

Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East - An Evaluation¹

On the 11th November 1994 the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East made a very historic agreement in Christology. His Holiness John Paul II and His Holiness Catholicos Mar Dinkha IV took a brave step to put an end to the Christological controversy, which kept these two churches apart for several centuries. These two leaders together with their hierarchy and faithful are determined to restore the full communion between the two churches. This Christological agreement is considered as a basic step towards that goal.

Whatever might have been the understanding of these two churches regarding the other in the past, now onwards they declare before the world that there is no disagreement in Christology and they have a common faith in the mystery of Incarnation. Both the churches recognize mutually that they both have kept the apostolic faith and guarded it uncorrupted. This joint declaration confesses the faith in the Incarnate Word our Lord Jesus Christ as the only Son of God, who became man for our salvation in the fullness of time. This was the constant faith of both the churches in the mystery of Incarnation of our Lord. It affirms its faith in the full humanity and full divinity of the Lord. He, the Word of God who became man, is consubstantial with the Father and consubstantial with us in all things except sin. His divinity and his humanity are united in one unique person, without confusion, or change, without division or separation. The central part of the common statement is as follows:

“Therefore our Lord Jesus Christ is true God and true man, perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity, consubstantial with the Father and consubstantial with us in all things but sin. His divinity and his humanity are united in one Person, without confusion or change, without division or separation. In him has been preserved the difference of the natures of divinity and humanity with all their properties, faculties and operations. But far from constituting one and another, the divinity and humanity are united in the Person of the same and unique Son of God and Lord Jesus Christ, who is the object of a single adoration.”¹

There is affirmation of the two natures and at the same time affirmation of the union of the two natures in the one person. This was the teaching of all the orthodox Fathers and orthodox Churches down through the centuries. It was thought, perhaps for centuries, that the Assyrian Church of the East did not share this sentiment of the one Orthodox –Catholic Church. It was chiefly because of misunderstanding. This fact is well recognized by the joint statement. There were, down through the centuries, misrepresentation of the Assyrian viewpoint and Christology. Everyone was trying to find fault with the Assyrian Church and accuse it of Nestorianism, which teaches, “the doctrine of two sons, and which divided the one Lord into two persons, morally united and quaternity instead of Trinity in the divinity”. But the close contact between the two churches enabled them to understand each other and see the same faith in both the traditions. It was a surprise for many. This statement avoids the errors of Nestorianism and Eutychianism at the same time. It teaches unity and at the same time duality: unity on the level of person and duality on the level of natures.

The document explicitly repudiates the error of *adoptionism*, *psilanthropism*: “Christ therefore is not an ordinary man whom God adopted in order to reside in him and inspire him, as in the righteous ones and the prophets.”¹

¹ *Ibid.*

¹ *Ibid.*p.230

It permits the churches to continue to use the preferred liturgical usages. No church is forced to abandon its liturgical usages for the sake of unity. Once it is recognized that the Apostolic Churches are having the same apostolic faith, the recognition of the ways of expression is the natural outcome. The Churches are more and more convinced of the need for distinguishing the content of faith and the formulation of faith. No church wants today to impose its own formulation on others. The one who is born from the Blessed Virgin Mary is truly the Son of God.

The document says: “That is the reason why the Assyrian Church of the East is praying the Virgin Mary as the *Mother of Christ our God and Savior*. In the light of this same faith the Catholic tradition addresses the Virgin Mary as the *mother of God and also as the mother of Christ*. We both recognize the legitimacy and rightness of these expressions of the same faith and we both respect the preference of each church in her liturgical life and piety.”¹

In Antiquity certain expressions were considered the touchstone of Orthodoxy and all those who did not subscribe to them were considered as heretics. Often religious politics and rivalries were mixed with the exposition of doctrine. One need not question the good will and love for truth in any group. However, factionalism prevailed over evangelical charity. Thus we find the crisis at the time of the Council of Ephesus in 431, Chalcedon in 451 and the Second Council of Constantinople in 553. **Theotokos** in the Alexandrian tradition is valid; however, the Alexandrian tradition need not be the unique criterion to judge all other legitimate traditions in the Christian Churches down through the centuries. The Alexandrian tradition is dear to us; at the same time those who uphold that tradition should be able to see the validity of other legitimate traditions. In the joint declaration we find the recognition of the plurality of traditions in the Church. Today the Churches are free to use the expression *Mother of Christ*,² or *Mother of God* or *both together*.

