

Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue  
between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East

# **The Images of the Church in the Syriac and Latin Patristic Traditions**

A study document

November 2022



## I. INTRODUCTION

1. Many theological dialogues concerning the Church have reflected on its various attributes or marks (“one, holy, catholic and apostolic”), on its institutions or on its sacraments, with the aim of expressing a common ecclesiology. Hardly any of these dialogues have based their reflection on the images of the Church, which are yet a heritage common to all Christians.

2. In the New Testament the Church is designated by various images and figures which had already been sketched in the books of the prophets. This imagery is often inspired by biological, social and family life, pastoral and rural life or by metaphors of construction work, such as body, people, mother, bride, fold, flock, field of God, olive tree, fig tree, vineyard, house of God, and temple.<sup>1</sup> Complementing and developing these classical images, the Fathers of the Church and the various liturgical traditions would come to draw inspiration from the Scriptures to propose many other types and symbols: moon, heavenly Jerusalem, Noah’s ark, seamless tunic, tabernacle, banquet, bridal chamber, spiritual hospital, ship, paradise, among others.

3. This document of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East sets out to present some images and symbols of the Church evoked by the Scriptures and developed by the Latin and Syriac Fathers of the early centuries – voluntarily omitting, for the purpose of this dialogue, the Fathers of the Greek and other Christian traditions. Its purpose is to show that the images of the Church, common to the Latin and Syriac traditions, although sometimes expressed and understood with different nuances, may help us to find together the foundations of a common ecclesiology.

4. However, not all of these images are of equal importance. Three among them put us in direct contact with the mystery of the Church in its Trinitarian dimension: that of the People of God, of the Body of Christ and of the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Other important images will be mentioned here, which, in one way or another, derive their meaning from these main themes: bride of Christ, mother, vineyard, place of healing, flock, and ship.

## II. THE PEOPLE OF GOD

5. The image of the People of God is taken from the Old Testament. God has chosen the people of Israel to be His people (in Hebrew and Syriac *‘ama*, in Greek *λαός*, in Latin *populus*), with whom He has made a covenant and whom He has gradually instructed. If Israel exists as a people, it is because it has been chosen by God (Dt 4:20; 7:6-8) and called by Him (Is 48:12), not because of its power or merits (Dt 8:17; 9:4), but for love: “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be His people, His treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set His heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that He swore to your ancestors ...” (Dt 7:6-8). This

---

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen gentium*, 6.

election will be sealed in the Covenant, the founding act of the chosen people, a pact sealed in the blood of a sacrifice, in which the twelve tribes commit themselves to fulfil the Law (Ex 24:4-8). Therefore, God is the God of Israel, Israel is the people of God (Dt 29:12; Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23; Ez 11:20 etc.): a holy people, consecrated to the Lord, dedicated to His service, witness to the one God (Is 44:8). However, if Israel enjoys such privileges, it is not for it alone: all nations are called to it (Is 2:2; Ps 46:10) to glorify God (Is 45:23) and share in the blessings of Abraham (Gen 12:3; Jer 4:2; Sir 44:21).

All this prepared and prefigured the New Covenant concluded in Christ with a people formed by both Jews and Gentiles, called to be together in unity, not by the flesh but in the Spirit, as announced by the prophet Jeremiah: “I will be their God and they shall be my people” (Jer 31:33). This new People of God constitutes “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people ... Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people” (1 Pet 2:9–10). One becomes a member not by physical birth, but by “being born from above”, “of water and Spirit” (Jn 3:3–5), that is to say, by faith in Christ and by baptism.

6. The Latin Fathers of the first centuries will abundantly develop the theme of the Church as People of God. Cyprian gives it a Trinitarian dimension, describing the Church as a “people who draw their unity from the unity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”.<sup>2</sup> Ambrose underlines that belonging to this people is realised through baptism: “This people, gathered together from among strangers, once a leper people, a people formerly defiled before being baptized into the mysterious river, this same people, after the mystery of baptism, washed away from the defilements of the body and the soul”.<sup>3</sup> Augustine underlines the continuity between Israel and the Church: “God did indeed bless a particular tree; he made the holy patriarchs his olive, as the Apostle says, and it flowered into the people of God”.<sup>4</sup> Developing the teaching of the First Epistle of Saint Peter (1 Pet 2:9-10), an understanding of the People of God in the Latin tradition will come to be based on the attribution of the priest–prophet–king triad to this people as a whole, and not only to its individual members, in order to express the various aspects of Christian grace. Leo the Great thus speaks of a “people adopted by God, entirely priestly and royal”.<sup>5</sup>

7. The Syriac tradition would also develop the expression People of God to designate the Church, “new People of God”, prefigured by the Old Covenant with Israel. Two ways of interpretation are superimposed: that of substitution, which presents the Church as the gathering of Nations [Gentiles] replacing the Synagogue, and that of continuation, which includes the Church as made up of two elements, the Jewish People (*the Nation*) and that of the Nations [Gentiles]. Christ gathers and leads to God all the nations under the sun and forms a single people, that is to say the Church, as envisaged by Jacob of Sarug: “The nations became one great people singing glory, a large

---

<sup>2</sup> Cyprian, *De Orat. Dom.* 23; PL 4, 553.

<sup>3</sup> Ambrose, *On Luke IV*, 50, PL 15, 1627.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms*, Ps. 134, n. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Leo the Great, *Homily III*, PL 54, 145b.

congregation, a torrent beyond measurements”.<sup>6</sup> Ephrem already presented the same idea about the Church in his Commentary on Genesis: “And in thy seed (which is Christ) all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”<sup>7</sup> Aphrahat<sup>8</sup> and Ephrem took pride in the dignity of Melchizedek, a Gentile, in the Church. Ephrem specifically commented upon the superiority of Melchizedek-like priesthood of Christ to that of Levites, where the Church – the assembly of Nations – is presumed to be the new People of God: “Nobler was Melchizedek than the high priests of the Nation: among the Nations he officiated and taught that the High Priest who was to come to the Nations would be immolated by the Nation.”<sup>9</sup>

8. The image of the People of God, a prevailing metaphor among the first Fathers until the fourth and fifth centuries, became infrequent until the 20th century, when it was revived in ecclesiology. The theology of the People of God offers enlightenment on the divine plan of Salvation: God wanted to save and sanctify humanity, not in isolation, individually, but as a community. Moreover, evoking the march of Israel in the desert and the history of Salvation, the image emphasizes the historical and eschatological dimension of the Church and its synodal dimension as “walking together” (*syn/odos*). It manifests finally the continuity of Revelation and of the faith from Abraham onwards. The new People of God does not replace the old one, Israel, on which it came to be “grafted” (cf. Rom 11:24): rather, it testifies to the fulfilment today in Christ of the promises God made to Israel. All nations being called to be part of this people, to which they are ordered in one way or another, the image is particularly fertile from an ecumenical and interreligious point of view.

### III. THE BODY OF CHRIST

9. The image of the Church as a body comes from the New Testament, and more precisely from Saint Paul. In the epistles to the Corinthians and to the Romans, Paul presents Christians as united members of a single body, the body of Christ, σῶμα Χριστοῦ. In this body, they really are in communion with one another through the Eucharist: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). In this body, the members are differentiated but complementary: they receive from the Spirit various gifts for the good of the whole body: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Cor 12:12). This first teaching experienced a new development in the captivity epistles, which highlight the role of Christ as Head of this body. Just as Christ exercises His pre-eminence in all things, “He is the head of the body, the church” (Col 1:18), hence He fills it with the goods of divine life which He himself has in fullness (cf. Col 2:9–10). It is in the epistle to the Ephesians that the notion of body finds its deepest development. Bringing together Jews and pagans in “one new humanity”, Christ reconciles “both groups to God in one body” (Eph 2:15–16). He is “the head”, “from whom the whole body, joined and knit together

---

<sup>6</sup> Jacob of Sarug, *Homily 164 on the Torrent which the Prophet Ezekiel saw*, HSJS V, p. 440, lns. 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Ephrem, *Commentary on Genesis*, XX, 3: CSCO 152, Syr. 71, p. 84.

