

THE FOURTH MEETING OF THE HEADS OF THE ORIENTAL ORTHODOX CHURCHES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

ST. MARK CENTER OF THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH
CAIRO-EGYPT
MARCH 15-17, 2001

COMMON DECLARATION

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

We, **Pope Shenouda III**, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark of the Coptic Orthodox Church, **Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I**, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East of the Syrian Orthodox Church, and **Catholicos Aram I**, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia of the Armenian Orthodox Church, and the members of the Standing Committee: H.E. Metropolitan Bishoy, H.G. Bishop Mousa, H.E. Metropolitan Theophilus George Saliba, H.G. Bishop Sebouh Sarkissian, and Archimandrite Nareg Alemezian, who are with us, give thanks to God for bringing us together once again in the context of this Fourth Meeting of the Heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in the Middle East, March 15-17, 2001, at the St. Mark Center of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Nasr City-Cairo, Egypt.

Led by our common spiritual heritage, tradition, faith, theology, doctrine and witness, and on the basis of the Common Declarations we made

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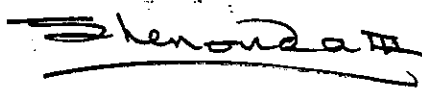
in our last three meetings (St. Bishoy Monastery-Wadi Natroun, Egypt, March 10-11, 1998; St. Ephrem Monastery-Maa'rat Sadnaya, Damascus, Syria, February 13-14, 1999; Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, Antelias-Lebanon, May 4-9, 2000), we have come once again together as a fellowship of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in the Middle East, to pray together, to re-affirm our unity in faith and our firm attachment to the first three Ecumenical Councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431), as well as to the teachings of our church fathers. We also have reconfirmed the decisions adopted and the guidelines set by us in the context of our common witness and service to our people particularly in the Middle East; a region where the Church of Christ was born and true faith was received and shaped by our fathers and martyrs through their teachings and martyrdom. This is our sacred heritage, indeed, which was delivered to us and to be delivered in turn to the generations to come.

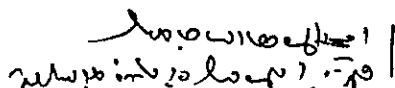
Guided by the Holy Spirit and inspired by the teachings and examples of our forefathers, we carefully studied the following important items and took appropriate actions:

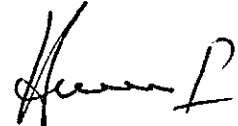
I. 1700th Anniversary Celebration of the Proclamation of Christianity in Armenia as State Religion

Pope Shenouda III and Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I welcomed the invitation of Catholicos Aram I to attend the celebrations of the Armenian Orthodox Church in the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, in Antelias-Lebanon, May 25-27, 2001, on the occasion of the 1700th Anniversary of the Proclamation of Christianity in Armenia as State Religion. In fact, Christianity was preached in Armenia by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew. Christian faith was a living reality in the life of the Armenian people in the following centuries. It was in 301 that Christianity became the state religion of Armenia. Hence, the Armenian nation is the first nation to accept Christianity as state religion.

Pope Shenouda III and Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I consider the 1700th Anniversary celebrations an excellent opportunity to share the joy of their sister Armenian Church, to pray for its prosperity and to re-affirm the unity that exists between the Armenian, Coptic and Syrian Orthodox Churches.







II. Theological Dialogues

A. Oriental Orthodox Churches-Eastern Orthodox Churches

1. We discussed the actual state of the theological dialogue between the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and emphasized the importance of this dialogue for the full unity of Orthodox Churches.

2. In response to the invitation of His Holiness Alexy II Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, we appointed Metropolitan Bishoy, Metropolitan Eustathius Mattha Rohom and Archimandrite Nareg Alemezian to participate in the meeting of the Coordinating Committee. This Committee, which will meet in Moscow, March 20-22, 2001, will prepare the agenda for the meeting of a larger Committee. The purpose of this Mixed Committee will be to discuss the present situation of theological dialogue between the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and to explore the possibilities of enhancing this important process. This Committee will also identify specific areas of closer ecumenical collaboration between our Churches and the Russian Orthodox Church.

