

Metropolitan Bishop of Damiette, *A Documentary on the Nestorian Assyrian Church of the East, Its History, Present Condition and Doctrines, (A Serious Ecclesial Ecumenical Case)* Cairo 2004.

His Eminence Metropolitan Bishop of Damiette, who is the Head of the Monastery of Saint Demiana and General Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church, speaks in the *Preface* to his book that „some Arabic books have been published in the past decade, which might result in doctrinal harm to their readers.” He continues to say that the immediate reason of publishing this book is a certain book in Arabic published by a Coptic monk in Egypt, defending the doctrines of the Nestorian Church. The author says: „The book in your hand is intended to clarify most of the facts surrounding the Assyrian Church of the East” He quotes in the *Preface* some citations from the Coptic Synods, asserting the heterodoxy of the Assyrian Church. The issues involved in the whole discussion are the following: 1. The question concerning Nestorius. 2. The question concerning Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mop-suestia. 3. The present day position of the Church of the East.

It appears that Amba Bishop mixes these three points and asserts out rightly that the Church of the East is Nestorian. He repeats in his book the old Egyptian antagonism towards the Antiochene traditions, and especially towards the Church of the East. He simply repeats the age old condemnation of the Antiochene Fathers and their Christology without seriously making reevaluation on the basis of the new documents and studies. He reiterates the opinions of the past, without taking into account sufficiently, seriously and ecumenically the new understanding regarding the Church of the East and the Antiochene writers and Fathers, venerated by that Church. He attempts at proving that the Assyrian Church of the East is still even today Nestorian. It seems that he identifies the *Content of Faith* with the *Formula of Faith* and that he does not accept the *plurality in theology* and the concept *Hierarchy of Truths*, which are very important in today's ecumenical world. He demands that the Assyrians curse their Fathers of Faith before their admission to the *Middle East Council of Churches*. His citations against the Church of the East and of the Antiochene Writers are

mostly from early writers, who did not have access to the writings, available at present to the modern scholars. He does not recognize the explanations given by the Assyrian Delegates in international Conferences regarding their Christology and Faith. He simply ignores their openness and honesty and reaffirms that they are Nestorians. In short, it seems that he wants to alienate the present day Assyrian Church of the East from all the ecumenical discussions and isolate them, as many did for the past centuries and hinder any ecumenical progress emerging from the current ecumenical discussions.

Diodore and Theodore. Modern scholars have done a lot of research on Diodore and Theodore and made available their extant writings to the modern readers. Serious scholars have shown that the surviving fragments and writings of Diodore, bishop of Tarsus, who died in the communion of the Catholic Church, contain no Nestorian heresy.

There are at present in the past thirty years, very many serious studies on Theodore of Mopsuestia, who also died in the communion of the Catholic Church, and was venerated as a saintly bishop, even during his life time and afterwards, in the Catholic Church. Amba Bishop does not refer to these writings and does not make use of them. These studies have sufficiently proved that the *authentic Theodore* does not speak of *two parsope*, but of one *unique parsopa of Filiation of the Word*, the common *parsopa* which is the *Parsopa of Economy*. In his *Catechetical Homilies* and in his *Commentary on John* and in the other extant works, one does not at all find Nestorianism. But the hostile fragments, culled out of context by his adversaries, may contain statements, erroneous if interpreted in the light of the Alexandrian Christology. It is today clear to all the students of history that in the Cyrillian Council of Ephesus (431) (which is accepted by the Churches at large as an Ecumenical Council) and at the Council of 553 (convened by Justinian, the Emperor), the valid and authentic Antiochene Christological tradition was not at all taken into consideration. It was simply ignored and rejected to uphold the Alexandrian tradition alone, as normative for the whole Church.

Nestorius. Even Nestorius himself had constantly denied the accusation leveled against him that he taught the doctrine of *two sons* and quaternity instead of Trinity and that Christ was a simple man, in whom the Godhead resided, resulting in a moral union. He repeatedly denied that there are two persons in the Incarnate Lord. „He is not one and another in Person, but he is one and another in nature”. Hence the saying *Mother of Christ* is valid as Christ is God and man. He used the expression *synapheia*, as it was used by Gregory Naziansen and he quotes from Gregory where he compares the Trinitarian union with the Christological union. It is there that Gregory used the expression *synapheia*, considering that it is a better expression to assert the absolute unity and the diversities both in the Trinity and in Jesus Christ. Gregory made it clear that in the Trinity there are three persons, but in Christ there are only two natures in the one Person. Nestorius quotes it and makes it his own.

Down through the centuries the Coptic tradition stood for the Cyrillian Orthodoxy in the 431 version and did not show the pliability which Cyril showed at 433 for reconciliation with the Antiochenes. The Antiochene position was further clarified by Mar Babai the Great († 628) of Mount Izla in his *Liber de Unione*. From his clarification, the orthodoxy of the Antiochene Christology becomes clear without any doubt.

Alexandrian and Antiochene positions. *Alexandrian Christology*, from the time of Origen, used to predicate all the predicates to the *Word of God* as the subject of predication. They started with the Word of God and insist on the oneness of the person. It is unitive Christology. They use the expression natural union and hypostatic union to designate the union of the two natures in Christ. It is Platonic in its philosophical background and *allegoric* and *anagogic* in its biblical exegesis.

The Antiochenes on the other hand do not predicate all the predicates to the *Word of God*, but to the Son, Christ, Son of God, our Lord and our Savior and our God. Their starting point is the historical biblical Jesus Christ and they insist on the duality of natures in the one Person, who is the Son. It is *parsopic union*. The union of the two natures takes place in the one Parsopa of Filiation or of Economy. They are Aristotelian in their philosophy and typological, literal and historical in their biblical exegesis. In the past there was confrontation between these two positions. But today many serious minded writers see both these as complementary and not contradictory.

