

GOD LOVES THIS COUNTRY

Pastoral Letter

On the 10th Anniversary of Independence

24 May 2001

INTRODUCTION

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19).

1. To this nation that God loves, to its leaders and all who live in it, to the faithful who are under our care and responsibility, and to all those of good will: may the grace and peace of God our Father be with you!

The mission of the Church is to proclaim God’s salvation plan to mankind. Parallel to this, the Church has the duty of enlightening the earthly and temporal conditions of humanity with the spirit of the Gospel (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5). For this reason the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of today's world are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the Church as well (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

As the commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the independence of Eritrea takes place - at a time when we are coming out of a devastating three-year war and when we are preparing for important new elections - we are reminded that God still loves this nation. He takes care of its people and continues to work wonders in the present as in the past. We, therefore, feel that we have an obligation to share words of consolation, hope, guidance and encouragement, given our current religious, economic and socio-political situation.

We, the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, offer you anew the consoling word of God as announced by the prophet Isaiah: *“Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt is expiated” (Is 40:1-2).*

TEN YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

Gratitude to God

2. Ten years ago, when the thirty years of devastation and war were over and the Eritrean People's Liberation army entered the capital in triumph - an event which provoked an unprecedented sense of joy and consolation - we published a pastoral letter as a means of helping the new nation focus and reflect upon this historic event. In that letter we wrote: *"We give thanks to God with an open heart and a humbled spirit, for he has brought us freedom: freedom from many years of war, freedom from unsuccessful peace deals and freedom from desperate living conditions"* (Peace and Progress, p. 7). Since we had thanked God who had worked wonders on our behalf at the time, it is only right and proper that we do the same again now ten years on. Among the events for which we now give thanks is the successful outcome of the popular referendum which, through hard work and careful coordination, allowed Eritrea to poll its citizens on the question of national independence and thence to take its rightful place as a fully recognized state among the family of nations. Then, after thirty years of severe deprivation, came the reconstruction of the nation. Though if not yet complete, it began promising success at home and admiration abroad. And thirdly, alongside these events, there was also the formulation and approval by the Parliament of the new national Constitution. Such positive developments took place in a context of peace, and were indeed blessings from God (cf. Eph 1:3).

Over the past three years, however, Eritrea has been caught up in a number of serious difficulties with large numbers of her citizens killed, disabled, displaced, deported, unprotected or left to no man's border trenches. The consequences of these difficulties have been far reaching. Reflecting on this situation, and given that God has enabled us to weather the worst and to glimpse a new horizon of peace, our first task as spiritual leaders is to identify the lessons that must be learned and to thank God once again for not abandoning us. Our main message, therefore, is: *"You shall know that I am the Lord"* (Ek 37:14), *"Praise the Lord, who is so good"* (Ps 136:1).

Freedom is God's Gift

3. From the outset of creation the human person has been marked with the gift of freedom. Because of this gift, the individual aspires to a specific claim of dignity, having been created in the image of God himself (cf. Gn 1:26-27; Ws 2:23; Si 17:3-10). Freedom, then, is born with human persons and it becomes their portion forever. We use all the means at our disposal to protect this God-given gift and, if necessary, we may even resort to force to keep and protect it from those who may try to snatch it from us.

Human beings make sacrifices for, and dedicate themselves to, the cause of justice, but we should not lose sight of the fact that it is God who, in his own mysterious ways, ultimately guides history in its journey towards the supreme goal of true freedom. *"For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; serve one another through love"* (Gal 5:13). Freedom, therefore, does not offer a license to do as one pleases, nor does it offer an escape

from one's duties and responsibilities. It is rather a decision to opt for, and be committed to, what is good. God himself says: *"I set before you here, this day, a blessing and a curse"* (Dt 11:26). Freedom is intrinsically connected with our God-given potential of mind and will (*Gaudium et Spes*, 17).

When we talk of independence and freedom in Eritrea, we envisage a truly free nation whose freedom is the sum of the freedoms of its nationals. We, therefore, necessarily include freedom of conscience and creed, freedom of speech and press, freedom of communication and freedom of association and assembly. Only when all the citizens of the nation enjoy this kind of comprehensive freedom can we speak of a truly free nation. The State has the duty of guaranteeing freedom to all the citizens who live within it and who abide by its laws. For a valid assessment of our current situation, perhaps we might usefully start by asking ourselves a couple of basic questions. What was our starting point? Where are we now? At the same time, and as part of an individual and national effort, we might also make an honest examination of conscience. *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive recompense according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil"* (2 Cor 5:10). So it is that we must ask ourselves some uncomfortable questions: Have we always done what is right for all our citizens? Have we, or how have we, used/abused our freedom? Have we always respected the rights of others? How have we understood justice? Have we used that gift of freedom and independence - attained at such a high price - worthily?

A Time of Peace and Development

4. In a previous Pastoral Letter (*Peace and Progress*, p. 41) we indicated that peace is not only the absence of war but it is also a safeguard for the rights of others. It is an expression of a full human life and the development of human well-being in all of its dimensions: *"... As we speak of a new society and of development worthy of a human person there is a point that needs to be stressed: without a holistic and integral human development, one cannot speak of authentic development. Development cannot be measured only in economic terms. For development to be just and right, it has to be holistic and integral. This means that it has to be participatory - where all of its citizens have a share - and has to develop all the different dimensions of human life. Its goal, then, is to strive towards the fullness of the human condition"* (*Popularum Progressio*, 2).

5. After Eritrea gained her independence, the nation's attention was concentrated on the peace and the development the country might enjoy. Expectations were high - both inside and outside the country. Many people convinced themselves that these goals might well be achieved without having to overcome too many major obstacles. Indeed, at first, things went on well, with significant progress being made in the fields of education, health, energy, infra-structure, and - even more promisingly - rural development. The Church, for her part, contributed enthusiastically to rural development. The Church is not an NGO and should never be confused with one. The Church's efforts in the field of development, however, are not based on partiality, religious considerations, nor on any motive of proselytism: *"By her nature and mission the Church is universal, in that she is not committed to anyone culture or to any political, economic or social system. She strives to consolidate the communities of people according to the dignity and hope placed on them by Christ"* (*Gaudium et Spes*, 42). Her place in society, as witnessed throughout history, comes not from any other source or authority but Christ.

