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THE CROWN COUNCIL OF ETHIOPIA

HIS IMPERIAL HIGHNESS PRINCE ERMIAS SAHLE-SELASSIE HAILE-SELASSIE
PRESIDENT

The Importance of the Preservation of Heritage, Hope, and Peace in 2023

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Royal Society of Saint George, California

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Thank you.

Before I begin, I would like to thank my good friend Ratu Muda Princess Karen Cantrell for the invitation to speak with you today. Many of you already know a great deal about Ethiopia, and some of you have already helped us with some of our projects in the past. You have my thanks for your support. I look forward to meeting the rest of you and sharing with you a little bit about my life and my work. On a personal note, I am always happy to return to California, which was my home for several years. Even before I was born, my father and grandfather came to Los Angeles in 1954, and several years later, in 1967, my grandfather received an honorary degree from UCLA. As an alumnus of UCSB myself, I know first-hand how many Ethiopians received a valuable education from the UC system, and how our country has benefited from that long relationship.

People sometimes speak of Ethiopia as a country full of history. This is true, but it only tells part of the story. It is not simply *the country* that is full of history. *We* are full of history. We do not simply walk through it. We do not simply pass by it. It is inside of us. It is in our blood. We know hundreds of years of our history by name. We know which of our ancestors built the churches, the monasteries, the castles spread out through thousands of square miles in Ethiopia's highlands. They are not simply tourist attractions. For us, they are our inheritance.

For those of you who do not know Ethiopia and its history, this may sound like a grandiose claim. I know all too well the degree to which the average world citizen's views of my homeland have been shaped by famine, civil strife, and revolution. I pray for a future in which that is no longer true. But we cannot build the future of our prayers without understanding our deep past. The history of my country, Ethiopia, goes back thousands of years, to the legendary days of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and their son Menelik, the first emperor of Ethiopia. This era is so shrouded in the mists of time that hardly any contemporary archaeological or written remains survive. But our national epic, the *Kebra Negast* or "Glory of the Kings," tells us that Menelik came to Ethiopia carrying no less a biblical relic than the very Ark of the Covenant holding the two tablets of God's Ten Commandments.

Ethiopian Christians believe that the Ark ultimately came to our ancient capital city of Aksum, in the northern highlands, where it is hidden still to this day. Aksum was the capital of a great empire in antiquity. Its influence reached from central Sudan to

southern Yemen. Roman Emperors sought its help in great wars and Christian bishops came from all across the Mediterranean to spread the gospel. Ethiopia was one of the earliest independent Christian kingdoms, and the first independent Christian nation in Africa. When the Roman Empire fell and Islam spread through the Middle East, Ethiopia found itself cut off and largely forgotten by the outside world. But these centuries saw some of our greatest works, including the famous rock-cut churches of Lalibela – a UNESCO World Heritage site which our saints’ lives teach was built by the emperor Lalibela with the miraculous help of the angels. Lalibela’s son was the last of his dynasty. His successors restored what we call the Solomonic Dynasty, the line of kings directly descended through Menelik from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. This line of kings ruled in Ethiopia into the 20th century, through the reign of my grandfather, Emperor Haile Selassie I.

For many people, all of this can seem like ancient history. In more modern terms, the history of Ethiopia as a nation-state only begins in the 1800s, as Ethiopia’s emperors defended its borders against the advancing armies of European colonialism. That resistance – and the determination and strength that preserved Ethiopia as Africa’s sole unconquered nation – is best known through our victory over Italy at the Battle of Adwa 127 years ago. A revolt against the Italians in Eritrea sparked a larger conflict, the Italians invading the highlands of Ethiopia in 1895. Ethiopia’s armies met the Italian invaders at Adwa on March 1, 1896. The Italians approached Ethiopian forces in three separate columns. The terrain of the Ethiopian mountainside is tricky, and the columns grew further

and further apart. Ethiopian forces outflanked the invaders and destroyed them, putting an end to any further thought of Italian invasion.

