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Christians and Iraqi Kurdistan Part 2

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This report summarizes the key aspects of the fieldwork undertaken jointly by the Danube Institute and Hungary Helps that took place in Kurdistan in March 2023. The first part is an academic analysis of the situation of Christians in Kurdistan. The second part focuses on individual reports by team members and an analysis of the churches in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The situation of women, families, and education in Iraqi Kurdistan (Virág Lőrincz)

An essential way to understand different cultures and civilizations is to spend time within and to live among them. We need to become active listeners and be attentive and aware of others' emotional and cognitive backgrounds. Aiming to understand them on a deeper level, it is fundamental to see the world through their glasses and to put aside our views and prejudices. These were the cornerstones of our two-week-long fieldwork about the situation of Christianity in Iraq, which forms part of the Danube Institute's longer-term research project titled Attacks on Christian Communities and Institutions.

Having a couple of times visiting the Middle East, it was no concern for me to participate in the research, but on the contrary, as the only female member of the research group conducting the fieldwork in Iraq, I aimed to develop a deeper relationship with local women, families, and young people. This implicit motivation was based on cultural traditions on the one hand and on elemental human norms of connection on the other. In the beginning, I had ambivalent feelings about the trip to Iraq, as the country had been ranked among the top 20 countries during the last decade where Christians faced the most extreme persecution. The mixed feelings of excitement and nervousness were quickly transformed into eagerness and fascination once we conducted our very first interviews. The captivating stories, memories, and experiences that local people shared with us have shed a different light on the country, with a vibrant history and one of the most devastating memories of humanity's recent past.

In an episode of the Danube Institute’s podcast with Juliana Taimoorazy, an Assyrian Christian, founder and president of the Iraqi Christian Relief Council, and a leading international advocate and 2021 Nobel Peace Prize nominee, the challenging situation of

Iraqi Christian women and families came to the fore. According to Ms. Taimoorazy, one of the country's most significant forms of discrimination against Christians is the personal status law. It regulates the issue of conversion in a way that makes the family, including children, officially Muslim if one of the parents chooses to convert to Islam. In addition, if someone with a Muslim parent decides to convert to Christianity, they are not allowed to change their religion on their ID cards. During our fieldwork interviews with Christian bishops, they have added that converted people have to face several difficulties, and they might even put their religious community in danger. A more devastating point of the interview was when Ms. Taimoorazy called the new generation of children within the Assyrian community "the lost generation," one underlying cause of which is the restricted education opportunities, especially in the neighboring countries.

It was predominantly after the 1991 Iraqi uprisings that voices in defence of women have become louder. With the establishment of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, the consciousness has been increased on women's rights and the elimination of gender discrimination, with particular emphasis on Christians and other religious and ethnic minority communities. The security vacuum after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the flare-up of anti-Western and sectarian violence led to another wave of upsurge in attacks on women in general but with a special focus on Christians. During the rise of ISIS, the whole world was resounding with the violence committed by them, especially against Christian and Yazidi women. However, as ISIS was officially defeated in a territorial sense in 2017, there is a danger that the threats and challenges that Christian people – with special regard to women – have to face daily will fade away or will be labeled as a secondary issue. Although ISIS was formally defeated, the remaining political, economic, and social instability and

insecurity left room for further violence against women. Since the territorial defeat of ISIS and a referendum held by the Kurdistan Regional Government on independence in 2017, the security situation of women – with particular interest of Christians and other non-Muslim minority groups – has improved somewhat in the northern region of the country, especially when compared to the Baghdad-ruled south.

During our fieldwork research in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, various degrees of violence against women were covered. While physical aggression in the form of kidnapping or sexual harassment was less common, difficulties in the economic sphere, discrimination at work, and verbal molestation in daily life seemed to be more of a threat. Therefore, in our research, we interviewed a wide range of Iraqi Christian women to understand their stories and get a complete picture of their situation in the Kurdistan region today. As we dug deeper into our interviews, everyone had a different story: political actors with governmental ties, high-ranking religious leaders, and women's rights advocates.

Regarding the situation of women and families, the critical issues of our research included, among others, the main challenges of being a female in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region as compared to the situation in the southern parts of Iraq, the communities' attitude towards conversion, their memories about ISIS, and how has life changed after Saddam's regime. Given that Assyrians – alongside Chaldeans and Syriacs – make up the most prominent Christian denominations in the country, we have talked to various members of the Assyrian community living in the Kurdistan Region, including the Assyrian Aid Society, the Assyrian Women’s Union, the Assyrian Student Union, and several cultural organizations. During the interviews, one of our assumptions that came to be true was that in violence against women, as in many cases of conversion, is shame, both in the community and even

in the family, prevents victims from talking openly about what happened. This was, of course, a complicating factor in our research, but the best we could do was to anonymously describe some of the cases that were shared with us.

Although it was an emotional overload to learn so much knowledge and experience in so little time while in a different culture, I was astonished by the openness and friendliness of the locals. They had trust in us with a strong desire to be understood and to send a message through us to the West so that people could learn about their history and their current situation.

With this introduction, our specific findings will be detailed in a chapter below.

The Villages (Dr. Calum T.M. Nicholson)

In his chapter, T*he Paradoxes of Christianity in Contemporary Iraq*, Dr Calum T.M. Nicholson draws on interviews with senior Christian clergy in the major conurbations of Erbil and Duhok, as well as time spent with ordinary people in small Christian villages in the Nahla Valley and on the Nineveh Plain, to illustrate some tensions between the perspectives of these two strata of the local Christian community, and the broader paradoxes of the wider Christian community in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The chapter begins with a general history of Christianity in Iraq, outlining the various denominations, the basis of their schisms, and their experience of recent Iraqi history, particularly during and after Saddam Hussein's Presidency.

It then proceeds to outline and reflect on the course of the scheduled interviews conducted by the research team with senior Christian clergy and Kurdish government officials in the cities. Noting the pattern of what they said, the chapter suggests two implications.

First, these senior figures were political ones, and as such, entirely conscious that, as foreigners, and notably foreigners whose work was partly funded by Hungary Helps (an organisation that has donated a great deal of money to the Christian churches in Iraqi Kurdistan), the research team might reasonably be seen as extensions of that donor organisation. As such, the chapter suggests that what these clergymen said could not be taken at face value.

Second, these senior figures also appeared more closely connected to the diaspora than they were to the local Christian communities, having either lived or been educated abroad. This raised the question of whether they could be truly seen as representatives of the ordinary Christians in Kurdistan.

The challenges these implications hold for research are, of course, not unusual but rather quite typical and even characteristic of any international development effort in any context. Questions of political interest and of representation are precisely what makes any such work so fraught.

The chapter then turns to the second week of the author's fieldwork. Having grown frustrated with the formality of the pre-scheduled meetings with senior clergymen and officials in the cities, meetings that were more reminiscent of political audiences than sociological interviews in the proper sense, the author made the decision to venture out to the villages, away from the otherwise ever-present handlers, to speak to ordinary members

of the Christian community, in the hope that such conversations would be less filtered, and more candid.