Before Independence, the activities of the Church had been severely impeded by the oppressive regime of Menghistu Hailemariam, and some of its structures, properties and buildings had been illegally "nationalized." The Church is still waiting for this injustice to be redressed by the current government which set out in 1991 to right the wrongs of the past. We are more than a little surprised that our claims have not yet been dealt with. Since we are concerned with an important question of justice, this is an issue that the Church does not intend to allow to simply disappear.

6. All projects of development - be they initiated by the government, the Church, NGOs or the private sector - need to encourage wide participation. Any partiality, favoritism, or privilege, shown to one group against another, will necessarily limit the potential for development and growth.

It is true that in the fields of economy and trade, many people held high hopes for accelerated economic growth. Leaving aside the growth figures recorded by the World Bank, where a different system of assessment pertains, some people believed that the level of growth actually achieved fell far short of the country's potential. However, granted that unbridled capitalism is not acceptable (*Centesimus Annus*, 42), a participatory economic system run on a suitable scale might have met with more success, especially at the poorer ends of the private economic sector. Though we do not claim expertise in such matters, we do feel it important to urge those most closely concerned with this issue to broaden their horizons for the country's benefit.

7. Basing ourselves on our reflection and observation of the past ten years, we would like to offer some recommendations. Given that development should be holistic, integral and participatory - so that each dimension of human life may receive its due benefit - we would like to suggest that structures be found that allow the flow of information and complaint from the lower sectors of society to the higher ones. The policies made by the government affect the lives of the ordinary populace (the so-call "broad masses") very directly. It is to be expected that people who complain about taxes - not to mention other measures - have a role in their establishment or control. It is not enough for policies to be made at the higher level and then be imposed by law on the people through administrators who are answerable only to their own superiors, while the people have no means of redress. It is to be noted with sadness that, even before the latest war broke out, transparency and public accountability were not the most prominent features of the country's administration.

This malaise is even more evident in our courts and legal system. There is an avalanche of complaints. The government did acknowledge this problem; but its excuse of a lack of properly prepared personnel is quite difficult to understand ten years after, with little progress having been made. Fortunately, we do not have a lawless society; generally our people are law-abiding and with a profound respect for order. However, this well-known fact does not exempt the authorities from instituting legal provisions to keep corruption from blossoming, or from addressing those instances where corruption has already become an issue. We believe that the setting up of such structures is of great urgency and importance.

No one denies that one of the fundamental issues in our world today is the right of workers to a pension and to a proper living wage. The salary of workers, administered in the name of our current "National Service", should take into account the situation of the worker and the conditions of his family and other dependent members. The rights of civil servants and public-sector workers also have to be protected (*Laborem Exercens*, 19). The extremely lengthy delay in land redistribution adds yet a

further burden on our people. The cost of rental homes has sky-rocketed, while the difference between what a worker must pay for his shelter and what he brings home in wages is grossly unfair. Though we cannot claim a full grasp of the dynamics of price-controls, it seems clear to us that the just resolution of the problem of land redistribution would go some way towards lessening the people's economic burdens; they could then construct shelters according to their means. The right to shelter is, after all, one of the more basic human rights (*Pacem in terries*, 11).

Culture and Identity

8. For quite some time now, we have been witnessing a gradual infiltration of attitudes and behaviors that negatively affect the historical traditions and the cultural identity of the people. It is our considerate view that certain government's programs are intentionally geared to destroying the existing order out of hand. Why, for instance, should the traditional September feast of *Mesqel*, which is rooted in the cycle of the seasons in this part of the world, be replaced by the New Year celebrations held during the western month of January? Why should the western feast of Christmas take precedence over the traditional feast of *Lidet*? How can this make Eritreans feel more united? Why should the Ghe'ez alphabet have been modified? How are the people supposed to be proud of their history, culture, heritage and their adherence to the principle of self-reliance if that very culture is in the process of being eroded by the government? In the same vein, why are people being alienated from their respective religious practices - Moslems as well as Christians - by the programming of national events at precisely those times when people would otherwise be about their religious duties? It would appear that there is perhaps some hidden agenda.

Wedding ceremonies today are another cause for concern. While we fully accept the religious and cultural importance of these events, they have nonetheless become much too expensive and indeed have become a kind of socio-economic competition. Thus we heartily endorse a social and cultural change. Returning to the question of the alienation of people from their religious observances (e.g. the youth who have to practice on Good Friday in preparation for national celebrations that occur much later in the year), we emphasize that this seriously disrupts the formation of our youngsters' consciences with regard to their religious duties. Therefore, we strongly urge the government to reconsider its current practice.

Social Life

9. Though the first few years of peace and development contained many good things, the overall social life of our people has been undergoing an increasing process of deterioration - particularly on the levels of morality and conscience. The principles of faith and fear of the Lord, the real foundation of our culture, have been painted over intentionally. Traditionally, freedom was always taken to include a range of concepts:

- knowledge of, and faithfulness to, one's duties and responsibilities;
- the option for, and fulfillment of, what was perceived to be good;
- family unity and responsible behavior;

- trust, compassion, solidarity, hospitality and generosity.

Today these values are fading fast, to be replaced by socially irresponsible behaviors, evidenced by attitudes of avarice, betrayal and licentiousness. These new attitudes are to be found in a particularly striking way in the dealings between tenants and landlords, consumers and merchants, employers and employees.

10. The negative changes in the individual and social behavior of the people are indicative of a diminished sense of a healthy fear of God. People seem to believe that, now that they are free from political domination, they may also consider themselves free from the rule of God (i.e. his commandments). This is a dangerous conclusion: *"Be careful not to forget the Lord, your God, by neglecting his commandments and decrees and statutes which I enjoin on you today: lest, when you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses and lived in them, and have increased your herds and flocks, your silver and gold, and all your property, you then become haughty of heart and unmindful of the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery" (Dt 8:11-14).*

What always characterized our people in the past was their option to live by God's decrees and commandments. The knowledge of God's wisdom and law was at the heart of their sense of belonging. To throw away this gem is tantamount to throwing away our people's identity. The development of social life and the teaching of the fear of the Lord are not two contradictory values. They are complementary. To strengthen the latter is to secure lasting foundation for the former. Faith, therefore, is expressed in the "here and now" while its relevance is as valid in the heaven we are able to create on earth as it is in heaven above.

