

Religious Unity: Janus in the Arena

Francis Sarguis, J.D.

Few issues in the history of this publication have generated as much interest as the one concerning proposed rapprochement between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Vatican. Interest was evident two years ago, when we published in English “*The Vienna Christological Formula in an Assyrian Perspective*” (JAAS Vol. IX, No.1, 1995), co-authored by Bishop Mar Bawai Soro and Chorbishop M.J. Birnie, both representatives of the Assyrian Church of the East. We wanted to provide a more rounded presentation, including a comparative statement from the Assyrian Chaldean perspective. We were unable to get a response to our invitation, but this of course did not prevent us from publishing what appeared to us an important contribution.

Mindful of interest in this question, JAAS decided to offer its readers a selection of opinions. The Assyrian language editor solicited comments in Assyrian from different constituencies, and he was disappointed to receive only a few answers. In our last issue, the responses received were published, along with his personal opinion. None of the letters were sympathetic to the rapprochement process. What ensued was a rush to judgment, suggesting that the Journal had violated academic norms of objectivity. With all due respect, the Journal has never taken a position on this issue, and it will not do so now. It is to be wished that those who criticized the last issue should consider why they failed to offer their written views to JAAS (either in Assyrian or in English), when they were invited to do so. Certainly no one should expect the Journal to compose fictitious letters in order to provide the balanced presentation all of us prefer.

For a people scattered to the four corners of the globe, “religious rapprochement” is seen by many as a watershed proposition. Momentous overtones hinge on its outcome. Some see its resolution as a prerequisite to national reconciliation; others view it as accelerating our cultural disintegration. The discussion is not likely to go away soon; in fact, the discussion ought to be encouraged.

In its last issue, JAAS had also invited readers to send in their personal opinions in English, for inclusion in the present issue. No doubt with an assist from interest generated by the previous issue, the English language editor did receive a selection of letters. We are grateful to the respondents featured below for taking the time to share their views with us.

1 *Mission Impossible?*

Madlaine Davis-Moradkhan, Ph.D.

During the past decades, many Assyrian nationalists have strived to reach unity between Assyrians, Chaldeans, Maronites, Jacobites, etc. They believed, and still do, that we are all parts of one nation and that through unity we can gain many of our lost rights at the international level.

However, many of their efforts to engage in dialogue, or to create joint institutions, have failed. These failures have generally been attributed to the division between the churches. Many argued that as long as division persisted among church leaders, it was useless to try uniting their followers.

Today, when the “dream” has come true and church leaders are engaging in a new dialogue aimed at unity, wouldn’t be a shame if the nation refused the opportunity for reunification? Who will the nationalists blame this time, if these efforts come to naught?

Unfortunately, the conditions for reunification seem quite binding and incompatible at the outset. The principles of the Assyrian and Chaldean churches which must be preserved in any future dialogue, as enunciated in the “**Joint Synodal Decree for Promoting Unity**,” require some reflection. I refer particularly to Point 7 of this Decree, which states:

“7. Recognizing in both of our churches the binding unity of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, that we share as well as our common liturgical and theological heritage, taking pride in the same fathers, Doctors of the church, acknowledging the same shared ancestry and culture, we nevertheless recognize the existence of actual differences between our churches that have been formed during the period of separation. Therefore, for the sake of being truthful with each other and toward our people, we respectively declare our basic intents and together formulate the following principles for dialogue:

“a. Whereas the Assyrian Church of the East sees that (i) the preservation of her ecclesial identity as expressed in her liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary patrimony as well as her Mesopotamian-Aramaic culture, and (ii) the recognition of her freedom and self-governance, are principles that must be preserved continuously throughout the process of dialogue and in any achieved model of unity; and

“b. Whereas in like manner, the Chaldean Catholic Church sees that (i) while the preservation of the same above-mentioned ecclesial identity as expressed in her liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary patrimony as well as her Mesopotamian-Aramaic culture must be maintained, the adaptation of that patrimony to existing regional and cultural conditions, and (ii) the preservation of her full communion with the Roman See, must be basic principles continuously maintained throughout the process of dialogue and in any achieved model of unity;

