

WHEN WILL THE VATICAN APOLOGIZE TO ETHIOPIA?

(by Kidane Alemayehu)

1. ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyze the role of The Vatican in supporting and abetting the 1935-41 occupation of Ethiopia by Fascist Italy. As a result of the atrocities committed by Fascist Italy, Ethiopia suffered immense losses including at least a million people killed, substantial properties destroyed, and the perpetration of gross human rights abuses.

Whereas The Vatican has repeatedly expressed its apology to Jews for its complicity with the Nazis who perpetrated the infamous holocaust during the Second World War, no such apology has been extended to the Ethiopian nation.

In the view of this paper, it is time that The Vatican owns up to its historic injustice to Ethiopia and, as a Christian entity, express its full apology to the nation.

This paper also emphasizes the importance of highlighting and correcting past injustices in order to put out smoldering fires of unresolved issues and to mitigate against any similar recurrences.

2. ADOWA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

There is no doubt that the Italian occupation of Ethiopia during World War II was a direct consequence of the humiliating defeat it suffered at Adowa in March 1896 at the hands of a proud African nation, Ethiopia. In his book: "My Life and Ethiopia's Progress" (1929 EC), H.I.M. Haile Selassie I quotes his famous letter to the League of Nations in which he stated:

"Italy is determined not to finalize the issue peacefully. Her aim is to spill a lot of blood for a revenge of Adowa." (1)

It became the function of the Fascist Italian government to deliver that country's long held aim for colonialism and revenge which, however, was perpetrated not with the level of humanity demonstrated by the Ethiopian victors during and after the battle of Adowa but rather with the most barbaric and unimaginable inhumanity ever known to man. In particular, the use of military airplanes to shower mustard gas on

the Ethiopian people as well as animals, and the environment in general was unprecedented and totally against international law. Emperor Haile Selassie stated:

“Italian airplanes came in droves of 9, 15, and 18 to drop rains of poison gas on people, animals, rivers and streams as well as pastures.” (2)

His Imperial Majesty further stated:

“The picture of many thousands of soldiers as well as rural people including women and children who were burned to death by the poison gas used by the enemy is still etched in our mind.” (3)

In his Amharic book entitled: “The Ethio-Italian War” (4), Paulos Gnogno presented the quantification of Ethiopia’s losses as follows:

Churches destroyed:.....	2,000
Homes destroyed.....	525,000
People killed.....	760,000*
Animals killed.....	14 million

*This figure was a preliminary estimate. A later interview by Woletta Selassie of several patriots residing in Ethiopia and USA revealed that the number of persons killed by the Fascists was not less than 1 million.

Paulos Gnogno also reported that whereas Ethiopia’s claim for compensation was 185 million (pounds sterling), what it was able to obtain was only 6 million (pounds sterling) (5). The inadequacy of this compensation has been commented upon by several scholars. One put it this way:

“The allotted compensation of twenty four million dollars in the Peace Treaty of 1947 did not even begin to address the harm committed by Italy to Ethiopia. We must open the file for additional compensation of at least ten to fifty billion dollars from the modern state of Italy. We must also prosecute the main players such as surviving commanders and soldiers responsible for the genocide committed by Italian commanders and soldiers. We have not properly dealt with the deaths of millions of Ethiopians due to the war of aggression and brutal occupation of Ethiopia in the 1935-41 period by Mussolini and his Italian government.”(6)

For the sake of comparison, one can refer to the compensation for the holocaust against Jews, which is known to be in billions of dollars. Even more important is the fact that the heirs of the holocaust especially the German government as well as the Vatican have expressed their repeated apologies to the Jews. Examples of reports of The Vatican's apologies to Jews are as follows:

BBC: "The Vatican has apologized to Jews on behalf of the entire Roman Catholic community for failing to speak out against the Nazi holocaust during World War Two. In his letter accompanying the apology, the Pope (Pope Paul II) said: "the Holocaust remained an indelible stain on the 20th century."(7)

Soon after his election, Pope Benedict XVI visited Cologne's main synagogue where he described the extermination of 6 million Jews as an "unimaginable crime". (8)

Despite The Vatican's direct complicity in the crime against Ethiopia, it has never offered its apology to Ethiopia.

