



CATHOLIC ARCHEPARCH'S HOUSE ASMARA  
ASMARA- ERITREA

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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# “Stand firm in your Faith”!

1Cor 16:13

Asmara, July 30, 2018

Dear Ge'ez Rite priests, nuns and faithful in the UK, USA,

*“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father; to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen” (Gal 1:3-5). May also the protection of our Lady Kidane Mehret be always with all of you!*

As you very well know I have just come back from a two month long pastoral visit to the above-mentioned two countries (April 25 to June 30<sup>th</sup>). From May 4<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> I was in the United Kingdom where I visited the Ge'ez Rite Catholic Communities in London, Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Glasgow and Birmingham. My visit to the Communities in the USA lasted from May 21<sup>st</sup> to June 25<sup>th</sup>. During this period of time I visited Cincinnati, Denver, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Oakland, Seattle, Los Angeles and Washington DC. At this juncture I would like to thank the priests, sisters and lay faithful in all the above-mentioned cities who did all they could to make my visit successful.

As all of you will recall, the main purpose of my visit in both countries was to help our communities in the Diaspora become aware of their Oriental identity and the continuity of their Ge'ez Rite tradition for generations to come in the countries where they are currently living and working. So, wherever I went, the main question I asked our communities was: *Do you want your Ge'ez Rite tradition to continue after yourselves?* Those of you who have migrated as adults are aware of the tradition and you generally like the Rite. At the same time it does not mean that you do not have to study it and practice it much more than you do at present. Many of you are enthusiastic to know and appreciate your Rite even more. But, as St. James puts it: you have to take concrete steps and be steady all the time: “ገበርቲ ቃል ኩነ፡ ርእሰኹም እናጠበርኩም ሰማዕቲ ጥራይ አይትኹኑ። ሓደ እኳ ሰማዕ ቃል ኮይኑ ገባሪ እንተዘይኮነ፡ ንሱ ነቲ ገጹ ብመስትያት ዚርእሱ ሰብአይ እዩ ዚመስል። ንሱ መልከዑ ይርእዮ፤ ከይድ ኢሉ ከአ ብኡብኡ እንታይ ከምዘመስል ይርስዕ። እቲ ናብቲ ሓርነት ዚህብ ፍጹም ሕጊ አተኩሩ ዚጥምት፤ ኣብ ምጥማቱ ድማ ዚጸንዕ፡ ነቲ ዚሰምዖ ከይረሰዐ ከአ ኣብ ግብሪ ዜውዕል ሰብ ግና፡ ኣብ ኩሉ ግብሩ ብፀዕ እዩ” (ያዕ ጳ 1:22-25). Endless discussions will never solve anything. It is better to start with practical steps that lay the foundations for a Ge'ez Rite Ecclesial Jurisdiction in the above-mentioned countries or continents.

At the Second Vatican Council our Mother Church has already clearly stated: *“Means should be taken therefore in every part of the world for the protection and advancement of all the individual Churches and, to this end, there should be established parishes and a special hierarchy where the spiritual good of the faithful demands it”* (Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, Rome, St. Peter’s Basilica, November 21, 1964, Number 4). So, we need to know and love our Ge'ez Rite and Liturgy and transmit it the young generations to come. As you yourselves are already very aware, transmitting this rich tradition to your children and your children’s children is, however, much more challenging and difficult than it seems. That is why I said to you: *if you are truly convinced of transmitting these riches to your posterity you have to start immediately with the following five steps:*

1. Faith is the foundation of all Christian life. Whatever increases your faith must be encouraged and whatever weakens your faith needs to be eliminated. Living far from the traditional safe environment where one was born and raised is very challenging, to say the least. As you very well know your knowledge of the Catholic Faith and Prayers is based only on the small question and answer catechism you used when you prepared for First Communion or Confirmation. When you went to Europe or North America you were faced with huge

questions based on the rampant materialism, secularism and relativism in those countries. In addition to that, the challenge of new religious movements is always present and several of your members have abandoned their Catholic Faith to embrace their teachings and practices. If you do not deepen your religious knowledge, your faith can easily be shaken. You may be troubled by doubts about so many doctrinal and moral issues. It is no longer possible to live in the traditional way you were used to living when you were back home in Eritrea. Hence, the need for continuous and intensive listening to and reading the Word of God, constant practical catechesis on the liturgical celebrations (Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Penance, Matrimony, Anointing of the Sick and Priesthood) and especially the Holy Mass. These will help you to be constantly converted to the Lord who will lead you to full communion with himself and your brothers and sisters in the faith. Providing yourselves with sufficient copies of the Bible, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and other necessary liturgical and catechetical books in Tigrinya is one way to help yourselves be well educated in the faith and to become active participants in the Eucharistic celebration.

