

**ADDRESS OF METROPOLITAN MAR MEELIS ZAIA, CO-CHAIR OF THE JOINT
COMMISSION FOR THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
AND THE ASSYRIAN CHURCH OF THE EAST**

*On the Occasion of the Signing of the 'Common Statement on Sacramental Life'
Rome; Friday, November 24, 2017*

His Holiness Francis, Bishop of Rome and Pope of the Roman Catholic Church:

"Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever..." (Galatians 1:3-5)

It gives me great joy to address these words of greetings to Your Holiness in the name of His Holiness Mar Gewargis III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, on this occasion of our joint signing of the *Common Statement on Sacramental Life* between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Catholic Church.

By the grace of God, we have herewith concluded the second stage of formal theological dialogue between our two Churches which began in 1994, after the momentous signing of the *Common Christological Declaration* signed by the late Pope John Paul II and Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV, of thrice-blessed and holy memory. At that time, the first stage of dialogue was brought to a fruitful conclusion after some ten years of a fraternal and fruitful dialogue of love and understanding, which opened the door for the second phase of our theological conversation concerning the holy sacraments and the sacramental understanding of both of our Churches. Since 1994, our *Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue* has discussed in a prayerful, ecumenical and academic way the importance of the sacraments in the life of our two Churches. Both the similarities of our common apostolic tradition and divergent particularities of our two ecclesial understandings and praxis have been studied. We can now, there proclaim the importance of the holy sacraments in the life of the Church and her faithful, as means by which God consecrates His creation and sanctifies His children, in Christ.

Now, we begin our third stage of dialogue which deals with the 'Constitution of the Church.' We shall discuss in a prayerful spirit the ecclesiological understanding of our two Churches, among which is the important theological concept of 'communion' at its various levels in the life of the Church. We realize that this is a long road which is marked by frank theological discussions, diverging ecclesiologies and different points of departure. However, a fraternal, sincere and genuine dialogue in the spirit of Christian charity will aid our two Churches along this path. Obedient to the words and will of our Savior who prayed to the Father for the unity of his believers (cf. Jn 17:21), we embark upon this difficult path in a humble spirit which is open to the movements and boundless inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, who continually sanctifies and guides those who

profess Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God incarnate for our salvation. May we be open to the same Holy Spirit and prepare our hearts to listen to His will and His desire for us.

Our common dialogue of love and understanding will bear witness that we profess Christ and belong to Him alone. In the face of the present and on-going persecution of Christians in the Middle East, we are all the more called to give before the world a common witness to Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (cf. I Pet 2:9). Let us offer prayers together to the Father of mercies and God of all consolation that He might make His lasting peace to abound among all the peoples of this tormented region of the earth, Christian and non-Christian alike. May we pray for those who are persecuted for the sake of Christ's holy name, and still also for those who perpetrate this persecution that the saving light of Christ might shine upon them. All types of religious fundamentalism and extremism must be unequivocally condemned by the adherents of all religions, in the Middle East and wherever in the world religious persecution is to be found. The human conscience must not allow our fellow man to be persecuted or killed in the name of God, He who is the author of life and the conqueror of death through His Son, Christ Jesus.

We give thanks, therefore to the Triune God—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—who has brought us together in Christ and has strengthened our dialogue and fraternal bonds of love in Him. We pray for Your Holiness' health and apostolic ministry as the Bishop of Rome and the Chief Shepherd of the Roman Catholic Church, while extending the prayers and fraternal sentiments of our Catholicos-Patriarch and all my brother bishops members of the Holy Synod of the Assyrian Church of the East. May the Grace and peace of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ remain with Your Holiness always.