

Ein Gespräch mit Mgr. Menghisteab Tesfamaria, Erz- bischof von Eritrea



Dieses Gespräch gibt es unter folgender Adresse auch als Video:

<http://www.kathtalk.ch/Video-Mgr-Menghisteab-Tesfamaria-Erzbischof-Eritrea>

Hallo und willkommen, ich begrüße Sie ganz herzlich zu Kathtalk. Mein heutiger Gast ist Bischof Menghisteab. Er ist Erzbischof von Asmara, der Hauptstadt von Eritrea. Er ist zurzeit unterwegs in Europa und macht auch einen Zwischenhalt in der Schweiz, wo er die katholisch-eritreischen Gemeinden besucht.

Excellence, welcome to Switzerland. And thank you for the time you give us here for this interview. Can you just tell me: How long have you been bishop of Asmara and what is the experience you have done with the people in your diocese?

I have been bishop since September 16th 2001, so it will be exactly 10 years next September. Since then I have tried to encourage vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, and to visit the parishes and also to do construction work with churches and rectories and also schools and kindergartens.

And can you tell us something about the importance of the faith for the Catholics in Eritrea. How important it is for them? And how do they practise it in the daily life?

Faith is very important for our people in general. I would say even for Moslems and Christians in general, God has a central place. And for Catholics, I think we have all the spirituality if you wish of the Universal Catholic Church, and for us belonging to the Eastern Tradition, the Eastern Rite, we have a special devotion to Mary, for instance, to Our Lady. Our parents, our priests and aunts, all encourage us to pray to Our Lady, to say the rosary and to always be close to her wherever we are, in church or outside of church.

Would you also say that there is a strong connection between religion and culture in Eritrea?

Yes, because Christianity reached Eritrea in the fourth century, practically from the time of the New Testament. And so, after so many centuries, it is even difficult to distinguish between the faith and the culture at times.

Now with modernity, with secularism and materialism, there is beginning to be a separation, but a little, but most of our people really are God-fearing and God is in their faith as well as in their culture. The expressions of the faith we have are also cultural heritage.

So on Sunday you would say that people go to church, that the churches are full?

Yes, people up to now, all people who are not disabled or sick go to church and receive the sacraments as much as possible. So it is in a way an act of faith but it is also a tradition to go to Church on Sunday.

You have in Eritrea also a special rite called the Ge'ez rite. Can you tell us what is special, what are special elements of this rite? Also compared to the Latin rite that we have here in Switzerland?

Well, the Church in general has many traditions. Even if it is one church it has many traditions, many cultural expressions of Faith. Since the beginning of the Church there have developed different rites, like the Latin rite, the Alexandrian rite, the Byzantine rite, the Armenian rite, the Chaldean rite, and so there are more than 20 rites in the church. And one of these rites is the one based on the Alexandrian rite after the Church the Patriarchate of Alexandria. Our Church in Eritrea as well as Ethiopia have developed and adopted this Ge'ez Rite. Geez is the ancient liturgical language we have, from which the spoken language of Tigrinya and also Amharic derive and we celebrate mostly in Ge'ez, in the language, now, though it is translated into the local languages, as well. This rite is very rich in symbolism, is very rich in liturgical expressions. We have for instance seventeen Eucharistic prayers – in the Greek terminology they are called anaphoras. And these are dedicated to the apostles, the one most common is the anaphora of the apostles. Then we have the anaphora of our Lord and then we have two anaphoras dedicated to our lady. And then there is the one of St. Cyril, Basil, Gregorius and so on and so forth. These are very rich, both liturgically and theologically. Then we have the liturgy of the hours also and liturgical year both temporal and santoral, which are very rich in a way and it gives an identity to the Church.

The Eritrean Orthodox Church has also the Ge'ez rite. Is it the same rite or are there also some differences?

The same rite. Some little differences of expression, practically, especially in liturgy it is the same rite.

