

QERELOS III (d. 1950)

The metropolitanate of Qerelos covered the reigns of Empress Zawditu (1916-1930) and Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974), the last sovereign of the Solomonic dynasty. This prelate is often called Qerelos V, but since the history of Ethiopia knows only two other metropolitans who bore this name (Qerelos I, in the thirteenth century, and Qerelos II, in the nineteenth), it seems preferable to call him Qerelos III.

Ras Tafari Makonnen (the future emperor Haile Selassie), in 1916 named [deputy](#) to the empress and heir to the throne (but often called regent), had launched a policy of reforms; on the ecclesiastical level, he wished the Ethiopian church to become more independent of the Coptic patriarchate. Hence, he allowed some individuals to raise in an Ethiopian journal founded by Tafari in 1925 and called *Berhan-enna Salam* (Light and Peace) the question both of the privileges enjoyed by Abuna Matewos and of the traditional principle according to which the spiritual head of the Ethiopian church had to be a Copt.

It was clear that nothing could be changed while Matewos was alive, but on his death, which took place at Addis Ababa on 4 December 1926, the question became a live issue and the debate won over the ranks of the Ethiopian clergy. But the failing health of the aged Coptic patriarch Cyril V delayed the opening of the question for some months: the Ethiopian church, whose traditional secular head was styled “King of Kings,” could only think of opening negotiations with the Coptic church after the death of Cyril (7 August 1927) and the election of JOHN XIX (1928-1942), at first designated as locum tenens and later as patriarch of the Coptic church (enthroned 16 December 1928).

Meanwhile, on 7 October 1928, Tafari had been raised to the dignity of negus, or king, by the Queen of Queens (i.e., Empress Zawditu). The locum tenens in the patriarchate had then addressed felicitations to him, and Tafari, in his letter of thanks, had raised the question of the

regulation of the Ethiopian church. The regent requested the patriarch to name a new metropolitan, traditionally a Copt, but to provide him with the power to name Ethiopian bishops. In particular, he asked that the episcopal dignity might be conferred on the *eccage*, abbot of Dabra Libanos. John XIX replied that, in conformity with tradition, both the new metropolitan and the bishops dependent on him could only be Copts from Egypt.

Tafari repeated his request in a dispatch in which he added, "Our desire coincides with that of our people." This telegram was followed by the sending to Cairo of an Ethiopian delegate, who was able to reach a preliminary agreement at the end of March 1929. According to this agreement the patriarchate, while confirming that the *abun* had to be a Copt, agreed to consecrate five bishops to be chosen from among the Ethiopian prelates. Four Ethiopian prelates were then sent to Egypt.

They were accompanied by an important delegation, which arrived in Cairo on 21 May 1929. On 31 May, after discussion with the Ethiopian delegation, the Coptic synod issued a decree fixing in detailed fashion the powers of the future metropolitan, as well as those of his bishops. This document specified that neither the archbishop nor his bishops, alone or united in assembly, had the power to name other bishops, whose consecration thus remained the exclusive province of the Coptic patriarchate.

The nomination of the metropolitan was then proceeded with, and the choice fell upon the HEGUMENOS (archpriest) Sidarus al- Antun, who was born at Naghamish (Upper Egypt) around 1880 and was the [deputy](#) of the metropolitan of Jirja. John XIX consecrated him on 2 June 1929, and at the moment of the laying on of hands called him Krollos (Cyril, or in Ethiopic, Qerelos). On the same day were consecrated the four other bishops, who, sixteen centuries after the evangelization of their country, were the first Ethiopians to be invested with episcopal authority.

The consecration of the fifth Ethiopian bishop, the *eccage*, who had not been able to leave the country, was deferred until later. The metropolitan and the four bishops went to Jerusalem on pilgrimage before leaving for Ethiopia. Finally, on 21 December 1929, John XIX himself left Cairo to carry out a patriarchal visit to Ethiopia. He was received with pomp at Addis Ababa, where on 9 January 1930 he proceeded to the consecration of the *eccage*, the fifth Ethiopian bishop.

