

**Hawassa**

**October 7, 2013**

**Province of Ethiopia**



**Evangelization Among the Sidama**

## **Reflection about the Work of Evangelization in Sidama Area of Hawassa Vicariate**

### **Introduction**

The third meeting organized by the Provincial Council to reflect on the evangelizing activity in the different territories where the Comboni missionaries in Ethiopia we are working, took place in Hawassa on October 7, 2013.

It dealt with our work of evangelization in Sidama area since the arrival of the first Comboni missionaries in 1964.

The meeting, to which the Provincial Council members and representatives from the parishes of Dongora, Fullasa and Teticha took part, was introduced by the Provincial who welcomed the confreres and explained the meaning of the meeting itself, intended to offer insights to the Provincial Council in the same way in which it has already been done in the areas of Gumuz and Gujji.

The introductory report, by Fr. G. Cavallini, was centered on an assessment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Hawassa Diocesan Synod held in 2004, its analysis of the reality of Hawassa Vicariate, challenges and future perspectives.

## **First Diocesan Synod of Hawassa:**

### **Most Relevant Pastoral Issues**

*Fr. Giuseppe Cavallilni*

#### Some historical hints

The major reasons justifying the decision to have a Synod, 15 years ago, were the great and ever-increasing number of socio-pastoral activities of the parishes, the multiplication of male and female Congregations joining the Vicariate, each with its own charism and vision, the first groups of local clergy and religious Sisters, and the complexity of the challenges emerging from Christian communities rich in numbers but with insufficient depth in their faith and Christian formation.

A situation which could become critical if nothing was done, as in fact it happened in the unfortunate events which arose between 2002-2003, the slandering campaign started by a group of ex-Catholics, ex-seminarians, people with hidden agendas and obscure political aims against bishop Ceresoli and some missionaries, with the aim of forcing the bishop to resign so as to replace him with a priest of their liking.

Be as it may, after 40 years of evangelizing activity, the picture of the Vicariate was extremely complicated, and we needed to find some sort of convergence and common policy in terms of pastoral approach and methodology, as well as at the level of our future standing before the government, facing the fast changing social tissue of the Ethiopian society at large. What else better than a Synod could help to reach these objectives?

It is worth recalling briefly the genesis of the Synodal Assembly!

The Synod was celebrated in 2 different sessions between April 13-17 and April 26 – may 1 - 2004 , namely about 40 years from the II-Vatican Council and the arrival of the first Comboni missionaries in Southern Ethiopia after World War II.

It took place also exactly ten years after the 1<sup>st</sup> Assembly of the Synod of African bishops in Rome, and indeed it made often reference to it.

The Synod, however, had a long period of preparation, starting off from a personal conviction which I cultivated in dialogue with Fr. Sebhatleab, whom I had replaced at the Pastoral Centre of Dongora at the beginning of 1998.

At that time, with the blessing of the then bishop Msgr. Ceresoli, two 'pastoral teams' made up of religious and lay people had already been formed and were operating at Vicariate level in the fields of pastoral animation and Christian formation: one led by our confrere Fr. Adelmo, of loving memory, who moved from Hawassa to the parishes of the Vicariate and to other Vicariates or Dioceses whenever called to animate the Christian communities; and the second at Dongora Pastoral Centre, aimed especially at the formation of lay leaders of the Vicariate, made up of myself, two trained lay catechists and a number of external helpers when needed.

For almost six years, following a thorough awareness-making plan of the parishes through week-ends of formation, assemblies, courses and seminars as well as plenty of pastoral initiatives organized at parish level and addressed to the various socio-pastoral agents and all categories of the faithful, we laid the ground for the actual Synod's celebration.

A peak moment in this journey was the incoming new Millennium, when we tried to make the Synod's preparation converge with the Jubilee celebrations.

A working paper, drawn up following the trace of similar documents laid out in other dioceses of east Africa, became the most important guidelines in the work of the synodal assembly.

Those of you who had the chance to read the final documents of the Synod describing the ten major topics discussed, the resolutions presented to the Bishop and the final message to the faithful know that we dealt not only with the themes discussed in the 1<sup>st</sup> Synod of African bishops in Rome ten years earlier, but also with the specific challenges present in this Vicariate: *Biblical formation, unity and collaboration among socio-pastoral agents, formation of lay leaders and ministries in the Christian community, youth pastoral care, evangelization, inculturation and ecumenism etc...*).

