

“WHERE IS YOUR BROTHER?”

(Gn. 4:9)

Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea

(Translation from the original Tigrinya text)

Asmara – Eastertide

25th. May, 2014

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Greeting

1. To our “... true child(ren) in the faith ...” and to all men and women of good will, “... Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Christ Jesus our Lord” (1 Tm. 1:2). In this Easter season when we celebrate Christ’s victory over sin and death, it is our sincere wish that you re-clothe yourselves in the wisdom and understanding that He has poured out upon us so abundantly (cf. Ep. 5:8-9).

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, our faith is not merely “... the guarantee of the blessings we hope for, or the proof of the existence of realities that are unseen ...” but through it “... we know that the ages were created by a word from God ...” (Heb. 11:1-3) and in its light we understand the true meaning of the events unfolding in this world. Encouraged by this faith, we now address this present Pastoral letter to you.

Preface

2. In these times in which so many men and women, duped by a mistaken understanding of progress, distance themselves even more from the faith, “We always thank God for you all, mentioning you in our prayers continually. We remember before our God and Father how active is the faith, how unsparing is the love, how persevering is the hope which you have from our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Th. 1:3). The **Year of Faith** that has just ended has helped us “... to illumine our human experience from within, accompanying the men and women of our time on their journey. It clearly showed how faith enriches life in all its dimensions” (*Lumen Fidei*, 6).

We have had the grace to begin this **Year of Faith** with great enthusiasm, to live it while reflecting on our own spiritual journey, praying to God and praising the name of the Lord, and undertaking acts of penance. As part of all this we have had the gift of the new Eparchy of Segheneiti, a reward for the great faith of our fathers. For all of these things we raise a joyful hymn of thanksgiving to the Lord.

3. The Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, in his **Motu Proprio** *Porta Fidei*, offers inspired suggestions to the whole church and to us Pastors of souls, with particular reference to the times in which we live, “... The Church as a whole and all her Pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance. It often happens that Christians are more concerned for the social, cultural and political consequences of their commitment, continuing to think of the faith as a self-evident presupposition for life in society. In reality, not only can this presupposition no longer be taken for granted, but it is often openly denied. Whereas in the past it was possible to recognize a unitary cultural matrix, broadly accepted in its appeal to the content of the faith and the values inspired by it, today this no longer seems to be the case in large swathes of society, because of a profound crisis of faith that has affected many people” (*Porta Fidei*, 2).
4. It was precisely as an invitation to remain steadfast in the faith during these times of grave crisis that Benedict XVI announced the Year of faith. As the Apostle Paul exhorted his disciple Timothy to “... concentrate on faith ...” (2 Tm. 2:22) with the same constancy as when he was young (cf. 2 Tm. 3:15),

so we too, the Pastors of the Church of God in Eritrea, feel the duty to be vigilant so that "... no-one should become lazy in the faith" (PF, 15).

Dear brothers and sisters, in assuring you that we have prayed for you "... that your faith may not fail ..." (Lk. 22:32), we also feel keenly the exhortation that Jesus addressed to Peter that he should confirm the brothers in their faith. For his part, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* reminds us that God's question "Where is your brother?" (Gn. 4:9) is asked of each of us (EG, 211). And so it is that we write you this Pastoral Letter with the intention of sharing the burden of the problems and sufferings of our brothers, to experience "... the great joy of believing" (LF, 5) and to "... renew our wonder at the vast horizons which faith opens up, so as then to profess that faith in its unity and integrity, faithful to the memory of the Lord and sustained by his presence and by the working of the Holy Spirit" (*ibid*).

PART I

THE CLOSING OF THE YEAR OF FAITH

5. The initiatives of the **Year of Faith** sought to stimulate within us a desire to undertake a renewed journey in our life of faith. In this context, the closing of this **Year** was not so much its point of arrival but rather its point of departure for a horizon of life and faith towards which we journey fore-armed with the fruits that have enriched us over the past jubilee year.

We must rediscover what kind of joy and how much of it infuses our faith, what and how many are the differences between those who believe and those who don't, which privileges and divine preferences make up the gift of faith, what and how much joy might be missing that would indicate a lack or the loss of faith. Without this gift we lose our sense of direction and travel between the events of this life as in an endless ocean, with no key to understanding our beginnings or end. Everything is reduced to the limits of each individual circumstance. For the person of faith, however, God is the first and last point of reference for creation and for the world, fruit of his fatherly tenderness and providence that calls us to be co-responsible for the fulfilment of the realities created.

6. Without faith, pain and injustice have neither meaning nor release. With faith, God proposes himself to us as the One "... who will wipe away every tear" (Rv. 21:4) from the faces of those who suffer or are persecuted and He gives us the certainty that "... all humanity will see the salvation of God" (Lk. 3:6). Without faith, even the best of experiences in human existence – life, love, harmony, mercy, reciprocal help, goodness – are incapable of overcoming the limits of human mortality. With faith these experiences become the start of eternity. With faith, God in his goodness and providence is at the centre of the origin and fulfilment of every positive human experience and value; everything that we do has in Christ who "... leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection ..." (Heb. 12:2). Without faith, death is the end of everything and the final breakdown of every relationship. With faith, death marks the passing from this earthly sojourn to the beginning of fullness in God and to the restoration of union with those who have gone before us in the journey of life.
7. Without faith, the world is only a simple product of chance, our lives a mere straw in a bale of negative forces, and our destiny a condemnation to nothingness. With faith in God, we discover our roots in his

creative goodness, we rediscover the reasons for a brotherhood that ties us to each other and we focus our attention on our final berthing in Him; life, however much loaded with problems and suffering, becomes anchored in the guarantee that God represents for us. Everything that "...is not sweetened by Christ remains sour and bitter" (St. Bernard). Faith in the One who is "... the Way, the Truth and the Life ..." (Jn. 14:6) illumines and directs our existence. Without it we lose ourselves in the shadows, "... If you will not take your stand on me you will not stand firm" (Is. 7:9).

