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Council of Catholic Hierarchs - Eritrea

Asmara 26 May, 2021

Date: _____

Ref. No. _____

To the Hon. Mr Semere Reesom
Minister of Education
Asmara - Eritrea

Re: Nationalization or closure of Catholic Church schools in Eritrea.

Mr. Minister,

"Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:2).

Since its establishment by Jesus Christ more than two thousand years ago, the Catholic Church has always steadfastly remained true to its mandate to serve man/woman, in light of the fact that its mission issues from its identity: as its founder and Lord Jesus Christ, Saviour of the world, did, so the Church has always and actively taken to heart the spiritual and material problems and needs of the people, without any distinction of religion, culture or language. In faithful adherence to this principle, this portion of the Catholic Church in Eritrea too has carried out its work, and continues to do so, always at the side of the people, in times of prosperity as well as in those of adversity.

It is well known how in 2018 secondary schools belonging to this Church were confiscated. Recently, procedures have begun for the confiscation or, alternatively, the closure of our remaining educational institutions, from pre-schools to intermediate primary schools, scattered throughout the country.

We mention some of them, as examples:

NAME	LOCATION	SITUATION	ARCH/EPARCHY
1. Primary School "Medhanie Alem"	Assab	?	Eparchy of Segheneyti
2. Pre-school "Medhanie Alem"	Assab	?	Eparchy of Segheneyti
3. Primary School "SS.Pietro & Paolo"	Addi Fennè	Nationalized	Eparchy of Segheneyti
4. Primary School "Chidane Mehret"	Ala La'elay	Nationalized	Eparchy of Segheneyti
5. Primary School "Aster'io Maryam"	May Harasat	Nationalized	Eparchy of Segheneyti
6. Intermediate "B. Ghebre Michael"	Tekelabi	Nationalized	Eparchy of Segheneyti
7. Pre-school "Medhanie Alem"	Ghinda	Nationalized	Archeparchy of Asmara
8. Pre-school "S. Daniele Comboni"	Embatkalla	Closed	Archeparchy of Asmara
9. Pre-school "S. Daniele Comboni"	Afabet	Closed	Eparchy of Keren

The following primary schools have not yet been nationalized or closed; however, according to instructions received, they will follow suit: 1 in the Eparchy of Barentù; 16 in the Eparchy of Cheren; 2 in the Archeparchy of Asmara.

Since the measures already taken, or about to be taken in this regard by the government authorities, do violate in principle and in fact its rights and are explicitly detrimental to the most elementary principles of justice, the Catholic Church firmly denounces these measures, inasmuch as:

1. they prevent her from offering, as a legitimate religious institution and as a community of Eritrean citizens, her services to the integral development of the Eritrean people;
2. they deny families the right to avail themselves of the opportunity to send their children to a school of their own free choice;
3. it uses force both as a principle and as a method, rather than dialogue and mutual understanding;
4. Just as they have done in the past in the process of forcibly closing down some and nationalizing other health centres serving the people with exemplary dedication and without any distinction of religion, ethnicity or group, today too the government authorities continue to try to make the people believe that the concerned health and educational institutions *belong* (!) to the people, and not to the Church. This is an open distortion of the truth, designed to confuse the people. And it is right and fitting that we, the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, promptly denounce the indisputable falsehood of the above misrepresentation. Let it be said once again, in no uncertain terms and without hesitation whatsoever, to friends and non-friends alike: the schools and clinics confiscated or closed, or due to undergo the same fate, are the legitimate property of the Catholic Church, built, established and organised in the supreme and exclusive interest of serving the people. In the same vein, we declare that she will never cease to claim the return of the social institutions forcibly taken away from her, as well as the right to carry out all the services of which she has been deprived. It is of no small importance too that, while some of these institutions are placed outside the perimeters of religious houses, others are located within the precincts of those houses.
5. Finally, the Catholic Church wishes to emphasise that all the services It offers to the people are not, nor are they meant to be, competitive with, or substitute for, what the State does in the same areas. Our aim is eminently collaborative and subsidiary, animated as it is only by the desire to offer the population greater opportunities of choice and fruition. We have already said, and now we repeat, that: contributing to the integral development of the human person and of the people is, for the Church, a task which is inseparably linked to, and deriving from, her being sent by the Lord Jesus Christ.

We, pastors and leaders of the Catholic Church in Eritrea, are deeply saddened and intimately hurt by the measures that the government is adopting by force, or has already done so, taking away from us the educational and health institutions that legitimately belong to us, thus severely restricting our service to the country. These measures we hereby formally denounce and firmly reject.

Finally, we wish to reaffirm with equal vigour that the Catholic Church in Eritrea, today as it has always done in the past and will do in the future, upholds and defends, as its inspiring principles, the paths of dialogue, mutual understanding, peace and mutual respect.

May the Lord God bless our people and our Country.

We, the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea

(Official translation from the original in Tigrinya)

