

JOINT COMMITTEE FOR THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE  
BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND  
THE ASSYRIAN CHURCH OF THE EAST

COMMON STATEMENT ON  
'SACRAMENTAL LIFE'

INTRODUCTION

On 11 November, 1994, His Holiness Pope John Paul II and His Holiness Mar Dinkha IV, Catholicos–Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East signed a Common Christological Declaration. This historic document was the result and the conclusion of a first phase of unofficial dialogues (1984–1994) between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. *“Whatever our Christological divergences have been, we experience ourselves united today in the confession of the same faith in the Son of God who became man so that we might become children of God by his grace”*: with these words, an age–old doctrinal controversy concerning the Christological implications and consequences of the Council of Ephesus was concluded and new horizons of theological dialogue and pastoral collaboration were opened up.

The Christological Declaration continues: *“Living by this faith and these sacraments, it follows as a consequence that the particular Catholic churches and the particular Assyrian churches can recognize each other as sister Churches. To be full and entire, communion presupposes the unanimity concerning the content of the faith, the sacraments and the constitution of the Church. Since this unanimity for which we aim has not yet been attained, we cannot unfortunately celebrate together the Eucharist which is the sign of the ecclesial communion already fully restored.”* The Joint Committee for theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East consequently programmed two further phases in its activity: one on sacramental theology and a following one on the constitution of the Church. The phase on sacramental theology was carried on between 1994 and 2004 and concluded with the document at hand. Our third stage of dialogue, which will begin subsequent to this present ‘Common Statement,’ shall be concerned with the constitution of the Church. It is the sincere hope of the Joint Committee thus to hasten the day that both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East will be able to celebrate together the Eucharist, as a sign of fully restored ecclesial communion.

The present statement, elaborated by the Joint Committee for theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, deals with sacramental life. As the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East have different ways of distinguishing and listing the sacraments, this document is structured according to a classification that applies to both of their traditions. All liturgical rites considered as sacramental celebrations in either both traditions or in

only one of them, are treated in five following subdivisions: 1. Holy Orders and the Sign of the Cross; 2. Holy Baptism and Chrismation; 3. Holy Qurbana or Holy Eucharist, Holy Leaven and the Consecration of the Altar; 4. Christian Life (Christian Marriage, Religious Life); 5. Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick and Funeral. The main purpose of this classification is to clarify how both sacramental traditions are one in their diversity; in different forms and rites, indeed, they both intend to celebrate the one and same mystery of salvation.

## I. SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

Sacramental life is a life of participation in the mystery of God's salvific work through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. This mystery is made present in the liturgy of the Church, which is called a celebration of 'Razeh' in the Syriac tradition, or 'Mysteries' in the Greek tradition or 'Sacraments' in the Latin tradition. Through the celebration of these mysteries, in grateful response to God's initiative, the Church enables the faithful to share in God's life and to concretely reflect that gift in their daily lives, through their communion with God and with one another.

As effective signs, sacraments convey the divine reality that they represent. Through their celebration, the Church in reality participates in the fruits of Christ's Paschal Mystery and in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Sacramental celebrations are thus more than a mere remembrance or an image of that divine reality; they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify. They actually introduce the faithful into God's work of salvation, through and in the Church. For believers, consequently, sacraments are ordinary means of salvation.

The Holy Spirit is the principal cause of this real effectiveness. He is at work through all the words and deeds of the assembled community. He associates to his transforming power the ordained ministers, for the accomplishment of their mission. He sanctifies the material element in every sacrament (such as bread, wine, water, oil, the imposition of hands, etc.) and operates through them. He unites the entire community to the life and mission of Christ. The Epiclesis therefore pertains to the very heart of every sacramental celebration.