In contrast to the interviews with senior clergy and government officials, in the villages, the meetings were spontaneous, the discussion free-range, and the answers given seemingly offered as an end in themselves rather than a means to some political end. Absent were the strictures of formality, with these interviews conducted while eating in houses, walking in fields, and even working together repairing walls and laying flagstones. This approach proved productive. With the interlocutors relaxed, having established a more personal bond over food or under the hot sun as we walked or worked, they spoke frankly. This allowed the author to glean so-called 'bottom-up' insights from people who had no one to represent but themselves and no agenda beyond the catharsis of giving voice to their frustrations, namely at the iniquities of their circumstances and the vicissitudes of their fortune.

Notably, through the eyes of these ordinary Christian villagers, the world appeared starkly different to the one presented by the clergy who claimed to speak for them. Where the latter were often charmingly dissimulative, these villagers by contrast, spoke with hushed earnestness, telling uncomfortable anecdotes with flat resignation. Where, for instance, the clergy had pointed to violence and persecution being a lot of the Christians at the hands of the Arabs, or the Kurds, or Muslims in general, the ordinary villagers spoke less of persecution by the Government or by Muslims, as their daily experience and most pressing concern, but instead of discrimination, and this at the hands of the clergy themselves.

But across both strata, certain patterns could be discerned. First, interviewees tended to diagnose the pathologies of all Iraqi society in terms of their own professional competencies. For clergy, it was Islam. For political figures, it was the economy. For non-profit

workers dealing with Yezidis traumatized by the apocalyptic fanaticism of ISIS, it was group psychology. And for ordinary people, it was the corruption of the power they were most familiar with.

Reading between the lines, a further pattern emerged, however, which might stand as an alternative diagnosis of the ills that affect Iraqis, Christians not least: foreign interventions which assume that this notoriously complex region is simpler than it in fact is. Whether these foreigners take the form of evangelical Christians, armies, the Iraqi Christian diaspora in Michigan or elsewhere, or foreign aid agencies like Hungary Helps, the law of unintended consequences applies strongly regarding their actions and interventions, however well-meant these may be.

With the caveat that the work is inevitably preliminary, based as it was on a mere two weeks of fieldwork, the purpose of the chapter will therefore be to offer less answers as much as cautions: to not simply point to what organisations like Hungary Helps might hope to achieve, in offering aid and support to minorities in Iraq, but also what might otherwise go unnoticed, including the unintended consequences of various efforts, however well meant. 'Ought', in short, should not be taken to necessarily imply 'can'.

The Churches

In keeping with the oral history nature of this work, a brief outline of each of the churches visited will focus primarily on their own self-descriptions. The one exception is with the

church not visited, the Armenian church. Gabriella Kocsis will provide a brief history of the Armenian church below.

To fully understand the unique challenges faced by Iraqi Christians, it is important to note their relative numbers. The NGO Open Doors provides the following numbers:

Religious landscape[a]

Iraq: Religious context	**Number of adherents**	**%**
Christians	166,000	0.4
Muslim	41,630,000	97.7
Hindu	4,900	0.0
Buddhist	370	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	20	0.0
Bahai	2,000	0.0
Atheist	74,400	0.2
Agnostic	221,000	0.5
Other	512,990	1.2
OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

[a] "Iraq – WWL 2022 Country Dossier," *Open Doors*, https://www.opendoors.de/sites/default/files/country_dossier/iraq_wwl_2022_country_dossier.pdf.

In our interviews, whether 166,000 thousand Christians actually remain in Iraq is questionable and in any case is constantly declining. Moreover, the Christian landscape is deeply divided by denomination:

Church spectrum today[b]

Iraq: Church networks	**Christians**	**%**
Orthodox	55,400	33.4
Catholic	95,700	57.7
Protestant	10,000	6.0
Independent	70,000	42.2
Unaffiliated	5,000	3.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-70,000	-42.2
Total	**166,100**	**100.1**
Evangelical movement	14,600	8.8
Renewalist movement	37,800	22.8
(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

Orthodox: *Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox.*
Roman Catholics: *All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome.* ***Protestants:*** *Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics.* ***Independents:*** *Christians*

[b] Ibid.

who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). ***Unaffiliated Christians:*** *Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches.* ***Doubly-affiliated Christians:*** *Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once.*
Evangelical movement: *Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls.*
Renewalist movement: *Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.*

With this overview, we turn to the Armenians in Kurdistan.

Armenians in Kurdistan (Gabriella Kocsis)

During the fieldwork, we did not have the chance to visit the Armenian communities of Kurdistan; however, due to their historical presence in Iraq, we decided to add them subsequently to our research. In the case of Armenians, the interviews were done online with prominent church and youth organization leaders who could share in-depth knowledge about the past, present and future prospects of the Armenians. Apart from that, we rely on secondary sources, written about the historical roots as well as current realities of the Armenian presence in Iraq.

Armenians have been present in the territory of modern Iraq for long centuries. There were Armenian clusters in Mesopotamia already before the seventeenth century, however, the first permanent Armenian communities were established after the Ottoman capture of Baghdad in 1639. The latest historical milestone of Armenian presence was the Armenian genocide in 1915. This event marked a new era for many Armenian communities in the Middle East, including Iraq. An estimated 20,000-25,000 genocide survivors arrived in the northern

territories of Iraq after the First World War. The majority of them stayed near Baghdad, and some settled in Mosul. During the next decades, the community attained a respected place in Iraqi society and began to resettle in different areas of the country. Armenian schools, and churches were built, creating an essential basis for the community.[c]

Prior to the 2003 American invasion, Armenians were estimated to be around 18.000-20.000 in number in Iraq. Similarly as for the other Christian communities, the 2003 invasion and the following events meant a direct and existential threat for the Armenians. They also witnessed their churches being destroyed and civilians kidnapped or killed by terrorist actions. Consequently, an irreversible decline occurred in the heretofore vibrant Armenian community. Many were displaced and found support in the Kurdistan region. Similar to other Christian groups, their numbers are endangered, and their future remains uncertain.

As there is a lack of future prospects and long-term plans, many Iraqi Armenians decided to leave. Their fragile identity mainly depends on the Armenian Church and community leaders. Among the young people, there is increasing uncertainty regarding their future in Iraq. What gives a bit of hope is the specific nature of Armenian communities in keeping their heritage, culture, language and religion alive.[d]

Syriac Orthodox Church[e]

[c] Hamied Al Hashimi, *Armenians of Iraq: History, Culture, Identity* (London: Austin Macauley Publishers, 2023).

[d] Robert Istepanian, "The Armenians of Iraq since 2003: Two Decades of Progress or Regression", Centre français de recherche sur l'Irak, (CFRI), 23/06/2023, https://cfri-irak.com/en/article/the-armenians-of-iraq-since-2003-two-decades-of-progress-or-regression-2023-07-07.

[e] Source: Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, https://syrianorthodoxchurch.org/general-history/.

Few Christian denominations can claim the antiquity of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, whose foundations can be traced back to the very dawn of Christianity. The Church justifiably prides itself as being one of the earliest established apostolic churches. It was in Antioch, after all, that the followers of Jesus were called Christians, as we are told in the New Testament, “The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” (Acts 11:26).