On 2 April 1930, Empress Zawditu died, and on the following day Ras Tafari Makonnen proclaimed himself King of Kings. His [coronation](#) took place at Addis Ababa on 2 November of the same year, with great ceremony; on this day he was blessed, anointed, and crowned by Qerelos III. But some time later the metropolitan returned to Egypt for two apparent reasons: the health of the metropolitan (who, it was said, found the altitude of Addis Ababa hard to bear) and the renewal of the holy CHRISM (the holy oil prescribed for the administration of sacraments prepared in Egypt by the Coptic patriarch).

It appears, however, that this journey had another reason: after the arrival of the metropolitan in Ethiopia, provision had been made for his material needs and those of his suite by assigning to him five important fiefs (including Salla Dengay and Mannagasha Marqos) and granting him a sum of one thousand thalers per month; but Qerelos had also asked that the property of his predecessor, Abuna Matewos (who, it was said, had amassed a large fortune) should be handed over to him. Since this demand had been rejected (it was added, moreover, that John XIX himself had judged that he did not have to intervene in this question), Qerelos III took offense and returned to Cairo. He was to return to Addis Ababa only in 1933, following a personal intercession from the pious Manan, wife of Emperor Haile Selassie.

The war of 1935-1936, which ended in the occupation of Addis Ababa (5 May 1936) by the armed forces of Fascist Italy, profoundly altered the general situation in Ethiopia: the prestige of the metropolitan declined,

and the position of the Ethiopian church became weaker. Certainly Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, viceroy of Ethiopia, began by proclaiming respect for all religions, but in fact, for reasons of imperial and international policy, Italy favoured the Muslims in Ethiopia over the Christians. Like the majority of notables, Qerelos also hastened to pay allegiance, in his own name and that of the Ethiopian clergy, to the Italian government (14 May 1936), while letting it be understood that he expected that Italy would recognize him publicly and officially as the supreme head of the Ethiopian church. The problem was a delicate one: by tradition, he was the spiritual head of his church, but until 1936 it was the emperor who was the actual head.

The Italian [government](#) hesitated to take a position on the issue, and in the meantime a difficulty arose: in the hope of inducing John XIX not to join the pro-Ethiopian wing of the Coptic patriarchate, the Italian government invited Qerelos III to write to the patriarch a letter to inform him of the good disposition of Italy with regard to the Ethiopian church. The metropolitan declared himself ready to do so, on condition that he did not have to submit to the viceroy the text of the letter.

The Italian authorities rejected this condition and hence abandoned their overtures. Taking up his original request, Qerelos wrote to the Italian [government](#) in July 1936 demanding that the Ethiopian church be exempted from any interference by the Italian authorities and that official recognition be given to the right of the metropolitan to manage the affairs of his church and to carry out all the necessary nominations. The Italian government considered that in this letter Qerelos was claiming wider rights than those that belonged to him in the time of the King of Kings, and chose to make no reply.

A serious incident took place shortly afterward. Because of armed attacks by the Ethiopian resistance, the capital had been placed at the center of a vast defensive enclosure, within which it was forbidden to introduce or hold arms, but a group of armed “rebels” was captured on 29 July 1936 at

Addis Ababa. Among the members of this group was found Abuna Petros, bishop of Wallo (with his seat at Dassie). In the course of the trial that took place the following day, the bishop did not explain the reason for which he had introduced himself into the capital, limiting himself to saying that he was defending his country. The military tribunal condemned him to be shot, and the judgment was executed immediately. [Petros](#) died a hero, after blessing his judges. Graziani, who was later reproached for being unable to pardon the prelate, declared publicly that “this execution did not alter in any way the respect borne by the Italian [government](#) for the Ethiopian church.”

An incident just as serious occurred some months later. On 19 February 1937 at Addis Ababa, in the course of an official ceremony, nine bombs were thrown at the viceroy. There were several wounded, including Graziani and Qerelos III (the former seriously hit by several splinters, the latter slightly wounded in the right hand). The Italian police declared that it was a case of a great conspiracy, but could establish only that the organizers of the attempt had probably acted with the support of certain monks of Dabra Libanos. By order of the viceroy, the monastery was attacked, and the monks who lived there, killed.

From this moment, Graziani considered the clergy the soul of the resistance. He, therefore, proposed to the [government](#) in Rome to delegate to Qerelos III the widest powers over the whole Ethiopian clergy and to break all links between the Ethiopian church and the Coptic patriarchate. This was to demand self-government for the Ethiopian church, under the authority of Qerelos, but Rome replied that “it was fitting not to get ahead of the times.”

