**THE TWELFTH MEETING OF THE HEADS**

**OF THE ORIENTAL ORTHODOX CHURCHES IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Residence

Atchaneh – Lebanon 21-23 June 2018

**COMMON DECLARATION**

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Amen.

We, **Pope Tawadros II**, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark, **Patriarch** **Ignatius Aphrem II**, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, and **Catholicos Aram I**, Catholicos of the Armenians of the Great House of Cilicia, say: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (II Corinthians 1: 3-4) and give thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ for granting us the opportunity to pray together and to reflect on issues and challenges of common concern, at the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Residence in Atchaneh, Lebanon. This is the twelfth official meeting of the Heads of our churches since 1997 within the framework of our full communion that exists since the early centuries of Christianity.

Congratulations were presented to His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II for the inauguration of the new Patriarchal Residence of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East in Atchaneh, Lebanon and the consecration of the church of St. Severus the Great in the Patriarchal Residence.

**The Christian Presence in the Middle East**

The Christian presence in the Middle East is our greatest concern and worry. We studied carefully the ways to strengthen the Christian presence in the region where Christianity was born, in order to continue to serve the peoples of the Orient, Muslims and Christians because the Christian presence is necessary to strengthen the spirit of openness and living together in peace with all the components of this Orient. In addition, an active Christian presence represents a strong support to the church in the Diaspora.

Since the latest tragic developments in the region, which resulted in the emigration and uprooting of hundreds of thousands of Christians from their homeland, particularly in Iraq and Syria, and the targeting of numerous churches and places of worship in Egypt (e.g. bombing of churches in Cairo, Alexandria, Tanta), a great number of our spiritual children who have a strong faith in Christ became martyrs and they are considered martyrs of the universal Church. We ask the Almighty God to strengthen the faith of our people and offer our condolences to the families of our martyrs, and pray for the recovery of the wounded.

We particularly pray for our beloved Lebanon which has always been a model for living together of its various components and is currently under the heavy burden of hosting hundreds of thousands of immigrants who reside in it because of the situation in the region. We appeal to the concerned authorities to work on bringing these immigrants back to their countries in dignity.

We also pray for the citizens of our countries who are suffering because of the crises and wars, especially in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, asking the Lord to spread peace and security to our countries and joy and hope to the hearts of the faithful.

The kidnapping of the two Archbishops of Aleppo Mor Gregorius Youhanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yazigi, continues to sadden our hearts. This is not a cause affecting these two eminent Archbishops and their churches only; rather, it is the cause of the Oriental Christians in general. Here, we ask our spiritual children everywhere and our Christians brothers and sisters to continue to pray for their safe return along with the rest of the kidnapped clergy and laypeople. We urge the international community, namely the governments, organizations such as the United Nations, and the decision makers to do everything that is possible in their respect.

We appreciate the visit of Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on 28 April 2017 to St. Mark Cathedral and their ecumenical prayer for the new Egyptian martyrs at St. Peter and St. Paul Church (next to the Papal residency, Abassiya – Cairo). The prayers were attended by the heads of all the churches in Egypt.

We, likewise, welcome the invitation of His Holiness Pope Francis, Head of the Roman Catholic Church, extended to their Holinesses and Beatitudes the Heads of the Churches in the Middle East, to a day of prayer and meditation in Bari, Italy on 7 July 2018.

**The Syriac Orthodox Church in India**

We listened to the report on the situation of the Syriac Church in India from His Eminence Mor Gregorios Joseph, Metropolitan of Cochin Diocese and Secretary of the Regional Episcopal Synod in India, and were informed about the efforts of His Holiness Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem II in this regard, particularly His Holiness’ recent visit last May which was preceded by an open invitation to the Catholicos of Kottayam to meet and initiate a dialogue for the reconciliation in a Christian spirit. There were no response from the other side to the repeated invitations of His Holiness to dialogue. Upon the suggestion of His Holiness Catholicos Aram I, we decided to send a letter signed from their Holinesses Pope Tawadros II and Catholicos Aram I, in which we call both factions of the Syriac Orthodox Church in India to send three delegates each to a meeting, hosted by the Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo in the presence of representatives of our three churches, aiming at initiating a serious dialogue that leads to reconciliation and the overcoming the disputes so that peace can prevail again in the church in India.

**Meeting for the Heads of all the Orthodox Churches**

We welcomed the suggestion of His Holiness Pope Tawadros II to extend an invitation to a meeting of the Heads of all the Orthodox Churches of both families to be held in the Papal Centre “Logos” at St. Bishoy Monastery, Egypt on 19 May 2019, to discuss the social and moral challenges facing our churches, away from political and theological issues.

**Theological Official Dialogues**

In our endeavor towards the unity of the church, we encourage our churches to participate in meetings with other churches in various official international bilateral theological dialogues:

**Dialogue with the Orthodox Church**

We studied the reports submitted on the progress of the dialogue with the Orthodox Church and welcomed the results of the meeting of the working group from the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox families which took place in Athens, Greece, 24-25 November 2014 where a road map was laid for the future work of the *Joint Commission for the Official Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches*.