I would like to encourage especially the recent arrivals and young people who can still remember the Christian life and activities they left back home. It is better to strengthen your faith while memories of your youth associations, your choir memberships and College experiences back in Eritrea are still fresh. In this way you can easily build bridges. More than ten years ago we expressed our deep concern for our young people thus: *“ Young men and women who had to leave their country of origin at an early age, or were born and brought up abroad, are faced with an ambiguous situation: that of being native by birth and blood, and foreign by culture and the surroundings in which they live! The uneasiness that such a situation creates to them is quite patent. The fact that statistically the younger members are taking an increasingly larger share within the migrant community is also a cause for some concern. In fact, it raises important questions and problems: are our young men and women equipped with a sufficient deposit of knowledge and experience while they step into an unclear and undefined future? Can we hope that they are self-confident enough to be able to continue their life-journey on their own?”* (Be Steadfast in Hope, 9).

Another important work to be done is that of a detailed statistical work in order to know exactly how many members there are in each city and in the countries where you live and work. The Catholic Church is always keen on knowing how many families and individuals make up a chapel, a parish, a diocese etc. This means looking for all Ge'ez Rite Catholics in your area and inviting them to register and participate actively in whatever is going on in the community. Your communities need to be welcoming and caring communities even for those who have drifted away for one reason or another. The Church has on many occasions and in many documents explained the role and mission of the lay faithful in building up the Christian community. For instance, we cannot deny, the very important and foundational role that Eritrean Catholics of the Ge'ez Rite in North America (ECGRNA) played in establishing our communities in many cities in the USA and Canada. Priests need the help and cooperation of the lay faithful.

2. Try to invite and support more priests and nuns who would help you in educating yourselves and your children. The presence of a priest, religious women and catechists is essential in educating yourselves and your children in the Faith of your ancestors. Also we, your Eparchs, will have to do more to provide more priests and nuns as much as we possibly can. Lay faithful without priests and nuns are like sheep without shepherds. But it is not enough to ask for priests. You need also to encourage and foster priestly vocations among yourselves, among your children. If among you there are those who feel called to the priesthood, we encourage them to come forward so as to allow us to contact the local ordinaries and start the dialogue on your formation and training.

However weak and human they may be, we would like to ask you to respect and listen to the priests we send you. At times we notice too much criticism against priests, or, even an attitude of treating them as mere employees of the community. If we want to say the utter truth, we can state that if one does not respect his/her priest he/she does not respect even the Church. The priest as *alter Christus* is, after all, a minister sent by the Church to serve you as **Prophet** who announces the Good News, as **Priest** who celebrates the Eucharist and administers the Sacraments, and as the **Shepherd** who cares for all members of the community without any kind of

discrimination. As a matter of fact, on the eve of a priestly ordination, one of the hymns in our Ge'ez Rite tradition says: “ለካህናት ክብር ይደልዎሙ፣ ለእላ ይትላእኩ ሠናዮ ሙልእኩተ፣ ለካህናት ክብር ይደልዎሙ”፣ and it means: *‘Respect is appropriate to Priests, those who are messengers of the Good News, respect is appropriate to Priests’*. Priests are sent to shepherd and guide the faithful. Respecting and listening to your own priests is, therefore, essential for building up the Church of God. As the prophet Malachi puts it: *“For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts”* (Malachi 2:7).

At the same time, as St Peter puts it very clearly, *“as each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God’s varied grace. Whoever preaches let it be with the words of God, whoever serves, let it be with the strength that God supplies, so that in all things God be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen”* (1Pet 4;10-11). This is why it is vital that priests, on their part, have to respect and care for each layman and woman, adult and child, and especially those in dire material and spiritual need. In other words, true respect must be mutual and committed for the common good. Again, St. Peter advises bishops and priests thus: *“Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly; not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock”* (1 Pet 5:2-3). Mutual respect is truly the cornerstone for building a healthy Christian Community. Priests, nuns and lay faithful need to cultivate an honest sense of mutual respect which is the first and essential step towards true brotherly and sisterly love. Also here, St. Peter is quite clear in his advice: *“Likewise you that are younger be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud’, but gives grace to the humble”* (1 Pet 5:5). St. Paul’s words best summarize the attitude each of you should have with his/her fellow lay faithful as well as with your priests and nuns: *“love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honor”* (Rom 12:10).