“c. Therefore, since some of our basic stands are distinct, both Holy Synods ratify the need for further dialogue and more involved collaboration between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean Catholic Church and, in due time and manner, between them jointly and the Roman See, in order to bring about unity between the Assyrian and the Chaldean churches.”¹

If unity is finally achieved and there is only one church, can such a reunited church maintain and preserve her ancient culture, and at the same time adapt it to existing regional and cultural conditions? Can such a reunited church maintain and preserve her freedom and self-governance, and at the same time preserve her full communion with the Roman See?

The question here should not be framed *“To be or not to be?”*, but rather *“How to be and not to be?”* Clearly, the task which the holy fathers have set for themselves is a most difficult one. It is to be hoped that the nation will not compound their challenge with arguments over the nature of God, a topic which in my opinion is generally over our heads.

After all, I ask what difference does it make to our divided, scattered and oppressed nation, whether Mary was called *“Mother of God,”* or *“Mother of Jesus”*? Yet clearly, it would make a great deal of difference if there were only one church, called the *“Church of the East,”* so that our nation would not be divided into two parts called *“Assyrians”* and *“Chaldeans.”*

Indeed, the crucial question for the ultra nationalists is not whether they are prepared to call Mary *“Mother of God.”* Rather, the question is whether they will consent to calling themselves anything but *“Assyrians”*. Why is this the watershed question? Because it has already been established that a future reunited Church will be called *“the Church of the East,”*² it has yet to be decided what the future reunited nation would be called.

Mrs. Moradkhan resides near Paris, with her husband Romel and their young son, Tiglath Ashur. The holder of a Ph.D. degree in computer engineering, she is an ardent Assyrian whose poetry, brief essays, and letters have appeared in various Assyrian periodicals. Her comments were accompanied by a separate supporting the Journal “for giving readers the opportunity to express their opinion about this issue.” We appreciate her submitting this text in English, one of several languages in her repertoire.

2 National Unity Above All

Youel A Baaba

A declaration issued by the Vatican on November 11, 1994 states that His Holiness Mar Dinkha IV, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East and His

¹ *Voice of the East*, Vol. 44, Nos.9-10, Sep-Oct. 1977, pp. 5-6 (Trichur 1, Kerala, India)

² In French: *“Eglise d’Orient”*

Holiness John Paul II, Pope of the Catholic Church have reached an agreement to proclaim together their common faith in the mystery of the Incarnation. Their declaration also includes these four significant points:

a. Both recognize the legitimacy and rightness of these expressions concerning reference to the Virgin Mary as “Mother of God” and “Mother of Jesus”, as they are expressions of the same faith.

b. The controversies of the past led to anathemas, bearing on persons and on formulas and that these divisions were brought about in this way due in large part to misunderstandings.

c. Living by this faith and these sacraments, it follows as a consequence that the particular Catholic churches and the particular Assyrian churches can recognize each other as sister Churches.

d. The unanimity concerning the content of the faith, the sacraments and the constitution of the Church has not yet been attained.

As Assyrians and members of the Church of the East, we are grateful to His Holiness Mar Dinkha and to the Church leaders who have labored long and hard to create communion between these two apostolic churches. The success of the Patriarch in bringing these two churches closer signifies his love for the unity of Christianity. We are hopeful that in the near future this communion will be perfected, but also that other significant issues having a great impact on our national identity will be discussed and accepted by the Catholic Church and others affiliated with it. Concerning reconciliation between the Church of the East and other Eastern Churches, it is imperative that reconciliation efforts be prioritized to advance Assyrian national unity.

a. Achieve reconciliation with our Assyrian brothers and sisters, adherents of our faith, followers of the old calendar.

b. Achieve reconciliation and unite with our Assyrian brothers’ adherents of the Catholic Church (Chaldeans).

c. Achieve reconciliation and unite with our Assyrian brothers’ adherents of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch.

d. Finally, develop an affiliation and mutual support with other Eastern Churches, Coptics of Egypt and others.

