

UPF Dusseldorf, Germany's Interfaith Prayer Group and Ethiopian Christmas

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Düsseldorf, Germany—The Düsseldorf interreligious prayer circle used its January meeting to find out how Ethiopians celebrate Christmas.

Because the Ethiopian Christmas is celebrated on January 6 and 7, the prayer circle chose January 8 as a suitable day on which to hold a meeting about this topic.

The two speakers were Mr. Sergio Brina and Mr. Dagachew Tamiru, both of whom were born and raised in Ethiopia. After introductions and a short review of the past year, Mr. Brina started off by explaining why Christmas begins on January 6 in Ethiopia.

Ethiopian Orthodox Christians use the Julian calendar—one of the oldest solar calendars, introduced by Julius Caesar—rather than the Gregorian. From the 16th century onward, the Julian calendar slowly was replaced in most places by the Gregorian. Currently there is a difference of 13 days between the two calendars. For example, January 6 on the Gregorian calendar corresponds to December 24 on the Julian.

Mr. Tamiru explained the course of events celebrated during an Ethiopian Christmas and the preparations made beforehand. The pre-Christmas preparations begin with 43 days of fasting to cleanse the body and mind. During this time, the faithful attend church every day and may eat and drink only afterward, starting at about 3 p.m. During the fasting period, abstinence from animal products such as meat and eggs, as well as luxuries such as tobacco, is maintained.

Thousands attend worship services on January 6, wearing traditional white clothes. Many people gather in and around the churches, and loudspeakers are used to broadcast the sermon and songs to those outside.

Every Ethiopian Orthodox church has a replica of the Ark of the Covenant in its sanctuary. The Ethiopians believe that the original Ark is to be found in a church in Ethiopia. On special occasions, such as Christmas, a replica of the Ark is brought out from the sanctuary during the Christmas mass and paraded three times around the church in a celebratory procession. This is followed by further processions, joined by all members of the community carrying candles. The whole ceremony is held over a period of about six hours and lasts until early the next morning.

After the Christmas mass, each family returns home to make ready for the celebrations. A huge feast is prepared, which the whole family enjoys together. Of special significance is the presence of a priest who sanctifies the house, family, guests and food with prayers and holy water and then eats together with the family. Whereas in Germany, for example, the rest of the day is spent in an atmosphere of silent contemplation, in Ethiopia the custom is to dance to traditional rhythmic drum music. Popular also is a type of hockey game, played by the whole family.

After the two speakers had completed their talks, each person was given a candle, which was lit by passing around a flame. We held the candles meditatively and sent positive energy out to the world.

This was followed by the serving of refreshments and an opportunity for informal discussion.