3. You need to lay solid foundations in your communities for financial self-reliance. It is not enough to make contributions when you are asked by your local parish or by your eparchies of origin. As members of a faith community

you need to be convinced that making contributions to your Church is an act of faith and membership. So each believer needs to make a fixed and unbroken remittance towards the building of his/her Ge'ez Rite Catholic Community. “ቤተክርስቲያን ትህብ እምበር ትውሃብዶ?” እናበልና ዳርጋ ብጃህራ ንደግሞ ዝክበርና ዘረባ ብፍጹም ኣይሰርሕን ምዃኑ ክንርዳእን ክንቅበልን የድሊ። እታ ቫቲካን እንብላ ንርእሳ ካብ ምእመናን ዓለም ብእትረኽቦ ምጽዋትን መባእን እያ እትካየድ። If you only wait for others to support you, you will never learn to support yourselves. We encourage you to look also at what other similar communities of other countries have done. Many of them have built or bought their own Churches and Rectories and multi-purpose facilities. If we love our faith and our Church we will do all we can to spread it and support it. If I am a member of a Catholic Ge'ez Rite Community I need to know clearly my rights and duties. I should not wait to be asked or reminded continuously! It is better to collect what you can, and then ask for help from others. This is the more dignified way of supporting oneself. It is because you do not have your own Churches or Chapels that you are always forced to celebrate at unsuitable hours and/or places. Here I would like to mention the good example of the community in Atlanta. They have united and managed to buy a building that can be transformed into a proper place of worship for the Ge'ez Rite Community there. With God's help, where there is a will there is a way! Every time one community embarks on such a task, all the other communities in North America should unite and contribute. Once one project is completed in a city another one could be started in another. Here, setting up a coordinating body would be needed at diocesan and national levels. In order to build confidence and trust in the community good book keeping and transparency are however critical.

4. Unity is both strength and concrete Christian Witnessing. This is more meaningful especially when a Church is a numerical minority. If it is to survive and grow, its members need to be very much united, avoiding any type of division based on ethnic, regional, or even parochial and eparchial pretexts. Even if you come from different Parishes, Eparchies and Regions of origin, those of you who live in one city or country in the Diaspora have to feel strongly united as one family of Christ. The foundation of your unity is not of human origin. We would therefore encourage you to listen and practice the following words of St. Paul the Apostles when he wrote to the Ephesian Christians:

*“ I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received; with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to **preserve the unity of the spirit** through the bond of peace: **one body and one Spirit**, as you were also called to the **one hope** of your call; **one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all**, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:1-9).*

During my visit and the visit of my brother Eparchs it has been noticed that there are a lot of unnecessary misunderstandings and even conflicts between lay faithful and priests (ECGRNA), among lay faithful themselves (e.g. Charlotte, Washington DC, the members of the Charismatic Movement, Seattle, Toronto, Calgary, just to mention a few). If you try to reproduce replicas of our Eparchies of origin it will be very hard for you to build a well identified and self-reliant ecclesial jurisdiction either in North America or in Europe. It is only if and when you will be a well gathered Ge'ez Rite Community in your cities that you can also help and cooperate with Eparchies in and outside of Eritrea. Also priests and nuns need to have a real Catholic mentality and care for all the faithful under their pastoral care, regardless of ethnic, regional or, eparchial origin. This is the only way that enables you to achieve the objectives you look for in your short and long term plans. At this juncture, we have to look also at what other Oriental communities such as the Copts, Maronites, Melkites, Byzantines, Ukrainians, Chaldeans, Syro-Malankara and Syro-Malabar Catholic communities in Europe or North America have done before us.

I would also invite you to listen to what St. Ignatius of Antioch said to the Magnesians in the second century of the Christian era: *“The Lord did nothing either of himself or through his apostles without his Father, with whom he is united; so too, you should undertake nothing without the bishop and the presbyters. Do not attempt to persuade yourselves that what you do on your own account is right and proper, but when you meet together there must be one petition, one prayer, one mind, one hope in love and in holy joy, for Jesus Christ is one and perfect before all else. You must all be quick to come together, as to one temple of God, one altar, to the one Jesus Christ, who came forth from the one Father, while still remaining one with him, and returned to him”* (No. 6:1-9).