8. The affirmation that our faith "... is the victory that has overcome the world ..." (1 Jn. 5:4) does not imply hate or contempt for the world but an invitation to defeat pride, malice, hate and sin, and to overcome the limits of earthly realities through a deep communion with the Lord leading us to the fullness of life and joy. It is in faith that humanity's similarity to God emerges. It is in faith that we rediscover ourselves to be children of the same Father and thus brothers and sisters to each other, ready to help each other. In fact God, who "... created human beings to be immortal, he made them as an image of his own nature ..." (Ws. 2:23) never ceases to ask of us, "Where is your brother?"

"Man is constantly worked upon by God's spirit, and hence can never be altogether indifferent to the problems of religion. The experience of past ages proves this, as do numerous indications in our own times. For man will always yearn to know, at least in an obscure way, what is the meaning of his life, of his activity, of his death (*Gaudium et Spes*, 41). As our Holy Father, Francis, has reminded us "...that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly ... We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything" (EG, 266).

9. The Church, whose mission it is to shine the light of the Gospel on earthly realities (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5), teaches that "... the light of faith does not make us forget the sufferings of this world. ... Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey. To those who suffer, God does not provide arguments which explain everything; rather, his response is that of an accompanying presence, a history of goodness which touches every story of suffering and opens up a ray of light. In Christ, God himself wishes to share this path with us and to offer us his gaze so that we might see the light within it" (*Lumen Fidei*, 57). It is in this context that the Church invites us to accept the question of God, "Where is your brother?". As Pastors of this local church, we are prepared to push this issue not for reasons of status or self-interest but from a true and sincere desire to serve. In fact "... authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it" (EG, 183).

10. Seeing in the light of faith means to accept "...the great gift brought by Jesus" (LF, 1). In fact, "... in God's gift of faith, a supernatural infused virtue, we realize that a great love has been offered us, a good word has been spoken to us, and that when we welcome that word, Jesus Christ the Word made flesh, the Holy Spirit transforms us, lights up our way to the future and enables us joyfully to advance along that way on wings of hope. Thus wonderfully interwoven, faith, hope and charity are the driving force of the Christian life as it advances towards full communion with God. But what is it like, this road which faith opens up before us? What is the origin of this powerful light which brightens the journey of a successful and fruitful life? (LF, 7).

11. "Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim

of our life? What is moral good, what is sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?" (*Nostra Aetate*, 1). "By contrast, when a divine instruction and the hope of life eternal are wanting, man's dignity is most grievously lacerated, as current events often attest; riddles of life and death, of guilt and of grief go unsolved with the frequent result that men succumb to despair. Meanwhile every man remains to himself an unsolved puzzle, however obscurely he may perceive it" (GS,21).

II

OUR PRESENT SITUATION

12. As we now turn our attention to our distant and more recent past, we find various reasons why we should offer praise to God. From the environmental point of view our homeland does not have great natural resources compared to many other countries; however it has enjoyed a relatively peaceful existence sheltered as it were from serious natural disasters. Traditionally our people are God-fearing, wishing to live in peace and harmony with others, far from inter-tribal or inter-religious conflicts. This people appreciates cultural diversity not as an excuse for division but rather as an opportunity for reciprocal enrichment. It looks to its future with balance and wisdom. In a word it is a people in love with and satisfied by peace. All this can only be explained by a history, culture and view of life deeply rooted in its age-old Christian faith. The question, "Where is your brother?", which today weighs on all our consciences, falls on ground that has always cultivated the values of solidarity and sharing among individuals, families and groups in all moments of life both happy and sad. We must pray unceasingly that these great values survive and continue to grow: "Lord, increase our faith". Indeed, as we shall indicate below, today there are new winds blowing – new currents of ideas, habits and practices that now threaten these same values.

While we acknowledge that a number of initiatives furthering the reconstruction of the country have been completed, at the same time, in as much as it is only natural to want more, we cannot put aside the issue of how much still remains to be done. There are wounds to be tended and healed. The positives must not blind us to the negatives that weigh upon the lives of our people and these embrace a wide range of dimensions and sectors: the personal and psychological dimensions as well as the social and public ones, everyday (material) life and likewise moral and spiritual standards. Pope Francis reminds us that "... It is up to the Christian communities to analyse with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country" (EG, 184).

The tragedies at Sea

13. "A voice is heard in Ramah lamenting and weeping bitterly; it is Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they are no more" (Mt. 2:17). During the months of September and October of last year, precisely at the time when at home nature reawakens and we gather the fruits of the earth, at the beginning of our traditional calendar year, our country and people were struck by a tragedy that shook even the outside world: the drowning of hundreds of our young countrymen in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea. This was the climax of an odyssey that has been going on for years over mountains, rivers, deserts and seas at the mercy of criminal human traffickers. We cried so much at home and in public "... The roads to Zion are in mourning; no one comes to her festivals now. Her

gateways are all deserted; her priests groan; her young girls are grief-stricken; she suffers bitterly” (Lm. 1:4). The words of the prophet break through the tears of Rachel as evoked in the Gospel of Matthew. Both passages refer to the events of 587 B.C. when the Babylonian invaders pushed Israel out of Jerusalem, gathered them on the plain of Ramah (today called Ramallah) and burned the city. After this the people of Israel were taken as hostages to Babylon. Rachel, who represents the people and the mothers of Israel. Cries for her children “who are no more”. In remembering this great sorrow of Israel, the prophet does not block a horizon of hope and return for the people.