All sacraments are celebrated in joyful hope of the coming of God's Kingdom; they are celebrated "*until He comes*" and "*that God may be all in all*" (cf. 1 Cor 11:26; 15:28).<sup>1</sup> Sacramental celebrations therefore stand in the eschatological tension between the 'already given' and the 'not yet fulfilled' dimension of God's Kingdom. They confer here and now an actual participation in the final reality of God's Kingdom, a Kingdom, which still awaits fulfilment. They introduce the Church into a life, which still tends towards its achievement: their full participation into the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 3:3-5; Rom 6:3-4).

The sacramental celebrations of the Church are not arbitrarily established. They spring from the life of Jesus Christ and the foundational activity of the apostles,

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations of Holy Scripture in this document are taken from 'The Jerusalem Bible' version.

through the working of the Holy Spirit. They also decisively touch the crucial stages or moments of human and Christian life. This origin and purpose makes sacramental celebrations among the most sacred and essential actions of the Church. As regards their origin, status and necessity, however, some historical and theological distinctions can be made among sacramental celebrations. This internal difference among the sacraments can be expressed in different ways.<sup>2</sup>

Though essentially one and the same, sacramental life has distinguishing characteristics and features in the liturgical traditions of East and West. These different traditions are the result and the expression of different missionary movements, ecclesial developments and cultural backgrounds. As one and the same mystery is celebrated in these respective traditions, their different characteristics and features can be considered as a remarkable element of complementarity within the Church of Christ. *“You have been trusted to look after something precious; guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us”* (2 Tim 1:14), writes St. Paul to Timothy. The following chapters present and explain that ‘unity in diversity’, which characterises the sacramental traditions of both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church has gradually recognised the treasure received from Christ and, as a faithful steward of God’s mysteries, determined its ‘dispensation’. In the Catholic Church, this gradual recognition led to the magisterial discernment that among liturgical celebrations there are seven that, in the strict sense of the term, are sacraments instituted by the Lord.<sup>3</sup> In the Assyrian Church of the East, no similar magisterial discernment was established. During the centuries, however, some authoritative authors employed distinct approaches dealing with the ‘Razeh’ or ‘Sacred Mysteries’, as celebrated in the Assyrian Church of the East. These approaches are slightly different from one another. Two of the most notable treatises, including a list of seven ‘Razeh’ or ‘Sacred Mysteries’, were composed by Metropolitan Mar Abdisho of Nisibis (+ 1318) and Patriarch Mar Timothy II (from 1318 till 1332).<sup>4</sup> Respecting the sacramental traditions of both the

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<sup>2</sup> During the centuries, several distinctions were made in the Catholic tradition between sacraments necessary for ‘the salvation’, ‘the perfection’ or ‘the preparation’ of the faithful, between ‘major’ and ‘minor’ sacraments. In a comparable way, different Church of the East authors composed distinct sacramental lists, reflecting analogous theological considerations.

<sup>3</sup> This discernment was formally decreed for the first time at the Council of Lyons II (1274); this determination was subsequently confirmed at the Council of Florence (1439) and the Council of Trent (1547).

<sup>4</sup> Patriarch Mar Timothy II, in his treatise «Book of the Seven Causes of the Mysteries (Razeh) of the Church» presented the following list: (1) Priesthood; (2) Baptism; (3) Consecration of Altars; (4) Eucharist; (5) Consecration of Monastic Life; (6) Funerals; (7) Marriage. Metropolitan Mar Abdisho, moreover, in the introduction of his treatise, presents the following list of the ‘Razeh’: (1) Priesthood; (2) Baptism; (3) Oil of Unction; (4) Holy Qurbana; (5) Absolution; (6) Holy Leaven; (7) Sign of the Cross. However, in terms of historic patrimony, it should be noted that in the same treatise on the ‘Razeh’, Mar Abdisho substitutes the chapter on the “Sign of the Cross” with a chapter on “Marriage and Virginity”; he deals with the subject of the “Sign of the Cross” in the following section dedicated to the acts of worship. For circumstantial reasons, Mar Abdisho’s list became more available and consequently recognized and adopted in the Assyrian Church of the East. In fact, during the Patriarchate of Mar Dinkha IV, the Holy Synod of the Assyrian Church of the East affirmed in 2001 Abdisho’s list of ‘Razeh’ as the official list for the Assyrian Church of the East.

Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, the succeeding chapters deal with all liturgical celebrations considered as ‘Sacraments’ or ‘Razeh’, in at least one or both traditions and with them only.

The liturgical traditions of the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East also practice a number of liturgical signs or rites which bear a resemblance to the sacraments, although they are not considered by both as ‘Sacraments’ or ‘Razeh’ in the strict sense of the term. In the Catholic tradition, these signs are generally called ‘sacramentals’. They signify effects, particularly of a spiritual nature, which are obtained through the intercession of the Church. They always include a prayer, often accompanied by a specific sign, such as the laying on of hands, the sign of the cross, or the sprinkling with holy water. Some of these rites are occasional blessings of persons, meals, objects or places. Other blessings have a lasting importance because they consecrate persons to God, or reserve objects and places for liturgical use. By this variety of ritual or liturgical signs, Christians are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments and various occasions in their lives are rendered holy. The following chapters do not deal with ‘sacramentals’ as such. All liturgical celebrations, mentioned herein after, are considered either by the Catholic or by the Assyrian tradition as belonging to the domain of their ‘Sacraments’ or ‘Razeh’.

## II. HOLY ORDERS

Jesus Christ personally called, formed and empowered the twelve apostles; from the very beginning they were his companions, called to assist him in the proclamation of the Good News, by their words and by their deeds (cf. Mk 3:13–19). After the Resurrection, the Lord commissioned his disciples to continue his work until the end of the world (cf. Mk 16:15–16; Mt 28:18–20; Lk 24:47; Jn 20:21–23; Acts 1:8). In turn, the twelve apostles transmitted their apostolic ministry to their successors, by the working of the Holy Spirit. They “*prayed and laid their hands on them*” (Acts 6:6; 13:3; cf. 2 Tim 1:6). The Church continued this apostolic tradition. By a specific consecratory prayer and the imposition of hands, she qualifies her sacred ministers for the fulfilment of their apostolic mission. Both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East believe that ordination is a spiritual charism given to men elected by the Church to celebrate the ‘Mysteries of the Church’ (*Razeh d-Edta*) for the edification of the faithful and the building up of the Body of Christ, but never apart from the Church. Holy orders may not be repeated.

The requirement that all ordained ministers of the Church should stand in the apostolic succession, in virtue of their sacramental ordination, is an expression and a guarantee of continuity between the apostolic origin of the Church and the present qualification of her ministers. Being ordained in the apostolic succession, all ministers of the Church participate in the Pentecost of the Church: the Holy Spirit descending upon the apostles and their successors, after Christ’s Resurrection, for the accomplishment of their world-wide mission, till the end of time.

The sacrament of Holy Orders is exercised in three different degrees, episcopacy, presbyterate and diaconate. As expressed in the liturgical rites,

theological teachings and uninterrupted praxis of both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, these three degrees pertain to the one sacrament of Holy Orders. Although each of the three degrees is related in a specific way to the one ministry of Christ, all three are conferred by a particular sacramental rite of ‘ordination’. As the bishop has the fullness of priesthood, he also can confer the presbyterate and the diaconate to others. The essential rite of the sacrament of Holy Orders for all three degrees consists in the bishop’s imposition of hands on the head of the ordinand and in the bishop’s specific consecratory prayer asking God for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and his gifts proper to the ministry to which the candidate is being ordained.

All sacraments normally have to be administered by an ordained minister, according to his degree of participation in the ministry of Christ.<sup>5</sup> Although reflecting a basic similarity, a few different practices exist between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East concerning the minister of some sacraments, at least in certain occasions. These differences will be indicated below, each of them in their respective context.