3. ROLE OF THE VATICAN IN SUPPORT OF FASCIST ITALY

There are numerous sources that provide ready material evidence for The Vatican's complicity with the Fascist Italian government prior to and during the occupation of Ethiopia. For the purposes of this presentation, the rich information provided by Avro Manhattan, in his famous book: "The Vatican in World Politics" (1949) is the main source. (9)

Manhattan recounts the initial struggle between The Vatican and the Fascists until, in 1922, the two sides led by Pope Pius XI and Mussolini respectively formed a strong partnership. Pope Pius XI dissolved the Catholic Party and paved the way for the Fascists to take control of Italy. So, on December 20, 1926, Pope Pius XI declared:

"Mussolini is the man sent by Providence."

The relationship between the Fascists and The Vatican kept improving to the extent that the Lateran Treaty between Pope Pius XI and Mussolini was signed in October 1928 according to which The Vatican was recognized as an independent sovereign state. The Fascists also provided a substantial amount of money to shore up the ailing bank serving The Vatican. The main reason for the symbiotic

relationship between the Pope and the Fascist Duce was their mutual dislike for democracy, socialism, and human rights. Manhattan stated:

“It was the alliance of these two men, Pius XI and Mussolini, that influenced so greatly the social and political pattern, not only of Italy, but also of the rest of Europe in the years between the two world wars.”

Mussolini’s main ally in his aggression against Ethiopia was, therefore, The Vatican’s Pope Pius XI. Manhattan states:

“Thus the Church became the religious weapon of the Fascist State; while the Fascist State became the secular arm of the Church.”

Pope Pius XI’s support to Mussolini was effective in arousing the enthusiasm of the Italian population for the war against Ethiopia as well as, “above all, to influence the proceedings of the League of Nations itself by indirectly making the Catholic representatives of the many Catholic countries who were members of the League understand that they should not vote against Fascist Italy”. Pope Pius XI considered Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia as a “defensive” war.

When the Italian occupation of Ethiopia was achieved, “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.”

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.”

4. A SECOND HUMILIATING DEFEAT FOR ITALY

In 1941, Fascist Italy suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the heroic Ethiopians and their allies. Although the Italian government did pay a compensation, however meager, for its war crimes against Ethiopia, to this day, The

Vatican has never owned up to its unholy support of a vicious Fascist attack against an innocent Christian nation, Ethiopia. Pope Pius XI and his cohorts should have recognized that on the basis of the New Testament, Acts, Chapter 8 versus 26-40, Ethiopia accepted Christianity when their forefathers were crucifying the disciples of Jesus Christ; not to mention the Roman soldiers who perpetrated the crucifixion of the Lord himself.

5. IMPORTANCE OF A VATICAN APOLOGY TO ETHIOPIA

The importance of a Vatican apology to Ethiopia is predicated on the principles of justice. A country or entity, even of The Vatican's international magnitude, should be held accountable for its grievous past deeds against Ethiopia. Unless Ethiopia fights against past injustices, it will continue to suffer current and future similar occurrences. In other words, we ignore history at our own peril.

It is, therefore, the duty and obligation of all peace loving people including Ethiopians and their friends to demand and persevere, until it is achieved, a formal and full apology by the Vatican to Ethiopia.

The Vatican has owned up to its follies against the Jews. That is why the current Catholic pontiff, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, made it his first duty following his election to confirm that the holocaust committed against the Jews was an "unimaginable crime". Bolstered by his obvious respect for human rights and justice, this paper's author submitted the attached letter (10) dated August 18, 2005 to His Holiness pleading with him to facilitate the Vatican's formal apology to Ethiopia. The author is confident that The Vatican will eventually respond positively to this cry for justice.

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Sources:

- (1) Emperor Haile Selassie, "My Life and Ethiopia's Progress", p. 183, 1929 EC;
- (2) Ibid., p. 255;
- (3) Ibid., p. 244;
- (4) Gnogno, Paulos, "The Ethio-Italian War", 1980, pp. 225;

- (5) Ibid., p. 224;
- (6) Hagos, Tecola W., "Treaty of Peace with Italy (1947)", 2004;
- (7) BBC, "Vatican Apologizes over holocaust", March 16, 1998;
- (8) DW Staff/AFP, August 19, 2005;
- (9) Manhattan, Avro, "The Vatican in World Politics", (Chapter 9) 1949.
- (10) Alemayehu, Kidane, "Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI", Aug. 18, 2005.