14. The Evangelist Matthew, in recalling the tomb of Rachel at Bethlehem, connects it to the slaughter of the Innocents as decreed by Herod. Rachel is inconsolable because her children “are no more”. But this is a cry that rises to the ears of God who is the only one able to offer her consolation and to heal the wounds of her soul – not only with words but also with hope and with the resurrection of the dead. In this way the cry “they are no more” is transformed and transfigured by the certainty that the fault has been redeemed by the resurrection of Jesus.

That tragedies such as those that have so sadly marked the history of our own land in these last decades should come to pass at the borders of a developed continent is truly, and as the Holy Father often repeats, unacceptable and incompatible with the standards of civilization and progress reached today.

With Rachel, mother of us all, and with all mothers, we raise our cries and our prayers to God. While we implore God’s mercy that our young people who have died may find in Him that peace and serenity that they sought for in vain on this earth, to their parents, families and relatives we extend our most sincere sympathies assuring them of our active support and compassion in their mourning.

Mass flight from the Country

15. Now however we must listen attentively to the voice of the Lord who is making us uncomfortable and asking us “Where is your brother? Where is your nephew, your niece? How are they living?” And in turn we ask ourselves: who is addressing the very sad state of affairs? Responsibility for it is to be placed at a variety of doors on a variety of levels. The roots of it, in fact, are complex and run deep and should be seen within a larger and more detailed picture: “Where, in such situations does our country as a whole stand?” This is a question that we cannot dodge by saying: Am I perhaps the one responsible for my brother?
- We must acknowledge frankly that the attraction of a better standard of living abroad has ended up creating unrealistic hopes and unrealizable illusions that in their turn induce our youth and their parents to an indiscriminate use of options as for example unplanned, ill prepared and even false marriages. There are also those who allow themselves to be seduced by the hope of a permanently subsidised life abroad and refusing to look for any kind of alternative at home.
 - These cases aside, the tragedy of the fundamental choices in question and the root of the problem is undeniable. And these pose very grave questions: how much longer can this chaotic human exodus go on? How come the tough conditions endured by those who flee across the desert and across the sea, the financial burden that it entails, the serious risks to life that are run do not convince the youth to forego such adventures, or better mis-adventures, of such magnitude? Given that so many of these stories end in tragedy, is there no other alternative solution?

- We might realistically ask ourselves if this situation of “neither peace nor war”, which we have lived for some time, has not brought us to the present position. So, what is missing? Is it political will or the lack of an actual possibility of bringing it to an end? If the international community has not yet played its part in this regard, and given that every individual is the first one responsible for the solution of his own problems, it is in the interests of the injured party to assume *in primis* the initiative for his own release. This does not take away from the fact that whoever holds a role of responsibility has the obligation to ask our youth - rather than condemn them to the exploiters and human traffickers – if it is not better to identify ways and strategies for getting out of this absurd situation of “neither peace nor war”? In so far as such a desire is conspicuously lacking, so it is that thousands of young men and women, attracted by the prospect of even a minimum of freedom, dignity and quality of life risk themselves in a desperate race against torture and death.

16. It is in the nature of things that wild beasts struggle with man for life. Unfortunately, today we have arrived at a situation in which the axiom about man becoming a wolf to his fellow man (*homo homini lupus*) is becoming true: man, created in the image and likeness of God, has been transformed into merchandise for commerce, butchered and mutilated for his vital organs. This is all for discreditable profit. We are participating in unheard of events, a return to the law of the jungle. We ask ourselves: if the consciences of the authors of these crimes have lost all feeling, how is it possible that the rest of the world tolerates it? Can the governments of the states of the perpetrators and the victims of these crimes really say that they have exhausted all the means at their disposal to put things right? What can we say? The truth is that “... when the order of values is jumbled and bad is mixed with the good, individuals and groups pay heed solely to their own interests, and not to those of others. Thus it happens that the world ceases to be a place of true brotherhood. In our own day, the magnified power of humanity threatens to destroy the race itself” (GS, 37). For as long as things remain as they are, surely we cannot escape the judgement of God, but neither can we escape that of our own times or of history.

On the other hand, there is no lack of voices who are rightly calling for a precisely planned and coordinated response, a change of mentality, and tangible, effective and incisive interventions. It is necessary to focus on the question of targeted legislative and political strategies. To neglect this issue renders all of us gravely responsible in front of God, and in front of humanity, “... For at the judgement seat of Christ we are all to be seen for what we are, so that each of us may receive what he has deserved in the body, matched to whatever he has done, good or bad” (2 Co. 5:10).

The Quality of Life

17. We know well the wounds that afflict our people today, condemning some to death and others to survival in misery – poverty, endemic illnesses such as HIV-AIDS, exile and all that goes with it

In a spirit of brotherly sharing and solidarity we appeal to God for eternal repose in his Kingdom for the former and for the latter the power and consolation of God.

For many years now our land has been undergoing an on-going process of desertification. Timely initiatives are now needed to bring this process to a halt and to protect the integrity of creation. We must make our people aware of what is going on “... God wants us to be the stewards of creation and of our

brothers and sisters” (Pope Francis). Only in this way will creation, in its turn, come back to being a steward to us.