An Unexpected War

11. If there is anything we can learn from history it is that "we have learned nothing." In our Pastoral Letter of 1991 (*Peace and Progress*, p. 28-29) we asked as to what we had learnt from the past. The answer given at that time was that *"War should never be repeated."* We then went on to quote: *"War is but useless slaughter" (Pius XI); "Nothing is lost by peace, everything can be lost by war" (Pius XII); "Not war, but peace must guide the destiny of humanity" (Paul VI); "War is an absurd phenomenon and always unjust" (John Paul II).*

We had hoped that our memory of the war would remain only as a warning and a reminder to future generations of the folly of our past. We desired a new life, free from war, for our people forever. This was not to be. Two good neighbor countries, extolled as such by the international community, unexpectedly forgot the progress they had made and went to war against each other leaving countless casualties on the battlefield and even more people, both at home and abroad, dumbfounded. Resentment soon turned into hatred, intentionally fostered and manipulated by the governments of both warring parties. There could be no winners!

12. A part from the human casualties, the damage caused to the society by this most recent war occurs at many levels. As manpower and resources were used for the war, the greatest damage was in the areas of development and reconstruction,. Alongside the economic tragedy, war brings social, moral, spiritual and human losses. In war every one loses. There is no winner. We cannot hide our deep sorrow at the fact that the war was not averted when there was still time to do so. We could only stand by and watch as events escalated.

Some of the more immediate tragedies of this war are obvious: households left to carry heavy economic, social and moral burdens because many of their members - including parents - have been sent to the front; women whose husbands had been conscripted, left to run their families with no economic or social resources; people in the border areas - having already lost livestock, belongings and farmland - collected in camps for the displaced; Eritreans who lived and worked in Ethiopia forcibly repatriated and their property confiscated; the economy of the country destroyed by mobilization, since those involved in production were conscripted; the lives of the country's youth either disrupted or destroyed; and all short and long-term plans for development suspended.

13. This war has far-reaching consequences by creating a vacuum within the country and in people's lives. Similarly, another vacuum has been created within the international community. Especially during the third and last offensives - when civilians were killed, their rights abused, extended territories occupied, and nobody quite knew what would happen next - the international community's response was one of indifference and silence.

The Platform for Peace

14. *"Even though, apparently, war seems to resolve them [disagreements], to choose the violence and conflict as a solution always exacerbates the problem; for this reason the Holy See has continuously encouraged peoples and governments to reject the spirit of violence and power, terrorism and armed conflict"* (John Paul II, *Address to the Eritrean Ambassador*, Dec. 14, 2000). We, the religious leaders of both countries have tried to encourage a peaceful solution to the crisis. On June 18, 2000 an agreement "on the cessation of hostilities" was finally reached and duly signed. Our hearts were filled with joy and we gave the agreement our full support. We thanked God for softening people's hearts and for providing us with a forum for peace. We thank our peace-loving people, always ready to pray, and all those governments and associations who worked so tirelessly so that the conflict may come to a peaceful end. Our appreciation goes also to both governments for accepting the peace deal and facilitating the peace process.

Seek Peace and Follow it

15. We implore the giver of peace, our Lord and God, to make this peace-agreement truly beneficial for our people and country. Peace is everlasting if it comes from God. If it is purely human it will be short-lived. The God who loves this country is again offering his peace to us: *"Peace be with you"* (Jn 20:19). It is our duty to prepare hearts worthy of that peace. It is important that we ask ourselves: *"Why did peace fade away so quickly?"* Perhaps our hearts were not prepared for it. Perhaps we did not thank God sincerely enough for it. People of Eritrea, seek peace and follow its path!

We believe that neither the people nor the government wanted this devastating war. If there is anything we want to tell our people and the government it is this: let us use and choose words and deeds that invite and stimulate peace.

16. We need to develop a global spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. From our Christian tradition we know that only the person who forgives will eventually triumph; the winner is the one

who is capable of mercy/forgiveness (cf. *Mt 5:7*). In the mass-media and in all our dealings we now need to convey messages of reconciliation and forgiveness. The rhetoric of threat and intimidation can only destroy the progress so far made during the recent peace talks. Our people have the right not only to desire, but also to hear, words of hope and messages of solace. We are conscious that the people who live near the border are those most affected by this war. If things go as expected, they should soon be able to return to their homes. Even after the formal process of border demarcation has taken place, we have to be in a position to dress and heal the wounds caused by so much destruction, so as to *"Be able close this chapter of our history marked by hatred, and to pave the way to a future of peace with hope for our two peoples"* (Pres. Isyas Afewerki, at Algiers, Dec. 13, 2001). To make this viable and tangible, cross-border reconciliation initiatives should be set up to mediate between the peoples most immediately involved. This is the responsibility that the government, religious leaders and elders of both countries should carry out. We encourage all involved to do their best so that the peace process may reach ultimate success. As St Paul puts it, *"Finally, brothers, rejoice. Mend your ways, encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you"* (2 Cor 13:11).

17. The reconciliation we have spoken about extends itself not only to our enemies, but also to ourselves. We will need to evaluate how we have used our opportunities. Since human nature is flawed, we need to strike the right balance.

Our society needs to coordinate a thorough-going program of reconciliation and forgiveness - no effort should be spared in this enterprise, and every view-point should be represented. If the slogan *"one people - one heart"* is to become a reality, we must reject any intentionally divisive terminology along with an *"us and them"* mentality. Again we insist on the importance for our society of internal reconciliation and unity. To ignore this call is for the country to court disaster: *"Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste, and house will fall against house"* (Lk 11:17; cf. *Mt 12:25*).

18. As we enter the antechamber of peace, we are faced with new challenges and much hard work. In effect, no-one in the country has been left untouched by the socio-economic crisis. The Church pledges its support to those who will be working to rebuild the people's lives. At the same time, we appeal to, and encourage the, world humanitarian community to offer and accelerate their support even more generously so that the people may sooner be able to stand on their own feet, and life may begin again. Today many NGOs and UN peacekeeping missions are making their way into the country. We appeal to our people and the government to offer their full support so that the peace-plan may speedily achieve its aims. We also appeal to all the NGOs and humanitarian relief agencies to do their best to help the needy of the country. At this moment - and given the grave humanitarian emergency that faces us - it would be senseless to adhere blindly to the albeit appreciable principle of self-reliance. The clock is running and the country's needs are many and great. If both "giver" and "receiver" act with due sensitivity, there is no reason why "dependency" should ever become an issue in Eritrea.

