BOOK REVIEW - GEDLI HEYWET BETSU’E ABUNE ABRAHA FRANCOIS
Seid, Kebreab (Rev)

GEDLI HEYWET BETSU’E ABUNE ABRAHA FRANCOIS
NBietekrstyann nMe’emenann ztewefeye hyab AmlaK
i.e. LIFE HISTORY OF ABUNE ABRAHA FRANCOIS: A Gift of God to the Church and the Faithful, On the 10th Anniversary of His Death), Frankfurt, Germany, 2010

Abune Abraha’s Dates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Diocese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Apr 1918</td>
<td></td>
<td>Born</td>
<td>Asmara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Mar 1944</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>Ordained Priest</td>
<td>Priest of Asmara (Ethiopian), Eritrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Apr 1961</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>Appointed Bishop</td>
<td>Bishop of Asmara (Ethiopian), Eritrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Oct 1961</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>Ordained Bishop</td>
<td>Bishop of Asmara (Ethiopian), Eritrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Jul 1984</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>Resigned Bishop</td>
<td>Bishop of Asmara (Ethiopian), Eritrea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Mar 2000</td>
<td>82.0</td>
<td>Died</td>
<td>Bishop Emeritus of Asmara (Ethiopian), Eritrea</td>
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</table>

Abune Abraha Francois is definitely a very unique figure in the Church of Eritrea, and of Ethiopia for that matter. Having lived in the 1918 – 2000 span of time, he experienced the Italian Colonization of Eritrea (1896 – 1941), the British Administration (1941 – 1952), the Eritrean – Ethiopian Federation (1952 – 62), the absorption of Eritrea into Ethiopia by the Emperor Haile Sellassie (1962), the thirty years of the Eritrean struggle for independence, and finally the Eritrean independence (1991) in his last 9 years, even though he was already out of Eritrea and in need of continuous medical attention. So many changes in the history of the Country and neighbouring Ethiopia.

Likewise, in the Church of Eritrea, Bishop Abraha saw the Missionary Church under the Italian Vicars Apostolic (Bp. Camillo Carrara and Celestino Cattaneo) grow towards a self asserting local Church with the formation of the Ethiopian Ordinariate (1936) with Abune Kidanemariam Kassa, the Exarchate with Abune Yaqob Gebreyesus and Abune Asratemariam Yemiru (1958 -60), in Eritrea and Abune Kidanemariam in Ethiopia. From then he was given the shepherd’s staff to run the Eritrean Church for the next 23 years. During his stewardship, he took part at the Vatican II Council and to a few Synods in Rome, he was a founding member of the Ethiopian Bishops Conference and the AMECEA (East African Countries Bishops Conference), as well as the SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences in Africa and Madagascar). He taught philosophy and theology to his seminarians and the religious clerics at the Abune Selama Kessatie Berhan Philhosphico-theological Institute which he was so instrumental in setting up. Before his bishopric he started also evening classes at the Kidane Mehret Cathedral for workers. During this time he introduced to the Catholic Action Movement (ICATE). Perhaps his main contribution to the Eritrean and Ethiopian churches was his single handed struggle to bring the Geez Liturgy to its genuine splendour, by liberating it of the spurious elements inherited from the proximity with the Roman Liturgy.

His personal and work experience is equally unique within the Eritrean context. His father of Sudanese origins (Kordufan) and his mother of Ethiopian descent met and were married in Keren (Eritrea). Both died of the plague after the WWI, leaving the two years old Abraha orphan at the care of the St. Agnes and St. Michael orphanages run by the Daughters of St. Ann under the Apostolic Vicariate of Eritrea. Bishop Abraha completed his academic studies in Rome at the Urbanian University. His first assignment as a young priest with two degrees, was at the Seminary in Addis Ababa where he worked for as an instructor, and therefore was able to speak Amharic. He returned to Rome as Dean of Studies of the Collegio Etiopico at the Vatican, started the Ethiopian service at the Vatican Radio and served for two years. From 1951, when he was nominated secretary of the new Exarch Abune Yaqob until 1988, when he resigned as Eparch of Asmara, for 33 years he was a major figure in the Eritrean Catholic Church and its society. He
visited a few African countries, especially those where some of his former classmates in Rome had been made Bishops.