Now that the Catholic Church has acknowledged that past anathemas were the results of misunderstanding, then it is appropriate that they be formally rescinded. It should be declared that the anathemas had no historical or logical basis. It is time that the Catholic Church demonstrates its courage and good faith by formally removing the anathema that it placed on Assyrians 1500 years ago when it declared that we are Nestorians. In removing this anathema, the Catholic Church should instruct all of its adherents that we are Assyrians and that from

now on all should use the correct national identity. If the Catholic Church truly seeks peace and unity in the Christian Church, then it must resolve this fundamental issue which is primary for the unity of the Assyrian nation. We strongly believe that Rome will show its love and support for the unification of the Christian church by removing these anathemas that have been the cause of division and unnecessary hatred.

Let us remember that Mar Nestorius was a Greek Patriarch in the city of Constantinople and that he had no contact with the Church of the East. He was excommunicated for his interpretation of certain theological issues. It happens that the Church of the East had similar interpretations; therefore, the anathema was placed not only on Nestorius but also on the Church of the East and its adherents who had no active role in the debate. Formal recognition of our national identity will be the corner stone on which a new unity can be created between all Assyrians, adherents of the Catholic Church and the Church of the East.

Some people claim that this point was acknowledged in the declaration. This writer does not believe that such recognition has taken place. In His speech welcoming Patriarch Mar Dinkha, the Pope referred to us as “Syriac communities”¹ and not as Assyrians. This writer believes that a communion between the Catholic Church and the Church of the East will not be significantly beneficial to Assyrians if they are not acknowledged by their true national name.

Eradicating the anathema “Nestorians” removes half of the cause of our division. It is imperative that the church hierarchy concentrate on removing the other half, the name “Chaldean” given to Assyrians who abandoned their ancestral church and affiliated with the church in Rome.

It is a historical fact that after the death of Mar Shimun VII in the year 1551, a dispute arose in the Church of the East. Southerners, Assyrians living in the plain of Assyria supported selection of the Patriarch based on heredity, as had been the case for the previous 140 years. Northerners, Assyrians living in the Hakkari mountains and the plains of Urmia and Salmas advocated a return to a general election, as had been the practice from the apostolic days to 1448. At the time, the Northerners represented the majority and they elected Bar Mama who became Mar Shimun VIII. Southerners did not recognize this election and elected their own candidate, Youkhanan Sulaka. With the aid of the Franciscan missionaries at Mosul, Sulaka was sent to Jerusalem and thence to Rome where he was accepted as Catholic and ordained as the first Uniat patriarch.² In exchange for his recognition by Rome, Sulaka surrendered his national identity and accepted the newly coined name “Chaldean”³ for himself and for his followers.

Rome snatched this historical opportunity and created a new identity for the Assyrian converts who did not accept the results of the general election. Instantaneously, Assyrians who were living in the heart of Assyria and in the neighborhood of Nineveh became Chaldeans. It is truly amazing how these

Assyrians who had retained their national identity for sixteen centuries could lose it by accepting the ordination of one individual in Rome. Today we see Assyrians who were born and raised in the villages of Hakkari, Urmia and Salmas identified as Chaldeans merely because they have chosen to adhere to the Catholic Church.

If a genuine agreement is reached between the Church of the East and the Catholic Church in Rome, the most beneficial outcome of this agreement will be the national unification of Assyrians. Union between Assyrians and those who presently call themselves Chaldeans will not materialize by the creation of a church communion. This unity will come into existence only when Rome acknowledges that the name Chaldean has no historical basis or justification and that it was applied strictly to segregate its new converts from the rest of the Assyrian people. Rome should advise those who have accepted the Catholic Church that henceforth they will be known as the Assyrian Catholic Church. Only when this happens can we achieve true national unity. If Rome does not take this step, the Patriarch and the leaders of the Chaldeans will have no justification or support for advocating to their follower's acceptance of their original national identity.

