

The reception of the Common Christological Declaration (1994)

From Pope John Paul II and Assyrian Patriarch Mar Denkha IV

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Introduction

In the context of this ecumenical meeting during which we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Common Christological Declaration between His Holiness Pope John Paul II and His Holiness Catholicos Mar Denkha IV, I would like to draw your attention to the roots of this historic event in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), convened by Saint Pope John XXIII.

Indeed, we cannot reread the documents of Vatican II without being guided by a major theme, that of "the Church as communion". Moreover, the holy Pope John XXIII, in the first announcements of the convocation of this Council, already underlined the ecumenical orientation of Vatican II. Having lived for a long time in the countries of Eastern Europe and in Turkey, he allowed himself to be questioned both by the Orthodox Churches and by the Islam of Turkey and the Middle East. He courageously wanted to open the doors of the Church by praying to the Holy Spirit to give new life to the Church.

There is no doubt: Vatican II gave a new ecumenical impetus to the Catholic Church and the great popes of the 20th and 21st centuries have appropriated this new breath, each according to his charisma and his sensitivity.

Paul VI, the successor of John XXIII, committed himself to continuing the work of Vatican II and to approving the documents voted by the Council Fathers. One of the first prophetic gestures of Paul VI in fidelity to the Council was to go to meet the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem and to sign with him on January 6, 1964 a first common declaration on the path to unity. And already on September 7, 1965, a new common declaration was signed, known as the "lifting of the anathemas."

Saint Pope John Paul II, the driving force behind Vatican II, had experienced the great persecutions of Nazism and Communism. In his first message addressed "to the Church and the world", he asked them not to be afraid and to open the doors of culture and reason to Christ in order to build the civilization of love. John Paul II traveled and wrote extensively, carrying in his heart and in his prayers the concern for the unity of Christians. In our reflection on ecumenism, we are particularly interested in his encyclical "Ut unum sint " in which he asked the sister churches to help the Bishop of Rome find the best way to exercise his service of unity and charity,

as during the first millennium of the history of the Church. We retain from his teaching the invitation he addressed to the Church and to Christians to "breathe with their two lungs", the East and the West!

Finally, no one is unaware that John Paul II wished, in the name of his faith and his hope, that the Church could complete the journey through the second millennium with synods for all the continents, with the hope of seeing the Church advance on the paths of Unity.

Pope Benedict XVI imposed theological respect especially on the Orthodox Churches, reflecting on the relationship between Faith and Reason in increasingly secularized and agnostic societies. In this approach, we cannot fail to mention the university lecture he gave in Regensburg, in which he indirectly wanted to dialogue with the leaders of Islam, recalling that a faith that does not open itself to rational questioning risks becoming trapped in the storm of violence.

It was also Pope Benedict XVI who convened a synod of the Catholic Church in the Middle East in 2010. In this context, the question of "positive secularism", that is to say, the relations of dialogue and complementarity between politics and religion, were raised with a view to freeing the Middle East from extremist and violent tendencies.

Succeeding Pope Benedict XVI in 2013, Pope Francis continued the same trajectory of Vatican II: ecumenical synodality, fraternity as a sign of the times, Christian communities in exodus for the proclamation of the Gospel, a call to recognize the face of Christ in all situations of poverty and social exclusion. Most recently, in the final declaration of the Synod on Synodality – a document that the Pope considered a document of the Magisterium – the ecumenical dimension is noted using the expression " ecumenical synodality ."

This brief historical overview from Vatican II and the Popes who participated in it or applied its orientations serves as an introduction to the subject in celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Common Christological Declaration of November 11, 1994, signed by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Mar Denkha IV, Catholicos of the Assyrian Church of the East. It is an eminently ecumenical event, an inestimable grace that the Lord has granted us, both to Catholics in general and to the Chaldeans and Assyrians in particular.

To explain the theme of the reception of this Common Declaration by the Catholic Church, I intend to address two fundamental aspects: the first is of a theological nature and the second of a pastoral nature.

Theological scope

First – First of all, we recognize the importance of the creation by the two signatory authorities of the Christological Declaration of a "Joint Committee for Dialogue" between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. Since 1995 this Joint Committee has been at work, supported both by the Assyrian Patriarchate and by the Dicastery for Christian Unity.

As in every ecumenical dialogue, the Committee began by addressing the theme of the sacraments in the two Churches, trying to reach the common source of faith and seeking to understand the different liturgical and anthropological forms from the different historical, linguistic and social contexts.