3. The Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church in June 2000 and the Permanent Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa in November 2000 have approved the pastoral agreement reached between them regarding the mutual recognition of the sacrament of the holy matrimony blessed in their respective churches in case of mixed marriages. We welcomed this significant ecumenical initiative, as we did in respect to a similar decision contained in the agreement that was reached between the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch.

B. Oriental Orthodox Churches-Anglican Communion

We agreed to respond positively to the letter of the Archbishop of Canterbury, H.G. Dr. George Carey, dated January 16, 2001, addressed to six Heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches concerning the upgrading of the theological Forum between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the world Anglican Communion. This resolution was taken by the Lambeth Conference in 1988 and was re-affirmed in 1998. We decided to delegate our representatives to the next meeting of the Forum to be held July 27-August 1, 2001, in London. The purpose of this meeting will be to clarify

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matters pertaining to the agenda, procedures, methodologies and timetable of the theological dialogue.

C. Oriental Orthodox Churches-Roman Catholic Church

1. According to the decision taken in our previous meeting, Catholicos Aram I met in Antelias with Cardinal Cassidy and Cardinal Kasper and notified them of our readiness to start a bilateral theological dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, following the same structure and procedures as with the Anglican Communion. Catholicos Aram I will continue to follow up this process.

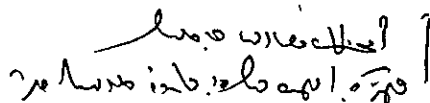
2. We carefully reviewed the document entitled "*Dominus Iesus*" issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Vatican. We noted our basic disagreements concerning a number of points included in this document. We decided that this document become a matter of serious reflection in our theological dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church.

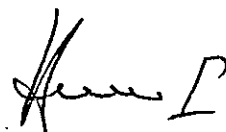
D. Oriental Orthodox Churches-World Alliance of Reformed Churches

The full report of the dialogue between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), prepared in the meeting of January 2001, at the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, Antelias-Lebanon, was submitted to us. This report includes an introduction about the family of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, its theological teachings, doctrine and traditions, as well as the *Agreed Statement on Christology* signed in 1994, and a summary of their meetings (Egypt-1993, Holland-1994, India-1997, USA-1998, Syria-1999, Scotland-2000, and Lebanon-2001). The report particularly refers to the points of agreements and disagreements existing between the two families.

We decided to study this report in our respective Holy Synods and consider it further in our next meeting.







Pope Shenouda III and Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I asked Catholicos Aram I to follow closely the developments of these theological dialogues and share with them his views for necessary action.

III. World Council of Churches and the Special Commission for Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches

We were informed about the interim report of the Special Commission for the Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches that was presented to the Central Committee of the WCC in its meeting in Germany, February 2001. We discussed a number of important issues and perspectives outlined in the said report. Catholicos Aram I, as Moderator of the WCC, exposed his own views concerning this critical process in the life of the WCC. Those members of the Special Commission present with us, Metropolitan Bishoy and Archimandrite Nareg Alemezian, shared with us their assessment of the last meeting of the Steering Group in Geneva. In light of our discussion, we decided:

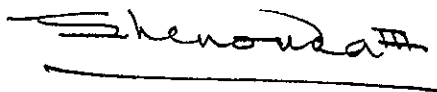
1. To express our appreciation and satisfaction concerning the first phase of the work of the Special Commission. It is our firm expectation that in the next phase the Commission will address more comprehensively and critically concrete issues and concerns pertaining to Orthodox participation in the life and witness of the WCC.

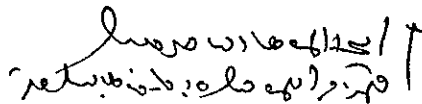
2. To propose that questions related to ecclesiology, as well as controversial theological matters be discussed in the Faith and Order Commission. We believe that Faith and Order could provide a proper context and framework for such a discussion.

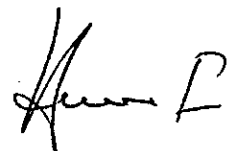
IV. Middle East Council of Churches

We received the report of the last meeting of the Executive Committee of the Middle East Council of Churches in Lebanon, November 2000.

We expressed our joy concerning the appointment of Prof. Girgis Ibrahim Saleh as Associate General Secretary of the MECC representing our family. We also discussed matters related to the activities of the MECC in the region.


