

Solemn Euphoria The Consecration of an Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Canada

By Grant LeMarquand

READERS and television viewers who are dependent on the western media for information about Ethiopia probably imagine that land as a place of famine and war. The recent history of suffering is the only Ethiopian history many westerners know.

But there is another Ethiopia, an Ethiopia rich in culture and tradition, a civilization which for centuries has been nurtured by the faith of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Christianity came to Ethiopia from Egypt in the Fourth century and received a fresh infusion of life from Syria in the fifth and sixth centuries. During some periods the church has been a shaper of the cultural and political life of the country. At other times believers have had to face opposition and persecution at the hands of the state. Today the church claims upwards of twenty million adherents.² At present it is in schism, one patriarch living in Ethiopia and another in Kenya.³ The Ethiopian churches in the western hemisphere are loyal to the patriarch resident in Kenya.

In recent years Ethiopian Orthodox Christians have been forced from their homeland by famine and by political oppression. Many are making their homes in the cities of Europe and North America, where they are founding parishes and preserving their church traditions.

Slightly more than a decade ago, a congregation of Ethiopian believers founded a parish in Toronto. "In Toronto the first Ethiopian parish opened in a tiny storefront at 425 Vaughn Road on Palm Sunday (Hosanna), 27 April 1986," a contemporary writer notes. "It is a congregation composed largely of Ethiopians and some Jamaican Rastifarians. There are 5,000 Ethiopians in Toronto."⁴

After outgrowing the storefront location, the parish worshiped in a second temporary home in the struggling Anglican parish of St. Mary the Virgin and St. Cyrian's. Finally, in February of 1997, the congregation was able to move into their own premises.⁵ The newly purchased building — a former warehouse — is situated in an industrial area of North York, a Toronto suburb.

The consecration

Consecrations of Ethiopian Orthodox churches are not accomplished quickly and easily. The brochure outlining the program of worship events for the consecration of Saint Mary Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo church optimistically announced that services were to begin on Friday, 21 February 1997, at 5:00 p.m., and to conclude with a lunch from noon until 2:00 p.m. the next day. In fact, worship began somewhat earlier than announced and continued for some hours later than scheduled.

Shortly before 5:00 P.M. on 21 February, a small group of resident and visiting Ethiopian Orthodox priests, together with three archbishops visiting from various parts of the United States, gathered in the newly acquired property of Saint Mary's to prepare to consecrate the building. The interior of this former warehouse was still in the process of being converted into a worship space. The black-robed clergy slowly chanted the service called *Wazema* as members of the congregation gradually arrived. Some worshipers sat (women on one side, most dressed in traditional white dresses, men on the other) listening, meditating, and sometimes adding their voices to the chants. Most worshipers removed their shoes, especially if they came near to the red-carpeted altar area. Some greeted one another or chatted quietly.

In the meantime, other members of the parish were engaged in practical tasks. They tested the newly installed sound system, organized chairs, carried sacred furniture (red rugs, a pulpit, a lectern, red curtains) in and arranged it around the sanctuary. A vacuum was brought in to give the altar area a once-over. One man perched on a step-ladder in the centre of the sanctuary to add some finishing touches to the paint on the angel-adorned screen surrounding the altar, which houses the central and most distinctive object in Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, the *Tobot*, the Ark of the Covenant.

The music of the chants in this preparation service was accompanied by the deep sounds of large skin-covered drums (*Kabero*). Some chants employed a small percussion instrument (*Senasen*), which sounds like a combination between a cymbal and a tambourine. The words of the hymns were in Geez (Ethiopic), the traditional liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox.⁶ Sometimes the clergy swayed, bowed, or clapped to the rhythm of the music — movements which all have symbolic significance. As the chanting continued, some of the tunes evoked ululations from the women's side of the slowly increasing congregation.⁷ The songs implored God's power, asking for blessings to come on the church and the congregation.

By 6:00 p.m. the congregation had increased to over two hundred. Soon the tempo of the chanting increased. Clapping and ululations became more frequent, the priests sometimes spinning as they sang. The sense of expectation increased. At 6:30 the singing stopped and the clergy withdrew to robe for the consecration. When they reemerged, their black robes were covered by shimmering silver or gold copes. At the entry of the clergy, the congregation — consisting of three or four hundred worshipers — rose to the sounds of ululations, ringing of bells, and excited clapping.

