

THE HIPPOLYTUS STATEMENT

Of the second consultation of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, Bildungshaus St. Hippolyt, St. Pölten, Austria, 1-6 October, 2012

INTRODUCTION

The commission for dialogue between the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht met for its second consultation in St. Pölten, Austria, from 1-6 October, 2012. In the context of shared prayer and the celebration of the Eucharist, three topics were addressed and discussed: Scripture and tradition, Christology (and in that context Mariology), and the question of the remembrance of the departed and the saints. Bishops and theologians of both churches gave presentations on each of these topics. The participants appreciated the inspiring papers and fruitful discussions, which not only fostered mutual understanding of each other's theology, but also deepened the joint reflection on the manifold richness of the mystery of God.

Agreement in the faith could be reached on all three topics, while respecting the particular and historically grown traditions of both churches. In order to appreciate both these traditions and the agreement that was reached, in this statement, brief sketches of the respective traditions' positions will be offered as well as a formulation of the consensus that was reached. The delegation of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church consisted of The Rt. Rev. Dr. Zacharias Mar Theophilus Suffragan Metropolitan (co-chair), The Rt. Rev. Dr. Isaac Mar Philoxenos, and The Rev. Prof. Dr. K.G. Pothen; the delegation of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht consisted of The Rt. Rev. Dr. John Okoro (co-chair), The Rev. Dr. Adrian Suter, and The Rev. Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit.

SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

The topic of Scripture and tradition was discussed on the basis of papers read by Bishop Dr. Isaac Mar Philoxenos and the Rev. Prof. Peter-Ben Smit. The commission agreed that both churches were in agreement with regard to this topic.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MAR THOMA SYRIAN CHURCH

The Mar Thoma Syrian Church has made a long journey of 2000 years and the Church has had relationships with interpretative traditions, primarily with the East Syriac liturgical tradition from the early centuries, and later with the Antiochene liturgical tradition beginning from the 17th century. The Bible was read and interpreted during the Eucharistic celebrations all along in its history. The Church came into contact with the Anglican missionaries from the 19th century. The Reformation which began in the 19th century was an effort to cleanse the church in its faith and practice on the basis of the Scriptures.

The constitution of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church states that it accepts "the Holy Bible consisting of the sixty-six books" as they are "comprised in the Old and New Testaments as the basis of all matters of doctrine and faith." The constitution also affirms the importance of feasts and fasts which is clearly taken from the East and West Syriac liturgical traditions. Since the reformation beginning from 1836, feasts and fasts which pertained to the life of our Lord Jesus

Christ alone have been celebrated. In its ordination service the Mar Thoma Syrian Church entrusts the apostolic faith and tradition to those ordained to the ministry of the church. Thus, the importance of the interpretative traditions and apostolic faith is affirmed in the church. The position of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church is expressed eloquently in the following intercession taken from the Liturgy of Holy Qurbana:

O Lord, we remember the heritage with which you have entrusted us, the labors of St. Thomas, Apostle of India, and of all the fathers, who passed on to us intact your word and doctrines and through whose care and nurture we now stand before you. Grant us grace that we may steadily adhere to the truth of this Gospel and faithfully pass on our trust to our children.

However, the Scriptures are taken to be authoritative for determining, correcting, and forming right faith and doctrine.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Old Catholic Church takes its name from its orientation towards the witness of the “Ancient Church” and has sought to renew its faith and order through a process of a continuous return to the sources. In this process, the return to the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church has been of preeminent importance. In particular, this long process has led the Old Catholic Church to reform its life and doctrine in multiple ways. In doing so, the Old Catholic Church, stemming from the Latin tradition, has taken recourse to sources from the Eastern and Oriental traditions as well, seeking to do justice to the full witness of the Ancient Church.

Already at an early stage, this led to both the recognition of the authority of the original text of the Scriptures and an emphasis on their availability in the vernacular. Also, the relationship between Scripture and tradition was reconsidered on the basis of the witness of the Ancient Church, leading to an understanding of the Holy Scriptures “as the primary rule of Faith” and the acknowledgement that “Scripture is understood within the tradition, but the tradition preserves its purity and the criterion of its truth through Scripture and from the content of Scripture.” Handing on the tradition of the Church is for the Old Catholic Church an ongoing process of the reception and re-reception of the faith, inculturating it for every generation anew; within the Church, the ordained ministry has a preeminent responsibility in this respect.

