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Clarifications about the recent nationalization of the Catholic Church's Health Centers in Eritrea

Asmara, 25 June 2019

(Translation from the Tigrinya original language)

In recent weeks, twenty-one Catholic Church-owned clinics, spread throughout the country, have been confiscated on the orders of the Eritrean government. If we recall the eight closures of last year, again at the order of the government, the health Centers condemned to suffer such a fate amount to twenty-nine units. Though the Catholic Bishops have expressed their opposition to this measure, they have not yet received any response from the State authorities. On the other hand, some information has been passed on to the mass media which, for being decidedly erroneous or deliberately misleading, is confusing those who, far or near, are unable to verify its reliability. It is precisely for the benefit of the latter that we consider it our duty to offer the following clarifications and specifications.

1. Mr. Tajadin Abedel Aziz, Director of the Public Relations Office of the Ministry of Health, in an interview with Asmara's correspondent of *Radio Voice of America* on 12 June 2019 said, against the evidence of the facts, that "it was a matter of *administrative actions of delivery* and not of closure or of nationalization of the Centers, or of intimidation of staff and employees."

- Well, we all know what the terms "delivery/passing on of something to someone" mean in the common modus operandi. How then to define behaviors such as: taking unilateral decisions about our structures and personnel without any previous agreement on the matter, without any notice, without a minimum of dialogue with the legitimate superior authorities who own those structures, without any attempt to understand the spirit and purpose of such institutions?
- If it had been a matter of "delivery", is it acceptable that those who requested them [the government envoys], indeed imposed them, did so without presenting a letter, a formal written piece of document of accompaniment, signed by the higher sending and ordering authority? In the absence of all this, can anyone politely tell us in which category of actions should we classify what has happened in our Centers in these days?
- Such being the situation, it is useless to declare that this was not a question of nationalization: the action taken against our Clinics was not only such, but on account of the way it was carried out, it went far beyond mere nationalization! While in some locations actions of force were involved, in other Centers the staff were ordered to "get out of the way", the premises were sealed, and the staff was placed in a position to be unable to accommodate patients...
- Words of threat and bullying have been spoken in various Centers. This could be observed by people who, unexpectedly, found themselves involved during the course of these deplorable events. When the staff on duty at our Clinics were required to sign the property transfer of the premises, and legitimately and conscientiously replied that such an act was not of their competence - as they were just mere executors of higher orders, and specified that such an act was of competence of the Church authority - at this stage the reaction of those making the request was more of intimidation and, sometimes, of blandishment.

2. Often, when issues such as the ones we are now talking about are raised, there is a kind of mantra repeated over and over again: “We have not touched religion”, “religious freedom is protected and guaranteed by law”, “Eritrea is a secular state” (in Tigrinya *‘alemawi: secular’*), “State and religions, Politics and religions are separate realities”, and so on.

- It is our firm belief that, with the recent requisitions of our Clinics, a specific right of our religion has been violated, which prescribes “to love others and to do good to them”. Any measure that prevents us from fulfilling - within the law and without harming anyone - the obligations that come to us from the supreme commandment of brotherly love, is and remains a violation of the fundamental right of religious freedom. At the same time, another right is violated: the right of people who choose, or need to, make use of our social services.
- To freely carry out a just obligation of one’s own religion, without harming others and in full compliance with the law, in no way can be configured as an encroachment on politics. In this case, neither we nor our social institutions can be accused of “political interference”, just as we cannot be accused of having exceeded the limits of our rights or of having committed acts of partisanship, ethnic-religious discrimination or favoritism, in our services among the population. The persons who, in one way or another, attend the contexts in which we operate and serve, will be able to witness to this without fear of denial.
- Moreover, does the fact that a State pursues a secular political line imply the right to impede, on its part, the works of charity that are carried out on the basis of one’s religious belief? If there is a new definition of secularity, we would be really happy to know about it! Otherwise, what is the point of trumpeting the full respect of religious freedom while, at the same time, the State binds hands and feet (figuratively!) to those who, for a free personal choice, have dedicated their lives to the service of others, especially the neediest?
- More was said about the clinics in question: it was stated that their closure would not have a significant (negative) impact on the NHS, and even if such an impact existed, it wouldn’t make any difference... There’s no need to discuss the matter! It would suffice that a third and autonomous party goes to the sites and checks the situation personally, or that it inspects the records of the Ministry of Health, which monthly collected reports on the activities carried out by our Clinics: it would have seen firsthand that the patients making daily use of such clinics are in the hundreds, while the annual figures amounted to more than 200.000 patients. These numbers are enough to highlight the total untenability of the aforementioned statements.

3. There are many States in the world, among which some of the countries not far from Eritrea, that follow the so-called “lay” or “secular” political line. Nonetheless, they have not banned the charitable and social works of the Church or confiscated the means and structures that the Church owns and uses to carry on such works. In those countries, the Church has always operated, and it still operates, without problems and without hindrance. Unfortunately, here with us, this pseudo-argument is becoming a pretext or a cover-up for an embezzlement of Church’s assets and for an unjust proscription of its social activities.

4. Finally, it must be taken note of, fortunately isolated, defamation campaign against the staff employed in the health Centers of the Catholic Church: innocent staff, who in this way is struck with impunity in its honorability. The creator of this muck-machine is a certain Edoardo Calcagno, journalist of the “Good Morning News” website. Having compiled information completely bereft of sources and evidence, the journalist carried out an irresponsible act, devoid of the most basic sense of professional ethics. Who’s behind it? What interests are at stake? Whatever the possible answers to these questions, the fact is that the reporter has presented the employees of our clinics in the guise of a corrupt gang, responsible for diverting the money destined for activities of the Centers. The recent government nationalization of the Clinics, always in his opinion, is to be regarded as a response to such misdeeds!

- The very fact that someone like Calcagno, who has the blessing of living in a free and democratic country, has chosen to make such infamous judgments without having listened to the opinion of both sides involved, is in itself an indication of the non-transparent purpose of his work and of his questionable credibility.
- Secondly, the charities that finance the activities of our Centers and regularly review the accounts are geographically not far from where he works; and it would not have been a superhuman undertaking for him to scroll through the regular reports that our offices submit to them semi-annually and annually.
- Finally, the fact that the government officials charged with nationalizing the Clinics or, as they say, with “taking them under their care” have not made the slightest mention of corruption, financial mismanagement, incompetence, discrimination of any kind, doesn’t this say anything to the aforementioned journalist? If anything, the suspicion that comes to us is another: will it not have been the very efficiency and administrative cleanliness of our Centers that made them the victim of the measures that we now have to regret?

It is therefore clear that Mr. Calcagno’s charges do not find confirmation in the same bodies for which he has chosen to spend his generous advocacy!

