

# Conclusions of the Continental Assembly of the Synod Catholic Churches in the Middle East

February 13<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Harissa-Lebanon

## “The name of the Church is Synod”<sup>1</sup>

### Foreword

1. The Catholic Churches in the Middle East (Coptic, Maronite, Greek-Melkite, Syriac, Chaldean, Armenian and Latin) held their Synodal Continental Assembly in Bethania (Harissa, Lebanon) from February 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023. The participants were from Egypt, the Holy Land, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and the Arabian Gulf. Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, General Relator of the 2021-2024 Synod on Synodality, and Sister Nathalie Becquart, Undersecretary of the Synod, were also present. In addition to the Patriarchs, the delegations included bishops and priests, religious men and women, and laypeople of all ages. The total number of participants was 125, including 40 lay and consecrated women (married and single) and 40 laymen (adults and young people of all ages, married and single), as well as people with disabilities. The Assembly was also attended by friends from the Orthodox and Protestant Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), as well as agnostic men and women. Some representatives of Muslim denominations also took part in the opening session.

2. The Synodal *Document for the Continental Stage* mapped the path of this Synodal Assembly. It was a Pentecostal moment during which all its members allowed themselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit, so much that prayer was the foundation on which the axes of daily reflections were built, both during the plenary assemblies and the group work. Mutual listening was the reference paradigm, while participation reflected the spirit of communion that reigned among the members of the Assembly. This communion reached its fullness in the Eucharist, which was celebrated each day according to one of the rites of the Eastern Churches and crowned each day's work. Moreover, the meditation of the Word of God and the spiritual conversations created an atmosphere of fraternity, trust, courage and responsibility during the deliberations, through which the participants attempted to shed valuable light on the fundamental question: “*How can the Church become more synodal?*”

3. The careful and meticulous organization of the Assembly created a relaxed and serene atmosphere that constituted a valuable motivation for hard and serious work. The credit for this goes to the immense effort made by the Secretary General of the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East, in collaboration with the organizing committee and other committees that prepared and accompanied the work of the Assembly.

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<sup>1</sup> John Chrysostome, *Explicatio in Psalmum* 149: PG 55, 493

## **I. “He pitched His tent among us” (Jn 1:14): The Word of God amid His People**

4. The presence of the Incarnate Word among us and in us did not cease, from the opening prayer until the end of the proceedings, to guide our steps during this Synodal Assembly. We listened to and celebrated the Word, and we meditated on what His Holy Spirit inspired us to do today. We realized that the People of God living in the Middle East are constantly being called to walk under the guidance of the Word and in the strength of the Spirit, in the midst of challenges, changes and misfortunes, animated by the hope of seeing this world transfigured into the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of peace, justice and joy, where God’s love is bestowed, without distinction, on all human beings.

5. God invites His Church to form first and foremost a single community, who listens to His Word, who walks under His guidance, who discerns what the Word reveals in order to share it when the Church goes out to meet every human being, and who remains faithful to their mission. Going out into the world is the reason for the Church’s existence; it is her vocation. The Word precedes the Church, and traces for her the path according to which, thanks to the inspirations of the Spirit who leads her, apprehends the needs of her People and of the world. In the first chapter of the Gospel of St. John, the Word emanates from the Father and “pitches His tent” among us; indeed, He pitches His tent in us – in His People and in His Church. Through His incarnation, the only begotten Son accomplished the sacramental presence of God, making it real and tangible, for God’s dwelling place is no longer restricted to any one place: it has become concrete in His mystical Body and in the union of its members. The more this Body remains united, harmonious and open, the more it allows the “Word” that is in it to come out to meet every man and woman.

6. The expression “pitching His tent” sums up God’s entire journey with His people, from the metaphor of the Ark of the Covenant or the Tent of Meeting in the Old Testament, to the Book of Revelation, the crowning book of the New Testament, where God pitches His tent in the New Jerusalem. God’s journey with His People is thus completed in glory, as He spreads His tent above His People and in their midst, once and for all and until eternity, by the virtue of His Incarnate Word. In turn, the Church also pitches her tent, in response to God’s presence and action in her, and moves on until she reaches her dwelling place, which is, as we learn in the Book of Revelation 12:12, the heavenly house: “Therefore rejoice, you heavens, and you who have pitch your tents in them!” This exhortation to joy recapitulates the celebration of salvation and the praise of the hymn of ultimate victory, as a sign of Christian hope, overcoming all our fears, anxieties and uncertainties, and transcending all tangible, perceptible and visible reality.

7. Throughout the history of salvation, God accompanies His people and offers them His Word and Spirit – all that He has and possesses. However, in the New Testament, God’s journey with His people is accomplished in an unprecedented way; through the incarnation of His Son, who manifests God’s indefectible and undeniable love to mankind. There lies the eternal covenant, the perennial communion, because through Jesus Christ the union between God and human is completed once and for all (*Ephapax*). The synodality that we aspire to live fully will only reach its paroxysm through the communion by which God introduces us, as His People, to His divine Trinitarian life and to our communion with one another, provided that we gather around the Word and the Body of the Risen Lord, and that we work according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in order to achieve communion with the world through the proclamation of the Good News and the bond to the cause of human dignity.

## II. The synodality of the Church: nature and signs

8. Synodality is not a casual thing in the life of the Church. It is a sign inherent in her nature. True synodality is, for us, members of the mystical body of Christ, identification with Christ and imitation of His way of life. Since Christ is risen, He “being, in very nature, God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:6-8). It was among us that He pitched the tent of His divinity and His humanity, and led us from death to resurrection, thus opening the way to divine life. He accompanied us on the path of life and was attentive to our trials, sharing our joys and offering us His love to the end. For us, Christ is the Way (Jn 14:6). That is why the first Christians were called “fellow companions,” “followers of Jesus” (*sequela Jesu*, the following of Jesus).