AGREEMENT ON SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

Both Churches can agree on the following and consider it to constitute agreement in the faith on this point.

- 1) Both churches recognize the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the heart of the tradition on which the Church’s witness is based and by which it is measured. Both churches identify with the statement that the Holy Scriptures are “the basis of all matters of doctrine and faith” (Constitution of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, I) and the statement that the Holy Scriptures are the “primary rule of faith” of the Church by which all matters of faith and order are measured (Thesis 9 of the 1874 Bonn Reunion Conference).
- 2) Both churches understand the Scriptures as a whole to be the authentic witness to God’s self-revelation through the divine Word, incarnate in the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Scriptures, God speaks to humankind in human language. – The Scriptures are God’s Word in human words.
- 3) Both churches read Scripture in the context of the Spirit-led life of the Church and hence of its tradition. In the life of the Church the Scriptures are interpreted for each

generation anew and insights from earlier generations, especially from the Fathers of the Church and the conciliar tradition, are indispensable for the understanding of the Scriptures. It is an essential part of the mission of the Church to receive the faith, witnessed to by Scripture and tradition, anew in new contexts and inculcate it afresh. Both churches understand the process of reception to be Spirit-led and open-ended. Differences in the interpretation of Scripture and tradition can result from different processes of inculturation in diverse contexts and do not need to be mutually exclusive, but can be complementary and enriching.

- 4) Both churches adhere to different canons of the Old Testament: the Mar Thoma Syrian Church adheres to the canon of the Hebrew Bible and the Old Catholic Church adheres to the canon of the Septuagint. They both recognize, however, that both of these canons have venerable histories and origins. Also, both churches concur that the so-called “deuterocanonical” books (or “anagignoskomena”) are “not of the same canonicity as the books contained in the Hebrew Canon.” (Thesis 1 of the 1874 Bonn Conference on Christian Unity; Orthodox – Old Catholic Dialogue, I.2).

CHRISTOLOGY

Christology, and in that context also Mariology, was discussed on the basis of papers read by the Rev. Prof. Dr. K.G. Pothen and the Rev. Dr. Adrian Suter. The consultation was able to conclude that both churches essentially share the same faith with regard to both of these topics.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MAR THOMA SYRIAN CHURCH

Several churches in the Syriac tradition did not involve themselves with the Christological controversies of the early centuries. The non-Chalcedonian churches in Oriental Christianity did not receive Chalcedon and were content with the understanding that they have one Lord Jesus Christ who is both fully divine and fully human. The Mar Thoma Syrian Church affirms the divinity and humanity of one Lord Jesus Christ, which is the mystery of the one incarnate Christ. Incarnation, which is a mystery, reveals the mystery of the triune God. Revelation of God is both unfolding and hiding the nature of the triune God at the same time. The purpose of incarnation is the redemption of humanity and the entire creation, by receiving and appropriating the way of redemption revealed in the incarnate Jesus Christ.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Old Catholic Church received the faith of the Ancient Church through the Latin tradition of the West. It is part of its tradition to confess its faith in Christ following the definitions of the conciliar tradition, including the Council of Chalcedon. At the same time, in the theological tradition of the Old Catholic Church, a strong emphasis has been developed to focus on the soteriological essence of doctrinal definitions, rather than on their letter and its acceptance. This also applies to Christological definitions. Accordingly, the Council of Chalcedon is seen as providing signposts for reflection on the mystery of the divinity and humanity of the one Lord Jesus Christ, rather than defining one particular Christology with one normative terminology. In doing so, Old Catholic theologians share in the broad ecumenical re-reception of this council.

AGREEMENT ON CHRISTOLOGY

- 1) As was already recognized in the Santhigiri Statement, both churches confess “the faith of the early Church with the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (without the “filioque”), while jointly recognizing the first three ecumenical councils (Nicea I,

Constantinople I, Ephesus). Thus, with the church of all the ages, we confess our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,

the only begotten son of God, begotten of the Father before all world, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man.

