



## *The commitment to keep hope and build the future*

*“Ethiopia today is at a crucial crossroads and we do not know which direction it will take”. The statement comes from the Bishop of Meki, Mgr. Abraham Desta, who is in Rome for some commitments and a guest in the IMC Generalate. In an interview, the Bishop talks about the situation in his country, tormented by a conflict that has lasted for more than a year and the role that the Church could have in restoring hope and the future to the population.*

**Jaime C. Patias\***

### **Work and pray together for peace**

Pope Francis, after the Angelus on Sunday 7 November, recalled again the sufferings of Ethiopia and prayed “for those people who are so severely tried” and for peace, “so that there may be fraternal harmony and peaceful path of dialogue”.

In this sense, Mgr. Abraham assesses that “Ethiopia today is at a crucial crossroads and we do not know which direction it will take. It is a very delicate moment in which we must pray a lot, for the people, for those who suffer and those who are dying. I do not want to point the finger at anyone, but right now, we are not going in the right direction. People need to sit and talk, no one should

be left out in this process, no one should be persecuted. “We are not going anywhere accusing each other” observes the head of the local church of Meki since 2003.

Ethiopia is a country of 115 million inhabitants with a great cultural heritage that is expressed in more than 80 languages. The Bishop underlines this richness and the ability they have to live in harmony. “Now, I can’t explain what went wrong, but there is something wrong with our country and with everything that is happening right now. The people who are involved must know how to stop and analyze the past, see the present and think about the future: to arrive at the peace and harmony that the Pope is asking for, we must commit ourselves to this journey. We do not have to accuse anyone anymore. I find it hard to fully understand everything that happens, but it is a fact that the people are suffering in all corners of the country”.

For this Mgr. Abraham insists on dialogue and prayer so that “people may have common sense and faith in God, but they should say no to such suffering and sit down and talk, commit themselves to the reconstruction of the country convinced that to do so we must take care of each other”, explains the Ethiopian Bishop and warns: “ If we are not willing to stop and think before speaking or taking any action, we could run the risk of taking the wrong path at this crucial crossroads in our history”.

Archbishop Abraham recalls that today, more than before, the Catholic Church has the duty and responsibility to proclaim the Gospel of peace, it must be a prophetic sign and commit itself to uniting the parties in conflict. “As a Bishops’ conference, we remind ourselves that we are in favor of justice and peace, and as spiritual leaders we cannot involve ourselves in political affairs, and instead we must be neutral in order to be able to dialogue with everyone and do our best to bring the parties closer to each other”.

Born in 1951 in Sebeya, Tigre region, in northern Ethiopia, Mgr. Abraham was trained in the seminary of Adigrat with the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers), was ordained a priest in 1980 and continued his studies first in Ireland and then in London with the Jesuits. He obtained his licentiate

in dogmatic theology and diplomas in community development and pastoral theology. When he returned to Ethiopia in 1985, they were years of great famine and civil war. He was rector of the minor seminary of Adigrat, secretary of the bishop and head of pastoral care, then chancellor and director of the secretariat of the diocese. In 2003 he was appointed Bishop of Meki.



## Always stay close to people

This is his first trip abroad since the Covid-19 pandemic broke out. “In this time, we have lost many friends and missionaries who were very dear to us, in particular I want to remember Father Paolo Angheben, who was a great missionary of the Consolata, a man of faith and prayer who worked with us for many years especially in the Vicariate of Meki and was one of the victims of Covid-19. He is certainly praying for us in heaven”, says Bishop Abraham.

“During the pandemic – continues the Bishop - we have been connected with our international partners and the government and we have distributed food and medical supplies to the needy, disseminated information to all communities, parishes and schools trying to warn of the dangers of the disease. We have tried to be very close to the people as we have always tried to face floods, droughts and famines”.



## The action of the Church includes everyone

The country of Meki is located about 130km south of Addis Ababa. The Catholic Church in Ethiopia uses two rites, the Latin and the Ethiopian, and works in harmony. In the Vicariate, half of the population is Christian, and Catholics are about 37,000. “But evangelization, which includes pastoral care and social work, is aimed at the whole population”, emphasizes Mgr. Abraham.

The Church of Meki has always been committed pastorally but also socially “in the social area – specifies Mgr. Abraham- we have projects for education, health for children and women, for the development of agriculture, food security and cereal banks”. To support all the projects, the Vicariate has the support of Caritas International, and the national ones of Australia, Germany, Italy and Spain. Other foundations that support our commitment are Manos Unidas and Catholic Relief Services.

“Evidently pastoral care is in any case our priority because through it we carry out the social work that is always integrated into evangelization, as the Gospel teaches us: “I came that they may have life and have it in abundance” (Jn 10,10). Mgr. Abraham clarifies and underlines: “This is a project of integral human development: every person needs, both in the spiritual and in the material field, they are things that we cannot separate”. For that in the diocese the Development Office and the Pastoral Office work together.

## The helpful staff

As for personnel, the Vicariate of Meki has 21 diocesan priests, accompanied by missionaries from 8 congregations, including the Consolata Missionaries. There are 6 seminarians in theology and philosophy, and another 16 are in high school. In the pastoral field the Vicariate is organized in four zones with their respective coordinators.

The Vicariate has 35 elementary and four high schools. In the various parishes there are 78 full-

time catechists and hundreds of volunteers. Their work of evangelization and human promotion is supported by a Formation Center for catechists and animators. A thousand workers hired according to the laws of the projects. When the projects end, the contract also ends.

“Over the years, the priests, missionaries and religious of the Consolata who worked in the Vicariate have sown a lot and also irrigated the plants that have grown – Archbishop Abraham reminds us – and we continue to take care of what has been sown”. Even today they continue to work in difficult areas such as in the mission of Weragu and Gambo and “I want to take this opportunity to thank them for the work they have done and continue to do.

The Bishop remembers with great affection and esteem Fr. Giovanni Monti, IMC (1933 – 2018). Abba Monti, as he was known, worked in the Vicariate of Meki for many years and in various services such as, Secretary General of the Development Office, Administrator (2002) and Vicar General. “Abba Monti is remembered by all as a man of God who dedicated his life to prayer, love for the church and for the people”, he underlines. “He was a humble and dedicated missionary who, even in times of sickness and suffering, persevered and endured without complaining. After almost four years of his death, the memories of his holy life and his missionary enthusiasm in the difficult context of Meki are a constant inspiration for many who feel his love and prayers from heaven”, the Bishop testifies.

Today eight missionaries and about twenty Consolata Missionaries work in Ethiopia and they are in Addis Ababa in the Vicariate of Meki and in the Vicariate of Nekembe.

## The challenges in evangelization

Bishop Abraham points out the three major challenges for evangelization: the lack of missionary personnel, material resources for projects and tensions in society. “We try to maintain dialogue with people even with those who think differently. We have a Justice and Peace office where we organize meetings of religious leaders to dialogue and promote peace”.

The Bishop points out another criterion in the work of reconciliation: “no one must be excluded. All society and ethnic groups, Christians and non-

Christians, should be present for a dialogue of peace. We take this responsibility very seriously by making sure we are not just on the side of the Catholics but with the whole population. This is highly appreciated by the people”.

## There will always be hope

The Bishop of Meki manifests his profound Christian hope: “we are people of hope and we cannot close the door to hope. If we collaborate there will be hope; if instead we remain deaf and blind, we can lose it.

Let us then keep our eyes and ears wide open and open our mouths only to say truthfully what needs to be said. I am convinced that God will guide us in a providential way but for this we must pray, believe and trust him and he will guide his church and political leaders”, concludes Mgr. Abraham.

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