Each of the visiting archbishops had a consecrating element: one a jar of oil, one a thurible, and the other holy water. As the clergy and the congregation sang, the bishops wandered around the altar area anointing, sprinkling, and censuring liberally. Holy water was also sprinkled on the worshipers. Liturgical books were opened from which prayers and Scripture readings were read and sung.

The high point

The high point of the ceremony was reached when the head priest — robed in a rich red robe embroidered with gold and silver images of crosses, leaves, flowers, and angels, which covered him from head to toe — emerged in a cloud of incense and to the welcome of ringing bells and excited ululations. A procession around the entire worship area was then punctuated by singing and by the chanting of Scripture. Biblical passages included *Exodus 15* (the Song of Moses), *Isaiah 6* (Isaiah's vision of the Lord), *Hebrews 10* (a text extolling the priesthood of Christ), and *Revelation 4* (a scene of heavenly worship). The content of the chanting also included sections from the ancient commentary tradition of the Ethiopian church.

The procession was not a hurried affair, and it was not clear that the route was planned out in advance, since short, quiet discussions would sometimes occur among the clergy about where they should go and what should be done next. No one was bothered by these pauses, as the sacredness of the ceremony did not seem to be dependent on the rites being accomplished in a spirit of formalism.

The second day of the consecration began early. From 4:00 to 8:00 in the morning, the clergy gathered again to chant a service called *Mahlet*, Saint Yared's Traditional Chanting. At 8:00 the Divine Liturgy began. As with the night before, the congregation and guests arrived gradually. By the end of the eucharist at about 11:00, almost a thousand worshipers had squeezed into the church. They were of all ages, in approximately equal numbers of men and women.

The first part of the service centered on the Word. In all Ethiopian eucharistic service only the New Testament is read, although some Psalms are chanted. Four kinds of passages are customary — one from a Pauline epistle, one from a "general" letter, a lesson from the *Acts*, and one from a gospel. Following the Scripture readings, the sermon was delivered by a visiting archbishop, who reflected on the Magnificat. Teaching during the liturgy is one of the few modern innovations the Ethiopian Church has adopted; traditionally teaching would have taken place after the liturgy.⁸

The anaphora seemed to a visitor to be exceptionally long. Actually, in light of the time pressure demanded by the many activities associated with the consecration, one of the shorter of the fourteen possible eucharistic prayers had been chosen for this occasion.⁹ The people received the communion in both kinds, the acting deacon distributing the wine, the priest the bread. The sense of reverence during the reception was evident. Some worshipers prostrated themselves on the floor of the sanctuary before partaking and then received with arms crossing their chests. After reception the communicants returned

to their seats with hands covering their mouths. For the rest of the day, those who had communicated would refrain from washing their hands or brushing their teeth.

Songs and speeches

After the liturgy a choir, which included members from visiting parishes from around Canada and the United States, sang Amharic hymns accompanied by vigorous drumming. This was followed by an hour and a half of speeches, mostly in Amharic, but some in English. Much of this time was spent welcoming visitors, many of whom presented gifts of money or objects to be used in worship. In addition to Ethiopian Orthodox visitors, representatives of various denominations were warmly welcomed. The mayor of North York was also present and was afforded a brief opportunity to speak.

The speech of the chairman of the board of trustees noted the cultural location in which the new parish finds itself. Reflecting on the fact that the sanctuary curtains were adorned with the flags of both Ethiopia and Canada, he spoke with gratitude about the new home his people had found in Canada. But he also spoke about the desire of the parish to preserve their traditions and culture. He expressed the hope that just as the Orthodox Church had helped to shape the life of the Ethiopian people, so Saint Mary's parish would make a positive contribution in their new home in Canada. A visitor reflected that time alone will tell how much they will be able to preserve and pass on to their children, and how much the community will have to adapt to their new home in the secular west.

