

## Conclusions of the Continental Synodal Assembly Catholic Churches of the Middle East

February 13-18, 2023, Harissa-Lebanon

### “The name of the Church is Synod”

#### Preamble

1. The Catholic Churches in the Middle East (Coptic, Maronite, Greek-Melchite, Syriac, Chaldean, Armenian and Latin) held their Continental Synodal Assembly in Bathania (Harissa, Lebanon) from February 13 to 17, 2023. These Churches held their took part through delegations from various countries: Egypt, Holy Land, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and the countries of the Arabian Gulf. Also taking part were Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, Rapporteur of the Synodal Assembly 2021-2024, and Sister Nathalie Becquart, Under-Secretary of the Synod. In addition to the Patriarchs, the delegations brought together bishops and priests, men and women religious, lay men and women of all ages. The total attendees were one hundred and twenty-five, including forty lay and consecrated women, married and single, and forty lay men, adults and young people of all ages, married and single, and people with disabilities. Friends from the Orthodox and Protestant Churches, and from the Middle East Council of Churches (CEMO/MECC), as well as agnostic men and women, also took part in this synodal assembly. Representatives of Muslim denominations took part in the opening session.

2. The *Synodal Document for the Continental Stage* constituted the roadmap for the progress of the Synodal Assembly. It was, therefore, a Pentecostal moment during which the members of the Assembly allowed themselves to be guided by the work of the Holy Spirit, to such an extent that prayer was the foundation on which the axes of the activity of daily reflection, both in plenary assemblies and in group work. Mutual listening was the paradigm of reference, while participation came to translate the spirit of communion which reigned between the members of the Assembly; which communion reached its fullness in the Eucharist which, celebrated each time according to one of the rites of the Eastern Churches, crowned the daily work. In addition, the meditation on the Word of God and the spiritual conversations created an atmosphere of brotherhood, confidence, audacity and a spirit of responsibility in the deliberations of the participants who were keen to shed precious light on the fundamental question: “ *How can the Church become more synodal?* »

3. The careful and meticulous organization created an atmosphere of relaxation and serenity which constituted a valuable motivation for assiduous and serious work. The merit goes to the immense effort made by the Secretary General of the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East (CPCO), in collaboration with the organizing committee and the other committees which prepared, ordered and accompanied the work of the Assembly.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Chrysostom, *Explanation on Psalm 149*: PG 55, 493.

## I. “He pitched his tent among us” (Jn 1:14): The Word of God in the midst of his people

4. The presence of the Incarnate Word among us and within us never ceased, from the opening prayer until the end of the work, to guide our steps in this Synodal Assembly. We listened to and celebrated the Word and we meditated on what his Holy Spirit inspires in us today. However, we realized that the People of God living in the Middle East find themselves constantly invited to journey under the guidance of the Word and in the strength of the Spirit, at the heart of challenges, vicissitudes and misfortunes, animated by hope. to see this world transfigured into the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of peace, justice and joy, where the love of God is granted to all human beings without distinction.

5. God invites his Church to form in the first place a single community listening to his Word, to journey under his guidance and to discern what the Word reveals to him in order to spread it when the Church goes out to encounter with every human being, and thus maintain fidelity to its mission. Going out into the world is the *raison d'être* of the Church and of its vocation. Indeed, the Word precedes the Church and traces for her the way according to which, thanks to the inspirations of the Spirit who leads her, she detects the needs of her People and of the world. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Saint John, the Word emanates from the Father and “pitches his tent” among us, much more he pitches his tent in us, that is to say in his People and in his Church. By his incarnation, the only-begotten Son accomplished the sacramental presence of God, making it real and tangible, because the dwelling place of God is no longer restricted to any place: it has taken concrete form in his Mystical Body and in the union of its members. The more this Body remains united, harmonious and open, the more it allows the “Word” which is in it to come out to meet every man.

6. The expression “pitch his tent” sums up the whole journey of God with his people, from the metaphor of the Ark of the Covenant or Tent of Meeting, in the Old Testament, to the Apocalypse, crowning book of the New Testament, where God pitches his tent in New Jerusalem. Thus ends in glory the journey of God with his People, who spreads his tent above his People and in their midst, once and for all and until eternity, by virtue of his incarnate Word. . In turn, the Church pitches her tent in response to God's presence and action within her, and proceeds until she comes to her home, that is, to the house heavenly, as we learn in the book of Revelation 12:12: “Rejoice therefore, you, the heavens and you who dwell in the heavens”. This exhortation to joy thus recapitulates the celebration of salvation and the praise of the hymn of ultimate victory, as a sign of Christian hope, overcoming all our fears, anxieties and uncertainties, and transcending all tangible, perceptible and visible reality.

7. Throughout the history of salvation, God accompanies his People and offers them his Word and his Spirit, in short, all that he has and all that he possesses. But in the New Testament, the journey of God with his people is realized in an unprecedented way by the incarnation of the Son, who manifests the unfailing and undeniable attachment of God to man. Eternal covenant, lasting communion, because through Jesus Christ the union between God and man is completed once and for all (*Ephapax*). The synodality which we aspire to live fully will only reach its climax through the communion by which God introduces us, as his People, into his divine Trinitarian life and into our communion with each other, provided that we gather around of the word and body of the risen Lord, and that we work according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in order to achieve communion with the world through the proclamation of the Good News and adherence to the cause of human dignity.

