

## THE MOVEMENT TOWARD ANTIOCHIAN UNITY

**I**n Eastern Christian thought the Holy Trinity – one in essence but distinct in persons – is the model for unity in the Church. The distinctness of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not in conflict with their unity as one God. So too the Church is meant to be one in essentials without losing the distinct theology, spirituality, liturgy or organization by which they strive to express the mystery of Christ.

## EXPERIENCE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

**T**he history of the Churches of the Middle East bears eloquent witness to legitimate pluralism. On the positive side, the various local Churches developed complementary traditions in harmony with their respective cultures (Greek, Syriac, Assyrian, Armenian, Coptic), which enrich us all. When these Churches diverged in what was seen to be essentials, however, their distinctness became the basis of disunity. And this disunity gave people cause to say that the Christians got the message of Christ all wrong. Thus Islam came to the fore.

During the c. 1200 years of the rule of Arab and Turkish caliphs in the Middle East, the various Christian Churches were somewhat frozen in time by the politics of the age. This helped maintain their distinctness but also their disunity, as overlords never seek to unify their subjects. Only in the present day have all these Churches begun to rediscover their unity and express their common faith in Christ in various official statements.

Such an initiative, of great importance for the Melkite Church, took place at the 1995 session of the Synod of Bishops of our patriarchate. Kyr Elias Zoghby, the retired Archbishop of Baalbeck, and a long-time leader among the Melkite bishops, offered the following statement as an indication of how the Melkite Church's stance on Christian unity might be expressed.

*"I believe everything which Eastern Orthodoxy teaches.*

*"I am in communion with the Bishop of Rome as the first among the bishops, according to the limits recognized by the Holy*

*Fathers of the East during the first millennium, before the separation."*

With only two exceptions, all the hierarchs present at the synod individually signed this profession of faith. The document was then presented to the Melkite Patriarch, Maximos V, and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Ignatius IV. The profession was accompanied by an endorsement by the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Byblos and Batroun, George Khodr which states, "I consider this profession of faith of Kyr Elias Zoghby to fulfill the necessary and sufficient conditions to re-establish the unity of the Orthodox Churches with Rome."

In the year that followed the bishops took another important step to bring unity a bit closer. The Melkite bishops at their July, 1996 Synod meeting in Rabweh, Lebanon unanimously approved a statement entitled Reunification of the Antiochian Patriarchate. It was then presented to the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Ignatius IV and has since been circulated widely. The text is as follows:

## REUNIFICATION OF THE ANTIOCHIAN PATRIARCHATE

**T**he Fathers of the Synod of the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate convened in Rabweh, Lebanon July 22 to July 27, 1996 and studied the documents presented by the patriarchal commission established by His Beatitude Maximos V (Hakim) on March 25, 1996. This commission consists of Archbishops Elias Zoghby and Cyril Salim Bustros; the patriarch asked them to do whatever is necessary through communications and meetings with the Orthodox patriarchal and synodal commission to reach Antiochian unity through oneness of heart, and to find ways for the two Churches-Melkite Greek Catholic and Greek Orthodox-to return to communion with each other and into unity within one Antiochian patriarchate. His Beatitude, Patriarch Maximos V and the Fathers of the Holy Synod are happy to report the following:

1. They thank His Beatitude, Patriarch Ignatius IV (Hazim) and the Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church for their concern on this subject, and the brotherly announcement they gave concerning this unity in the final communique of their Holy Synod convened. October 16-22, 1995. They share what the Orthodox said [at

this synod] "that since receiving the mutual representatives in the 1974 synod with great love, we look forward together to Antiochian unity, preserving our one heritage and one worship which is the fount of one belief."

2. They all look forward to the day when the Melkite Greek Catholics and the Greek Orthodox in the Antiochian patriarchate return to being one Church and one patriarchate. They affirm to all that this reunification does not mean a victory of one church over another, or one church going back to the other, or the melting of one church into the other. Rather, it means putting an end to the separation between the brothers that took place in 1724 and led to the existence of two separate independent patriarchates, and returning together to that unity that prevailed in the one Antiochian patriarchate before the separation.