According to ecclesiastical tradition, the Church of Antioch is the second established church in Christendom after Jerusalem, and the prominence of its Apostolic See is well documented. In his *Chronicon* (I, 2), the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea tells us that St. Peter the Apostle established a bishopric in Antioch and became its first bishop. He also tells us that St. Peter was succeeded by Evodius. In another historical work, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Eusebius tells us that Ignatius the Illuminator, “a name of note to most men, [was] the second after Peter to the bishopric of Antioch” (III, 36).

In the mid of the 5th century, the Bishop of Antioch and his counterparts in Alexandria, Byzantium and Rome would be called patriarchs. The Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch used to be known by his own name; however, since 1293, the patriarchs of Antioch adopted the name Ignatius, after the Illuminator. The See

of Antioch continues to flourish till our day, with His Holiness Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I, being the 122nd in the line of legitimate patriarchs.

The patriarchate was forced to move from Antioch in ca. A.D. 518, after a period of turbulent history, to various locations in the Near East until it settled in the monastery Dayro d-Mor Hananya (also known as Kurkmo Dayro, Deir az-Za'faran–Syriac and Arabic respectively for Saffron Monastery) in Mardin, Turkey, during the 13th century. After another period of heinous violence during and after World War I, which took the lives of a quarter million Syriac Orthodox faithful, the patriarchate was transferred to Homs, Syria, in 1933 and later to Damascus in 1957.

The Syriac Orthodox Church is quite unique for many reasons. Firstly, it presents a form of Christianity, which is Semitic in nature, with a culture not far from the one Christ himself experienced. Secondly, it employs in its liturgy the Syriac language, an Aramaic dialect akin to the Aramaic spoken by Christ and the Apostles. Thirdly, its liturgy is one of the most ancient and has been handed from one generation to another. Fourthly, and most importantly, it demonstrates the unity of the body of Christ by the multiethnic nature of its faithful…

The Syriac Orthodox Church has been a member of the World Council of Churches since 1960 and is one of the founding members of the Middle East Council of Churches. The Church takes part in ecumenical and theological dialogues with other churches. As a result of these dialogues, the Church has issued two joint declarations with the Roman Catholic Church and another with the Eastern Orthodox churches.

In Syriac, the proper name of the Church is *`idto suryoyto treeysath shubho*. In the past, the name of the Church had been translated into English as "Syrian Orthodox Church". The Holy Synod of the Church approved the translation "Syriac Orthodox Church" in its session of March 28-April 3, 2000.

History

…Syriac Christianity was not centered just in Antioch, the Roman capital of Syria. In fact, Syriac Christianity can be traced further East in Mesopotamia. As local tradition tells us, Christianity was received in Edessa during the time of the Apostles. This is reported in a number of documents, including Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*. He gives us the text of a correspondence between the city's king, Abgar Ukomo, and none other than Jesus Himself:

Abgar Ukomo, the toparch, to Jesus the good Savior who has appeared in the district of Jerusalem, greetings. I have heard concerning you and your cures, how they are accomplished by you without drugs and herbs … And when I heard of all these things concerning you I decided that it is one of two things, either that you are God and came down from Heaven to do these things, or are the Son of God for doing these things. For this reason I write to beg you to hasten to me and to heal the suffering which I have …

The reply from Jesus to King Abgar, according to the same tradition, was carried by a certain Ananias and read:

Blessed are you who believed in me, not having seen me … Now concerning what you wrote to me, to come to you, I must first complete here all for which I was sent, and after thus completing it be taken up to Him who sent me; and when I have been taken up, I will send to you one of my disciples to heal your suffering and give life to you and those with you.

The story continues to describe how one of the Seventy Disciples, named Adai, was sent to King Abgar to heal his disease…

Syriac Christianity spread rapidly in the East. The Bible was translated into Syriac to serve as the main source of teaching as early as the second century. Till our day, the antiquity of the

Syriac biblical versions is upheld with high esteem by modern scholars…

The Church of Antioch was thriving under the Byzantine Empire until the fifth century when Christological controversies split the Church. After the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451, two camps of the one Church emerged: The Greek Church of Byzantium and the Latin Church of Rome accepted Chalcedon, but the Syriac and Coptic (later Armenian as well) Churches rejected the council. The former group professed that Christ is *in* two natures, human and divine, whilst the latter adopted the doctrine that Christ has one incarnate nature *from* two natures. It is worth noting that the drafts of the Council were according to the position of the Syriac and Coptic Churches. The final resolution, however, was according to the doctrine of the Western Churches and was rejected by the Syriac Church. This schism had sad consequences on the Syriac Church during the next few centuries…

Aside from their ecclesiastical role, Syriac Churchmen have contributed to world civilization. As early as the fourth century, academies and schools were set up in monasteries throughout Syria and Mesopotamia. Monks and scholars were busy studying the sciences of the Greeks, commenting on and adding to them. It is no surprise that when the Arabs, who conquered the Near East

at the end of the seventh century, wanted to acquire Greek knowledge, they turned to Syriac scholars and churchmen. Arab caliphs commissioned Syriac scholars to translate the sciences of the Greeks into Arabic…

The Syriac Orthodox Church survived under the dominion of many empires in the centuries that followed. Under the Arabs, Mongols, Crusades, Mamluks and Ottomans, the Syriac Orthodox Church continued its survival. Neither intimidation nor oppression could suppress the faithful, but the Church diminished in size to a fraction of what it was.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Syriac Orthodox Christianity was confined mostly to mountainous rural areas, such as Tur Abdin, and various towns in the Ottoman Empire. The worst of the persecutions was yet to come. During World War I, massacres and ethnic cleansing befell the Syriac Orthodox Christians at the hands of the Ottoman Turks and the neighboring Kurds. The year 1915 is known in Syriac by *sayfo*, or '[the year of the] sword'. It is estimated that a quarter of a million perished; villages were emptied; monasteries and Churches were destroyed. This resulted in what the Syriacs call (in Turkish) *sefer berlik* 'the collective exodus', a migration to the newly established countries of Syria,

Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine. Some left the Middle East altogether, forming new communities in the Americas.

As a result of further immigration that ensued, the Syriac Orthodox Church today has faith not only in the Middle East and India, but in Europe, the Americas and Australia as well.

Faith and Doctrine

The faith of the Syriac Orthodox Church is in accordance with the Nicene Creed. It believes in the Trinity, that is, one God, subsisting in three separate persons called the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The three being of one Essence, of one Godhead, have one Will, one Work and one Lordship. The special aspect of the First Person is His Fatherhood, that of the Second Person His Sonship, and that of the Third Person His Procession.

The Syriac Orthodox Church believes in the mystery of Incarnation. That is, the Only Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, took to Himself a body and became man. It further believes that at the time of Annunciation, when the Angel Gabriel was sent to the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit came upon her and cleansed her of all natural impurity, filling her with His grace. Then the Only Son of God came down and entered her immaculate womb and took to Himself a body through her, thus becoming a perfect Man with a perfect Soul. After nine months,

He was born of her, and her virginity was maintained contrary to the laws of nature. It further believes that His true Godhead and His true Manhood were in Him essentially united, He being one Lord and one Son, and that after the union took place in Him, He had but one Nature Incarnate, was one Person, had one Will and one Work. This union is marked by being a natural union of persons, free of all separateness, intermixture, confusion, mingling, change and transformation.