<sup>8</sup> Aphrahat, *Dem.* XI, 3: PS I, p. 476, lns. 20-3.

<sup>9</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity*, VIII, 20: CSCO 223, Syr. 94, p. 31.

by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Eph 4:12–16).

10. The Syriac Fathers would develop these Pauline themes. Ephrem recalls the link between the Body (*paghra*) of Christ and the Church in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 10: "For just as by the one body which we receive we are all made one body, so you, by means of the one food which you eat there [i.e. Eucharist], become one".<sup>10</sup> In the Spirit, the risen Christ constitutes the community of believers as His body, as Ephrem emphasizes again when commenting on Ephesians 4:16: "The gifts of the Spirit are like members which help the body of the Church to grow".<sup>11</sup> As Ephrem recapitulates in a striking formula: "He died to our world in his body, that we might live to his world in his body".<sup>12</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, commenting on 1 Corinthians 12:13, reflects that it is through baptism that we become members of the Body: "Therefore, the congregation of the faithful is also called the body of Christ, and each one of us is a member of his [body], and he is the head of us all because through the power of the Spirit we will receive, as it were, a natural conjunction, as the apostle also says, 'For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.'"<sup>13</sup>

11. The Latin Fathers also developed with their own particular approach the image of the Church as Body of Christ, with a view to instilling in the faithful the sense of the unity of the Church, both local and universal. For Cyprian, the unity of the ecclesial body is both visible and spiritual. Guaranteed by the unity of the Head, it is not broken by the diversity of local traditions. On the sacramental level, the source of unity is the Eucharist: "For just as numerous grains are gathered, ground, and mixed all together to make into one loaf of bread, so in Christ, who is the bread of heaven, we know that there is but one body and that every one of us has been fused together and made one with it."<sup>14</sup> Above all, the doctrine of Augustine on the total Christ (*Christus totus*), head and body, has left an indelible mark on the Western tradition. Facing the Donatist controversy, Augustine responded by asserting the unity of the Body of Christ: "Our Lord Jesus Christ consists of head and body, as a perfect man [...]. The Church is the body that belongs to his head. By this we do not mean just the Church present in this place, but the Church both here and throughout the whole world".<sup>15</sup> A little later Leo the Great would exclaim: "Christian, remember your dignity, now that you share in God's own nature ... Bear in mind who is your head and of whose body you are a member."<sup>16</sup>

12. The image of the People of God, found in the Old Testament, presents the Church in continuity with the People of Israel, while the image of the Body of Christ to designate the Church stems from the New Testament. It expresses, better than any other, the vital,

---

<sup>10</sup> Ephrem, Arm. III: *In Paulum*: Arm. in *Srboyn Ep'remi Matenagrut'iwkn'* III, p. 69, Lns. 26-9; tr. (Latin): *S. Ephraemi Syri Commentarii in Epistolas D. Pauli... a Patribus Mechitaristis*, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 71, lns. 4-9; tr. p. 69.

<sup>12</sup> Ephrem, *CDiat.* XXI, 15: C. McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709 with Introduction and Notes*, JSSS 2, p. 325.

<sup>13</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, in *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans., Marco Conti, ed., Joel E. Elowsky, ACT, p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* XLIII, PL 4, 383.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *Exposition 2 of Psalm 90*, PL 37, 1159.

<sup>16</sup> Leo the Great, *Ep.* XLIII, PL 4, 383.

realistic character of the bonds which unite the members of the mystical body with one another – bonds of proximity, complementarity, solidarity, mutual service – and with Christ the head, who communicates His own divine and filial life. A more organic and charismatic vision of the Church follows from this conception. Moreover, the notion of communion, shared by both Latin and Syriac traditions, and highlighted in ecclesiology in the second half of the 20th century, is in line with the theology of the Body of Christ.

#### IV. THE TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

13. In the Old Testament David speaks to Nathan of his aspiration to build a “house” for the ark of God (2 Sam 7:1–3), a project which would only be undertaken under the reign of Solomon with the construction of the temple of which the Ark of the Covenant is the inner sanctuary (1 Kgs 8:1–9). The prophets had announced, however, the coming of a new and definitive temple in a messianic and universalistic perspective: “For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Is 56:7). The New Testament proclaims the fulfilment of this promise in the New People. Christ speaks of His own body as a temple (Jn 2:21; cf. Heb 9:11), comparing himself to the stone rejected by the builders which became the cornerstone (Mt 21:42; cf. Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7; Ps 117:22). Saint Paul declares for his part that the faithful are the “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19): “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Cor 3:16–17). In the community too, the Spirit lives as in a temple, which has Christ as its cornerstone and rests on the Apostles and the prophets: “[T]he household of God [is] built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling–place for God” (Eph 2:19–22). This structure is described by various terms: “God’s building” (1 Cor 3:9), “household of God” which is “the Church of the living God, the pillar and the bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15), “dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:19–22), “the home of God among mortals” (Rev 21:3), “temple of the Living God” (2 Cor 6:16; cf. 1 Cor 3:16–17; Eph 2:21), of which we are the “living stones” (1 Pet 2:5), “holy city, the new Jerusalem” that John sees in a vision coming down out of heaven from God at the hour when the world will be renewed (Rev 21:1 et seq.).

14. The Syriac Fathers often use building images to describe the Church: Solomon’s temple, Noah’s Ark, and above all “house founded on rock” from the parable of Matthew 7:25. Aphrahat develops the theme of the Temple in relation to the Church.<sup>17</sup> For Ephrem, the Tower of Babel is the antitype of the Church which leads to heaven,<sup>18</sup> designated also as the Tabernacle,<sup>19</sup> and the House of Refuge.<sup>20</sup> Jacob of Sarug uses the image of the house built by Melchizedek on Golgotha,<sup>21</sup> of the altar built by Abraham

---

<sup>17</sup> Aphrahat, *Dem.* XIV, 38: PS I, p. 680, lns. 1-2; *Dem.* IV, 10-11: PS I, p. 157, ln. 20 - p. 161, ln. 23; *Dem.* VI, 1: PS I, p. 252, lns. 9-13.

<sup>18</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity*, I, 44: CSCO 186, Syr. 82, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Ephrem, *Commentary on Exodus*, XXV-XXXI: CSCO 152, Syr. 71, p. 152.

