

## THE MUNNAR STATEMENT

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of the consultation of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, Mar Thoma Retreat Centre, Munnar, Kerala, India, 17-19 February, 2014

### INTRODUCTION

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The commission for dialogue between the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht met at the Mar Thoma Retreat Centre (Munnar, Kerala, India) from 17-19 February 2014. Prior to the meeting, the delegates attended the yearly Maramon Convention where they participated in the worship and heard the preaching by both Mar Thoma and international speakers. The Old Catholic delegation was also invited by the Episcopal Synod and the Sabha Council of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and addressed by the Metropolitan, the Most Rev. Dr. Joseph Mar Thoma Metropolitan. The members of the commission are most grateful for the generous hospitality of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, its Metropolitan, bishops, clergy and laity during these days. This spiritual and practical hospitality of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church provided an important and inspiring paradigm for the hospitality and welcoming attitude of the two traditions towards each other during the meeting.

During the meeting, the following topics were addressed: The reception of ecumenical councils, the role of symbols and icons in the life of the church, inculturation, faith, life, practice and ethics, and prospects for the future of the relationship between the two churches. In doing so, the commission followed and completed the agenda set at the meeting of 7-11 November 2011 in Santhigiri Ashram (Aluva, Kerala, India). Theologians of both churches presented papers on all of these topics. It was a reason for much gratefulness that there was much mutual recognition of the two churches in each other's positions. It was felt that the dialogue helped both churches to receive the faith of the early church afresh for a new day. 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, The Very Rev. Prof. Dr. K.G. Pothen, the Rev. Sam T. Koshy, and the Rev. Shiby Varghese; the delegation of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht consisted of The Rt. Rev. Dr. John Okoro (co-chair), The Rt. Rev. Dr. Harald Rein (observer), The Rev. Dr. Adrian Suter, and The Rev. Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit.

### COUNCILS AND THEIR RECEPTION IN THE CHURCH

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The topic of councils and their reception in the church was discussed on the basis of papers read by the Very Rev. Prof. Dr. K.G. Pothen and the Rev. Dr. Adrian Suter. The commission established that both churches were in agreement with regard to this topic, especially concerning the role of councils and the way in which the church receives the faith in a conciliar process.

### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MAR THOMA SYRIAN CHURCH

The Mar Thoma Syrian Church stands in the rich double tradition of Semitic/Hebrew and Greek Christian thought and is rooted in the life and ministry of St. Thomas, the Apostle. It understands the faith as a way of life ("Margam") that was committed to them by St. Thomas and finds its expression in a life of discipleship and worship; liturgy is faith celebrated. This is the perspective

from which the Mar Thoma Syrian Church approaches the ecumenical councils. It accepts the first three ecumenical councils and remembers them in its Eucharistic liturgy as affirmative of the faith of the Syriac tradition. At the same time, it had no part in the controversies leading to later ecumenical councils or in these councils themselves, which it recognizes, but has not formally accepted. This position does not imply rejection or disapproval of these later (four) ecumenical councils, but, on the contrary respect and regard. The focus of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church is on the first three councils and the creed of Nicea-Constantinople. The latter creed is recited in the liturgical celebration of its sacraments.

### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Old Catholic Church takes its name from its orientation towards the witness of the “Ancient Church”, including the faith of the seven ecumenical councils. It acknowledges that the later councils sought to further develop the faith that had been confessed by the earlier ones. In the Old Catholic tradition, the conciliar tradition and the conciliarity of the Church are of high importance. Therefore, the Old Catholic Church has a strong focus on the continuous reception of the faith of the early Church, as expressed in the conciliar tradition and through the episcopal-synodal life of the Church and in its liturgy (e.g., the use of the creed of Nicea-Constantinople in the Eucharist).

### AGREEMENT ON COUNCILS AND THEIR RECEPTION

Both Churches can agree on the following concerning the ecumenical councils and their reception and consider it to constitute agreement in the faith on this point.

- 1) Both churches receive the faith of the early church. For the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, this faith is expressed in the first three ecumenical councils, which it accepts. For the Old Catholic Church, this faith is expressed in the seven ecumenical councils.
- 2) Both churches recognize that they receive, through their respective traditions and histories, the same faith of the early church.
- 3) Therefore, the two churches agree that the difference in the number of councils that they recognize does not affect the relationship between both churches.

