



## Second meeting of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Church is held



### **DECR Communication service, 19.02.2023**

On 11-16th of February, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' and His Holiness Patriarch-Catholicos Abune Mathias of Ethiopia, the second meeting of the Commission for Bilateral Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

From the Moscow Patriarchate side, there were Metropolitan Leonid of Klin, Patriarchal Exarch for Africa, co-chair of the Commission; Hieromonk Stephan (Igumnov), DECR secretary for inter-Christian relations, secretary of the Commission; V. V. Kipshidze, vice-chairman of the Synodal Department for the Church's Relations with Society and the Media; Deacon Dimitry Serov, director of the Moscow Theological Academy Publishers; S. G. Alferov, a DECR staff member.

The Ethiopian side was represented by Archbishop Philipos of South Omo, rector of the Holy Trinity Theological Academy in Addis-Ababa, co-chair of the Commission; Rev. Daniel Sayfemichael, head of the Ethiopian Church Department for External Relations, secretary of the Commission; Archimandrite

Uedejesus Sefugalato, deputy chancellor of the Ethiopian Church, dean of the parishes in Addis-Ababa.

During the meeting, the Commission reviewed joint projects implemented since its previous meeting in Addis Ababa (January 21-25, 2019) and discussed future plans for collaboration. Today the bilateral dialogue is developing cooperation in a number of topical areas, including: countering Christianophobia; supporting traditional moral values in the modern world; mutual assistance in the pastoral care of believers of the two Churches living in Russia and Ethiopia; coordination of interaction between the two Churches at the level of foreign communities and international venues; contacts in the academic and youth spheres; cooperation in the sphere of church art and production of church tableware; and cooperation in the field of the arts and culture.

Specific proposals by the Commission for the development of each area of bilateral cooperation were set forth in a joint memorandum that was adopted at the meeting. It consists of 12 points, the main content of which is given below.

### **1) Joint protection of Christianity, in particular Orthodox Christians**

This aspect has a paramount importance for our Dialogue, taking into account the grave challenges of the time we live in. Today, the world is divided as never before by a complex of military-political, socio-economic and provocative ethnic hatred factors. These divisions are extended to instrument religion and cause the utmost possible damage to the traditional Christian Communities continuing to honor its spiritual traditions in a global society which is rapidly losing any moral guidelines. Both Ethiopia and Russia are suffering from externally provoked disturbances. Hate speech and schismatic movements are used like instruments to raise violence.

We express our deepest condolences to the loved ones of all the victims of these tragedies, and our strong solidarity with all those who continue to be in mortal danger today. We've done this also before, including at the highest level.

We welcome the letters of support sent in December 2019 by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, addressed to His Holiness Abune Mathias, Patriarch of Ethiopia, to the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, and to the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs. The media campaign carried out by the Russian Orthodox Church in 2019 – 2020 to highlight acts of aggression against the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, including the organization of the Moscow international online conference “On the Situation of Christians in Africa” (December 22, 2020) took a significant public reaction, as well. These days, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate (DECR), His Eminence Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk raised the voice in defense of the unity of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. The Ethiopian side of Commission stressed the importance of the visit by the Russian Ambassador and Parliamentary delegation to His Holiness Abune Mathias as a sign of solidarity.

For its part, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church has demonstrated its real fraternal support to the Russian Orthodox Church delegations during a number of official Meetings held the last 2022 in the venues of the World Council of Churches. The firm position of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church against the attempted discrimination of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as the principle support and understanding of the complexity of the situation, that the Moscow Patriarchate have faced recently, is particularly valuable.

We shall definitely continue to support each other, including:

- In the media space
- At all public events our common participation
- At the humanitarian level.

## **2) Interaction on international platforms**

This aspect of cooperation includes contacts between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church representatives on the sidelines of all existing international organizations of inter-Christian, inter-religious and other speciality. Practically, this means holding fraternal meetings in a variety of formats in order to discuss the full range of issues of mutual interest and then – to present a united voice in order to defend our common positions on the most burning issues.

## **3) Common support for traditional moral values in the modern world**

One of such strategic tasks is protection of traditional moral values in their genuine Christian understanding. Today, the influential powers of the Western “ultra-liberal” and “post-secular” society are aggressively imposing another, and really terrible understanding of the key concepts of morality to the whole mankind. The most dangerous thing is that they’re trying to give this all an erroneous theological justification.

Among these terrible developments are attempts at all levels to legalize abortion, euthanasia, ethically questionable reproductive technologies, the so called “gender ideology” and other perversions that will

lead to the total degradation of humanity. The Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church have common position in rejection of all that. The Commission welcomes the efforts of all religious, state, public figures and institutions aimed at countering this deadly threat. We consider the adoption of the law banning LGBT propaganda in the Russian Federation the late December, 2022 to be a historical event.

Our Churches intend to defend the principles of Christian morality in the public space and oppose to erroneous theological understanding of it. The Commission recommends to establish professional cooperation between our respective Church institutions in the future. The Russian Orthodox Church has a Synodal Commission on Bioethics, and there are also the appropriate specialists under the Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. As a first practical step, the Russian and Ethiopian sides will exchange their official Church documents on this topic. The mentioned documents shall be carefully studied, translated into Amharic and Russian, respectively, and published for the attention of our believers and a wider audience. In the future, it could also make a weighty contribution to the development of the official dialogue between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church families.