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

**8.** Synodality is not a fortuitous thing in the life of the Church, but a sign inherent in its nature. True synodality is for us, members of the mystical body of Christ, identification with Christ and imitation of his way of life. Since Christ is risen, "He, of divine condition, did not jealously retain the rank which made him equal to God. But he annihilates himself, taking the condition of a slave, and becoming like men. Having behaved like a man, he humbled himself even more, obedient unto death, and death on a cross! (Phil 2, 6-8). It is among us that he pitched the tent of his divinity and his humanity, and that he led us from death to resurrection, thus opening the way to divine life for us. He accompanied us to travel the path of life, and became attentive to our trials, also sharing our joys and offering us his love to the end. For us, Christ is the Way (Jn 14:6). This is why the first Christians were called "fellow travellers", "followers of Jesus" (sequela *Jesu*, following Jesus).

**9.** By her nature, the Church is synodal, for she is not only an institutional and juridical body, but in the first place the mystery of Christ who acts among and in those who believe in him (Lumen Gentium , 1 -5). This work is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit who was granted to the Church on the day of Pentecost to accompany her in her mission and "direct her with varied gifts, both hierarchical and charismatic" (Lumen Gentium , 4 ). Thus the faithful together follow in the footsteps of the risen Christ, listen to his word and unanimously discern his will in the light of the Holy Spirit, consulting one another in dialogue on the subject of the modalities of his realization *hic et nunc*, according to the givens of the *context* and the demands of the Kingdom.

**10.** The Synodal Church is the Church of unity, catholicity, holiness and apostolicity. These four signs constitute the Church of God in a place, a "*humus*", *ie* in a history, a geography, a culture, a language, challenges, traditions, poetry, stories, etc. Our synodal Church is the Church of the Arab East, as it was depicted by the late Father Jean Corbon: Church heralding the mystery of Christ and faithful witness to the Good News, even to martyrdom. It is true that she bears the deposit of faith and transmits it in "vessels of clay" (2Co 4,7), enduring suffering, fragility and fear, yet she keeps the spirit of hope. It is undeniable that synodality consolidates unity, manifests catholicity, leads to holiness and safeguards the bond of apostolicity and mission. This is verified in the common journey of a people united by the Word of God, his will and his divine economy; a people sanctified by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who constantly renews in them the life of the risen Christ; a people that gathers together without any distinction, because "in Jesus Christ there is no longer either slave or free" (Ga 3,28), because all humanity forms the family of God; a people who, through the centuries, have never ceased to collect the Good News from the Apostles and the Churches, transmitting it to the world in a spirit of creativity which suits and adapts to changing contexts and circumstances. So synodality rests on the work of the Holy Spirit who transfigures us *hic et nunc* into a new People of God, Mystical Body of Christ, living Temple of the Spirit.

**11.** Our Churches find themselves at the heart of a struggle for survival and active presence, in order to meet the challenges of unity in a fragmented world undermined by selfishness and self-absorption; the challenges of holiness in a world that has lost the bearings of spiritual and human values; the challenges of catholicity in a world dominated by discrimination and whose behavior is marked by despicable racism; the challenges of apostolicity in a world where media overshadows the Gospel values of love, justice and

peace. These challenges acquire a dimension of extreme gravity in a Middle East where armed conflicts, violence, hatred and war are exacerbated. However, the common journey of the Churches, in a spirit of authentic synodality, is the only way to guarantee the proclamation of the Good News and the coming of the Kingdom of God. This approach therefore requires the common journey of the People of God and active collaboration in the healing of wounds, in consolation in sorrows, in solidarity in trials, in the purification of memory, in the collective elaboration of decisions and their implementation.

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

**12.** The theology of our Eastern Churches has always insisted on emphasizing the meaning of synodality, referring to the mystery of the economy of salvation, to the life of the Trinity and to earthly communion with the human species, a communion concretized in the summoning of the People of God and their exhortation to gather together in what was once called in Hebrew *Kahal*. In his plan, God has associated his people as partners, a people made up of men, women, children, as well as strangers, answering the call of God and flowing from all sides to worship him, listen to his Word, discern his will and act in accordance with his precepts.

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

**14.** Our Eastern Churches emerged from the bosom of synodality, notably regional councils or synods which, according to historians, appeared in the region of Asia Minor during the second half of the 2nd century . Following the Council of Chalcedon, they were instituted as patriarchal churches in accordance with the provisions of the Code of Justinian in the 6th century. Over the centuries, patriarchal canon law has evolved, especially following the restoration, from the 18th century, of the union of our Churches with the Roman Apostolic See. Since the middle of the 19th century, this patriarchal code was considerably affected by the denominational regime or system of the *Millets* (confessional communities), under which the laity participated as members in the work of the synods. Nevertheless, the interference of politics and the interference of personal interests resulted in the exclusion of the lay faithful from the synods; which opened the way to the appearance of a form of clericalism accentuating the stranglehold on power and authoritarianism in the process of promulgation of decisions. Thanks to the exhortation of Pope Francis, today we intend to highlight the decisive role

of all the members of the same ecclesial body, and thus favor the concrete application of synodality in all its dimensions.

**15.** Synodality in the East is indispensable for the management of plurality in all its forms. This is an ecclesiastical *praxis* approved in the synods of our patriarchal Churches where the decision of the *protos* or *first* is conditioned by the assent of all, and where the attitude of all the members does not contradict the decision of the *prototypes*, in accordance with Canon 34 of the Apostles. This *praxis* also commands the Assemblies of National Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops who, in this region, work together to accomplish the same mission through the establishment of a common pastoral plan. The creation of the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Orient (CPCO) strengthens this cooperation; it shows more particularly the importance of the process of common journeying which has been expressed above all in the distribution of *Pastoral Letters* addressed, from the year 1991, to the faithful of the different Churches, setting out and analyzing the most salient questions which are in relation to their presence and the proclamation of the Gospel in the Middle East. What characterizes, however, this process of common journey within our Eastern Catholic Churches is precisely their rallying in 1990, as a united ecclesial family, to the Council of Churches of the Middle East (CEMO/MECC), in view of living in communion with all the Christian brothers and sisters of the region, of engaging together in taking on the painful challenges, of conversing together in a common dialogue with the Muslims, the Jews and the other constituent elements of Middle Eastern society, and to walk together towards a dignified and effective proclamation of the Gospel.