### SYMBOLS, IMAGES, AND ICONS IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

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The question of the role of signs/symbols, images, and icons in the life of the church was discussed on the basis of papers read by the Rev. Sam T. Koshy and the Rev. Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit. The consultation was glad to be able to conclude that both churches essentially share the same faith with regard to this topic.

### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MAR THOMA SYRIAN CHURCH

Standing in the tradition of the oriental churches and receiving the biblical heritage with its rich symbolism, symbols are of high importance for the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. Through symbols, eternal realities become present in time and space to human beings, who also exist in time and space. The central symbol is Jesus Christ, from whom all other symbols derive and to whom all other symbols point. Both the liturgy and the church architecture are replete with symbols. While the Mar Thoma Syrian Church is not iconoclast, it also does not celebrate the feast of orthodoxy; regarding icons as symbols, it does respect traditions that use icons as part of their worship, but, due to the heritage of its reformation and because of its caution with regard to the abuse of images (“idolatry”), it does not emulate or recommend it. This position also applies to the veneration of images and saints at large.

## THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCH

In the faith and worship of the Old Catholic Church, symbols play an important role. They are considered as material signs that point beyond themselves to the spiritual. Fundamentally, all ecclesial symbols refer to God, who alone is worthy of adoration and worship. The ground for the use of visible symbols to refer to the invisible God and thus aid the believers on their spiritual journey is found in the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ, who himself is the perfect image of the invisible God. Thus, symbols are an essential part of divine-human communication. Icons, statues, and other imagery or decoration that occurs in Old Catholic Churches, is part of this Church's cultural heritage and, whenever used in worship, used as a means of furthering the devotion to God in Christ. Abuses of images as idols are carefully avoided; in modern Old Catholic church buildings a clear reluctance to use much images can be discerned.

### AGREEMENT ON SYMBOLS/SIGNS, IMAGES, AND ICONS IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

- 1) Both churches agree that symbols, understood as signs with a deeper meaning, making accessible a reality that goes beyond themselves, are of high importance for the life of the church and divine-human communication. The eternal communicates itself to the temporal by means of signs belonging to the realm of the temporal. In this sense, the central and foundational symbol within the Christian tradition is God in Jesus Christ himself. All other signs and symbols ultimately are derived from him and point towards him.
- 2) Both churches are wary of the abuse of images that can become idols; in the Mar Thoma Syrian tradition this has led to a situation in which the use in worship and veneration of icons is not common and not encouraged. In Old Catholic liturgy, the use of images and icons is limited and Christ-centered. Such use of images and icons is respected by the Mar Thoma Syrian Church.

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## INCULTURATION

The third topic of the consultation concerned the notion of inculturation. Papers were read by the Rev. Shiby Varghese, the Rev. Dr. Adrian Suter, and the Rev. Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit.

### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MAR THOMA SYRIAN CHURCH

The Mar Thoma Syrian Church is a church that stands in the Syriac tradition and in that of its reformation; inculturation is part of its historical existence. It considers the inculturation of the Gospel as a crucial issue in the Church's missionary activity that has its basis in the incarnation of Christ, who took on human nature and was formed in a human culture to carry out the work of salvation. The missionary inculturation of the Gospel through the work of the Church stands in analogy to the incarnation. The interpretation of the tradition leads to a dialogue between Gospel and culture. In this dialogue, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church is neither hostile to culture nor fully identifies with it, but attempts to be hospitable to elements of the culture in which the Church exists. Many examples of the integration of spiritual, liturgical, and social aspects of this dialogue between Gospel and culture exist. Some of them concern the integration of Indian culture into the life of the Church, e.g., the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, others show a critical interaction between Gospel and culture, such as the commitment of the Church to the struggle of the "untouchables" (Dalit) for social justice.

### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Old Catholic Church sees inculturation of the Gospel in new cultures as part of the missionary endeavor of the Church and in analogy to the incarnation of the Divine Word in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. In Old Catholic tradition, this understanding of inculturation is expressed through an emphasis on the use of the vernacular in the worship and the life of the church, conscious attempts to seek the dialogue with the culture in which the Church exists, as it is expressed in art and modern thought, and outreach to other cultural groups, beyond the predominantly Western Old Catholic Church. At the same time, the Old Catholic Church also engages in a critical dialogue with contemporary culture. Such a dialogue takes place, not in the last place, through the equipment of the faithful (e.g. through adult education) to assist them in their own discernment for their life in Christ in contemporary culture.