9. The Church is synodal through her very nature, for it is not only an institutional and juridical body, but first and foremost the mystery of Christ who works among and in those who believe in Him (*Lumen Gentium*, 1-5). This work is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, who was given to the Church on the day of Pentecost to accompany her in her mission and to direct her “with hierarchical and charismatic gifts” (*Lumen Gentium*, 4). In this way, the faithful walk in the footsteps of the Risen Christ, listen to His word and unanimously discern His will in the light of the Holy Spirit, agreeing in dialogue on the modalities of its accomplishment *hic et nunc*, according to the context and the requirements of the Kingdom.

10. The synodal Church is the Church of unity, catholicity, holiness and apostolicity. These four signs constitute the Church of God in a place, in a “*humus*”, i.e., in a history, geography, culture, language, challenges, traditions, poetry, stories, etc. Our Synodal Church is the Church of the Arab East, as it was portrayed by the late Father Jean Corbon: A Church announcing the mystery of Christ, and a faithful witness of the Good News, even to the point of martyrdom. It is true that she carries the deposit of faith and transmits it in “jars of clay” (2 Co 4,7), enduring suffering, fragility and fear; yet she keeps alive the spirit of hope. It is undeniable that synodality consolidates unity, manifests catholicity, leads to holiness and safeguards the bond of apostolicity and mission. This can be seen in the common journey of a people united by the Word of God, His will and His divine economy; a people sanctified by the Holy Spirit, who constantly renews in them the life of the Risen Christ; a people that gathers without any distinction, because “in Jesus Christ there is no longer slave nor free” (Gal 3:28), because the whole of humanity forms the family of God; a people who, throughout the centuries, has never ceased to bring the Good News from the Apostles and the Churches to the world in a flexible spirit of creativity that adapts to the changes of context and circumstances. Synodality is based on the work of the Holy Spirit, who transfigures us *hic et nunc* into the new People of God, the mystical Body of Christ, the living Temple of the Spirit.

11. Our Churches find themselves in the midst of a struggle for survival and active presence, in order to meet the challenges of unity in a world divided and undermined by egoism and self-centeredness; the challenges of holiness in a world that has lost its spiritual and human values; the challenges of catholicity in a world dominated by discrimination, and whose behavior is marked by unacceptable racism; the challenges of apostolicity in a world where over-mediatization obscures the evangelical values of love, justice and peace. These challenges take on an extremely serious dimension in the Middle East, where armed conflicts, violence, hatred and war are exacerbated. A common journey of the Churches, in a spirit of authentic synodality, is the only way to guarantee the proclamation of the Good News and the coming of

the Kingdom of God. This process requires a common journey of the People of God and an active collaboration in order to heal the wounds, to console the sorrows, to be in solidarity in the trials, to purify the memory, and to collectively elaborate decisions and put them into practice.

### **III. Synodality in our Eastern Theological Tradition**

**12.** The theology of our Eastern Catholic Churches has always emphasized the meaning of synodality, referring to the mystery of the grace of salvation, the Trinitarian life and the earthly communion with the human race – a communion concretized in the summons of the People of God and their exhortation to gather in what was once called in Hebrew *Kahal*. In His plan, God sees His People as partners; a people made up of men, women and children, of strangers, responding to God’s call and flocking from all sides to worship Him, to listen to His Word, to discern His will and to act according to His precepts.

**13.** All of our Eastern Catholic Churches, with the exception of the Latin Church, have been established according to a patriarchal and synodal structure (see *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 7-11). However, synodality is first experienced, within these Churches, in the Liturgy, in the worship of the One and Triune God. No synod can be held if it is not inaugurated and closed by the celebration of the Eucharist – a sign of communion and unity, taking place in the presence of the People of God who explicitly approve and accept the resolutions taken. Unfortunately, for historical reasons, the synods of the Eastern Churches have become over the years simple annual assemblies limited to the participation of the bishops, following the example of the National Episcopal Conferences – although these synods are clearly distinguished from them by their nature, power and status conditioned by the reception of the whole People of God. It is undeniable, therefore, that the return to synodal practice, concretized by the presence of representatives of the entire ecclesiastical world, is more in keeping with the Pope’s exhortation to revalorize the theology of the People of God, to rekindle the sense of faith (*sensus fidei*), and to assume common apostolic responsibility in accordance with what is recommended in the second chapter of the constitution *Lumen Gentium* (9-18). In virtue of such a return, communion, collective work and commitment to the common mission will be revealed in a more radiant clarity.

**14.** As we mentioned above, our Eastern Catholic Churches have their origins in synodality, namely in the regional councils or synods which, according to historians, appeared in the region of Asia Minor in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Following the Council of Chalcedon, they were established as patriarchal churches according to the provisions of Justinian’s Code in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Over the centuries, patriarchal canon law evolved, especially following the restitution, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, of the union of our Churches with the Roman Apostolic See. Since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this patriarchal code was considerably affected by the confessional regime or system of *Millets* (confessional communities), according to which the laity participated as members in synods. Nevertheless, the interference of politics and personal interests led to the exclusion of the lay faithful from the synods, which paved the way for the emergence of a form of clericalism that emphasized the grip on power and authoritarianism in the process of promulgating decisions. Today, thanks to the exhortation of Pope Francis, we intend to re-emphasize the decisive role of all the members of the same ecclesial body, thus promoting the concrete application of synodality in all its dimensions.

**15.** Synodality in the East is indispensable for the management of plurality in all its forms. It is an ecclesiastical *praxis* approved in the synods of our patriarchal Churches, where the decision of the *protos*, or first, is conditioned by the assent of all, and where the outlook of all the members does not contradict the decision of the *protos*, in accordance with Canon 34 of the Apostles. This *praxis* also commands the Assemblies of National Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops who, in this region, work together to accomplish the same mission through the implementation of a common pastoral plan. The creation of the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East (CPCO) has strengthened this cooperation, and shows the importance of the process of common journey, which has been expressed above all in the Pastoral Letters addressed, from 1991 onwards, to the faithful of the different Churches, revealing and analyzing the most salient issues related to their presence and the proclamation of the Gospel in the Middle East. However, what characterizes this process of common journey within our Eastern Catholic Churches is precisely their joining in 1990, as a united ecclesial family, through the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), in order to live in communion with all their Christian brothers and sisters of the region, to engage together in addressing the difficult challenges they face and in common dialogue with Muslims, Jews and other parts of Middle Eastern society, and to journey together towards a worthy and effective proclamation of the Gospel.

