

The Santhigiri Statement

Of the joint consultation of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, Santhigiri Ashram, Alwaye, Kerala, 7-11 November, 2011

0. Introduction

In the course of the past years, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht have engaged in dialogue and exchange in a number of ways. This has included the shared use of churches, the exchange of theological students, visits of delegations consisting of bishops and clergy, as well as a visit of the Archbishop of Utrecht to Maramon (Bible convention) and a visit of Bishop Mar Philoxenos to the Synod of the Old Catholic Church of Austria.

As a next step on this ecumenical journey, at the request of the Most Rev. Dr. Joseph Mar Thoma Metropolitan and the Most Rev. Dr. Joris Vercammen, Archbishop of Utrecht, representatives of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht met from 7-11 November 2011 in Santhigiri Ashram, Alwaye, Kerala, India. The meeting took place in order to explore the basis for a formal dialogue between the two churches. The delegations consisted of, for the Mar Thoma Syrian Church: the Rt. Rev. Dr. Zacharias Mar Theophilos Suffragan Metropolitan, the Rt. Rev. Dr. Isaac Mar Philoxenos, the Rev. Dr. K.G. Pothen (co-convener), the Rev. Dr. M.C. Thomas, and the Rev. Sam Koshy (Mar Thoma Syrian Church), and for the Old Catholic Church: Rt. Rev. Dr. John Okoro (co-convener), the Rev. Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit, and the Rev. Dr. Adrian Suter. In the course of the meeting, the members of the consultation joined in prayer, formal and informal theological discussion, while the Old Catholic members had the opportunity to familiarize themselves more with the life and context of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. As a result of the joint deliberations, the following common statement became possible. In it, insights on commonalities and differences between the two churches are presented, as well as considerations and proposals as to topics in need of further discussion and the methodology required for a fruitful dialogue.

1. Areas of Discussion

The consultation discussed papers on both churches' understanding of ecclesiology, Baptism, and the Eucharist. In the course of these discussions, a number of other topics were touched upon as well. The results of these deliberations are presented here.

1.1. *Ecclesiology*

We recognize that both the Mar Thoma Syrian and the Old Catholic traditions see the Church as a communion of salvation, bound together with God through the trinitarian mystery of salvation; it is characterized by a life of *leitourgia*, *martyria*, and *diakonia* and stands in apostolic succession, of which the threefold apostolic ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons is a central expression.

It exercises the ministry of Word and Sacrament, with its priestly, prophetic, and governing dimensions.

Both churches have structures of church governance that are characterized by episcopal leadership and structures that assure the participation of laity and clergy alike in processes of discernment and decision making.

Both churches affirm their belief in the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” and consider themselves as realisations of the same.

For this reason, both churches see themselves as participating in the fullness of salvation and are oriented towards communion with other churches.

Both churches can also recognize that they share a history of being autonomous churches in apostolic tradition.

Both Churches also underline the ecclesiological significance of the Eucharistic assembly, while simultaneously stressing the necessity of communion on various levels of the life of the Church. As a result, both churches can identify with the tradition and language of Eucharistic ecclesiology.

1.2. Sacraments and Sacramental Theology

The life of both Churches is characterized by the celebration of seven sacraments (Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation/Chrismation, Confession, Marriage, Ordination, and Anointing of the Sick) as means of initiation into the Church and as means of sanctification by God’s grace. At the same time, the proclamation of the Word of God is an indispensable part of every liturgical celebration. The consultation discussed the respective understandings of Baptism and Eucharist, as well as sacramental theology in general.

The consultation also discussed the question of the ordination of women to the apostolic ministry. The Mar Thoma Syrian Church does not disagree with such ordinations theologically, but, for reasons of tradition and culture, does not ordain women to the apostolic ministry. Most Old Catholic Churches do ordain women to the apostolic ministry. However, this question was not seen as a church-dividing difference between the two Churches.

1.2.1. Baptism

Both churches regard baptism as a means of grace, effecting a person’s initiation into the communion of the church and its faith, as well as into a life of discipleship. In both churches, children born into families that are members of the church are commonly baptized as infants, while unbaptized adults joining the church are baptized following their conversion. Both churches celebrate the Baptism of an anointed candidate with sanctified water in the Name of the Triune God and complete it by Chrismation. The minister of baptism is the Bishop or a priest; in

the Old Catholic tradition, in special pastoral cases and with a specific commission by the bishop or the responsible priest, Baptism is also administered by deacons.