**16.** Along this common journey, our Churches were nourished by their communion with the Church of Rome and the Roman Pontiff, thus contributing to the building up of the catholicity of the Church, enriching it, thanks to their ecclesiastical patrimony. , theological, patristic and cultural, of their presence, contribution and participation in Roman Catholic councils and assemblies, constantly recalling their value as a sign testifying to the unity of the Church of Christ, thus evoking the motto of Pope John Paul II: "The Church breathes with her two lungs, the East and the West" (cf. *Ut unum sint*, 54). Indeed, our Churches find in the synodal process a unique opportunity to renew themselves in fidelity to their Master, the Lord risen from death, and in submission to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and to what he breathes into them today. today.

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

**17.** The participants in the work of the Synodal Assembly expressed the difficulty of communicating under the difficult conditions which have affected, and continue to do so, the countries of the region, especially in terms of disruption, conflicts and wars. Taking charge of the priorities relating to the survival and safeguarding of the Christian presence had a profound impact on the synodal process, the common reflection, the mutual listening, and above all the attention given to those who seem to live on the margins of ecclesial life in conditions of separation and remoteness. The earthquake which devastated part of Turkey and Syria has afflicted the minds and saddened the hearts of the members of the Assembly. Who had to carry in their prayer and their reflection the inhabitants of these devastated regions, throughout their meeting with their representatives, and did everything to express their communion and solidarity with the victims and their families. The Synodal Assembly rekindled the hope of a new impetus offering our Churches and all their members the possibility of resuming, with fresh impetus, the common journey, with a view to bearing witness and accomplishing the mission, especially in

a context where diverse cultures coexist, a multitude of religions, different currents of thought, and conditions specific to each country, each society, each people. Where its directives were observed, the synodal process thus enabled the members of our Churches to live the experience of the common journey, to encourage mutual listening and freedom of expression, especially on the part of women and young people ( APECL2 , §1.1, p3).

**18.** The summaries drawn up and presented by the Churches during the Synodal Assembly, as well as the deliberations carried out in the reflection and working groups, unanimously underlined the crucial importance of the following questions: Unity in diversity ; The liturgy is our life; Call for a creative and revitalized ecumenism; The Church of openness to the different other; Communion and Hope in the Heart of Suffering: Towards a Humble Church; In favor of the renewal of structures for a more synodal Church; Media, digital culture and their contributions to making the Church more synodal.

#### **IV.1. Unity in diversity: source of wealth or stumbling block?**

**19.** Since its birth, the Church of Antioch has known a diversity of ecclesial and liturgical ways of life; it has notably opened up to the civilizations of the peoples who have taken up residence there, to their languages and traditions. Likewise, the Churches of the region have lived their unity in diversity, placing themselves at the service of the proclamation of the Gospel and witness to the faith (APECL, §1.5 -p4). This unity did not mean standardization and fusion (E. Ch. I, p3). Rather, it meant a real sharing of the same good, a concerted response to the questions raised, and a common appropriation of the challenges faced (AHCE, p1). The foundation of this unity is the same baptism, communion in the same body of Christ, and the call to the same mission (APECL, §1.4, p4). Consequently, the one and plural Church is a Church constantly renewed by the Spirit of God, who equips it with all kinds of charisms, ministries and structures, strengthens it by the unity of initiation which is accomplished in within it, and by the integration of all the members without any exclusion (AHCE, p2).

**20.** Unity in diversity is manifested within the patriarchal Church in the communion of the same synod where the dioceses assume, in sharing, the responsibility of management and pastoral care, cooperate in the care of the People of God , through the unity of liturgy, history, identity and hierarchy. This unity extends to communion with the Catholic Churches in the same country and the same region, which leads to the establishment of structures of synergy and partnership, like the Assemblies of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops created in each of the countries of the region, and of the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East.

The aim is to foster cooperation in the common pastoral space at the service of the same evangelical proclamation. However, each Church maintains its own identity and its ancient and illustrious tradition, which ratifies unity in diversity, manifests the richness of plurality and its decisive role in the expression of the same faith, and concretizes the catholicity of the Church, whether at the level of the Eastern Catholic Churches, or with the Roman Catholic Church, or with the Orthodox and Protestant Churches of the Middle East.

**21.** The men and women, sons and daughters of our Churches, are competent beings, endowed with various charisms and talents which they willingly place at the service of the unity of the Church and its renewal (ESI, §17 , p3). This is why it is incumbent on the ecclesiastical authority, which maintains a close collaboration with the whole of the people, to properly discern charisms and ministries, so that all the members of our people assume common responsibility in the different areas of life. Church (E. Ch. I, §21, 23 p10-11). In this regard, we highlighted the

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<sup>2</sup> See List of acronyms and references, page 18.

role of charismatic movements in Egypt, especially their impact on the consolidation, through common praise and prayer, of fraternal bonds between young Catholics (AHCE, p2).

Others praised the efforts made by religious orders to authentically live the Gospel virtues (E. Ch. I, §5 p4), recommending that the ministry of priests be valued, especially in difficult circumstances. (ESI, §15, p3). They also spoke about the mission of married priests and its positive impact on the family, children and young people.

A request was thus made to re-examine the requirements relating to the preparation of married men for the reception of holy orders, and to reconsider the theological, legal, pastoral, human and social aspects (APECL, §3.13, p8) .