Sacramental ministry has to be situated within the context of the Christian community, as a service to the common priesthood of the baptised. The whole community of believers, indeed, is in a special way priestly. Christ, high priest and unique mediator, has made of the Church “*a kingdom, priests for his God and Father*” (cf. Rev 1:6; 5:9–10; 1 Pet 2:5,9). Lay Christians exercise a baptismal priesthood through their participation, each according to his own charism or calling, in Christ’s mission as priest, prophet and king. Through their baptism and unction, they fully participate in the mission of the Church, especially in its mission towards the world. Christian parents, as heads of their families, educate their children in the faith, giving them the example of Christian virtues and “*offering their lives as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*” (Rom 12:1); this is their spiritual worship. Lay Christians also have the right and the duty, individually or grouped in associations, to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and received by all throughout the world. Some lay Christians can also be admitted temporarily or permanently to different forms of non–ordained ministry.<sup>6</sup>

## THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

The Trinitarian formula, as expressed in the ‘Sign of the Cross’, is a basic element of all sacramental celebrations. Because all sacraments are conferred in the name of the

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<sup>5</sup> Both in the Catholic Church and in the Assyrian Church of the East all sacraments are normally administered by an ordained minister. Only regarding the sacrament of Matrimony, two different traditions exist within the Catholic Church (cf. *infra*).

<sup>6</sup> In the Assyrian Church of the East, minor orders or ministries are transmitted in a specific liturgical celebration and are received through a rite implying only a ritual blessing, like the ministries of reader and sub–deacon. Similar ministries exist in the Catholic Church: “*for the purpose of assisting the work of the common priesthood of the faithful, other particular ministries also exist, not consecrated by the sacrament of Holy Orders; their functions are determined by the bishops, in accord with liturgical traditions and pastoral needs. Servers, readers, commentators, and members of the choir also exercise a genuine liturgical function*” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London, 1994, n. 1143).

Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the ordained minister repeatedly makes the ‘Sign of the Cross’ during all sacred mysteries or sacramental celebrations. By doing so, he expresses that these celebrations are performed in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. At the same time he efficaciously administers to the assembled community and the faithful all divine gifts, which take their origin and come upon them from the Holy Cross (cf. Col 1:20). From one sacramental celebration to another, Christians are increasingly endowed with the gifts of salvation, brought about by the life-giving sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The fundamental conviction that every sacramental celebration depends on the salvific death and resurrection of Jesus Christ explains why some authors of the Assyrian Church of the East ranked the ‘Sign of the Cross’ among the ‘Razeh’ or ‘Sacred Mysteries.’

The ‘Sign of the Cross’ functions as an explicit symbol of unity among all the sacramental celebrations. For the Assyrian Church of the East, when used in a sacramental manner by the priest in all of the sacred mysteries (*Razeh*), it is part of the consecratory process of each of the sacraments, by which they are ‘sealed.’ All of them are means by which the Church further associates her members into the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 6:6–11) and into the eternal communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### III. HOLY BAPTISM AND CHRISMATION

Faithfully following the commandment of the Lord before his Ascension into heaven (Mt 28:16–20), Saint Peter said on the day of Pentecost: “*You must repent . . . and every one of you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 2:38). From the very beginning of her existence, the Church has thus celebrated and administered the sacrament of Holy Baptism.

By their baptism, Christians are brought from the darkness of ignorance and sin into the light of knowledge and holiness (cf. 1 Thess 5:5; Eph 5:8). Baptism is their second birth; if by their first birth they receive the gift of human life, by their second birth from water and the Holy Spirit they receive the gift of divine life and salvation. Baptism is among the ordinary means for salvation, as already affirmed by the Lord himself (cf. Jn 3:5).