<sup>20</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity*, III, 15: CSCO 186, Syr. 82, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Jacob of Sarug, *Homily 155 on Melchizedek, Priest of the Highest God and the Types of Our Lord*, HSJS V, p. 160, lns.15-22.

and Isaac<sup>22</sup> which later will become the very place of Jacob's sacrifice, associated with Golgotha.<sup>23</sup> Ephrem and Jacob of Sarug associate still more explicitly with the Church the image of the rock anointed by Jacob, the stone on which Jacob rested his head during his dream, and on which he poured oil when he woke up (cf. Gen 28:11–18): "Bring oil, pour it upon the stone, for it is the Church, and depict her for me, since she will return after some time".<sup>24</sup> The stone on which Moses was seated during the fight against the Amalekites symbolizes for Jacob the foundation of the Church on which the outstretched arms of Moses prefigure the victorious Cross: "Then the Church was established with the cross on her. Blessed be his redemption!"<sup>25</sup> Lastly, as states Isho'dad of Merv, bishop of Hadatha in Assyria: "Hanana [God the Merciful] says He gathered all beings as scattered members to one substance of the body of Christ; that Christ might be the filling up of all the defectiveness that is in you, being united and joined together like members to the head; and complete in Him by the power of grace, in all the fullness of God, that is to say, as in the place of a pure temple to God; and He constantly dwells in them".<sup>26</sup>

15. The Latin Fathers developed the Christocentric character of the image of the temple, as did Gregory the Great commenting on 1 Corinthians 3:11: "He alone sustains our ways and our sins, He who carries the whole construction of the Holy Church".<sup>27</sup> However, following Saint Paul and like all the Eastern Fathers, they see in this temple the abode of the Holy Spirit, immediate source of all the spiritual goods of the Church, of its unity across time and space, and the diverse and complementary functions of its members. Augustine explains the foundation of this particular role of the third Person in the Church: the Spirit being the bond of love and communion between the first two Persons, and consequently the source of love and unity in the Church. This insight clarifies why the Church itself, like the Holy Spirit, can be called "charity" and "unique dove." In this line, the image of the Spirit, soul of the Church, living in it, organizing and governing it in the same way as the human soul lives, organizes and governs the body, proved to be of great fruitfulness: "What our spirit, that is to say our soul, is for our members, the Holy Spirit is for the members of Christ, for the body of Christ, which is the Church".<sup>28</sup>

16. The image of construction, shared by the Latin and Syriac traditions, allows to better understand the pneumatological dimension of the Church, a fundamental dimension rediscovered in the 20th century in Western theology. This aspect brings into renewed focus the understanding that once the work that the Father had entrusted His Son to do on earth was completed (cf. Jn 17:4), the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost to permanently sanctify the Church and thus to give believers, through Christ, in the same Spirit, access to the Father (cf. Eph 2:18). Moreover, as an edifice, the

---

<sup>22</sup> Jacob of Sarug, *Homily 109 on Abraham and his types*, HSJS IV, p. 90, lns 8-13.

<sup>23</sup> Jacob of Sarug, *Homily 74 on Jacob's Revelation at Bethel*, HSJS III, p. 201, lns. 13-14.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203, lns. 11-12.

<sup>25</sup> Jacob of Sarug, *Homily 158 on Moses' extended hands during the battle*, HSJS V, p. 306, ln. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Isho'dad of Merv, *S. Paul's Epistles* in M.D. Gibson, ed., *The Commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv: Bishop of Hadatha (c. 850 A.D.) in Syriac and English*, Vol. V, Part I (Syr), p. 118; Vol. V, Part II (Eng), p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory the Great, *Homilies on Ezekiel*, Book II, hom. 1, para. 5 in Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, p. 265: SC Vol. 360, p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *Homily 267*, 4: PL 38, 1231D.

Church is continuously under construction and renewal, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## V. THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

17. The unity of Christ and of the Church conveyed in the image of the Body of Christ implies also the distinction of the two in a personal relationship. This aspect is expressed by the image of the bridegroom and of the bride. In the Old Testament, the relationship between God and the people of Israel is described by using bridal imagery, especially by the prophets Hosea (1:2; 2:5) and Ezekiel (16:4–5). In the New Testament the metaphor of the bridegroom is used by John the Baptist (cf. Jn 3:29) and Jesus also alludes to himself as “the bridegroom” (Mk 2:19; cf. Mt 22:1–14; 25:1–13). Saint Paul presents the Church and each faithful member of His Body, as a bride “betrothed” to Christ the Lord to be with Him in one Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:15–16; 2 Cor 11:2). He uses the bridal imagery to stress the Church’s purity: the Church is the immaculate Bride of the immaculate Lamb (cf. Rev 19:7; 21:2.9; 22:17) whom Christ has loved, and for whom He sacrificed himself “in order to make her holy” (Eph 5:26); to whom He is united by an eternal covenant, and of whom He does not cease to take care as of His own body (cf. Eph 5:29).

18. The Western Fathers very early developed the feminine symbolism of the Church. For example, Clement of Rome uses the text of Genesis 1:27 to symbolize the union of Christ and the Church: “Christ is the Groom and the Church is his Bride”.<sup>29</sup> Certain *orante* images in the Roman catacombs (representation of a woman in prayer raising her hands towards heaven, like in the catacombs of Priscilla) are probably also representations of the Church. Ambrose evokes the image of the bride about baptism and applies it both to the Church and to the soul of the neophyte, quoting the Song of Songs and referring to Christ’s baptism in the Jordan: “But Christ, beholding His Church, for whom He Himself, as you find in the book of the prophet Zechariah, had put on filthy garments, now clothed in white raiment, seeing, that is, a soul pure and washed in the laver of regeneration, says: ‘Behold, thou art fair, My love, behold thou art fair, thy eyes are like a dove’s’, in the likeness of which the Holy Spirit descended from heaven”.<sup>30</sup> Augustine, commenting on the Epistle to the Ephesians, distinguishes in the “whole Christ” the one who acts as the head (*ex persona capitis*) and the one who acts as the body (*ex persona corporis*): “What does this mean? ‘The two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the Church’ (Eph 5:31–32). And the Lord himself says in the Gospel: ‘So they are no longer two, but one flesh’ (Mt 19:6). They are, in fact, two different persons, yet they are one in the conjugal union ... as head, he calls himself the bridegroom, as body, he calls himself ‘bride’.”<sup>31</sup>

19. The image of the Church as the bride of Christ, fulfilling God’s covenant with Israel, is a theme dear to the Church of the East’s liturgical tradition, often linked with the typological exegesis of John 19:34 (the birth of the Church/Bride, and the Sacraments (*raze*) of Baptism and Eucharist). The Syriac Fathers, in general, describe

---

<sup>29</sup> Clement of Rome, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Quasten I, p. 64.

<sup>30</sup> Ambrose, *De sacramentis*, LH, 15th Thursday of Ordinary Time.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *En. in Ps. 74:4*: PL 36, 948-949.

the Church as: “adorned bride”, “glorious bride”, “bride of the King”, “Bride of Jesus the high priest, the heavenly bridegroom”.<sup>32</sup> In applying this bridal imagery, Ephrem passes freely from the Church to the individual Christian: at baptism each individual soul is betrothed to Christ, and these betrothals are renewed at each Eucharist.<sup>33</sup>

The betrothal of Christ with the Church takes place during His baptism in the Jordan: “Blessed be Christ who has betrothed you to himself from the water of baptism”.<sup>34</sup> This betrothal fulfils the betrothal in the Sinai between God and His people, Moses foreshadowing the role of John the Baptist, as stated in the Syriac liturgy: “He betrothed her through Moses and through John. He wrote her wedding pact in the Jordan River”.<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that Aphrahat and Ephrem are among the very first Fathers of the Eastern Church who introduced the idea that the holy apostles, following Moses and John the Baptist, and the bishops their successors, are the betrothers of the Church, as Aphrahat says: “He [Christ] is the bridegroom and the apostles are the ‘betrothers’, and we are the bride; let us prepare our dowry”.<sup>36</sup>

The betrothal of the Jordan was also prefigured by the betrothals in the Old Testament, which were always held near a well. Ephrem, in his commentary on the Diatessaron, lists them: that of Rebecca with Isaac (through Eliezer) (cf. Gen 24:11), of Rachel with Jacob (cf. Gen 29:9), and of Zipporah with Moses (cf. Ex 2:15): “All these were types of Our Lord who espoused his Church at his baptism in the Jordan”.<sup>37</sup> At the time of His baptism in the waters of the Jordan, Christ washed and purified the Church His bride so that she would be “without spot or wrinkle” (Eph 5:27): “Blessed are you O holy and glorious Church, bride of Christ who was pleased in his love to give you his body and saved you by his blood, and washed away your impurities by his baptism and sanctified you by his grace”.<sup>38</sup>

The marriage of Cana also symbolizes the marriage of Christ and the Church,<sup>39</sup> foreshadowing the Eucharist, wedding banquet of the Lord and the Church.<sup>40</sup> However, if the Church is betrothed to Christ in the Jordan, she truly becomes the bride of Christ on the Cross. The living blood with which Christ wrote down the dowry<sup>41</sup> was that He paid for His bride: “Exult and rejoice O faithful Church in the bridegroom ... who has given you his body and costly blood as dowry”.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> *Hudra* III, p. 566 (ܘܕܪܐ ܘܕܪܐ).

