

A Short life history of martyrbishop Abune Petros who became martyr on the 29 th of July 1936, in Addis Ababa Ethiopia in the struggle against colonialism and oppression.

Abune Petros was born 1892 in a farmer family in the city of Fiche, which is situated north of Addis Ababa. He got the baptismal name Hailemariam that means power of Maria. As the custom of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) tradition he got a special bishop name, that is PETROS with the Ethiopia title for a bishop which is ABUNE. As a young boy Abune Petros was known as clever, helpful and humble disciple in the city and the church in Fiche.

martyrbishop Abune Petros

He chose early to study the EOC diakon and priest education. At the age of 24 he took the EOC oath and became a monk. He grew up and became a principled and well-known teacher around the monasteries in Fiche and Wolamo area. In 1918 he was assigned by the EOC as he teacher and priest for the Debre-Menkrat monastery church in the region of Wolamo. Abune Petros continued to teach there when in 1924 he was assigned as the main teacher for the well-known island monastery-church of Mary, which is situated inside Lake Zewai in southern part of Ethiopia. He was well known for his teaching and preaching to the people around the region to seek first the kingdom of **God**: "To put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." (Colossians 3:12).

His teachings and preaching were very popular and insightful to the people in the area and the disciples he teaches in the Monastery. In 1928 in connection with the nomination of Ethiopia bishops in the St.Marks Monastery in Alexandria, he was nominated to one of four bishops of Ethiopia, with the title and name ABUNE PETROS.

Abune Petros was nominated as bishop of the central and eastern part of Ethiopia. Half of his time he stayed in the City of Dessie and the surrounding monasteries, while the rest of his time he spent visiting and teaching in the monasteries around the Wereilu region. To help him in the administration of the churches and monasteries in the two regions, two priests were assigned to him one from each region. He continued to preach the gospel and teach in the churches. He was liked by many for his teaching and exhortation to stand-up for the belief, the truth and follow the example of our lord **Jesus Christ**: "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake." (Phillippians 1:29). As we read further we will see that Abune Petros exemplified this with his life.

When Italy with the leadership of fascist Mussolini's army invaded Ethiopia in 1932, Abune Petros followed with Emperor Haile Selassie and the Ethiopian defence forces to the northern front. He helped the wounded, prayed and consecrated the dead and preached the Gospel. During that time he saw the undiscerning terror and violence of the invading army: He saw how the invading army with the help of nerve gas and technologically advanced

weaponry burned down the forest and villages with innocent civilians and at last won the war at Maichew. The patriots retreated and decided to continue guerrilla warfare against the fascist army. Abune Peteros, with all the impressions he got from the war and the burned villages of civilians, returned safely and took refuge in the well-known monastery church of Debre Libanos.

In the monastery he urged the priests and monks to fast. He himself started to fast and pray for the mercy of **God** to the people of Ethiopia and prepared himself for the big challenge that is waiting ahead for him: "My earnest expectation and hope, is that I will not be put to shame in anything but my lord **Jesus Christ** will even now as always be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death." (Phillippians 1:20).

During these difficult times he started to question in his preaching. "How a Christian country as Italy could undertake such a hideous terror action of occupation on another peaceful Christian country that is Ethiopia. "For him all Christians were brother and sister pilgrims helping each other in this world on the way to meet **God** in Heaven. With that he began his crusade against the invading army's terror and killing machinery. He went further and condemned all the violent actions and killings of civilians by the invading army.

The fascist army was by then committing undiscerning violent actions against innocent civilians because they had suspicion that the people are helping the patriots who were growing in both strength and manpower. During these times there were some EOC priests who out of fear of the terror of the army accepted the Italian leadership in Addis Ababa. Through these priests the fascist army sent letters to win the support of the popular and respected bishop Abune Petros to its camp, to accept the powerful army of Italy as government and stop with his preaching against the violence of the army on civilians and the patriots. If he did this they promised him the best house quarters and a peaceful life in Addis Ababa. Abune Petros saw these letters as an incitement to commit sin against **God**, his Christian belief and consciousness. With that he refused to accept the offer and stayed in fasting and prayer in the monastery of Debre-Libanos. "Choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of **God** than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin" (Hebrews 11:25).

The resistance against the encroachment and violence of the invading army kept on growing like wild fire over the whole of Ethiopia. The patriots began to win battles at different fronts. Abune Petros continued his teachings and preaching to the people to stand-up for their belief and conviction and that **God** would visit the downtrodden people of Ethiopia soon. He went on further and preached against Italy's right to occupy Ethiopia with terror and violence. He exhorted the people not to be afraid of the terror and violence from the occupying army. "I say to you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the one who has the power to kill the body and after that has the authority to cast in to hell; yes I tell you fear Him." (Luke 12:4-5).