According to the Scriptures and to the doctrine of the Church, the effect of baptism is manifold. It purifies the neophytes from sin (cf. Acts 2:38). It makes them ‘*adopted sons of God*’ (Gal 4:5–7). It incorporates them into the Body of Christ, which is the Church (cf. Rom 8:17; 1 Cor 6:15; 12:27). It transforms them into temples of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:19). It makes them in a special way participants in the priesthood of Christ and in his prophetic and royal mission (cf. 1 Pet 2:9). It qualifies and leads them into a life of sacrifice, holiness and happiness (cf. 1 Cor 16:13–16; 2 Cor 5:15). It makes them participants in the death and Resurrection of Christ (cf. Rom 6:3–11) and the divine nature of God (cf. 2 Pet 1:4).

In accordance with the early Church, when whole ‘households’ received Baptism,<sup>7</sup> both the Catholic and the Assyrian tradition practice the baptism of adults and the baptism of infants. Children are baptised to bring them into the realm of freedom of the children of God, being freed from the servitude of sin. Every human being is in fact conditioned or affected by sin (cf. Jn 1:29; Rom 5:12–13), as Mar Timothy II says, “*a person, who is born from a slave, is a slave himself, till he receives liberation from his servitude*”.<sup>8</sup> Infant baptism manifests moreover, in a very emphatic way, that all faithful receive their new creation in Christ as a sheer gratuitous gift of salvation.

Since Christian initiation is incorporation into Jesus Christ and reception of the Holy Spirit, baptism with water is completed by the acts of imposition of hands and unction with Holy Oil.<sup>9</sup> The Latin liturgy administers a first post-baptismal unction, which announces a second and usually later postponed anointing with Sacred Chrism, called Confirmation. The Assyrian Church of the East liturgy, in accordance with the Oriental practice, administers a “final signing” with Holy Oil, immediately after the baptismal rite. This “final signing” is considered as a distinct completion of the baptismal rite for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the perfection of Christian life. It covers what the Latin liturgy means by her separate and usually postponed sacrament of Confirmation.<sup>10</sup>

The rite of initiation into Christian life is a journey with several distinct steps or stages, including the catechumenate, profession of faith, baptism with water, anointing with sacred oil and admission to Eucharistic Communion. Although these essential elements are the same in both the sacramental traditions of Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, different liturgical practices and sequences have developed. For adult baptism, both traditions normally administer baptism, chrismation and Holy Communion during one single celebration. For infant baptism, however, liturgical practices differ. In the rite of the Assyrian Church of the East, consistent with the Oriental practice, the initiation of infants begins with baptism, immediately followed during one and the same liturgical celebration by the signing (*shumlaya*) with holy oil and completed by the reception of the Eucharist.<sup>11</sup> In the Latin rite, infant baptism is normally followed by years of catechesis, before being completed later on by confirmation and Eucharist. Infant baptism as practised in

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Acts 16:15,33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16.

<sup>8</sup> Mar Timothy II, Book on the Seven Causes of the Church Razeh, III, 20, The meaning of infant baptism.

<sup>9</sup> In the Latin tradition, the consecration of “Sacred Chrism” is reserved to the bishop. In some Oriental traditions this consecration is even reserved to the Patriarch. In the Assyrian Church of the East it is the celebrant who consecrates fresh oil of baptismal anointing during the baptismal liturgy, signing it with the old Holy Oil (also called the ‘Oil of the Horn’), and praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>10</sup> Traditions differ with regard to the ordinary minister of this ‘final unction’ or ‘confirmation’; in the Latin rite the original minister of Confirmation is the bishop; in the rite of the Assyrian Church of the East, consistent with the Oriental practice, the priest who baptizes confers himself the “final anointing” during one and the same liturgical celebration.

<sup>11</sup> In most Oriental traditions, infants immediately receive Holy Communion with their baptism and unction, during one and the same ceremony. In the Assyrian Church of the East children receive the Holy Qurbana or Holy Communion after being confirmed at baptism. The priest dips the small finger of his right hand into the chalice containing particles of the Body, and places it in the mouth of the child.

both traditions requires parents, godparents and the Christian community to make sure that children are reared in Christian faith and Christian life.