**16.** In this common journey, our Churches were nourished by the universal Church and their communion with the Roman Pontiff. They thus contributed to the building of the catholicity of the Church, enriching it, thanks to their ecclesiastical, theological, patristic and cultural patrimony, by their presence, contribution and participation in the Roman Catholic councils and assemblies. They constantly reminded us of their value as a witness to the unity of Christ's Church, thus evoking the motto coined by Pope John Paul II: "The Church must breathe with her two lungs [the East and the West]!" (cf. *Ut unum sint*, 54). Indeed, our Churches can find in the synodal process a unique opportunity to renew themselves in fidelity to our Master, the Risen Lord, and in submission to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and to what He breathes into them today.

#### **IV. The experience of the Continental Synodal Assembly**

**17.** The participants in the Synodal Assembly expressed the difficulty of communicating under the harsh conditions that have affected, and continue to affect, the countries of the region, especially in terms of disruption, conflict and war. Taking charge of the priorities related to the survival and safeguarding of the Christian presence in the Middle East had a profound impact on the synodal process, common reflection, mutual listening, and especially the attention given to those who seem to live on the margins of ecclesial life, in conditions of estrangement and distance. To take a recent example, the earthquake that devastated parts of Turkey and Syria, and which has afflicted the minds and hearts of all the members of the Assembly – who carried the inhabitants of these devastated regions in their prayers and reflections, throughout their meeting with their representatives. They also did everything possible to express their communion and solidarity with the victims and their families. Today, the Synodal Assembly has rekindled hope for a new impetus to our Churches and their members to take up, with renewed vigor, a common journey of witness and mission, especially in a context of diverse cultures, religions, currents of thought, and the conditioning of each country, society, and people. Where its directives have been observed, the synodal process has enabled the members of our Churches to experience a common journey, to encourage mutual listening and freedom of expression, especially on the part of women and young people (A.C.P.B.L.<sup>2</sup>, §1.1, p3).

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<sup>2</sup> See List of Acronyms and References, p. 17.

**18.** The syntheses prepared and presented by the Churches during the Synodal Assembly, as well as the deliberations in the reflection and working groups, unanimously underlined the crucial importance of the following issues: Unity in Diversity; The Liturgy, Our Life; The Call to a Creative and Revitalized Ecumenism; A Church of Openness to the Other and to Differences; Communion and Hope in the Midst of Suffering: The Journey Toward a Humble Church; Renewal of Structures for a More Synodal Church; and finally the Media, Digital Culture, and their Contributions to Making the Church More Synodal.

#### **IV.1. Unity in diversity: a source of wealth or an obstacle?**

**19.** Since its birth, the Church of Antioch has experienced a diversity of ecclesial and liturgical ways of life, and has been open to the civilizations of the peoples who have taken up residence there, to their languages and traditions. Similarly, the Churches of the region have lived their unity in diversity, placing themselves at the service of the proclamation of the Gospel and the witness of the faith (A.C.P.B.L., §1.5 -p4). Their unity did not mean uniformity and fusion (E. Ch. I, p3). Rather, it meant a real sharing of the same good, a concerted response to the issues raised, and a common facet of the challenges to be met (A.C.H.E, p1). The foundation of this unity is the same baptism, communion in the same body of Christ, and the call to the same mission (A.C.P.B.L., §1.4, p4). Consequently, the one and plural Church is a Church constantly renewed by the Spirit of God, who confers upon it all kinds of charisms, ministries and structures, and strengthens it by the unity of initiation accomplished in its midst and by the integration of all members, without any exclusion (A.C.H.E., p2).

**20.** Within the Patriarchal Church, unity in diversity is manifested in the communion of the same synod, where the dioceses assume, in sharing, the responsibility of management and pastoral care, and cooperate in the care of the People of God, through the unity of liturgy, history, identity and hierarchy. This unity extends to communion with the Catholic Churches of the same country and region, resulting in the establishment of structures of synergy and partnership, such as the Assemblies of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops established in each of the countries of the region, or the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East. The aim is to foster cooperation in a common pastoral space, in the service of the same Gospel proclamation, and without losing each of the Churches' identity, historical, and illustrious tradition, which ratify unity in diversity, manifest the richness of plurality and its decisive role in the expression of the same faith, and concretize the catholicity of the Church, whether it be at the level of the Eastern Catholic Churches, with the Roman Catholic Church, or with the Orthodox and Protestant Churches of the Middle East.

**21.** Men and women, sons and daughters of our Churches, are competent beings, endowed with various charisms and talents which they willingly place at the service of the unity of the Church and its renewal (S. C. I., §17, p3). For this reason, it is incumbent upon the ecclesiastical authority, in close collaboration with the whole people, to discern well the various charisms and ministries surrounding them, so that all people may assume a common responsibility in different areas of ecclesial life (E. Ch. I, §21, 23 p10-11). In this regard, the role of the charismatic movements in Egypt was highlighted, especially their impact on the consolidation, through common worship and prayer, of fraternal bonds among young Catholics (A.C.H.E, p2). Others praised the efforts of religious orders to live authentically the evangelical virtues (E. Ch. I, §5 p4), recommending to appreciate the ministry of priests at its core value, especially in the present difficult circumstances (S. C. I., §15, p3). They also spoke of the mission of married priests and its positive impact on the family, children and youth. A request was made to re-examine the requirements for the preparation of married men to the reception of Holy Orders, and to

reconsider its theological, juridical, pastoral, human and social aspects (A.C.P.B.L., §3.13, p8).