¹ *Ibid.*

² **Emmeh damsiha** is the form, which was commonly used in the Assyrian Church. But one finds also the expression **yaldat Alaha** (*Mother of God*).

The common declaration recognizes that the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East are **Sister Churches** and that there exists among them deep spiritual communion in the faith¹. It encourages both the churches for pastoral cooperation .In order to continue the dialogue; a **Joint International Theological Commission** was set up, consisting of members from both the churches². It held so far seven *meetings*. The Joint Commission studied extensively the topic **sacramental theology of the Church**.³ The commission has come to the conclusion that there is perfect agreement regarding the understanding of the sacraments in both the traditions. There was a study on the **Anaphora of Addai and Mari**. Roman Catholic Church has recognized this Anaphora as it is without explicitly mentioning the words of institution. At the same time it is made clear that it is the Holy Spirit who transforms the elements into the body and blood of Christ. It was recognized that through other means the Assyrian Church also is linking the Eucharistic celebration to the Last Supper and the Sacrifice on the Cross. Such is the case of the **Malka (holy Leaven)**.⁴ A final document also is prepared by the commission on the sacraments, including the issue of the number of the sacraments. After several discussions it became clear that the number **seven is symbolic** and there is no need of overemphasis on the number seven .It is also recognized that there could be various listing of the sacraments in the various churches, especially where there is no explicit distinction between the sacraments and the sacramentals⁵. In the meantime **the Pontifical Commission for Promoting Christian Unity** issued on 20th July, 2001, a document entitled “**Pastoral Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean Church**”.⁶This document has been elaborated in agreement with the Congregation for the Doctrine of faith and the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. One can joyfully say that this International Commission is one, which works earnestly for the restoration of full communion between these two churches, and the work is progressing.

Now one question remains to be asked: It is a question regarding the **reception** of the agreement. How far has the joint statements and common declaration affected the life of both the churches? Did all the members of the hierarchy and the faithful of both the churches at large accept them enthusiastically? Are there still some Catholics who consider the Assyrians as Nestorian heretics? Do the Assyrians still have apprehensions regarding the Catholic Church on any point? Or are there still prejudices existing among them?

¹ *Syriac Dialogue*, I, p.231.

² *Ibid.*

³ The results of the discussion are presented to the authorities of both the churches for their scrutiny and final approval.

⁴ “After a long and careful study, from a historical, liturgical and doctrinal perspective, the Catholic Church authorities concluded that the Anaphora of Addai and Mari can be considered valid.” Bishop Mar Bawai Soro.

⁵ The Church of the East does not make a distinction between the Sacraments and the Sacramentals. It was the case in the other Syriac Churches also. For example, in the Antiochene tradition, blessing of the houses (*Veeduqudasa*), blessing of the Church (*Palliqudasa*), blessing of the oil (*Muron qudasa*) etc. were considered Qudase (=Sacraments).

⁶ Cfr, *Christian Orient*, 22/4(2001) 152-154; *L'Osservatore Romano*, 14th November, 2001.No.46 (1718) published a theological explanation of the document: Cfr, *Christian Orient*, 22/4(2001), p.155-161.