We, likewise, appreciated the efforts of the working group which met upon the invitation of the two co-chairmen, H.E. Metropolitan Emmanuel of France and H.E. Metropolitan Bishoy of Damiette, in Antelias on April 12th, 2018 in the presence of His Holiness Aram I and with his blessings and gracious hospitality. The working group met to discuss the developments of the bilateral theological dialogue and to prepare for the upcoming meeting of the full Joint Commission. The working group was composed of bishops from the two families. The purpose of the meeting was to explore the possibilities of reactivating this process which is important in the life of the two Families. The next meeting of the full commission of the theological international dialogue will be held from 30 October-2 November, 2018.

**Dialogue with the Catholic Church:**

We inspected the report of the annual meetings of the international Joint Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches which were held: **Cairo** 2016: **Rome** 2017: **Etchmiadzin** 2018. The most recent meeting was hosted by the Armenian Church in Etchmiadzin where His Holiness Catholicos Karekin II received the members in the patriarchal residence.

The Commission which met in Rome in 2017 finalized its paper on “*The Exercise of Communion in the Life of the Early Church and Its Implications for our Search for Communion Today*”; this paper was submitted to the authorities of the churches for consideration and action. The Commission is now working on the seven sacraments of the church and papers were presented from both sides. During the plenary meetings of 2018, the members continued to work on the topic of the sacraments and papers were presented on the sacraments of Penance/Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick and Holy Orders.

**Dialogue with the Anglican Communion**

Our dialogue with the Anglican Communion achieved good results in Christology and Pneumatology; we are waiting that the holy synods of our churches approve the two agreements.

After a discontinuation that lasted for circa 10 years because of the stand of our Oriental Orthodox Churches in relation of some developments in some Anglican churches, the meeting of the international theological dialogue was resumed. The **second meeting** took place in England 2013, **the third** in Cairo 2014 (the Christological agreement was signed by the two co-chairmen), **the fourth** in Wales2015 (The Commission completed its work on the Procession of the Holy Spirit – which is the first part of the work on the theological understanding of the Holy Spirit – agreeing on the omission of the Filioque clause which was added to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in the Latin Western tradition), **the fifth** in Antelias 2016 (The Co-chairmen signed the second part of Agreed Statement on the Work of the Holy Spirit, and it was sent to our churches for reflection and comment), **the sixth** in Dublin, Ireland 2017 (Part A on the procession of the Holy Spirit, and Part B on the Work of the Holy Spirit were drawn together and signed. The Commission began to work on the topic of the ‘Authority in the Church’, studying papers prepared by both Anglican and Oriental Orthodox members on topics that included the Number of the Ecumenical Councils, the Interpretation of the Council of Chalcedon, the Meaning of the Anathemas of Ecumenical Councils, and the Authority of Scripture and Tradition. The next meeting of the Commission will be hosted by the Syriac Orthodox Church at the Patriarchal Residence in Atchaneh on October 23-27, 2018.

**Middle East Council of Churches**:

We were glad to receive the news of the election of Dr. Souraya Bachaalany as the Acting Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches during the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Council at the Antonine University in Baabda, Lebanon on 25-26 January, 2018. The election of Dr. Thuraya Bachaalani for the Catholic family of Churches was substantiated following the resignation of its Secretary General Fr. Michel Jalkh who was appointed as President of the Antonine University, which prevents him from continuing to fulfill his mandate as Secretary General, which ends in September 2020.

On this occasion, we pray for the success of Dr. Bachaalany and we are ready to offer all possible help to make her mission at the Council a successful one.

**The World Council of Churches**

We received a letter from the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches declaring the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the Council. The Executive and Central committees held their meetings in Geneva, 12-21 June 2018.

We seek this opportunity to congratulate ourselves and all the member churches of the WCC on this occasion, hoping that the Council will truly reflect that position of its members churches and to continue to defend the causes of world peace and human rights.

**The United Bible Societies**:

We were informed about the next meeting for all the member churchesin the *Committee for the Collaboration between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Orthodox Church with the United Bible Societies.* Letters of invitation were sent to the Heads of the Orthodox Church and Oriental Orthodox Churches to nominate a delegate. The meetingwill be held in Etchmiadzin- Armenia, September 2018. The theme of the meeting is “Inspiration of the Holy Scripture”. The last meeting was held in Ierapetra – Crete, September 2017. We were also informed about the final approved version of “*Memorandum of Understanding and Collaboration between the Eastern Orthodox Church, The Oriental Orthodox Churches and the United Bible Societies*”. We affirm the importance of continuing and strengthening this collaboration in our region.

As we conclude our twelfth meeting, we encourage the Subcommittees of our meeting (Seminaries Committee, Publication Committee and Youth Committee) to renew their efforts in order to strengthen working together among our sister churches and we hope that this will be reflected positively in the life and witness of the faithful members of the church.

We would like to express our warm thanks for the gracious hospitality of His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II.

We extend our apostolic benedictions and pray for the peace in the Middle East and the whole world.

“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (II Corinthians 13: 14).

**Tawadros II Ignatius Aphrem II Aram I**

Pope of Alexandria Patriarch of Antioch Catholicos

Patriarch of the See and all the East of the Great House

of St. Mark of Cilicia