

## **Abba François Marcos**

### **An Educational and Spiritual Leader in the Community**

Ethiopia is in a continuing process of economic and social evolution. Increases in per capita income owe their origins in part to those who provided educational leadership to generations of Ethiopians. Abba François Marcos (1909-1988), of the Emdeber Catholic Church in Shoa, was one such leader.

Abba François was a member of the Capucin Catholic order. His early schooling took place in Asmara, and then in Harar. While fluent in Guraginya and Amharic, much of his education was in French and Italian. The school where he pursued his secondary education in Harar was the same institution where Ras Tafari, later Emperor Haile Selassie I, had been enrolled.

In 1928, Emdeber was emerging as a local woreda capita in Shoa. Accessible by off-road vehicles only in the dry season, it nevertheless drew the French Capucin order to establish a mission church at the edge of the village. The Capucins built a one room school at the bottom of the hill where the mission church was located.

Two years later, the French left and were replaced by an Italian Capucin mission. It was not long after that Mussolini's army invaded Ethiopia from the north and southeast. They occupied the country until an Anglo-Ethiopian force drove them from power in 1941.

The Italian occupation involved several efforts to modernize the infrastructure of Ethiopia. With a system of primary and secondary roads serving with Addis Ababa as the capital, Emdeber stood in between the Addis-Jimma and Addis-Hosana spokes. The Italians built an all-weather bridge across the Gojam river, and a macadam surface stone road that connected Wolkité to Hosana via Emdeber. Remnants of the road could still be seen well into the 1970's and 1980's.

The significance of the all-weather road is that it facilitated the remittance economy on which much of the income of the local population in the region had come to depend. As Ensete was a principal crop, it did not require constant attention, and that made it possible for many local Gurage to migrate on a seasonal basis to Addis where income earned was often shared with local families in the region.

By the early 1950's, it was clear that while the remittance economy was important to the local Gurage community, education would serve as a catalyst. In 1955, the one-room primary school building near the Catholic mission was replaced by a stone school at the western edge of town. It was during the following years that

Abba François was designated as the principal priest for the Emdeber Catholic Mission, and he emerged as a leader in supporting the expansion of the Emdeber primary and secondary school.

Working closely with Abba François was Ato Haileyesus Woldemariam, who had been appointed a Minister of Elementary Education by Emperor Haile Selassie. Haileyesus noted that Abba François was a recognized leader in supporting the expansion of schools in the region, and worked to have Emdeber as the main feeder secondary school in the region that would draw from elementary schools located in nearby villages.

During this time, Ethiopia had a shortage of secondary school teachers. While Emdeber still had a cadre of French speaking teachers linked to the early days of the Catholic mission, there were insufficient numbers of teachers at the secondary level who could teach in English. The solution was to recruit teachers from a mix of sources. One source was to attract Ethiopian University students who were under obligation to spend a service year before they could graduate. Another was to recruit teachers from abroad. Emdeber had a cadre of teachers recruited from India, notably Kerala, which had a good reputation for well qualified teachers who themselves engaged in the very remittance type of economy as their local Ethiopian counterparts. A third source was the United States Peace Corps, which sent volunteers to work in various programs but for which serving as teachers was a primary role.

For this former Peace Corps volunteer who taught secondary school history from 1965 until June 1968, the impact of Abba François was evident. He received the early group of volunteer teachers at the Catholic mission until local housing could be obtained. In addition, he worked with the headmasters of the secondary school to find ways in which school enrollments could grow in the context of fiscal austerity. What emerged was a partnership with local parents and supporters where parents would underwrite the construction of primary school classrooms to supplement the stone secondary school building. In addition, parents made in-kind contributions for the construction of an Emdeber school library, constructed in the form of a traditional local sauer-bét, but which would house the school's library. Unfortunately, in the turbulent events of 1968, a man set fire to the structure and it was never rebuilt.

As Abba François nurtured the Emdeber secondary school, he also served as a leader to the Gurage Road Construction Organization. The organization had been established to build an all-weather road to replace the aging former road that the Italians had constructed during their occupation in the 1930's. The significance of the Gurage Road Construction Organization cannot be emphasized enough to the

development of Emdeber and the region. As the last bridge was opened in 1968, Emdeber was able to acquire a telephone service, a generator-operated electric service for lighting, and a pharmacy. This later would be supplemented by a local bank, two hotels, a business communications center, and numerous other services.

As to the secondary school that opened opposite the Gotam river in 1968, it later was able to briefly have a satellite internet service support educational programs in computer use, and which was supplemented by contributions by former students in the building of a computer laboratory.

As Abba François became older, he moved from Emdeber to the Catholic Mission in Addis Ababa sometime in the late 1970's. There he maintained continuing involvement with the local community on matters of education and development of the region. He had succeeded not only in making Emdeber a successful magnet for education, but also throughout the region via the mission church operations he helped to organize. By the time of his passing, the Emdeber mission church had been designated as a Catholic Cathedral, and still serves as a beacon of support for education to the regional community. It is a legacy that many who spent time in the region have not forgotten and which deserves to be noted by current and future generations.

I have not written here about the personal qualities of Abba François. I found him to be a warm, highly intelligent, and wise person whose hospitality and vision I admired from the first days I spent with him at the Emdeber mission, and from a visit I made to see him at the Addis Mission in January 1982. We always spoke in French, and often discussed matters of education and of Ethiopia's history. I was saddened by his passing, but always heartened by the legacy he created as an educational and spiritual leader of the local community.

Phillip LeBel  
Former Peace Corps Volunteer IV (1965-1968)



View of the Emdeber Catholic Church, 1968



P.LeBel with Abba Petros Dubale and Abba François Marcos,  
Emdeber, Shoa, Ethiopia 1968





Abba François Marcos, Emdeber, 1968



Abba François Marcos, Emdeber, 1968





Abba François Marcos, P. LeBel, 1981



Emdeber Secondary School Student Morning Ceremony, 1967



National Service Teachers, Emdeber, 1966





Abba François Marcos Memorial, Emdeber Cathedral, 2009



