big difference. In our case it wasn't just the Unimog, it was particularly the set of chains which were made available to us by a German volunteer, Frank Thomas, who was working in Erbore, the village nearest to the lake and the place from which the original rescue was launched in late 1977 through the police Morse Code message to Addis Ababa. With-



Putting on chains

second island. On an earlier trip we had some fishing hooks and Jan's skills at filleting catfish came to the fore. On this trip we weren't able to fish, being too far from the water. But we didn't eat much as it was so hot onshore, with the heat reflecting off the ground making it much hotter than in the water. To make life more uncomfortable still the mosquitoes numbered in the millions – per cubic metre. This was in contrast to previous trips where the cool breeze kept them away. It was a puzzle as to where they all came from as the access they would have to blood from animals would have been very little and to human beings practically zero – but they were keen to make up for it. We came prepared with a few mosquito nets and camp beds. We had to resort to these or take shelter in the vehicles as soon as we could after nightfall to avoid the onslaught.

After putting the chains on the Unimog we set out for Jan's car, quite nervously as this was our last chance. But the Unimog took the lake in its stride and we soon relaxed. Too soon. Suddenly we realised that even though the wheels were turning the Unimog wasn't moving. We were surrounded by water and had nothing to measure our speed against. The lake surface was rippled and the nearest land was miles away. Somehow or other the driver got us moving and our heartbeats returned to normal. We got to Jan's car which was now washed clean from the rain which fell in our absence. We had approached from the west but having walked the lake a few times we now knew that the best way to tow out the car was to go south-eastwards where the bed of the lake was more stony, and then travel around the south of the lake and back up north to our camp, which we succeeded in reaching before nightfall.

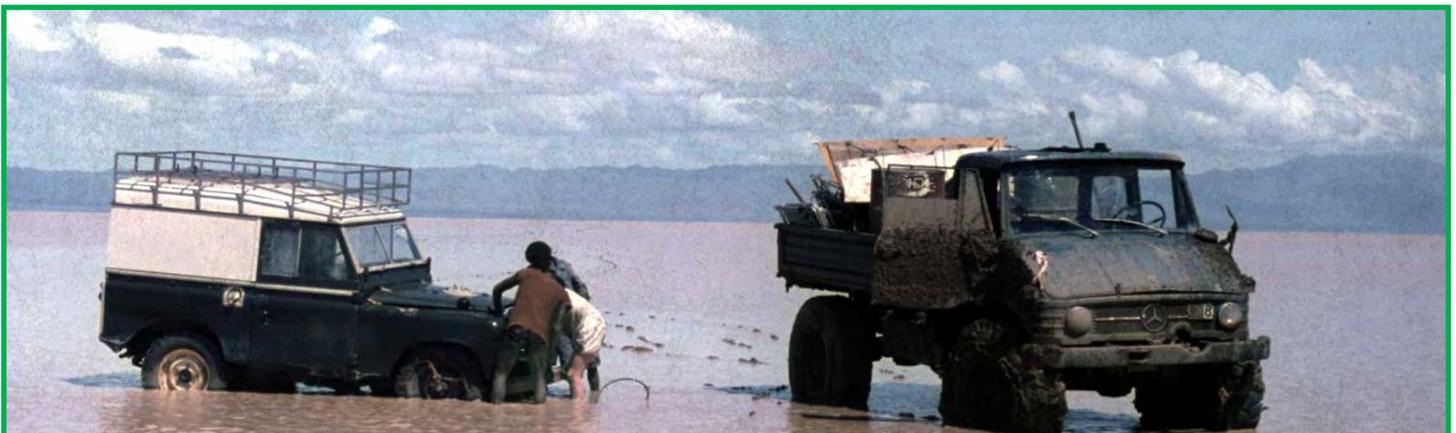


Striking the rock

out those chains we probably would have failed once again.

The team included the driver, Tesfaye, as well as his assistant; Jan Ermers and Morishu, the only two to do all four trips, as well as Owen Lambert, fresh from an appendix operation, and myself.

This trip was to be quite different from the others as we would not be based on the island but on the lake's western shore which put us even further away from our water source on the



The water level is down several inches from our previous visit. Normally the lake would be dry at this time.

