

THE Patriarch's Smile

During a visit to Ethiopia's Haile Selassie Cathedral, a Covenant pastor was reminded that Christ overcomes all barriers.



While on sabbatical last spring, teaching at the Christian Education College and Seminary in Nekemte, Ethiopia, my wife, Gael, and I spent a few days in the capital city Addis Ababa. On Orthodox Good Friday our friend Tezera took us to one of the seven high peaks that surround Addis, the third highest elevation capital in the world. The view was beautiful, but the sound was even more amazing. From Orthodox cathedrals all over the city we heard the sounds of priests chanting and congregations responding. It was overwhelming to hear the entire city pulsing with song and praise.

Next, we visited the Haile Selassie (Holy Trinity) Cathedral. When we arrived a little before noon, the cathedral was packed, and the church grounds were filling up with worshippers. A deacon of the church met us and agreed to guide us through the

cathedral. We left our shoes at the door and waded into a sea of white-clad humanity. (White is the traditional dress of Good Friday.)

Our guide walked up the side aisle to the very front of the sanctuary, while Gael and I self-consciously and reluctantly followed. The service was very formal, the clerical vestments were colorful and varied. Celebrants were leading the chanting and preparing the altar. The congregation was bowing, kneeling, praying, and singing.

As our guide turned toward the altar, I could not believe he was walking us into the middle of the proceedings. I stopped our guide—concerned about the propriety of what we were doing. We didn't want to distract the worshippers or disrupt the service. In a reassuring voice he responded, "Take pictures, ask questions. Take pictures, ask questions!"

We finally stopped about three feet before the altar. Gael and I immedi-

ately knelt down as we experienced the high holy moment. The altar was laid with fine cloth set with two ornate Ethiopian crosses, one silver, the other gold, the communion elements between them. Behind the altar was a large painting of the crucifixion. Beyond the painting, hidden by a curtain, was the traditional Holy of Holies of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church within a replica of the ark of the covenant containing the tabot, the tablets of Moses.

As we prepared to leave the sanctuary, our deacon guide drew our attention to a brightly vested dignitary seated on a throne. "This is a very special Good Friday service," he told us, his voice swelling with pride, "because we are honored to be in the presence of His Holiness Abuna Paulos, the patriarch of the entire Ethiopian Orthodox Church!"

Honor indeed; the patriarch is the leader of one of the oldest Christian

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traditions, established early in the fourth century. The deacon then encouraged us to meet the patriarch. I went first, kneeling before him. I nervously introduced myself, saying that I was a pastor visiting Ethiopia for the first time, and would be teaching at the Nekemte Christian Education College and Seminary. He nodded.

Next Gael went forward. This time the patriarch took the initiative. "Are you his wife?" he asked.

Gael told him that she was. "Will you be teaching the way of the Orthodox?" he asked.

She quickly answered, "I'll be teaching English." Gael's quick-witted avoidance of his question surprised him. He smiled broadly and gave this thoughtful response: "I understand."

We did not naively assume that the

patriarch's understanding signaled some new possibility for worldwide Christian unity, nor did we believe that he was giving us some kind of special blessing. However, a veiled message of affirmation wasn't lost on us. Underneath the layers of history, theology, culture, and conflict that defines and divides the church, there was an undeniable understanding that unites the church of Jesus.

The church has spent much of the last two millennia attempting to deny this understanding. In the divided church we are quick to defend our individual turf, focusing on who and what we are against and why. Precious little time and effort has gone into building unity based on the essentials that bind us together as the body of Jesus Christ.

On Maundy Thursday, just prior to his Good Friday passion, our Lord prayed for his disciples to be united.

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe

that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:20-23, NIV).

Back home, in our membership class at church, we talk about how to practically live out this prayer by considering the following. In essential beliefs, we have unity. In non-essential beliefs, we have liberty. In all our beliefs, we show charity.

The early church has a clear message for Christians today: understanding and unity must take root in the church first, in order for it to spread powerfully into the world (Acts 4:32-33).

In the patriarch's smile on Orthodox Good Friday, we were touched once again by the hope that we live, work, and pray for: thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. □

Jeff and Gael Mitchell later traveled to Axum, Ethiopia, where they are pictured at the Church of the Evangelist.

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Gael Mitchell kneels before His Holiness Abuna Paulos, patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, during the Good Friday service.