1.2.2. Eucharist

Concerning the Eucharist, its contents and structure, broad consensus was noted. Both churches understand the Eucharist as the remembrance of God's salvific acts, making these present to the assembled congregation in the sharing of bread and wine as the Body and Blood of Christ. The Eucharistic celebration unites heaven and earth, past and present, and joins the Church with the entirety of creation in its worship of God. Both churches agree on the affirmation of the unique presence of Christ, as a mystery, in the celebration and the elements, but do not express this faith using models such as transubstantiation, consubstantiation, or receptionism. The Eucharist is presided over by the Bishop or, in his stead, a priest.

1.3. The Communion of Saints

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.

As to the veneration of and prayer to saints, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Church differ: Due to the abuses related to the veneration of and prayer to saints, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church has rejected such veneration and prayer at the time of its reformation and they are no longer in use now. By contrast, the Old Catholic Church retained the use of prayer to and veneration of saints in a theologically qualified way. Both churches reject the abuse of the veneration of and prayer to saints. The current consultation does not see the existing differences as touching the fundamentals of the faith.

With regard to the prayer for the departed and the role of images and icons in the church, the differences between both churches seem to be similar.

1.4. Christology

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.” 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; this question needs to be further discussed between the two churches.

2. Areas for further Discussion

Based on the above considerations, the consultation was able to identify a number of areas that would merit further discussion in a dialogue between the two churches. Discussion of these topics is needed, partly because we discussed them only briefly or not at all, partly because our discussion left open questions that still seem relevant for our ongoing ecumenical journey:

- a. Since the Mar Thoma Syrian Church is non-Chalcedonian, while the Old Catholic Church is Chalcedonian, Christology cannot be dealt with by just referring to a common tradition. We therefore need a discussion about our understanding of Christology.
- b. There has been only limited discussion on the question how the two churches see the ordained ministry. Further information on this issue, that is crucial for many ecumenical dialogues, is needed.
- c. Since the two churches differ in their attitude towards same-sex relationships, we need a deeper reflection on how to deal with diversity with regard to ethical issues.
- d. The importance of Scripture and its relation to Tradition and the Church also seems to be in need of further joint exploration.
- e. Also the fact that the Mar Thoma Syrian Church considers the first three ecumenical councils as authoritative, while the Old Catholic Church considers seven ecumenical councils as authoritative, needs further exploration.
- f. Similarly, the differences between the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Church regarding: a) images and icons, b) the saints, and c) the faithful departed, are in need of further discussion.

3. Methodology

Personal meetings of a joint commission are indispensable in order to enhance mutual trust and clarify open questions. At the same time, such meetings are both time-consuming and expensive. Therefore, it is very important that such meetings work as effectively as possible. Both delegations should be well prepared. This includes:

- a. common agreement on the agenda of the meeting;
- b. reflection of the own theological position on these issues;

- c. careful study of official and/or representative documents of the other church on these issues.

Every delegation should provide the other with documents of the own church concerning the issues that are to be discussed, in so far as such documents are available in English. Such documents could include:

- a. official statements by the church's governing bodies;
- b. presentations of the church's position in reference works;
- c. consensus texts from other ecumenical dialogues;
- d. official comments on ecumenical statements (for example on the Lima report).

Each delegation draws up a short commentary to clarify the status of the documents involved. Whenever one delegation finds relevant differences or issues of possible dissent, the issue is put on the agenda of the joint commission.

4. Conclusion

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. We hope to have assisted in paving the way for a formal dialogue between our churches. Certainly, we recommend our churches to pursue such a common ecumenical journey, given the large areas of agreement between our churches.

As agreed by:

The delegation of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Zacharias Mar Theophilos Suffragan Metropolitan
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Isaac Mar Philoxenos
The Rev. Dr. K.G. Pothen
The Rev. Dr. M.C. Thomas
The Rev. Sam Koshy

The delegation of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht
The Rt. Rev. Dr. John Okoro
The Rev. Prof. Dr. Peter-Ben Smit
The Rev. Dr. Adrian Suter