## Exploration and Farewell— Final Rescue Trip

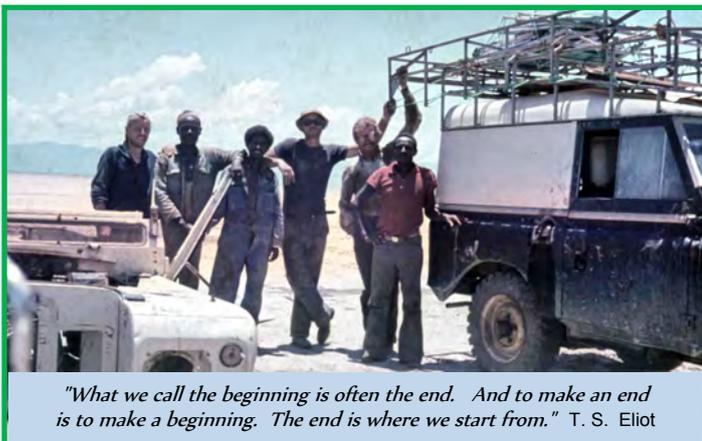


The following day we approached Hans's car from the south, in much less time, and on the way we found a spring and, after a little digging, topped up with water. Hans's car was in deeper water but by evening we had it back at base.

Then the hard work in the intense heat began. We had two cars to work on, one to be cannibalised and the other got in condition to drive it home. The latter's rear differential had to be installed and front springs replaced completely. The engine had to be checked out and got ready for starting. Another nasty surprise – it was seized. All our time and money would have been wasted if the car wouldn't start. As all were very occupied doing various tasks I kept this knowledge to myself and asked the Unimog driver to give it a tow. Fortunately it turned.

The three or four days we spent in that camp were filled with hard work all day in the heat working on one car and dismantling the other. By the end we were able to return with three vehicles when we had only come with two. Each of the three vehicles was loaded inside and on top with parts from Hans's car.

We hit for home and made for the highlands, driving the whole day to get away from the heat and the mosquitoes. Having got there Jan's car gave up, the clutch paying for the months it had spent in the water. It had to be towed the rest of the way home. It gave many years of service after that, making worthwhile the efforts to retrieve it.



*"What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from." T. S. Eliot*

As we came nearer to Arba Minch Owen and I came across a man lying on the road, having a fit, probably epilepsy. But we weren't sure. What to do? After a moment debating whether we should drive around him and continue on or take him back to the nearest Health Centre, risking being accused of having harmed him, fortunately our humanity prevailed, and we took him back to the Health Centre where he was kindly taken in. It would have been bad if we, who had spent weeks rescuing vehicles, had passed by on the other side.

As I look back over the years contact has been lost with many of those on the first trip which could have turned out so tragically but fortunately all survived and lived to tell the tale. Hans Meier died about twenty years ago in a tree-felling accident in Switzerland. Abba Tesfaye Dogiso returned to his home place in Walaita and is still active there. Morishu is in Chenchu still. Sr Mary Fisher is back in the US having also worked in Kenya and South Africa in the meantime. Brendan Duggan too is in the US, having worked in Ireland, East Germany and Kenya in between. Owen Lambert is in Ireland, as active as ever on behalf of those in need. Jan Ermers is retired, having continued on in Ethiopia for many more years. He then spent seven years in China before returning to Holland. To say he is retired could be misleading. He is a keen member of several choirs, visits Ethiopia every year or two and is an enthusiastic walker. Three or four years ago he "clocked up" 6500 kms, walking from Holland to Bethlehem, via Slovenia and Croatia, arriving on schedule in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. He too returned from there to his own country by another route. The following year he walked 2500 kms from Holland to Rome and last year did 850 kms for the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. The durability he showed dragging rafts across Lake Stephanie 37 years ago obviously hasn't deserted him.

This experience could not be repeated today. Tullow Oil is drilling near the lake, unimaginable then. The beep of the mobile keypad has replaced the dots and dashes of the Morse Code. Vehicles of all types fly past the lake, not really aware of its existence, seeing only the sedge in the Woyto delta. I haven't been to the lake in thirty years and I am told the wildlife is long gone. Will I ever go back? I am not sure if I want to see what history is doing to the place. And where I am is hot enough anyway!

*Martin Kelly*

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