A Christian person can only be configured to Christ and signed with the seal of the Holy Spirit once and forever. Both baptism and anointing therefore confer an indelible spiritual character on the faithful.

#### IV. HOLY QURBANA OR HOLY EUCHARIST

From the beginning the Church has been faithful to the Lord's command "*Do this in remembrance of me*" (1 Cor 11:23–25). With respect to the very first Christian communities it is written "*they remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers*" (Acts 2:42).<sup>12</sup> More precisely on Sunday, the Day of the Lord, Christians met to celebrate the memorial of His passion and resurrection, to share in his Body and Blood and to grow as living members of His Body, which is the Church. That celebration thus became the centre of the Church's life.<sup>13</sup>

In the Assyrian Church of the East sacramental and Eucharistic theology, the concept of *Mdabranuta*' is of particular importance. According to the Syriac vocabulary, *Mdabranuta*' covers the whole salvific mystery, God's divine economy for the creation and the salvation of humankind. Originating in the eternal plan of God, *Mdabranuta*' finds its 'former dispensation' in the Old Testament, culminating in the Advent of Christ in humanity. Its 'present dispensation' is the New Testament economy, beginning with the Incarnation, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and being completed by the descent of the Holy Spirit. Its 'future dispensation', which began at Pentecost, still awaits the Second Coming of the Lord, the glorification of the Church and the renewal of creation. The entire *Mdabranuta*' or salvific mystery is commemorated and celebrated throughout the Liturgical Year, in the Liturgy of the Hours and in the Sacraments. Its most clear and comprehensive celebration, however, is effected during Holy Qurbana or the Eucharistic celebration. During the Eucharist, the human condition before the Incarnation is evoked, humanity's need to God's salvific economy is confessed, and forgiveness is prayed for. Gratitude is expressed for the abundance of grace, given through the Old Covenant, through the Incarnation, through the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. An enumeration is made of the many blessings and benefits obtained through the provision of Gods salvific economy. The whole mystery of salvation or *Mdabranuta*' is thus summarised, celebrated and gratefully received in every Eucharistic celebration. Although this comprehensiveness is more evident or extensive in the Syriac Eucharistic tradition, it also is a characteristic feature of all Catholic Eucharistic traditions. In both traditions, the whole mystery of salvation is gratefully commemorated and celebrated in every Eucharistic celebration.

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<sup>12</sup> The Peshitta text reads: "And they remained continually in the doctrine of the apostles, and they participated in prayer and in the breaking of the Eucharist."

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Acts 2:42,46; 20:7,11.



Reflecting their common Eucharistic faith, the same fundamental structure characterises Eucharistic celebrations in the tradition of both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East: the gathering of the local community presided by the bishop or the priest, the Liturgy of the Word including readings from both the Old and the New Testament, the intercessions of the faithful, the presentation of the offerings, the anaphora or Eucharistic prayer, the fraction and the communion in the Body and Blood of Christ, followed by prayers of thanksgiving.

The anaphora or Eucharistic prayer leads to the heart and summit of the Eucharistic celebration, which is the receiving of ‘the bread of heaven’ and ‘the cup of salvation’. By the invocation of the Holy Spirit and by the representation of what our Saviour has done and said at the Last Supper,<sup>14</sup> the elements of bread and wine sacramentally become the Body and Blood of our Lord. Both the Epiclesis and the Words of our Saviour are thus necessary elements of the anaphora or Eucharistic Prayer. The real and true presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine, moreover, is part of our common faith and devotion.

While sharing the same Eucharistic faith, different liturgical traditions have developed in both the Catholic Church and in the Assyrian Church of the East for the celebration of Qurbana or Holy Eucharist. These different liturgical backgrounds and traditions are a constitutive element of our respective ecclesial identities, which leads to mutual enrichment. Each of these traditions should therefore be faithfully preserved and organically developed. In this context, a highly respectful consideration is due to the anaphoras traditionally used in our liturgical heritages, especially when they date back to venerable antiquity.