**22.** However, maintaining unity in diversity is not easy; rather it is the gift of the Holy Spirit. In order to manage diversity within unity, enormous efforts and sacrifices must be made in a spirit of humility, fraternity, repentance and fidelity to Christ. The members of the Synodal Assembly had to point out certain grievances that are detrimental to the achievement of unity within each Church, leading to the dissension of the People of God and its dispersion, such as the tensions felt between clergy and laity and the aggravation of the gap that separates them from one another (A. P.E.C.L, §1.7, p4), as well as the abuses and ethical transgressions committed by the clergy, consecrated persons and laity in search of a life of luxury and wealth. These behaviors caused many young people to leave the Church (A.C.P.B.L., §2.3, p. 5-6), provoking a state of weariness and despondency among the priests who, because of the constraints, are seeing their numbers decrease (A.C.P.B.L., §1.7, p. 4).

**23.** Failure to address certain tensions would eventually lead to the disfigurement of this rich diversity, as well as to the misuse of hierarchical power, and thus turn us away from a spirit of communion and sharing. The exercise of ordained and non-ordained ministries is intended to build up the body of Christ harmoniously. Where power is not exercised in a spirit of service, trust between the faithful and clerics is eroded (C.C.C.S., §6, p2), and so the clerical spirit will prevail to the extent that bishops, priests and consecrated persons begin to abuse their power (A.C.H.E., p3). Assembly participants expressed dissatisfaction with ecclesiastical authorities who monopolize power and make decisions without consulting the faithful (S. C. I., §21, p4), and complained about the lack of coordination between ordained ministers and their lay partners (C. Ch. I., §8, p5). Others also noted the lack of coordination and cooperation between religious orders and dioceses (C. Ch. I., §4, p5). Such things lead to the exacerbation of a negative spirit, the alteration of the spiritual sense of communion (A.C.H.E., p3), and the questioning by the faithful of the relevance of the decisions issued by the ecclesiastical authority, when the latter monopolizes the power of decision to the detriment of the spirit of service, thus hindering the understanding of unity in diversity.

#### **IV.2. The Liturgy, Our Life**

**24.** The Pastoral Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* affirms that “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the font from which all her power flows. For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's supper.” (SC 10). Indeed, Liturgy is the life of the Churches in the East; its celebration constitutes the fundamental axis of ecclesial life (C. Ch. I., §13, p8). The high point of liturgical celebrations is undoubtedly the Eucharist, for it builds up the Church, the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12).

**25.** While recognizing the splendor of the liturgies and spiritualities proper to the Eastern Churches (A.C.O.H.L.), the reports underlined the tensions created because of the sometimes-literal practice of the traditional liturgical rules, to the detriment of the faithful and their active participation in the work of adoration and prayer, as well as in the sacraments. Among these tensions pointed out were the emergence of aberrant devotions of religiosity and unhealthy phenomena related to apparitions (C.C.C.S., §3, p3); the problem of any form of renewal of traditional liturgical models (S. C. I., §17, p3); the non-adherence of the new generation to the convictions related to the liturgical rites and symbols (C.C.C.S., §1, p4), because of a deficiency in liturgical formation (S. C. I., §16, p3). In addition, the divergent sensitivities concerning whatever order governing the liturgical celebration sometimes led to dissensions that weaken

communion and erode confidence in the Church's maternal love. There is also the problem of the style, content and purpose of the homily; the disharmony in the choice of hymns; the absence of an inspecting body to verify the content of the texts, and define the nature of their use in the Church in the form of recitation and song. Some participants recommended abandoning liturgical puritanism, being open to the process of evolution of liturgical prayers and their adaptation to the aspirations of the faithful, especially the young (A.C.P.B.L., §1. 2, p3), thus emphasizing the need for a liturgical reform capable, on the one hand, of taking into consideration the safeguarding of tradition and, on the other hand, of opening up to modernity (A.C.P.B.L., §2.4, p6). Hence the urgency of allowing the Liturgy to adapt to the emerging realities and their context, in order to be able to regenerate it (C. Ch. I., §2, p3; (A.C.H.E, p5) in conformity with the requests involved in the process of returning to the roots.

### **IV.3. The Call to a Creative and Revitalized Ecumenism**

**26.** The synodal Church is ecumenical because it is the accomplishment of the common journey of the People of God (C. Ch. I., §19, p10), a journey that cannot be completed without encountering the brothers and sisters of the other Churches (A.C.P.B.L., §1.3, p3-4). "In the East, we shall be Christians together or not be" (CPCO, 1st pastoral letter, 1991). For the Christian presence is dependent on the witness of each faithful and each Church, based above all on the common witness of Christians as a whole. It is undeniable that the ecumenical movement in the Middle East has contributed to the emergence of a dialogical reality that favors collaboration and dynamic interaction between the Churches (E.S.I., §6, p2), as well as a common human pastoral care in the service of charity, through the deployment of concrete spiritual and ecclesiastical experiences (A.C.P.B.L., §3.7 p7). Some participants saw the experience of mixed marriages as a positive factor that could consolidate relations between the Churches (E.S.I., §6, p2), while others saw it as a risk factor and a source of conflict (Coptic Church). The participation in the Assembly of some Orthodox and Protestant friends was an enriching experience that confirmed the importance of living together and of the untiring search for visible unity.

**27.** For the Christians of the East, unity is a matter of life and death (Patriarch Maximos IV). Therefore, the adhesion of the Catholic Church to the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) was a clear expression of her desire to achieve unity in diversity, through gathering and collaborating in various areas of ecclesial life, especially the *diakonia*, and also through coexisting with other citizens of different religions and confessions. The Council contributes greatly to the spreading of an ecumenical spirit among the Churches, the accentuation of rapprochement and of a common pastoral work, and the strengthening of a common witness. For this reason, the ecumenical movement in the Middle East is seen as the unique model of a common journey that transcends the frameworks and limitations of the single church family; a model also of commitment to communion among the Churches, in all their diversity and despite their doctrinal, liturgical and canonical differences.