19. We know that soon we should be looking forward to the start of military demobilization, when thousands of soldiers will be returning to society and to employment as well as to their families and friends. We offer them our warmest welcome. We are aware of the conditions under which they have had to live over the past few years. We cannot ignore the human and spiritual wounds inflicted on them. Their successful re-integration into civil society will require much in the way of patience and

hard work. Specific rehabilitation programs along with secure financial assistance-packages will become necessary. To accompany these, we also foresee a need for complimentary programs to encourage spiritual, moral and psychological rehabilitation.

The service-personnel returning home are seriously disadvantaged from the spiritual and religious point of view, for having lost all contacts with this area of their heritage. It is a vacuum that we will have to seek to fill-in , possibly through specific religious programs. Any life stripped of its spiritual dimension will, in fact, act negatively on both the individual and the social levels. People who, because of this war, have been crippled or maimed will require particular help, if they are once again to become confident members of society. Special care will be required for the families of those who have been killed during the war. Such help should also take into account the social, economic and political changes that have occurred since these events took place, and it should be continued for as long as it may be needed.

20. The war deaths constitute an unbridgeable gap in the lives of the families who have been left behind. We understand the pain that the latter will be enduring. But empathy and sympathy are not enough. We are duty-bound to back up our words of consolation with practical help, which may very well take the form of financial support. At the same time, we have to make sure that our departed children have not died in vain by avoiding past mistakes and, above all, by working for the growth of a society that is firmly grounded on the principles of justice and legality.

21. In line with the peace agreements, troops are being re-deployed at some distance from the front-line. This move has a direct impact on the towns and villages that take them in. A serious decline in moral standards has been detected in these areas with the expansion of a "military ethic" among civilians, the increased incidence of HIV/AIDS, the deterioration of general moral behavior, and the overall breakdown of traditional social structures. To ignore this alarming state of affairs would amount to self-deception. We, therefore, recommend that intensive seminars on "social behavior" be offered to troops and people alike. If a solution is to be found, as it is, all sectors of society need to be included in the process.

22. It is in family-life that the most deleterious effects of the war are felt. Having huge distances to travel, and staying away for lengthy periods of time, family members in military service have little chance to influence family affairs. Frequent and lengthier visits should be encouraged. The need for a proper and on-going guidance in moral matters, and access to counseling for problems of loneliness, isolation and other personal problems, require viable solutions. We abhor certain methods of military discipline, because in the long run ruthlessness can only breed ruthlessness. As far as religion is concerned, we recommend that troops be allowed freedom of conscience and worship in reasonable compatibility with military regulations and respect of other soldiers' religious sensibilities. We are convinced that the employment of military chaplains - of all faiths - would go a long way towards the solution of many of the above problems. This would also help to deal with the problem of the spread of new religious sects among the military.

II

OUR FUTURE PLANS

23. The teaching of the Church and, more specifically, the documents of the Second Vatican Council maintain that the human person is not only the pivot of creation but also the lens through which our world should be viewed. We have been created in God's image (cf. *Gn* 1:26) and have been chosen as the head and the steward of creation (*Gaudium et Spes*, 12). The main consequence of this view is the belief that creation exists for our benefit. This belief may then be further extended to include the existence of the nation. The nation exists for the people, not vice-versa. To ignore this truth is to risk making people slaves of social and economic structures instead of the other way around.

24. How, then, are we to avoid making ourselves slaves? We must build a just society based on a fair constitution. This is no easy task. The process has a beginning, but is never definitely concluded, as it needs to be subjected to constant change.

A Constitution embodies the law of the nation. It is a covenant entered into by both the people and the government that is to administer it. It is also a device by means of which the people are able to control the administrative authorities. Such a Constitution does not exist for its own sake, but rather as a structure to promote the just and truthful administration of society, and to ensure unity and equality within that same society. By extension it also provides a solid base for true development.

The following are some from among the most basic principles upon which, we believe, we may seek to establish a just society based on a fair constitution.

1) *Plenary humanism* in development: the term *development* refers to more than economic growth. Just and transparent development involves all the people and touches upon all aspects of human life. Sometimes, it may appear that self-contained humanism - i.e. where the divine is of no account - succeeds in its aims, and may seem to be able to foster development. This, however, is only a temporary gain. In the long run, having no outside standard to measure themselves against, people will turn against other people. Ultimately, a world without God makes humanity inhumane (*Populorum Progressio*, 14;24).

2) *Social justice and issues of human rights* are the fundamental identifying elements of a just society. As individuals and as citizens earning our living through honest labor, we need to be treated justly. The less privileged in society are entitled to the same respect as those in the higher echelons. The guaranteeing of a just wage is both a right and a duty. God himself warns us not to ignore this duty: "*Woe to him who builds his house on wrong, his terraces on injustice, who makes work his neighbor without pay, and gives him no wage*" (*Jr* 22:13). God is on the side of the oppressed; so let us not oppress them in turn. "*For I know the Lord will secure justice for the needy, their rights for the poor*" (*Ps* 140:13). To those then who, for whatever reason, quit their jobs, just and proper remuneration must be made.

3) *A tradition of legality*. The Eritrean society has traditionally held the exercise of law and the demands of rights and duties in high esteem. From ancient times, laws crafted over the centuries regulated social life at the regional, provincial, district and village levels. They were the basis for claim to justice for everyone. Along with these laws, the values of hard work, cooperation and solidarity were ever present. All of this belongs to our tradition. It is not the product of imitation or imposition from outside. We need to show, by word and deed, that this tradition has not been uprooted; that our society still respects those who work hard and those who offer their services for

the good of all; that there will be no agenda that will allow the emergence of "privileged" or "unprivileged" classes of citizens; and that jobs and responsibilities are distributed according to criteria of competence rather than convenience.

25. Equality and unity are enhanced rather than threatened by pluralism. Equality in the areas of justice, law, rights, duties as well as economic and social opportunities make for a stable and well-ordered society. Freedom and democracy cannot exist without this foundation. Given that freedom is ultimately a gift from God, we would like to share some further thoughts on the kind of freedom we are talking about:

1) *Freedom of Religion*: this emanates from the very nature and identity of humanity itself (*Pacem in Terris*, 11). It includes, among other things the right to freely express one's ideas and beliefs, to worship, to teach, to publish, freedom of association and freedom from external interference, including the government, in matters of belief and religion (*Ibid.*, 12-13). Today there seems to be a serious misunderstanding about the role of Religion in society as a result of a calculated effort to portray it as divisive and contrary to development and to women's promotion. While we repeat that this is absolutely not correct, we take this opportunity to declare our opposition to all attempts to obstruct religious development, or to use religion as a means to divide people or enkindle negative feelings and attitudes.