## Assessment of the Synod's implementation

1. In spite of the support and constant presence of Bishop Ceresoli, as it usually happens, some pastoral agents at first objected to the Synod's idea, convinced that it was not yet time to hold a Synod. During the years of preparation, they joined in the process but only when the initiative appeared successful, and in some cases giving also a precious contribution.
2. The Synod saw the positive involvement of the laity representing all Parishes. It was a real experience of renewed communion and commitment to the welfare of the churches. It appeared also as a 'kairos' which might have enhanced the final healing of the wounds left after the unfortunate campaign which I briefly described earlier. I dare to suggest here that, from what I could gather, the evolution of the general situation of the parishes in the years following the Synod confirmed that the indispensable process of internalization of the Synod's spirit was almost totally absent.

A post Synod's Commission had been formed and, on the basis of the guidelines issued by the Bishop and fruit of the Synod, was able to produce in time various documents among which:

- a) A Five-Year-Pastoral Plan which should have been implemented between 2005-2010.
- b) Statutes of Pastoral Councils;
- c) Guidelines for the Journey towards Self-Reliance;
- d) Catechists' Guidelines, and other materials.

I do not have enough elements allowing me to make an assessment concerning the implementation of the Plan and the other Guidelines, since I left the Province and the Vicariate in 2005.

Before my return to Ethiopia, the new bishop wrote to me in various occasions re-affirming his intention of taking up the Synod's Guidelines and the Pastoral Plan, which included the launching of the new Catholic Youth Pastoral Centre of Hawassa. Since then, I did not have the chance to talk to him about it.

### Local Ordinaries

After Msgr. Ceresoli completed his service, I had the chance, a month after his ordination, to interview the newly elected bishop, Msgr. Migliorati for Nigrizia.

I'd like to report here some of his comment which may be very enlightening concerning the Synod and the optimistic vision the new bishop cultivated at that time:

*The local Church of Hawassa has made along the years important steps towards self-sufficiency. What is your impression regarding this issue?*

“We still have a long journey ahead -the Bishop answers- the Catholic Church is seen by the government as an NGO with money and material means. There is -on the other hand- still a rather paternalistic attitude in some missionaries and, on the opposite side, the search of many to get personal benefits from the church. We need to put greater trust in the communities we formed and in the pastoral agents arisen from them, but also the need of a maturation of conscience on their part, concerning their capacity to give, and not only to receive. The way to self-sufficiency is still long and this is confirmed by the fact that once again a ‘foreign bishop’ has been chosen. I can testify, however, that good steps have been made and the many written documents and concrete directives issued along the years confirm this. It’s a question of putting them into practice, aware that this church can become, even if gradually, self-sufficient both at financial and ministerial level. 45 years of evangelization are still too short to expect a full assumption of responsibility. A relevant event which has taken place few years ago in the life of the diocese is the first diocesan Synod. The bishop newly ordained (himself...) had just returned to this country, but had the chance to insert himself in the process and to know the topics been discussed”.

*The bishop continues giving a personal assessment of that event:*

“The 1<sup>st</sup> Diocesan Synod organized in Ethiopia, which ended 5 years ago in the Solemnity of Pentecost, has had the merit of carrying out a global analysis of the set up of our church, underlining many aspects still valid today. The many articles and resolutions of the final document, divided into 10 major chapters, are still valid and up to date, and if we could say that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, after 44 years since its conclusion has not yet been fully understood, known and thus also fully realized, this holds true of our diocesan Synod to which, thank God, I had the opportunity to participate in its final stage. In my short message to priests, religious and faithful gathered in Hawassa’s cathedral on April 16<sup>th</sup> for the Chrism Mass, after my nomination as Bishop I simply said: “*I don’t have any special plan, since the diocesan Synod has indicated the way to go: let us all be committed to its concrete implementation*”.

The fields of work (especially the Youth, catechesis and biblical formation, Gospel inculturation and inter-religious dialogue...) are very clearly spelled out. We only need to be committed. I think that my Episcopal ‘motto’ “CHRIST OUR HOPE” could be ‘programmatic’ and most of all could indicate to us the road we should take in this new phase of growth of the Church the Lord has entrusted to me: He is the model but at the same time He is present in us to build up His Kingdom. Human promotion, but with Christ at the centre. God wants the integral development of every human person, and without Christ no one can reach the fullness of his/her humanity”.

*I finally asked one word concerning the pastoral agents, especially the young local clergy:*

“Relationship between local clergy and religious on the one hand and foreign pastoral workers on the other are difficult in all parts of Africa -says the Bishop.- My diocese has probably still some wounds which ask to be healed through reciprocal esteem and recognition, being aware that we are all working for a common cause, witnessing that the Catholic Church is truly God’s family gathering and expressing different charisms for the common welfare. Since the beginning of my Episcopal service I thus say: let’s get rid of all prejudices, let us courageously face together an enterprise which requires time, patience and reciprocal trust. I’m not pessimistic, in these recent years there has been an improvement and from both sides there has been a better acceptance. With God’s grace I’m sure that there will be even better relationships”.

