

AN EYE WITNESS TO THE COLLUSION OF THE VATICAN AND MUSSOLINI'S ADVENTURE IN ETHIOPIA.

By Dr. Syoum Gebregziabher

Since the 1880's, the Italians had had their eyes on Ethiopia, or Abyssinia, (as it was called) however; Emperor Menelik's forces decisively deflected their attempts at colonization. The Battle of Adowa of 1896 and its victory brought Ethiopia to international attention. Europe for the first time acknowledged an African nation that had resisted and defeated an European power. By 1923, Ethiopia became a member of the League of Nations.

Ras Teferi Makonnen, the then Regent of Ethiopia, set out on an international tour, visiting Jerusalem, Cairo, Alexandria, Brussels, Amsterdam, Stockholm, London, Geneva, and Athens. Il Duce Mussolini who felt the humiliation of the Italian defeat by the Ethiopians and the respectful reception that Regent Haile Selassie received, especially by those countries who were allies of Italy and the wide publicity and admiration he was being accorded humiliated Mussolini's and increased his desire for revenge. But to camouflage the indignity, Il Duce invited Ras Teferi the Regent to stay at the Villa Torlonia, making it appear as if Ethiopia were under the Italian protectorate and that he enjoyed an indirect influence!

In the meantime the Lateran Pact signed by Mussolini and a Vatican representative on 11 February 1929, had three significant parts: (1) a **political advantage** (giving the Vatican its own micro-state), (2) a **financial convention** (giving the Vatican reparations) and (3) a **concordat** (giving privileges within Italy, letting the Church influence public education). In return for all of this, Mussolini received Vatican recognition over the Kingdom of Italy — of which he happened to be the "dictator." Mussolini achieved a great diplomatic success; perhaps the greatest of his career to have boosted his future adventure to avenge Italy's historical humiliation at the battle of Adowa.

By February 1934, Mussolini had indicated to his General De Bono his intentions to conquer Ethiopia and avenge Italy's defeat at Adowa. The Vatican on the "Day of Faith" in 1935, actively supported the war effort by helping Mussolini in his nation-wide drive to collect financial aid and active support of the Church to colonize Ethiopia. This Pact is a building mortar that gave Mussolini the unfettered license in his colonial venture. It effectively not only silenced the Vatican in condemning the various and continuous atrocities of Fascist Italy; but also the use of the poison gas. The brutal savagery of the Fascist colonizers in Christian Ethiopia was not only condoned but; abated by Vatican leaders. Vatican came to Ethiopia with an evangelizing mission!

As a recruit seminarian, on my way to Harrer and later to Figan Birra in the training to priesthood¹ my experience of Italian apartheid was tacitly supported and tolerated by the Catholic priest: whom I had considered protector of human rights and my role model. I had assumed my priest had the moral fortitude to defend me . He failed me miserably and injected an early doubt to what I thought the Church its servants ought to have. This impression at a formative age of 9¹ left its permanent mark in my life.

¹ The symphony of my Life (Syoum Gebregziabher) The Red Sea Press ISBN 978-1-56902-357-0 May 2012 pp 64-69

On 19 February 1937, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani held an outdoor ceremony to honor the birth of Prince Umberto's son. Two Eritrean patriots threw seven or eight bombs at Graziani and his entourage, wounding the viceroy and thirty others whereupon Graziani's guards shot down numerous people then and there and the Italian army and police went rampaging all over the city searching the native quarters for hidden arms and killing everyone in sight throughout Addis Ababa. The secretary of the Fascist Party in Addis Ababa, Guido Cortese, called for more drastic action, and for 48 hours the Italians massacred Ethiopians, burning their homes and businesses and looting their property with no restraint whatsoever. I was out with my nanny in search of my father as to his whereabouts. On our way, I saw several dead bodies on the street just before we were imprisoned with other 3000 prisoners. After three days of this traumatic experience, women and children were released. I was one of them ²As regard to the other prisoners of more than 3000 people what happened to them is a question that is better left to historians. Thousands were killed indiscriminately throughout the city. As someone who professed the Catholic faith and no voice of protest from the Vatican had confirmed my conviction that the Vatican and Mussolini were the same colonizers.

In my later schooling at Akaki Seventh Day Adventist School, the classes were conducted after a prayer and we were assigned to memorize a chapter or a verse from the Bible. But some of us coming from other Christian denominations were not in conformity with the teaching of the Seventh Day Adventist School. This created some confusion, but at the same time enabled me to better evaluate my own religious perspective. The Seventh Day believed the end of the world was approaching, and that the number 666 in the Book of Daniel Revelation referred to the Pope! Although their teaching did not convert me, they did make me less of a zealot and more tolerant and skeptical about religious practices and teaching.³ My later College and university training and education have enabled me to evaluate my own religion rationally without prejudice.

In "**The Symphony of my life**" published May 2012, I have clearly indicated: as a Catholic Seminarian I was and I am a living witness of the close social, political and economical relations and collaboration of the Catholic Church with the Fascist government that had occupied Ethiopia. The allegation that Ambassador Zewde, in his journalistic investigation, did not find any concrete evidence that Pius 11 personally blessed Mussolini's army does not expunge the Holy See from moral and religious responsibility⁴.

I understand that Zewde wrote his remarkable book as a historian with his journalist and diplomat background and experiences. Zewde's statement that there are no evidences that Pope Pius 11 personally and actively collaborated with or blessed the invading Mussolini's army, does not necessarily relieve him from His high Vatican position and responsibility for the action of His Cardinals, Bishops, and priests. It appears to me that Pius the 11, may have not **personally, blessed Mussolini's invading army; but did collaborate in implementing his irredentism and his colonial ventures.**

Ambassador and Journalist Zewde has in my opinion erred. His acceptance of the historical facts so far presented, should convince him to stand up with his fellow

² ibid pp 60-61

³ ibid pp 84-89

⁴ Yekedamawee Haile Selssie's Government Chapter 16; pp 206-311

Ethiopians in demanding justice. The Vatican should apologize for the Fascist atrocities perpetrated on innocent Ethiopians as it did for the Nazi holocaust on the Jewish people.

His book is a monumental contribution to the Ethiopian history of the period covered. Yet his attempt to immunize the Holy City from such responsibility, not only devalues his book but it also defuses the contents of his book.

The present Pope (Pope Francis I) is the 266th Pope of the Catholic Church having been elected bishop of Rome and absolute sovereign of the Vatican City State. Indeed the Pontiff has reinvigorated the Church around the world and is bringing redemption to the Catholic Faith. Yes, redemption will ultimately depend on the rediscovery of a moral authority by accepting the spiritual lapses of the Vatican.

It is time for Pope Francis I who has made clear his aim to restore the church's original evangelical passion for "a clarion call for a decisive shift in the Catholic Church's self-understanding in full continuity with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council"⁵ to recognize and acknowledge the moral lapses of Pope Pius 11. **It is a duty and a privilege to give my timely eyewitness account of the various atrocities perpetrated on the Ethiopian population during the brief occupation of Ethiopia by Mussolini's regime.**

⁵ The Wall Street Journal