It is not only our natural resources that are abandoning us but also our human wealth:

- Thousands of educated young people, or those with notable intellectual potential, are leaving us in what in effect we might term a “brain drain”,
- Children re-join their parents abroad in journeys with one-way tickets
- Parents re-join their children abroad and, once they have acquired the relevant documents of residency, do not return home any more.

In a word, we find ourselves having to balance the books with a real and proper drain on our resources and human energies. What will become of a country whose most productive facets lack all appeal? It is people with all their potential who make a nation what it ought to be.

18. We are terrorised by the prospect of a drastic depopulation of the country. Certainly, the memory of and nostalgia for one’s own country will continue to stay with the exiles abroad. But, in history, there are very few cases of the mass return of exiles to their country of origin. Among the generations that the country has lost, probably for ever, there are not only those of the youth and the middle-aged but also the babies born and brought up abroad. If we now do nothing to ensure that these generations do not lose contact with their roots, the country will have serious problems to face. This is the cry of alarm that is rising from the country and is addressed to all – to individuals and to families, to the elderly, to the political authorities and to the religious leadership. We need to run to the shelters with courage and creativity to stop those who have not yet left and to call back those who have already gone.
19. In our times there is a clear changing of place from that saying of our fathers, “... one’s own land is as insatiable as one’s own eye” to that which has come to dominate today, “... your home land is where your well-being is foremost”. If either claim is of undeniable value, then, the solution is yet another: to explore ways and means that allow the country to offer the citizen a true and effective possibility for self-fulfilment. We take the opportunity to repeat what we wrote in another Pastoral letter in 2001, “... There is no point in just asking the question, "Why are our youth choosing to go abroad?" - for no-one leaves a country of milk and honey to seek another country offering the same opportunities. If one's homeland is a place of peace, jobs and freedom of expression there is no reason to leave it to suffer hardship, loneliness and exile in an effort to look for opportunity elsewhere” (*God Loves This Country*, 29).

Psychological and Moral Situations

20. For the above-mentioned reasons and for a thousand others equally incompatible with life and human dignity, there is a prevailing uncertainty over the future of people. There is a growing disdain for the value of human life, a tendency to look for solutions to one’s own problems using means and methods that eschew morality. On the other hand, the delusion engendered as result of the non-achievement of the ends proposed, the uselessness of one’s own aspirations, looking to distant lands as the only alternative for self-fulfilment, are bringing a growing number of people to frustration and desperation. They find themselves looking at a horizon that grows always darker and heavier.

Alongside this, the breakup of the family unit inside the country – through military service unlimited in terms of time and monetary reward and through the imprisonment of many young people in actual prison or in punishment camps - is exposing to misery not only elderly parents with no visible means of support, but also entire families and it is having serious consequences at the economic level as well as at the psychological and mental levels.. The rapid, almost endemic, distribution of illnesses such as diabetes, blood pressure problems, and cardiac conditions is among the more immediate signs of the above.

Civil Society

21. A general weakening of moral social values and thus the pillars of a life together is to be noted, a tendency towards incurable forms of social decadence (cf. Jr. 4:11-21).

a. The Family

For various reasons – among them once again national military service, the impact of communications technology and the mass media, and the conditions of life for the youth – the influence of the elders and of parents on their children and upon the youth in general is diminishing visibly. We wish to urge elders and parents not to abdicate their just responsibilities, even though many negative factors seem to challenge them, to continue to exercise their role of mediation and persuasion, not to let themselves be seduced by private concerns, to be outward looking; above all to save the family, because the continuance of the family is the salvation of the country. Since the family is the ground where brotherhood flowers and flourishes, the question “Where is your brother?” refers above all to the family circle. The family is the nucleus of the Church and the foundation of society. It is there that “... the various generations come together and help one another grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social life” (GS, 52). Thus “... All those, therefore, who exercise influence over communities and social groups should work efficiently for the welfare of marriage and the family” (GS *ibid*).

b. Moral Re-building

22. A public power no longer at the service of the common good but an instrument for monopolising private or group interests, and the furthering of selfishness, favouritism, corruption ... displays signs of an incipient, or maybe advanced, moral emergency. Corruption is not limited to financial transactions but encompasses all those behaviours which have been uprooted from the common criteria of public and personal morality. The tendency of looking after one’s own interests is spreading without evaluating much less denouncing the morality of the means used to gain it. Hiding the truth and encouraging deceit are basic elements of corruption. These are all symptoms of a moral ill-health which we must cure with a restoration of the principles of transparency and responsibility and, on a deeper level, with a leap of conscience and fear of the Lord. If nothing is done then anarchy, injustice, and violence will triumph undisputed. To the religious leaders of every denomination rests the duty of reawakening consciences, of encouraging the conversion of hearts and minds, and to the civil authorities rest the duty of initiating a political system that is clear, transparent and lawful.

c. Lawfulness

23. A trait that is characteristic of the tradition of our people is the sense of what is lawful, respect for the institutionalised moral code. In our tradition there is more respect for the one who appeals to the norms

of the law than to the one who threatens with the force of arms. Might it be that because this tradition is ever more surely disappearing that corruption now seems to pervade the fabric of our social life together? Since the principle of lawfulness cannot be set aside from any project for moral and social reconstruction, one can never finish insisting on its importance. In treating someone accused of an offence, justice cannot and must not be disassociated from humanity and compassion.

Every legal case must be lawfully based on this premise, reasoned according to the proper procedures and brought to its conclusion at the right time. More generally, the engaging of the principle of constitutionality, a demand acutely understood and pressingly invoked by whoever appreciates the value of justice and liberty, can no longer be disregarded.

