



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

ST. EPHREM MONASTERY, MA'ARAT SADNAYA,
DAMASCUS, SYRIA
MARCH 7-9, 2002

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 Moussa, H.E. Metropolitan Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, 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 Fifth Meeting of the Heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in the Middle East, March 7-9, 2002, at the St. Ephrem Monastery of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Maa'rat Sadnaya, Damascus, Syria.

From the dawn of Christianity our three Churches have been sharing the same apostolic heritage and the one faith. In our Common Declarations of the four previous 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; St. Mark Center, Cairo Egypt, March 15-17, 2001), we have affirmed our strong attachment to our common spiritual heritage and unity of faith expressed in the first three Ecumenical Councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431), and through the teachings of our holy fathers. We have also restated the rejection of all kinds of heresies by our fathers in the course of our respective histories. We have recommitted ourselves to the decisions taken by our Churches in the context of our common witness and service to our faithful in the world and particularly in the Middle East, where the Christian witness was faithfully carried on by our fathers since the apostolic era. We must preserve what we have inherited from our fathers, saints and martyrs as a sacred treasure to be cherished by all generations.

We studied issues of common concern that have emerged since our last meeting. We received a report from the Standing Committee, and took the following actions:

I. Inter-Church Relations and Bilateral Dialogues

A. Oriental Orthodox Churches-Eastern Orthodox Churches

1. Based on the proposal of the Joint Commission of Theological Dialogue between the two Orthodox families, we encouraged the publication in local languages of studies dealing with the Christological agreements signed by the two families (1989, Egypt, and 1990 and 1993, Switzerland). We believe that such publications will significantly help our faithful to better understand the findings and the results of this dialogue, aimed at the restoration of full communion between the two families.

2. We welcomed the initiation of ecumenical collaboration with the Russian Orthodox Church. The Coordinating Committee met in March 19-21, 2001, and the Joint Commission for the Relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and Oriental Orthodox Churches in the Middle East in September 3-5, 2001, in Moscow-Russia). The purpose of these meetings was to deepen the collaboration with the Church of Russia and clarify the existing difficulties concerning the reception of the agreed Christological statements signed by the two Orthodox families.

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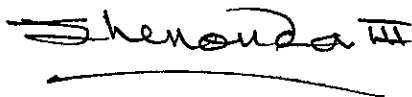
3. Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I and Catholicos Aram I welcomed the visit of Pope Shenouda III to His Holiness Bartholomew, the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople (Istanbul), September 13-16, 2001. This meeting was an occasion to discuss issues related to inter-Orthodox relations and participation of our Churches in the ecumenical movement. The two Heads of Churches have also discussed the ways of advancing the theological dialogue between the two Orthodox families and in this context they asked H.E. Metropolitan Bishoy to continue his contacts with the Orthodox Churches as Co-chairman of the Theological Commission.

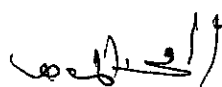
B. Official Theological Dialogue Between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Anglican Communion

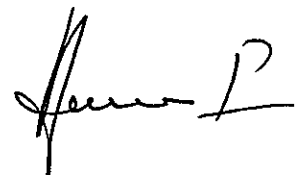
We received the report of the meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the Theological Dialogue between the family of the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the World Anglican Communion, in Midhurst, England, July 17-August 1, 2001. This report includes the agenda, membership and procedures and working plan. Six representatives of the Oriental Orthodox Churches have participated in this meeting. The aim of this meeting was to upgrade the dialogue from a Forum to Commission in response to the request of the Anglican Communion and set the agenda and methodology for the future work of this Commission. We have participated in the work of the Preparatory Committee with three delegates representing each of our three Churches and we will continue to bring our active participation in this theological dialogue.

C. Official Theological Dialogue Between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church

We have received an invitation from the Vatican to start an official theological dialogue with our Churches. H. E. Cardinal Walter Kasper has discussed this project with His Holiness Aram I and they have emphasized the importance of bilateral theological dialogue between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. In this context H. E. Metropolitan Bishoy met with H. E. Cardinal Kasper to follow up this dialogue. Cardinal Kasper has proposed that the Preparatory Committee meet next autumn in the Vatican. An invitation will be sent from the Vatican to all the Heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. It is in the light of the responses the future course of a formal theological dialogue will be initiated with the Roman Catholic Church.