With the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the Old Catholic Church rejoices in confessing the mystery of Christ being ‘fully divine and fully human.’” The same statement also retained that “a difference between the two churches consists in the fact that the Old Catholic Church understands this mystery following the tradition and language of the Council of Chalcedon, whereas the Mar Thoma Syrian Church does not”. Therefore, it was placed on the agenda of this consultation.

- 2) The consultation could benefit from the work of earlier theological consultation on the topic of Christology between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches, in which much agreement has been reached already and in which a re-reception of the Council of Chalcedon is taking place. In particular, the dialogues between the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and Churches of the Anglican Communion are of relevance. In this context, the Church of England acknowledged that the Mar Thoma Syrian Church’s “statement of understanding of the Nicene Creed had removed all suspicion of lingering Nestorianism” and that for the Church of England to take further action towards the Mar Thoma Syrian Church “would have no implications for relations either with Chalcedonian or non-Chalcedonian Orthodox.”¹
- 3) The discussion was also greatly helped by the recognition that the Mar Thoma Syrian Church was not involved in the Council of Chalcedon, nor took sides in the surrounding and ensuing debates.
- 4) Furthermore, a long-standing tendency in Old Catholic and Mar Thoma Syrian theology to focus on the reception of the essence, rather than the letter of conciliar decisions, and a reluctance to repeat theological controversies of the past in contemporary theology, provided a basis for rapprochement. In receiving past theological insights and ecclesial teaching, the focus should be on the intention and soteriological concern underlying them, rather than on the letter of what has been transmitted. Accordingly, both churches take a dynamic view of reception and a hermeneutical approach to the past. This approach also received broad recognition in recent ecumenical dialogue.
- 5) Thus, both churches can together receive the faith of the Ancient Church, confessing the mystery of the one Lord Jesus Christ as being both fully divine and fully human. The Lord Jesus Christ is one, just as the work of redemption is one. At the same time, his divinity does not diminish his humanity, nor exists his humanity at the expense of his divinity. Therefore, both churches reject one-sided Christologies that emphasize one of these two aspects of Christ to the detriment of the other, both in history and in ongoing contemporary theological reflection.
- 6) In the context of the faith in Christ and the mystery of the incarnation of the divine Word, also theological reflection on Mary has its place, given that we believe in “Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, the Word of Life, God Incarnate of the Blessed Virgin Mary.” (Liturgy of Holy Qurbana) Following the Council of Ephesus, both Churches rejoice in the remembrance of Mary, the Mother of our Lord, “who was born of the Virgin Mary for the life and salvation of all mankind.” (Liturgy of Holy Qurbana). Both churches remember

¹ See the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Board for Mission and Unity of the Church of England, *The Church of England and the Mar Thoma Church* (s.l, 1974), p. 2.

Mary as the chosen one, whose “yes” to God and whose identification with her Son’s suffering are exemplary for the life of every Christian. Also, both churches stand united in rejecting all tendencies to give Mary an independent soteriological status.

THE REMEMBRANCE OF THE DEPARTED AND THE SAINTS

The third topic of the consultation concerned the remembrance of the faithful departed and the understanding and role of saints in the life of the church. A paper on this subject was presented by the Rev. Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit and a joint presentation was offered by the members of the Mar Thoma Syrian delegation.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MAR THOMA SYRIAN CHURCH

The Mar Thoma Syrian Church recognizes the apostles, preachers, the evangelists, martyrs, the confessors, and all the saints. They are remembered for their faith and their exemplary life of devotion to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The Church acknowledges their influence on the faith community and prays that the present generation will emulate their life and example. The liturgy affirms the Church as a mystical body, a unity of the church in the present and all the faithful departed. The Church also affirms that God will raise and gather all the faithful departed in the last day to inherit the heavenly kingdom.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Old Catholic Church views the church as the “communion of saints”, consisting of those that have been called by God, are brought into fellowship with God through baptism, and are being sanctified by God. The Old Catholic Church gratefully remembers those saints in whose life and death the power of God’s love has become manifest in a particularly intense and clear way. Whenever such saints are remembered, however, the church does not praise them, but God, whose transforming love for humankind and all of creation, has reached its goal in them.