The Syriac Orthodox Church calls Mary *yoldath aloho*, 'Bearer of God', because she gave birth to Christ, God truly incarnate.

The Syriac Orthodox Church believes that the death of Christ was the separation of His soul from His body, but His deity did not at any time leave either His body or His soul. It further believes that by His death for us, He conferred upon us salvation from eternal death and reconciliation with His Heavenly Father…

The Syriac Orthodox Church conforms to the teachings of the Three Ecumenical Councils of Nicea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (A.D. 381) and Ephesus (A.D. 431). It rejects the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451).

Form of Worship

In accordance with Psalm 119, verse 164, "Seven times in the day have I praised thee for thy judgments, O Righteous One," the Syriac Orthodox Church set the times for the prayer to seven: Evening or *ramsho* prayer (Vespers), Drawing of the Veil or *Sootoro* prayer (Compline), Midnight or *lilyo*prayer, Morning or *saphro* prayer (Matins), the Third Hour or *tloth sho`in* prayer (Prime, 9 a.m.), the Sixth Hour or *sheth sho`in* prayer (Sext, noon) and the Ninth Hour or *tsha` sho`in* prayer (Nones, 3 p.m.). The Midnight prayer consists of three *qawme* 'watches' (literarily 'standing')…

The sign of the cross is made with the right hand. The thumb, first finger and second finger are brought together, and the first finger is extended further than the thumb and second finger, indicating that Christ is the One and Only Savior. The sign of the cross is drawn starting from the forehead, down to the breast and then from the left to the right shoulder. This tradition symbolizes that the Lord Christ came down to earth from the heights and redeemed our earthly body from the gloomy paths of darkness (left), to the paths of truth and light (right).

Apart from sermons, all prayers are sung in the form of chants and melodies. Thousands of tunes and melodies existed, most of which are unfortunately lost. Still, hundreds of melodies remain

and these are preserved in the Treasury of Tunes, known in Syriac as *Beth Gazo*. Since a musical notation system was not developed, the tunes were transmitted down the ages as oral tradition. As a result, a few schools of music emerged, most notably Mardin, Edessa, Tur `Abdin, and Kharput, to name a few.

During the celebration of the Eucharist, priests and deacons put on elaborate vestments which are unique to the Syriac Orthodox Church. Whether in the Middle East, India, Europe, the Americas or Australia, the same vestments are worn by all clergy.

Church Hierarchy

The supreme head of the Syriac Orthodox Church is the Patriarch of Antioch and all the East. He also presides over the Holy Synod, the assembly of all bishops.

The local head of the church in Malankara (India) is the Catholicos of the East. The Catholicos is under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Antioch and is accountable to the Holy Synod and the local Malankara Synod. He is consecrated by the Patriarch and presides over the local Holy Synod.

The local head of every archdiocese is an archbishop. He is under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch and is accountable to the Holy Synod. The archbishop is ordained by the Patriarch and at least

two bishops. Some archdioceses are 'patriarchal vicarates'; the patriarchal vicar, regardless of ecclesiastical office, is accountable directly to the Patriarch.

Each parish is assigned a vicar. He is under the direct jurisdiction of his archbishop and is directly accountable to him. The parish is run by a board of trustees (or a committee) which is elected by the parishioners and approved by the archbishop.

Deacons assist the priest in the administration of the liturgy. Each archdiocese may have one archdeacon who is called "the right hand of the bishop." Only qualified and learned deacons are elevated to this office.

There are three ranks of priesthood in the Syriac Orthodox Church:

- Episcopate: Within it, there are the ranks of Patriarch, Catholicos, archbishop, and bishop.
- Vicarate: Within it, there are the ranks of chor-episcopos and priest or *qasheesho*.
- Deaconate: Within it, there are the ranks of archdeacon, evangelical-deacon, subdeacon, lector or *qoruyo*and singer or *mzamrono*.

Syriac Catholic Church[f]

The Syriac Catholic Church shares the heritage of the Syrian city of Antioch, the political and socioeconomic center of the eastern Mediterranean in the ancient world. Though inhabited by a diverse collection of peoples — Greeks and Macedonians, Romans and Jews, Syrians and Nabateans — Antioch was culturally Hellenic and its lingua franca Greek. But those who lived in Syria's rural interior spoke Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic nurtured in the city of Edessa.

Founded by the apostles Peter and Paul, the church of Antioch — where the followers of Jesus Christ were first called "Christian" (Acts 11:26) — emerged as the center of a faith community, Greek- and Syriac-speaking, that spread throughout the Roman East and beyond. Though Antioch's bishops presided over this vast and diverse church as patriarchs, Edessa cultivated a distinct form of Syriac Christianity.

An ancient legend claims Christ was personally responsible for Edessa's evangelization, instructing St. Thomas the Apostle to send a disciple to cure Abgar, Edessa's sickly king. Bearing a cloth featuring a miraculous image of Jesus, Addai (Syriac for Thaddeus,

[f] Source: Michael J.L. La Civita, "The Syriac Catholic Church," *One Magazine*, https://cnewa.org/magazine/profiles-33370/.

one of the 70 disciples of Jesus) and his assistant, Mari, cured the king, won disciples and established the church.

Christological controversies. As the church grew, embracing converts from Greek, Roman and Semitic cultures, debates raged regarding the nature of Jesus, his relationship to the Creator and how to interpret and practice his teachings.

Antiochene Christians cultivated contrasting schools of theology and philosophy, one more theoretical and Greek-speaking, the other more literal and Syriac-speaking. These schools did not develop in isolation — cross-pollination was the norm — and the church in Antioch eventually fashioned a particular image and understanding of Jesus that countered a more allegorical Christology developed by Christians in Alexandria, the Roman capital of Egypt…

the seat of the Syriac Orthodox patriarch of Antioch moved from monastery to monastery, usually in Mesopotamia and always beyond the grasp of the emperor. In 1293 the patriarchate settled in Kurkmo Dayro, where it remained until 1933. This late fifth-century monastery, located in southeastern Turkey near the town of Mardin, remains an active Syriac Orthodox community.

In the seventh century, Syriac Orthodox Christians generally welcomed the invading Muslim Arabs tribes, who accepted them as “People of the Book.” No longer hounded, Syriac Orthodox scholars flourished. Poets composed hymns that simplified complex ideas. Scholars translated ancient Greek texts and wrote biblical commentaries. Monks explored grammar, medicine, philosophy, rhetoric and science. Theologians and poets continued the tradition of creating liturgies, borrowing elements from the Byzantine, Church of the East and Maronite traditions.

Arab Muslim leaders employed Syriac scholars, who were largely responsible for the Arab world’s familiarity with ancient Greek astronomy, chemistry, mathematics and philosophy — disciplines that eventually reached Europe via Arab Sicily and Spain.

At its height in the mid-14th century, the Syriac Orthodox Church, which stretched from the eastern Mediterranean to modern Afghanistan, included 20 metropolitan sees and more than 100 eparchies. In the 17th century, the Syriac Orthodox patriarchate received into the church tens of thousands of Thomas Christians in southwestern India.