**22.** However, maintaining unity in diversity is not easy; it is rather the gift of the Holy Spirit. In order to properly manage diversity within the unit, enormous efforts and sacrifices must be made, in a spirit of humility, brotherhood, repentance and faithfulness to Christ. The members of the Synodal Assembly have had to raise certain grievances which are detrimental to the achievement of unity within each Church, leading to the dissension of the People of God and to their dispersion, such as the tension which shakes the relations between clergy and lay people and the aggravation of the tear which separates them from each other (APECL, §1.7, p4), the abuses and ethical transgressions committed by members of the clergy, consecrated and lay people, in search of a life of luxury and opulence. These behaviors pushed many young people to desert the Church (APECL, §2.3, p 5-6), provoking a state of weariness and despondency among the priests who, because of the constraints, saw their numbers decrease (APECL, § 1.7, p4).

**23.** Not dealing with certain tensions would eventually lead to the disfiguration of this rich diversity, as well as to the bad practice of hierarchical power, by turning away from the spirit of communion and sharing. Indeed, the exercise of ordained and non-ordained ministries has as its goal the harmonious building up of the body of Christ. Where power is not exercised in a spirit of service, trust between the faithful and clerics is eroded (CECS, §6, p2), so that the clerical spirit will rage to the extent that bishops, priests and consecrated will begin to abuse their power (AHCE, p3). Assembly participants expressed their dissatisfaction with ecclesiastical authorities who monopolize power and enact decisions without consulting the faithful (ESI, §21, p4), and complained about the lack of coordination between ordained ministers and their lay partners (E. Ch. I., §8, p5). Others have also noted the lack of coordination and cooperation between religious orders and dioceses (E. Ch. I., §4, p5). This led to the exacerbation of the negative spirit, the alteration of the spiritual meaning of communion (AHCE, p3), and the questioning by the faithful of the relevance of the decisions issued by the ecclesiastical authority, when the latter monopolizes decision-making power to the detriment of the spirit of service, thus hindering the advent of unity in diversity.

#### **IV.2. The liturgy is our life 24.**

The Pastoral Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* affirms that “the liturgy is the summit towards which the action of the Church tends, and at the same time the source from which all its virtue flows. For the apostolic labors aim that all, having become children of God by faith and baptism, gather together, praise God in the midst of the Church, participate in the sacrifice and eat the Lord's Supper” (SC 10). Indeed, the Liturgy is the life of the Churches in the East; its celebration constitutes the fundamental axis of ecclesial life (E. Ch. I., §13, p8). The apogee of liturgical celebrations is, without doubt, the Eucharist, because it builds up the Church, the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12).

**25.** While acknowledging the splendor of the liturgies and spiritualities of the Eastern Churches (AOCTS), the reports highlight the tensions that are created because of the practice sometimes

literalization of traditional liturgical rules to the detriment of the intelligence of the faithful and their active participation in the work of adoration and prayer, as well as in the sacraments. Among these tensions are reported: the emergence of aberrant devotions of religiosity and unhealthy phenomena linked to apparitions (CECS, §3, p3), the problematization of any form of renewal of traditional liturgical models (ESI, §17, p3), the non-adherence of the new generation to beliefs in liturgical rites and symbols (CECS, §1, p4) due to a deficiency in terms of liturgical formation (ESI, §16, p3). Added to this is the fact that divergent sensibilities relating to this or that order governing the liturgical celebration sometimes lead to dissension which weakens communion and erodes confidence in the maternal love of the Church. There is also the issue of the style, content and purpose of the homily; Also problematic are the disorder in the choice of chants, the absence of an inspection authority capable of verifying the content of the texts, and of defining the nature of their use in the Church in the form of recitation and chanting. Some participants recommended renouncing liturgical puritanism, opening up to the process of evolution of liturgical prayers and their adaptation to the aspirations of the faithful, especially the young (APECL, §1.2, p3), thus emphasizing the need for a liturgical reform capable, on the one hand, of taking into consideration the safeguarding of tradition and its constant evidence and, on the other hand, of opening up to modernity (APECL, §2.4, p6). Hence the urgency of allowing the Liturgy to acclimatize to emerging realities and their context in order to be able to regenerate it (E. Ch. I., §2, p3; (AHCE, p5) in conformity with the requests involved in the process of returning to the roots.

#### **IV.3. Call for a creative and revitalized ecumenism**

**26.** The Synodal Church is ecumenical, because it is the realization of the common journey of the People of God (E. Ch. I., §19, p10), a journey which does not end without the meeting of brothers and sisters of other Churches (APECL, §1.3, p3-4). "In the East, we will be Christians together or we will not be" (CPCO, 1st pastoral letter, 1991). For the Christian presence is dependent on the witness of each faithful and of each Church, resting above all on the common witness of Christians. It is undeniable that the ecumenical movement in the Middle East has contributed to the emergence of a dialogic reality favoring collaboration and dynamic interaction between the Churches (ESI, §6, p2), and favoring a common work of human pastoral care at the service of charity, through the deployment of concrete spiritual and ecclesiastical experiences (APECL, §3.7 p7). Some participants saw in the experience of mixed marriages a positive factor likely to consolidate relations between the churches (ESI, §6, p2), while others have seen it as a risk factor and a source of conflict (Coptic Church). The participation in the Assembly of some Orthodox and Protestant friends was an enriching experience which confirmed the importance of living together and the tireless search for visible unity.

**27.** For Eastern Christians, unity is a matter of life and death (Patriarch Maximos IV). The membership of the family of Catholic Churches in the Middle East Council of Churches (CEMO/MECC) was therefore the clear expression of its desire to achieve unity in diversity, through gathering and collaboration in various areas of ecclesial life, especially the diakonia of proclamation, and also through coexistence with other citizens from different religions and confessions. Indeed, the Council contributes to spreading the ecumenical spirit among the Churches, to emphasizing rapprochement and common work in pastoral care, and to strengthening common witness. This is why the ecumenical movement in the Middle East is seen as a unique model of a common journey transcending the frameworks and limits of the single ecclesial family; model



also a commitment to communion between the Churches in all their diversity and despite their doctrinal, liturgical and canonical divergences.