Cyril and Nestorius. Cyril and Nestorius represent the two ancient traditions of the Church. St. Cyril was one of the eminent theologians of Christian antiquity. Nestorius was a pastor of souls, seriously concerned about the orthodoxy of the Church against the Arians and the Apollinarians and other heretics. Both had their particular backgrounds and ecclesial concerns. But after the Ephesene conflict (431), the Alexandrian Cyrillian Christology became normative and the Antiochene tradition was simply ignored and was not reevaluated until recently.

Recent studies. Recent studies threw much light on the Antiochene Christology and showed the complementarity of the various Christologies developed in the Church, such as the Chalcedonian/neo-Chalcedonian Christology, the Christology of the Oriental Orthodox (of the so called Monophysites) and the Christology of the Assyrian Church of the East (of the so-called Nestorians). Thus the *one nature (mia physis-one kyana, one qnoma)* Christology of the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the *two qnome* Christology (*two kyane, two qnome and one parsopa of Filiation*) of the Church of the East are accepted together with the *hypostatic union*, the *hypostasis synthetos* and *enhy-postasis* (of the Chalcedonians and neo-Chalcedonians), as authentic explanations of the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The incarnate Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, is one Person in two natures and is unique. But he is seen from several angles, because He is an inexhaustible mystery. No theology can

fully comprehend the depth of the Lord. He is one but the description about him is not one and identical. No theology can claim exclusiveness in the comprehension of the Lord and no Christology can be normative to judge the other Christological developments in the Church, once the basic truth about Jesus Christ is recognized by them, that He is fully God and fully man.

The Assyrian Church of the East. Down through the centuries, the Church in the Persian Empire was branded as Nestorian and nobody tried to re-evaluate the statements of the past. But recent studies based on authentic sources and on their own Syriac background have shown that in their liturgical and canonical collection, *they do not teach the Nestorian heresy*. It is clear to all those who read the sources, objectively and ecumenically and without prejudice. Ecumenically means that they have to be read in their own particular philosophical, theological and exegetical backgrounds. They have to be understood as they clarify the terms. Today in the ecumenical discussions they have clarified that the incarnate Lord is one Person. He is both God and man. He is unique. He is our God and Lord and Savior. They made it clear in their Christological agreement with the Catholic Church in 1994. They do not divide the one Christ into two persons and do not say that Christ is a simple man in whom Godhead resided. When they speak of *two qnome*, they do not intend to speak of person, but they refer to the actual existence of the divinity and humanity in Christ. In addition, they use concrete and abstract expressions interchangeably. Thus they use man instead of humanity, God instead of divinity. They inherited this from the Antiochene tradition. There is no justification today in calling them Nestorian heretics. They never taught the Nestorian heresy.

Nestorianism or Nestorian heresy. Nestorian heresy teaches that there are two persons in Jesus Christ, one of man and another of God. They are united morally as between husband and wife or as among friends. Mary is the mother of the man Jesus and hence she cannot be called the Mother of God.

This heresy is not seen in the liturgical and canonical traditions of the Church of the East. The Roman Catholic Church has recently accepted their liturgical preference of calling Mary, *Mother of Christ*, our Savior and our Lord and God.

Ecumenism. Times have changed and the Christians are asked to be forward looking and not merely preservers of past traditions. Past was meaningful, but we do not live in the 5th century and the problems facing the Churches are not the problems of the 5th century. All the Churches have to face the new challenges of materialism, consumerism and religious indifferentism and persecution in several forms. The Churches have an obligation to show that Christianity is valid and relevant even today and it is for the contemporary man. They have to show that the Church of Christ is salvific for the modern man. Today a united witnessing is very necessary to present Christ to the modern man in the 21st century. Moreover the world is becoming one global village and nobody; no Church, can live in isolation and can isolate others and other Churches. Tradi-

tions may be sacred but if the traditions do not help to love our neighbor and do not allow to extend our hands to our brother Christians, that tradition becomes meaningless. We may not be living for the present but we live for the past dead people and for their dead traditions.

The present work of His Eminence Metropolitan Amba Bishop of Damiette is a going back to the old days of antagonism and animosity and does not at all exhibit genuine Christian charity and ecumenical spirit. It shows a very fundamentalist attitude which is very unchristian. In the process of the unity of Christians, no one can be forced to accept the formulations of any Church, even of the Ecumenical Councils. But one can evaluate whether there exists the *content of Faith* in a particular church tradition, in the light of the *Hierarchy of Truths*. No precondition can lead to the path of unity. Ecumenism is a joint search for the truth and objectivity and not for the imposition of the formulas of any group on others, how much sacred they may be for that tradition. Unless the Churches stand as equal partners, no genuine dialogue can take place and no unity can emerge. No church can dictate its formulas to others.

The same is true regarding the *veneration of saints*. Each Church has its own list of saints and heretics. In the ecumenical situation, Churches can refrain from calling the saints of other Churches as heretics. It is not necessary that immediately they accept the saints of the other Churches. But no Church should put a precondition for dialogue, the condemnation of the fathers and saints of their Churches. It is not the genuine ecumenical methodology.

The Churches in the Middle East lived in isolation and hostility for 1500 years in the midst of hostile surrounding, mutually accusing as Monophysites and Nestorians. No Church gained anything from this type of anti-Christian outlook, rather the enemies have swallowed the quarrelling factions of Christianity and today we have come to the present day situation, as we witness there. Erosion of Faith and loss of membership was the net result. The question we would like to put before the author is this: Should we continue this attitude till the end of time? Or is there no way out from this life situation in the Middle East? How does this book help to create better human and Christian atmosphere among the Churches, especially better relationship with the Church of the East?

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