Assyrians just like others are free to join any church of their choice. However, accepting another church affiliation does not change one's national identity. Assyrians and Chaldeans are one people having the same language, history, culture and heritage. They are and always will remain Assyrians.

It is expected that there will always be people on both sides who will oppose unity. There are some Assyrians who believe that this is the first step to the subordination of our church to the Catholic Church and that ultimately we will lose the freedom of our church and our national identity. This writer firmly believes that there is no truth in this allegation. His Holiness Mar Dinkha has declared on many occasions and to different audiences that it is not his intention to subordinate to the Catholic Church. There are those among the Chaldeans who fear that their unity with Assyrians may bring reprisals from the Arab countries or their leaders since until now they have formally declared themselves as Arab Christians.⁴ This unity will not occur by words and declarations. It will take time and a great deal of labor on both sides. We need to approach it with love and patience to reach an understanding and appreciation of different points of view. Using historical truths, we can all return to one name and become a united nation.

To succeed and achieve our objective, it is imperative that every Assyrian irrespective of his church affiliation supports those who are working to bring about a national unification. With God's help and honest and sincere work, we hope that we will achieve this objective.

Notes:

1. *The Messenger*, published by the Church of the East. The March 1995 issue was wholly dedicated to record the events of this historic meeting. The Pope's speech appears on page 12.
2. John Joseph, *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors*, Princeton University Press, 1961, page 30.
3. David Gewargis Malik, *Outlines of Assyrian History*, Chicago, 1933 (In Assyrian)
4. At the January 1990 conference held in Baghdad where religious leaders from different churches were appealing to Saddam to release the hostages, Mar Rafael Bet David publicly stated that he and his followers are Arab Christians. See *The Middle East Council of Churches, Vol.4/1 (Limasol, Cyprus January 1991)*. Patriarch Bet David stated the same at the ceremony celebrating his ordination in May 1989 in Baghdad. His speech was published in the *Church Magazine (No, 6), Beirut, Lebanon*.

Mr. Baaba has been a frequent contributor to this Journal, particularly in the Assyrian section. A native of Baghdad, Mr. Baaba received degrees in geology and engineering, as well as management. During his recently-concluded career, Mr. Baaba served Bechtel as Senior Project Manager, and Lyondell-Citgo Refining as Vice-President and project director. Mr. Baaba is best known to Assyrians for establishing the Youel A. Baaba Library, which is maintained in Alamo, CA, where he resides.. The Library houses a large collection of Assyrian manuscripts and, from time to time, it publishes or reprints Assyrian works.

3 Fraternal reconciliation is long overdue

Francis X. Paz, Ph.D.

The recent steps by the Church of the East and the Roman Catholic Church to reconcile their differences and to come into closer communion are the most positive steps the two churches have taken towards each other in 1500 years. It is a scandal to Christianity, and a violation of Christ's wish that "all may be one", that these two ancient churches have been split apart and even hostile. Where was the love and forgiveness for our Christian brethren in this history?

The Council of Chalcedon which 'expelled' the Church of the East and the Patriarch Nestorius from communion with the rest of the Christian church did this partly in ignorance and partly politically. The divergence over the title Theotokos (Mother of God) and Christostokos (Mother of Christ) given to the

Virgin Mary was a nominal divergence, a quibble over names which has now been corrected by the recent agreement between the Pope and the Catholicos Patriarch.

Every Christian should rejoice at this coming together of two sister churches. The Virgin Mary's two titles of Mother of God and Mother of Christ will continue to be used according to the traditions of the two respective churches, with both churches understanding that Christ was both fully man and fully God. Both churches always held this view, so what was the big argument about? The centuries of misunderstanding and geographical and political isolation have been dissipated and both churches have been brought into fraternal relationship again. And let us pray that full inter-communion will be re-established between these two daughters of Christ. How can this lead to a dilution of the dogmatic essence of the Church of the East? The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds remain the same for all Christian churches and nothing of these creeds has been diluted. What is being diluted is the negative accretions of centuries of ignorance and mistrust, and to that all should say good riddance.