The official Anglican representative at the service brought greetings from the primate, the bishop of Toronto, and from the Anglican bishop who was formerly the Archbishop of Canterbury's official representative to the Oriental Orthodox churches.¹⁰ The representative also expressed the hope that good relations would continue between Saint Mary's and the Anglican Church of Canada. He noted that the Anglican church had already contributed to the Ethiopian parish in various ways, including the loan of space for worship and the establishment of a scholarship fund to encourage interchange with the Oriental Orthodox.

The ceremonies concluded with a final procession, with robed clergy, choirs, and with much drumming and chanting. They culminated in a ceremony of song and movement called the *Woreb*, a kind of dance before the altar.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity evident in these two days of worship is a unique combination of word and symbol, song and movement, which expresses a deep joy and a profound awareness of the holiness of God. A sense of the sacred was evident in the elaborate ritual which somehow managed to be almost entirely devoid of formalism. Here was ceremony without pomp, order without pretension — holiness, that is, with drums. Here is a tradition which exults in God's gracious and holy presence, expressing its joy with the music and art and movement of an ancient but living African culture. The Church which for so many centuries shaped and was shaped by Ethiopian culture is a living and joyful witness to the creative possibilities of the in cultururation of the gospel.

¹ "Tewahedo" is an Ethiopic term meaning "the two are one," a reflection of the Christological emphasis of the Ethiopian Church.

² For an overview of the history and distinctive features of the Ethiopian Orthodox, see Colin Battell, "The Ethiopians," in *Light from the East: A Symposium on the Oriental Orthodox and Assyrian Churches*, edited by Henry Hill (Anglican Book Centre, 1988) pp. 62-81.

³ See "Patriarch Abuna Paulos of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," *The Living Church*, 14 November 1993, p. 8.

⁴ Henry Hill, "Conclusion," in *Light from the East*, p. 161. Since Hill wrote these words in 1988 the Ethiopian population in Toronto has increased substantially.

⁵ Andrew Cash, "Ethiopian gain leaves Anglicans at a loss: Africans outgrow their pews, Anglicans try to survive," *Now*, 20-26 February 1997, p. 25.

⁶ Translations of some Ethiopian prayers and hymns can be found in *Let Us Pray to the Lord: A Collection of Prayers from the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Traditions*, edited by Georges Lemopoulos (WCC, 1996) and in *Liturgy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Extracts)*, edited by Marcus Daoud, published in Addis Ababa in 1959.

⁷ Frequently encountered in spontaneous African worship, ululation is a high, wavering sound made by the voice box and the tongue and used to express a deep emotion, usually joy or grief.

⁸ On the use of Scripture in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition see especially Roger Cowley, *Ethiopian Biblical Interpretation: A Study in Exegetical Tradition and Hermeneutics* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications No. 38, Cambridge University Press, 1988); G. A. Mikre-Selassie, "The Bible and its Canon in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," *The Bible Translator* 44, no. 1 (1993) pp. 111-23; and Miguel A. Garcia, "Ethiopian Traditional Biblical Interpretation," *African Christian Studies* 12, no. 2 (1996) pp. 1-8.

⁹ See E. Hammerschmidt, *Studies in the Ethiopian Anaphoras* (Berliner Byzantinistische Arbeiten xxv; Berlin, 1961).

¹⁰ There has now been almost a century of warm and cordial relations between the Anglican Communion and the Ethiopian Orthodox. See the following Lambeth Conference Resolutions: 1908, Resolutions 63 & 64; 1920, Resolutions 21 & 22; 1930, Resolution 36; 1968, Resolution 57; 1988, Resolution 5. In the various published proceedings of the Anglican Consultative Council see: ACC-5 (1981), Resolution 6; ACC-6 (1984), Resolution 27; ACC-7 (1987), Resolution 14; ACC-9 (1993), Resolution 4.

The Rev. Dr. Grant LeMarquand is Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Mission at Trinity. Dr. LeMarquand has written and edited numerous articles and books, including Why Haven't You Left? Letters from the Sudan and A Comparative Study of the Story of the Bleeding Woman in North Atlantic and African Contexts. He is executive editor of Trinity's new theological journal, the Trinity Journal for Theology & Ministry and international editor of Anglican and Episcopal History.