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We re-affirm our support to this regional ecumenical organization as its founding and active members. We also underline the urgent need for making the ecumenical witness of the MECC more efficient and responsive to the new realities and expectations of the churches in the region.

V. Sub-Committees

A. Sub-Committee for Theological Seminaries

We received the report of this Sub-Committee, which met on November 24-25, 2000, in Maa'rat Sayednaya-Damascus, Syria, and expressed our appreciation about the progress made in this area. In view of the proposal made in the article 6 of the said report, we decided to establish a special department for Oriental Orthodox Studies in our seminaries.

We appointed Metropolitan Bishoy as Coordinator and Prof. Girgis Ibrahim Saleh as proxy of this Sub-Committee.

B. Sub-Committee for Youth

We appointed Archimandrite Nareg Alemezian and Father Mashdots Chobanian as proxy. This Sub-Committee will convene in October 2001, in Antelias-Lebanon.

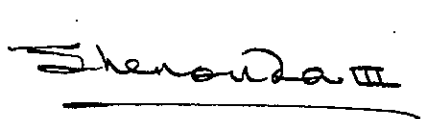
C. Sub-Committee for Publications

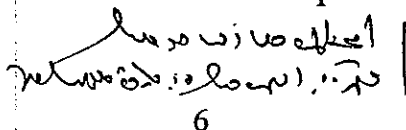
We appointed Metropolitan Theophilus George Saliba as Coordinator and Rahban Elia Habib Bahi as proxy. This Sub-Committee will convene in June 2001, in Cairo-Egypt.

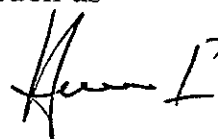
The Standing Committee will coordinate and supervise the work of these Sub-Committees.

VI. Exchange of Resources of Information

We consider the sharing of information among our Churches a vital task for our fellowship. Our Churches have important resources (such as




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books, magazines, audio cassettes, video tapes, cd-s, etc.) that must be shared and exchanged between our Churches. This process will significantly help us to have deeper knowledge about the life and witness of our Churches.

VII. Peace in the Middle East

1. We pray that our common Lord Jesus Christ may grant His peace to the Middle East. We urgently need peace in our region. A comprehensive and permanent peace with justice is achieved when the Palestinians are given full right for an independent state having Jerusalem as its capital, when the occupation by Israel of the West Bank, Jerusalem, Gaza, Golan Heights and Shebaa Farms is ended.

2. The attempts to change the demographic structure of Jerusalem aiming at its Judiazation, ignoring the international agreements, building more settlements, confiscating lands, military aggression against the Palestinian people, refusal of the return of the refugees and besieging of the people in their towns and villages, etc., all these will widen the circle of violence and will never help to achieve real security and permanent peace in the Middle East.

3. We urge the international community to exert necessary efforts and strong pressures to lift the unjust sanctions imposed on the people of Iraq causing much suffering and pain. We invite everybody to support the people of Iraq and especially the children, the sick and the elderly.

4. The Middle East has been the birthplace of Christianity. We are not strangers in these lands. We are integral to the civilizations, cultures and societies of the Middle East and have played a decisive role in the various spheres of the societies. Therefore, we appeal to our faithful to remain firmly attached to this region, including the Holy Land. We must strengthen and re-organize the Christian presence and witness in our region, at the same time deepening our peaceful co-existence and dialogue of love with our Muslim neighbors based on mutual respect and trust.

5. We pray for the peace of the whole world and ask God to support the peaceful efforts of all people of good will to overcome violence in its various forms and manifestations.

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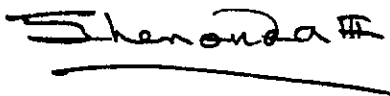
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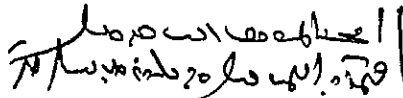
At the end of our meeting, we thank the Lord for His guidance in our deliberations and decisions. We ask Him to give us the strength and courage to work for the unity of His Church and for peace with justice.

We thank the Coptic Orthodox Church for her love and kind hospitality. We also thank all who prayed and assisted us for the success of this meeting.

Glory be to God the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Pope Shenouda III



Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I



Catholicos Aram I

March 17, 2001

St. Mark Center Coptic Orthodox Church
Nasr City-Cairo, Egypt