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Spirited Support for Ethiopia's Orthodox Church

by Rev. Owen Lambert, CSSp

Few works of the Catholic Church in Africa over the past 25 years can compare to that of the Spiritans, or Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers, among the tribal peoples of Gamo Gofa in southwestern Ethiopia. When the work began, our congregation presumed that Gamo Gofa was unevangelized – a ripe area for the congregation to follow its charism of bringing “the Gospel everywhere...to undertake the most humble and laborious works for which it is difficult to find laborers.”

This hypothesis influenced the congregation's decision to send a team of missionaries to the region in 1972. (I arrived in 1974.) Soon after we arrived, however, the dynamic presence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church shattered our impressions and, ultimately, altered our mission. We discovered that this Eastern church, numbering more than 30 million members, was ministered to by more than 200,000 priests and bishops. In addition, more than 25,000 monks and nuns, successors of the desert fathers, nourished the faith life of these people.

Feast of the Archangel Gabriel. A most significant experience for me occurred in December 1974, just a few months after my arrival. I joined thousands of Ethiopian Orthodox pilgrims from the Chencha area, where I had been stationed since September, in celebrating the feast of the Archangel Gabriel. We walked deep into the mountains to the Church of St. Gabriel, some 18 miles away, along footpaths congested with pilgrims.

Many of the 50,000 pilgrims brought along their children for baptism. Many brought gifts of livestock – sheep, goats or chickens, perhaps an ox – to be offered in thanksgiving. Most had in their hearts a prayer intention or a promise to make so that their prayer might be heard by St. Gabriel.

The highlights of the feast were the early morning baptisms, the blessing of the people with the waters of a holy spring situated beside the church, the processions with the *tabot* (a small wooden coffer patterned after the Ark of the Covenant), and the celebration of the Eucharist. Though a stranger, I was absorbed into this Christian event and shared in it.

Reconsidering Our Mission. How can our mission here have relevance, I reflected as I walked back to Chencha, if it does not take this Christian tradition and presence into account?

Other members of our mission group, familiar with Vatican II's insights on ecumenism and the council's inclusive ecclesiology, had similar experiences. Spiritans in Arba Minch, a town not far from Chencha, initiated regular contact with the Ethiopian Orthodox Archbishop, Abune Salama, and the local clergy. These Spiritans frequently attended the liturgy at the two Ethiopian Orthodox parish churches in the town.

When Abune Salama built a third parish church, which he named Holy Saviour, Spiritans assisted in the effort. On the day the church was consecrated, one Spiritan donated a chalice to the parish priest. This gift was greatly appreciated and gave witness to our having the same Eucharist, though not yet shared.

Since that time the town of Arba Minch has grown from 15,000 to over 50,000 people. In the meantime two additional Ethiopian Orthodox parishes have been opened.

To serve the needs of the Catholic community in the town, the Catholic Church of the Presentation of the Lord was opened in 1990 with the understanding of the Ethiopian Orthodox archbishop, clergy and faithful.

Development in Relations. From 1974 through 1977, fellow Spiritans and I made contact with the clergy and faithful of the four Orthodox Church parishes in the town of Chencha, along with many of the 41 other parishes scattered over the mountains and valleys of the greater Chencha area. The two oldest parishes, St. George in the village of Dorza and St. Mary at Burbur, date back to the 16th century, long before Venerable Francois Libermann, our community's "second" founder, sent his first missionaries to Africa in the mid-19th century.

In 1847, Libermann called for respect for the African people's culture, values and religious experience:

Do not judge at first sight, nor according to what you have seen in Europe of its habits and spirit. Be African with the Africans...not in the European manner but leaving them what is theirs. Be with them as servants... what St. Paul calls making oneself all things to all peoples.

Beginning in 1977, the Spiritans established a Catechetical Training Center at Chencha to assist the Ethiopian Orthodox archbishop in training his clergy. Over the years, more than 500 Ethiopian Orthodox priests, deacons and monks have participated in our four-month-long program. Spiritans have continued this work along with a variety of other pastoral initiatives.

In Saula, where the third Spiritan mission opened in 1976, the experience was the same. The greater Saula area had more than 40 Ethiopian Orthodox parishes, including a large parish serving the town proper. At the present time, the archbishop, supported by the Catholic Church, is planning an Orthodox monastery for nuns.

As we became better acquainted with the region, we learned there were over 150 Ethiopian Orthodox parishes, served by hundreds of priests, monks and deacons, in the Archdiocese of Gamo Gofa. The Ethiopian Orthodox Christian tradition and spirituality are deeply interwoven into the culture of many of the people. All these parishes and churches were built up by the communities themselves without any outside help – a hugely successful mission achievement by the financially strapped Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Rethinking Evangelization. This new and unexpected situation in Gamo Gofa and the challenges it presented were agonized over by the Spiritan group during the following years. The inspiration of Vatican II, the council's emphasis on ecumenism and its crucial place in the Catholic Church's mission, along with other significant statements and developments especially with regard to Orthodox and Catholic relationships, were of particular relevance in guiding us to a new understanding. We came to express our Ethiopian mission in the context of supporting the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Our practice of evangelization among the tribal peoples who border Kenya flows from this inspiration.

Since 1983, Spiritans have assisted the Orthodox clergy in evangelizing the nomadic Hamar peoples who live close to the Kenyan border. The fruit of this effort is that there are now four Ethiopian Orthodox parishes established there.