2) *Freedom of speech and press*: in order to convey and receive the message of truth, freedom of expression is a *sine-qua-non* precondition. This universally acknowledged right is a natural consequence of the freedom of conscience and thought (*Pacem in Terris*, 26-27). Truth, transparency, and freedom are the corner-stones of a truly democratic society; all the citizens have the right to search for the truth and to express their thoughts and opinions.

3) *Human rights* are not only part of a mature and healthy democracy, they are its very foundations. "...The priority of the person finds its most vital and essential expression in the enjoyment of our basic human rights - be they ethical (respect for the person), cultural (freedom to search for the truth and to express one's own ideas), educational (right to schooling), religious (right of free public and private worship according to the dictates of one's conscience), political (right to active participation in public life and affairs), and so forth. It is precisely through respect of these rights that the structures and functions of society can come to be of service to man." (*Peace and Progress* p, 32).

4) *Preparation for elections*: official government sources have indicated that, by the end of this year, elections will be held. This is good news, and we urge the government to see it through. How were the preparations for the 1993 referendum handled? What preparations are in hand now? Let us enter these elections with the same openness of spirit and calm efficiency as we did for the referendum.

5) Where there is a *just Constitution* there will be an effective legal system. Though, ten years ago, we may have lacked sufficient prepared personnel, this should not be the case anymore today. Society in Eritrea respects the law: so it should not be too difficult to find competent and efficient citizens at home to do the job. We wish to think that the government of Eritrea works and cares for its people. Nonetheless, with the passing of time certain bad habits do develop. Care must be taken

to keep our legal system free from suspicion. It is ultimately for the government's good that there be an institution to screen and point out where mistakes have been made.

6) The lack of a *trustworthy legal system* engenders corruption. We are of the opinion that it will be very difficult to claim immunity from charges of corruption in this country. Wherever there are human beings, there are also mistakes. As human beings in Eritrea are much the same as elsewhere, care should be taken to ensure that corruption does not become endemic either now or in the future. If it is true, as the saying goes, that "*Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*", the solution is an effective legal system. It should be borne in mind that a lack of accountability will surely wreck society.

Social Problems

26. The family is the proper context where we find the foundation and marked identity of Eritrean society. A society is strong and united to the extent to which it promotes strong and united families. As the most precious social institution and the wellspring of our society, the family must be cherished and protected. There can be no doubt that some national programs (summer camps, national service, etc.) are negatively affecting the family and many of its values. The above mentioned programs may very well benefit the country, but why at the expenses of the family? Could these programs not be run in a way that they may be of benefit to our families as well? One of the aspects that are causing the most serious damage to family life is physical separation: wife-husband, parents-children... Another serious problem is gender promiscuity. Isolation and loneliness generates a disorderly life-style: responsibilities are deserted, illegal conjugal relations occur, mistakes are covered up, divorce rates soar, one-parent families increase as do the numbers of teenage parents, and marriage contracts are drained of life. We need to fix these problems before the family completely loses its identity. It is public knowledge that the families both of the displaced and of those engaged in national service find themselves in grave psychological and financial difficulties. When a family's bread-winner is sent for service, or youth from the rural areas are taken for service of one kind or another, proper provision should be made for the financial wellbeing of those left behind. Ultimately, what would be the gain if the family falls apart while one or more of its members is away serving the country?

27. The cost of living in Eritrea is getting out of hand even for those who have salaries. How will it be faced by those who have no income? Matters become even more serious when military or other forms of national service deprive families of their main - sometimes their only - income. Many families face destitution, and complaints are rife. This state of affairs demands immediate attention. In our traditional society begging was considered shameful; today it is visibly increasing among both the civil as well as the "service" sectors of society. In conscience, we need to redress the balance for all those who are in need. We therefore appeal to our people, but above all to the government so that the necessary steps are taken to handle the problem urgently.

28. The status of women in our society is another issue that requires attention. Much has been said, and even done in terms of rights, equality and quality of life, and this must continue. However, not all that has been said and done was necessarily for the benefit of women. It is important to avoid the risk of going to the other extreme. Balance is needed here as much as in any other issue.

During the past thirty years women have been directly involved in armed conflicts. It was the inevitable consequence of war. But war and armed conflicts are not ideals to cherish, even less so for women, whose vocation as the source of life and whose sense of compassion are a most great blessing for society. Experiences of past conflicts should remain as memories of courage and determination from which we might learn much, not as something to be looked at with nostalgia.

Life, from its very beginning, involves guardianship-stewardship, and this is especially true with regard to women: as mother, the woman is the core of the family – and thus of the whole society; as wife, she shares with her husband the same dignity and the same responsibility over the family and the children. In short, woman, as mother, is the emblem of a nation.

Scripture says: "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal 3:28). Today women - married or in consecrated life – are given the opportunity to offer their specific contribution and influence society positively. This is a welcome trend whereby women can fully participate in the political, economic, educational, and religious life at both the national and international levels. This is a right that needs to be fostered and further developed. Yet, women's social responsibilities should not relegate their vocation to family life to a secondary role. This awesome vocation is of an unparalleled importance (cf. John Paul II, *Woman a Teacher of Peace*, 6, Dec. 8, 1994).

One cannot fail to notice that much of the propaganda purportedly promoting women's social and political equality is, instead, becoming more harmful than advantageous to them. We highly endorse the recommendation that women, like men, should have - from their earliest childhood - equal access to education as well as parity in employment and salary. However, this equality should be one of dignity and rights, not one of hardship and disgrace .

For this reason, the Church – mandated to advocate the dignity and uniqueness of all people and to do all it can so that justice and peace may prevail – was, and is, actively involved in the holistic promotion of women, ensuring that their rights are respected and promoted. We guarantee that the Church will continue to offer her contribution in the future as well.

29. The program known as "*Coordinated Religious Education*", through which the Ministry of Education permitted religious instruction to be given in public schools, was very beneficial. No explanation was given when this program was terminated. We believe that it should be reinstated and that teachers, methods and materials should be selected and prepared. Those responsible in the Church for this activity are ready to begin discussions on this matter with the Ministry of Education at their earliest convenience.

