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AN OVERVIEW OF THE CHALDEAN CHURCH

Introduction

I would like first to thank His Eminence Cardinal Péter Erdő for inviting me to participate in the 52nd International Eucharistic Congress. Heartfelt thanks for your presence which is a concrete sign of solidarity with Christians in their troubled homeland. Many thanks to Hungarian Government and Church for their generous aid in restoring houses, schools and Churches in Nineveh Plain that has been destroyed by Isis. As a way of appreciation and gratitude, Teleskuf town is called the daughter of Hungary (Bint al Majjar).

The Middle Eastern Christian drama has been going on for years. The pressures are tough and the emigration- hemorrhage continues, in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Holy land and Lebanon. Unfortunately, the West is not aware of the difficulties and fears that Christians are facing in various countries. Radicalism (terror) as a politic and religious ideology is growing more and more in the Middle East (M. E.) and Christians are innocent victims, regardless of their dedication. Extremists want to take advantage of the current situation to mark the end of Christian presence in M. E. Many have left the country making “life” difficult for those who wish to stay and continue their testimony with enthusiasm and persistence.

Since Middle Eastern Christians are the root of Christianity, we believe that their presence is crucial and they rely on your support. My example in this speech will be the Chaldean Church, which is similar to other Churches in this part of the world.

Historic Background

Christianity entered Mesopotamia (Iraq) around the end of the 1st Century. According to the Tradition, St. Thomas the Apostle was the first to evangelize those regions through his trip to India. He is considered the “patron” of the Church of the East. After finishing his mission in Mesopotamia, St. Thomas went to India bringing the Good News to the people of Kerala region and the Christians of the Malabar coast are still known as “the Christians of St. Thomas”. They are still using the Chaldean liturgy translated after Vatican II unto Malayalam local dialect. The apostles preached normally wherever there were Jewish communities (due to their language and biblical faith) as it was the case in Mesopotamia (Iraq) after the exile of the Jews in 587 BC that is why our liturgy is a Jewish Christian liturgy.

A Synod, which was the first of its kind in 410 under the auspices of Patriarch Isaac gathered forty Bishops and a number of crucial decisions were issued concerning dogma, administration and ritual practices, such as the adoption of the Nicene Creed; having a single leader of the Church “the Archbishop of Seleucia”; and the management system of dioceses.

Openness to the World

History witnessed an incomparable evangelization carried out by the Church of the East that extended to far East, from Sumatra Island, Sri Lanka, the Indian Malabar coast and China to the Arabian Peninsula. None of the Churches expanded the way the Church of the East did in the first millennium Traders and monks went to preach the Gospel following the silk road. They had a profound sense of the dimension of their Christianity and at the same time of enculturation: They called Christianity “religion of Light”, Christ “Enlightened” and the gospel “The Pearl”. Metropolitan Abdisho of Nisibi (†1318) listed about twenty metropolitans with 200 dioceses. At the time of Islam arrival to this region in the 7th Century, Christians were the majority in Iraq and Persia, while today we are minority.

Martyrdom is its Charisma

The Chaldean Church has no external designs and building decorations because it didn't exist in a Christian state. However, its beauty is from

within, in its liturgy, spirituality, and martyrs who sacrificed their lives for their faith and still are up-to-date. Martyrdom is the charisma / charm of the Chaldean Church because since its founding it has been through persecution by the Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans and today by Muslim extremists like al Qaida and Isis. Hence, I would like here to recall the explosion of the Syriac Catholic Cathedral in Baghdad on October 31, 2010, where 48 people, among them two young priests, were killed during Sunday mass.

Also the drama of the overnight exodus of 120,000 thousand Christians from Mosul and Nineveh Plain leaving everything behind and seeking safe refuge. they stayed for example in Kurdistan for more than three years, that is until the release in 2017. In terms of liturgy, the Chaldean Church includes a procession and a series of hymns to honor martyrs and their relics (Martyrium) morning and evening. This spirituality gives us the strength to remain, persevere and hope.

Christology

Since, the Church of the East was outside “the borders” of the Roman Empire and isolated due to its geographic and political situations, it did not participate in the ecumenical councils. Also, it is not right to name it as a Nestorian Church, simply because Nestorius was not its Patriarch, but the Patriarch of Constantinople. So, the Church of the East adopted the Antiochian Christology, which is characterized by the historically ascending person of Jesus Christ as described in the Synoptic Gospels: from Human to God in contrast to the descending person according to the Alexandrian description, from God to man counting on the word “logos” as stated in the beginning of John’s Gospel. The Church of the East, considered itself as a part of the Catholic Church. However, the differences are related to vocabulary according to Christological statement issued by St. Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Dinkha IV in 11 Nov. 1994 in Rome.

