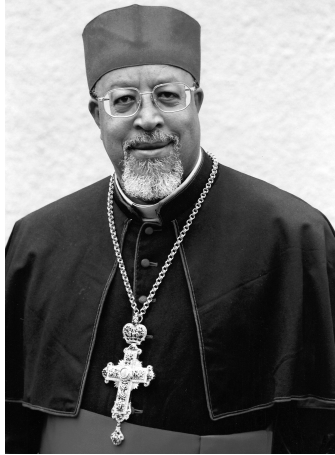


SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW

From Vincentian Confrere to Vatican Cardinal

Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel, C.M.



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Sunday, January 4, 2015 started out as a typical day for the Archbishop of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. After celebrating Sunday Mass, he enjoyed a midday meal with several of his resident diocesan priests, then settled down for a quiet afternoon of reading and prayer. This was the perfect time for **Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel, C.M.** to relax and nap, which he learned from his student days in Rome, in the daily *"buon riposo."*

His time of rest ended shortly as his priest-secretary frantically knocked at the door. "We are getting calls from priests who say they heard on the radio that the Holy Father has named you a cardinal." The Archbishop shrugged, told him not to believe what was on the radio, and began to read... and pray. "I thought perhaps I should re-read the story of Samuel and Eli in the first Book of Samuel, since it is either the Lord or the Holy Father who disturbed my sleep," he said. Minutes later, his secretary returned saying, "We can confirm that you were named a cardinal today by Pope Francis at his weekly angelus address." It was a truly surprising moment for the new Cardinal-

designate, as he reflected on what had brought him to this point in his life.

It began with his grandparents, fervent members of the Eastern Catholic Ethiopian (Ge'ez Rite) Church who moved from central to eastern Ethiopia to escape religious persecution. "They set an example for my parents and the ten of us children," Berhaneyesus said. "Their strength of conviction in putting our Catholic faith before all else stayed with my parents and all of us." Berhaneyesus' nine siblings today include four brothers and five sisters. All but one still live in Ethiopia. His first contact with the Vincentians came in a primary school run by the Christian Brothers. "A Vincentian, Fr. Fikre-Mariam Ghemetchu, (later, Apostolic Vicar of Nekemte Vicariate) gave a vocation talk on priesthood. Right away, I knew it was something I had to try."

The Lazarist School in Addis Ababa, staffed by Vincentians of the Netherlands, was where Berhaneyesus came to know the Congregation of the Mission. After graduation, he entered the novitiate, living in a rural area, experiencing a simple, prayerful community life and direct service to the poor. After taking vows, he studied philosophy and theology in London's Land Missionary Institute and Kings College. He returned to Ethiopia, and Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel, C.M. was ordained to the priesthood in the Congregation on July 4, 1976.

His first years of priesthood found doing pastoral work. It was a time of great upheaval in the world, and Ethiopia was no exception. Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia since 1930, had been deposed in a coup in 1974. The "Derg," a group of Marxist ideologues with military support came to power, and ruled until 1991. They sought out religious leaders for persecution. Berhaneyesus was a target, so they imprisoned him, along with other Ethiopian religious leaders.

"It was seven of the longest months of my life," he said in reflecting on his imprisonment. "It occurred in 1979-80 at the height of their power. First, they accused me of being a CIA agent, then, a Vatican spy. Finally, they charged me with being a parasite on Ethiopian Society." The most difficult part of prison was a month in solidarity confinement. "It was a perilous time for a couple of reasons", said Berhaneyesus. "First, it was known that putting one in solitary was often used as a cover to kill him, since the person was isolated from the prison population. Also, the guards would often take a prisoner out at night, simulate killing him, and return him to the cell."

"Secondly, the experience of being in solitary confinement was a terribly lonely one, as there was no one to talk with or anything to read. You had only yourself, and no human contact, light, or exercise. In retrospect, it was easy for me to see how people in solitary can end up having nervous breakdowns. You can lose all sense of time, place, and perspective in such a situation." So how did Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel endure this precarious time?

“Despite the horrors of prison and solitary confinement, I found it transformative. It led to a spiritual rebirth for me. I had nothing, literally nothing, in solitary, so I cried out to the Lord from the depths of my being. I truly felt the presence of Jesus in those dark days. When I returned to the prison population, they cheered. I was told that prisoners had often chanted my name so the guards would know I was not forgotten. This, I believe, was what kept me alive. So I resolved to be an example of service to my fellow prisoners. I started a garden to grow vegetables for the prison population. I made efforts to help serve the elderly and sick prisoners, so they would not be neglected in getting the very limited amounts of food and water that were given us.”

After release from prison, Berhaneyesus was forced to leave Ethiopia, so he went to Rome to study. He returned to Ethiopia determined to serve, and did so generously. His efforts to live the Vincentian charism and model leadership were noticed by Rome. In 1994, he was appointed the prefect of the Diocese of Jimma-Bonga. In 1997, he became Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Addis Ababa. In 1998, he was ordained Bishop, and in 1999, he became Archbishop of Addis Ababa. Sixteen years later, Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel, C.M. was created Cardinal for Ethiopia, the second such, after His Eminence, Paulos Tzadua, who served from 1977-1998.