Spiritans are extending and deepening this work. One priest, who started with pastoral renewal in existing Ethiopian Orthodox parishes in Jinka, is now planning an evangelization outreach to smaller indigenous ethnic groups with local Ethiopian Orthodox leaders of the area under the guidance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Archbishop, Abune Kewoustos.

Acculturation to Ethiopian Christian Tradition. Respect for the culture, values and religious experience of a people is not entirely new to the Church. Consider this extract from guidelines given by the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1659 to the first vicars apostolic of Indo-China:

Do not make any effort...to induce people to change their rites, their customs, their way of life, unless these are obviously in opposition to religion and morality. What could be more absurd than to transplant France, Spain, Italy or some other part of Europe into China? It is not these that you have to introduce but the faith, which will never despise or violate the rites and usages of any people; provided that they are not perverse: but instead, intends to safeguard and protect them.... There is no more powerful cause of repudiation and

hatred than to introduce changes into the way of life proper to a country.... Therefore you should never oppose the customs of these countries to those of Europe, but on the contrary lose no time in adopting them yourselves. (Collectanea S.C.P.F.; Rome 1907, Vol. No. 1 135)

When the above, which regards non-Christians, is true, how much more should the Gamo Gofa Spiritans be expected to acculturate themselves to the ancient Ethiopian “heritage of spirituality and liturgy, of discipline and theology [which] belongs to the full catholic and apostolic character of the Church.” (Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism* 17)

This is a heritage that it is “of supreme importance to understand, venerate, preserve and foster...in order faithfully to preserve the fullness of Christian tradition, and to bring about reconciliation between Eastern and Western Christians.” (*Decree on Ecumenism* 15)

In August 1977, the Spiritans of Gamo Gofa presented to a meeting of the Ethiopian Catholic vicariates their understanding of this pastoral mission as being in the context of the presence of an existing church and of evangelization being undertaken with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This vision of mission was accepted at the meeting and won the approval of the then administrator apostolic.

The Spiritan group returned from this meeting with a great challenge – how would this mission be realized? This challenge was met through discussion and dialogue in a climate of genuine respect for, and sensitivity to, the Ethiopian Orthodox presence in the Gamo Gofa area and the inculturation of its traditions, spirituality and faith among the people.

Formal agreements were signed for major pastoral undertakings at Gamo Gofa at both archdiocesan and patriarchal levels. These agreements have been reshaped and renewed over the years – they are the only official ones in place between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Ethiopia.

Walking Together. Deep humility imbues our mission in Gamo Gofa. Accepting the pain of letting go of our own Latin Catholic traditions in a creative spiritual way gives the mission life. Rather than working alone or apart from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, we continually encourage and support her in her apostolic mission; rather than leading, we walk with the church in wholehearted, unconditional recognition and respect. It is against the spirit of this mission to attempt to “convert” the Ethiopian Orthodox faithful to the Catholic Church. The Spiritans in Gamo Gofa have grown to understand that the mission of evangelization includes in its heart a contribution toward the restoration of the visible unity of the Church of Christ.

Catholic and Orthodox Relations. The Ethiopian Orthodox hierarchy have claimed their responsibility for the evangelization of the non-Christians of the area. They have also asked for our assistance. Is not the mandate of Christ, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15), addressed to all Christians, Catholic or Orthodox? A papal guideline concerning the Orthodox Church in Russia, which was published in 1992 reads:

Should circumstances permit, the pastors of the Catholic Church, out of missionary zeal and concern for the evangelization of millions of people who do not yet know Christ, should endeavor to cooperate with the Orthodox bishops in developing pastoral initiatives of the Orthodox Church. They should be pleased if...they can help to train good Christians. [Pontifical Commission for Russia II, 4]

These guidelines are valid, *mutatis mutandis*, in all places where Catholics and Orthodox live side by side.

Initially, the Spiritan group had not fully appreciated the hostility and fear of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as a result of the attitudes and mission practices of the Catholic Church in Ethiopia. Nor had we realized, in our searching and moving toward this fresh, yet old, Catholic practice of mission revived by Vatican II, the difficulties that would arise.

Our support is given in the service of the pastoral and evangelization work of the Ethiopian Church. While taking care of the Catholic community, we refrain from establishing parallel Catholic Church structures alongside the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's own structures and among its faithful, where such activity brings about an unacceptable confusion. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is understandably very sensitive to the building of Catholic Church structures.

The Spiritans of Gamo Gofa have not, however, remained isolated from the Ethiopian Catholic Church. Catholics and Orthodox share numerous workshops, seminars, reflections and retreats for major seminarians and young religious, along with multiple informal contacts to raise awareness among missionaries and religious of the implications for mission in Ethiopia in the wake of Vatican II. Many positive developments are taking place and awareness is steadily growing.

Support for the Spiritan Option. To guide us in our unusual mission, we benefit constantly from advice given to us by various renowned theologians, our congregation's leaders and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

We are most grateful to all for their patient assistance and encouragement. Their support emphasizes the missiological implications of pastoral and evangelical activity in vastly Orthodox regions such as Ethiopia, as well as the significant value of our work in helping to correct an unfortunate historical relationship between the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Without this ongoing support and without various interventions, this apostolate could hardly have lived. Still there are voices raised against it. Even so, the work continues.

Father Lambert's article was adapted from a Spiritan publication honoring the 25th anniversary of the Spiritans in Ethiopia.