The impact of this victory at Adwa was felt around the world. For the European colonial powers, the victory of an African army was an immediate, direct threat to their global hegemony. It played a longer, more lasting role as well. It created a permanent example, eternal proof that the oppressed can rise up against their oppressors, and that with faith and strength, they will inevitably prevail. We had to provide that proof again, a generation later, when Italy occupied Ethiopia in the 1930s.

The rapacity of the fascist troops, and Mussolini's use of poison gas, was the world's first glimpse of the horrors of World War II. In his moments of deepest despair, my grandfather's faith in God and humanity gave him hope. Rather than fight and die, my grandfather did something no emperor before him had ever done, and he went into exile. His critics at home called it a pointless decision, but time proved them wrong. For years, his ringing appeal to the League of Nations served as the conscience of the free world. When that free world finally woke to the fascist threat, my grandfather returned home from exile at the head of Allied armies. With this act, he secured Ethiopia's independence once and for all. He was no longer simply an Ethiopian, but something more: in the following decades, he led a wave of independence movements across the continent, and became the father of free Africa.

And yet again – as we have seen so many times in world history – all of our progress seemed to slip away in a single moment. When I was just a child, my family found

itself in exile for the second time in a century. Communist revolutionaries overthrew my grandfather's government in 1974, deposing Menelik's ancient dynasty. Our country sank into civil war in the 1970s and famine in the 1980s.

But we never gave up hope. We founded Ethiopia's first civil rights organizations; we rallied Amnesty and other international organizations in defense of our prisoners of conscience; and we mobilized local communities in our new homes around the world to raise funds for food aid and to help our people eat. In those decades, we lived in a permanent crisis, facing one problem after another, with never enough time to catch our collective breath and consider how much of our ancient history hung dangling by a thread.

Ethiopia has a tremendously rich cultural heritage. It is one of the oldest countries in the world. It appears in no less than ten books of the Bible, including the famous passage in the Psalms in which Ethiopia stretches her hand out to God. The verse is a promise of the future, a prophecy demonstrating God's greatness. But that verse also describes our past, the way Ethiopia has sought out its God. Today, modern scholars have become increasingly aware of the great antiquity of Ethiopian Christianity.

Think about the Gospel manuscripts stored at the Abba Garima Monastery just five miles east of Adwa, the site of our victory against Italy. These copies of the Ethiopian Bible have survived more challenges than we can imagine. Now, radiocarbon and other advances are proving what Ethiopian Christians have always believed, that these Gospels are 1500 years old, making them the oldest illuminated Bible manuscripts in the world.

Have they survived the two years of civil war only now coming to an end in the northern region of Tigray? I do not know.

Think about the ruins of ancient Aksum. The stela fields there are one of the greatest monuments of African antiquity. But they sit on weak ground and face constant threat of collapse, without proper archaeological work having been finished on our historic capital. Now, with Tigray devastated by the civil war, who will act to protect these stela? If we in the diaspora and our leaders in the central government show proper care for those sites, if we honor Tigray's past as our own, we can help heal our country. Cultural preservation and respect for our past can be a bond through which we build our shared future.

This is true not simply for our ancient ruins or our Christian ones. Years ago, speaking about the relationship between church and crown in Ethiopia, I borrowed a phrase from the Prince of Wales, now His Majesty King Charles III. I spoke of the need for the Ethiopian crown to serve not simply as the defender of the faith, but as the defender of *all* faiths. For many centuries, Ethiopia thought of itself as a Christian country surrounded by foreign Muslim powers. But in truth, modern Ethiopia is a country both Christian and Muslim.

The great city of Harar – the City of Ninety-Nine Mosques – is one of the holiest cities in Islam. My great-grandfather's palace is there. My grandfather was born there. Ethiopian Christians and Ethiopian Muslims can no more separate from each other than California can sail into the sea. The mosques and museums of that ancient city are in

desperate need of funds for renovation. Attention to those sites can fulfill the promise of defending all faiths.