**28.** The withdrawal into denominational identity, the fear of opening up to a different otherness (ESI, §3, p1), the lack of transparency (AOCTS, §5, p2), the spread of proselytism exercised above all by certain new evangelical communities under the pretext of offering financial, medical and food aid in the midst of the economic crisis acutely affecting the standard of living, so many dark realities which disturb inter-ecclesial relations and damage the ecumenical spirit ( APECL, §2.8, p6). To this are added tensions and discords affecting the relations of the Churches of the West with the Churches of the East (CECS, §2, p3); the problem of ecclesiastical canon law which is torn between unity and decentralization; political interference in ecumenical affairs (Latin Church) leading some participants to evoke the metaphor of the "ecumenical winter" (AHCE, p4), succeeding the ecumenical golden age prevailing in the sixties and seventies of the past century.

#### **IV.4. The Church of openness to the different other (enlargement of the space of the tent)**

**29.** In the Middle East region plagued by serious political, security and social tension, due to the Sunni-Shia conflict in Iraq, Yemen and Syria, and the hegemony of fundamentalist movements and organizations in some countries, Christians feel the danger of uprooting, deportation, and the threat of annihilation of the Christian patrimony (APECL, §2.11, p6). The reports provided by the Catholic Churches of the Middle East and resulting from the work of the Synodal Assembly underline the emergence of various tensions: fear of the resurgence of violence ( ESI, §2, p1), risk of dissolution in the culture predominantly Muslim (ESI, §13, p3), impact of religious extremism on Christian presence (CECS, §9, p3), inability to create new methods and strategies of listening and removing barriers (E. Ch. I., §10, p6), lack of an environment conducive to dialogue (E.

Ch. I., §11, p7), stifled indifference and loss of all interest vis-à-vis the different other (E. Ch. I., §24, p11), fruitlessness of attempts at dialogue and rapprochement in some cases (E. Ch. I., §18, p9), the problem of the settlement of Palestinian refugees and displaced Syrians with a Muslim majority, leading to a dysfunction relating to the experience of freedom of faith in general, and to the free and regular practice of Christian religious rites in particular (APECL, §2.10, p6). However, in spite of all this, the openness of the local Churches to the different other was clearly reaffirmed, both at the level of faith and at the level of culture or concepts and choices. Emphasis was also placed on the need for listening, dialogue and coexistence, because the tent, *ie* the Church, which God has erected in the heart of man and of the world, is large enough to accommodate all, without any exclusion.

**30.** The concept of others is not limited to women and men who belong to other Churches, nor to other religions! The different other could be closest to each person. Through her fidelity to Christ, the Church pursues the same work of redemption, insofar as she manifests her love to every human being without distinction or discrimination. It cannot exclude anyone, for it would lose its identity and its mission which consists in pursuing redemption through Christ. The participation of the faithful with special needs, physically and mentally handicapped, either in prayer or in the reflection groups, was an eloquent expression testifying, during this Assembly, to the magnitude of the tent of the Church. In this regard, the participating members, among those with special needs, brought out the characteristic of their participation in the life of the Church and its mission, according to their own capacities (APECL, §1.11, p4) . In any case, it will be necessary, on the one hand, to safeguard the dignity of these people; on the other hand, organize training sessions

and sensitization, in parishes, schools, institutes and universities. Hence the importance of training competent guides and counsellors, capable of supporting these people and their families.

**31.** The Church will become more synodal as it strives to promote coexistence and dialogue with other religions, with a view to manifesting the true and unique face of God (E. Ch. I., §6, p5). Listening is the first step in welcoming the different other (E. Ch. I., 9, p6). In this regard, the reports and deliberations of the working groups have paid tribute to the initiative of Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed Tayeb, Grand Imam of the Al-Azhar Mosque, who signed and published the Document on Human Fraternity . The positive concrete repercussions were welcomed, as was the impact of the meeting of the Holy Father Francis with Ayatollah Al-Sistani at the Negef (É.SI § 13, p. 3), and the crucial effect produced through the visits made by Pope Francis to the countries of the Middle East, has thus demonstrated the positive and promising nature of dialogue with Muslims.

**32.** The opportunities for dialogue are intensified and consolidated in the participation in institutions and conferences advocating understanding (E. Ch. I., §18, p10), in meetings and gatherings bringing together the faithful belonging to different religions, and in collaboration with all religious bodies aimed at establishing common bases for dialogue (AHCE, p2). Emphasis has therefore been placed on the importance of formation in dialogue, the promotion of initiatives of openness to the faithful of other religions, the concretization of human fraternity (APECL, §1.5, p4) , the importance of creating new methods of dialogue that can help transfer it from administrative offices to parishes and to everyday realities (APECL, §4.2, p8).

#### **IV.5. Communion and hope in the heart of suffering: Towards a humble Church (the mustard seed, Mk 4, 30-32)**

**33.** The Churches of the Middle East were born out of suffering and persecution, and their history was written in blood. The hagiography of the martyrs constituted the largest part of the *Synaxaire*, and became a source of inspiration for many believers, who drew from it an energy of hope to survive and persevere. Their relics remain a source of blessings and miracles to this day. This difficult reality has not prevented the emergence of tensions and challenges, first and foremost emigration (E. Ch. I., §3, p4), which have been frankly raised by the consultations within the Churches and the syntheses working groups throughout the Synodal Assembly. The reports and interviews have denounced a fundamental problem from which our Churches suffer and which is becoming more and more critical and dangerous, namely the mass emigration of young people, which leads to emptying the latter of their capacities and resources (APECL, § 1.7, p4), and to disperse families in diaspora countries or in internal displacement (ESI, §2, p1) This problem has degenerated into an existential threat (CECS, p1-2).

