

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

St. Ephrem Monastery, Ma'arat Saydnaya,
Damascus, Syria
December 9-10, 2005

COMMON DECLARATION*

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

Greetings to you all with the spirit of Christian love and fellowship.

We, Pope Shenouda III, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark, Patriarch Mar Ignatius Zakka I, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, and Catholicos Aram I, Catholicos of the Armenians of the Great House of Cilicia, give thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ for granting us, once again, the opportunity to pray and to reflect together on issues of common concern, at St. Ephrem Monastery, in Ma'arat Saydnaya, Damascus, Syria. This is the eighth time that we come together as Heads of Churches, with the members of the Standing Committee we had appointed, within the framework of our fellowship that we initiated in 1996.

* This is the English version of the Common Declaration made by the Heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in the Middle East, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark, His Holiness Patriarch Mar Ignatius Zakka I, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, and His Holiness Catholicos Aram I, Catholicos of the Armenians of the Great House of Cilicia, on the occasion of their eighth meeting, held in St. Ephrem Monastery, Ma'arat Saydnaya, Damascus, Syria, December 9-10, 2005. This fellowship which comprises the Coptic Orthodox Church, Syrian Orthodox Church and Armenian Orthodox Church was founded in 1996, at the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, Antelias, Lebanon.

In our meeting here in Ma'arat Saydnaya, we reaffirmed our unity of faith that, for centuries, has been the basis of our common doctrinal position and theological teachings. Deeply rooted in the Holy Scriptures, the Apostolic Faith and Tradition, the three Ecumenical Councils (Nicea, 325, Constantinople, 381, and Ephesus, 431) and the teachings of our Church Fathers, our unity has sustained the life and witness of the Churches of the Oriental Orthodox family becoming a living source of spiritual strength and missionary engagement. For the family of the Oriental Orthodox Churches the full communion and visible unity of churches is based on the unity of faith which is manifested through eucharistic communion and other sacraments of the church.

We are responsible to preserve and protect the Holy Scriptures as a source of revelation against those erroneous declarations which create confusion and endanger the sacredness, authority and integrity of the Holy Scriptures. The Holy Scriptures are handed to us through the holy prophets, our Lord Jesus Christ, the holy apostles, the holy fathers and the holy Tradition. St. Paul instructed his disciple Bishop Timothy, to: "*Guard through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you*" (2 Timothy 1.14). We are called to follow this apostolic exhortation.

The unity of our faith must acquire concrete manifestations and touch the life of our people through common witness and joined engagement, particularly in the sphere of religious and moral education, theological formation and social diakonia. In these areas, our Churches have made significant achievements. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are called to carry out, with renewed commitment, our missionary task.

The authenticity and credibility of Christian teaching on moral issues should be re-stressed in the context of a rapidly changing world especially in some Christian circles where the moral values of the Holy Scriptures are challenged by new trends and values of secularization and globalization. St. Paul has warned that "*In the last days difficult times will come. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy*" (2 Timothy 3.1-2). As Christians we must sustain our lives and conduct as well as our work in accordance with these moral and spiritual values.

In our solidarity and unity of faith we are not confined to our Churches; we feel also responsible to strive for the unity of all churches, both in our region and in different parts of the world. We remain firmly committed to the ecumenical movement both through the World Council of Churches, as a global ecumenical fellowship, and the Middle East Council of Churches, as a regional ecumenical fellowship. We will continue our active role in the World Council of Churches. The work of the Special Commission and particularly the consensus decision-making procedure is expected to enhance the involvement of the Orthodox Churches in the life and witness of the Council.

With this same spirit our Churches are actively engaged in bilateral theological dialogues. These theological dialogues with Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican and Reformed Churches will further spell out the authenticity and orthodoxy of the Christological teachings of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Those theologians who used to call us

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monophysites (single nature), have come to realize that we are miaphysites (one united nature), following the teachings of our common father St. Cyril of Alexandria. There still exist differences with other churches, which need more dialogue and discussion. We should keep in mind that reception by the churches of the agreements of theological dialogues needs time and patience.