D. Official Theological Dialogue Between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC)

The full report of the first phase of this dialogue had already been sent to our Holy Synods and the Executive Committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) for study, discussion and action.

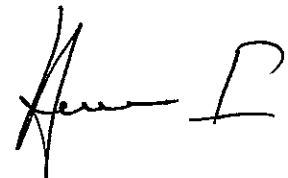
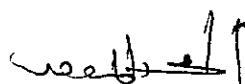
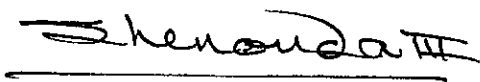
We consider theological dialogues of decisive importance for the visible unity of the Church. Pope Shenouda III and Patriarch Zakka I express their great appreciation to Catholicos Aram I who has been following closely the initiatives developments in this important area of our ecumenical witness.

II. Ecumenical Collaboration

A. World Council of Churches

1. We received the Communique of the last meeting of the Special Commission for the Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches, in Bereckfurdo, Hungary, November 15-20, 2001. We discussed with particular attention the report of the section on Consensus Decision Making. This report includes a proposal to form a 'Standing Committee' (Parity Committee) with half of its members Orthodox and the other half from the other members of the Council, to address 'Orthodox concerns'. We were informed that the next meeting of the Special Commission will be in Helsinki, Finland, May 27-June 2, 2002, where the full report of the Commission will be finalized to be presented to the Central Committee of the WCC in September 2002, in Geneva, Switzerland. We fully support the idea of 'consensus decision making' and the idea of establishing a Standing Committee which could ensure more active Orthodox participation in the life and witness of the Council.

2. We expressed our appreciation for the important role that the Faith and Order Commission is playing in the World Council of Churches and the ecumenical movement at large. We welcomed the participation of the Oriental Orthodox participants in the Inter-Orthodox Consultation organized by the Faith and Order in Moscow, Russia, September 5-11, 2001, on "Confessing the One Faith". We propose the revision of the title of "Confessing the One Faith" to "Confessing the Apostolic Faith as expressed



in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)" which was suggested by Pope Shenouda III to the Faith and Order Commission. The Faith and Order Commission should continue its vital task by initiating reflection processes on questions related to ecclesiology and controversial theological and ethical matters.

3. As to the ongoing discussion on Ecumenical Forum, where our family is represented by H. E. Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, we believe that the Ecumenical Forum may promote wider participation of all Churches and ecumenical organizations in the ecumenical movement. We welcome this project which needs further clarification and at the same time we urge that the participation in such Forum must be based on the confession of the divinity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the one Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

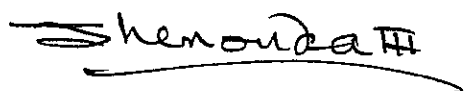
B. Middle East Council of Churches

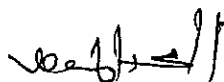
1. We received a letter from the General Secretary, Rev. Dr. Riad Jarjour, expressing his best wishes for the success of this meeting. We appreciate his continuous support to our family of Churches.

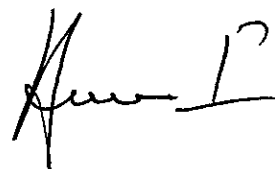
2. We encourage the decision taken by the Executive Committee of MECC in its recent meeting in Cairo, February 18-20, 2002, concerning the formation of a committee with the mandate of dealing with proselytism. In fact, proselytism has negative effects on the ecumenical activities in the region and therefore we urge that all churches and ecumenical organizations look at this issue with utmost responsibility and with the ecumenical spirit.

3. Based on our discussions in the same meeting of the Executive Committee, regarding the report of the Unit on Faith and Unity, we believe that the MECC should make great efforts to promote discussion and dialogue among the member Churches on issues of faith and dogma. Such collaboration, as Pope Shenouda III had pointed out in the Executive Committee, will help our faithful to challenge all heretical movements such as Jehovah Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, Mormons, negative Bible criticism, etc.

4. We find that the Council is performing an important role in the life of the Churches in the Middle East and it needs more support from our Churches to







re-activate its tasks, implement its programs and achieve its aims. We believe that re-assessing the work of the Council is of vital importance to make the Council's ecumenical witness more relevant and efficient.

5. With regard to the post of the General Secretary, we believe that our family of Churches in the Middle East should nominate a candidate for the post of General Secretary one of its members upon the termination of the period of the current General Secretary.