Within this same issue there is also the question of the actual absence of an open discussion of the problems of the country, of mature and dispassionate dialogue, of access to objective and verifiable information. The gossip, the indirect whispering, the bad-mouthing, the deceit or, in the best of cases, the lack of interest in the common good ... are in large part the fruit of incorrect information, or worse still, of direct and systematic disinformation. The lack of dialogue, of reciprocal listening, of mutual impartiality is enlarging and deepening our differences and restricting the space available for a lasting solution to our problems.

d. Education

- 24.** In order that education might play its fundamental role of solid basis for cultural and social progress, for the integral growth of the youth and for the over-all development of the country, it must urgently make provision for the institutions to which it has been deputed should be enlarged, renewed and modernised. It must take up again, adapt, contextualise and inculturate the more advanced principles and methodologies that have accompanied the growth of more developed countries. The wise use of educational experiences from elsewhere could be a fount of great enrichment.

As in the past, so in the present, the Church is open to every possibility of offering its contribution in this field, promoting the values of truth, brotherhood, freedom, equality, democracy, justice, the rights and dignity of each person, and of lawfulness.

“...Hence, the social order and its development must invariably work to the benefit of the human person ... This social order requires constant improvement. It must be founded on truth, built on justice and animated by love; in freedom it should grow every day toward a more humane balance” (GS, 26).

e. Straightened Economic Circumstances

- 25.** When we think that at this time our families live, or survive, only thanks to remittances coming from family members abroad - on the one hand as our fathers used to say “God permits problems, yes, but never without a way out” – we feel a sincere sense of gratitude, on the other hand we realise that this dependence on family members abroad cannot be a permanent solution. If we do not create opportunities for work, if the youth are not allowed the possibility to make themselves self-sufficient, if we do not put an end to the stagnation of agriculture, commerce, and industry, we will never break out of this vicious circle of dependence and poverty. We do well to insist on the self-sufficiency of the nation but we should not forget that this is achieved through the self-sufficiency of individuals and families. Elegant and high-sounding slogans are not enough. We need opportunities for employment.

The exorbitant prices of consumer goods, the absolute insufficiency of salaries, the unstoppable climbing of rents, the prolonged block on building, the impossibility of dedicating oneself to work of one's choice have brought us to a desperate economic emergency. How can we get out of this situation if there is no room for private initiative, enterprise or creativity? How can we speak about the independence and the dignity of a nation without presupposing the dignity and independence of the people? It is no longer a question of a standard of life more or less comfortable but of the problem of living or not living, of the lack of the most essential goods such as water, bread light We ask, in the name of everyone, for the attention of the public authorities and their duty to create an economic system worthy of the dignity of the human person.

f. Moral and Spiritual Life

26. We are very worried about the moral and spiritual wounds that afflict our society. At times we ask ourselves if there might not already be a process in action aimed at changing our identity, a progressive overturning of values and of the moral code, the insinuation of principles for the dismantling of the ethical conscience. The words of St. Paul come to mind, "... People will be self-centred and avaricious, boastful, arrogant and rude; disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, irreligious; heartless and intractable; they will be slanderers, profligates, savages and enemies to everything that is good; they will be treacherous and reckless and demented by pride ..." (2 Tm. 3:2-4). Devil worship that is often disguised as modernity, might also take shape in this way. Are the rumours that satanic cults are also active in our society totally groundless? We do not know but the fact that we are speaking about it at all must be worrying, "...Unlike former days, the denial of God or of religion, or the abandonment of them, are no longer unusual and individual occurrences. For today it is not rare for such things to be presented as requirements of scientific progress or of a certain new humanism" (GS, 7).

Also here nearer to home there are creeping tendencies seeking to push religion - as the inspiring principle of life and the measure of human morality - into a corner or to exploit it for merely monetary ends. There are pseudo-religious propagandists in whose preaching the redemptive value of suffering and of the cross is rendered completely meaningless or despised. We must instil at all times an understanding that religion is the value that most deeply forges the conscience of people and builds up true freedom and an authentic sense of life.

27. The serious consequences that follow from using religion as a tool for division and disunity, instead of a principle for cohesion and unity and a true sense of belonging to the national community, will have escaped no-one's notice. Without an authentic relationship with God and with the dictates of a good conscience and a true sense of religion, it becomes difficult to create balanced and harmonious social relationships. The success of dialogue, of the settlement of differences and collaboration for the common good, is based on the ability to listen, on reciprocal respect and on a feeling for justice that every true religious sense inspires.
28. Another aspect that, in our society, has come to impose itself with all its destructive burden is the degeneration of the relationship with money. When money becomes the criterion upon which all social relations are based, inevitably one falls into a practical form of machiavellianism for which the end justifies the means. And this is what we see happening in various sectors of public life: in commerce, in the offices, in marketing, in house rents; the search for money is the only thing that matters, beyond all morality and every respect for man, his dignity and his rights. What else but money can be behind the horrific trafficking of human beings, the buying and selling of vital organs, prostitution? Only a

return to a proper sense of religion can free us from slavery and from the worship of money, the falsest god of them all. The apostle Paul warns us, "... We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it" (1 Tm. 6:7). And Jesus, "... No-one can be the slave of two masters You cannot be the slave of both God and money" (Mt. 6:24).

The Root of all Evil

29. Sin: this is the root of all evil, personal and social. Life centred exclusively on itself, profit, greed, corruption, irresponsibility, things that poison our social life together, are the venomous fruit of this "dark evil" in our lives. The taking root and propagation of similar deviations is the true and great threat to the unity, peace and the life itself of the nation. Even if, as has already been said, responsibility for the evils of the country show themselves at different levels and in different circumstances, no-one can hold himself innocent in this regard so that "... If we say, 'We have never sinned,' his word has no place in us" (1 Jn. 1:10).