#### **4) Exchange of experience in the media space**

The great success of our Bilateral Dialogue was the press-tour of the Russian secular and church media specialists headed by co-secretary of our Commission Rev. Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov) to Ethiopia September, 27 – October, 4, 2019, during the Meskel (Holy Cross) Celebration. In addition to establishing professional contacts, a number of TV projects issued about the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, its history, traditions and modern life. All of them had a great success among the millions of Russian Orthodox believers. Our colleagues who made these exclusive documentary materials brilliantly reflected the fraternal spirit of the relationship between our peoples. Russian side express special thanks for accompanying the project to co-secretary from Ethiopian side Rev. Fr. Daniel Seifemichael, general director of Media Corporation of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and Mr. Vladimir Legoyda, the Head of the Department for Church's society and media relations of the Russian Orthodox Church. This cooperation in media seems to be a very promising field of cooperation. It should definitely be continued on a regular basis.

#### **5) Rendering assistance in pastoral care for the communities of Russian believers in Ethiopia and Ethiopian believers in Russia**

The area of activity that requires attention is taking care of our believers who permanently live or stay

for a long time abroad. Today, there's a relatively large congregation of Ethiopian believers in Russia and a Russian-speaking community in Ethiopia.

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church express the gratitude to the Embassy of Ethiopia in Moscow and the Russian Diplomatic Mission in Addis Ababa, both of which play a significant role in the consolidation of our compatriots. The both Churches are also ready to provide such mutual support. There is a very positive experience of such interaction. On Easter 2019, with the assistance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church the Russian Orthodox Church performed Church services for the Russian-speaking believers. Rev. Fr. Stefan (Igumnov) also held such visits during 2022 and 2023, and made several consultation meetings with members of the Ethiopian community in Moscow over the last four years.

On February 12, 2023 His Eminence Abune Philipos with the assistance of the DECR, Moscow Patriarchate had the meeting with Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church faithful community based in Moscow and surroundings in the Pokrovsky (Intercession) Convent of St. Matrona. His Eminence provided pastoral instructions service and advices to the faithful in order to strengthen their spiritual gathering. In the future, rendering pastoral care for the communities of Russian believers in Ethiopia and Ethiopian believers in Russia will permanently established by the decisions of the both Churches Authority.

## **6) Inter-Church cooperation in the Diaspora**

The Commission also noted the fact that there are very significant canonical-administrative structures of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church throughout the world, including the areas of non-Christian tradition. At the present stage, the greatest interest is in establishing working contacts at the level of Russian and Ethiopian Bishops in diaspora, especially on the African continent and in the Southeast Asia region.

## **7) Contacts in the academic field**

This area of cooperation has always been exceptional important in the relations between our Churches. It has a very successful background. In particular, the student exchange project was successfully launched in the 1950s – 1970s. To a certain extent, this became possible thanks to the personal contribution of His Eminence Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad and Novgorod, who held a number of important church positions at that time.

The resumption of this cooperation began in 2019, just before the Covid pandemic, when two students from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church started study course at the Institute for Post-Graduate Studies of St.st. Cyril and Methodius in Moscow. At the same time, other agreements were concluded to expand this practice, which in today's conditions can be successfully implemented.

The Commission recognized the importance of several visits of Russian Orthodox Church delegations headed by Rev. Fr. Stefan (Igumnov) to the Holy Trinity University and traditional ecclesiastical schools in various places of Ethiopia (Addis Ababa, Debre Birhan, Lalibela, Gondar and Jinka).

The Commission also reached into understanding the importance on professional cooperation between the Moscow Theological Academy and the Holy Trinity University in Addis Ababa. The two academical institutes will carry out detail cooperations.

#### **8) Contacts in the youth field**

Plans for establishing cooperation in the field of youth ministry have also been considered. This service cannot be underestimated.

#### **9) Cooperation in the field of church art and production of church tableware**

The Commission confirms the existing agreements on the development of cooperation on this topic which has serious practical significance. Regular business contacts between the “Sofrino” Art Production of the Russian Orthodox Church and the relevant EOTC's institutions have to be started at the soonest.

#### **10) Interaction in the field of social work and diaconia**

Similarly, this direction is an integral part of the ministry of any Christian Church. Nevertheless, it has a

vital importance for the both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church today, especially in the conditions faced by our believers who live or are forced to stay in war zones and places of natural disasters. Professional exchange of experience in this field is relevant.

The Commission proposes to receive a delegation of representatives of the diaconic structures of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in Russia to get acquainted with the activities of the Synodal Department for Church Charity and Social Service, as a first step in this way.

Participation of the Ethiopian specialists in the work of thematic sections within the framework of the annual forum “International Christmas Educational Readings of the Russian Orthodox Church” could be also very promising. Further possible cooperation in this area is planned through the “Russian Round Table” operating on the basis of the DECR.

### **11) Contacts between representatives of Russian and Ethiopian monasticism**

The Commission discussed the possibility of developing contacts between the monastic communities of both Churches. In particular, a mutual exchange of monastic delegations is planned with the purpose to visit Russian and Ethiopian monasteries and convents and get a more complete view of their spiritual traditions and the today’s ascetic life.

### **12) Development of pilgrimage tours both in Ethiopia and Russia**

In a similar way, pilgrimage tours of our believers to the holy places of Russia and Ethiopia can be opened. The Commission encouraged the great interest that is already existed among our people in this sphere. The coordination of pilgrimages will be effective by the direction of both Churches in cooperation with the “Ethiopian Airlines” company.

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Members of the Commission expressed their deepest gratitude to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus', Metropolitan Leonid of Klins, Patriarchal Exarch for Africa, Abbess Feofaniya (Miskina), and the sisters of the Pokrovsky Stauropegic Convent in Moscow for their heartfelt hospitality.

The results of the work of the commission will be submitted for final approval to the Holy Synods of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Church.

The next meeting of the Commission is scheduled to be held in 2024 on the territory of the Ethiopian Church.

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