Family is a sacred institution established by God. The sacredness and integrity of Christian family must be preserved. Hence, we condemn all practices and behaviors related to marriage and sexual orientation that are not in accord with the biblical and moral teachings. In view of the emerging tendencies and challenges that jeopardize the credibility of Christian moral teachings and spiritual values and traditions, we appeal to our people to remain deeply attached to their Christian identity and values, keeping strong their faithfulness to the Gospel message.

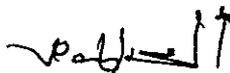
Besides the inter-church collaboration, we consider inter-religious relations and dialogue to be imperative. The Christian-Muslim dialogue has been integral to the history, civilizations and cultures of the Middle East. Our Churches in this region have been in constant and existential dialogue with Islam. This dialogue of life, based on mutual understanding, trust and respect, must continue with renewed emphasis, particularly on the level of people at grass-roots. We are increasingly called to keep the peaceful relations and harmonious co-existence between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East and on global level. Due to emerging concerns and new developments especially in Iraq and Palestine, continuous efforts must be made to develop mutual respect and understanding between Muslim and Christian teachers, scholars and community leaders. Everybody has the right to explain and defend his or her religion without becoming aggressive and offensive towards the other religion. The Christian-Muslim dialogue in the Middle East must be conducted by the Churches. Therefore, we recommend that the Middle East Council of Churches give a priority attention to this vital area of concern through its Dialogue Commission.

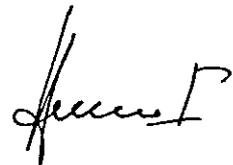
We appeal to our communities living in different parts of the world to remain firmly attached to their native lands by supporting all initiatives and actions that promote peace with justice in the Middle East, as well as mutual respect and understanding among religions and nations.

The Coptic Orthodox, the Syrian Orthodox and the Armenian Orthodox Churches have played a significant role in all major initiatives, processes and actions in our region leading it to greater peace and prosperity. We cannot remain silent and indifferent in the face of the prevailing unstable situation in the Middle East.

We believe that the peace process must continue with new impetus, and the Palestinian people must have its independent state and the right to return home. Israel must implement all Resolutions of the U.N. Security Council by withdrawing from the occupied Arab territories, including the Farms of Shabaa in South of Lebanon, Golan Heights and Jerusalem. Only full justice will bring about comprehensive, real and permanent peace in the Middle East.

Shenouda III





Iraq must soon regain its independence, integrity and sovereignty. All occupying forces must leave Iraq and the nation-building process must be enhanced with the participation of all communities.

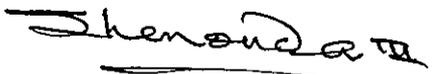
We condemn all forms and expressions of violence. Religion, in its proper understanding, is a promoter of love, hope and reconciliation, peace, justice and human rights. It cannot be exploited and used for non-religious purposes. We urge all those who, for one reason or other, use violence, to resolve their problems through dialogue and mutual understanding.

We greet the President of the Republic of Syria, His Excellency Dr. Bashar Al-Assad, the heads of all religious communities and the people of Syria. We note with joy that the Christians in Syria are engaged in a renewal process: they are experiencing religious freedom; they re-organizing their Christian life and witness; they are building new churches and monasteries; and they are playing an active role in society and contributing to the progress of the country.

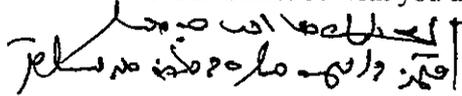
We appeal to our Churches in the Middle East and throughout the world to remain faithful to the Gospel, its values and imperatives, and participate more actively in the total life and witness of the church. Our collaboration will intensify and deepen further. We will, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, give a renewed efficiency and vitality to the witness of our Churches, and particularly to their educational, theological, diaconal, evangelistic and ecumenical work.

As we conclude our Eighth Meeting, we would like to express our congratulation to His Holiness Patriarch Mar Ignatius Zakka I on the occasion of 25th anniversary of his election and enthronement as the Supreme Head of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church. We pray the Almighty God to strengthen His Holiness in his pontifical ministry. We would also like to express our warm thanks to His Holiness for his kind hospitality

May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.



Shenouda III
Pope of Alexandria and
Patriarch of the See
of St. Mark



Mar Ignatius Zakka I
Patriarch of Antioch
and all the East



Aram I
Catholicos
of the Great
House of Cilicia