III. Sub-Committees

We listened to the reports of the Sub-Committees and we mandated the Sub-committee for Theological Seminaries to follow up the formation of the Department of Oriental Studies in our seminaries. We have appointed a coordinator and a moderator for each Sub-Committee as follows:

A. Sub-Committee for Theological Seminaries

H. E. Metropolitan Bishoy, **Coordinator**;
Sub-deacon Jerjes Ibrahim Saleh, **Moderator**.

B. Sub-Committee for Youth

V. Rev. Archimandrite Nareg Alemezian, **Coordinator**;
Sub-deacon Razek Syriani, **Moderator**.

C. Sub-Committee for Publications

H. E. Metropolitan Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, **Coordinator**;
V. Rev. Archimandrite Norayr Ashekian, **Moderator**.

Concerning the recommendation of the Sub-Committee for Publications to publish a common book in Arabic, in Armenian and other languages, which will include the history of each of our three Churches, we find it helpful and necessary. Such a publication will certainly help our faithful to know better each other and to deepen their historical bonds and common faith in Christ.

We appreciate the work of the Standing Committee and encourage it to continue supervising the activities of the Sub-Committees.

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IV. Christian-Muslim Relations

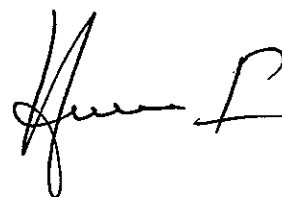
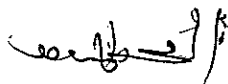
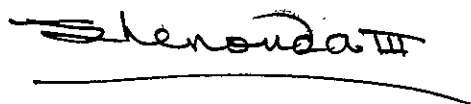
After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, international, regional and local conferences were held in which the Churches of our family have actively participated and significantly contributed to its discussions and actions. We support all initiatives aimed at dialogue and collaboration between Christian and Muslim communities. We re-emphasize the importance of collaboration and peaceful co-existence between Christian and Muslims especially in our region.

V. Justice and Peace

We are deeply concerned with the present critical situation in the whole world and especially in our region. We re-affirm our commitment to stay in the Middle East, to co-exist with our Muslim neighbors in the spirit of mutual love, respect and trust working together for justice, peace and reconciliation. We believe in the dialogue of religions and cultures and we resist atheistic and secularist trends, and work for the promotion of spiritual and moral values.

We call upon the international community, governments and players of civil society to work together in order that justice and peace prevail all over the world, terrorism may be eradicated and injustice and poverty may be eliminated, which are among the main causes of human suffering. We commit ourselves to work together in order that goodness, progress and mutual understanding and respect may become the guiding principles of all societies.

The continuation of the Israeli occupation of the Arab territories in the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem, Golan Heights and Shebaa Farms, and the continuous disregard by Israel of international law and the decisions taken by the United Nations, aggressions against the Aqsa Mosque, attempts aiming at the Judiazation of Jerusalem, building more settlements, confiscating and scraping lands, destruction of buildings, the continuing military attacks on the Palestinian people, the refusal of the rights of refugees to return back homes, and similar illegal and violent measures have contributed to the increase of violence. This situation will cause more pains and shedding of blood, and will threaten peace and justice.



Therefore, we support all efforts and initiatives with the aim of fulfilling a comprehensive and permanent peace with justice in our region, and the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

We urge the international community to lift the unjust sanctions imposed on Iraq which caused much suffering and pain to the people of during the last years.

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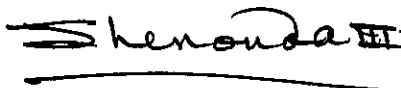
At the end of our meeting, we thank the Lord for leading our deliberations and decisions. We ask Him to grant us His abundant grace and wisdom to enable us to work for the preservation of the Apostolic faith and the unity of His holy Church. We also pray that God may grant our faithful and the whole humanity the hope that peace, justice and goodness will prevail in the whole world.

We thank the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch for its brotherly love and warm hospitality. We also thank all who worked, prayed and assisted us for the success of this meeting.

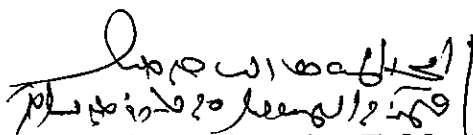
Glory be to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

March 9, 2002

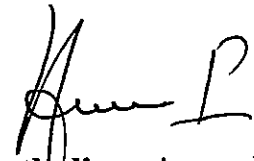
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Pope Shenouda III



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