**34.** Despite the tireless initiatives taken by Pope Francis to safeguard the Christian presence in the region, and despite the efforts of their Beatitudes the Patriarchs and Bishops to maintain the best relations with civil authorities and heads of other religions, fears are only growing in terms of the return of waves of violent fundamentalism, the resurgence of emigration, the challenges of welcoming immigrants and displaced persons (AHCE, p4), the way of preserving the identity of immigrants , their traditions and rituals in the countries of the diaspora, as well as their ecclesial membership on the one hand and the relationship with the Latin Church and their integration in the countries of immigration on the other hand (APECL, §2.9, p6). Some of the participants also raised difficult questions faced by

believers living in the countries of the Middle East, among others those of armament, compulsory military service, liberation theology?! (CECS, §2 p4), as well as the fidelity of Christian leaders to spiritual values in the exercise of their political office, in particular when making decisions of war and peace (APECL, §3.6, p7).

**35.** As for the recommendations presented by the reports and the work of the teams, they can be summarized in three :

- For the Church, being open to others and listening to different opinions has broadened horizons of hope, united Christians in bearing witness to their faith and nurtured the feeling of belonging to the Church ( APECL , §1.1, p3) ; - Trust in the initiatives of local Churches and National Assemblies, without wait for solutions from abroad (ASP of 14.02.2023);
- Witness that the consecrated life offers a good model for living in integrity and hope in the heart of suffering (CS Dulcis).

#### **IV.6. In favor of renewing structures for a more synodal Church 36.** It became clear

to the Assembly that the Eastern Churches are synodal in structure.

For these different structures to be put at the service of communion, partnership and mission, they must be constantly renewed, in particular by activating them at different levels: pastoral and diocesan councils, national assemblies of patriarchs and bishops and the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East, so that these structures are more contributive, professional and transparent, and that they do not hinder the transmission of the message to all. Some lay men and women have proclaimed their desire to live in partnership within the Church, to share the responsibility and carry the burden of mission with their bishops and priests (APECL, §4.4, p8). They recommended watching over the work of financial committees and of those responsible for bringing relief and assistance to the needy, the poor and the afflicted (E. Ch. I., §11, p22).

**37.** In order to respond to the call of His Holiness Pope Francis to build a more synodal Church, the Eastern Catholic Churches strive to approach cultural pluralism with greater awareness and esteem for the other, especially when they accompany young men and women who feel estranged from the Church, lest this feeling become indifference over time. A number of Assembly participants spoke of the reluctance of lay men and women to sometimes participate in the life of the Church, due to the lack of transparency and the tyranny of the authoritarianism of some clergymen (APECL, § 1.8, p4). Other participants also observed the predominance of the institutional character within the Church, which sometimes alters the foundations of ecclesial, priestly and monastic service, because of their distance from the spirit of gratuitous mission and the personal testimony. Certain ecclesiastical institutions sometimes acquired an organizational character from which the rich benefited more than the poor (APECL, §2.6, p6). However, some have expressed the need for the Eastern Catholic Churches to review the concept of ecclesiastical leadership, its tasks and its principles, and to adopt the modern foundations of administration and governance. The renewal of ecclesiastical structures requires special attention and devotes greater attention to the pastoral care of the family, women and youth.

#### ***- The pastoral care of the family***

**38.** Assembly participants saw the need to ensure family education, raising children to pray, reading the Holy Bible and training to listen to the Word of God (APECL, §4.1, p8) . In this education, it is with audacity and transparency that we must grant

new ethical questions the attention that is due to them (APECL, §4.4, p9). For this, the participants recommended devoting special programs to married couples and fiancés (E. Ch. I., §5, p5), and to accompany spouses and families who encounter difficulties due to cultural changes. . Thus, the Church seeks to deal with the phenomenon of the disintegration of the family and works to protect and strengthen it, since it is the nucleus of the Church and of society (APECL, §3.2, p7 ).

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

**40.** Access to the sacraments in some of the above cases is often a problem in churches. The question concerns the fact of discerning well, in such situations, in the light of the Word of God and according to the data offered by the teaching of the Church. Some believe that for the Catholic Church it is necessary to define the concept of sexuality and the moral issues related to it, while others emphasize topics that help to avoid problems and difficulties, finding new ways to support families through Church institutions (E. Ch. I., §14, p8), to provide appropriate preparatory programs for the sacrament of marriage (E. Ch. I., §17, p10), to communicate with families who live apart from the churches (CECS, §1, p4), and to try not to exclude or exclude anyone in the synodal process.

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

**41.** The participants in the Assembly confirmed the vocation and role of women in the life and mission of the Church, as constituent, active and pioneering members of the synodal process (APECL, §3.3, p7) . Her participation in this journey is the result of her commitment to the mission of the Church, despite her exclusion from decision-making bodies, which prompted the Office for the Pastoral Care of Women, in the Maronite Church, to suggest a synod special for women, constituting a first in our Eastern Churches, both in its theological, academic, pastoral and social meanings and approaches (APECL, §3.14, p8). This synodal journey took on an ecumenical and global dimension, including members of other Churches, even Muslims.

**42.** During the debate in the reflection groups, the debate focused on the question of the vocation and role of women in the Church, on their participation in administration and governance. The participants in this Assembly ask the Church to take clear and uncompromising initiatives in this regard (ESI, §16, p3). This requires prophetic courage, especially since the issue of women's ministry has been discussed (APECL, §1.14, p5). However, before addressing this question, it is necessary to provide theological, ecclesial and technical training to committed women, before some of them assume an active role in the administration or receive an ecclesial ministry such as that of deaconess in works of charity (APECL, §1.16, p5).

