

The Common Christological Declaration of 11 November 1994
 A commentary on the text based on the theological tradition of both churches
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Precisely 40 years ago, 7 to 9 November 1984, HH Mar Dinkha paid an official visit to Pope John Paul II; it was the second encounter (the first being the inaugural Mass of Pope John Paul in 1978 in Rome). In his greeting, the Patriarch referred to Nicaea 325, “when all Christians shared one faith and Church” and he expressed the faith saying, “we all believe in one God, the Father of all, and in the mystery of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God” – (with references to 1 John 4,14f and 5,5 and John 15,12-13). His key terms further have been “love and peace”, and the Patriarch underlined that “frequent meetings and gatherings ..., especially when organized as dialogues and consultations” will bring about love and peace. He asked to pray for “immediate and everlasting peace in the Middle East”, esp. between Iran and Iraq.

Pope John Paul mentioned the separation of the Churches for centuries and expressed the “hope of one day establishing full communion between us”. For this it is necessary to clarify misunderstandings and resolve differences. He also referred to the common “prestigious missionary history”, the numerous saints, the example of many martyrs and the rich theological, liturgical and spiritual patrimony which they share with the Chaldeans. Such a heritage may be an invitation to pray and work that the visible unity of the Body of Christ may be re-established. In view of the “the terrible war”, he assured that the Apostolic See will use all means to contribute to a re-establishment of peace.

10 years later, 11 November 1994, Pope John Paul II mentioned in his address, that Mar Dinkha at that former occasion “shared ... (his) ardent wish that a declaration of the Pope of Rome and of the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East would one day be able to express” together the “common faith in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary”. Immediately historians and theologians started to examine the Christological consequences of the Council of Ephesus, among them the eminent patristic and Syriac scholar André de Halleux ofm (died 30 January 1994, few months before his retirement), actively involved in the official dialogue with the Coptic Orthodox (since 1974) and then the Eastern Orthodox (since 1979)¹. The result finally was the Common Christological Declaration (CCD), signed in Rome on 11 November 1994 by Pope John Paul II and Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV. I would like to comment on the text and show to what extent it is based on the respective theological traditions of the two Churches. It will turn out that the text is not only dealing with Christology but marking also the path to the future. The goal is to attain “full communion between” the two “Churches”, and “a unity ... to be expressed visibly”².

¹ Cf. *Dietmar Winkler*, “Between Progress and Setback: The Ecumenical Dialogues of the Assyrian Church of the East”, *Syriac Dialogue* 4, Vienna 2001, 138-151, here 141. – ISPCU 88 (1995/I) 2: H.H. Mar Dinkha came to Rome already 22 October 1978 at the Mass of inauguration of Pope John Paul II. He paid an official visit to the Pope, Rome 7-9 November 1984, ISPCU 56 (1984/IV), 88-89 (addresses of Mar Dinkha, and Pope John Paul II), and he further came 27 October 1986 during the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi.

² CCD, last paragraph.

The “Common Christological Declaration”³ can be structured in the following way (the numbers are mine):

I. Introduction (1–2)

1. Thanks to God for the new meeting
2. Importance: Basic step for the way to full communion. Central message: “from now on, [they can] proclaim together their common faith in the mystery of the Incarnation.”

II. Christological part (3–7)

3. Christ’s coming to earth
4. Ontological statements on Christ
5. Against heresies; the Marian titles *Christotokos* and *Theotokos*
6. Conclusion: one faith in Christ. Looking back into the past
7. Again: the same faith in the Son of God. Future witness together

III. Ecclesiological part (8–11)

8. Transition: importance of Christology for ecclesiology
9. Sacraments: Baptism, Anointing, Eucharist, Forgiveness, and Ordination
10. Recognition as sister churches, but no Eucharistic communion
11. Common witness to the faith, pastoral cooperation (especially catechesis and formation of future priests)

IV. Conclusion (12)

- Thanks to God for rediscovering the uniting elements in faith and sacraments.
- Commitment to dispel the obstacles in view of the Lord’s call for unity.
- Establish a mixed committee for theological dialogue.

The Common Declaration starts first with the expression of the gratefulness for a “new brotherly meeting”, which both of them consider “as a basic step on the way towards the full communion to be restored between their Churches”. The result is then already stated: “They can indeed, from now on, proclaim together before the world their common faith in the mystery of the Incarnation.”