Ethiopia is a country of over 95 million people, with less than 1 percent Roman Catholic. The majority religions are Ethiopian Orthodox at 44 percent, Muslims at 34 percent, followed by Protestants at 18 percent. While Catholics are the smallest of all religious groups, there is a unique significance due to past and present events. The origin of Christianity in Ethiopia owes itself to a Church Father, St. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria. Today, with a small Catholic population, the Church has a major impact in Ethiopia. “Although Catholics are less than 1% of the population, we run over 400 schools and 43 health centers. We just started St. Thomas, the first Catholic University in Ethiopia. In fact, the one public university in the country until ours was started by Canadian Jesuits,” Berhaneyesus noted.

As one involved in Church leadership for over two decades, Berhaneyesus has experienced Ethiopia in rural and urban areas. He has seen it evolve from a place of chaos to one of stability. “Finally now we have economic growth. That has helped to create jobs and will a better environment for our people,” he noted. The relocation of the headquarters of the 34 country African Union to Addis Ababa is also a major step forward for Ethiopia, its people, and hopefully, the Church. Berhaneyesus serves as Chair of the Association of Members of the Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa (AMECEA). He has two immediate goals. The first is to have the AMECEA admitted to membership in the African Union as an observer, akin to the Vatican’s status at the UN. The second is to have Pope Francis invited to address the African

Union. He is hopeful he can achieve both goals in his role as Cardinal of Ethiopia.

When asked about pressing social issues of the day in Ethiopia, Berhaneyesus mentioned several: human trafficking, which affects young women taken from rural areas to cities and out of the country; arms trading, where illegal weapons are sold to neighboring countries (such as Somalia) to destabilize governments and promote civil war; child soldiers, emerging in far rural areas for neighboring countries; and care for the influx of refugees. "They are approximately 200,000 Sudanese, 100,000 Somali, and 80,000 Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. We are simply unable to receive and care for such a great number of refugees." He said the Church is working with government and charitable (NGO) agencies to assist these refugees.

In terms of other issues affecting the Church in Ethiopia, Berhaneyesus has two key goals: provide Catholic education to lift people out of poverty, and keep young people in the country, instead of past migration to other African nations. "This is why I started the Catholic University (St. Thomas) in Ethiopia, and why I am aligning it with established universities in Eastern Africa and the United States. I want our young people to learn the culture of Ethiopia and contribute to our society. Education is the key to making this possible. Besides our primary and secondary schools which serve Ethiopians regardless of religious creed, I want to provide our young people with an academic and professional university education to impact them throughout their lives."

What does this new Cardinal want for the Catholic people of Ethiopia? "Faith is a gift, one that we must pass on. Although we are small (.07% of the population), we exist to proclaim the God's reign on earth by our words and deeds. I believe in the efficacy of Jesus' parable of the mustard seed in Gospels. Jesus tells us that, *'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a person took and sowed in a field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, yet when full-grown it is the largest of plants. It becomes a large bush, and the 'birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches'* (Mt. 13:31-32). The Church in Ethiopia has been and will continue I pray to be that mustard seed, enabling all to grow in grace and faith as disciples of Jesus."

Berhaneyesus Demerew Cardinal Souraphiel, C.M. has held many roles in his 66 years. They include son, brother, grandson, student, seminarian, Vincentian confrere, priest, pastor, professor, provincial, and member of the Catholic hierarchy. But the two most important roles he undertook were largely unknown – until now. They are **agent of reconciliation** and **life-saver**.

When Berhaneyesus returned to Ethiopia after studies at the Gregorian University in Rome, the "Derg" Marxist movement which had imprisoned him and killed so many, had been overthrown. Eventually,

a new constitution was written and an elected government prevailed. The “Derg” party members were jailed and sentenced to death for killing, torture, and jailing of many Ethiopians. Berhaneyesus received a request from the Deng group leader who had jailed him, asking to meet. This man, and other officials, had been condemned to death for crimes against the Ethiopian people.

Berhaneyesus went to the same prison where he had been held and met his former persecutor, who asked forgiveness. Berhaneyesus told him he had forgiven him long ago. “When he asked how this was possible, I looked at him and said, ‘If I did not forgive you, I could not live with myself, so I had to do it.’ The man broke down and cried, so we prayed together. Then he told me that he had many others to ask forgiveness of, and asked what to do. So I said I would bring religious of other denominations to meet with him and those who were guilty of these actions.”

When other religious leaders who had been imprisoned agreed to meet, Berhaneyesus set it up. It was a powerful encounter. As they were leaving, one of the condemned men said to him, “This may be too much to ask, but could you ask them to spare our lives?” He spoke with the religious leaders in private and they agreed to write the Ethiopian government and ask that these men not be executed, but that their sentences be commuted to life in prison. Eventually, the government relented, and their lives were spared.

So, besides the parable of the mustard seed, perhaps a scripture story more worthy of the new Cardinal is the ‘parable of the lost sheep’: *“There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance”* (Lk. 15:7).