Following these reflections, which lasted about twenty years, with periods of suspension of dialogue, a valuable result was the "Joint Declaration on Sacramental Life" in the two Churches, a declaration signed on November 24, 2017 by His Eminence Cardinal Cokh , Prefect of the Dicastery for Christian Unity, and His Beatitude Mar Milis. Zaya , head of the Assyrian delegation. We can consider this joint declaration as a document of great value for our two Churches, serving mainly bishops, priests, deacons and especially lay people and catechists. I myself translated this declaration into Arabic so that it could be widely disseminated within the Arabic-speaking communities concerned.

Beyond the strictly academic aspect of this Dialogue Committee, we consider that these annual meetings have helped us to know each other better, to build bonds of friendship and mutual respect, and to consider possibilities for collaboration and mutual assistance.

Second – In a new phase of this theological dialogue, we have addressed the theme of the representation of the Church in the two traditions. To do this, we have studied the different images concerning the Church in the Syriac tradition and the Latin tradition, noting that they are more or less the same since they are drawn from Holy Scripture. Currently, this ecclesiological approach based on the different representations of the Church is extended by a study that seeks to deepen the theme of the Church based on the liturgy and the different feasts celebrated by each of the Churches.

Thirdly – In addition to the theological work of this Joint Committee for Dialogue, we must mention the holding of a highly academic conference on the Anaphora of Addai and Mari, which was held on 25 and 26 October 2011 at the Gregorian University in Rome, in partnership with the Oriental Institute. Speaking of this Anaphora, we must specify that this text, which belongs to apostolic times and does not contain the words of consecration, is nevertheless in use in the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist in the Assyrian Church. In the context of the 1990s, the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity took on the task of preparing a document on the reciprocal admission to the Eucharist between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean Church. The text published in October 2001 had been approved by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on January 17 of the same year, after a thorough study, validating this Anaphora as a valid prayer for the Eucharistic consecration. In this regard, Father Robert Taft SJ , a renowned specialist in Eastern liturgies, wrote: "This is the most important magisterial document after the promulgation of the last Catholic dogma, that is, since 1950 when Pope Pius XII proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption."

Pastoral scope

We come to the second part of our presentation, namely the results at the pastoral level. I will limit myself to speaking about the relations between Assyrians and Chaldeans in Syria, while specifying that the same exchanges are practiced in Iraq, Lebanon and in the diaspora.

First – Let us first recall how much this common Christological declaration encouraged mutual aid, especially theological, between the two Churches. Thus, seminarians, future priests of the Assyrians and the Chaldeans, found themselves together at Babylon College and in Rome in the various pontifical universities and especially at the Oriental Institute. A serious theological and historical approach helps future ecclesiastical leaders to work towards hastening the advent of full communion.

Second – About a hundred young Assyrians from the villages of Khabour studied at the University of Aleppo and priests from the Chaldean Church of Aleppo were their chaplains: biblical training, cultural activities, theater to relive important moments in the history of our Church. We should also mention the training camps during the summer for young people from the region of Jasiné (north-east of Syria) under the joint direction of the Assyrian priest and the Chaldean priest! Even today, Assyrians and Chaldeans feel at home when they can participate together in the liturgy, whether Assyrian or Chaldean, especially on feast days. It is truly the expression of the faith of a people who believe that we belong to the same Church, to the same history, to the same region, a faith which pushes pastors, bishops and priests to work together and to let themselves be guided by the Gospel of Our Lord.

The recognition of this Anaphora constitutes a concrete application of the text of Vatican II where the Church of Rome recognizes in the Assyrian Church of the East, and in the other Eastern Churches, the presence of "true sacraments founded on apostolic succession: the priesthood and the Eucharist" (*Unitas redintegratio* n°15). In this regard, the same Father Taft noted that "it was the first time that the Catholic Church appealed to the principle of ecumenism to recognize the validity of the Anaphora of Addai and Mari."

Let us conclude our brief presentation of this Anaphora by quoting the words of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (future Pope Benedict XVI), then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "The Anaphora of Addai and Mari freed Catholic theology from the limitations of matter and form that had paralyzed sacramental theology in the West under the influence of Thomistic scholasticism." Finally, let us clarify that, following this decision of the Magisterium validating the Anaphora of Addai and Mari, a decision was taken by the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean Church to allow their faithful to receive the sacraments in the sister Church in the absence of a minister of their own Church.

Conclusion

Our ecumenical reflection was prompted by the Common Christological Declaration of 11 November 1994 between Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Mar Dankha IV, Catholicos of the Assyrian Church of the East. We propose to conclude it by quoting Proposition No. 4 of the Synod of the Catholic Church of the Middle East, which met in Rome in October 2010: "In the midst of

a world marked by divisions and extreme positions, we are called to live as a Church of communion, without becoming a confessional community, remaining open to all. We will be able to do this if we remain faithful to our rich historical, liturgical, patristic and spiritual heritage, as well as to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and to the norms and structures of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (CCEO) and the Code of Canon Law (CIC)."