### **The present challenges**

I might probably be biased in evaluating the present situation of this Vicariate based upon the dream cultivated at the time of the Synod, but after almost a year from my return I’m convinced that all the major issues faced during the Synod, were considered then challenges, and are still present!:

The biggest challenge regards still the understanding among the church leaders and religious. Namely, the need to establish a deeper collaboration, encounter and reciprocal knowledge among the various Institutes, male and female, the local clergy and religious as well as other lay leaders of the different ethnic groups. Indeed, it appears as if the various entities tend to follow each one their own ways and methods both in the pastoral settings and in the structures of human promotion.

3. The challenge and urgency of imparting deeper instruction on biblical formation, Catholic identity and catechesis for all appears even more critical than in the past, given on the one hand the increased number of children and youth ‘borne Catholic’, who never followed a sufficient catechetical-sacramental education and, on the other, the much greater influence exercised by Protestant churches, new denominations and sects especially once Catholic youth move to towns.

4. The challenge of a stronger presence in the towns, aimed originally at offering pastoral care to the youth and the Catholic families living there, was partially taken up with the building of some infra-structures, but in many cases such buildings have not been sufficiently used or have seen a very irregular presence of the pastoral agents.

5. Nothing appears having been done to study ways of establishing any sort of inter-ecclesial or inter-religious dialogue. The impression is of a church sticking to the defense of its existence, lacking strong leadership and pastoral creativity, a situation which pushes easily especially the new generation of Catholics to imitate and follow Protestant models of prayer and singing in liturgies and large gatherings. This may lead

also to a gradual weakening and loss of meaning of essential sacraments like confession, marriage and Holy Communion.

6. Concerning self-reliance and church-administration, there is certainly a long way to go, in spite of a good financial contribution of the faithful in many parishes aimed at covering the costs of pastoral activities and remuneration of catechists. There is, however, in most parishes still a heavy dependence on external help to cover expenses for development projects, maintenance of infrastructure and salaries. Accountability and transparency in the collection, the use and the financial reporting in many instances seem to be lacking. Very few parishes seem to have established a financial committee.

It is not my task to propose here possible ways of facing and try to respond to these challenges and others not mentioned here. I can only add an aspect which may become extremely relevant if things will develop according to what the bishop himself has hinted in various circumstances, namely the possibility of a future division of this Vicariate and the creation of a new ecclesiastical circumscription. If and when this had to happen, the set up of this local church will in many ways be revolutionized, and a totally new chapter will open up in the development of the work of evangelization in this part of South Ethiopia.



## SHARING

A rich exchange followed this presentation. The sharing included not only the critical but also the positive results and successes of the evangelization work in the Vicariate during last 50 years were underlined.

Particular mention and appreciation was expressed for the generous work of so many Comboni missionaries (priests, brother and sisters) who worked until their death for the growth of this local church.

The major challenges still facing the work in the Vicariate today have been presented as follows:

1. The challenge and need to establish a deeper collaboration, encounter and reciprocal knowledge among the various Institutes, male and female, the local clergy and religious, as well as other lay leaders of the different ethnic groups which has not been satisfactorily met.
2. The challenge and urgency of imparting deeper instruction on biblical formation, Catholic identity and catechesis for all appears even more critical than in the past, given on the one hand the increased number of children and youth 'borne Catholic', who never followed a sufficient catechetical-sacramental education and on the other the much greater influence exercised by Protestant churches, new denominations and sects especially once Catholic youth move to towns.
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The meeting continued with the input by Fr. Rodolfo Cipollone who presented a short history of the mission of Fullasa, today the largest of the Vicariate, which the Comboni missionaries are in the process of handing over to the Bishop and the local clergy.

The process of discernment to reach the decision to hand over the parish of Fullasa has been a long and painful one, also due to the difficulty of reaching a consensus among all members of the Province concerning the parish which should have been handed over.

Father Cipollone, besides making a historical chronicle of the events and the personnel which along the years served the parish of Fullasa (which will be reported in a future more detailed written manner for the knowledge of all the members of the Province...), emphasized both the positive process of growth undergone by the mission, which at present has a registered number of around 34.000 baptized Catholics, as well the challenges which the local clergy will still have to face, given the vast territory and the number of Christian communities to be served.

### **Prayer**

The evening prayer was the moment in which we thanked the Lord for the witness and generosity of service of all the Combonis who in so many years contributed to the strengthening of the faith of so many Christians at Fullasa.

May the Lord give their due reward to all those who spent great amount of their missionary life for the wellbeing and the growth of Fullasa, and may God bless and accompany the diocesan priests who took now over the responsibility of the parish.