**28.** The withdrawal into the confessional identity, the fear of opening up to a different otherness (S. C. I., §3, p1), the lack of transparency (A.C.O.H.L., §5, p2), and the spread of proselytism, exercised especially by certain new evangelical communities under the pretext of offering financial, medical and food aid in the midst of the economic crisis that is acutely affecting the standard of living, are dark realities which disrupt inter-church relations and are detrimental to the ecumenical spirit (A.C.P.B.L., §2.8, p6). In addition, there were tensions and discordances affecting the relations between the Churches of the West and the Churches of the East (C.E.C. S, §2, p3); the problem of ecclesiastical canon law, which is torn between unity and decentralization; political interference in ecumenical affairs (Latin Church), leading some



participants to evoke the metaphor of the “ecumenical winter” (A.C.H.E, p4), following the ecumenical golden age that prevailed in the sixties and seventies of the past century.

#### **IV.4. A Church of Openness to the Other and to Differences (enlargement of the tent space)**

**29.** In the Middle East, which is experiencing serious political, security and social tensions due to the Sunni-Shiite conflict in Iraq, Yemen and Syria and the hegemony of fundamentalist movements and organizations in some countries, Christians feel the danger of being uprooted, deportation and the threat of annihilation of their heritage (A.C.P.B.L., §2.11, p6). The reports provided by the Catholic Churches in the Middle East and coming from the work of the Synodal Assembly highlighted the emergence of various tensions: fear of renewed violence (S. C. I., §2, p1); risk of dissolution into the predominant Muslim culture (S. C. I., §13, p3); impact of religious extremism on Christian presence (C. Ch. I., §9, p3); inability to create new methods and strategies to listen and break down barriers (C. Ch. I., §10, p6); lack of an environment conducive to dialogue (E. Ch. I, §11, p7); indifference and loss of interest in the other (C. Ch. I., §24, p11); unfruitfulness of attempts at dialogue and rapprochement in certain cases (E. Ch. I, §18, p9) ; and the problem of the settlement of Palestinian refugees and displaced Syrians with a Muslim majority, leading to a dysfunctional experience of freedom of faith in general, and of the free and regular practice of Christian religious rites in particular (A.C.P.B.L, §2.10, p6). However, despite all this, the openness of the local Churches to others, whether different in faith, culture, concepts and/or choices was clearly reaffirmed. Emphasis was also placed on the need for listening, dialogue and coexistence, because the tent, i.e., the Church, which God has set up in the heart of mankind and the world, is wide enough to welcome all, without any exclusion.

**30.** The concept of the other is not limited to women and men who belong to other Churches, nor to other religions! The “different other” could be the one closest to each person. Through her fidelity to Christ, the Church pursues the same work of redemption, insofar as she manifests her love to every human being without distinction or discrimination. She cannot exclude anyone, because if she does, she would lose her identity and her mission to pursue redemption through Christ. The participation of the faithful with special needs, either in prayer or in reflection groups, was an eloquent expression during this Assembly of the size of the Church’s tent. In this regard, the participating members, among those with special needs, emphasized the characteristic of their participation in the life of the Church and her mission, according to their own capacities (A.C.P.B.L, §1.11, p4). In any case, it will be necessary not only to safeguard the dignity of these persons, but also to organize formation and awareness sessions in parishes, schools, institutes and universities. Hence the importance of training competent guides and counselors capable of accompanying these people and their families.

**31.** The Church will become more synodal as she strives to promote coexistence and dialogue with other religions, in order to manifest the true and unique face of God (C. Ch. I., §6, p5). Listening is the first step in welcoming the different other (C. Ch. I., 9, p6). In this regard, the reports and deliberations of the working groups paid tribute to the initiative of Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of the al-Azhar Mosque, who signed and published together the *Document on Human Fraternity*. Its positive concrete repercussions were welcomed, as was the impact of the meeting of the Holy Father Francis with Ayatollah al-Sistani in Najaf (S.I. § 13, p. 3), and the crucial effect produced by the visits made by Pope Francis to the countries of the Middle East, manifesting the positive and promising character of the dialogue with Muslims.

**32.** The opportunities for dialogue are intensified and consolidated through the participation in institutions and colloquiums promoting understanding (C. Ch. I., §18, p10), meetings and gatherings of the faithful belonging to different religions, and the collaboration with all religious bodies aiming at establishing common bases for dialogue (A.C.H.E, p2). Emphasis was placed, therefore, on the importance of formation in dialogue, of promoting initiatives of openness to the faithful of other religions, of concretizing human fraternity (A.C.P.B.L, §1.5, p4), and of the importance of creating new methods of dialogue that could contribute to transferring it from administrative offices to parishes and to realities of every day (A.C.P.B.L, §4.2, p8).

#### **IV.5. Communion and Hope in the Midst of Suffering: Toward a humble Church (the mustard seed, Mk 4:30-32)**

**33.** The Churches of the Middle East were born amid suffering and persecution, and it is in blood that their history was written. The hagiography of the martyrs formed the largest part of the *Synaxarium*, and became a source of inspiration for many believers, who drew from it an energy of hope to survive and persevere. Their relics remain to this day a source of blessings and miracles. Yet, this reality also provoked the emergence of tensions and challenges, the first of which is emigration (C. Ch. I., §3, p4), and which were raised frankly by the consultations within the Churches and the syntheses of the working groups throughout the Synodal Assembly. The reports and interviews denounced a fundamental problem from which our Churches suffer, and which is becoming more and more critical and dangerous, namely the massive emigration of young people, which leads to the emptying of the Churches of their capacities and resources (A.C.P.B.L., §1.7, p4), and to the dispersal of families (C. Ch. I., §2, p1). This problem has degenerated into an existential threat (E.C.S., p1-2)