#### AGREEMENT ON INCULTURATION

- 1) Both churches consider inculturation as a fundamental aspect of their historical and their missionary activity, which continues the mission that Jesus gave to his apostles, and understand it in analogy to the Incarnation.
- 2) Both churches understand the relationship between Gospel and culture as a dialogical one, in which the Church can be both hospitable and critical towards the culture in which it exists.
- 3) Both churches recognize that the transmission of the Gospel from one culture to another is a complex process of “translation” from one socially established structure of meaning to another, in which neither cultural system is normative.
- 4) Both churches recognize that the ongoing inculturation of the Gospel in a multitude of cultures leads to an ever greater discovery of the richness of the Gospel on the one hand and to diversity on the other. This diversity is to be understood as the result of the inculturation of the one Gospel of Jesus Christ and, therefore, as a diversity that has its basis in the fundamental unity of the one incarnate Lord.

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#### FAITH, LIFE, PRACTICE AND ETHICS

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The fourth topic of the consultation concerned the notion of faith, life, practice and ethics. Papers were presented by the Rev. Sam T. Koshy, the Rev. Dr. Adrian Suter, and the Rev. Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit.

#### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE MAR THOMA SYRIAN CHURCH

For the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the field of faith, life, practice, and ethics, has its origins and roots in the Trinity and the Triune God’s salvific work of recapitulation of creation and renewal of life through the incarnation of the Son of God. The Church progresses as a pilgrim through history in a life of *kerygma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*. In the *kerygma* the church transmits and interprets the tradition and the liturgy, in *koinonia* the church seeks to be a healing, reconciling, and mentoring network in which the Trinitarian relationships are emulated, *diakonia* is the mission of the Church in which it embodies God’s love in the world and celebrates the “liturgy after the liturgy.” In the sacraments, the created world is lifted up to the heavenly realm and through them God in Christ invites the faithful to the journey of a sanctified life. The liturgical year fulfills a similar function, providing space for reflection and focus on the faith and on issues of ethical and moral import. In the missionary work of the church, an extension of God’s love, care, and justice in the world, the three dimensions of *kerygma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia* are also present. In the context of this all, ethical questions are considered in relation to the Trinitarian love of God. For any social relation, the Trinity provides a life affirming paradigm. In ethical debates, the Bible is interpreted in the Eastern tradition of interpretation; in the discussion of all ethical questions, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church operates very carefully, seeking to take into

account doctrine, biblical interpretation, cultural criticism, and the importance of the enhancement of human relations. Cultural differences with other churches may lead to differences in reflection and method to culturally specific questions, but taking into account the distinctiveness of different cultural contexts can help to see such differences as part of the harmony of the ecumenical journey towards unity.

### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Old Catholic Church understands salvation as the restoration of communion with the Triune God, who is in himself communion. In the liturgy, the faithful are incorporated into this communion and the liturgy is, therefore, a model and paradigm for life in Christ. In the interpretation and reception of the faith, Old Catholics use a careful hermeneutical approach that seeks to do justice to the witness of Scripture and tradition, contemporary culture, and the dignity of the human person. Furthermore, the Old Catholic Church knows from its tradition a strong sense of personal responsibility of the faithful for their own discernment of their life in Christ, also in relation to ethical discernment; this has its roots partially in the Church's liberal (not "libertinist") historical background and contemporary thinking that equally emphasizes personal responsibility. By exercising their personal freedom and responsibility in the Church, the faithful bring to fruition the gifts of the Spirit that they have received. In this participatory process of discernment, clergy and laity alike seek to discover what the meaning of the faith and an appropriate life in Christ means for today.

### AGREEMENT ON FAITH, LIFE, PRACTICE AND ETHICS

- 1) Both Churches agree that life in the church is life in communion (*koinonia*) after the paradigm of the Trinity; this life is characterized by witness (*kerygma* or *martyria*), worship (*leitourgia*), and service (*diakonia*). This life in communion is salvific because it participates in the renewal of all things in Christ until all is restored to communion with God.
- 2) In both Churches, church practice, most notably: *diakonia*, is understood as the "liturgy after the liturgy." In the liturgy, which transmits the faith of the Church and relates the created world to God, the faithful are invited to and strengthened for their part in the Church's pilgrimage of faith in the world. The missionary work of the church is an essential part of this continuation of the liturgy in everyday life.
- 3) Both Churches use a very careful hermeneutical approach when it comes to discernment in ethical matters: the precise study of doctrine and the thorough interpretation of the Bible are combined with constructive cultural criticism and attention to the life enhancing aspects of ethical decisions.
- 4) Both Churches recognize that the inculturation of the Gospel in diverse contexts may lead to differences in church practice and ethical decision making. They are convinced, however, that these differences are best understood as resulting from cultural differences and as part of the harmony of the ecumenical journey towards unity.