Of course, in practice sometimes, for instance, as Catholics we have the so called low mass. That is the one that is not chanted, that is not sung. On weekdays we have this mass. Then we use daily mass. For the Orthodox it is only on special occasions.

And then some other small differences are there, for sure.

You have also special liturgical music, you have special instruments. Can you tell us something about that?

Yes, the liturgical music is inspired by Old Testament tradition in a way. We have this type of experts in that music. They are experts in music and in musical science and so on and so forth. As instruments we have the drum and then we have the sistrum to keep the time. We have the praying stick which serves to lean on it, because we stand for long hours and we need some support. And then also it is used for the liturgical dance, you know following David who was dancing in front of the Ark of the Covenant. In Jerusalem, he was dancing for the lord. We have the same style of dancing during the liturgy, Not during the mass, but before mass and in the eve, the vigil, during the night, we have very nice chanting as a preparation for the Eucharist or a continuation of the Eucharist also.

And you as Bishop or the priests they are also dancing?

The priests they join. They may join. Usually these special experts are the ones who dance. The music experts, because it is not easy. Not everyone is able to do it. Some priests who are well acquainted with the chanting may join. But not everyone can do it.

You have also a special liturgical calendar. Why do you have an other calendar than we have here in Switzerland?

Well, we follow the Julian Calendar in a way. At the beginning all the Church was following this calendar, but then with St. Gregory the Great, he changed it and it became the Gregorian Calendar for the Latin rite, for the West. We remained with the first calendar and we have also a new beginning of the year in our tradition. It starts on the 11th of September like also in the East, in Israel and other countries. That is our time of harvest. New life starts during that time, flowers - like for you, the springtime, for us it is at the beginning of September. We have this beautiful place, sign of life.

And Christmas is not on the 25th of December, but on the 7th of January, which was the original Epiphany for all the Church. Because the stress that is given in the East is more the Epiphany, the revelation of God to humanity. And so it remained there and we celebrate Christmas during this time.

Can you tell me – because of these differences, these calendar differences – are there any practical problems for Eritreans here in Switzerland? That they have later Christmas for example? I'm thinking of someone working somewhere and for us here it's a normal working day and for him it's Christmas.

Yes, of course, as any migrant. When you go away from home, you'd like to remember, to be attached to your roots in a way. So I'm sure they might find it difficult. They would like to be home for Christmas, but they can't usually. So they will find it a little difficult to adapt, but they will manage, I'm sure.

What is important according to me is that it is important also to Eritrean Catholics to understand and to know the Church that has welcomed them here. The Church that follows the Latin rite. Because we have one faith, it is one Church with different expressions. And so I am encouraging my Eritrean Catholics here. I am asking them to know better, to make an effort to know and integrate also into the Church where they have come without losing their ancient and rich tradition.

Would you suggest something to the responsible of the Catholic Church here in Switzerland? Something special for the Eritrean Catholics living here in Switzerland?

Nothing different from what the Church has said since the Second Vatican Council - that is wherever these Catholics, especially the Eastern Catholics go, the Church is asking the host Churches to respect their tradition. It is a richness that comes also to the West in a way. So Pope John Paul II expressed it beautifully. He says: There are the two lungs of the Church. The Catholics in Switzerland have two lungs instead of only one. I think mutual respect and whenever possible to allow the Catholics of Eastern rite or the Ge'ez rite to express themselves in their liturgy of the origin.

At the same time though it's good that they make an effort to understand and participate in the parishes close to their homes and their work.

Excellence, thank you very much for this interview.

Auch Ihnen, liebe Zuschauer und Zuschauerinnen, danke fürs Dabeisein. Ich würde mich freuen, wenn Sie beim nächsten KathTalk wieder dabei sind!

Mit Mgr. Menghisteb Tesfamaria, Erzbischof von Eritrea, unterhielt sich Marco Schmid, Nationaldirektor der migratio.

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