#### **- *Youth ministry*** **43.** The

Assembly stressed the importance of young people and their role in the life of the Church, as well as their accompaniment and formation, especially of those who have turned away from ecclesial communion ( AHCE , p3). She also insisted on the need to support the

victims traumatized by the moral attacks that some clergy and lay people have inflicted on them, as well as on the help to be provided to them to face the challenges they encounter (APECL, §2.3, p5-6).

**44.** The Assembly expressed the need to encourage and support initiatives that invite young people to meet and work together for the proclamation of the Good News, including, for example, the preparatory meetings of young people to accompany the Synodal Assembly, the University Pastoral, the prayer meetings according to the spirituality of the Ecumenical Community of Taizé, the National Youth Days, the ecumenical synodal experience which brings together young people from the countries of the Middle East under the aegis of the *We Choose Life* group and the *Pro Oriente* (For the Orient) foundation, and other meetings and gatherings... Today, young people need to find in the synthesis of this Synodal Assembly proofs of the commitment of the Church in favor of these orientations, by recognizing its signs of weakness as regards its capacity to approach delicate questions which require a prophetic word and an explicit standpoint. The transparency and sincerity with which ecclesiastical leaders behave at all levels helps young people to rebuild their self-confidence, according to the demands imposed by the desire to purify their memory and lead their lives on the path of repentance. All this contributes to renewing the pastoral care of young people and attracting them to the person of Jesus Christ, as Pope Francis affirms in the apostolic exhortation: "Christ lives" (chapter 7).

Thus the Church becomes more synodal. (J. APECL).

#### **IV.7. : Media, digital culture and their contributions to making the Church more synodal 45. Media and**

advertising are found at the base of the Church's mission to preach the Good News of salvation to the world: also a- t-she was a pioneer in the design of methods, techniques and media and information means to proclaim the Good News of the Resurrection. Since antiquity, handwritten copies of the Holy Bible and prayers have appeared in our Eastern Churches as a tool for dissemination and written information. Then, the icon which conveys and figures the scriptural facts of salvation was adopted as a means of visual transmission. Subsequently, there appeared the process of using popular melodies in the Syriac Rite Churches and replacing their texts with the prose and poetry of the Holy Fathers, including the eminent figure of Saint Ephrem the Syrian, harp of the Saint Mind. This process is considered an audio-media tool.

**46.** The Eastern Churches have followed the development of the media. They establish specialized institutions in different countries, and strengthen their structures through Catholic centers for the media, supervised by episcopal committees. Given the importance of this sector, the action of serving the Good News and the "new evangelization" depends on the good use that the Churches make of communication and digital culture. During the synodal consultations and the work of the Assembly, the following affirmations were put forward: to show the importance of the media as an effective tool of communication to convey the Good News (E. Ch. I., §12, p7); affirm that Christian media experts, clergy and lay, must take responsibility for witnessing in favor of Christian principles and values (AOCTS), confronting concepts and ideas that offend human dignity and nurture the spirit of estrangement of God and contribute to spreading moral decadence (APECL, §3.18, p8). Also confirmed is the need to train experts in the field of Christian communication and media (APECL, §4.3, p8). The Churches' conclusions and the Assembly's debates have warned of the repercussions of the abuse of social media on the faithful, in particular on young people (APECL, §2.7, p6).

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

47. "The name of the Church is synod". This definition sheds light on how one might understand the very nature of the Church, as well as the unity of its members and the complementarity of their roles, as well as their union in Jesus Christ, by the action of the Spirit. Holy. The Church is in history, the People of God who walk together towards the fulfillment of the Kingdom of the Father. But how could this synodality develop? And what would be the means of achieving it?

48. During the Synodal Assembly, in prayer, spiritual conversation, debates and discussions, proposals emerged which could support the Churches to be more in conformity with their deep nature and to become more synodal. Here are the most important:

To. Operate a change in the mentalities of all, laity and clerics, in order to assume the universalism of salvation through Christ and to provide themselves with the adequate means to better understand and realize it. This requires that each baptized person live and recognize himself as a member of the People of God, by word, committed action, example of life and witness.

b. Recognize the complementarity between the royal priesthood and the ministerial priesthood (diaconate, presbyteral, episcopal), both participating in the one Priesthood of Christ and ordained to one another (LG 10). To do this, adopt spiritual discernment as a method to promote listening, walking together and the ability to recognize the will of God.

vs. Affirm that each baptized faithful enjoys a "sense of faith" and that the Church realizes her mission through the universal call to holiness, until Christ is "all in all". Commit to walking together despite all that it requires in terms of counting and openness to others in order to accept them as they are.

d. To work for the renewal of liturgical life in the Churches, taking care to preserve the essence of Sacred Tradition and ensuring, at the same time, the adaptation of liturgical offices to the current needs of the People of God, dependent on contexts and circumstances specific to different countries and societies. Insofar as the life of the whole People of God is organized around the Liturgy, it is important to take into account all the factors that intervene and to properly train the members who work for this renewal of liturgical life. . e. To purify the ministry of priests from all

weakness and shortcomings present in some among them, because they are incompatible with the holy vocation and service in the image of Christ, Servant par excellence. This purification requires reviewing the means and criteria for choosing candidates for the holy orders of deacon, priest and bishop. This presupposes not being content with ensuring only their scientific and theological skills, nor their know-how in matters of management and administration, but it is above all a matter of ensuring their ability to respect their holy commitment and to maintain a life of virtue which is the sign of a pastoral commitment and of a love of Christ until martyrdom (See the notes on the papers hung on the walls).

f. Make an irreversible commitment to the restoration of the visible unity of the Church and to promote ecumenical relations with churches and ecclesial communities in the Middle East. In addition, it is a question of setting up new initiatives towards the other Churches, in particular in the fields of cooperation and common witness. Operationalize the role of the Catholic Churches in the Council of Churches in the Middle East and seek to unify the dates of feasts.