Shortly afterward Qerelos asked permission to go to Egypt “for reasons of health.” The [government](#) in Rome refused him permission, suggesting that he come to have himself attended to in Italy. He left Addis Ababa on 21 May 1937, after entrusting the interim care of the archepiscopate to Abuna Abraham, bishop of Gonder. He embarked at Massawa three days

later, convinced that he was going to discuss with the Italian government the new regulation of the Ethiopian church. During the passage through the Suez Canal, he received a delegation from the patriarchate, to whom he declared that if the Italian government intended to raise the question of the new regulation of the Ethiopian church, he proposed to reply that this problem was the exclusive concern of the Coptic patriarchate.

In Rome, Qerelos paid visits to the king, to Mussolini, and to the minister for the colonies, A. Lessona. His health was then attended to, but the question of the regulation of the Ethiopian church was carefully avoided. Mussolini had just taken the decision, in his inner council, to place at the head of the Ethiopian church a metropolitan who was “an Italian subject”—that is, an Ethiopian prelate. Since this elevation had to be prepared for carefully and secretly, Qerelos was invited to go to Egypt, leaving him to understand that before there could be any further discussion, it would be appropriate for him to examine the problem as a whole with John XIX. It was only after Qerelos’ departure for Egypt that Graziani was called upon to prepare in secret the new regulation for the Ethiopian church.

On 7 September 1937, seeing no signal from the Italian side, Qerelos went to the Italian legation in Egypt, to which he presented his requests, which he had meanwhile discussed with the patriarch. He asked that the Ethiopian church be exempt from all Italian control and that the metropolitan should have the power to manage and to dispose freely of all ecclesiastical property. After a retreat spent in Upper Egypt, Qerelos presented himself afresh at the Italian legation on 26 November.

He received an evasive reply that his requests were “under examination.” In reality, Italy had already decided to separate the Ethiopian from the Egyptian church and had set its choice on Abuna Abraham. After [Abraham](#) had accepted, a series of nominations and elevations among the Ethiopian clergy was proceeded with. Then a synod was organized; it declared the independence of the Ethiopian church, elected Abraham as a

metropolitan with the rank of archbishop (*liq pappasat*), and named six new bishops.

This manoeuvre took the Coptic patriarchate unawares, but when Rome attempted to induce John XIX to accept the fait accompli, it met with a refusal. Even the Egyptian [government](#) protested, but the Italian legation in Cairo replied that it was a “question internal to the Italian empire,” which did not admit of discussion. It was then that the synod of the Coptic church, in its meeting on 28 December 1937, pronounced the solemn excommunication of Abraham, the bishops named by him, and any person who had recognized or came to recognize the powers of those excommunicated. [Abraham](#) died on 21 July 1939, and on 12 September he was replaced by Abuna Yohannes, who in his turn consecrated four titular bishops and two assistant bishops. Finally, on 30 July 1940, the Italian government granted to the Ethiopian church a detailed constitutional charter, confirming first and foremost its autocephalous character—that is, its complete independence of any other church.

Some months later, the Italian empire collapsed, and on 5 May 1941, Haile Selassie, escorted by British troops, made his return to Addis Ababa. He had previously received at Khartoum a telegram in which John XIX asked that Qerelos be allowed to accompany the emperor at the time of his return to Ethiopia, but the emperor had replied that it was not appropriate to get ahead of events. He therefore returned to Addis Ababa accompanied by the *eccage*, who had shared his exile, and it was upon this prelate that the charge fell of reorganizing the Ethiopian church.

A year later, John XIX sent to Ethiopia a delegation headed by Qerelos, accompanied by three laymen. It arrived in Addis Ababa on 2 June 1942, and Qerelos was able to occupy once again his old residence. He could also take up again his place in the religious ceremonies, but no other power was accorded to him. Qerelos did not follow the Coptic delegation when it returned to Egypt with the Ethiopian requests that (1) on the death of Qerelos, he be given an Ethiopian successor; (2) the new

Ethiopian metropolitan be empowered to consecrate Ethiopian bishops; and (3) the excommunication launched against the Ethiopian clergy be lifted.