The Christological part (3–7) can be analyzed in the following manner. It starts with Christ’s coming (3):

As heirs and guardians of the faith received from the apostles as formulated by our common fathers in the Nicene Creed, we confess one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten of the Father (N, C) from all eternity (C, FU) who, in the fullness of time (FU), came down from heaven (C) and became man for our salvation (N).

³ CCD = “Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East,” (11 November 1994), in Gros et al., *Growth in Agreement II* (2000), 711–712.

Thus, this section refers first of all to the apostolic tradition and the Nicene creed (N) – in fact, not only Nicaea but also the creed of 381 of Constantinople (C) is used in the wording immediately after. It is a kerygmatic statement which shows similarities with the Formula of Union (FU) of 433⁴ (and thus also with the first part of the Definition of Chalcedon where the Formula of Union is taken up). The Nicene Creed was received at the Synod of Persian bishops in 410 in Seleucia-Ctesiphon under Catholicos Mar Išāq, supported by the Persian king Yazdgard; the Symbol and the canons of Nicaea were brought to Persia by the bishops Marutha of Maipherqat and Acacius of Amida.⁵ This synod is documented as first synod in the Collection Synodicon Orientale⁶.

The second sentence offers a theological explanation:

“The Word of God, second Person of the Holy Trinity, became incarnate by the power of the Holy Spirit in assuming from the holy Virgin Mary a body animated by a rational soul, with which he was indissolubly united from the moment of his conception.”

Just to remind us: The terminology of the *unus ex trinitate*, one of the Trinity, is found in Proclus of Constantinople (434–446) (in his *Tomus ad Armenios*), and became later in connection with *crucifixus* or *passus est* the shibboleth of the Anti-Chalcedonians (in order to underline the unity in Christ). At the beginning of the sixth century, Scythian monks from the Danube region propagated the use of the formula, first in Constantinople and, after having been dismissed there, also in Rome. There too their request was not reciprocated. But the addition was made: *una persona*. After some discussions and at the request of emperor Justinian the formula finally was approved by Pope John II on 25 March 534.⁷

It was of high importance for the Antiochene school that God’s transcendence was not violated by ascribing passion or change to the divinity. The Assyrian Church follows the tradition of the strict Antiochenes. The terminology of *unus ex trinitate*, however, later was used: Babai the Great (d. 628) (in his *De unione* II 8, and there § 43; III 12⁸) wrote that the

⁴ Formula of union, transl. Tanner, *69-70: “We confess, then, our lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, perfect God and perfect man of a rational soul and a body, begotten before all ages from the Father in his godhead, the same in the last days, for us and for our salvation, born of Mary the virgin, according to his humanity, one and the same consubstantial with the Father in godhead and consubstantial with us in humanity, for a union of two natures took place.”

⁵ Cf. Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche 2/5 (Freiburg i.B. 2022), 22-23. J. Labourt, *Le christianisme dans l’empire perse sous la dynastie sassanide (224 - 632)*, (Paris 1905), 93. A. de Halleux, *Le symbole des évêques perses au synode de Séleucie-Ctésiphon (410)*, in: G. Wießner (ed.), *Erkenntnisse und Meinungen II*, GOF.S 17 (Wiesbaden 1978), 161-190.

⁶ Synodicon Orientale, ed. J.-B. Chabot (Paris 1902), 253-275.

⁷ See for the development A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition 2/2* (London 1995), 317–343.

⁸ Babai, *De unione* II 8: “God the Word, as one of the *qnome* of the Trinity”, the phrase “one of the *qnome* of the Trinity” is found 25 times.

union (of Christ) is of one of the *qnome* of the Trinity with the nature of our manhood; for Catholicos Timothy I the Great, too, it was no problem to speak of the *unus ex trinitate*.⁹

The terminology of assuming a body (animated by a rational soul) is clearly opposing Apollinarius; “to assume” is Antiochene terminology, based on Philippians 2:7¹⁰ (“he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men”). The explanation of the Incarnation is a combination of the key passages of the Alexandrian (John 1:14¹¹) and Antiochene traditions by its formulation: the Logos became flesh (incarnate) by assuming a body.

