

Some Thoughts About Christology

William F. Macomber

Some of the articles in your last issue have pushed me to thinking again about Christology and the longed for reuniting of the great Church of the East into a single patriarchate. Also, the issue gave me some details about the recent declaration of the two patriarchs about our common faith in Christ. I hope I may add some of my own thoughts.

It is my conviction too that the faith of the Church of the East about Christ and the faith of the Catholic Church are basically the same, namely, that Jesus Christ our Lord is *one* who is true God and true man. He is not a mere holy man in whom God dwells, as is the case with the prophets and the saints. No, as St. John the Evangelist clearly teaches, he is God the Word made flesh. He is the natural Son of God the Father, who is, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the one true God, who has assumed our human nature and has become truly a man, like us in all things save sin. That is our faith.

That is why we Catholics say that Mart Maryam is Yaldath Alaha. She is the true mother of Jesus Christ, who is truly God – not, of course, according to his divine nature, but according to his human nature. We also say that God the Word died on the cross and rose from the dead. Whatever Jesus did or said or suffered, God the Word did or said or suffered, because Jesus is God the Word made flesh. All this is said on the level of faith and is, I believe, the common faith of both churches.

When we proceed to the level of theology, however, we have problems. Catholics say “*one parsopa one qnoma two kyane in Christ.*” The Church of the East says “*one parsopa, two qnome, two kyane in Christ.*” What is a *qnoma*? For us, a *parsopa* is a *qnoma* of an intellectual nature, that is, of God, of angels or of men. A *qnoma* or hypostasis is a subject of being, action and predication. It answers the question *which one* is, or does or is acted upon in some way. If the *qnoma*'s nature is intellectual, we call the *qnoma* a person, a *parsopa*. What is the *qnoma* or hypostasis for the theologians of the Church of the East? That is not clear to me. From the fact that they say two *qnome* in Christ, it would seem to follow that a *qnoma* is like a *kyana*, which answers the question *what kind*. The problem with that, however, is that they also say “three *qnome* one *kyana* in God,” where *qnoma* has to answer the question *who* or *which one*, and *kyana* alone answers the question *what* or *what kind*.

I read somewhere that it was because of mutual ignorance that the two churches anathematized each other. I am far from sure that this is historically true. Perhaps my memory is at fault, but I don't think that the Catholic Church ever anathematized the Church of the East, and I don't remember that the Church of the East ever anathematized the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church did anathematize Nestorius, but Nestorius was not a member of the Church of the

East. The Catholic Church also anathematized what was understood to be the doctrine of Nestorius, which was the theology of Theodore the Interpreter, which Catholics have traditionally called Nestorianism. Here the possibility of ignorance and error may have entered in. What the Catholic Church has understood and condemned as Nestorianism is the doctrine that Christ is not basically one, but is two beings united in a special way; that Christ is a man in whom God dwells and to whom God is united. Is that the doctrine that Theodore and Nestorius intended to teach? Catholics have traditionally thought that it was, but, since we have lost a large part of what Theodore actually wrote, we may well have been mistaken. In any case, what we thought was the *doctrine* of Nestorius does not agree with the *faith* of the Church of the East.

The Catholic Church anathematized not only what was thought to be the doctrine of Nestorius, but also certain of the writings of Theodore the Interpreter which were thought to teach Nestorianism. Not all the writings nor all the doctrines of Theodore were condemned, but only those that agreed with what Nestorius was thought to have taught. The fact is that the biblical commentaries of Theodore were quite popular in Europe as well as in Syria and the East. They are still popular in the Jacobite Church to the extent that the commentaries that they do use by Dionysius Bar Salibi are to a great extent derived from those of Theodore, although they understandably do not mention his name.

