

## Loving Ethiopia death – His holiness Abune Melkisedek. By Yilma Bekele

I have the good fortune of residing in Oakland, California where His Holiness Abune Melkisedek, Secretary of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in exile and head of Mekane Selam Medhane Alem Cathedral resides. Writing about his Eminence is not easy. Most famous people are attracted to the limelight. Being the story is part of their psychological makeup. Their motto 'It is all about me' is what attracts people towards them. Politicians, actors, athletes are perfect examples of the self-centered among us. Here in the US even religious leaders are not immune from this disease of me first philosophy.

Our Orthodox Tewahedo experience is different. Pictures of our church leaders are not the main attraction. Their name is not written in big letters outside the church or lit in neon for all passers by to see. The emphasis is where it should be, mans relationship to his/her God. Our father dearly referred to as Abatachen by all exemplifies that doctrine. His holiness is no more than a simple servant of God doing his work to serve his beloved Church and his dear country. There is nothing complicated about him. For such a giant of a person in the life of our Church and Country, for a person with decades of unsurpassed service to both he surprises us all by the simplicity in his interactions with all and his sunny disposition under all circumstances.

These values did not just happen. They are the result of his devotion and strong belief that has sustained him ever since he embarked on the road of serving God. He has traveled many happy and not so happy roads. He has reached the apex of his Tewahedo Church as well as being imprisoned like a common criminal. He has humbly advised Emperor Haile Selassie on spiritual matters, as well as the Deanship of Trinity Cathedral the largest Orthodox Church In Addis Abeba. He has also experienced the life of an exile, a common refugee in a place he never dreamt he would find himself. When you see Abatachen you will never read all the trials and tribulation he has gone thru. What you see is a kind smiling face always worried about the comfort and well being of others. When you meet him personally his eyes twinkle with all the love and his face brightens like the mid day sun to welcome you.

Our holy father has this ability to make you feel safe and comfortable around him. He speaks simply and clearly. He listens intensely and makes his points direct and easy to understand. As a young one he has fulfilled the requirements of his church as deacon, priest, and studied Zema, Quine among others. Abatachen was one of the first chosen to go abroad and study the modern workings of religion, philosophy and how the outside world functions. He received his degree in theology from Halky Greek Theological College in Istanbul, Turkey. He speaks Geez, Amharic, Greek, and English fluently and understands Tigregna, Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish and Italian. He has found the time to write several books both in Amharic and English on spiritual matters to help his people understand this ancient religion he is a leader of.

Upon exile from his beloved homeland he did not land into an established Church and a functioning congregation. He started from scratch and was able to build a home away from home for all his children. When he came to Oakland he found a congregation that was being tossed around from Greek Orthodox to Serbian Orthodox Churches with no place of its won. In 1993 at long last an old abandoned Catholic Church was acquired and the process of rebuilding started with earnest. The inside was filled with stray animals and discarded items while the outside has turned into a weed garden. Here is a story as told to me by my friend Asrat one of the founders of the church. Abatachen ordered ten brooms and gathered all the young people in the Church. When they got

there Abatachen after blessing the place got the brooms to the side of the room while all eyes were looking to see what was going to happen. Most were assuming locals would be hired to do the cleaning while they supervise. To their surprise Abatachen picked one broom for himself at which point everybody ran towards him to take the broom away to stop him from such menial labor. To their surprise he handed them each their own individual broom and started to clean without wasting a second. How could anyone walk away from this act of leadership by example?

The fact that his room did not have adequate heating, even had broken glass in the window did not deter Abatachen from making the Church a place where all felt welcome and proud. It was a lesson in humility to see Abatachen prepare meals for the young deacons that have to go to adult school. Today Oakland Medhane Alem Tewahedo Cathedral is located in a modern building with a large Kitchen, meeting facility that also serves as a school for the young ones, office space and a parking lot. That is not all Abatachen helped increase the number of Churches in North America from five to over forty with the number of members estimated over fifty thousand. The modernizing influence he started in Ethiopia has continued in attracting and promoting a bigger role for women in church matters. There is no question his vision has resulted in strengthening the church beyond anyone's expectations. If Oakland is a clue to that assertion it is easy to see the important and key role our mothers, sisters and daughters are playing in making the congregation strong and vibrant.

At the ripe age of ninety his Holiness has become a globetrotting ambassador traveling as far away as Australia and South Africa not counting all of North America his home base. Abatachen is both a peacemaker and a combatant. He was forced to flee his homeland because he would not accept wrong deeds no matter where they come from. Exile has not been easy. The illegal regime that has circumvented our Tewahedo Church at home is always waging a relentless war abroad too. Abatachen due to the central role he plays in keeping his flock together has been the target they would like to destroy. Our Holy father has dealt with this unequal struggle against a State with patience, wisdom from long experience and guidance from God and been able to steer his flock in the path of steadfastness, focused and unyielding to being bullied by cowards.

It is with deep satisfaction we witnessed the resolution by the Holy Synod in Exile standing on the side of our Moslem brethren in their bitter conflict with the dictatorial regime currently in power in Ethiopia. That is what love for country and religion is all about. Our two religions have lived side by side since time immemorial and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church's firm stand on this matter is in the tradition of our ancient religion and its adherence to preserving peace and tranquility in our country. This act alone is proof that our Holy Father's presence in North America at this critical time in our history our God is always looking after our ancient land, that he will not abandon his children where ever they might be scattered.

This year it is a proud and joyous moment in North America. His spiritual children are celebrating and honoring Abatachen at the annual Ethiopian Heritage Society celebration in Washington DC on July 27<sup>th</sup>. His Holiness is the guest of honor and what a deserving leader they picked. No one exemplifies lifetime dedication and service to country and people. Ethiopians in Oakland are blessed to have such a shepherd who has managed to keep his flock together in peace and love in this time of turbulence in our homeland and places of exile. We are proud that our people in North America are cognizant of his tireless work on behalf of his people and country and are paying due respect for decades of service. We all wish him a long life; we pray that our God allows him to return to his native land in peace and health. God be with Abatachen.

If you live in the DC Metro area please go to Ethiopian Heritage Society festival at George Town University, Harbin field Multi sports facility from July 27 to 29<sup>th</sup>. As we made our country proud during the recent ESFNA event in Dallas let us show our unity in diversity to all those that preach our demise. Our love for each other and our ancient land is what keeps us going when all else seem to fail.

Further Information and resources:

<http://ehsna.org/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuLtMUbCpGY>

<http://ethiomeia.com/broad/3446.html>

<http://www.ethiopia.org/index.php/interview/313-his-holiness-abune-melkie-tsedek-delvers-message-at-the-eve-of-christmas>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopian\\_Orthodox\\_Tewahedo\\_Church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopian_Orthodox_Tewahedo_Church)