Emphasis is placed on the fact that it is a union from the very moment of conception. Thus, any interpretation meaning the assumption of an already existing human being is excluded. The union is an indissoluble one. Such a statement is rooted in the East Syrian tradition.¹²

The following passage (4) is dealing with the question, what Christ is, and presents theological consequences regarding Christ’s essence and being. He is a) true God and true man, b) perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity, c) consubstantial with the Father and consubstantial with us in all things but sin, and d) his divinity and his humanity are united in one person, without confusion or change, without division or separation. There is no mention of ‘natures’ (thus the dispute about the terminology of the *qnome* is avoided), the abstract nouns (divinity, humanity) are used. All these statements can be found also in the definition of Chalcedon. The four adverbs [in Greek. ἀσυγχύτως, ἀτρέπτως, ἀδιαίρετως, ἀχωρίστως] are mentioned here.

Important is the statement (found in Chalcedon and in Cyril, also in the Tome of Leo): “in him has been preserved the difference of the natures of divinity and humanity.” The continuation: “with all their properties, faculties and operations,” goes beyond the sixth century

⁹ This holds true for Ishoyahb II, Babai and Timothy, see *L. Abramowski*, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche 2/5*, ed. T. Hainthaler (Freiburg i.B. 2022), Register sub nomine.

¹⁰ Phil 2.7: ἀλλ’ ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβὼν, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος.

¹¹ John 1.14: Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας.

¹² See *L. Abramowski*, *Neue christologische Untersuchungen*, TU 187 (Berlin, Boston 2021), 109 (original: *Die Christologie Babais des Großen*, in: *Symposium Syriacum 1972*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta 197*, Rom 1974, 219–245, here: 244, in German; here in English transl.): “One must certainly judge that a unity of which such statements can be made is not loose and insufficient, but on the contrary of truly unique firmness, which is also expressly described as eternally valid. In factual terms, it is more than a hypostatic union, because the hypostatic union of body and soul ... is solvable and can be dissolved, but the two natures in Christ can never be separated from each other, and their unity survives everything that the human nature goes through in becoming, passing away and resurrection. This is undoubtedly due to the divinity of the divine nature in Christ.” For Timothy, see ep. 16 and *Abramowski*, *Jesus der Christus 2/5*, 710, 727, 744.

and addresses already the Christological disputes of the seventh century, to which the Council of Constantinople III in 680/1 replied.

After this positive explanation of the faith, follows the warding off of heresies: first the heresy of two subjects (ἄλλος καὶ ἄλλος)¹³, described already by Gregory Nazianzen in his letter to Cledonius (known to Timothy I, as he quoted this letter); after its rejection follows the expression of the unity in Christ:

“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.”

Such a statement is standard in the Antiochene tradition, and directed also against the reproach of venerating two sons (an accusation that was frequently made against ‘Nestorians’). The whole formulation is concise without technical terms and expresses the essential and common elements. The Catholics can understand here the hypostatic union, the unity in the hypostasis of the Logos; the Assyrians may have in mind the “prosopon of filiation.”

In § 5, a further heresy is rejected, namely an adoptionist Christology, when it is said:

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.

The Christological heresy of a “mere man”, ψῖλος ἄνθρωπος, is here excluded, and positively the Declaration affirms that the humanity born by Mary was always that of the Son of God himself. We find such a wording in the work of Catholicos Timothy I, for example in his letter to the monks of Mar Maron, when he explained Phil 2, and remarked: Not a simple man was united to the Word, but the Word itself who is from eternity, united himself the flesh and fixed it in the Virgin Mary.¹⁴

On this basis (“in the light of this same faith”), the titles *Christotokos* and *Theotokos* used in prayers and liturgy by Assyrians and Catholics, can be correctly explained:

The humanity to which the Blessed Virgin Mary gave birth always was that of the Son of God himself. That is the reason why the Assyrian Church of the East is praying the Virgin Mary as

¹³ See *Gregory of Nazianz*, ep. 101 ad Cledonium, 20-21, ed. Gallay, SC 208 (1974), 44-47: “And if one has to express it briefly: that from which the Redeemer is made is one and another (ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο) (if it is true that the visible and the invisible are not the same, and likewise the timeless and that which is subject to time), but he (the Redeemer, σωτήρ) is not one and another, far be it. 21. For both (τὰ ἀμφοτέρω) are one (ἓν) through the union (συγκράσις) of God, but incarnate, and of man, but deified, or whatever one may call it. I say here "one" and "another" (ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο), in contrast to what is said of the Trinity. For there there is "one" and "another" (ἄλλος καὶ ἄλλος), so that we do not confuse the hypostases, but not "one" and "another" (ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο), for the three are one and the same in the Godhead.”

