



Ethiopian and Eritrean Monasticism: The Spiritual and Cultural Heritage of Two Nations

Mario Alexis Portella

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The first-ever comprehensive publication about both Ethiopian and Eritrean monasticism, this new book by Mario Alexis Portella describes in detail how the monastic structure and spirituality embodied itself in the religious and political fervor of the Ethiopian and Eritrean nations. With the only non-institutionalized monasticism in the Christian world, today's nations of Ethiopia and Eritrea possess an historical heritage that has shaped their respective socio-political societies. Although ancient Ethiopia, formerly called Aksum (northern Ethiopia and present-day Eritrea), was the first nation to officially proclaim itself Christian, it was not until the arrival of the Nine Saints in the latter part of the 5th century that the country was united as a Christian nation. Despite political setbacks in the High Middle Ages, monks continued to inculcate local and ethnic customs into a unique branch of Christianity. Its watershed event was the 8-monk Ethiopian delegation at the Ecumenical Council of Florence in 1441, which not only continued to pave the way for a national church, but encouraged Ethiopians to unite themselves against foreigners who attempted to destroy their Christian-national identity. One case in point was when Ethiopian holy men and holy women sustained their religious integrity before a forceful attempt by the 17th century Portuguese Jesuit missionaries to Latinize their faith. Another defining moment was when Abune Petros became the symbol of perseverance and unity before the Italian Fascist invasion of 1935 - an act of genocide which sought to exterminate the very monastic foundation that civilized its society. And even after society's last Christian emperor, Hailé Selassie, was deposed in 1974, modern-day monks, such as Abune Theophilos, martyred by the Derg Regime, remind us that they continue to provide stability to their community.

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