5. It is also important for you to know that the local Bishop of the host country where you live and work is your first and nearest shepherd. You need to follow his directives with love and great respect. I am so grateful for the hospitality all the bishops showed me when I visited you. It shows the real Catholic Spirit in all the dioceses that are hosting you. We, the Eparchs from your country of origin, can help you keep your Ge'ez Rite tradition only with and through your local Bishops. Hence, your Oriental tradition should not hamper your being fully integrated in the local Church which is certainly made up of many ethnic groups and liturgical traditions. At the same time recognition by the Diocesan and National offices of the hosting Churches is essential for our Ge'ez Rite Catholic communities so as to enable them to keep their true identity. I am sure they are ready to give you all the support you need as long as you are well organized and contribute your fair share.

In our pastoral letter of 2004, speaking to you about the great dangers of the rampant culture of consumerism, individualism, materialism and relativism you face in the new countries you have settled, we stated: *“One of the most pervasive tendencies today is to live just for momentary pleasure and transient fulfillment: “Only that which fulfils my desires in this moment has a meaning and deserves to be pursued. I don’t care about all the rest. Success now and here... and nothing else.” This is a way of living that ruthlessly mixes-up right and wrong, obeys to a shortsighted materialistic pragmatism and relativism, is totally unconcerned with moral principles and problems, and is insensitive to the voice of the conscience.*

*When this mentality becomes an all-pervasive norm in one’s life, it is quite easy for one to forget the others, their problems, and to focus only on oneself. This attitude can hardly be seen separately from individualism. Indeed, it is strictly entwined with it. Great vigilance is needed to avoid that the mere logic of profit becomes “the” priority in one’s life. Mutual care and attention among spouses, children, and family members are, instead, the most basic requirements for a healthy family life. Human life must be respected. The moments of mutual care and/or concern we share on such occasions as our children’s baptisms, or our family members’ illness or death are manifestations of our respect for, and love of, human life and for all God’s creation. If we are able to preserve what we already have in store in this regard in our own culture, there is much we can offer to other cultures and peoples as well, “So that seeing your good works,*



*they may give praise to your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16)”(Be Steadfast in Hope, 22). Unsurprisingly, it is still very relevant!*

*In the same document we also said: “Once again, on behalf of our Dioceses, we wish to renew our deepest appreciation to the local Churches of the Latin Rite; for all that they have been doing for our sons and daughters through all these long years. We know we do not need to recommend them to continue to confirm our communities in the one faith hope and charity as they have been doing so far, tirelessly. We all need to continue to pray together for the displaced, the exiles, the orphans, the widows, the prisoners, for all those who are faced with so many difficulties and problems. It is the responsibility of all of us to work in order to prepare a bright future for them and, above all, to strengthen them in their faith-journey towards our final destiny: eternal salvation” (Be Steadfast in Hope, 30). At the same time we would like to assure our brother bishops and all their collaborators that we in the countries of origin are always ready to help whenever we can. Feel free to contact us at any time and do not hesitate to ask for any information and cooperation that are needed in this regard.*

## **Conclusion**

Once it is tangibly evident that our communities in the Diaspora are ready and show enough maturity, I can assure you that the Holy See will be ready to create a Ge’ez Rite Exarchy, or even an Eparchy with its own Exarch or Eparch in North America and another in Europe, and elsewhere too. Hence, let us start to lay solid foundations so as to make this dream a reality. Let us set our priorities straight and stop wasting a lot of time and energy in minor issues, or, even in unconstructive squabbles. We encourage you to give top priority to the common spiritual heritage which is priceless for you and your posterity.

As you remember, in the year 2004, we wrote a Pastoral Letter to all our faithful in the Diaspora by the title: ብተሰፋ ብርገፁ; “Be Steadfast in Hope”. The message of that Pastoral letter is still relevant and actual. I would invite you to read it and share its contents among yourselves. It is available both in the Tigrinya and English languages.

This letter is meant to be read both personally and also in your communities. I wrote it in English keeping in mind the young who need to read it and be active participants in the process. If deemed useful you may also share it with the hosting

pastors and bishops. In this letter, I would like to include also the Ge'ez Rite communities in Canada because I intend to visit them as soon as I can and that the issues to be raised are the same.

Thank you for the attention and God bless you all.

*+ Mengheseab Tesfamariam*  
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Metropolitan Archbishop of Asmara, Eritrea