Many of the doctrines of Theodore and much of his theology remain today in the liturgy of the Chaldean Church. The names of the three Greek Doctors were changed by the Chaldeans to those of Basil, Gregory and John Chrysostom, if I remember rightly, and of course they dropped the doctrine of two *qnome* in Christ, but most of the rest of Theodore's theology remains today. In 1964, I published an article entitled "*The Theological Synthesis of Cyrus of Edessa ...*" in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, vol.30, pp.5-38 and 363-384. Cyrus, Qiyore Urhaya, was a disciple of Mar Aba I, who was the one who collected the writings and commentaries of Theodore the Interpreter, had them translated into Syriac and gave them to the Church of the East. The synthesis of Qiyore is the synthesis of Theodore, which is still enshrined in the liturgy of the Chaldean Church, which in this regard is practically identical with that of the Church of the East, minus the two *qnome* in Christ. Theodore also seems to have taught a doctrine on Original Sin that appeared to conflict with Catholic teaching on the subject and may have been the source of the doctrine called *Semipelagianism*, which the Catholic Church does condemn, but that doctrine doesn't seem to have got into the liturgy.

However, although the Church often makes extensive use of theology, what she teaches is not theology but faith. Therefore, it seems to me, it ought to be possible to express the faith of the Church without recourse to philosophy and theology. This is what St. Gregory Nazianzen did. He wrote somewhere, "*When we speak about God, we must say '–88@H and '–88@H, but not '–88@ and '–88@. When we speak about Christ, on the other hand, we must say '–88@ and '–88@, but not '–88@H and '–88@H.*" In other words, in God there is

more than one who, but only one what, whereas in Christ there are more than one what, but only one who. If this had been clearly understood and taught by all theologians, perhaps we could have avoided the schisms that divided the unity of the Church. The faith of the Church is also very clearly expressed in the writings of Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom. The confessions of faith of Yahbalah II and Sabriso I also seem clear to me.

The other big point of controversy between the Catholic Church and the Church of the East concerns the role and authority of St. Peter in the Apostolic College and that of his successors in the Church. That is a thorny issue. To me, if the Church is to be one and united, there has to be a successor to St. Peter with some kind of universal authority. That authority must not be such that it takes away the local authority of individual bishops, who are also successors of the Apostles, nor should it nullify the authority of the bishops in an ecumenical council. Then there is also the question of distinguishing the authority of the Bishop of Rome as successor to the universal authority of St. Peter and as Patriarch of the Church of the West. That distinction has not perhaps always been clearly understood and observed in practice in the relationship of the Bishop of Rome to the Chaldean Patriarch and the other patriarchs.

These, it seems to me, are the two big points of controversy between the Catholic Church and the Church of the East: the theological controversy about *qnoma/e* in Christ, as opposed to the faith of the Church; and the authority of the Bishop of Rome.

There is the question of the seven sacraments. Many have claimed that the Church of the East lacks the sacraments of penance and the anointing of the sick, and it is true that Timothy II does substitute two other ceremonies when he enumerates the sacraments. However, it is not true that the Church of the East lacks the sacrament of penance, which I myself have seen administered, and I wonder if the same might not be true of the blessing of those who are sick that St. James mentions in the Bible..

And, yes, there is also the question of the Anaphora of Sts. Addai and Mari, which today lacks a Narration of the Institution.. Western theologians have traditionally been of the opinion that the Narration is essential for the consecration of the Eucharist. Today, however, it is recognized that individual churches have some power for establishing the essential elements of the sacraments, even though it is limited. What the limitations are, especially with regard to the Eucharist, doesn't seem to be so clear. Did Iso-yahb III, who is thought by some to have abbreviated Addai and Mari and possibly have eliminated the Narration, which still is found in the Maronite Church's version of the anaphora – did he stay within the limitations or go beyond them?

As for the reunion of the Church of the East, it may be helpful to study the histories of other patriarchates, those that successfully reunited and those that tried and failed. Patriarchal elections occasioned by deaths or resignations would seem to be the crucial moments, but it is essential beforehand to obtain complete

unanimity among the electors of the divided factions, both to end the schism and to accept the candidate favored by the majority. I hope and pray that complete unanimity may soon be achieved among those who have to elect successors to the great Catholicos-Patriarchate of the East.