¹⁴ See *T. Hainthaler*, “Christ in the flesh, who is God over all (Rom 9,5 Pesh.): The Letter of Catholicos Timothy I (780–823) to the Monks of Mār Māron,” *The Harp* 29 (2014), 86–87. Ed. R. Bidawid, *Les lettres du Patriarche nestorien Timothée I. étude critique avec en appendice La lettre de Timothée aux moines du Couvent de Mar Maron* (trad. Latine et texte chaldéen), ST 187 (Città del Vaticano 1956), p. 99: non enim homini simpliciter unum est Verbum, absit! Sed ipsum Verbum quod ab aeterno est, sibi carnem univit et in Virgine Maria infixit.

‘the Mother of Christ our God and Saviour’. In the light of this same faith, the Catholic tradition addresses the Virgin Mary as ‘the Mother of God’ and as ‘the Mother of Christ’.

Follows the confirmation: “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.” – We need a statement that explicitly expresses the mutual recognition of the orthodoxy of the correctly understood tradition of the dialogue partner. Through dialogue they can learn from each other where misunderstandings and problematic statements can arise and how they can be avoided. Above all, through correct understanding.

The conclusion of the Christological part (6) states: “This is the unique faith that we profess in the mystery of Christ.” The anathemas of the past are mentioned. The divisions brought about “were due in large part to misunderstandings.” Finally (in 7) the aim of the future is to witness together to this faith to the contemporary world.

Comment: The text takes into consideration the patristic tradition, but avoids the crucial technical terms *hypostasis* and *prosopon*—, which are differently understood in the respective churches¹⁵. ‘Nature’ is used only once (4: “difference of the natures of divinity and humanity”), but elsewhere the document speaks of ‘divinity’ or ‘humanity’. The declaration expresses the center of the Christological faith with a minimum of technical terminology. It does not always use kerygmatic language, yet a rather simple wording that is correct—despite the complex historical developments. It would be problematic to use a totally new language and loose the link to tradition, a constituent element of Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches.

A short and very precise wording offers the basis for the recognition of the controversial Marian title. The whole explanation in 3–4 is a solid fundament and at the same time a hermeneutic how to understand the Christological faith. The common basis became clear, in doing justice to the theological tradition of the patristic times, that is, the time when the schism started.

¹⁵ Cf. the explanation of *qnoma* at the Second Consultation of the Syriac Dialogue 1996 in Vienna in the Joint Communiqué. Syriac Dialogue 2, ed. Pro Oriente (Vienna 1996), 193: “Thus the following explanation of the term of ‘*Qnoma*’ has been presented by the Assyrian, Chaldean and Syro-Malabar delegations of the Church of the East: ‘In Christology, as expressed in the synodical and liturgical sources of the Church of the East, the term *qnoma* does not mean *hypostasis* as understood in Alexandrine Tradition, but instead, individuated nature. Accordingly, the human nature which the Holy Spirit fashioned and the Logos assumed and united to Himself without any separation, was personalized in the Person of the Son of God. When we speak of the two natures and their *qnome*, we understand this very much in the same sense as two natures and their particular properties (*dilayatha*). It is important to note that the term *qnoma* is used in a different way in Trinitarian theology.’”

Ecclesiological Part (8-11)

The Ecclesiological Part starts with a transitory paragraph (8), building the link between the Incarnation seen in a soteriological way and the Church. The sacraments of the Church are shortly described: Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, Forgiveness, Holy Orders. – These five are the immediately shared sacraments. Omitted are marriage and Anointing of the sick in the Catholic tradition, as well as Ferment (Malka) and sign of the Cross in the Assyrian tradition. This problem of listing two different sacraments in addition to the five commonly recognized ones was resolved in the ‘Common Statement on Sacramental Life’ signed in 2017¹⁶ (the draft was finished in 2000).

A consequence is drawn in the next paragraph: Because of this faith and these sacraments, “the particular Catholic churches and the particular Assyrian churches can recognize each other as sister churches”¹⁷.

Missing is still “unanimity concerning [...] the constitution of the church”. Therefore, it is not yet possible to “celebrate together the Eucharist”, as the ecclesial communion is not yet fully restored.

However, “the deep spiritual communion in the faith and the mutual trust” which already exist make it possible to witness together the Gospel and to cooperate in pastoral situations. Two examples are mentioned: catechesis and the formation of future priests. – In fact, in the following years the formation of future priests of the Assyrian Church of the East in Catholic theological Faculties in the States or in Rome was made possible and took place.