The only way for an authentic growth for the people, the only principle upon which to found a society reconciled and worthy of the values inherent to human dignity, is the restoration of the absolute centrality and primacy of God and thus to man a return to reflecting God's image and likeness, "... If Yahweh does not build the house in vain do its builders toil" (Ps. 127:1)

When we speak of a "nation" we do not refer simply to a territory, we mean a people that share the same historical journey, the same cultural values, the same moral ideals, the ability to deal with moments of serenity and of difference in a spirit of unity and solidarity. Any journey towards true and authentic progress presupposes the care, promotion and development of this shared scheme of values.

30. We have spoken above of our people as a "people in love with ...peace" (No. 12) and this is a great blessing. Nevertheless "... Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an 'enterprise of justice' (Is. 32:7). Peace results from that order structured into human society by its divine Founder, and actualized by men as they thirst after ever greater justice" (GS, 78).

The true enemy of peace is injustice (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2317). Respect for persons, for their dignity and their rights is the corner-stone of peace. The absence of such respect destroys the foundations of peaceful human coexistence. For this reason we ask for the liberation of all those who have been arrested and those who have been waiting under arrest for longer or shorter periods of time. Justice should be administered to all those who have been detained illegally, those forgotten in prison ... These are times when the disturbing question "Where is your brother? Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground" (Gn. 4:9-10) resonates more strongly than ever.

Conclusion

In this Easter period, in which the nation, too, celebrates its twenty-third anniversary of independence, it is the duty of all of us to pray that the Lord may bless this country and make it a land of hope, peace and justice. It is equally important that all of us – people and the religious and state authorities – join forces to let this happen. We know well that the people are indefatigable in their prayers for peace. Based on

the word of Jesus, "... Whatever you ask for in my name I will do" (Jn. 14:13) we are sure that our prayers will not be in vain. Thus we open hearts and minds to He who tells us "... Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace which the world cannot give, this is my gift to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid" (Jn. 14:27)

III WITNESS

"You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8): Evangelization

31. "... There is an urgent need, then, to see once again that faith is a light, for once the flame of faith dies out, all other lights begin to dim" (LF, 4). To ensure that the flame of faith always remains alive and its light always bright means nothing less than putting into practice the words of Jesus, "... you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end" (Ac. 1:8).

This demanding word from the Lord is addressed to us today. When, at the beginning, the community of the faithful was gathered by the Apostles it grew prodigiously and today the Church is growing still. We, too, are called to insert ourselves into this current of life and witness. Replying to the same call, the first proclaimers of the Gospel in our land, St. Frumentius and the nine Roman Saints and, in more recent times St Giustino de Jacobis and the missionaries of successive decades have revived and revitalised the ancient flame of faith. The blessing of gathering the mature fruits of their witness and preaching has fallen to us. In our country, the faithful of the Catholic Church who are organised into four Eparchies, are trying their best live their vocation reading the signs of the times and following the teachings of the universal Church.

32. We pay our filial respects to all the bishops, priests, religious both male and female, and faithful who have passed on to us the flame of the faith while, following in their footsteps, we undertake to keep it burning always more brightly. Historically the Catholic faith is expressed through its efforts to provide continuity to the evangelising word and to the work of Jesus through a multiplicity of initiatives: education, care of the sick and of orphans, women's promotion within a complex programme for the integral promotion of the whole person. This is an activity that the Church continues to carry forward also today deepening and enlarging it the context of an attentive reading of the signs of the times. It is, in good measure, one kind of response the Lord's question, "Where is your brother?"

It is worrying to see the risks that the faith has to run among our countrymen, particularly the youth, who, uprooted from their homes live dispersed in so many countries of the world. . In general everyone is required to acknowledge the need not take the duties of the faith for granted, not to become too materialistic, to keep our consciences healthy, that sin exists, that we must not ignore our limits, and to trust ourselves to the grace of God. The first step to take in this direction is penitence: to recognise our weaknesses, never tire of asking forgiveness for the wrong we have done, to forgive those who have done wrong to us, and not to repay one evil with another

33. Our journey of faith in general, and that of the **Year of Faith** in particular, require of us urgent renewal. This necessarily calls us to an examination of conscience on the quality of our relationship with God the Father, with our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the life-giving Holy Spirit. And then there is our relationship with other people: what is the spiritual situation of our Christian faithful? What is the moral and human situation of our society in general? How is my brother and my sister whom I look on with the eyes of faith faring? "...The Second Vatican Council presented ecclesial conversion as openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ There are ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelization, yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them. Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church's "fidelity to her own calling", any new structure will soon prove ineffective" (EG, 26).
34. The teaching and life of Jesus, as with those of his disciples, aligns itself with the little seed that, in order to grow and bear fruit, must first fall to the earth and die. This is the plan of life for every Christian within the Church. Therefore we must not let ourselves feel discouraged by the tests and sufferings that we must face for the sake of the faith, aware that "... when I am weak then I am strong" (2 Co. 12:10). Jesus' words should be of comfort "... There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom" (Lk. 12:32).

Regarding our journey in the future we can treasure the words that the recently canonised Pope John XXIII spoke in his address at the opening of the Vatican II Ecumenical Council "... our duty is not just to guard this treasure ... but earnestly and fearlessly to dedicate ourselves to the work that needs to be done in this modern age of ours, pursuing the path which the Church has followed for almost twenty centuries (*Pope John XXIII, opening address - article 6.3*). Our mission as Church today is that of dedicating ourselves witnessing and evangelization with immutable faith and untiring dedication, in the certainty that the Holy Spirit, who acted through the Apostles, will not hesitate to give us the strength, desire and will to bring to fulfilment the work we have started (cf. Ac. 2:2-9; 4:13.29.31; 9:27-28).