## HOLY LEAVEN

In different ways the early Church practised a partition of Eucharistic bread, combined with a distribution of these particles among the churches or the celebrants of a specific area. Such liturgical practice existed both in the Christian East and in the Christian West. One of these practices, called the ‘fermentum’, consisted in a distribution of small Eucharistic particles by the bishop to the priests of the surrounding area; each priest had to dip this particle into the cup of his eucharistic celebration, hence the name ‘fermentum’ or ‘leaven’. Similar practices gradually disappeared in the Western Church and in most of the Oriental Churches.

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<sup>14</sup> Among the Anaphoras of the Church of the East, the Anaphora of Addai and Mari occupies a special and venerable position, being recognized as its most ancient Anaphora. The validity of the Eucharist when celebrated with the Anaphora of Addai and Mari was recognised by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith on January 17th 2001; Pope John Paul II subsequently approved this decision (cf. *Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East*; and *Ammissione all'Eucaristia in situazioni di necessità pastorale*, in: *L'Osservatore Romano*, Friday 26 October 2001, p. 7–8.

The Assyrian Church of the East, however, faithfully conserved such a liturgical practice, called ‘Holy Leaven’ or ‘Malka’.<sup>15</sup> Every year on Holy Thursday, the local parish priest renews the Holy Leaven by mixing the old Leaven with the new one. This Leaven is subsequently to be used during the year in all the Eucharistic loaves prepared by the priest before the Eucharistic celebration. In the sacramental tradition of the Assyrian Church of the East, this Holy Leaven has an integral and necessary part in the overall process of consecration. Further, the Holy Leaven functions as a visible sign of historical continuity between every Qurbana or Eucharistic celebration and the Last Supper (cf. Mt. 26:26).

## CONSECRATION OF THE ALTAR

Both the tradition of the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East reverently respects the altar around which the community is gathered, on which the Eucharistic gifts are offered and from which the Body and Blood of the Lord are received. A solemn liturgy for the consecration of an altar is provided in both their liturgical rites. This consecration is reserved for the bishop; it is carried out by an invocation of the Holy Spirit and an unction with sacred oil.<sup>16</sup> However, in the Catholic and Assyrian traditions, the consecration of the altar is not considered one of the sacraments.

## V. CHRISTIAN LIFE

### CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

Marriage is vested with special importance and meaning, expressing both the order of creation and the order of salvation, that is God’s eternal plan for the creation (cf. Gen 2) and the salvation of humankind, culminating in Jesus Christ (cf. Eph 5:32). It is a covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a lifelong and complete partnership, which of its own nature is ordered to the wellbeing of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children. This intimate communion of life and love has been established by the Creator and endowed by Him with its own proper laws. The model of Christian marriage is the covenant between Christ and his Church, as made clear by the Apostle Paul: “*Husbands should love their wives just as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her to make her holy*” (cf. Eph 5:25–26). Through the celebration of the Church, the spouses receive the grace that enables them to represent in their conjugal love the fidelity of God to the people

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<sup>15</sup> In virtue of its venerable origin, theological meaning and liturgical statute, the Holy Leaven was ranked by Mar Abdisho of Nisibis among the ‘Razeh’ or ‘Sacred Mysteries’. The rite of Holy Leaven is still practiced by the Assyrian Church, not by the Chaldean or the Syro–Malabar Church.