**34.** Despite the tireless initiatives taken by Pope Francis to safeguard Christian presence in the region, and despite the efforts of their Beatitudes the Patriarchs and bishops to maintain the best relations with civil authorities and leaders of other religions, fears are growing about the return of waves of violent fundamentalism; the resurgence of emigration; the challenges of welcoming immigrants and displaced people (A. H.C.E, p4); the preservation of the identity of immigrants, their traditions and rituals, as well as their ecclesial belonging on the one hand and the relationship with the Latin Church and their integration in the countries of immigration on the other hand (A.C.P.B.L, §2.9, p6). Some of the participants also raised sensitive issues faced by believers living in Middle Eastern countries, among others those of armament, compulsory military service, liberation theology (C.C.C.S., §2 p4), as well as the fidelity of Christian leaders to spiritual values in the exercise of their political function, especially when making decisions about war and peace (A.C.P.B.L, §3.6, p7).

**35.** The recommendations presented in the reports and the work of the various teams can be summarized in three points:

- For the Church, to open up to others and to listen to different opinions have broadened horizons of hope, united Christians in the witness of their faith and nourished their sense of belonging to the Church (A.C.P.B.L, §1.1, p3);
- To trust in the initiatives of local Churches and National Assemblies, without waiting for solutions from abroad (C.A.S.P of 14.02.2023);
- To witness that consecrated life offers a good model for living in integrity and hope amid suffering (S.C. Dulcis).

#### **IV.6. In Favor of a Renewal of Structures for a More Synodal Church**

**36.** It has become clear to the Assembly that the Eastern Churches are synodal in structure. For these different structures to be put at the service of communion, partnership and mission, they must be constantly renewed, especially by activating them at different levels: the Pastoral and Diocesan Councils, the National Assemblies of Patriarchs and Bishops, and the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East. This way, these structures can become more contributive, professional and transparent, and will not hinder the transmission of the message of the Church to all. Some laypeople proclaimed their desire to live in partnership within the Church, to share the responsibility and burden of mission with their bishops and priests (A.C.P.B.L., §4.4, p8). They recommended that the work of the financial committees and those who are responsible for providing relief and assistance to the needy, the poor and the afflicted be monitored (C. Ch. I., §11, p22).

**37.** To answer the call of His Holiness Pope Francis to build a more synodal Church, the Eastern Catholic Churches are working to approach cultural pluralism with greater awareness and esteem for the other, especially as they accompany young men and women who feel estranged from the Church, so that this feeling does not turn into indifference over time. Several participants in the Assembly spoke of the reluctance of laypeople to participate at times in the life of the Church, because of lack of transparency and tyranny of authoritarianism of some clergymen (A.C.P.B.L., §1.8, p4). Other participants also pointed out the predominance of the institutional character within the Church, which at times alters the foundations of ecclesial, priestly and monastic service, because of their deviation from the spirit of free mission and personal witness. Some ecclesiastical institutions have sometimes acquired an organizational character from which the rich have benefited more than the poor (A.C.P.B.L., §2.6, p6). Some have thus expressed the need for the Eastern Catholic Churches to review the concept of ecclesiastical leadership, its tasks and principles, and to adopt modern foundations of administration and governance. The renewal of ecclesiastical structures requires special attention and must grant greater attention to the pastoral care of families, women and youth.

##### ***Pastoral care of the family***

**38.** The participants in the Assembly saw the need to educate families; to teach children how to pray, how to read the Holy Bible and how to listen to the Word of God (A.C.P.B.L., §4.1, p8). In this education, it is with boldness and transparency that the new ethical questions must be given the attention they deserve (A.C.P.B.L., §4.4, p9). To this end, the participants recommended that special programs be devoted to married and engaged couples (C. Ch. I., §5, p5), and that the Church accompany spouses and families who encounter difficulties because of cultural changes. The Church will thus be committed to dealing with the phenomenon of family disintegration, and will work to protect and strengthen the family, for it is the nucleus of the Church and society (A.C.P.B.L., §3.2, p7).

**39.** Churches have recently observed an increase in the number of separated couples, of those who prefer to change their denomination or religion to divorce, and of women who resort to abortion (A.C.P.B.L., §2.13, p7). They see the LGBTQ+ community sometimes participating in the transfer of ideas and concepts from Western society and the spread of gender theory in the world of electronic communication and social networks, as well as their impact on youth (A.C.P.B.L., §2.12, p6).

**40.** Access to the sacraments in some of the above-mentioned cases is often a problem in the Churches. The question is how to properly discern in such situations in the light of the Word of God and according to the elements offered by the Church's teachings. Some believe that for the

Catholic Church, it is necessary to define the concept of sexuality and the moral issues that go with it, while others emphasize topics that help to avoid problems and difficulties, by finding new ways to support families through ecclesial institutions (C. Ch. I., §14, p8), providing appropriate preparatory programs for the sacrament of marriage (C. Ch. I., §17, p10), communicating with families who are away from the Church (C.C.C.S., §1, p4), and seeking to exclude no one in the synodal process.

### ***Vocation and role of women***

**41.** The participants in the Assembly confirmed the vocation and role of women in the life and mission of the Church, as constitutive, active and pioneer members of the synodal process (A.C.P.B.L., §3.3, p7). Their participation in this process is the result of their commitment to the mission of the Church, despite their distance from the decision-making bodies, which led the Office for the Pastoral Care of Women in the Maronite Church to suggest a special Synod for Women, which constituted a first in our Eastern Churches in its theological, academic, pastoral and social implications and approaches (A.C.P.B.L., §3.14, p8). This synodal journey has taken on an ecumenical and global dimension, including members of other churches and even Muslims.