The Italian authorities in Addis Ababa who saw and heard him preach wanted by all means to stop Abune Petros from preaching and inciting people to resistance. However, since he was very popular and respected bishop, many in the Italian authorities would rather win his support to accept the Italian authority in Ethiopia than imprisoning or killing him. In the month of July 1936, the patriots planned and executed an attack on Addis Ababa. During that time one of the day Abune Petros clothed with his bishop garment and the ever-present hand cross rapped in a small blue scarlet cloth went into the capital city and began to preach to the people who were lamenting in the grips of the invading army. The soldiers were given order

to arrest the Abune and bring him to court for treason against the Italian occupation. While he was in prison waiting for court appearance, both the priests in the city and the officers of Italy tried to convince him to accept the Italian occupation. And finally have him the following ultimatum: To stop preaching against the occupying army's violence and terror against civilians and the patriots, accept the Italian authorities in Addis Ababa and finally condemn the patriots as bandits. Otherwise, he was told that he will lose his life. Abune Petros refused to comply to the ultimatum set by his tormentors and through the (Italian) interpreter gave the following answer to the interrogating officers of the invading army: "The cry of my country men who died due to your nerve-gas and terror machinery will never allow my conscious to accept your ultimatum. How can I see my **God** if I give blind eye to such a crime." Listen to me you who know righteousness, a people in whose heart is my law, do not fear the reproach of man, nor be dismayed at their revilings. For the moth will eat them like garment...." (Isaiah 51:7-8). "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:10).

After this a quick assembled court sentenced Abune Petros to death. The news of the death sentence on the popular bishop of Ethiopia spread over the whole country. People began coming to Addis to say farewell of their beloved bishop who stood up for the righteous cause which **God** have called him, for the right of the people of Ethiopia to freedom and independence and against the terror and violence of the invading army. All this from the pulpit of a church and in the presence of a deadly ultimatum upon his head. Due to his popularity the fascist army was afraid of riot and attempts by the patriots to free him from prison, and decided that the execution of the death penalty should be done as soon as possible. He was taken to his execution place where a many people and the fascist army officers and generals were gathered, and were told to say his last speech. We cite the Ethiopia Orthodox Church newspaper Vol.1, No. 8,9,10,1945 for the account: " When Abune Petros came to the place of execution and was given to say his last words, he took his hand cross and removed the blue cloth that was rapped around it and blessed the people at the four corners of the world and said the following last words: "My country men do not believe if they tell you that the patriots are bandits, the patriots are people who yearn for freedom from the terrors of fascism. Bandits are the soldiers who are standing in front of me and you, who come from afar, terrors and violently occupy a weak and peaceful country: our Ethiopia. May **God** give the people of Ethiopia the strength to resist and never bow down to the fascist army and its violence. May the Ethiopian earth never accept the invading army's rule." After that a swarm of bullets from the execution platoon pierced and killed our beloved bishop Abune Petros.

The fascist army wanted by any means to cover up the crime they did against Abune Petros and Ethiopia by forbidding everybody all writings about his execution. Because of his popularity both inside and outside of Ethiopia they thought it might injure their policy of occupying Ethiopia due to the domestic and international opinion that grew against his act. However hard they tried to stop the publicity, the example of Abune Petros shines in all people who love the truth unto this day. Above all, the fascist army's lost all credibility from the domestic opinion, many found courage after this to leave the occupying army's stronghold in the capital city to join the patriots and fight for independence. patriotic resistance grew more in strength and led to a sooner freedom of the country from the fascist occupation. The popular Ethiopian Poet-Laureate Tsegaye Gebremedhin has illustrated the last days of Abune Petros life by a theatre play called: "Petros at that Hour".

A statue of Abune Petros was raised in the capital city Addis Ababa 10 years after his death, as a reminder to coming generations of: his unwavering stand for the truth. His unbending courage to stand up against every form of violence on human rights, his integrity and his

commitment not to give in for short term gain or treat. Above all his unwavering conviction and belief that we all one day will stand up and answer for our deeds in his life before **God**.

Acknowledgement

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Sweden would like to thank the Church of Sweden, particularly bishop Jonas Jonson of Strängnäs Diocese, for all the help we got and the remembrance of our martyr bishop Abune Petros as one of the millennium Martyrs.

This Article is Contributed by Kiefe Michael - Melbourne