<sup>33</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith*, XIV, 1-3: CSCO 154, Syr. 73, pp. 61-62; Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity*, XXV, 16: CSCO 223, Syr. 94, p. 93.

<sup>34</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Resurrection*, III, 1-7: CSCO 248, Syr. 108, pp. 85-86.

<sup>35</sup> *Hudra* III, p. 612 (ܘܕܪܐ ܘܕܪܐ).

<sup>36</sup> Aphrahat, *Dem.* XIV, 39: PS I, p. 681, ln. 26 – p. 684, ln. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ephrem, *CDiat.* III, 17: CSCO 137, Arm. 1, p. 45. For Jacob of Sarug, Jacob’s betrothal with Leah and Rachel thus foreshadowed the betrothal of Christ to Israel and to the Church: Jacob of Sarug, “A homily on Our Lord and Jacob, the Church and Rachel”, HSJS III, pp. 208-223.

<sup>38</sup> *Hudra* III, p. 586 (ܘܕܪܐ ܘܕܪܐ).

<sup>39</sup> Ephrem, *CDiat.* V, 8: CSCO 137, Arm., pp. 62-63; Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity*, XVI, 2 and XXXIII, 1: CSCO 223, Syr. 94, p. 55, pp. 119-120; Ephrem, *Hymns against Heresies*, XLVII, 3: CSCO 169, Syr. 76, pp. 183-183.

<sup>40</sup> Jacob of Sarug, *Homily 43 on Our Lord portrayed in Scripture as food and drink*, HSJS II, p. 237, ln. 20 – p. 238, ln.10.

<sup>41</sup> *Hudra* III, p. 586 (ܘܕܪܐ ܘܕܪܐ).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 576-577 (ܘܕܪܐ ܘܕܪܐ – ܘܕܪܐ ܘܕܪܐ).

20. The image of bride and bridegroom, common to the Latin and Syriac traditions, reveals the eternal and unconditional love of God for His People (cf. Jn 3:16). As a result, all these bridal images express the intimate, unconditional and indissoluble union of Christ and the Church. In this union, all the initiative comes from Him, who has given to her His own flesh and does not cease filling her with love and graces. She, for her part, responds to this solicitous love with a burning, exclusive love. However, the history of the Church shows that this image has two aspects: that of fidelity (the bride of the Song of Songs) and that of infidelity (the wife of Hosea), holiness coexisting with failure.

## VI. THE MOTHER

21. The figure of the Church as Mother of believers is not explicitly present in Scripture. It appears however implicitly developed in the New Testament, for example in the words of Christ on the Cross, entrusting to John, His disciple, Mary as his mother: “Behold your mother” (Jn 19:27). Moreover Saint Paul, when he evokes the maternity of the celestial Jerusalem: “But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother” (Gal 4:26, cf. Rev 12). Saint Paul compares here the two peoples, Israel and the Church of the Nations, represented by the two wives of Abraham: he gives the name of mother, formerly reserved for the first chosen people, to the community of those who believe in Jesus, and he contrasts the freedom of the latter to the weight of Mosaic Law.

22. The image of the Church as mother was one of the most popular in early Christianity. The most ancient Latin patristic tradition has long insisted on the theme of the *Ecclesia mater* bringing the faithful to a new life. The Latin Fathers have often made a parallel between the two mothers, namely Mary and the Church: by the integrity of her faith, the Church is a virgin mother as Mary is the virgin mother of Emmanuel. As Ambrose taught, Mary is a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ.<sup>43</sup> The fertile virginity of Mary is a privileged sign of that of the Church. Cyprian draws a parallel between the fatherhood of God and the motherhood of the Church in his renowned formula against schism: “You cannot have God for your Father if you do not have the Church for your Mother”.<sup>44</sup> Baptism is the locus of childbirth, “the one Mother is rich with the offspring of her fertility”.<sup>45</sup> The Church not only generates children but, like a mother, she nourishes them with the Eucharist<sup>46</sup> and with the milk of the Word of God, as Augustine reflects: “The Church is a nursing mother whose breasts are the Old and New Testaments”.<sup>47</sup> All believers advanced in the ways of grace participate in this motherhood: by doing the will of the Father, they are, with Mary and the Church, mothers of Christ in their souls (cf. Mt 12:50).<sup>48</sup> As

---

<sup>43</sup> Ambrose, *Expos. Lc.* II, 7: PL 15, 1555.

<sup>44</sup> Cyprian, *De unitate Ecclesiae*, c. 6. PL 4 503A.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Hippolyte, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, II.

<sup>47</sup> Augustine, *Homily 3 on the First Epistle of John*; PL 35, 1998.

<sup>48</sup> Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, I, 6.

Augustine reflects: “Let us love the Lord our God, let us love the Church, God as our Father, the Church as our mother”.<sup>49</sup>

23. The theme of the Church as Mother as such does not immediately attract the attention of the Syriac Fathers. The reason is likely that in early Syriac Christianity, the image of the Mother is applied to the Holy Spirit (*Ruha*), considered to be a female and maternal figure linked to the dove hovering over the waters of Jordan. However, the personification of the Church in the figure of Mary helps to deepen the theme of maternity on the basis of the patristic typology of the Second Eve.<sup>50</sup> Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of believers, is the type of this Mother Church. In the same way as the first Eve, born from the side of Adam, is the mother of all living beings, the New Eve, Mary, is the mother of all believers and the type of the Church born sacramentally from the pierced side of the New Adam on the cross. As recited in the Holy Week *Memre* attributed to Ephrem: “Let us call the church itself ‘Mary’ for it befits her to have two names”.<sup>51</sup> Mary has a dual relationship with the Church: she belongs to the Church, as first of the believers; and, as Mother of Christ, metaphorically, she is mother to all members of Christ’s Body. Thus, Mary and the Church are closely linked as types, both Virgin and Mother.

It is through baptism, which revives those who receive it, that the Church becomes the mother of the faithful. Ephrem compares the baptismal waters to the “womb” which spiritually gives birth to the children of the Church.<sup>52</sup> In his *Hymns on the Epiphany*, Ephrem affirms: “Baptism is a mother who engenders each day spiritual infants and gives to God new and holy sons”.<sup>53</sup> In his *Hymns on Virginity*, he evokes the waters sanctified by the baptism of Christ becoming sanctifying for those who are baptized: “At your baptism, O Saviour, the fountains of water were sanctified, and they became a spiritual womb for humanity”.<sup>54</sup> The maternity of the Church in baptism is also developed in the *Liber Graduum*, where the terrestrial Church is represented as a mother raising children for the celestial Church: “This blessed nurse, which every day bears and brings up fair wards and sends them to that great Church on high”.<sup>55</sup> A little further we find: “Now this Church, with its altar and baptism, bears mankind like children; they suck [her] milk, till they are weaned”.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, the Church not only gives birth but also dispenses spiritual gifts to her children, nourishing them with the Word and the Sacraments. The Church conceives and gives birth spiritually to her children into the life of faith and fellowship in and with God, bestows upon them the gifts of the Holy Spirit and nurtures them at the table of the body and blood of Christ. The Church of the East’s Liturgy also celebrates the maternity of the Church, in particular in its liturgy of the hours: “Confirm O Lord, her [Church] life

---

<sup>49</sup> Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 88, 11, 14, PL 38, 1140-1141.

