

Celebrating the Life & Legacy of Abune Antonios the Third Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church

By Hailemariam Tesfai-March 19, 2022 Los Angeles

It is with utmost pride that we are assembled here today in Los Angeles, California to celebrate the life and legacy of our great religious leader, his Holiness Abune Antonios the Third Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church. Abune Antonios who inspired us with a legacy of genuine religious leadership and patriotic duty by standing against the evil regime oppressing the Eritrean people and disturbing the peace and stability of our region. Abune Antonios who dedicated himself to God, and to the Orthodox Tewahdo Church since the young age of 5, kept his promise to defending the righteous teachings and dedicated himself to serve the disadvantaged, and not the powerful carrying the sword. Since his departure, much had been said about this legacy and his contributions to the Church, and the people. Therefore, today I will be focusing on the unfinished business he left us to complete. The messages of good governance, justice, equality, unity, fraternity, civility, independence and modernity.

1. Good Governance: The absence of duly elected leaders, who are free of corruption, and the abusive security apparatus is ailing the continent of Africa. The constitutional practice of good governance is key to the socioeconomic prosperity, peace, security and political stability of the whole continent. Good government respects human rights as well as the separation of religion and state. Good governance encompasses a responsible, transparent, inclusive, equitable and participatory government accountable to the people.

2. Unity and Fraternity: The regime in Eritrea, used the differences in society to divide people along religious and regional lines. For every political move, the government uses one religion against the other by introducing policies that seem to favor one over the other. A war or a military operation with covert underground messages expressing that it is benefiting one's religion or awraja/state and shifting periodically to use the prior action to destroy the other side. This has to stop because people are taking turns to support the government one after the other. The major religions, and various congregations have to forge a permanent cooperative platform of conversation to address their differences. The sacrifices made by both His Holiness Abune Antonios, and the late Abona Haj Musa Mohamed Nur demonstrated the unity and fraternity of both religions and will

serve as a symbol of solidarity to institutionalize the separation of religion and state in the future free and democratic Eritrea.

3. Civility-Good Manners Abune Antonios has taught us by his actions. He lived a life of love, humility, selflessness, kindness, and respect for people's religious rights. The sacrifices made by both Abune Atonios and the late Haj Musa Mohamed Nur has created a symbol of resistance to the dictatorship and signifies the peoples position in the separation of religion and state in the future free and democratic Eritrea. Through peaceful means of struggle and well-crafted statements they shook the foundation of tyranny in Eritrea. Their legacy teach us the need for humility, civility and decency in our day to day communications. The social media on both sides of the conflict in Eritrea, is full of conversations with vulgar expressions including the use of vulgar words and statements. Freedom of expression doesn't mean you are free to say anything you want without accountability for its harmful consequences.

4. Independent Religious Institution: In the Middle Ages, and until recently in our region, after the rank of king, the hierarchy was the nobles, and the knights who used the clergy to empower themselves by integrating the church structure and function with the ruling regimes. This history of interdependence encouraged the government of Eritrea to intervene in the religious affairs first by funding the Orthodox Church to ensure its loyalty. Abune Mekarios, rightfully and strongly, opposed the government involvement with his historic statement to the "president" "*Atatyena ember Aythangrena*" (*help us walk, but don't carry us on your shoulders*". The government insisted on funding a construction of Church Administrative building, and then started to forcefully collect or share alms donated to the church by its followers. When the church started to disagree with the state policies related to religions, the government demanded the funds given to them be returned to the Treasury Department. The church agreed, and sent invitation letters to its parishioners for a meeting without telling them that the meeting was for fundraising purposes. The government security traced every letter and asked the church what the purpose of the meeting was. The church told them it is fundraising campaign to pay the debt owed to the government. The security office warned them not to do any fundraising on that day. The church administration cancelled the fundraising, and started paying the money on a monthly basis. In the future democratic Eritrea, the land and property of the religious institutions must be protected. And, there should be a clear separation of religion and state, and the rights of all

religious denominations must be equal and constitutionally guaranteed.

5. Modernity & Universality: Education plays a key role in the socio-economic and political change of a nation. According to unverified data, Eritrea has 76.5% literacy rate in 2018. Elementary school students, dream of leaving the country to avoid Sawa indefinite military services, high school and higher education is history. Traditionally women are tasked with child-rearing and caring are more disadvantaged receiving none or lesser education. These statistics are reflected in our religious institutions. Churches and mosques were the only sources of literacy for hundreds of years. The church now have literate and educated followers dependent upon the clergy for guidance. Abune Merkarios who is currently serving as the acting Patriarch, clearly understood the challenges and had a plan to modernize the church. But, he was intentionally exiled to put the church under full control of the government. As demonstrated by the Archbishop of the Eritrean Catholic Church during the "Hawkha Abelo? *ሐወኝ ኣቤሉ*" "Where is your brother?" Movement courageously declared from inside Eritrea to inspire the Eritrean people to demand answers to the whereabouts of their disappeared children, the regime in Eritrea did not react by jailing the Bishops fearing global sanctions. Modern churches structured with advanced hierarchy of administration connected to their international headquarters are more powerful than ancient churches with lesser or no resource for advancement. The role of Abune Mekarios in the advocacy for the Patriarch with the priest orthodox churches was instrumental in exposing the authoritarian government to the world. I hope his dreams come true in post PFDJ Eritrea to see an independent and modernized orthodox church.

In Conclusion:

I hope Abune Antonios' dreams come true in a post-pfdj Eritrea so that members of the church can enjoy an independent and modernized orthodox church, and for all Eritreans to freely practice their respective religions, and administer and defend their religious institutions using the rights guaranteed by a constitution.

Victory to the legacy of Abune Antonios

Victory to the Eritrean People

God Bless our nation!