In general, one must confess that at least a tiny part of the hierarchy and faithful of both the churches is not deeply aware of the changes taking place in the ecumenical world. Even today, unfortunately, a few well-intentioned Catholics, both of the hierarchy and of the faithful, consider the Assyrians as heretics. They cannot digest the change of attitude that has taken place in the last 35 years in the Catholic Church. They keep on the old way of thinking and acting, regarding the Assyrians. For them the content of faith and the formulation of faith are identical. **Theotokos** is sacrosanct for them and they insist that it must be found in all the church traditions. They cannot accept a variant expression such as **Mother of Christ** our Savior and Lord. Even in several Catholic seminaries and faculties, the results of the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East have not reached. Many continue to maintain a pre-Vatican ecclesiology and mentality. The Catholic Church has advanced much further. In the same way in the Assyrian Church also there are a lot of tribal elements. A small percentage of the members of the hierarchy are still holding the tribal character of untouchability to the Catholic Church. Although the Catholic Church has shown a lot of good will, there are still some who view the Catholic openness with suspicion. For such people anything Roman must be seen with suspicion.

Centuries of separation cannot be bridged in 35 or 50 years. When we consider the long period of separation and the short period of encounter in recent years, one can rejoice in the Lord for the marvellous graces the churches have received from the Lord for the unity and common witness. The dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East is progressing faster than any other dialogue that is going on in the post conciliar era on the global level. One can only be happy, hopeful and joyful about the achievement so far.

One can ask further a legitimate question: Did the Church of the East modify its Christology? Did they add something to the faith of their church recently so that their Christology may be acceptable to the Catholic Church and other churches? We know from church history that they never accepted the Nestorian heresy. But after

confessing their faith in the one Incarnate Lord who became man for our salvation, they adopted a formulation that was Antiochene and was distinct from the formulation of the Alexandrians. From the Synods of the Church of the East, one can convincingly prove that they did not adopt or hold the Nestorian heresy. The liturgical traditions of this church also show clearly that they held the orthodox faith. But one may find accusations of Nestorianism in the writings of their opponents down through the centuries. Everyone was repeating the earlier statements of the adversaries. We do not find any Synod of the Assyrian church where they modified their Christology. On the contrary they continued to uphold the ancient apostolic faith. So the accusation of Nestorianism was unfounded and prejudiced. They never taught the *doctrine of two sons* or *quaternity instead of Trinity*. They never taught the heresy of *adoptionism of Paul of Samosata* nor did they consider our Lord to be a simple man (*psilanthropos*).

If the Persians were not Nestorian heretics, how can the St. Thomas Christian in India be called Nestorians? When the Portuguese missionaries came to India during the 16th century, they considered everything other than Latin as heretical. And in fact, Francis Roz, a Jesuit priest and later bishop of the Thomas Christians in India, wrote a pamphlet on the errors he found in Kerala, “*About the errors of the Nestorians who live in this East India*”¹. The Church in India had suffered a lot because of the overzealous and prejudiced missionaries, who knew nothing of the life and theology of the Syriac Churches. And even today the St. Thomas Christians suffer from the tragedy of division. Equally painful are the statements of some of the present day members of the Catholic hierarchy and Catholic faithful in India repeating or more strongly asserting the missionary sentiments of the 15/16th c. Portuguese. In 1999, at the 400th anniversary of the *Synod of Diamper*, some of the Catholics in India were over enthusiastic in proclaiming the *Nestorianism of the St. Thomas Christians in India* and announcing to the world that it was the missionaries who converted these Christians from the error of Nestorianism to the true faith. How far away are these prelates and faithful, who repeat the age-old slogans of heresy and schism, from the modern ecumenical world and the ecumenical openness of the Popes and the official Catholic Church!

