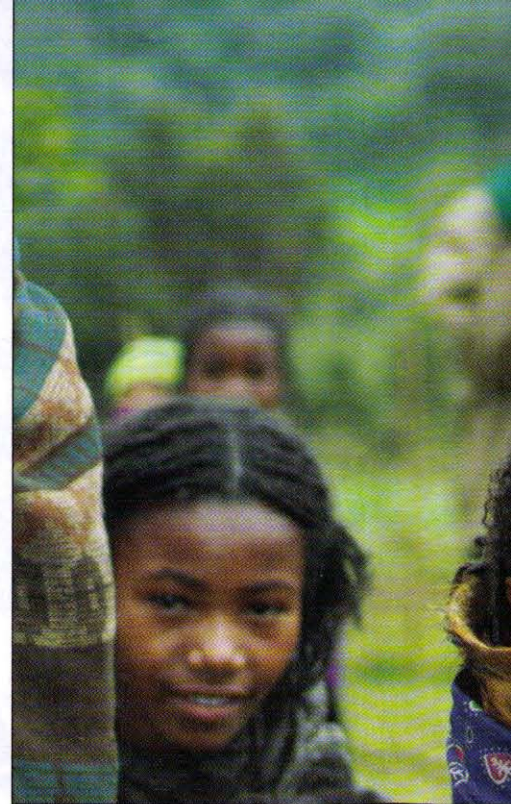


# Visiting



*Fr. Franco with  
Dom Leonardo*



South of Ethiopia, a territory that extends as far as the border with Kenya. The Diocese of Hawassa embraces six ethnic groups with their own distinctive languages: The Sidama, The Oromo, The Guji, the Gedeo, the Borana and the Amaro. To date there are sixteen Missions/Parishes and more than 200,000 Catholics in an area where there were no Catholics at all when the first two Comboni Missionaries arrived there in 1964. A greatly encouraging picture to anybody who arrives there from our countries in Europe where too often we get from the secular mass media the wrong

## “NEW FLOWER”

Last August and during the first week of September, together with Fr. Franco Mastromauro, a Comboni missionary who lives and works in London, I traveled through Southern Ethiopia for three weeks in my capacity as a pediatrician. The aim of our journey was to see what changes or developments had occurred in education, health care and other social aspects of life in rural areas through the work by the Comboni Missionaries in their Missions which are supported by donations from Italy, England Austria

and Germany. The first two Comboni Missionaries arrived in Hawassa, Southern Ethiopia in 1964 when the leader of Ethiopia was still the late Emperor Haile' Selassie. The two missionaries had been given permission to start a Catholic Mission in that town recently started by the same Emperor around Lake Hawasa whence the new town took its name.

Over the years the Comboni Missionaries, later on helped by other Missionary Orders of Priests and Sisters, founded other Missions in the

impression that the Church is in its last throes.

To reach these Missions, we travelled on very adventurous roads that make one dream of our motorways back at home.

In every Mission we visited, we found basic school structures in place, generally from Primary One to Primary Eight. Some Missions also offered higher education and gave girls special attention through courses in home economics, tailoring, embroidery and secretarial skills. Graduates from these



*A Guji Family*

schools are given jobs at various commercial institutions or local Government Offices all over the country. Although the schools themselves were empty during our visit - pupils were on summer holiday - I was very impressed by the education structures that are in place.

During Sunday Masses in the local Cathedral at Hawassa and in other Churches in the Diocese, I could not help admiring the reading abilities of the children who read at Mass. I wished our pupils at home in Austria could see how fluently they read and how enthusiastic those children were to be reading in public in church. The great efforts and resources that the Church

has invested in furthering education over a period of many years are now bearing fruit!

It was also very encouraging to see on the Feast of the Assumption of our Lady, the white Comboni Missionary Bishop surrounded by black faces, his local Clergy, concelebrating the Mass. In the Mission of Dongora at around 30 miles outside Hawasa, we had the pleasure of having lunch with a still active eighty-nine-year-old Comboni Father, one of the two pioneers who started the Missions among the Sidama people in 1964.

Nearly all the missions offer primary health care services to the surrounding population. Even though there is no

doctor on duty, the nurses, midwives and medical technicians offer optimal health care! Infections, TB, HIV, malaria and malnutrition are daily challenges! Compared to our sophisticated health care system in Europe, their basic structures work very well.

I was particularly shocked at some severe cases of kwashiorkor; they were the worst I have ever seen in many years of practice. The health care attendants were, however, used to this and took the necessary steps for the child's recovery.

Visits to other institutions, such as the Centres run by the Mother Theresa Sisters, showed me the wide variety of help being offered to the people of Ethiopia with great professionalism and care. I don't know how the Government of Ethiopia could cope with all of these problems without the great work which is being done daily by the Catholic Church and the various NGOs that have been working in Ethiopia since the great famine that killed around one million people there in the eighties.

In order to do this work, caring for the poorest and most abandoned in society day in day out, year after year, one needs to love the person she or he is caring for and be in constant contact with Our Lord who said: "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers you do it unto me". Without this Christian motivation it is very hard to understand why and how so many young volunteers would offer themselves to do things that they would not do for money in their own countries.

A special event for me was our visit



*A group of Ethiopian bishops*



*Caring for the sick at a local clinic.*



*Fr. Franco with Dr. Thomas.*



*Poor but happy*

to leprosy patients in a leprosy centre in Addis Ababa.

Some forty years ago, a colleague of mine at University interrupted his medical studies to go to Ethiopia where he started a project to help leprosy patients in Addis. He organized a workshop where people with leprosy could learn some skills compatible with their physical handicaps earn some money for their daily lives and regain their dignity. They no longer needed to be separated from the rest of society. Unfortunately my colleague died very young, but his work is still alive! To find people in such a big city who knew him so many years ago and still spoke of him so affectionately was for me a very moving experience.

On our visits to these projects, we travelled through different landscapes of incredible natural beauty. It was the rainy season; we saw trees covered in flowers, birds of all different sizes and songs, families of apes and hippopotami. When I had looked at the topographic map of Ethiopia at home

before the trip, I had seen only the red zone, showing instances of malaria! I was not prepared for the amazing beauty of the country which seems to offer a tourist a perennial flower show wherever he goes. That is why, very appropriately, Emperor Menelik II at the end of the nineteenth century called the new capital of Ethiopia "Addis Ababa", "New Flower".

Today's Ethiopia offers the visitor an impression of a country on the move. Wherever one travels one can see building sites of all sizes and forms. The road network has been enlarged and improved immensely over the last ten years. Trade is booming both in Addis and in other provincial towns. Hawsasa is fast developing into an attractive and feverish capital town of the South with numerous banks, high schools, wide new roads, hotels & restaurants that make one forgets that he is in one of the poorest countries in the world. And yet, at the same time, extreme poverty is evident everywhere with people begging for money outside

churches, shops, along streets and at traffic lights between winding cars.

One impression of Ethiopia will always remain with me: the many poor people of all ages begging for financial help.

On one instance we met a group of noisy and playful young boys and girls who as soon as they approached us started asking for money. One of them saw a small bag of tomatoes we had just bought from a local farmer and started asking for a tomato. He jumped with joy when he got a big tomato from our bag!! So much happiness for so little.

Of all the countries I have visited on my journeys, mainly in Eastern Europe and Asia, Ethiopia remains the poorest of all. Nevertheless, despite their poverty, I have seen people of all ages who are happy; it is not easy to find such simple happiness back here at home.

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*'Ethiopia remains the poorest of all' (Dr. Thomas)*