Today, some 4.2 million people, including 3.7 million in India, adhere to the rites and traditions of the Syriac Orthodox Church…

The ascent of Europe and the Roman church, combined with the advance of Islam and the decline of the Christian East, hardened what had been a gradual separation between the churches of the West and East. Yet, the advance of Catholic Crusaders into the heart of the Muslim Middle East inaugurated warm relations between Catholic and Syriac Orthodox bishops, some of whom expressed an interest in the restoration of full communion with Rome.

Efforts to restore the full unity of the church took place in Roman-sponsored councils in Lyon in 1274 and Florence in 1439. A decree of union between the Catholic and Syriac Orthodox churches took place in Florence on 30 November 1444, but as with all efforts for union at the time, it failed. The papacy had offered economic and political support in exchange for acceptance of papal authority — support welcomed by beleaguered civil and ecclesial leaders. But the rank and file, often led by the monasteries, largely rejected union as well as offers of support…

The Ottoman Turks (who had governed most of the eastern Mediterranean since the 15th century) in 1829 recognized Syriac Catholics as a distinct community… In 1782, the Syriac Orthodox synod elected Metropolitan Michael Jarweh of Aleppo

as patriarch. Soon after his enthronement, he declared himself a Catholic and took refuge in the mountains of Lebanon. There, in Sharfeh, he built a monastery dedicated to the Virgin Mary that remains an important Syriac Catholic center.

With a renewed Catholic presence and bolstered by the presence of French and Italian religious, the Syriac Catholic Church grew at the expense of the Syriac Orthodox Church, which declined. But this Catholic advance came to a sudden end. Europe's colonial quests and the long and painful decline of the Ottoman Turkish Empire — which quickly unraveled in the late 19th century — coincided with the rise of nationalism among the empire's peoples. Sensing a threat, the Ottomans murdered more than 25,000 Syriac Christians, Catholics and Orthodox between 1895 and 1896. Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans, all suspected of harboring similar separatist sentiments, also perished.

During World War I, the sultan's Christian subjects found themselves caught between two opposing cultures — their Sunni Muslim superiors and the Allied "Christian" powers of Great Britain, France and Russia.

Encouraged by the Allies, who offered vague promises of independence, Ottoman Christians turned on the sultan. The consequences were grave. Hundreds of thousands were killed,

including some 50,000 Syriac Catholics and six of the church's bishops. Survivors, including the Syriac Catholic patriarch, sought refuge in the empire's cities, especially Beirut, which remains the seat of the Syriac Catholic patriarchate…

Today, the Syriac Catholic Church includes about 130,000 members scattered in cities and towns throughout Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, the United States and Venezuela.

As with most Christian communities of the Middle East, Syriac Catholics have suffered heavily as the region's stability has deteriorated. Thousands have fled the violence in Baghdad and Mosul, where they once enjoyed relative prosperity, for their remote ancestral villages near ancient Nineveh. Many Syriac Catholic families in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria have emigrated to the West to escape economic stagnation.

The Syriac Catholic Church, though influenced by the Latin (Roman) tradition, has nevertheless contributed to the modern revival of Syriac scholarship, benefiting the entire family of Antiochene and Syriac churches, Assyrian, Catholic and Orthodox.

Chaldean Catholic Church[g]

[g] Source: "Summary of the history of the Chaldean Church," *Chaldean Patriarchate*, https://saint-adday.com/?p=3336. Adapted from the book "A Summary of the History of the Chaldean Church" by Bishop (Patriarch) Louis Sako.

…The roots of the Chaldean Church go back to the Church of the East, which flourished outside the walls of the Roman Empire and was also called the Syriac Church of the East, Syria Medanhaya, in reference to the spot in which it spread east of the Euphrates River, and the Church of Persia, in reference to Persia. These designations go deep into the history and civilization of Mesopotamia "Beth-Nahrain". As for the current designations: the Chaldean or Assyrian Church, as church designations, which have their own characteristics and reasons, they are relatively late, even though they date back to very ancient civilizations and peoples. The "Syriac" language was the language of trade and culture in the Silk Road countries, and its colloquial dialect is still spoken by most Christians in Iraq and southern Turkey, including Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syriacs, and in Iran and the diaspora…

The influence of Jerusalem on the Christians of the East is clear through several indicators: church leadership, liturgy, Jewish blessings in the Mass of Addai and Mary, processions and requests, prayers at the end of the month, and holding a feast for Mar Shmoni and her children who were martyred in the second century BC…

But, the "Western" influence on the Church of the East occurred in the field of theological thought, especially with regard to Christology. This influence was achieved through what was translated from the books of the great fathers of the School of Antioch: Theodore, Bishop of Masissa, and Diodorus, Bishop of Cyrus. The Church of the East adopted Antiochene Christology with an upward theological trend: from man to God, in contrast to

the Alexandrian downward trend from God to man. This theology was rejected by the Council of Ephesus in 431 and was officially adopted by the Councils of Beth-Laphat (484) and Selec-Ctesiphon (486).

The first time the name Nestorius appeared was in the year 612 in a debate between two theological groups: the Levantine and the Syriac Orthodox, before Shah Khosrau II. In fact, we rarely find any influence on the teachings of Nestorius in the Church of the East, but the strongest and most direct influence is on Theodore, Bishop of Masissa, whom I considered "the greatest teacher."

The Church of the East, despite all the difficulties, considered itself, along the line, part of the universal Church, but its circumstances did not allow for the establishment of relations with the Western Church, so it lived in historical and geographical isolation more than doctrinal.

History witnesses unparalleled missionary activity carried out by the Church of the East, which extended to the Far East from the island of Sumatra, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), the Malabar coasts of India, China, and the Arabian Peninsula…

Christianity continued to flourish in these regions, even after the Arab conquest, and institutions became established there: schools, hospitals, and monasteries. Father Henry Lammens, the Jesuit, says about the spread of the Syriac language: "One of the strangest things is that the spread of the Aramaic language reached a great extent during the reign of the Seleucids, and it became the dominant language in all of Semitic Asia, I mean in Syria,

Mesopotamia, the Chaldeans, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula. Muslim Arabs also studied it because of its many benefits. We do not think that any other language, not even Greek, rivaled Syriac in its wide spread…

In the fifteenth century, the dioceses of the Church of the East declined in northern Mesopotamia and in the Hakkari Mountains…

At the end of the eighteenth century, under the influence of the Patriarchate of Amed and with the assistance of the Capuchin and Dominican monks, most of the members of the Church of the East in Mosul and its plain joined Catholicism…

[in the 19th century] Many members of the Assyrian Church of the East moved to the Chaldean-Catholic Church. This came about through the efforts of the pastoral work of monks and priests among the villages. Anglican and Russian Orthodox missionaries also carried out a evangelization campaign in the Assyrian countryside, especially in Iran and the Hakkari Mountains, which reduced the number of those belonging to the Koganese Patriarchate. During the First World War (1914-1918), many areas of Eastern Christians were devastated…

In 1989, the Chaldean Synod elected a patriarch, Bishop of Beirut Raphael Bidawith (1989-2003), and Iraq had just emerged exhausted from the First Gulf War, a war that lasted for eight years and claimed many lives. What made matters worse was that the regime did not learn the lesson, so it invaded Kuwait, and the Second Gulf War followed, followed by twelve years of economic blockade (1991-2003). The increasing migration of Christians

marked his reign, and the Chaldean diaspora witnessed a revival: bishops and priests in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States of America.