<sup>50</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* III, 21, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Ephrem, *Sermo ad nocturnum dominicae resurrectionis*; in *St. Ephraemi Hymni et Sermones*, ed. Lamy I, 533.

<sup>52</sup> Ephrem, *CDiat.* II, § 8: Eng tr. C. McCarthy, *Diatessaron*, p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Epiphany*, XIII, 1: CSCO, 186, Syr. 82, p. 189.

<sup>54</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity*, VII, 7: CSCO 223, Syr. 94, p. 26.

<sup>55</sup> *Liber Graduum*, “On the hidden and public ministry of the Church”, XII, 2: PS III, p. 289, ln. 24 – p. 292, ln. 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 3: PS III, p. 292, ln. 26 – p. 293, ln. 2.

in your mercy and guard her children in your grace”.<sup>57</sup> “Look with compassion and have mercy, O our Saviour, and raise up your Church and guard her children through the prayer of all your saints”.<sup>58</sup>

24. The theme of the Church as mother shows that Christian life is a progressive process: the faithful grow in the life of faith, which is the life of Christ in them, through the liturgy, the sacraments and the pursuit of holiness. What can be said of the Church can be said of each faithful. Each member of the Church is like a microcosm of the Church: bride of Christ by an undivided love but also, by the spiritual fruitfulness of witness and charity, “brother, and sister and mother” of Christ (cf. Mt 12:50). This theme of the Church as mother makes it possible to evoke the unity of Christians, children of the same mother, as Ephrem does: “That from all churches there may be a single Church of Truth; and let her children be gathered, righteous in her bosom, that we may confess thy goodness – Praise to reconciliation”.<sup>59</sup>

## VII. THE VINEYARD

25. The images of the Church in Scripture are often drawn from the life of the fields. The Church is the land of agriculture, the field of God (1 Cor 3:9). In this field grows the ancient olive tree; its holy roots are the patriarchs by whom the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles takes place (Rom 11:13–26). But the most recurrent image is that of the vineyard. For the prophets, the “chosen vineyard” represents the people elected, pampered by their Lord, the “heavenly winemaker”; but this vineyard is unfaithful (cf. Hos 3:1; 10:1), sterile in good works (cf. Jer 2:21; 8:13), as laments the song of the vineyard in the book of Isaiah: “He expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes” (Is 5:1–2). The winemaker delivers it to devastation (Is 5:7; Jer 5:10; 12:10; cf. Ez 19:10–14; 15:6 et seq.). But one day this vineyard will be faithful (Ps 79:9–17).

In the parables of Jesus, the vineyard is clearly identified: “the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel” (Is 5:7). If it does not bring fruit to its owner, it is because the winemakers, the leaders of Israel, divert the profit, killing the prophets and finally the only Son himself. So they will be chastised and the kingdom of God will be entrusted to others, as the parable of the unfaithful winemakers recounts (Mt 21:33–34). The faithful winemakers are those who actually accept to work in the vineyard (not only in words, like the eldest son in the parable of Matthew 21:28–32, who represents the heads of the first elected people), even those hired at the last hour (Mt 20:1–15). The most significant New Testament text on the vine–church is John 15:1 et seq. Its meaning is close to that of the Body of Christ. We pass here from the vineyard–Church to the vineyard–Christ. The true vineyard is Christ: He is the one who gives life and fertilizes the branches that we are; by the grace of the Church we remain in him, without whom we can “do nothing”. Through the Incarnation, the Word was made from our nature, as the vineyard is of the same nature as the branches.

---

<sup>57</sup> Hudra III, p. 563 (ܘܕܪܐ ܘܨܝܕ).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 597 (ܘܨܝܕ).

<sup>59</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith*, LII, 15: CSCO 154, Syr. 73, p. 164.

26. The image of the vineyard symbolizing the call and then the rejection of Israel inspired the Syriac fathers such as Aphrahat, Ephrem, and Jacob of Sarug. Jacob compares the song of Isaiah on the vineyard (Is 5:1–7) and the parable of the winegrowers (Mt 21:33–43): the vine described by Isaiah is the symbol of Israel, just like Matthew’s winemakers who kill the heir; the vineyard is finally entrusted by the owner to other winegrowers – the nations (Mt 21:41).<sup>60</sup> But beyond this narrative the vineyard also symbolizes the relationship of the Church to Christ, described by Ephrem in a hymn which is a long allegory of the Church-vineyard,<sup>61</sup> which is one with Christ. The vineyard is a symbol of Christ’s Passion, of the Eucharist, and also of the harvest of God’s judgment (Rev 14:19).

27. The Latin Fathers would also develop this image of the Church as vineyard. Gregory the Great summarises the traditional ecclesiological interpretation of the parable of the unfaithful vinegrowers of Matthew 21: “[Our Creator has] a vineyard, the universal Church, which has grown, so to speak, as many branches as it has produced saints, from Abel the righteous to the last one to be born at the end of the world”.<sup>62</sup> Ambrose brings this parable closer to the allegory of the vineyard in John 15: “With good reason, then, do we call the people of Christ a vine, whether because they mark their foreheads with the sign of the cross or because their fruits are harvested in the last season of the year, or because, just as in the lines of a vineyard, poor and rich, lowly and mighty, servants and masters, all who are in the Church share a perfect equality”.<sup>63</sup> Augustine, emphasizing that the branches also form part of the vineyard, makes it an image of the Incarnation: “For as the vine and its branches are of one nature, therefore, His own nature as God being different from ours, He became man, that in Him human nature might be the vine, and we who also are men might become branches thereof”.<sup>64</sup> In reality, the vineyard is the whole Christ, vineyard and branches, or, according to the corresponding Pauline image, head and body. Thus, it is a communion of sap, of life, and of grace, between Christ and His Church.

The image of the vineyard, more than the other images, evokes the necessary cleansing and purification. Those in the Church who know this should not be alarmed: this pruning is meant to increase fertility, as reflects Augustine: “For who in this life is so clean as not to be in need of still further and further cleansing? The fruitful [are cleansed so that] they may be so much the more fruitful, as they have been made the cleaner”.<sup>65</sup>

28. The botanical images indicate the vital character of the Church, its mysterious, progressive yet irresistible growth – and the spiritual death for those who cut themselves off from its trunk. From a spiritual point of view, they show more than the corporeal images the necessity of being pruned for the growth of life in Christ. They show the Church as “God’s plantation”, as a spiritual garden made up of trees which are Christians, “*neophytes*” [literally “new plants”], planted by baptism, and ultimately as

---

<sup>60</sup> Jacob of Sarug, *Homily 133 on the Parable of the Vineyard*, HSJS IV, p. 760, lns. 15-16.

<sup>61</sup> Ephrem, *De Ecclesia*, 1-15: CSCO 174, Syr. 78, pp. 67-70.

<sup>62</sup> Gregory the Great, *Homily 19 on the Gospels*, PL 76, 1154 sq.

<sup>63</sup> Ambrose, *Commentaries on Saint Luke*, IX, 23-33, PL 15, 1799-1802.