We feel that it is most important for all of us to raise, and reflect on, the following vital questions: What are our youth thinking and saying today? How do they view their country? Do they trust the administrative system? Does the country's economic development and social and religious stability give them cause for hope? If hope has evaporated, then they have no future to look to at home, and it is only obvious that they will look for solutions elsewhere. They will simply abandon their mother country and will look for a better future abroad. A nation that is unable to harness the potential of its youth is doomed to instability. Indeed its very existence as a country may be put into question. We believe that we, as both civic and religious leaders, have a great responsibility to bear. There is no

point in just asking, "Why are our youth choosing to go abroad?" - for no-one leaves a country of milk and honey, as the saying goes, to seek another country offering the same opportunities. If one's homeland is a place where peace and freedom are enjoyed and employment is available, there is no reason to leave it to endure exile, loneliness and hardships of all kinds.

30. Our youth will soon be returning home burdened with grim memories. Wounded by war and war-propaganda, many of them will be physically, mentally, morally and spiritually scarred. These wounds will need time to heal, and society must be able to offer them a healing environment. In war the individual has no time to think, to speak and dream freely: he is a victim. The returnees need to be assisted and eased back into civilian life as they face new life situations and problems. They should be offered employment and opportunities that will meet their desire to participate fully, once again, in the life of the society to which they belong. They also need to be protected from feelings of despair, nihilism and related negative tendencies. Our recommendation is that their integration into society be carefully planned. Their economic, religious and social lives should be meticulously studied. This huge task should not be left to the government alone. All parties - NGOs, Religious groups etc. - should be asked to offer their contribution, too. The psychological and moral wounds of the returnees are, in our view, particularly serious. Our young men and women facing such situations should be encouraged to share their experiences and help each other through the mass-media programs and extensive seminars.

HIV/AIDS

31. With the first official recognition of the existence of this devastating disease, official government response was - and still is - focused on the extensive promotion of condoms. The fact remains however that HIV/AIDS is still in rampant increase. The government programs seem to have done little except, again, to boost the sale and the spread of condom. The failure of this first program resulted in the introduction of a new slogan: "one partner with one", the message of which is, to say the least, ambiguous: does this refer to a matrimony context? Or does it refer to relationships before or outside of marriage? What kind of union is it the one based on the "one-partner-with-one" slogan, which is entered into in a total disregard for marriage as envisaged by moral law and by our customary laws? Are sexual relationships to be evaluated in terms of personal choice only? If fear of contracting HIV/AIDS is the only reason for staying with one partner, what does that say about the value of intimate human relationships? What about the role of the conscience in the life of the individual? How long can relationships - ultimately based on fear - be expected to last? Should they last?

What needs to be done, we believe, is for religious leaders and educational institutions to pool their efforts and strive to re-establish a moral basis for behavior among the youth, to reawaken their faith in God and their sense of responsibility towards society. Such a program would include a re-introduction to the values and dignity of marriage, the value of abstinence and virginity before marriage and the pivotal importance of family life. Every means at our disposal should be employed to carry out this far-reaching awareness campaign.

Similarly, involving the minds and hearts of our youth in activities such as sports, education, arts, work, service, and good deeds, both moral and spiritual, will help guard them from damaging behaviors and incidental sexual relations.

Our newspapers, for the most part, encourage promiscuity and infidelity. What we need is mature, informed, corrective and educational media contributions, if we are to help our youth.

The country's Religious and Faith communities should form their own committees to deal with the HIV/AIDS issue. A national coordinating committee should be formed, as well, to enhance the sharing of experiences. We strongly support the formation of a trauma-counseling-healing-center where HIV-AIDS patients could be cared for.

III

A NEW AGE WITH A NEW SPIRIT

32. Jesus Christ began his ministry on earth with the following words: "...*The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed the one who takes no offence at me*" (Mt 11:4-6).

The Church, founded by Christ and sent to the whole world, accomplishes her mission by following the words of Jesus and approaches the whole of human kind, for "*The whole creation is waiting with eagerness for the children of God to be revealed. It was not for its own purpose that creation had frustration imposed on it, but for the purposes of him who imposed it – with the intention that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God*" (Rom 8:19-21).

The Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, strives to put the power of salvation at the service of all (*Gaudium et Spes*, 3). Grace, freedom and salvation can only be attained through repentance and through the acceptance of God's mercy. Reconciliation with God and reconciliation with our fellow human beings are likewise dependent on these same two prerequisites. Over the past three years, in preparation to the 2000 Jubilee Year, the Catholic Church throughout the world has been using all her energies to make such a reconciliation a reality. During this important world event, the message of reconciliation, penance, mercy and salvation was repeatedly proclaimed (John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 1994, 14).

A Jubilee focuses on three objectives:

- an evaluation of the past;
- an assessment of the present;
- a proposal for future plans and projects.

Concomitantly, the Jubilee is a time for correcting the mistakes of the past in a spirit of repentance, and for giving thanks to God for the blessings of both the past and the present. It is a time when people are called to assess their current situation in reference to God's plan and will, and to

amend whatever needs to be amended. It is also a time to look forward to the future, to renew our covenant with God and to move on to meet the new horizons of our faith.

Our past Christian Journey

33. *"I am continually thanking God about you, for the grace of God which you have been given in Christ Jesus; in him you have been richly endowed in every kind of utterance and knowledge; so firmly has witness to Christ taken root in you" (1 Cor 1:4-6).*

We have received our prophetic and apostolic Christian traditions through St Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria, who sent St. Frumentius, the revealer of light, as our first bishop. Abune Selama brought us the Gospel when we were still gentiles. St. Justin de Jacobis gave new life and vigor to our Christianity for no less than 22 years. He came at a time when we needed re-awakening, and was prophetic enough to see the value of, and thus to work with, our ancient traditions, values and customs. We give thanks to God who provided us with such a loving and tireless apostle. We remember with great admiration the long list of bishops, priests, consecrated men and women and dedicated lay faithful, who received the teaching and testimonies of faith and life and, with great zeal and competence, passed them on to us.

Today we, too, want to move on, renewed in spirit and bolstered by the example of St Justin de Jacobis. In particular, we urge our Priests and Religious to collaborate with our people in true charity and humility. It is our mission and calling to proclaim the living and liberating message of the Good News and to incarnate it in the daily lives of our people.

It is fitting for us to give thanks to God, who enabled our "Little flock" (Lk 12:32) to offer a significant Catholic contribution to the life and the growth of this country over many years, bearing witness to the Gospel and to its redeeming message.