One of the achievements of this period was the Christological Declaration (agreement on the divinity of Christ) between Catholics and the Assyrian Church of the East on November 11, 1994, specifically between Pope John Paul II and Mar Khananishua Denha IV. This initiative encouraged the leadership of the two sister churches: the Assyrian and the Chaldean, to form a joint committee to follow up the dialogue, and the two patriarchs: Mar Denha and Mar Raphael, signed a joint statement in 1996. In 2001, the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity issued a document containing broad outlines for sharing sanctities between the two churches, especially in the countries of expansion. The Holy See also declared the validity of the Mass of Addai and Mary, without the text of the narration, in 2002.

In December 2003, the Chaldean Synod elected the Patriarchal Assistant, Bishop Emmanuel Deli, as Patriarch, succeeding Mar Raphael Bidawith, who died in Beirut in the same year.

Most Chaldean Christians still live in Iraq, in the major cities and in the countryside, especially in the villages of the Nineveh Plain. They work in the fields of education, medicine, and trade, and although they are a numerical minority, their presence and participation are valued by their citizens, in addition to their culture, openness, and sincerity.

Chaldeans are spread across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, northern Türkiye and eastern Iran. In addition to the presence of important groups in the Eastern Mediterranean, the state of political and economic instability in which these countries live has pushed them into diaspora. They have important communities in the Americas, Australia, and Europe, and they have their own cultural centers, social activities, and churches that preserve their original rituals…

In general, the theology of the Levant stems from the cultural, social, and economic reality of the Levant: Christians were usually peasants, shepherds, or monks, and they rarely held positions of power or authority, so their theology was full of spontaneity, enthusiasm, and heart. It is closer to contemporary theology than to classical theology.

The concept of the sacrament in the Church of the East is not specific. It was used to refer to sacred things just as the West used the word sacrament in relation to signs and sacred things, to the point that Saint Augustine (+ 430) mentions a list of 340 sacraments. The word “secret” was not crystallized and defined until later, and the number seven was also determined by the Latin Church at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The Church of the East, like the rest of the non-Catholic Eastern Churches, did not find a way to crystallize the secrets in an accurate methodology for many reasons until recently. The signs that sanctify material elements were considered secrets through which they could bestow the Lord’s blessings and express His presence and love. She saw in these secrets an opportunity to

meet him. The list of the seven sacraments was detailed in the book Al-Jawhara by Abdishu Al-Subawi (+ 1318), which is an official approved Christian education book: priesthood, baptism, anointing, communion, holy leaven, the forgiveness of sins, the sign of the cross or marriage, and virginity, while the list of his contemporary is Second Timothy (+ 1332).) In his book: "The Seven Reasons for the Church's Sacraments," Vatican Syriac Manuscript 151, it was mentioned a little differently: priesthood, baptism, communion, marriage, consecration to monastic life, consecration of altars, and burial. Abdishu adopted dualism in determining the truth and validity of the secret: matter, like water, bread, and oil. And the form, that is, the formula of prayer. It seems that this determination was made under the influence of Western missionaries who began to flock to this region. Narsai sees three dimensions to every sacrament: the doctrinal dimension, which is the expression of upright faith; the moral dimension, living according to the arrangements of the new situation that the sacrament constitutes; and the eschatological dimension, the hope of obtaining the fullness of what the sacrament symbolizes in the world to come. It is certain that some sacraments came to confirm On the unity of the Church and apostolic communication, as in the case of the sacred leaven, "kingship" and episcopate of apostolic succession…

There are two basic conditions in the entire Levantine tradition of spiritual life:

1- A true commitment to imitating Christ, each according to his or her own circumstances. It is a spirituality based on the relationship of love in a radical way, following the example of the wedding covenant.

2- Practicing deep prayer, that is, the spirituality of "divine love and the mysticism of the heart," as we find it among many Eastern spiritualists: John Al-Daliathi, Simeon de Tibutha, Isaac of Nineveh, and Sahadona. This compassionate practice allows the believer to unite with God in prostration and thanksgiving and brings him strength, light, and peace amid his daily struggle. His prayer is included in the prayer of Jesus and is based on it. The Eastern Sufis exerted an influence on the Muslim Sufis.

3- There is a dualism among the Eastern spiritualists, most of whom were monks, which may have been influenced by Gnosticism: the secular Christian and the hierarchical Christian (the book of hypocrites), the strivers (monks), and the ordinary people (Aphrahat the Wise)…

The Church of the East recognizes seven church secrets, but its theologians give less importance than the Latin Church gives to the number seven. Even today, in the Eastern churches, which are generally non-Catholic, there is no clear distinction between the seven sacraments, quasi-sacraments, and some ritual practices, as we mentioned previously…

Ancient Church of the East[h]

[h] Source: H.H. Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, "An Introduction to the Church of the East."

The history of the Church of the East, which over many centuries comprised the major portion of Christianity, remained until recently almost unknown to the West, except for occasional accounts, such as that of Marco Polo, who traversed Asia in search of adventure and wealth. This was primarily due to the complete isolation which existed between the two branches of Christianity, Eastern and Western, both of which originated in the same source, namely, the Aramaic, a language of the Semitic group.

Inevitably, historical and geographical reasons were partly to blame for this isolation. But the most important factor in the total ignorance of Western Christianity as to the history and accomplishments of this Church of Asia was the cruel and selfish policy adopted toward it by the Roman-Byzantine emperors and their successors, whose imperialist religion the Church of the East refused to follow, and who therefore branded it with the misnomer “Nestorian.‘’ This, together with the eclipse prevailing over Europe during the Dark and Middle Ages, completed the picture of separation.

It is only during the last century or so, especially in this generation through the writings of various Protestant missionaries, travelers and secular historians, that the West has finally become aware of the existence of the Church of Asia. Arnold J. Toynbee, in his outstanding work, “The History of Civilization,” has shed further light on the amazing achievements of the Church of the East, not only because of its missionary enterprise and great contributions in the scientific field, but especially as the bearer of the torch of the Syriac civilization, and champion against the Hellenistic onslaught. That

torch, which the oppressed and persecuted Church of the East was unable to bear any longer, with the rise of Mohammed, was taken over by Islam and carried on to a victorious end with the final expulsion of Hellenistic influence from the Middle East. Thus, in this special field, where the Church of the East had failed because of its lack of political support, Islam had succeeded. Nevertheless, it is one of the mysteries of the Divine Providence that the descendants of the heathen Assyrians, from whom the Greeks Largely borrowed their civilization and culture, would now, as Christians, stand in the gap against Hellenistic cultural encroachment.

The beginning of the Church of the East coincides with the earthly ministry of our Lord. King Abgar, sovereign of the little state of Oshroene, with its capital known as Orhai or Edessa, in the northwest of Mesopotamia, believed in Christ and His mission. The Assyrian people, therefore, speaking the Aramaic language (the language spoken by Jesus and His apostles, and in which the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament were written), can rightly claim the honour of being immediately next to the small band of Galileans as followers of our Lord, in their conversion to the "Haymanutha Mshikhayta," the faith of the Anointed One.