The joint Christological declaration is a milestone in the history of Christianity and Pope John Paul II was courageous enough to understand the Assyrian position. The present author is also very happy about the outcome because he is also indirectly involved in the process. The study on *the Christology of Mar Babai the Great* by the present author paved the way for a new view of the Church of the East². And even in the formulation of the statement there was a humble and modest part for the author. When I defended the Doctoral thesis at Augustinianum in 1978, and presented a copy of the thesis to the Holy Father John Paul II on the 20th December, 1978, I could not imagine that this study would make so much change in the Christian world. Now almost all the scholars in the Catholic Church accept the Assyrian Christology as one of the Christologies of the church. The Catholic Church and the Catholic scholars do not consider that the Church of the East was Nestorian. They learned to distinguish between Nestorianism and the teaching of the Church of the East. Everybody repudiates the Nestorian heresy, but one cannot find the heresy of Nestorianism in the liturgical or canonical traditions of the Church of the East.

Finally it is worth quoting two statements of His Holiness Pope John Paul II. One is at the signing of the common declaration in 1994:

“We all recognize that it is of supreme importance to understand, venerate, preserve and foster the rich heritage of each of our Churches, and that a diversity of customs and observances is in no way an obstacle to unity. This diversity includes the power of our Churches to govern themselves according to their own disciplines and to keep certain differences in theological expression which, as we have verified, are often complementary rather than conflicting”³.

¹ Roz, s. j., “De Erroribus Nestorianorum qui in hac India Orientali versantur” in *Orientalia Christiana*, vol. xi.no.40, Rome, 1928; English translation, in *Christian Orient*, 10/4(1989) 143-162; Malayalam translation, in G. Chediath, **Mar thoma Sleehayude Indian Sabha**, Kottayam, 2001, p.97-117.

² G.Chediath, *The Christology of Mar Babai the Great*, Rome, 1978 (doctoral thesis); later it is printed in book form in 1982 by the Oriental Institute of Religious Studies Publication, Kottayam (No.49).

³ *Syriac Dialogue*, 4, Vienna, 2001, p.143; *The Messenger*, 11(1995) 13.

Further His Holiness exhorted the Catholics and Christians at large: “All the Christian Churches must humbly acknowledge their grave responsibility for the marginalisation and the sufferings endured by the Assyrian Church throughout the centuries. The pejorative epithet, ‘*Nestorian*’, often synonym of heretical with which they have referred to this Church until recent times is **no longer acceptable and must be definitely abandoned.**”¹

Now it is high time that the Syrian Orthodox Church and Malankara Orthodox Church enter into a meaningful dialogue with the Assyrian Church of the East. The Syrian Orthodox and Malankara Orthodox Church are regularly participating in the **pro Oriente Syriac Dialogue**. But so far these two churches have not entered into a serious ecumenical dialogue with the Church of the East. As Syriac Churches, it should have been easier for these two churches to understand the Church of the East. Perhaps the horror of Nestorianism has deeply entered into the liturgical tradition and life of these churches. There is no serious attempt from the part of these two churches for a meaningful dialogue with the Assyrians. On the contrary one may notice a trend, which is very detrimental to any kind of understanding with the Assyrian Church of the East². One can understand the background of the antipathy of the Syrian Orthodox church in West Asia. But one cannot understand the reasons why the Malankara Orthodox church is maintaining such an attitude. For 17 centuries, they had a common tradition with the rest of the Christians in India. Only in 1653 that they separated themselves from the main body of the Church and eventually adopted the West Syrian liturgical traditions and attitudes. On the one hand they are in constant conflict with the Syrian Orthodox church; on the other hand they cling to the deviated and biased attitudes and sentiments of the Syrian Orthodox church.

¹ *Information Service*, 91(1996/1-2) 24-26.

² Syriac Dialogue, 4,p.147-148; Among the Oriental Orthodox Churches, three churches have made a union: the Syrian Orthodox, the Armenians in Lebanon and the Coptic Orthodox. They have decided to have all future ecumenical activities jointly. Patriarch Shenouda of the Coptic Church is the one who gave leadership to such a union. Many observe that this is to hinder any future dialogue with the Assyrian and exclude them from the Middle East Council of churches. It is however very painful to see such anti-Christian attitudes, especially in the modern times.