The Situation Today

34. As we consider our unique spiritual heritage, so much impregnated with a profound reverence for God, we need to ask ourselves: where have we reached in our journey towards God today? The ability to maintain a distinctive faith-identity is the product of a strong Christian formation and dedication of the faithful, as are most of our social institutions

Today we have to admit that – with the infiltration of new customs and constant social changes - our courage in championing the Gospel-values has diminished and, with it, the possibility of being "*The light*" and "*The salt*" within the society. Behaviors and attitudes that are completely alien to our traditional Christian ethos are becoming both normal and acceptable: shameless prostitution, witchcraft, betrayal, avarice, divorce, cohabitation; abandonment of established religion, expansion of questionable sects, and a shuttling between the two; secularism and the growth of an ungodly life-style...are but a few from among the manifestations of the general moral and spiritual decline visible in our society today. Dominated as we are by what has become fashionable, we may easily forget the meaning and the implications of Jesus' words: "*They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world*" (Jn17:14).

If we are to accomplish our vocation and mission effectively, we will need to formulate and implement together a national pastoral plan that will help the Christian faithful to defend their faith and their identity from confusing and ever-changing attitudes, and thus become courageous witness of the Gospel

With specific regard to Matrimony, let us not forget that we belong to a tradition that, locally, has become proverbial as an emblem of fidelity and stability: "*Like the marriage of the Catholics.*" This is a tradition that once again we need to refresh. Only then will we be able to become credible, when we speak about HIV/AIDS, about pre-marital chastity, about abstinence, about fidelity and perseverance in marriage, and about a society that thrives on trust. We have first to understand these values ourselves and then bear witness to the others by both our words and our example. Let us not be swayed by the whims, fads or fashions of the moment. We remind our Catholic faithful that they are called to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed, and to become the light of the world.

It is our duty to engage with other Christian Churches in a respectful and loving dialogue, and to pray together cognizant of our distinctive identities. Distinctiveness, in this context, is the indispensable guarantee against syncretism or confessional relativism which would only lead to unnecessary confusion and to an even greater split.

In this time of great confusion, the Catholic faithful need to study deeply, and hold firmly onto, the Word of God and the truths of their Tradition. It is good to be acquainted with current trends among the new sects mushrooming in the country, but one must first know one's own faith and be adequately equipped to meet the challenge that they represent. Feeling as if sent to re-awaken our faith, they show an aggressiveness which can have an effect only on people whose religious education is superficial. Faith as a simple cultural tradition alone does not prepare us for such a challenge. We need to grow steadfast in what we believe. Strengthened by our faith in God's love, our acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Savior and the Lord, our obedience to the Holy Spirit who guides and enlightens the Church, our faithfulness to the established Christian teaching, united in communion with the Saints, we will then, like the first Christians, be able to enlighten the confused. We must be always ready to show - to those who consider faith as an archaic tradition and pretend to live in a godless world - the reason for our hope (cf. *1 Pt 3:15*), with all gentleness, compassion and reverence, but also without fear or shame. This is what we mean when we exhort you to set your "being different" as an examples for others, in a concrete manner: by staying away from all mischief, oppression, lie, theft, corruption, bribery, avarice, adultery, drunkenness, licentiousness, and egotism.

Embracing the Values of the Gospel

35. Our society - traditionally motivated by, and publicly expressive of, its healthy fear of God - still needs to be renewed by the Spirit of the Gospel, so that creeping "paganism" may not overtake it by stealth. This new call to Evangelization is, therefore, aimed at proclaiming the Good News not only to those who do not know it, but also to those who have heard or embraced it, but are seriously affected by the contemporary secularizing mentality and way of living. For this reason, we are now called to re-evangelize our own society. In this new age, we Christians need again to arm ourselves spiritually and proceed on our journey with courage as true witnesses of Christ.

Our father St Justin de Jacobis, in his evangelical creativity and ability to work in collaboration with others, is a unique example for us. Despite all the difficulties and challenges of his time, he prepared books, formed pious and hard-working priests and catechists, and involved lay people in his evangelizing mission. This is an example we need to follow even today. Closeness to the daily life of the people and to their problems is the great lesson that St. Justin has bequeathed to us, one that our priests and religious will treasure as a means of spiritual growth alongside with the community of the faithful. To transform society from within, while helping to bridge differences, is what commitment to re-evangelization is calling us to, today.

36. In this effort, priority must be given to the Christian formation of our people with a particular focus on specific groups: *the family* should be closely assisted so as to be deeply rooted in its vocation as the cell of the people of God, the small domestic church; *the youth* need an accompaniment that could possibly be organized by age-groups; *the workers* should be offered a form of accompaniment suitable to their life and work conditions; *diocesan and religious seminarians* are expected to have the formation and the training that their future pastoral mission requires.

The Future Journey of our Church

37. The jubilee we have just celebrated has given us an opportunity to reflect on our situation - past and present - and helped us to prepare ourselves for the journey that lies ahead of us. We have been called on to strengthen our Christian spirituality through prayer, witness and service.

The Church as the Family of God

The local Catholic Church in Eritrea is a portion of the Universal Church and, as such, is a small "Family of God". This concept covers a range of specific meanings and purposes: solidarity, mutual love, unity, harmony, fraternity, mutual acceptance, collaboration. cooperation, mutual trust and compassion. It also combines references to the deep traditional roots of the family unit in Eritrea and the style of Christianity as expressed in the African context – a synthesis between Gospel values and “African-ness”. Finally it incorporates a call to faithfulness, on-going renewal and continuity. We strongly believe that all these values should be strengthened, developed, and their validity guaranteed.

In recent times, this spirit has been most evident in the way that Eritrean deportees from Ethiopia and returnees from the Sudan were welcomed home. In this climate, love, reconciliation, and peace will naturally prosper. If we are to succeed in becoming truly a family of God, these are the signs that we must manifest. There can be no doubt that the Church has the potential to offer a substantial contribution to the development of local society, but this will only come about if we are able to turn ourselves into a spiritually healthy and committed family of God. To this end, we must encourage serious dialogue, understanding and trust.

A spirit of harmony and unity will prevail in our Christian Churches if we work with diligence and sincere commitment. Similarly we look forward to stronger links with our Sister Churches through increased activity in the ecumenical sphere, and with our Muslim brothers through inter-faith dialogue. As children of the same Father, it is only right that attitudes of fraternity and

understanding unite us. It is the firm intention of the Catholic Church to contribute so that these relationships may continue to grow and deepen.