But there is simply not enough time or money. Everywhere I turn in Ethiopia, I am reminded of the most ancient sites with deep ties to the Ethiopian crown. I think particularly of Gishen Mariam, in northern Wollo. The church and monastery there date back to the Aksumite period, when it was founded by the famous emperor Kaleb. The church receives hundreds of thousands of pilgrims each year, in part because it is home to one of the fragments of the True Cross, brought there in antiquity. My own grandmother took a pilgrimage to Gishen Mariam and made an offering there when she was pregnant with my father. This is what I meant earlier: Ethiopia is not simply a country *with* history. It is a country in which *we live* our history, in a continuous line from the Aksumite kings to my own close family.

In the past, it was second-nature for Ethiopian nobility and royalty to sponsor church construction or renovation, to support the maintenance of our ancient sites. The revolution in 1974 was an explicit and horrific rejection of that natural instinct to honor and respect our past. Our government's recently renewed willingness to preserve and protect our historic sites is part of a promising trend. For too many decades, we were taught to condemn our history, or dismiss it as an antique relic. But we are in the midst of a great awakening: in recent years, our brothers and sisters all across Ethiopia and all around the world have held unprecedented celebrations every March to commemorate our great victory at Adwa 127 years ago.

Today, we are once again learning to do what our ancestors did as a matter of course. Many of you will have heard the story of the Ethiopian nun, *emahoy* Tsege-Maryam Gebru, who passed away last month. In her nearly 100 years of life, she was many things to many people: a pianist, a brilliant composer, a singer at my grandfather's court, and – like me – an exile from her homeland, unable to live safely in Ethiopia when Orthodox Christianity suffered persecution under the Communist Derg regime. She found a home in Jerusalem, where she lived for decades in an Ethiopian Orthodox convent. All of the news coverage published since her death has focused on her musical talent, and her unique, rhythmically complex, blues piano work. But what hardly anyone has mentioned is her own role in our deep tradition of support for the church. Until the end of her life, she donated money from her own meager retirement funds for the renovation of the Ethiopian Monastery of the Holy Trinity in the Jordan Valley, in the West Bank. This unique piece of modernist architecture dates to the 1930s, when my grandmother, Empress Menen, bought the land and funded the monastery's construction.

This brings me to our most recent effort, fundraising for Holy Trinity Cathedral in Addis Ababa. Menbere Tsebaot (“Altar of Victory”) Cathedral – more commonly known as Holy Trinity– is the final resting place of my father; my grandfather, Haile Selassie; my grandmother Menen; other members of my family; several patriarchs of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church; and many heroes of Ethiopia's patriotic resistance to fascist invasion and occupation in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, my grandfather founded Holy

Trinity Cathedral not simply to be the Orthodox metropolitan seat for Addis Ababa, but to serve as a memorial to commemorate that fight for our freedom and dignity.

But the cathedral is now eighty years old and in serious need of renovation. The Orthodox Tewahedo Church has begun to repair structural damage, water damage, and damage to the murals and stained glass windows; to replace the electrical system; and to renovate the imperial crypt. The renovation work is already underway at the hands of one of the most reputable construction firms in Ethiopia. But it is not fully funded, and the Cathedral has launched a major fundraising campaign to meet the shortfall.

Last fall, representatives from Holy Trinity Cathedral invited me to serve as an ambassador for this fundraising campaign, to help contribute to the renovation. So far, we have raised \$35,000 towards our \$100,000 goal over the last several months. I am looking forward to going home this summer to present our contribution to the cathedral. It is not simply the money that matters. It is the symbolism, the proof that in Ethiopia, our people – our national family and my own family – intertwine intimately with our church, and with our faith, generation after generation, forever. The violence, the persecutions, the civil strife and conflicts we struggle with do not change this fact. They challenge us, but they do not deter us.