How does this undermine our Assyrian legacy? None of the liturgy, the ancient language, the traditions of the Church of the East will be changed. Are members of the Chaldean church any less Assyrian despite their union with Rome?

Let us always remember that we are Assyrians only on this earth and in this life, and when we go to our final reward in God's eternity, it will be as Christians under judgment. And what will God's judgment be if we have refused the open hand of our Christian brother? Humbly, let us all pray that we may be one in Christ Jesus.

Dr. Paz is professor of comparative literature at the State University of New York. He received B.A. and MA degrees in history from the University of Chicago, and a Ph.D. from Columbia University. He also studied in Egypt under a prestigious Fulbright scholarship. Dr. Paz is the son of Sarah Sayad Paz, a well-known Chicago Assyrian and a writer in her own right.

4 *Are we still "heretics"?*

Eshou Y. Solomon

The [Assyrian] Ancient Church of the East ("AACE") was founded by Apostle Thomas and one of the seventy disciples of Christ (Luke 10:1, 17). However, by the 5th Century, it became well known as the "Nestorian Church." That is because Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople from 428 to 431, preached boldly the same Christology on which the AACE was founded. Yet the AACE has always resented the reference as the Nestorian Church, because that implies that Nestorius was its founder.

The Christological viewpoint held by this church and promulgated even belligerently by Nestorius was as follows: The person of Christ has two natures. Of course, the Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox churches believe in that, too. But the AACE believes, like Protestants, in the two natures of Christ as distinct and separate. In the AACE view, Mary is not “mother of God/*Theotokos*,” but she is mother of His human nature. This does not mean at all that the AACE questions Christ’s divinity. But its doctrine of Christology differs with that of the Catholic and Orthodox churches that say the two natures of Christ were inseparable at the time of his birth. The AACE believes firmly that Christ is perfect God and perfect man. As perfect man, He suffered in His earthly life. As perfect God, He rose from death to join God the Father and God the Holy Spirit - perfect Trinity in one person/*parsopa*.

The AACE’s holy fathers believed strongly in this Christology, and their missionaries carried this belief from Mesopotamia as far as Persia, India and China. Actually, the cross they carried into those remote regions personified their church’s faith. “It has a crown on the top, with two rounded projections on either side to represent the natures of Christ. Three rounded projections on each arm symbolize the Trinity, and a large circle in the center represents sun (light), a symbol widely used by the ancient Assyrians.”

Now, if the current members and leadership of the AACE still believe in their forefathers’ Christology, as stated above, then they are regarded by the Catholics as heretics, because Nestorius himself was branded as heretical, for his bold advocacy of the AACE’s Christology, at the Council of Ephesus in 431. The Assyrians must remember their church’s history, especially *vis-a-vis* the Catholic Church. Otherwise, it is said, history repeats itself!! But I do not think, at this point, it is necessary to rehash the even violent history of the Roman Catholic Church against the AACE.

On the other hand, if the Roman Catholic Church is ready to accept the AACE’s doctrine on Christology, then that, it seems to me, will please God, and God will consider it reconciliation, solidarity and unity *ipso facto*!

Meanwhile, the AACE and all of the churches should continue to pray fervently and ask God that the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us and rose from the grave, will guide us, that all of us who are in many churches and many communions may be one church, one communion, and one in Him. As He Himself earnestly prays for us in his hour of death, saying: “I pray also for those who through your Word will believe in me, that they may be one as you, Father, are in union with me and I with you ... “

Mr. Solomon is a native of Syria, where he received his BA in English Literature. He also holds two MA degrees, one in Christian Education, another in Linguistics. Currently a resident of Ellicott City, MD, Mr. Solomon serves as a Communications Management Technician for the US government.