<sup>64</sup> Augustine, *Tractatus, 80 in Ioan. I*, PL 35, 1839.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, PL 35, 1840.

a Paradise, as describes Cyprian: “The Church is like Paradise; within her walls she encloses on the inside fruit-bearing trees. ... And those trees she waters by means of fountains – that is, by the four Gospels. By them she generously spreads ... the graces of baptism”.<sup>66</sup> Within this Paradise stands the “tree of life”, as Ephrem reflects: “God has planted a beautiful garden. He built his pure Church. In the middle of the Church he planted the Word. The assembly of saints bears resemblance to Paradise”.<sup>67</sup>

## VIII. THE FLOCK

29. In the Old Testament God presented His people as the flock of which He wanted to be himself the pastor (cf. Ez 34:11; Ps 22 and 79). In the Gospel, the true pastor is Christ (cf. Jn 10:11; 1 Pet 5:4), the unique and necessary entry into the fold of the Church (cf. Jn 10:1–10), who leads and feeds His sheep for which He gave His life (cf. Jn 10:11–15). Finally, the pastor identifies with the Lamb, leading His flock to “the springs of the water of life” (Rev 7:17, cf. 14:4). Simultaneously, the pastor is the Bridegroom who, in the Song of Songs, “pastures his flock among the lilies” (Song of Songs 2:16); and, in chapter 19 of the Apocalypse, “the Lamb is united with his bride, who is clothed with the fine and pure linen of the righteous deeds of the saints” (Rev 19:8).

30. The Good Shepherd is one of the oldest iconographic representations of Christ, depicted as early as the Roman catacombs (such as the catacombs of Priscilla and Callixtus). The Latin Fathers commented extensively on the figure of the Good Shepherd, “the only one who grazes with justice”, says Augustine.<sup>68</sup> The sheep are continually led and nourished by Christ himself, “although they have human shepherds at their head”<sup>69</sup> – starting with Peter, to whom was exhorted: “Tend my lambs [...] feed my sheep” (Jn 21:16-17). This intimate relationship can only be realized within the one Church, which must become universal, bring together all men, even the most distant, either by origin or by sin, as Leo declares: “It is He Who, without excluding any nation, makes one flock of holy sheep from every nation under heaven, and daily fulfils what He promised, saying, *Other sheep also I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd* [Jn 10:16].”<sup>70</sup> The Latin Fathers also bring closer to the Johannine figure of the good shepherd the synoptic parable of the lost sheep, the hundredth sheep, which so often inspired them, the hundredth sheep representing the Gentiles, the sinner, and – in a metaphor followed by much of the patristic tradition – all of humanity.

31. The image of the flock is also developed by the Syriac Fathers. Theodore of Mopsuestia, commenting on John 10, underlines the giving of His life by the Good Shepherd: “I am the good shepherd. Indeed, if the thief kills, not only do I not kill, but I give new life to the human race after taking death from them”.<sup>71</sup> The image allows him

---

<sup>66</sup> Cyprian, *Epist.* 73, 10. JD 39.

<sup>67</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, VI, 7-9: CSCO 174, Syr. 78, p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> Augustine, *Homily on the Pastors*, LH, 25<sup>th</sup> Thursday *per annum*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Leo the Great, *Homily 63 on the Passion*.

<sup>71</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, in *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans., Marco Conti, ed., Joel E. Elowsky, ACT, pp. 92-93.

to emphasize the uniqueness of the Church called to bring together the Gentiles and the Jews: “So there will be one flock, one shepherd. This sentence alludes to those among the Gentiles who would come to faith because many among the pagans as well as many among the Jews were destined to gather together into a single church and to acknowledge one shepherd and one lord who is the Christ”.<sup>72</sup> Ephrem in his Commentary on the Diatessaron of Tatian also evokes the role of Peter: “John [the Baptist], seeing that he had completed the course of his life, handed over his flock to the chief Shepherd. This was like his Lord who, when dying, handed over his flock to the chief pastor whose mouth had confessed him and whose tears were a pledge. (Thus) did the Shepherd make known to his flock his care for it. (The Lord) did not finally hand over his little flock to its pastor until he had received genuine pledges. He received the threefold (confession) that (Simon) had professed as trustworthy pledges for three (denials). Therefore, when his Master said (to him), *Do you love me?* Our Lord was wanting to receive from him his true love, so that, after having given the pledge of love, (Simon) might receive (Jesus’) sheep as a flock.”<sup>73</sup>

32. All these images of the pastor and the flock, common to the Latin and Syriac traditions, converge to evoke the love of Christ for His Church and for each of its members, especially the infirm and the lost: out of love, He nourishes, guides, protects, and finally gives His life for them. His very personal relationship with them calls for reciprocity: those who recognize the voice of their Saviour are part of this flock when He calls them by name.

## IX. “SPIRITUAL HOSPITAL”

33. Another patristic understanding of the Church is that of a place of healing, sometimes referred to as a spiritual hospital.<sup>74</sup> While the Old Testament does not prohibit the use of medical practices (cf. 2 Kgs 20:7; Tob 11:8 s.), one’s recourse is above all to God, the master of life and the one who heals (cf. Ex 15:26). The prophets announce the suppression of all diseases in the new world (cf. Is 35:5) thanks to the Just One who will take upon himself our illnesses (cf. Is 53:5). Jesus miraculously heals sick people whom He asks to believe (e.g., Mt 9:28; Mk 8:2-6). He presents himself as the physician of sinners (Mk 2:17), a physician who, to remove infirmity and disease, takes them upon Himself (Mt 8:17). However, giving physical healing is only one aspect of the all-encompassing healing act of Christ, a symbolic act of healing human nature itself. The gestures of Jesus towards the sick signify the work of vivification accomplished by Him. They are thus a prelude to the Christian sacraments.

Far from reserving this power for himself, Jesus communicated it to the apostles when He sent them to proclaim the kingdom (cf. Mt 10:1.8; Mk 6:13; Lk 9:1.2.6). The Acts of the Apostles mention many miraculous healings in the name of Jesus (cf. Acts 3:1-

---

<sup>72</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, in *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans., Marco Conti, ed., Joel E. Elowsky, ACT, pp. 93-94.

<sup>73</sup> Ephrem, *CDiat.* IX, § 5: Eng tr. C. McCarthy, *Diatessaron*, pp. 156-157.

<sup>74</sup> John Chrysostom, “Against Publishing the Errors of the Brethren,” in P. Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. First Series*, Vol. IX, p. 235.

11; 8:7; 9:32-34; 14:8-10). Saint Paul mentions the gift of healing as one of the charismas granted by God for the general good of the Church (cf. 1 Cor 12:9).

34. The theme of Church as a place of healing recurs among the Syriac Fathers. The seventh Demonstration of Aphrahat deals with this theme,<sup>75</sup> where he points out that there are remedies for all the illnesses in this hospital (i.e. the Church) as a wise physician – Jesus Christ – is present there.<sup>76</sup> While a soldier is wounded in the war, in the same way, anyone who labours in the spiritual struggle can also be wounded by the Enemy.<sup>77</sup> If the one who is wounded gives himself into the hands of the wise physician, he will be healed,<sup>78</sup> otherwise, the wounds will be turned into infection which may eventually lead to death.<sup>79</sup> According to Aphrahat, repentance and real conversion are medicines by which the wounded are healed.<sup>80</sup> Physician/healer (*asya*) and Medicine of life (*sam hayye*) are two titles used for Christ in Syriac literature, especially in Ephrem: “O the healer of all! You have nursed me in my sickness. I am unable to pay you for your medicines, for they are priceless”.<sup>81</sup> Like Aphrahat, Ephrem too ascribes to Christ the image of the physician of life.<sup>82</sup> The Commentary on the Diatessaron 7 is about the bodily healing of the woman in Luke 8:43.48.<sup>83</sup> Jesus is our healer and medicine.<sup>84</sup> Christ is not like other healers. He heals not by surgery but by mercy and grace.<sup>85</sup> This power of healing is shared by Peter, John, the other apostles and their successors, but also by the “elders of the church” upon whom James called to pray for the sick (cf. James 5:14).