Chaldean Catholic Church

When Crusaders occupied the Holy land, western missionaries came to the East. In 1340 a direct contact took place when a group of Eastern Christians in Cyprus joined the Catholic Church and were called

Chaldeans. This union with Rome was renewed in 1445 by Bishop Timotheus, at the time of Pope Eugene IV (1431-1447) after the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-1445). In November 12, 1553 Youhanna Soulaqa was ordained Bishop in Rome and declared as the Patriarch of Chaldeans, arrived in Amed (Dyrbakir), where he chose to have his Patriarchal headquarters. He was accompanied by a group of Dominican friars to help spreading Catholicism. He strengthened his position by ordaining two Metropolitans. Patriarch Soulaqa died on January 12, 1555 after being tortured by Ottomans. The Chaldean Church considers him a martyr of union with the Catholic Church.

Today, the Chaldean Church has 18 dioceses, 8 in Iraq, 2 in Iran, one in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, 2 in America, one in Canada and one in Australia. The number of the faithful is more than one million.

Eastern Spirituality

Oriental spirituality is a project to know deeply the person of Christ and to be integrated with him. Jesus Christ is the “head” of salvation – Oikonomia, which is realized in the Church (the community – his mystical body) and ultimately inside the faithful, when there is a gradual “matching” during the liturgical year “seasons”, as we go through different stages of salvation history, living the real theological and moral meaning to be crowned eventually by the sanctification of the Church (the eschatological dimension). Also, through continuous personal and communal meditation, in the paschal mystery of Christ and the Church. It is a forming program grounded on reflection and meditation on essential and predestination subjects that form the Christian community. Based on this, the Eastern Liturgy places a “permanently” shining light in the middle of the temple to illuminate the tables of the Eucharist and the Holy Bible, i.e. to shed the light on Jesus Christ to honor Him and follow His example.

A Christian faithful without a mystical-spiritual experience is “incomplete”. Since every Christian must have some mystical experience, which is not an exceptional situation. Spirituality means that we let the Holy Spirit pray inside us to lead us to know the mystery of God, rather than to be isolated from the world, by having a direct knowledge of God as our father. This sort of knowledge should increase in the midst of

our detailed daily life and we should be witnesses for that. According to the Eastern tradition, there are two conditions for the spiritual life:

- A commitment to follow the example of Jesus Christ, pertaining individual's circumstances. This is based on a radical "divine" love relationship similar to a wedded couple's – covenant. We receive the Eucharist – the body of Christ until it is transformed into us. That is, we take something from him on daily basis and put it on ourselves in order to be united with Him. *"Because I love that son, I have become a son. who joins the one who does not die is also not dead. who is pleased with life becomes alive"* (hymns of Salomon, p. 97).
- Practicing deep prayer, or spiritual and "mystic" heart prayers. This emotional practice allows the faithful to unite with God through prostration and thanksgiving, providing us with power, light and peace during daily struggle. Such prayers invite us to join Jesus prayers and is based on it.

Short Notes on our Church Liturgy

- The Church of the East recognizes seven sacraments.
- There are three anaphors, among which is the anaphora of Addai and Mari that dates back to 3rd Century. Currently we have the new (4th) Anaphora of St. Thomas 2020. Chaldean theology has the line of grace and hope.
- We believe that the blessing of God, His pardon and mercy is for all!
- Since Jesus is risen and glorified the Church of the East uses the Cross without the Crucified on it.

What is the Future of Christians in Iraq after Pope's Visit?

The apostolic visit of Pope Francis to Iraq (5-8 March 2021) and Iraqi Christians in particular, is historical and its importance lies in supporting a persecuted Church that continues to suffer and lives in a climate of mistrust and suspicion, which prevent Christians from seeing a future in their country.

Pope Francis visit strengthens Christians' faith and renews their hope as well as filling them with enthusiasm to rebuild trust and cooperate with their citizens based on national and spiritual fraternity. Christians

and Muslims must evaluate the Pope's messages and put its details into practice.

The pope touches the hearts of all Iraqis by his messages. Cardinal Pietro Parolin summarized what he has learned from this meeting with the Iraqi believers by saying that it is a testimony of faith that reaches the point of martyrdom. This is the great lesson that we can draw today from Iraqi Christians. Despite the attacks and murders, Christians in Iraq continue to proclaim their Catholic faith with great courage. It is a great teaching. He added, they teach us this ability to be honest in spite of all difficulties. This is a call for solidarity.

Christians share the same dream with Iraqis to live in peace, stability equality and dignity. They would appreciate every help to achieve that. The only solution is to have a strong secular civil state, and real democracy similar to the one applied in most countries of the world. The secular regime embraces and protects all religions, cultures, groups and languages, manages public affairs fairly and protects them. The civil state does not interfere with the religious choices of its citizens and does not elevate its politics to an ideological doctrine (sectarian) in order to obtain power and domination. It is a requirement to separate religion from politics. The international community should help Iraqis to implement this vital project.

On the other hand, and in order to stop the immigration of Christians, it is necessary to improve the situation of their cities and villages, by rebuilding their homes, roads and create jobs, especially for youth.

Conclusion

This 52nd International Eucharistic Congress should be an opportunity for every Christian to deepen his incorporation into Christs, and then to strengthen communion and unity among them through their membership in the Church. Each Eucharistic celebration is a celebration of "last supper" and carries the meaning of sharing and being together. Let us complete our spiritual journey to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who will not leave us in darkness, but will shine with the light of His resurrection on us.