John XIX died on 22 June 1942, and so it was the locum tenens in the Coptic patriarchate, Anba Yusab (the future patriarch, 1946-1956) who, on 26 June, pronounced the lifting of the excommunication “with regard to the pretended archbishops and bishops, with the return of each of them to the post which he previously occupied.” But since this decision did not answer all the Ethiopian requests, it received no publicity in Addis Ababa. On the contrary, the Ethiopian church declared that the power to ordain priests was the exclusive province of the *eccage*, so that Qerelos was in fact set aside. Any further discussion had to be delayed because of the very serious difficulties that thwarted the election of the new Coptic patriarch, so much so that the patriarchal throne remained vacant until the election of MACARIUS III on 12 February 1944.

After this election, the Ethiopian clergy increased its pressure. It began by abstaining from invoking the name of the new Coptic patriarch in religious functions, as tradition required. In June 1944 a Coptic mission went to Ethiopia and returned with a document containing the requests of the Ethiopian church, the principal of which were the nomination of an Ethiopian archbishop and the creation of an Ethiopian synod matching the Coptic synod and having the power to choose the Ethiopian bishops, who were to be consecrated by the said archbishop.

On 29 January 1945, Macarius III convened the synod of the Coptic church, which formed a special committee to study the Ethiopian requests. On 16 June the synod approved the report of this committee, which, while welcoming several Ethiopian requests, explicitly refused to assign to the metropolitan of the Ethiopian church the right to name bishops and refused to name an Ethiopian metropolitan. The response was very badly received in Ethiopia. In addition, the negotiations were interrupted afresh by the death of Macarius III on 31 August 1945.

In December 1945 the representatives of the Ethiopian clergy assembled at Addis Ababa. This was a stormy assembly, the majority of the speakers proclaiming that from the moment the Coptic church refused to satisfy the demands of the Ethiopian church, nothing remained but to proceed to the separation of the two churches. The emperor opted for a more flexible approach and so, on 9 January, sent to Egypt a delegation armed with a letter in which he earnestly requested a new examination of the problem. On 31 January the Coptic synod convened under the presidency of Anba Athanasius, locum tenens in the patriarchate, and accepted the principle that after the death of Qerelos III the archbishop of the Ethiopian church was to be chosen from among the Ethiopian prelates. The synod also accepted the principle of increasing the number of Ethiopian bishops who were to be consecrated by the Coptic patriarch. The demand for the power of the future Ethiopian archbishop to name bishops directly was rejected on the ground that in the church of Saint Mark this power belonged only to the patriarch.

The Ethiopian church then sent to Egypt five prelates who were to be consecrated bishop, and it was during their presence in Cairo that the new patriarch YUSAB II was elected; he was enthroned on 27 May 1946. On 20 June Yusab II reconvened the synod, which confirmed the refusal to grant the future archbishop of the Ethiopian church the power of naming bishops directly. In consequence, the patriarch attached a condition to the consecration of the five Ethiopian prelates: they must formally pledge themselves not to consecrate either an archbishop or a bishop. This resulted in an impasse, for the Ethiopian prelates refused to accept this condition. They were then summoned to Addis Ababa, to which they returned on 4 August 1946.

In June 1947 the emperor made known directly to the Coptic patriarch his desire to resolve the problem. Yusab II formed a special committee, the final report of which was approved by decree of the Coptic synod on 24 July. This decree provided for the possibility of delegating to the metropolitan of the Ethiopian church, in each case separately, the power

of consecrating an Ethiopian bishop, on condition that each candidature should be submitted for the prior approval of the Coptic patriarchate. Upon the announcement of this decision, Qerelos III finally left Ethiopia and returned to Egypt.

The Ethiopian clergy having approved the decree, Yusab II ratified this entente on 29 March 1948, and the agreement between the two churches was finally signed in Cairo on 13 July 1948.

A subsequent agreement, which came about in Cairo on 25 June 1959, completed this very extensive process of achieving autonomy for the Ethiopian church within the framework of "the See of Saint Mark," but this last agreement cannot be ascribed to the episcopate of Qerelos III, for he died in Cairo on 22 October 1950. This date thus marks the end of the episcopate of the last Egyptian metropolitan (*abun*) of the church of Ethiopia.

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