We have worked to finance the restoration of King Sahle-Selassie's palace in Shoa. We have worked to restore the damaged monument to my great-grandfather, Ras Makonnen, in Harar, in eastern Ethiopia. Two decades ago, we were part of an international campaign to pressure the Italian government to return the stolen stela from the ancient

fields of Aksum 68 years after the fascists had taken it from our homeland. Today, we hope that the British will one day, as part of a discrete, long-term intellectual exchange, repatriate the sacred replicas of the Ark of the Covenant – and so many of the other objects they still hold in the British Museum – to right the wrongs committed during their brief invasion of Ethiopia in the 1860s.

But all of this work looks backwards. Our next steps must face forward. Our ancestors built churches. Will we spend our whole lives simply repairing them? I want to build our future anew. Think about the Ethiopian Orthodox Church begun in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1972, but still nothing more than a foundation. Will we finish that church in my lifetime? I do not know. Think about the Ethiopian Orthodox congregations here in the United States, many of whom find temporary homes renting older churches no longer used by their original denominations. Will any of them have their own churches in my lifetime? I do not know. Who among us today has the vision of a King Kaleb or an Emperor Lalibela? Who among us will build the churches that Ethiopians will see as miracles a thousand years from now?

I can imagine the coming generation building a Church of Reconciliation with an Altar of Peace, a monument to the Ethiopian people's renewed commitment to come together as a family and lay aside our bloody feuds forever. Will this church be in Tigray? In Oromia? In Amhara? A gift from one of Ethiopia's people to another? Maybe in all of these places, built by all of us together, at home, in the diaspora, and with all of the international community joining us as one.

But our faith is only the beginning. It feeds our heart and soul, but does not feed our body. It teaches us patience and wisdom, but does not teach us how to build power-plants and dams. I share Ethiopia's pride and joy in the completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the largest hydroelectric dam in Africa. Ethiopia first conceived of this long-delayed dam in my grandfather's day. It has been too long coming.

I dream of a day when the Renaissance Dam is no longer remarkable. I hope that my sons will live to see an Ethiopia filled with projects even more impressive than this. I pray for a future in which Ethiopia's last famine is as long in the past as the Great Depression is for you; in which our last day of brother killing brother is much a distant dream as your own Civil War; in which we never again read that government troops have shot at our churches and made martyrs of our people.

Dreams are a happy thing, but the work that it takes to build them is hard. I have spent many years meeting men and women like you; networking; fundraising; trying to open doors around the world. We were fortunate enough to run a scholarship program for Ethiopian college students in America. We have been able to finance remarkable prototypes for bringing clean water to African villages. We have secured grants in kind for the digitizing of some of Ethiopia's national archives. But all of these are *ad hoc* initiatives.

I hope one day to build a permanent endowment, a financial institution that will lay the foundations for Ethiopia's monarchy for the next hundred years to come. I want not one scholarship program, but many. I want to finance not one prototype, but a rolling wave of start-ups, with impact investment micro-loans sponsoring Ethiopian

entrepreneurs throughout the entire country. I want to support not just one digitization project, but the creation of entire museums dedicated to preserving knowledge of our church and our crown. The next stage of the Solomonic crown should include the formation of an NGO, a think-tank to serve as an incubator for the research and development of new ideas in all of these fields.

Some will say that this is not possible until peace prevails. I disagree. This is the work that will make peace possible. It is the work that will prove to the next generation that Ethiopia's crown is the foundation of its unity. It is the work that will lift us up out of poverty forever, and the work that will – like the great monuments at Adwa and Lalibela, like our victory at the battle of Adwa in 1896 – once again make Ethiopia an inspiration to an entire continent of free people, yearning for a better future. Some of you have worked with me for years to build that future. Some of us have just met. I am looking forward to working with you.

Thank you.