The experience of pastoral agreements about ecclesial identity, communion

ceremony and mixed marriages (Charfet-1996) could be considered as a model for such initiatives, especially for the unification of the date of the celebration of Easter.

- g. Recognize the value of religious, cultural and human diversity in the Middle East region, and confirm the choice to live together in order to open a new page in relations with Muslims and Jews, as well as with the adherents of other religions, agnostics and those who declare that they do not belong to any particular religion, philosophy or ideology. To work for the purification of memory and to engage in an authentic and daring dialogue, based on charity and mutual respect. It is only under these conditions that our Eastern Churches will be able to contribute to the pastoral care of reconciliation at the service of the common good and the future of the peoples of the region.
- h. Abandon all forms of exclusion of women, as regards their participation in the life of the Church, particularly in the elaboration of ecclesial decisions. Our respective churches should begin to think seriously about restoring the diaconate of women. We are also impatiently awaiting the conclusions of the synod for women, the initiative and implementation of which belong to the Maronite Church, with the aim of enabling women to be effectively more active and more present in life. of the Eastern Catholic Churches.
- i. Trusting young people and believing in their gifts and ability to contribute to various responsibilities, especially in the service of announcing the Good News. This requires a pastoral accompaniment which consists in listening to them attentively, accompanying them and assisting them in the discernment of their vocation in their Churches. Have faith in the participation of people with disabilities and in the value and importance of their constructive role in the life of the Church. It is appropriate to welcome their human and spiritual experience, as well as the expression of their hope likely to inspire the healthy.
- d. Adopt methods of governance and transparency for the administration of ecclesial institutions, in the various sectors. Many voices have been raised among the faithful of the Eastern Catholic Churches calling for a re-examination of the methods of governance and administration, particularly when it comes to decision-making. These voices called for understanding power as one of the concrete expressions of charity and service.
- k. Avoid minority complexes and banish the fear associated with it, due to multiple hardships suffered through persecutions, immigration and other difficult situations, so as not to succumb to temptations and to preserve the Faith and the Hope. It would also be necessary to work to enable Christians to put down roots in the territories of their respective countries and to help stem the current process which is emptying the East of the Christian presence and risks changing its demographic identity. This requires establishing close cooperation with the civil authorities. Furthermore, for our Churches to be able to incarnate the Church of Hope in the Middle East, there is a need to rekindle the prophetic spirit which listens to the Will of God and works to achieve it, because God is the true Master of History. This is how the testimony of Hope remains until the end of time.

## VI. Priorities

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

Help the particular Churches to promote the catholicity of the Church in a harmonious relationship between Unity and Diversity, while preserving the specificity of each of them? In this sense, what is the contribution and the role of the Eastern Catholic Churches in the communion of all

the Churches? b. Specify the structures of communion and the legal links between the Catholic Patriarchal Churches and the Successor of Peter in the See of Rome? Reconsider the nature of their relationship with the various dicasteries of the Roman Curia which are at the service of communion within the universal Church?

vs. Define and promote the most appropriate structures and mechanisms to concretize synodality in the life of the Church, People of God, while considering the multiplicity and diversity of religious and socio-cultural contexts throughout the world?

## Conclusion

**50.** In the joy experienced at the idea of a meeting which made it possible to celebrate the One Church, and despite the sadness linked to the loss of the victims of the deadly earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, we were given the grace to celebrate the Continental Synodal Assembly of Catholic Churches in the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf. Together, we listened to each other and to the message that the Spirit gives us today. All participants in this Assembly expressed their joys and hopes, as well as the fears and challenges they face. This encouraged them to undertake concrete initiatives for which they invested themselves in the respective Churches. Moreover, their participation ensured that synodality was a real experience and a space for free expression, especially for women and young people, as well as for many people whose voices were no longer heard; or even for people with disabilities; and finally, for all those who have found themselves on the margins of pastoral life. The experience of this Synodal Assembly constituted a sort of remedy for many difficult situations within each Church, and for the tense relations between the different Churches. This Assembly has clearly recognized two dimensions without which the Church would lose the *raison d'être* and the soul of its existence in the East: the ecumenical dimension which concerns relations with sister Churches; the dialogic dimension which ensures openness and encounter with other religions.

**51.** It is clear that the People of God in the Middle East is led to bear witness to its faith, through its life and its Hope, despite the complexity of the current context. The call to renewal, to journeying together, to dialogue and to discernment are an urgency that admits of no postponement. Harvesting, without delay, the fruits of synodality, is done with regard to the constant commitment to walk together behind Christ and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the People of God, animated by the will to promote human brotherhood. This is how the Eastern Catholic Churches will manage to respond to the call of His Holiness Pope Francis, to realize what God wants for his Church in the third millennium: to be more synodal.



## List of Acronyms and References

- **(AHCE)**: Assembly of the Catholic Hierarchy of Egypt
- **(AOCTS)**: Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land -
- (APECL)**: Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Lebanon
- **(ASP)**: Continental Synodal Assembly Plenary Session -
- (CECS)**: Council of Catholic Churches in Syria
- **(CS Dulcis)**: Conversation spirituelle...
- **(E. Ch. I.)**: Chaldean Church Iraq -
- (ESI)** : Syriac Church Iraq - **(J.**
- APECL)**: Youth, Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Lebanon

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