

Celebrating an Ethiopian and Eritrean Small Christian Community (SCC) in South Africa

By Hailu Adalo

The Ethiopian and Eritrean SCC was founded by some faithful Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrant Catholics in St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Johannesburg Archdiocese, South Africa in 2000. These first Eastern Africans met after a Sunday Mass celebration and recognized their similar physical appearances. After talking with each other they continued sharing information about Ethiopians and Eritreans coming into South Africa as immigrant and migrants especially Catholics. During two years of attending Parish Mass Celebrations they had contact with an Eritrean Franciscan Capuchin Priest and Ethiopian Seminarians from Pretoria.

The group came together to participate in masses, *Bible* Sharing and meetings in the Parish Hall. They agreed to invite an Ethiopian Permanent Deacon to visit them and celebrate his son's marriage ceremony in 2003. This was a good opportunity to see new members especially in the parish and give some diocesan members an opportunity to know about the Catholic gathering.

This small group continued in faith and courage in its ongoing formation in the same parish in Johannesburg. They invited an Ethiopian Lazarist Priest to lead their second retreat and conduct the marriage of two couples in 2004. The faithful members continue to welcome new comers from both Ethiopia and Eritrea. They invited the Ethiopian Deacon for the second time for formation and to perform the marriage of one of the couples in 2005.

Before going back to Ethiopia the deacon advised the community to elect group leaders to promote the spiritual support of the small community. Some group members moved from Johannesburg City for lack of work while others were granted resettlement opportunities in England, Australia and Canada. In addition some group members including leaders changed from the Catholic Church by marriage and language to the Ethiopian Pentecostal Churches. As the last step before me, a faithful student came from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia at end of 2006 and met with the first group leaders. From there they elected new group leaders to organize with him this small group at same parish. Before he went back home, I arrived to South Africa.

Responding to the request to animate this group, I heard from the Ethiopian Deacon the concern about the spiritual challenges in a foreign land to continue in faith and the native languages. There was the great issue for some members to understand the local languages in attending Sunday masses. I started with this Small Christian Community a spiritual journey at the end of 2006.

November, 2006 in the Diocese of Tazneen was my first arrival place in South Africa because my elder brother lived there. In that beginning I met some our diocesan Catholics and I had started with them weekly prayer and *Bible* Sharing in the some of the members' houses. I traveled with my brother when he went to the Free State Bethlehem Province looking for work.

In the beginning of January, 2007 I was invited to lead some of our Diocesan Wedding Celebrations with another preacher. In the Bethlehem I participated attentively in the Catholic Parish.

At the end of 2007 I have moved to the Diocese of Rustenburg where I meet a few Catholic members and continued with them to attend mass. From there I conducted services with the Johannesburg group members by traveling every month to the end of 2008. A diocesan priest came to attend a workshop in Johannesburg. We arranged for him to meet with us and celebrate mass. He celebrated two masses in the parish in October, 2008 and helped us to welcome new comers. When he went back to Ethiopia he informed the Archbishop of Addis Ababa about our challenges.

After some quite time I have received news of the Archbishop of Addis Ababa's visit. He came to attend the Episcopal Ordination of his friend in Archdiocese of Pretoria. After that he communicated with me to see our group. I contacted the Johannesburg group leaders and I arranged with the St. Francis of Assisi Parish Priest to welcome him for mass. The archbishop celebrated the parish mass and after mass he met with our SCC in the Parish Hall on 1 February, 2009. That moment encouraged me to continue this ministry with immigrant brothers and sisters in South Africa. The archbishop gave me great advice, counseling and prayers because I took the opportunity to stay with him from Friday evening until Sunday at his congregation's house in Johannesburg.

The Ethiopian and Eritrean SCCs members today are organized in various diocesan parishes e.g. Archdiocese of Johannesburg, Archdiocese of Pretoria, Diocese of Rustenburg, Diocese of Port Elizabeth, Diocese of Keimoes-Upington, Diocese of Dundee, Diocese of Klerksdorp, Diocese of Tazneen and some families in the Archdiocese of Durban.

I was commissioned as an Acolyte on 8 June, 2014 by the Archbishop of Pretoria to take up this ministry with the Ethiopian and Eritrean SCC in South Africa. Two photographs of our community are below.

The special training that I have received during the Lumko East Africa SCCs Workshop (Waumini Pastoral Program) at Mary Ward Centre, Nairobi, Kenya from Monday, 7 September to Saturday, 3 October, 2015 has been very helpful. The overall theme was "Towards Communion of Communities." I now return to South Africa with new insights and ideas for building this new way of becoming church.

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