3. They see that this reunification has become possible today due to the progress in the communion of faith that has taken place through the grace of God in recent years on the international level through the Joint International Theological Commission between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches. This commission produced four documents announcing unity of faith in basic doctrines: "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity" (1982), "Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church" (1987), "The Sacrament of Orders in the Sacramental Structure of the Church" (1988), "Uniatism, Method of Union in the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion" (Balamand, 1993). They consider their task of reestablishing communion within the Church of Antioch a part of reestablishing full communion between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches on the international level.

4. The Joint Commission will discuss one point further, that is, "The role of the Bishop of Rome in the Church and in the Ecumenical Councils." On this subject the Fathers of the Synod adopt what was stated in the Second Vatican Council: "To give due consideration to this special feature of the origin and growth of the Eastern Churches and to the character of the relations which obtained between them and the Roman See before separation" (*Decree on Ecumenism #14*); and also what His Holiness, Pope John Paul II said in his encyclical *That All May be One (Ut Unum Sint) #61*: "The Catholic Church desires nothing less than full communion between East and West. She finds inspiration for

this in the experience of the first millenium.” Concerning the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, the Fathers declare that they are inspired by the understanding in which East and West lived in the first millenium in light of the teachings of the seven Ecumenical Councils, and they see that there is no reason for the separation to continue because of that primacy.

5. Based on the unity in the essence of the faith (that existed in the first millenium), the Fathers of the Holy Synod see that “*communicatio in sacris*” is possible today, and that they accept it, leaving the ways and means of its application to the joint decisions of the two Church Synods, Melkite Greek Catholic and Greek Orthodox.

6. The Fathers of the Holy Synod announce that they will remain in full communion with the Apostolic Church of Rome and at the same time will work out with her precisely what is required for them to enter into communion with the Antiochian Orthodox Church.

7. They commend the efforts that the ecumenical leaders of our Church have made, especially Archbishop Elias Zoghby, who has been laboring for this more than twenty years. They thank the members of the Joint International Theological Commission for their accomplishments, and ask them to continue the dialog on this subject. The Fathers delegated the Synodal Ecumenical and Theological Commission to deeply research the ways of unification, and discuss its canonical and pastoral implications, and to hold joint conferences and conventions to include the faithful of both Churches on the path toward this unity.

8. Finally, **they ask all their faithful to join with them in prayer** that the holy will of God be fulfilled in all of us and that the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ to His heavenly Father be accomplished: “*that they may be one, just as we are one ... that the world may know that You have sent me*”(John 17:21-23).

## OUR ROLE IN THIS QUEST

**T**he Melkite Synod's request for the prayers of each of us (#7, above) is focussed on the divine will: “that the holy will of God be fulfilled in all of us”. As was mentioned above, Christian unity is very much the will of God. But the Synod is asking for more specific, more directed prayer. Their request is that we pray that God's

will (unity) “be fulfilled in all of us,” both our Melkite Greek Catholic Church and the Antiochian Greek Orthodox Church.

To pray wholeheartedly that the day come when our Antiochian Greek Churches can truly glorify God “with one mind and one heart,” we need to feel strongly – as Christ does – that disunity is against the divine will. As Churches, we need to recognize Christ's longing for unity and to pray that our Churches come to feel that longing. *We need to pray that our Churches feel the pain of disunity.* It is only when we feel disunity as pain that we will be moved to heal it.

In his explanation of the Profession of Faith, *Orthodox in Union? Yes!-Uniate? No!*, Archbishop Zoghby points out that the more involved we are with the Church, the more unmoved we seem to be by the disunity of our patriarchate. “For us the Latins are strangers, whom we love fraternally in Christ. The Orthodox, however, are our own cousins, our brothers by blood. We often live under the same roof. . . . Our Eastern Catholic people seem to suffer even more than we hierarchs do from the schism which nothing can justify. When shall we, the pastors of these Churches, have also suffered enough from these divisions to put, finally, an end to it?”

While we can pray that the members of the various Commissions be responsive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we should also be praying that our own hearts and minds be cleansed of any negative sentiments or feelings of superiority to other Christians and that our bishops and priests be moved to pray for these intentions in every public liturgical service in our parishes and to make this movement towards Antiochian unity known throughout our community, that God's will for our Church “be fulfilled in all of us.”

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