It is above all through the Eucharist that healing takes place. Eucharistic bread and wine, as well as the sacrament of reconciliation, are curative medicine. Considering Christ as “Medicine of Life” who is hiddenly present in the Eucharistic Bread and Cup, Ephrem writes: “The Grape of Mercy was pressed and gave the Medicine of Life to the Peoples”.<sup>86</sup> It is this “Medicine of Life” that nourishes a Christian: “Our Lord baptized humankind with the Holy Spirit, He nourished it with the Medicine of Life”.<sup>87</sup> In his Tenth Hymn on faith, Ephrem describes the garment of Christ as a “fountain of medicines”.<sup>88</sup>

35. This theme of the Church as a place of healing is implicit in many Latin Fathers. They see in the Good Samaritan a representation of Christ, and in the man fallen into the hands of the brigands they identify humanity wounded by sin (cf. Lk 10:25-37). Neither the Law nor the offering of sacrifice represented by the doctor of the Law and

---

<sup>75</sup> Aphrahat, *Dem.* VII, 2-6: PS I, p. 316, ln.6 – p. 321, ln.15.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: PS I, p. 316, lns. 6-8.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: PS I, p. 316, lns. 17-21.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 3: PS I, p. 317, lns. 1-4.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 3: PS I, p. 317, lns. 8-11.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 3: PS I, p. 317, lns. 7-8.

<sup>81</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Nisibis*, IV,16: CSCO 218, Syr. 92. p.16.

<sup>82</sup> Main theme of *Hymns on Nisibis*, XXXIV: CSCO 218, Syr. 92. pp.80-83.

<sup>83</sup> Ephrem, *CDiat.* VII, § 1- 27b: Eng tr. C. McCarthy, *Diatessaron*, pp. 129-144.

<sup>84</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Nisibis*, XXXIV, 10-11: CSCO 218, Syr. 92, pp.82-83.

<sup>85</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on the Church*, XXXI, 1: CSCO 198. Syr. 84, p.76.

<sup>86</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity*, XXXI, 3: CSCO 223, Syr. 94, p. 113.

<sup>87</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Nisibis*, XLVI, 8: CSCO 240, Syr. 102, p. 55.

<sup>88</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith*, X, 7: CSCO 154. Syr. 73, p. 50.

the Levite are enough to save mankind from sin. Only Christ taking upon himself the sins of humanity, by His sacrifice on the Cross, heals all humankind of its wounds, of its sins. He makes of His mercy a refuge, that is to say the Church is where those who struggle and are burdened find rest (cf. Mt 11:28). This refuge, where the Samaritan takes the wounded man to be taken care of, is interpreted by some Fathers (like Origen)<sup>89</sup> as the Church, the “spiritual hospital” where Jesus leads those whom He has saved and where they find shelter until His return. The oil can be seen as a reference to the oil of anointment used in the Latin Church for the sacraments (baptism, confirmation, holy orders and sacrament of the sick), and the wine, remedy of the time, as a reference to the Eucharist.

36. The image of the Church as a place of healing, shared by both Latin and Syriac traditions, implies that members of the Church are above all in need of Christ for their recovery. The sacraments extend the healing gestures of Christ. By taking on our illnesses during His Passion, Jesus gave them a new meaning: like all suffering, they now have the value of redemption. Saint Paul affirms that they unite the Christian to the suffering Christ (cf. 2 Cor 4:10), completing “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24). To serve the sick is to serve Jesus himself in His suffering members (cf. Mt 25:36). The sick in the Church are therefore not cursed persons from whom we turn away (cf. Ps 38:12), but the image and the sign of Christ Jesus.

## X. THE SHIP

37. In the Old Testament, Noah’s Ark appears as the symbol of salvation and instrument of eschatological deliverance. In the New Testament the theme of the ship is found in the Galilean preaching and the narratives associated with Lake Tiberias, in particular the episode of the appeased storm (cf. Lk 8:22-25; Mt 8:23-27; Mk 4:36-41; Jn 6:16-21). There is also a reference to Noah’s ark in 1 Peter 3:20.

38. Early Christianity presents the Church as a ship which travels through a troubled and stormy world, considered as an ocean. This is developed in works like the epistle from Clement to James, the Apostolic Constitutions and the treaty on the Antichrist of Hippolytus of Rome, where the Church is described as the ship, God as the owner, Christ as the pilot, the bishop as watchman, presbyters as the crew, deacons as rowers and catechists as the stewards. The ship is seen especially as a place of salvation: it is often associated with the cross, as in Justin who identifies in the mast of the boat the symbol of the Cross. Tertullian in his *De baptismo* presents clearly the ship as a symbol of the Church when commenting on the episode of the calming of the storm: “The ship prefigured the Church, which on the sea of this world is buffeted by the waves of persecution and temptation, while the Lord in his patience seems to sleep, till the last moment when, awakened by the prayer of the saints, he subdued the world and gives back peace to his own”.<sup>90</sup> This theme is taken up by Cyprian and is even at the origin of the expression “Outside the Church there is no salvation”,<sup>91</sup> which emphasizes the unity

---

<sup>89</sup> Origen, *Homily 34 on Saint Luke*.

<sup>90</sup> Tertullian, *De baptismo*, XII, 8.

<sup>91</sup> Cyprian, *De unitate Ecclesiae*, VI, PL 4, 503.

of the Church and the need to belong to it in order to be saved: “He who was not in the Ark of Noah could not be saved by water, so neither can he now appear to be saved by baptism who has not been baptized in the Church, which is established in the unity of the Lord according to the sacrament of the one ark.”<sup>92</sup>

39. The image of the ship as a symbol of the Church is also present among the Syriac Fathers, although associated more closely with the eschatological vocation of the Church. To illustrate the journey of the Church in time towards the eschata, the Syriac tradition, like many other Christian traditions, presents images linked to navigation, such as the boat and the harbour. Aphrahat in Demonstration XIV exhorts the clergy, the helmsmen, to take care of the ship to ensure that it does not sink and lose its goods.<sup>93</sup> In Demonstration XXIII, he compares the Church to a ship sailing through troubled waters which is led by the righteous who are the helmsmen.<sup>94</sup> Ephrem compares the Church to Noah’s Ark which is guided by Christ the “helmsman,”<sup>95</sup> and Narsai speaks of “the ship of the Church.”<sup>96</sup> Likewise, Mary, type and true model of the Church, is compared to a ship in the Church of the East’s liturgical tradition.<sup>97</sup>

The imagery of the harbour or of arrival at the port, closely linked to the imagery of the ship, is a recurring symbolism in the liturgical prayers of the Syriac East. In the liturgy the Church is presented as a haven of peace: “O Christ, you established a haven on earth for those who praise you”.<sup>98</sup> Though the Church is established on earth, its foundation, its form and its final destination are heavenly. The *Liber Graduum* introduces the concept of three Churches: the Church in heaven, the Church visible on earth and the inner Church of the heart.<sup>99</sup> All three are intimately linked: the celestial Church is the very goal of Christian life, the visible Church is modelled on this celestial Church, and the Church of the heart on the visible Church. Ephrem, in his *Hymns against Heresies*, understands the life of the whole human race as a pilgrimage in three stages: from Eden to Moses, from Moses to Christ and from the age of the Church towards the future kingdom.<sup>100</sup>

40. The image of the ship, common to the Latin and Syriac traditions, highlights the soteriological and eschatological nature of the Church, which will attain its full perfection only in the glory of heaven, at the time of the restoration of all things (cf. Acts 3:21). At that time humanity as well as the entire world will be perfectly re-established in Christ (cf. Eph 1:10; Col 1:20; 2 Pet 3:10-13). The expression “pilgrim Church”, adopted so strikingly by the Second Vatican Council, is inspired by Augustine, but it is no less appropriate to the conviction of early Syriac Christianity that “here we have no lasting city” (Heb 13:14).