This common bond and the exchange of ideas, traditions and customs between the ancient Assyrians and the Hebrews, enabled the Assyrians to accept and appreciate the Christian Faith in a manner that was not possible for non-Aramaic speaking peoples. Because of this, the unequalled zeal and missionary expansion this Church of Asia, which to this day has preserved in

its purity the Apostolic Faith and traditions of the early Church, can be readily understood.

The Church of the East, as this branch of Aramaic speaking Christianity came to be known, was officially founded by the Apostles, Mar Patros (St. Peter), Mar Toma (St. Thomas), Mar Addai (St. Thaddeus) and Mar Mari of the seventy disciples. St. Thaddeus was sent by St. Thomas to the City of Edessa immediately after the resurrection, thereby fulfilling the promise made to King Abgar by our Lord himself.

The City of Arbil (Erbella) in Assyria also shares the glory with Edessa as the starting point of Eastern Christianity. Among its early Patriarchs, three of them were related to Mart Maryam (The Lady Mary), the Holy Virgin, and Mar Yosip (St. Joseph), her righteous spouse. It was the Church within the Persian Empire and therefore remained unaffected by the many theological disputes, schisms and heresies that in later centuries arose within the imperial Christianity of the Roman Empire, which, for the most part, were dictated by personal ambitions and animosities among the various prelates and unceasing struggle for power between the Latin and Greek Churches.

However, the endless persecutions this ancient,nt Church suffered, first from the heathens and later under various Islamic rulers, reduced it greatly in numbers and finally scattered its children into many lands. It must, however, be said in fairness to both the Persians and Islamic rule that at various periods, the Church enjoyed a great measure of tolerance, both under the rule of the Sapors and Arab Khalifs, perhaps more so than any of those

other religions could have enjoyed in a reversed role under the Byzantine Emperors or the Western Christian rule of the Middle Ages. The following charter, given to the Church of the East in Arabia by Mohammed himself, is an example of this fact. The heads of the Christians of Najran, in Arabia, led by their ruler, Saeed, along with their Bishop, Eshoyab ("Given by Jesus"), paid an official visit to Mohammed (whom they refer to as "the prophet of Tayaye, a leading Arab tribe) and on the occasion Mohammed gave the Church in Arabia the following charter of Protection:

"He commanded the Tayaye (Arab) that they must protect the Mshikhaye (Christians) from all harm, and must not oblige them to go out with them to fight, nor must they try to change their customs and their laws. He , moreover, exhorted his followers to help the Christians repair their churches whenever such a need may arise; and if any of his followers has a Christian wife, he should not oblige her to leave her faith and that he should not prevent her from fasting and prayer and all other obligations of her faith, these and many other similar rules or protection…" Assemani Z. 13.05 XCIV

Similar charters of protection were given from time to time by the Khalifs to the Church of the East.

The persecutions which did occur were in fact, for the most part, caused by the political ambitions of Constantine and his successors and later by the various Crusaders, who in the name of the Cross of Christ, carved out their ambitious territorial expansions and plundered the Middle East. At the

same time a covetous eye was constantly directed at the great Christian Church of the East, and no means was spared by these Roman Emperors and their successors to agitate the heathen and the Islamic rulers against its followers.

The purity of the Apostolic Faith of this most ancient Church can be seen throughout the prayers and praises of its worship, which express the theological point of view of the Church. Little is known of the fact that all the fathers of the Latin Church of the first and second centuries, such as Tatian Yostino (Justin Martyr), Organon (Origen). Melito, lrenaeus, and others who followed St. Paul the apostle to Rome, were all Assyrians or Syrians, Aramaic speaking people, missionaries of the Catholic Church of the East.

The Faith of the Church of the East in relation to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is that of the Council of Nicea, at which it was represented. As regards the Christological doctrine, it holds firmly to the teachings of the Bible. It professes in Christ, two natures and two Qnumai, namely, human and divine (“Qnumai” is an Aramaic word which is very difficult to define in other languages. The nearest equivalent is the Greek Hypostasis, “in Latin “substance“ and in English “substance.“). It believes firmly in the Godhead and the humanity of Christ. The Church of the East repudiates the non-scriptural title “Mother of God,” given to the Virgin Mary, in that the term “God” implies God the Spirit, and spirit cannot be subject to birth or suffering. It calls the Virgin Mary “Mother of Jesus,’’ ‘’Mother of Christ,” ‘’Mother of our Lord.’’ “Mother of our Redeemer;’’ namely, mother of His humanity, but not of His Godhead. In the words of Mar Babai the Great, in

the Tishbukhta ''Brikh Khannana,'' "In His Godhead, begotten of the Father without beginning before all time; In His manhood born of Mary, in the fullness of time, in a united body."

It holds strictly to the teaching of the Bible, and will recognize no doctrine that is contrary to these Scriptures. In the words of St. Paul: ''But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be "Khrim" (Anathema)."

Individual Assyrians started coming to the United States of America some time during the middle of the Eighteenth century, but it was only after the First World War that they began coming in as immigrants. The tragedies and untold sufferings that forced them out of their homes of origin in the Middle East, in Kurdistan and Iran, have already passed into history, and is therefore neither necessary or appropriate to deal with these events and the causes lying behind them here.

Today, many thousand Assyrians live as happy and contented citizens of the United States of America. A considerable number of these Assyrians on their arrival in this country identified themselves with their respective co-religionists, and they are already on the way to being absorbed into these larger bodies. These Assyrians were the fruits of missions, which, during the past four centuries, proselytized in India and the Middle East. The Roman Catholic, the Russian Orthodox and the Presbyterians were the most prominent of these missions, the latter two working chiefly among the Assyrians of Iran…

Except for a short visit of one of the Bishops of the Church, and a second by the Metropolitan of India, who was delegated by the Patriarch to visit the Church of the East in the United States, the Church existed without any episcopal supervision, and the seriousness of this fact, for a Church whose foundation is based upon Apostolic succession and close episcopal supervision, cannot be overestimated…

Assyrian Church of the East[i]

It is not known exactly when Christianity first took root in upper Mesopotamia, but a Christian presence had certainly been established there by the mid-2nd century. In the 3rd century, the area was conquered by the Persians. Although this was to be a multi-ethnic church, the Assyrian people traditionally played a central role in its ecclesial life. Its geographical location caused it to become known simply as “the Church of the East.”

Around the year 300, the bishops were first organized into an ecclesiastical structure under the leadership of a Catholicos, the bishop of the Persian royal capital at Seleucia-Ctesiphon. He later received the additional title of Patriarch.

In the 5th century, the Church of the East gravitated towards the radical Antiochene form of Christology that had been articulated by Theodore

[i] "The Assyrian Church of the East," *CNEWA*, https://cnewa.org/eastern-christian-churches/the-assyrian-church-of-the-east/.

of Mopsuestia and Nestorius and fell out of communion with the church in the Roman Empire. This was due in part to the significant influx of Nestorian Christians into Persia that took place following the condemnation of Nestorian Christology by the Council of Ephesus in 431 and the expulsion of Nestorians from the Roman Empire by Emperor Zeno (474-491). In addition, the Persian Christians needed to distance themselves from the official church of the Roman Empire, with which Persia was frequently at war. In this way, they were able to maintain their Christian faith while avoiding suspicions that they were collaborating with the Roman enemy.