35. In what tangible ways can we reinvigorate our witness? We must be merciful and reconciliatory and live conforming not to the norms of this world (Rm. 12:2) but to Christ, taking upon ourselves the problems and sufferings of our neighbour, "...In loyalty to their country and in faithful fulfilment of their civic obligations, Catholics should feel themselves obliged to promote the true common good. Thus they should make the weight of their opinion felt in order that the civil authority may act with justice and that legislation may conform to moral precepts and the common good" (AA, 14). The Church herself, in her leaders and her members, must pursue her prophetic mission through a journey of penitence and conversion, "... If you repent, I shall restore you to plead before me You shall be as my own mouth. They will come back to you ..." (Jr. 15:19).

It is not difficult to identify the priorities which must guide the action of the Church in the present and in the future. Over centuries our experience has passed on the centrality of the liturgy and of catechesis hand in hand with everyday life. The following documents of the universal Church indicate in a particularly way the basis for prioritising our choices: 1. Vatican II's **Dogmatic Constitution on the Church** (*Lumen Gentium*); 2. Pope Paul V's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*; 3. Pope John Paul II's Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*; 4. The 2012 General Synod of Bishops papers dealing with **New Evangelization**; 5. Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*.

In a word evangelization consists in the announcing of Christ, Redeemer of the world. This is the joyful message that the Church transmits to men in every moment "... welcome or unwelcome" (2 Tm. 4:2). And this is the most precious gift that we offer to the country so that it might live by listening to the word of God, participating in the sacraments and the divine liturgy and giving witness to it with our lives.

Weaknesses in our Life of Faith

a. Nominal Christians

36. One of the problems that Vatican II has tackled with lively concern is that which it defines as "nominal Christianity". For example *Gaudium et Spes* refers to it, "...This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age" (GS, 43).

The nominal Christian lives and works by leaving to one side the presuppositions of faith, not making them guiding principles of existence but adopting a more selectively opportunistic approach to evangelical principals and living outside the liturgical life of the community of believers; in short although baptised he/she does not live the duties that derive from their baptism (cf. EG, 15). St. John gives us proper advice, "... Children, our love must be not just words or mere talk, but something active and genuine" (1 Jn. 3:18).

37. This is one sector of society that awaits new evangelization. This means, as Pope Paul VI said during his visit to Latin America (Haiti), a proclamation carried out with new impetus, a new spirit, and renewed creativity and credibility. All the above presupposes an attentive reading of the changes taking place within our society so that we might respond with a proclamation that knows how best to adopt the language, pedagogical criteria, methods and new means that are available. In the same context of evangelical duty we now add the pastoral care of those who are far from the Church, those who hunger and thirst for God but have found no way of satisfying that yearning. In fact in every human being there is an innate need for God, and only by meeting the Lord can man find true peace and tranquillity (St. Augustine).
38. All the members of the Church are called to involve themselves in this new evangelization. The conscientization of the lay faithful in this regard is a task that can be neither delayed nor postponed. Since evangelization expresses itself above all through a life of witness, a coherent synthesis between the Gospel and daily life must be established, "... the laity should vivify their life with charity and express it as best they can in their works. They should all remember that they can reach all men and contribute to the salvation of the whole world by public worship and prayer as well as by penance and voluntary acceptance of the labours and hardships of life whereby they become like the suffering Christ (cf. 2 Co. 4:10; Col. 1:24)" (AA, 16).

b. Secularism

39. "I am astonished that you are so promptly turning away from the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are going over to a different gospel" (Ga. 1:6). This is how St. Paul reprimands those who have lost their fervour for the faith and become apathetic. Seeing how quickly certain deplorable forms of behaviour, such as the use of magic, adultery, deceit, robbery, corruption, extra-martial betrayals, are

spreading even in our society, we cannot but feel that the reprimand of Paul is addressed also to our society.

“...Such attitudes can have different causes: revolt against evil in the world; religious ignorance or indifference; the cares and riches of this world; the scandal of bad example on the part of believers; currents of thought hostile to religion; finally, that attitude of sinful man which makes him hide from God out of fear and flee his call” (CCC, 29). These are all manifestations of that complex and detailed phenomenon called secularism or spiritual worldliness. “... Do you not realise that people who do evil will never inherit the kingdom of God? Make no mistake – the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, the self-indulgent, sodomites, thieves, misers, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers, none of these will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Co. 6:9).

c. Inadequate Christian Formation

40. “... Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have” (1 P. 3:15). This is a duty that presupposes deep knowledge, the assimilation of the message of the faith, doctrinal study, preparation for sacramental life and the growth of a sense of Church. At a time when it is totally inappropriate to try to live the elementary notions of the faith as learned in infancy, there exists a kind of religious illiteracy that must be overcome. “... In the historical conditions in which he finds himself, however, man experiences many difficulties in coming to know God by the light of reason alone This is why man stands in need of being enlightened by God's revelation” (CCC, 37-38).