As we encourage a spirit of collaboration, understanding and tolerance in the religious sphere, we extend the same invitation to the leaders in the civil, political and government spheres. We strongly urge our government officials and political leaders to develop a spirit of dialogue and sharing among themselves and - at the same time - with the general public, the other parties, the Churches and spiritual leaders, so that our Nation may truly feel itself to be one family.

Witness and Prayer

38. Clear Christian witness and deep spirit of prayer should be both the source of the strength and the distinguishing mark of the Catholic Church. Her members are called to become the "*Salt of the earth and the light of the world*" (cf. *Mt* 5:13-16). However, we have to confess that in our lives - both individual and social - there are signs and evidences that are clearly inconsistent with what we believe about our own calling as witnesses of the Gospel. As already mentioned, in the last few years our society has been witnessing a growing decline of moral values: traditional social structures are being abandoned, marriage is rapidly losing its social and religious significance, abortion and divorce are becoming common-place and the practice of witchcraft is on the increase. So far, many Christians have had little or nothing to say in response. Even worse, growing numbers among them are being trapped by the prevailing trend. This is clearly a far cry from the vocation of believers who claim to be steeped in a Christian tradition, to be enlightened by the person and the teachings of Christ, to be partakers of the Eucharistic mystery. The time has come for us to take stock of our situation and make a radical examination of conscience. We must ask ourselves how we have reacted to the precepts of the Gospel, the teachings of the Church and the thrust of our Christian spirituality. We need conversion. The first step is to return to the practice of regular prayer. The second is to put into practice the most fundamental law of Christian life - namely love of God and neighbor (cf. *Mk* 12:30-31; *Jn* 13:34; *1Cor* 13). Prayer and thanksgiving make up the essence of our response to the God who revealed himself to us in Christ. Prayer involves focusing oneself - heart and soul - on God, believing and proclaiming that he is the source, purpose, support and sustenance of our life. Jesus insists that we pray (cf. *Mk* 11:24; *Mt* 7:7-11; *Lk* 9:13) as he did himself - conversing with the Father (cf. *Lk* 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 10:21) sometimes in thanksgiving and blessing (cf. *Mt* 11:25-27; *Lk* 10:21-22) and, at other times, in appeal and imploration (cf. *Mk* 14:33-36; 5:78). Christian life without prayer is unthinkable. Prayer is about being vitally connected with God and with our vocation to holiness and to evangelization. Liturgy, the prayers of our Christian tradition, but above all the Holy Eucharist, are the *loci* where our prayer life reaches its apex. It is there that the faithful in our parish communities and family-groups should return to renew and refresh their spiritual energies.

A Serving Church

39. "*We present ourselves once again to this country, as it struggles to come to terms with its new historical position, in the way assigned us by the Gospel. Our particular mission is to serve*" (*Peace and Progress*, p. 37). A Church that effectively wants to bear witness to its faith can only do so through her service. Like the deacons of the New Testament (cf. *Acts* 6:1-7), the Church has an

obligation to serve the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the victims of war. As Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, so we are called to serve one another. Let those in the family - husband, wife, children - practice mutual service with love and joy so that authentic service may be rendered in the church and in society. If properly planned and implemented through suitable means, this service can become for us the best way of fulfilling our social responsibilities. Work - as the Old and New Testaments indicate - is a vocation, a mission and a service (cf. *Mk* 6:3; *Mt* 13:55; *Hos* 20:9; *2 Th* 3:6-12). *It is by* developing a proper attitude towards work that we achieve the betterment of ourselves, the development of a self-reliant Church and the improvement of the world to which we belong.

CONCLUSION

40. We conclude this our letter with a word of encouragement to all people of good will in this country: as we treasure the lessons from our remote and recent past history, let us strive to develop a true spirit of peace, reconciliation, harmony and collaboration, now and in the future. We strongly recommend that an extra effort be made to create a society where all the members may find tranquility, stability and safety; where our children and youth may grow up in an atmosphere of serenity; where adults may find fulfillment in their work and joy in their families; and where our elders may find shelter and warmth in their twilight years. We place our plans and commitments under the protection and the guidance of God, for, only through his wisdom, can people learn to respect, serve and guide each other.

- We call on you, *the Catholic faithful*, who are under our particular pastoral care, "*So that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*" (1 Pt 2:9), "*Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtues, virtue with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with devotion, devotion with mutual affection, mutual affection with love*" (2 Pt 1:5-7). In this way, by strengthening yourselves, you can make a positive contribution in the society to which you belong and bear witness to the Gospel.

- We call on you, *our Catholic families*. Your vocation is to become true and authentic "*Domestic churches*". Let the light of the Holy Spirit guide you and make you a source of light for others. May you find strength and courage in the covenant of our Faith and inspiration in the example of the Holy Family in Nazareth.

- To you, *our Catholic youth*, we say: as Simon, in embracing Jesus, was able to glimpse into the bright future contained in his promise of salvation, so we too see ourselves, our future and our hope reflected in you: "*Let no-one have contempt for your youth*" (1 Tm 4:12). Be steadfast in your faith, but first find it and embrace it. "*You will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith, and of the sound teaching you have followed*" (1 Tm 4:6).

- We call on you, *the clergy*, our primary collaborators in the pastoral care of our flock: we acknowledge your perseverance, service and commitment. We assure you that "*When the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive an unfading crown of glory*" (1 Pt 5:4) and recommend you to the Lord's care so that you may remain always firm in your vocation of priestly service. We also recommend our seminarians to God's care and call on them: follow your vocation conscientiously,

bathed in the light of God, so that one day soon you may worthily take up the baton of committed service to God's people.

- *To those in religious life we say:* you have consecrated your lives to make life itself holy and to bring the lost sheep back into the fold. You have embraced the evangelical counsels of poverty, obedience, and chastity for the sake of God's kingdom: continue living your consecration generously and joyfully, with your torches lit, your lamps bright, illuminating both the Church and the society to which you belong. May your lives be a spotless example to others.

May Our Lady continue to intercede for us with her Son
so that our people may soon find true and lasting peace.

May the LORD bless you and keep you!
May the LORD let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you!
May the LORD show you his face and bring you peace!
(Nb 6:24-26).

Abune Zekarias Yohannes
Abune Lucas Milesi
Abune Tesfamariam Biddho

Eparch of Asmara
Eparch of Barentu
Eparch of Keren