

AC - RC

JOINT COMMISSION FOR THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE
BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE ASSYRIAN CHURCH OF THE EAST

COMMUNIQUÉ
Rome, November 16-19 2022

The fourteenth plenary session of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East took place from 16–19 November 2022 at the Domus Sanctae Marthae in the Vatican, hosted by the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity. It was the fourth session of the third phase initiated in 2017 on the theme of the mystery of the Church in both Latin and Syriac traditions. The Commission was co-chaired by His Beatitude Mar Meelis Zaia, Metropolitan of Australia, New Zealand and Lebanon, and the Most Reverend Johan Bonny, Bishop of Antwerp.

The Joint Commission finalized a study document entitled “The Images of the Church in the Syriac and Latin Patristic Traditions.” The document sets out to present some images and symbols of the Church evoked by the Scriptures and developed by the Latin and Syriac Fathers of the early centuries. Its purpose is to show that the images of the Church, common to both traditions, although sometimes expressed and understood with different nuances, may help us to find together the foundations of a common ecclesiology. The document reflected on nine images: the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the bride of Christ, the mother, the vineyard, the “spiritual hospital”, the flock and the ship.

As the document states: “The ecclesiology of the Fathers, especially those of the early centuries, is formulated in a typological and symbolic language rather than in conceptual and systematic presentations [...] Such symbolic language is accessible to all. Even today, it may speak more to our contemporaries than conceptual language which, of course, remains necessary [...] The images of the Church, shared by both the Latin and Syriac traditions, have great ecumenical value. They invite us to reflect on the unity of the Church.”

The meeting of the Commission coincided with the first official visit of His Holiness Mar Awa III, elected and enthroned as Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East in September 2021. On Saturday 19 November, His Holiness Pope Francis met with His Holiness Mar Awa III, and received the Commission in audience at the Apostolic Palace. In his address, Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III expressed the conviction that “the unity of the Churches of Christ is an imperative for all of us, in order that we might bring about concrete change in the world for the betterment of all of humanity.” In his response, Pope Francis affirmed: “It is important that on our ecumenical journey we draw ever closer together, not only by returning to our common roots, but also by proclaiming together to the contemporary world, through our witness of life and with our words of life, the mystery of the love between Christ and his bride, the Church.”

During his visit to the Vatican, Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III and the members of the Commission were also received on 16 November by Cardinal Kurt Koch, Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, in the presence of Cardinals Pietro Parolin, Leonardo Sandri and Peter Turkson.

The members of the Joint Commission prayed for the repose of the soul of Very Reverend Thomas A. Baima, who passed away in April 2021. Father Baima played an important role in the resumption in 2017 of the Commission, of which he was an active and valued member. The Commission also informally exchanged ecumenical news of the last three years marked by the pandemic and other pastoral challenges faced by both Churches, in the Middle East and the West.

The Commission will re-convene in Rome in 21-25 November 2023 for its fifth session of the third phase on the theme "Liturgy in the life of the Church: A comparative study of the Latin and Church of the East's liturgical traditions".

The Assyrian delegation included His Grace Mar Awgin Kuriakose, Patriarchal Administrator of the Archdiocese of India and the Gulf; His Grace Mar Paulus Benjamin, Bishop of Chicago and Eastern USA; His Grace Mar Abris Youkhanan, Bishop of Kirkuk and Diana and Patriarchal Auxiliary; Archdeacon William Toma, Under-Secretary of the Synod (Co-Secretary); and Cor-bishop George Toma.

The Catholic delegation included the Most Reverend Antoine Audo, SJ, Bishop of Aleppo for the Chaldeans; Professor Dr. Theresia Hainthaler, Honorary Professor of Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology, Frankfurt; Reverend Father Jijimon Puthuveettilkalam, SJ, from Campion Hall, Oxford University; and the Reverend Father Hyacinthe Destivelle, OP, Official of the Dicastery (Co-Secretary). Most Reverend Francis Kalabat, Bishop of Saint Thomas for the Chaldeans, USA, was not able to attend.

[<http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiesa-assira-dell-oriente/commissione-internazionale-di-dialogo-tra-la-chiesa-cattolica-e-/sessione-plenarie---rapporti/2019-rome1.html>].