---

<sup>92</sup> Cyprian, *Epistle 74*, 11.

<sup>93</sup> Aphrahat, *Dem.* XIV,16: PS I, p. 612, lns. 2-4.

<sup>94</sup> Aphrahat, *Dem.* XXIII, 10: PS II, p. 28, ln. 21- p. 29, ln. 6.

<sup>95</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity*, XXXI, 15: CSCO 223, Syr. 94, p. 116.

<sup>96</sup> R. H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai* (Texts and Studies VIII.1; Cambridge, 1909), p. 65.

<sup>97</sup> Aphrahat, *Dem.* XXIII, 10: PS II, p. 28, ln. 21- p. 29, ln. 6.

<sup>98</sup> Hudra III, p. 567 (ܘܕܪܐ).

<sup>99</sup> *Liber Graduum*, "On the hidden and public ministry of the Church", XII, 1-7: PS III, pp. 285-304.

<sup>100</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns against Heresies*, XXVI, 4: CSCO 169, Syr. 76, pp. 104-105.

## XI. CONCLUSION

41. The ecclesiology of the Fathers, especially those of the early centuries, is formulated in a typological and symbolic language rather than in conceptual and systematic presentations. Being pastors for the most part, their theology has a pastoral aim, concerned with the unity of their communities. They explain the mystery of the Church in the light of the Old Testament, using biblical images foreshadowing the New Covenant. The theology of the Syriac Fathers, in particular, is most often expressed in hymns or sermons. Their argumentation, of Semitic style, does not proceed by demonstration, but by inclusion. In all this, they are faithful to the biblical categories and to the midrashic traditions of the early Judeo-Christian Church.

42. These images of the Church complement and illustrate the classical attributes and marks of the Church, without replacing them. All images having different layers of meaning, they come together by affinity, enriching one another. For example, wine (symbol of wisdom or drunkenness) and the cup (symbol of communion or anger) are associated with many other realities: vineyard, grape, winemaker, harvest, press, blood, judgment, sacraments... Such symbolic language is accessible to all. Even today, it may speak more to our contemporaries than conceptual language which, of course, remains necessary.

43. These images illustrate three essential aspects of the Church. Firstly, its aspect of communion – communion in the Body of Christ in the unity of the Spirit, union of the vineyard and the branches. Secondly, its dynamic aspect – it is a people on the move, a building under construction, a growing vineyard, a ship in voyage. Thirdly, the aspect that Augustine defined as the “*Ecclesia permixta*,” that is, its intermingled nature: the bride is sometimes faithful and sometimes not, the vineyard is sometimes fertile and sometimes sterile, in the fields grow both weeds and good grain.

44. The images used by the Fathers show that their view of the Church is essentially Christological. All images are related to Christ: stone, pastor, bridegroom, architect, winemaker, physician, and helmsman. Christ, by His baptism, death and resurrection, obtained salvation and established the Church as the locus par excellence of His experience. The Fathers extend the terms attributed to Christ to the Apostles and to the Church. The Church, as a type of the future kingdom, is the vehicle of this salvation and prepares its children to receive the fullness of salvation in the eschata through the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. This Christocentric vision of the Church is particularly striking among the Syriac Fathers, while keeping in mind that the pneumatological dimension is not absent. The Syriac Fathers, who contemplate the maternal action of the Spirit, seem, however, to have a vision which is essentially personal and sacramental of the activity of the Holy Spirit.

45. The images of the Church, shared by both the Latin and Syriac traditions, have great ecumenical value. They invite us to reflect on the unity of the Church. The Church is our mother who wishes to bring her children together.<sup>101</sup> Ephrem and Cyprian also

---

<sup>101</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Nisibis*, XXIX, 4, 40, 41: CSCO 218, Syr. 92, p. 65, 69.

compare the unity of the Church to “the seamless and undivided tunic” of Christ,<sup>102</sup> the tunic being the symbol of the intact faith transmitted by the apostles: “That coat bore with it a unity that came down from the top [...] He cannot possess the garment of Christ who parts and divides the Church of Christ”.<sup>103</sup>

*Vatican City, 19 November 2022*

Cardinal Kurt Koch

*Prefect of the Dicastery  
for Promoting Christian Unity*

Mar Meelis Zaia

*Metropolitan of Australia,  
New Zealand and Lebanon*

---

<sup>102</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on Crucifixion* V, 6: CSCO 248, Syr. 108, p. 61.

<sup>103</sup> Cyprian, *De unitate Ecclesiae*, § 7.

## Abbreviations

ACT = Ancient Christian texts

*CDiat* = *Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*

CSCO = Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium

*HS* = *Horae Semiticae*, Cambridge, 1916

*HSJS* = *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, 6 vols., USA, 2006

JSS = Journal of Semitic Studies.

*JSSS* = *Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement*

*LH* = *Liturgia Horarum*

*PO* = *Patrologia Orientalis*, Paris, 1903

*PS* = *Patrologia Syriaca*, 3 vols., Paris, 1893-1926

*SC* = *Sources Chrétiennes*

*Arm.* = Armenian

*Dem.* = *Demonstration*

*Eng.* = English

*Hom.* = Homily

*Lns.* = Lines

*Para.* = Paragraph

*Syr.* = Syriac

*Tr.* = Translation

*Vs.* = verses

## Bibliography

Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms: Enarrationes in Psalmos 121–150*. The Works of St. Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century. Pt. 3, vol. 20. Translated with notes by Maria Boulding, O.S.B. Edited by Boniface Ramsey. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004.

Bedjan Paul, *Breviarium iuxta ritum Syrorum Orientalium id est Chaldaeorum*, Vol: I-III, Rome, 1938

Ephrem, *Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron* in *Saint Ephrem's Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709*, Translated by Carmel McCarthy, JSS, Supplement 2, Oxford: Oxford University Press on behalf of the University of Manchester, 1993.

- Ephrem, *In Paulum*: Arm. In *Srboyn Ep 'remi Matenagrut 'iwnk' III*, Venice, 1836; Tr. (Latin): *S. Ephraemi Syri Commentarii in Epistolas D. Pauli... a Patribus Mechitaristis*, Venice, 1893.
- Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, Theodosia Tomkinson, transl., Etna, California, 2008, 2nd ed.
- Dunlop Gibson, Margaret, ed., *The Commentaries of Isho 'dad of Merv, Bishop of Hadatha (c. 850 A.D.): In Syriac and English: Vol. V/Part II: The Epistles of Paul the Apostle in English*, HS XI, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1916.
- , ed., *The Commentaries of Isho 'dad of Merv, Bishop of Hadatha (c. 850 A.D.): In Syriac and English: Vol. V/Part I: The Epistles of Paul the Apostle in Syriac*, HS XI, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1916.
- Murray, Robert, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, revised edition, Cambridge 1977.
- Schaff, Philip, ed., *Nicene and post-Nicene fathers. First series*, IX, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1989.
- Darmo, T. (ed.), *Hudra* vols. I-III, Mar Narsai Press, Trichur, 1960-1962.
- Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans., Marco Conti, ed., Joel E. Elowsky, ACT, Downers Grove, Ill.: Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2010.