Strengths in our Life of Faith

a. Faith in the Providence of God

41. “... Continue to grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 P. 3:18). It is in the total trusting of ourselves to God's grace and to his help that we must seek the solution to our problems, not through recourse to magicians or diviners, “... All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead, or other practices falsely supposed to "unveil" the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honour, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone” (CCC, 2116).

b. Fidelity to the Church

42. Following the ‘whole Christ’ is the characteristic of the true believer. The body is not separate from the head of Christ and so it is absurd to affirm, “Christ yes, the Church no” and thus to deny the Church and her teachings the same faith and love as that reserved for Christ. Both are needed if we are to guarantee our completeness and maturity in the faith.

c. Following the Cross of Christ

43. “... As the Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. It is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows” (NA, 4). To follow Christ means to accept to carry his cross, “... If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mt. 16:24). Our faithfulness and dedication to the Church grows in the measure to

which our faithfulness to the cross of Christ increases. Acceptance of the will of God in every moment of life and patience and perseverance when things are difficult is the fruit of our being rooted in the mystery of the cross. In that moment when suffering and difficulties mark our life and we ask, “Why? Why me?”, the only answer we can find is in the cross of Christ. This answer is equally valid for the difficulties faced in the priestly life, religious life, married life and family life. Christianity was born and has flowered in the cross, and the Christian, returning to the foot of the cross finds there the reason to persevere when times get tough.

d. *Listening to the Word of God*

44. “... Human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt. 4:4). “...The days are coming – declares the Lord Yahweh – when I shall send a famine on the country, not hunger for food, nor thirst for water, but famine for hearing Yahweh’s word” (Am. 8:11). One of the greatest aims of the **Year of Faith** was to give new life to this hunger and thirst in the people of God and to make of the Word of God the source of their renewal.

In line with Vatican II, we trust that “... through the reading and study of the sacred books "the word of God may spread rapidly and be glorified" (2 Th. 3:1) and the treasure of revelation, entrusted to the Church, may more and more fill the hearts of men. Just as the life of the Church is strengthened through more frequent celebration of the Eucharistic mystery, similar we may hope for a new stimulus for the life of the Spirit from a growing reverence for the word of God, which "lasts forever" (Is. 40:8; see 1 P. 1:23-25)” (*Dei Verbum*, 26). Given that “not to know the Scriptures is not to know Christ” (St. Jerome), we urge parish priests and the pastors of the people of God to zealously promote the reading and knowledge of Sacred Scripture.

It is encouraging to note signs of a reawakening of interest in the reading of the Bible. At the same time we remind the faithful that it is of the greatest importance that such reading be constantly linked to a healthy interpretation and faithful to the teaching of the Church. The translation of the Bible into our local languages is a blessing. We must continue in these efforts with the proper preparation and competence.

e. *Sacramental Life*

45. Recalling the promise of Christ, “... Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28), “...The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body” (DV, 21). Since the Eucharist is “... the fount and apex of the whole Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11) it is not possible to build the church without it. In our country there exist age-old traditions of popular piety. It is necessary that these, if they are to preserve and develop their essential characters, be constantly fed by an intense sacramental life. The **Year of Faith** just ended is a particular instance of this.

With joy we note in our people the desire and will to participate in the holy Eucharist. At the same time, we would like to recommend that such participation be attentive and spiritually demanding. This must be evidenced in the fruits that just such participation produces in daily life, which in turn must be reinvigorated through access to the Sacrament of Penance, the reception of Holy Communion, by the unity of family life based on holy matrimony, until leaving this world with the sacrament of the Sick.

With Mary “Star of the Sea”

46. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our sincere wish for you is that, following in the footsteps of Mary “Star of the Sea” you may live and grow safe in faith, hope and charity. Only if you live the present time strong in this faith and in this hope (cf. Ep. 5:16; Col. 4:5) and you await the future anchored in patience (cf. Rm. 8:5), will you give true and effective witness to the Gospel of Christ the Lord. In this regard, the exhortation of the Vatican Council remains true “... Let them not, then, hide this hope in the depths of their hearts, but even in the program of their secular life let them express it by a continual conversion and by wrestling "against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness (Ep. 6:12)” (LG, 35).

May Mary most holy - to whom Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, turned with these words, “... When you hastened with holy joy across the mountains of Judea to see your cousin Elizabeth, you became the image of the Church to come, which carries the hope of the world in her womb across the mountains of history. But alongside the joy which, with your *Magnificat*, you proclaimed in word and song for all the centuries to hear, you also knew the dark sayings of the prophets about the suffering of the servant of God in this world. Shining over his birth in the stable at Bethlehem, there were angels in splendour who brought the good news to the shepherds, but at the same time the lowliness of God in this world was all too palpable” (*Spe Salvi*, 50) - be of comfort, incentive and inspiration.

Conclusion

To rise with Christ means to pass from darkness into the light. If we are not children of the light, we will not see the truth. And without the truth there is no freedom (cf. Jn. 8:32). “... Every time I pray for you all, I always pray with joy for your partnership in the Gospel (Ph. 1:4); on all of you we invoke the freedom, peace and joy that the Father has given to us through the resurrection of his Son, and to which has called us to be strong and credible witnesses.

O Maria “... you were in the midst of the community of believers, who in the days following the Ascension prayed with one voice for the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:14) and then received that gift on the day of Pentecost. The “Kingdom” of Jesus was not as might have been imagined. It began in that hour, and of this “Kingdom” there will be no end. Thus you remain in the midst of the disciples as their Mother, as the Mother of hope. Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope, to love with you. Show us the way to his Kingdom! Star of the Sea, shine upon us and guide us on our way! (SS, 50)

*Star of the new evangelization,
help us to bear radiant witness to communion,
service, ardent and generous faith,
justice and love of the poor,
that the joy of the Gospel
may reach to the ends of the earth,
illuminating even the fringes of our world. (EG, 288)*

The Catholic Bishops of Eritrea.