AGREEMENT ON THE REMEMBRANCE OF THE DEPARTED AND THE SAINTS

- 1) In the Santhigiri statement, substantial agreement with regard to the communion of the saints was already formulated:

Both Churches agree on the identity of the communion of all the faithful as “saints.” Both churches understand the “communion of saints” as consisting of the church on earth, the faithful departed, and the eschatological church (“church militant, church expectant, church triumphant”). Beyond this, outstanding faithful are recognized and treasured in both Churches and “the mother of our Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary”, “the holy prophets, the apostles, the preachers, the evangelists and the martyrs, the confessors and all the saints” (Liturgy of Holy Qurbana, p. 33) are commemorated in the liturgy.

The same statement also noted that both churches have different practices with regard to the faithful departed and the saints. It further described the Old Catholic practice of the remembrance of the departed and the saints as being “theologically qualified” and noted that the difference does not touch the fundamentals of the faith.

- 2) The following theological qualification of Old Catholic practice of remembering the faithful departed in the liturgy was discussed and deemed in accordance with the Scriptures. When the faithful departed are remembered in the liturgy, this is an expression of the communion of all the faithful in Christ that cannot be destroyed by

death. By remembering the faithful departed before God and asking God to remember them, the biblical notion of “remembrance” is taken up. Such remembrance goes beyond merely “thinking of”, but involves the renewed presence of those remembered (example: the Eucharistic anamnesis). When God, according to his free judgment, remembers the departed mercifully, he grants them life eternal. This is the core of the remembrance of the departed, whose salvation does not depend on any prayer by the Church, but only on the unmerited grace that is received through Christ’s unique work of salvation.

- 3) Keeping this in mind, both churches can recognize their faith in an intercession from the joint Mar Thoma Syrian – CSI – CNI liturgy that mentions both remembrance and recognizes dependence on God’s grace:

Lord, we thankfully remember the faithful departed, and pray that you raise and gather all the faithful and grant that we may be counted worthy of entering your presence and be gathered into your heavenly kingdom.

- 4) In the celebration of the liturgy, both Churches share the experience and conviction that the church on earth is united with the worship of the heavenly communion of saints, as part of the mystical body of Christ. Both churches rejoice in being part of the “great cloud of witnesses” and give God thanks for the lives and works of His saints, while praying to be given the grace to emulate their life and example, in the hope of being united with all the saints in God’s kingdom when Christ comes in glory. For this reason, the saints (apostles, evangelists, martyrs, etc.) are commemorated in the liturgy and the life of the Church. In the Old Catholic Church, this remembrance is done through the various senses that have been given to human beings, from which e.g. the use of images results. This practice is not shared by the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, but the theological intention – remembrance and giving God thanks for his saints – is the same. Both churches vehemently reject any worship of saints or holy objects. We worship not the creature, but the creator alone.
- 5) Based on the strong sense that the church on earth is united with the church triumphant, the Old Catholics also know of one further kind of prayer that involves saints: requests made to saints to pray for the church militant. While this practice is not shared by the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the underlying notion of the unity of all members of the mystical body of Christ is part of its tradition as well. Both churches also confess that salvation is always God’s free and gracious act mediated through Christ alone. Saints are not seen as additional mediators, nor are they considered as offering more efficacious prayers than the church militant, nor are they worshiped in any way. In line with this, both churches reject any practices or doctrines that would suggest this.

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

The members of the consultation respectfully submit this common statement to the Episcopal Synod of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the International Bishops’ Conference of the Union of Utrecht of the Old Catholic Churches, for their consideration. We hope to have assisted, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, in discovering more aspects of the unity in the faith of our churches and look forward to continuing this ecumenical journey.

AS AGREED BY:

The delegation of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Zacharias Mar Theophilus Suffragan Metropolitan (co-chair)
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Isaac Mar Philoxenos
The Rev. Prof. Dr. K.G. Pothen

The delegation of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht
The Rt. Rev. Dr. John Okoro (co-chair)
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