### REVIEW OF THE DIALOGUE PROCESS

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At the end of this stage of the dialogue process, it is possible to review the results so far and to formulate conclusions on the basis of that. Therefore, a systematic review of the dialogue process so far is presented here.

1. The Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht are both in full communion with the Churches of the Anglican Communion. Therefore, the commission concentrated upon certain areas of discussion, either because

these seemed potentially controversial, or because the commission hoped that a discussion would be particularly enriching. A systematic approach, however, which deals with all aspects of the faith, seemed not necessary.

2. The two Churches have pursued very different paths in history. The Mar Thoma Syrian Church is rooted in the Syriac tradition and the tradition of its reformation of 1836, which was influenced by the Church Mission Society. Though the church was under Portuguese and Roman Catholic hegemony from 1599 onwards, it established its autocephaly in 1653. The Old Catholic Churches are rooted in the Latin catholic tradition, they consider themselves in continuation with various conciliar movements in the Western church that were in conflict with the See of Rome and its universalist claims. Their existence outside of the Roman communion started in 1723 in the Netherlands, and after the First Vatican Council (1870) in other countries.
3. Both Churches underline the importance of being rooted in the tradition of the Ancient Church. For the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople and Ephesus are of high importance and remembered in the liturgy of Holy Qurbana and the other sacraments. The theological reflection within the Mar Thoma Syrian Church has come to rediscover the richness of the early Syriac teachers of the faith. The Old Catholic Churches refer to the seven Ecumenical Councils of the first millennium, while acknowledging that the later councils sought to further develop the faith that had been confessed by the earlier ones. A rediscovery of the Eastern patristic tradition has greatly influenced Old Catholic thinking.
4. Both churches uphold the importance of participatory decision making and the responsibility of both clergy and lay people. In the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the main decision-making bodies are the Episcopal Synod, the Sabha Council, and the Prathinidhi Mandalam (General Assembly); the latter two include a majority of lay people. The Old Catholic Churches have their national synods, which also include a majority of lay people, as well as different other national bodies, and the International Bishops' Conference.
5. Concerning potentially controversial areas, the commission is pleased to find substantial agreement in all of its discussions: In Christology, the faith is substantially the same, although Old Catholic theology is used to expressing it in Chalcedonian terms, while this is not the case in the theology of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. Consensus could also be reached on the question of Scripture and tradition. In the theology of sacraments, the role of Mother of the Lord and of the saints, the remembrance of the faithful departed as well as the theology of symbols and icons, there are differences in practice and interpretation, but the underlying faith is the same. As for other differences in church life and ethical understanding, these are clearly due to the cultural differences between India, the home of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, on the one hand, and Western and Central Europe, the home of the Old Catholic Church, on the other hand. – The discovery that consensus could be reached on these potentially controversial subjects deepened mutual trust and strengthened the will to proceed further on the common ecumenical path towards unity.
6. Concerning mutual enrichment, discussions on spirituality, mission and inculturation proved to be particularly interesting. The interaction between different theological methodologies and approaches was very fruitful, and it was an especially enriching experience to see that they led to very similar results. Historical background information on the roots and the development of the two churches was extremely helpful to understand both the theology and the practice of the two churches. The dialogue was



also greatly helped by the participation of both churches in the broader ecumenical movement and their commitment to the cause of ecumenism.

### CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

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The members of the consultation rejoice in the spiritual fellowship that they experienced and in the mutually enriching exchange of views and the charitable discussions. On the basis of this consultation and the previous meetings of the dialogue commission, the members of the commission are of the conviction that their two churches share the same faith, which is also the faith of the early church. Therefore, they consider the formal establishment of a communion relationship, in analogy to the relationship of both churches to the Churches of the Anglican Communion, a very distinct and highly desirable possibility. With these concluding remarks, the commission respectfully submits 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 churches in communion.

#### AS AGREED BY:

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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 Very Rev. Prof. Dr. K.G. Pothan

The Rev. Sam T. Koshy

The Rev. Shiby Varghese

The delegation of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht

The Rt. Rev. Dr. John Okoro (co-chair)

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Harald Rein (observer)

The Rev. Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit

The Rev. Dr. Adrian Suter