

POPE BENEDICT XVI'S BLIND SPOT ON ETHIOPIA

By Kidane Alemayehu

Pope Benedict XVI's current visit to Africa is one of the clear indications of His Holiness' interest in issues of human rights and the plight of his flock in developing countries. This is worthy of the highest respect, if only His Holiness could be consistent in the case of Ethiopia which has been awaiting justice for seventy years!

Soon after his election as Pope, nearly four years ago, one of the first tasks Pope Benedict XVI set himself to was to travel back to his home country, Germany, and visit a Jewish synagogue in Cologne where he condemned the Nazi Holocaust as an "unimaginable crime". While his action is greatly lauded, Pope Benedict XVI has, however, not yet responded to a repeated request for an apology to the Ethiopian people for the Vatican's complicity with the Italian Fascists who perpetrated war crimes in Ethiopia during 1935-41 when one million Ethiopians, including women and children perished. The Global Alliance for Justice: The Ethiopia Cause, being confident in His Holiness' sense of justice and fairness, launched a global campaign by issuing an international petition calling on the Vatican to apologize to the Ethiopian people. For more details and direct support, please visit: www.globalallianceforethiopia.org.

It is a historical fact that Fascist Mussolini was able to invade Ethiopia and commit his war crime with the direct support of the Vatican which was then headed by Pope Pius XI who had declared to the world that Mussolini was "a man sent by Providence." The Vatican was a source of great support to Fascist Italy at the League of Nations which, tragically, gave a free hand for Mussolini to invade Ethiopia which was one of the League's own members!

In his book, "The Vatican in World Politics", the renowned scholar, Avro Manhattan states:

"Thus the (Catholic) Church became the religious weapon of the Fascist State; while the Fascist State became the secular arm of the Church."

With the barbaric use of poison gas which was repeatedly sprayed by numerous Italian warplanes on urban as well rural areas throughout Ethiopia as well as the use of ground forces supported by tanks and other armaments, Fascist Italy committed untold atrocities that resulted in:

- (a) the murder of approximately 1 million Ethiopians, including the killing of 30,000 people in Addis Ababa within a few hours, over 400 people at the famous Debre Libanos monastery, the execution of two bishops (Abune Petros and Abune Michael) and hundreds of thousands of innocent people including women and children

throughout Ethiopia.

(b) the destruction of 2000 churches, and 525,000 homes;

(c) the annihilation of 14 million animals; and

(d) the use of extensive poison gas that played havoc to the Ethiopian environment.

(Source: *The Ethio-Italian War*, Paulos Gnogno)

When Italy succeeded to occupy Ethiopia, “practically the whole world condemned Mussolini, all except the Pope”. (quoted by Manhattan from Teeling, *The Pope in Politics*). On May 12, 1936, Pope Pius XI expressed his jubilation by stating:

“The triumphant joy of an entire, great and good people over a place which, it is hoped and intended, will be an effective contribution and prelude to the true place in Europe and the World.”

According to Avro Manhattan, the Pope’s joy was expressed in a more cogent and graphic declaration by the Archbishop of Torano with the following words:

“The war against Ethiopia should be considered as a holy war, a crusade” (as Italian victory would) “open Ethiopia, a country of infidels and schismatics, to the expansion of the Catholic Faith.”

Thanks to the valiant struggle of the Ethiopian patriots and the support of friendly countries, Ethiopia regained its independence but it is still awaiting the appropriate apology and compensation from the Vatican and the Italian Governments.

The Vatican keeps apologizing to the Jewish people, as it should, for the reason that it failed to raise any objections at the time that the Nazis were committing the holocaust crime. In the case of Ethiopia, the Vatican’s involvement with the Fascists was not a mere silence but rather direct and fully complicit. It is, therefore, surprising, to say the least, that the Vatican has yet to express its apology to the Ethiopian people.

Ethiopia deserves to be among the first countries in Pope Benedict XVI’s itinerary on his first visit to Africa: (a) for the purpose of expressing his historic direct apology to the Ethiopian people; (b) due to the facts that Ethiopia is mentioned numerous times in the Bible and that it is one of the earliest countries to accept Christianity; and; (c) the fact that the country has over 40 million Christians.

To conclude, Pope Benedict XVI’s current visit to Africa is a clear indication that His Holiness is according the importance and respect that is due to the continent. Inspired by this basic perspective and filled with hope and confidence, one cannot help raising the question: will Pope Benedict XVI put aside his blind spot on Ethiopia and bring justice to a case that has been outstanding for too long by doing his basic Christian duty of apologizing to the Ethiopian people?

Ethiopia raises it hands unto God (Psalm 68/31).