The conclusion (12) looks at the past and the future: It expresses thanks for rediscovering the elements which unite already, and brings the commitment to do everything in order to overcome the obstacles in the future. For this last-mentioned goal, a “Mixed Committee for theological dialogue” is established.

Comment: This part on the ecclesiology gives the items to be dealt with, a program (or road map so to say) which was followed in the next years. On this way, a study document on “The Images of the Church in the Syriac and Latin Patristic Traditions” could be finished in November 2022¹⁸.

¹⁶ Common Statement on ‘Sacramental Life’, 24 November 2017, <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiesa-assira-dell-oriente/commissione-internazionale-di-dialogo-tra-la-chiesa-cattolica-e-/documenti/testo-in-inglese1.html>

¹⁷ See *Unitatis redintegratio* 14; *Ut unum sint* 55-58.

¹⁸ <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiesa-assira-dell-oriente/commissione-internazionale-di-dialogo-tra-la-chiesa-cattolica-e-/documenti/en.html>.

Conclusion

Here I have tried to show that the formulations of the Joint Declaration can be found in the patristic Greek tradition as well as in the East Syriac tradition, and thus is rooted in the theological tradition of the Catholic (and Orthodox) Churches as well as of the Assyrian Church of the East.

This declaration is the fourth Christological declaration of the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council after Declarations with the Coptic Orthodox (1973), the Syrian Orthodox (in 1971 and 1984), and the Malankara Orthodox (1990), an overview and analysis of such declarations can be found elsewhere¹⁹. The structure is similar: first a reference to the common basis, then a Christological confession, which might have specific characteristics; then the rejection of heresies, followed by an agreement on practical consequences.

The Common Christological Declaration was called “an ecumenical landmark”²⁰ by Dietmar Winkler in 1996; in 1994 he wrote that the wording of the Document is guiding for the ecumenical process, as the statements should be acceptable even for the Oriental Orthodox²¹.

In his Address, 11 November 1994, HH Mar Dinkha spoke of “this historically important day”, he referred to UR (21 November 1964) as an “encouragement to continue the process of working toward unity”. Since the two Churches are built upon the same foundation, namely the apostolic tradition and the Holy Scripture, they have a “common source of living theology” on their move “toward a more complete unity”. The statement of common faith is “providing a foundation of hope and promise for our current and future relationship”. “The desire for ecclesial concord still burns in our hearts and souls”. The signing of the statement of faith is “a significant step toward future cooperation and enhanced ecumenical relations”.

Pope John Paul saw in the signing the opening to wide horizons for pastoral collaboration, especially for the (spiritual and theological) formation of priests and laity, and catechesis. Besides he expressed the willingness to welcome refugees and help those in the homelands. To be highlighted is his remark:

¹⁹ For a survey and analysis, I may refer to *T. Hainthaler*, *Christological Declarations with Oriental Churches*, in: G. D. Dunn, W. Meyer (eds.), *Christians Shaping Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium*. Studies Inspired by Pauline Allen, (Leiden, Boston 2015) 426-456.

²⁰ *D. W. Winkler*, “The Current Theological Dialogue with the Assyrian church of the East”, *Symposium Syriacum VII*. Uppsala 11-14 August 1996, ed. René Lavenant, Rome, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 256, 1998, 159-173, 169-172 (on the Declaration), here: 170. See; *idem*, *Jüngste Entwicklungen in den ökumenischen Beziehungen der Assyrischen Kirche des Ostens*, *Ökumenisches Forum* 18 (1995) 281-288.

²¹ *Idem*, *Theologische Notizen zu den ökumenischen Dialogen mit der Assyrischen Kirche des Ostens*, *Ökumenisches Forum* 17 (1994) 243-266, here 255: „Dieses Dokument ist ökumenisch durchaus richtungweisend, da die christologischen Aussagen auch für die orientalisch-orthodoxen ... Kirchen annehmbar sein müßten.“

“Finally, a Church so distinguished in its past for its heroism as regards fidelity to the faith cannot remain marginalized in the Christian world, and especially among the Churches of the Middle East. We hope to be able to help you break down any isolation that still exists.”

In a third point he mentioned the Chaldeans’ readiness “to foster the great movement towards the restoration of the unity of all Christians”. In referring to UR 14, 15-17 and 18, he underlined 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 expressions” which often are complementary rather than conflicting. The Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, thus shows the spirit “in which the Catholic Church proposes this exchange of gifts”, while the Holy Trinity is the real “model of true unity within diversity”.