What were the main guiding principles in his Episcopal ministry and how much did they influenced the growth and maturity of the Eritrean Catholic Church? How much did he accomplish and how much did he have to change given the socio-political-military situation in Eritrea during his What was his personal reading of the history evolving under his eyes? How much was he affected/limited by the difficult moments his country was going through? What did he have to say about the UN decision to federate Eritrea to Ethiopia? What was the stance of the Catholic Church under his leadership to the independence struggle, to the Marx-Leninist indoctrination under the Dergue, the nationalization of monasteries, convents and the Catholic schools, and the only University founded and run by the Comboni Missionary Sisters? How did Rome perceive his ministry in Eritrea and his influence within the Bishops Conference?

Given his very analytical and methodical approach Bp. Abraha insights were very deep and sometimes diverging from those of the majority, like when he stopped taking part at the Bishops Conference because the Missionary members outnumbered the native Bishops and when a vote was requested the Latin Rite approach or European solutions always had better chances than the solutions by the native hierarchy.

Abba Kebreab Sead has tried to answer those crucial questions in his newly published book. His is a first ever attempt to present Abune Abraha Francois’ life in such an extent. In fact, not much has been published by the Bishop himself, even though he spent so many years in teaching, preaching and corresponding. But even less was written about him also, and that only in a few magazines. Therefore, Abba Seid’s work is a must read to have an insight of the Eritrean Catholic Church during the 1951-1988 years, when the Abun was at the helm. I greatly valued the author’s generous references to original documents. For someone, like me, who was in Eritrea and interacted with the Bishop several times, they bring back memories and offer answers to questions that had never settled in my mind (e.g. His response to the Dergue’s nationalization of the Cistercian Fathers’ monastery in Asmara. Mine, and many other people’s understanding was that the Bishop had submitted too sheepishly and too early to the Government’s request. From the documents published in the book it is clear that that was not the case. Unfortunately, the author does not provide the response of the Bishops’ Conference to Abune Abraha desperate request for help and support.)

My appreciation to Abba Kebreab for his work is wholehearted. I definitely understand how difficult it must have been to get access to the documentation. His work reflect his close relationship to the Bishop during his Seminary years in Asmara. His insider’s insights of many details of the goals and struggles of Abune Abraha are the results of an interested and sentimental involvement in facts described. Weel done, Abbatie, and Thank you also for giving the Eritrean church history your contribution.

If you would accept it, here are a few suggestions for a future edition of your wonderful effort:

1) the book be enriched by an ample analysis of the historical times in which the Bishop lived,
2) give more evidence to the results of the Bishop’s actions (e.g. How did the bishop’s intervention about the “Tezkar” influence the final decisions? What was the effect of the Capuchin accepting to minister in the Bilen’s area, and how did Abune Abraha and his successors look into it? What about the Eparchial Seminaries being run by the local clergy . . .),
3) precious testimonies from people who lived and worked with him (e.g. Bishop Zecharias Yohannes, Padre Agostino Galavotti, Fr. Eziio Tonino, Abba Daniel Beraki ofm cap, the clergy who passed to the Catholic from the Orthodox Church) be presented. We do not have too many survivors of those times, unfortunately. The Late Bishop Luca Milesi and Tesfamariam Beddeho would have given valuable insights into his personality.
4) I would suggest that the Archives of the Comboni Sisters for what the Sancta Familia University of Asmara is concerned, the Ethiopian Bishops’ Conference in Addis Ababa, the Asmara former “Vicariate”, the Collegio Ethiopico, the Congregation for the Eastern Churches, etc. be consulted for more details on the events and the Bishop’s reactions.

I wish the library of the Theological Institute of Asmara would dedicate one shelf to the collected works of, or about, Bishop Francois, including the tapes of his famous homilies. That would be a monument that indeed he does deserves, and would give eminence to the library itself. In fact, the tapes could be transferred into CDs and made available in bookstores.
I would also suggest that an enriched version of the book be translated into English for historians outside Eritrea. In fact, it was the wish of the late John Paul II that each Church writes its own “Acta Martyrum” for the benefit of the whole Church, because, as the book title hints, Abune Abraha is indeed a Gift of God to the entire Church.

Finally, may I point out that Abune Abraha at a certain point in his tenure had stopped signing himself, at least in the Eritrean ecclesiastical circles, with his last name. He would sign simply Abba Abraha (without a cross before his signature, the simple title ABBA, and with his baptismal name only). It happened that one day I needed his *imprimatur* and went to him with his name already typed in the usual way other bishops do. He asked me to rewrite it in the simple form ABBA ABRAHA, PAPAS ZEMEMBER ASMARA (Abba Abraha, Bishop of the Chair in Asmara). He definitely started doing it to conform to the Geez tradition, where the monk renounce to get his identity from his earthly father and is content to be known by the name which made him son of God in Baptism.

By Abba Vittorio Boria