**42.** During the discussion in the reflection groups, the debate focused on the question of the vocation and role of women in the Church, on their participation in administration and governance. The participants of the Assembly asked the Church to take clear and uncompromising initiatives in this regard (S. C. I., §16, p3). This requires prophetic courage, especially since the question of women's ministry was discussed (A.C.P.B.L., §1.14, p5). However, before addressing this issue, it is necessary to provide theological, ecclesial and technical formation to the women involved, before some of them assume an active role in administration or receive an ecclesial ministry such as that of deaconess in works of charity (A.C.P.B.L., §1.16, p5).

### ***Youth ministry***

**43.** The Assembly stressed the importance of young people and their role in the life of the Church, as well as their accompaniment and formation, especially for those who have turned away from ecclesial communion (A.C.H.E., p3). Members also insisted on the need to accompany victims traumatized by the moral aggressions that some clergymen and laity have inflicted on them, as well as on the help to be given to them to face the challenges that they encounter (A.C.P.B.L., §2.3, p5-6).

**44.** The Assembly expressed the need to encourage and support initiatives that invite young people to meet and work together for the proclamation of the Good News, among which are, for example, the preparatory meetings of young people to accompany the Synodal Assembly; the University Pastoral prayer meetings according to the spirituality of the Taizé Ecumenical Community; the National Youth Days; the ecumenical synodal experience that brings together young people from the countries of the Middle East under the aegis of the group *We Choose Abundant Life* and the foundation *Pro Oriente* (For the East); as well as other meetings and gatherings. Today, young people need to find in the synthesis of this Synodal Assembly evidence of the Church's commitment to sensitive orientations, recognizing her weaknesses in her ability to address delicate issues that require a prophetic word and an explicit position. The transparency and sincerity with which Church leaders behave at all levels will help young people to rebuild their self-confidence, following the requirements necessary to purify their memory and to find the path to repentance. All of this contributes to renewing youth ministry and drawing them to Jesus Christ, as Pope Francis affirms in his apostolic exhortation: "Christ lives" (chapter 7). In this way, the Church becomes more synodal (Y. ACPBL).

#### **IV.7. Media, Digital Culture and their Contributions to Making the Church more Synodal**

**45.** The media and publicity are at the base of the Church's mission to preach the Good News of salvation to the world: she has therefore been a pioneer in the conception of methods, techniques and media and information means to proclaim the Good News of the Resurrection. Since antiquity, handwritten copies of the Holy Bible and prayers have been used in our Eastern Churches as a tool for dissemination and written information. Then the icon, which conveys and figures the scriptural facts of salvation, was adopted as a means of visual transmission. Subsequently was born, in the Syriac Rite Churches, the process of using popular melodies and replacing their texts with the prose and poetry of the Holy Fathers, including the eminent figure of St. Ephrem the Syriac, the Harp of the Holy Spirit. This process is considered an audio-media tool.

**46.** The Eastern Churches have followed the development of the media. They are establishing specialized institutions in various countries and strengthening their structures through Catholic media centers, supervised by episcopal committees. Given the importance of this sector, the action of serving the Good News and the "new evangelization" will depend on the good use that the Churches make of communication and digital culture. During the synodal consultations and the work of the Assembly, the following elements were highlighted: to show the importance of the media as an effective communication tool for conveying the Good News (C. Ch. I., §12, p7); and to affirm that Christian media experts, clergy and laity, must assume the responsibility of witnessing in favor of Christian principles and values (A.C.O.H.L.), opposing concepts and ideas that offend human dignity, nourish the spirit of estrangement from God and contribute to the spread of moral decadence (A.C.P.B.L., §3.18, p8). The need to train experts in the field of Christian communication and media was also confirmed (A.C.P.B.L., §4.3, p8). The conclusions of the Churches and the debates of the Assembly warned against the repercussions abuse of social media can have on the faithful, in particular on young people (A.C.P.B.L., §2.7, p6).

#### **V. How can our Eastern Catholic Churches become more synodal?**

**47.** "The name of the Church is Synod." This definition sheds light on how we might understand the very nature of the Church, as well as the unity of her members and the complementarity of their roles, and their union in Jesus Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. The Church is, in history, the People of God that walks together towards the accomplishment of the Father's Kingdom. But how could this synodality develop? And what would be the means of its accomplishment?

**48.** During the Synodal Assembly, through prayers, spiritual conversations, debates and discussions, proposals that could help the Churches to be more in line with their deepest nature and to become more synodal emerged. Here are the most important ones:

- a. *To bring about a change in the mentality of all*, laity and clergy, in order to assume the universalism of salvation through Christ and to provide all with the adequate means to better understand and accomplish it. This requires that each baptized person live and recognize themselves as a member of the People of God, through word, committed action, example of life and witness.
- b. *To recognize the complementarity between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood* (diaconate, presbyterate, episcopate), both of which participate in the one Priesthood of Christ and are interrelated (*Lumen Gentium* 10). To adopt spiritual discernment as a method to promote listening, walking together and the ability to

recognize God's will.