Synods in the 5th century also decreed that celibacy should be obligatory for no one in this church, including bishops. A number of bishops and even patriarchs were married until the early 6th century when the decision was taken to ordain only celibate monks to the episcopate. Priests, however, have always been allowed to marry, even after ordination.

The Church of the East was always a minority in largely Zoroastrian Persia, but nevertheless it flourished for many centuries, with its rich scholarly activity centered on the famous school of Nisibis. The church expanded through missionary activity into areas as far away as India, Tibet, China, and Mongolia. This continued even after the Mesopotamian homeland was conquered by the Muslim Arabs in the 7th century. The Patriarchate was moved to the new city of Baghdad after it became the capital in 766. By 1318, there were some 30 metropolitan sees and 200 suffragan dioceses. But, during the invasions of Tamerlane in the late 14th century, these Christians

were almost annihilated. By the 16th century, they had been reduced to a small community of Assyrians in what is now eastern Turkey. The church was then further weakened by the formation of a Catholic counterpart known as the Chaldean Catholic Church.

During World War I, the Assyrians suffered massive deportations and massacres at the hands of the Turks, who suspected them of supporting the British enemy. About one-third of the Assyrian population perished. Most of the survivors fled south into Iraq, hoping to be protected by the British. But in 1933, after the end of the British mandate in Iraq, a clash between Assyrians and Iraqi troops ended in another massacre and a further scattering of the community. The Iraqi authorities then stripped Assyrian Patriarch Mar Simon XXIII of his citizenship and expelled him. He went into exile in San Francisco, California, USA.

In 1964, a dispute arose within the church, triggered by Mar Simon's decision to adopt the Gregorian calendar. But the real issue was the person of Mar Simon and the centuries-old practice by which he was elected. By 1450, the office of Patriarch and some other episcopal sees had become hereditary within one family, usually being passed down from uncle to nephew. This often produced unqualified leaders of the church who, at times, were elected at a very young age: Mar Simon himself had been elected at age 12. The dissidents also held that a Patriarch was needed who could live with his community in Iraq.

Those opposed to Mar Simon were supported by Mar Thomas Darmo, the Assyrian Metropolitan of India. In 1968, he traveled from India to Baghdad and ordained three new bishops. They then met in synod and elected him Patriarch over against Mar Simon. Mar Thomas Darmo died in the following year and was succeeded in 1970 by Mar Addai of Baghdad. His faction became known as "The Ancient Church of the East."

In 1973 Mar Simon resigned as Patriarch and married. As no successor could be agreed upon, the Assyrian bishops, in communion with him, attempted to persuade him to resume his office despite his marriage. But in the midst of these negotiations, on November 6, 1975, Mar Simon was assassinated in San Jose, California. The bishop of Tehran, Iran, was elected Patriarch in 1976 and adopted the name Mar Dinkha IV. He took up residence in the United States.

Mar Dinkha made it clear that with his election, the patriarchal dynasty had ended. This removed the major reason for the schism between the two groups. Although the rift has not yet been healed, recent meetings between bishops of the two sides have made progress towards resolving the dispute.

Meeting in Australia in July 1994, the Assyrian Holy Synod reached a number of important decisions concerning the life of this church. The bishops established a Commission on Interchurch Relations and Education Development to prepare for theological dialogues with other churches and

develop programming in religious education. The Synod also officially sanctioned the residence of the Patriarch in Morton Grove, Illinois, USA.

A milestone in relations with the Roman Catholic Church was reached on November 11, 1994, when Mar Dinkha IV and Pope John Paul II signed a Common Christological Declaration in the Vatican. The statement affirms that Catholics and Assyrians are "united today in the confession of the same faith in the Son of God…" and envisages broad pastoral cooperation between the two churches, especially in the areas of catechesis and the formation of future priests. The Pope and Patriarch also established a mixed committee for theological dialogue and charged it with overcoming the obstacles that still prevent full communion. It began meeting annually in 1995, and in 2017 it released an important Common Statement on "Sacramental Life."

This international theological dialogue between the Assyrians and the Catholic Church as a whole has been accompanied by an improvement in relations between the Assyrian Church of the East and its Catholic counterpart, the Chaldean Catholic Church. In November 1996, Mar Dinkha IV and Chaldean Patriarch Raphael I Bidawid met in Southfield, Michigan, and signed a Joint Patriarchal Statement that committed their two churches to work towards reintegration and pledged cooperation on pastoral questions such as the drafting of a common catechism, the setting up of a common seminary in the Chicago-Detroit area, the preservation of the Aramaic language, and other common pastoral programs between parishes and dioceses around the world.

On August 15, 1997, the two Patriarchs met again in Roselle, Illinois, and ratified a "Joint Synodal Decree for Promoting Unity," that had been signed by the members of both Holy Synods. It restated the areas of pastoral cooperation envisaged in the Joint Patriarchal Statement, recognized that Assyrians and Chaldeans should come to accept each other's diverse practices as legitimate, formally implemented the establishment of an Assyrian-Chaldean "Joint Commission for Unity," and declared that each side recognized the apostolic succession, sacraments and Christian witness of the other. The text also spelled out the central concerns of both sides in the dialogue. While both churches wanted to preserve the Aramaic language and culture, the Assyrians were intent on retaining their freedom and self-governance, and the Chaldeans affirmed the necessity of maintaining full communion with Rome.

In mid-1997, it was announced that the Assyrian Church of the East and the Syrian Orthodox Church had agreed to establish a bilateral theological dialogue. As a gesture to foster better relations with the Oriental Orthodox churches, the Assyrian Holy Synod decided in 1997 to remove from the liturgy all anathemata directed against others.

Although the Assyrians accept only the first two ecumenical councils, recent ecumenical discussions held under the auspices of the Pro Oriente foundation have concluded that in substance, the faith of the Assyrian Church is consistent with the Christological teaching of the Council of Chalcedon (451). Officially, the church adheres to extreme Antiochian Christological

terminology, according to which in Christ there are two natures and two qnoma (a Syriac term with no Greek equivalent that refers to an individual but never personalized concrete nature) in one person. The synod of bishops has requested that their church not be called Nestorian since this term has been used in the past to insult them. The Assyrians are not in full communion with any other church.

The East Syrian rite of the Assyrian Church appears to have been an independent development from the ancient Syriac liturgy of Edessa. It may also preserve elements of an ancient Persian rite that has been lost. Services are still held predominantly in Syriac.

Mar Dinkha IV passed away on March 26, 2015. The election of a successor was originally scheduled to take place in June but was delayed until September, pending the outcome of a dialogue with the Ancient Church of the East regarding possible reunification. Unfortunately, that dialogue was not successful, and the bishops of the Assyrian Church of the East elected Bishop Gewargis Sliwa as the new patriarch on September 18, 2015. One of his first acts in office was to announce that the headquarters of the church would be moved from Chicago (where Mar Dinkha IV had resided) to the city of Erbil in the Kurdistan region of Iraq…

Location: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, North America, Australia, India

Head: Mar Gewargis III (born 1941, elected 2015)

Title: Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East

Residence: Erbil, Iraq

Membership: 400,000

Website: http://news.assyrianchurch.org/

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