5 *Our Survival Requires Assyrian-Chaldean Religious Unity*

Francis K. Khosho

There is an ancient superstition of the sea that, inevitably, one wave comes along that is greater than any that has preceded it. It is called the Ninth Wave (the powerful culmination of sea and wind). There is no greater force. To catch the Ninth Wave at the critical moment requires special skill, timing your movements to mount it at its peak.

Today, we Assyrian-Chaldeans see a Ninth Wave in our future. Our own Ninth Wave is “**Reunion: A Hope for Survival.**” This brings significant change and significant challenge. To catch this challenging wave of change before it sweeps by or over us, we must participate actively and positively as individuals and organizations to pave the way for our church leaders. This can be achieved when we rely on each other. Trust that is based on honest and reliable conduct over time will greatly enhance their ability to cope with their tasks. If we all understand mutual values, concerns, needs, wants, hopes, and respect the opinion of others and seek solutions rather than scapegoats, we will have a better chance of avoiding disagreements.

The Ninth Wave prospects of the Unified Church of the East appear to be within grasp. I feel extremely confident for the future of our church and our nation, following the patriarchal reunion of his holiness Mar Rafael Bidawid with his holiness Mar Dinkha IV on Friday, November 29, 1996, at the Chaldean Chancery in Southfield, Michigan.

My soul had been aching from years of division within our church and nation. I was sick of feeling that Assyrian-Chaldean people had come to be the most unknown people in the world. The Christian communities (Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syrian-Christian) existed in Bet-Nahrain and belonged to the same stock, and held the same beliefs. They belong to the same ancestry, culture, and blood, based on a common language, culture and heritage. They have endured thousands of years of history, glory, and persecution by many different conquerors to Bet-Nahrain, living for thousands of years in their own state and shared experience of the loss of their state.

All of this inseparably unites the Assyrian-Chaldean people as one nation forever. The event in Southfield, Michigan, in my opinion was a day of atonement and unity for Assyrian-Chaldeans in America and the world, who were called upon by their spiritual leaders to support their effort in unifying the two branches of the historical Church of the East. This meeting became a rolling think tank as the Assyrian-Chaldean people debated with each other, discussed the future of the Assyrian-Chaldean community, and reflected on what the ambitious reunion meant to them. It should power all Assyrian-Chaldean life, help them stay motivated, help them start being involved in their community activities, and cut through any static to keep up their momentum.

Too many centuries had passed since anyone organized a deeply significant event for Assyrian-Chaldeans, whose survival standing was warping under a steady drumbeat of division and destruction of our nation. As an Assyrian-Chaldean, I have been waiting for the call for Assyrian-Chaldean men and women to stand up and be counted.

We are divided. Why should it be so? Indeed why? Again and again, we should ask ourselves how things got so bad, and what it will take to improve them. From my involvement in our communities' activities, and reading and studying our history over the last fifteen years, I would say that the most common answer will be that Assyrian-Chaldeans need to be increasingly self-reliant, because the best solutions will come from within our community. We have got to talk about these tensions going on among Assyrian-Chaldeans. We are in bad shape if we don't do anything about our differences. Let's get it together before it all starts tumbling down.

Through the innovative efforts of our church leaders and community members, our church and nation will evolve into a large and diverse community that is meeting the changing needs of the world. We must avoid shifting blame, bad-mouthing others, grabbing credit, and publishing hateful material. Instead, we must use wisdom and diplomacy in our approaches toward unity. If this is achieved, then the Assyrian-Chaldean dream, willing providence of God Almighty, will come true.

Mr. Khosho, a resident of Poway, CA, is best known as Editor of Twin Rivers Bibliography: Assyrian, Chaldean and Syrian Past and Present (1987), an extensive compilation of publications relating to this people. A frequent contributor to Assyrian periodicals, Mr. Khosho is also the author of a winsome children's book (illustrated), The Eagle Who Thought He Was A Chicken (1993), a parable of the Assyrian nation.