- c. *To affirm that every baptized member of the faithful has a "sense of faith" and that the Church carries out her mission through the universal call to holiness, until Christ is "all in all" (1Cor 15:28). To commit ourselves to walking together, despite all that this requires in terms of stripping ourselves of all our possessions, and to be open to others to accept them as they are.*
- d. *To work for the renewal of liturgical life in the Churches, taking care to preserve the essentials of the Holy Tradition and at the same time to adapt the liturgical offices to the present needs of the People of God, which are dependent on the contexts and circumstances proper to the different countries and societies. Insofar as the life of the whole People of God is organized around the Liturgy, it is imperative to uphold the designated roles of each member and align their formation and development with their individual gift and ministry.*
- e. *To purify the ministry of priests of all weaknesses and shortcomings present in some of them, because they are incompatible with the holy vocation and service in the image of Christ, the Servant par excellence. This purification requires a review of the means and criteria for choosing candidates for the holy orders of deacon, priest and bishop. This implies not being satisfied with merely ascertaining their scientific and theological competence, nor their managerial and administrative know-how, but above all their capacity to respect their holy commitment and to live a life of virtue that is a sign of pastoral commitment and love of Christ to the point of martyrdom.*
- f. *To make an irreversible commitment to the restoration of the visible unity of the Church, and to promote ecumenical relations between the Churches and ecclesial communities in the Middle East. In addition, to develop new initiatives towards other Churches, especially in the areas of cooperation and common witness. To improve the efficiency of the role of the Catholic Churches in the Middle East Council of Churches and to seek to unify the dates of feasts (spiritual conversations). The experience of the pastoral agreements regarding ecclesial identity, common catechism, solemn communion and mixed marriages (Agreement of Charfet-1996) could be considered a model for such initiatives, especially for the unification of the date of the celebration of Easter.*
- g. *To recognize the value of religious, cultural and human diversity in the Middle East, and to confirm the choice to live together in order to open a new page in relations with Muslims and Jews, as well as with adherents of other religions, agnostics and those who declare themselves not to belong to any particular religion, philosophical trend or ideology. To work for the purification of memory and to engage in authentic and bold dialogue based on charity and mutual respect. Only in this way will our Eastern Churches be able to contribute to the pastoral care of reconciliation for the common good and the future of the peoples of the region.*
- h. *To abandon any form of exclusion of women from participation in the life of the Church, especially in making ecclesial decisions. Our respective Churches should begin to reflect seriously on the re-establishment of the diaconate for women. The conclusions of the Synod for Women, initiated and implemented by the Maronite Church, are eagerly awaited, with the objective of enabling women to be more active and present in the life of the Eastern Catholic Churches.*
- i. *To trust young people and believe in their gifts and capacity to contribute to the various responsibilities of the Church, especially in the service of proclaiming the Good News. This requires pastoral accompaniment that consists of listening attentively to them, accompanying them and assisting them in the discernment of their vocation.*
- j. *To have faith in the participation of people with disabilities and in the value and importance of their constructive role in the life of the Church. Their human and*

spiritual experience should be welcomed, as well as the expression of their hope, which can inspire the healthy.

- k. *To adopt the principles of good governance and transparency in the administration of Church institutions.* Many voices have been raised among the faithful of the Eastern Catholic Churches to re-examine the methods of governance and administration, especially in processes of decision-making. These voices have called for a vision of power as one of the concrete expressions of charity and service.
- l. *To avoid minority complexes and to banish the fear associated with it,* due to multiple hardships suffered through persecution, immigration and other difficult situations, in order not to succumb to temptations and to preserve Faith and Hope. To work to enable Christians to take root in the territories of their respective countries and to contribute to stemming the current process that is emptying the East of the Christian presence and risks changing its demographic identity. This requires close cooperation with the civil authorities. Furthermore, for our Churches to incarnate the Church of Hope in the Middle East, there is a need to revive the prophetic spirit that listens to the Will of God and works for its accomplishment, for God is the true Master of History. This is how the witness of Hope can remain until the end of time.

## **VI. Priorities**

**49.** From all these synodal conclusions, three priorities emerge that deserve, from the point of view of the Eastern Catholic Churches, to be presented at the first plenary assembly of the next Synod (October 2023):

- a. To help the particular Churches to promote the catholicity of the Church in a harmonious relationship between Unity and Diversity, while preserving the specificity of each of them. To reflect and act on the contribution and role the Eastern Catholic Churches can have in the communion of all the Churches.
- b. To clarify the structures of communion and the juridical links between the Catholic Patriarchal Churches and the Successor of Peter in the See of Rome. To reconsider the nature of their relationship with the various dicasteries of the Roman Curia, which are at the service of communion within the universal Church.
- c. To define and promote the most appropriate structures and mechanisms to concretize synodality in the life of the Church and of the People of God, while considering the multiplicity and diversity of religious and socio-cultural contexts throughout the world.

## **Conclusion**

**50.** In the joy of a meeting that celebrated the One Church, and despite the sadness provoked by the loss of many after the deadly earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, we were given the grace to celebrate the Continental Synodal Assembly of the Catholic Churches in the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf. Together, we listened to each other and to the message that the Spirit is giving us today. All the participants in this Assembly expressed their joys and hopes, as well as the fears and the challenges they face. This has encouraged them to undertake concrete initiatives for which they have invested themselves in their respective Churches. Moreover, their participation made synodality a tangible experience and a space for free expression, especially for women and young people, as well as for many people whose voices were no longer heard; or for people with disabilities; and finally, for all those who found themselves on the margins of pastoral life. The experience of this Synodal Assembly has been a kind of

remedy for many difficult situations within each Church, and for strained relations between the different Churches. It clearly recognized two dimensions without which the Church would lose the reason for her existence and her soul in the East: the ecumenical dimension, which concerns relations with sister Churches, and the dialogical dimension, which ensures openness and encounter with other religions.

**51.** It is clear that the People of God in the Middle East are called to be witnesses to their faith, through their life and their Hope, despite the complexity of the present context. The call to renewal, to journey together, to dialogue and to discernment is an urgency that admits of no postponement. To gather, without delay, the fruits of synodality, is done in view of the constant commitment to walk together behind Christ and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the People of God, animated by the will to promote human fraternity. This is how the Eastern Catholic Churches will succeed in responding to the call of His Holiness Pope Francis to achieve what God wants for His Church in the third millennium: to be more synodal.



## **List of Acronyms and References**

- **(A.C.H.E):** Assembly of the Catholic Hierarchy of Egypt
- **(A.C.O.H.L):** Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land
- **(A.C.P.B.L):** Assembly of the Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of Lebanon
- **(C.A.S.P):** Continental Assembly of the Synod, Plenary Session
- **(C.C.C.S.):** Council of Catholic Churches in Syria
- **(S.C. Dulcis):** Spiritual Conversation...
- **(C. Ch. I.):** Chaldean Church, Iraq
- **(S. C. I.):** Syriac Church, Iraq
- **(Y. ACPBL):** Youth, Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Lebanon

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