<sup>16</sup> Due to its ecclesial and liturgical importance, the consecration of the altar was ranked by Patriarch Mar Timothy II among the ‘Razeh’ or ‘Sacred Mysteries’; according to his liturgical order, the consecration of the altar functions at the same time as a consecration of the whole church and the sanctuary where the altar stands. In the actual liturgical practice of the Assyrian Church, following the sacramental list of Mar Abdisho, the consecration of an altar is a liturgical rite, that is not considered as a sacrament. In a similar way, in the Catholic tradition, the consecration of an altar is ranked among the sacramentals.

of His covenant and of Christ to his Church, and to bear witness to that divine fidelity. Christian marriage thus receives its sacramental character.<sup>17</sup>

The parties to a Christian marriage are a baptised man and woman, not impeded from contracting marriage and who freely express their consent.<sup>18</sup> The Church's minister receives and blesses their consent in the name of the Church.<sup>19</sup> He especially prays the Holy Spirit, the ever-available source of their love and fidelity, to bless and to seal their covenant. The presence of the Church's minister and also of the witnesses visibly expresses the fact that Christian marriage is an ecclesial reality.

The unity of marriage, distinctly recognised by our Lord, is made clear in the equal personal dignity that must be accorded to husband and wife in mutual and total affection. The indissolubility of marriage is clear in the Lord's saying: *"They are no longer two, therefore, but one body. So then, what God has united, man must not divide"* (Mt 19:6).

As a participation in God's creative love, marriage is ordered to the procreation and upbringing of offspring (cf. Gen 1:27–28). In our time and world, often alien and even hostile to faith, believing families are of primary importance as centres of living and radiant faith. It is in the bosom of the family that parents are by word and example the first heralds of faith for their children. They should encourage their children in the vocation proper to each one of them, fostering with special care any religious vocation. Spouses unable to receive children can likewise have a conjugal life full of meaning, in both human and Christian terms. Their marriage can radiate fruitfulness of charity and of sacrifice, both between themselves and towards others.

## RELIGIOUS LIFE

Religious life has developed in the tradition of both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, since the first centuries, as a special charism and way of Christian witness. Vocation to religious life was considered as a special gift of the

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<sup>17</sup> Marriage does not appear on the list of the 'Raze' composed by Mar Abdisho. His list reflects indeed an earlier stage in the development of the actual list of seven sacraments, preceding some later developments, common to the Greek and Latin tradition. In the tradition of the Assyrian Church of the East, however, the liturgical texts used for the celebration of marriage, as well as the teaching documents explaining its meaning, display the same elements which are considered as constitutive for its sacramental character in the Catholic tradition.

<sup>18</sup> Regarding marriages between Christians belonging to different Christian communities or marriages between Christians and non-Christians, we have to refer to the appropriate canonical regulations of both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. In the Catholic Church, permission for a marriage between a catholic and a non-Christian can be given by the bishop; in the Assyrian Church of the East, however, no such permission can be given.

<sup>19</sup> In the Latin Church, it is ordinarily understood that the spouses, as ministers of Christ's grace, mutually confer upon each other the sacrament of Matrimony by expressing their consent before the Church. In the Assyrian Church of the East, in accordance with the Oriental tradition, the liturgical rite of marriage must have the presence of the priest, the cup of blessing, and the Cross as 'intermediaries' required for the validity of the rite.

Holy Spirit, for the sanctification and enrichment of the Church.<sup>20</sup> Several spiritual or ecclesial themes were related in a specific way to religious life, such as desert life (cf. Mk 1:12–13), the radical imitation of Jesus Christ (cf. Mk 10:17–31) and the following in example of the first Christian communities (cf. Acts 2:42–47).

Different forms of religious life developed in both traditions. In the Catholic Church successive periods of foundation and reform repeatedly contributed to the internal renewal and diversification of religious life. In the Assyrian Church of the East religious life spread at the end of the third or the beginning of the 4th century and prospered for many centuries.<sup>21</sup> At the end of the 14th century, nevertheless, it came to a rapid decline and almost completely disappeared, mainly due to drastic social and political circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

## VI. RECONCILIATION, ANOINTING OF THE SICK AND FUNERAL

### RECONCILIATION

According to Holy Scripture, God's heart is not like the heart of men and He does not like to destroy (cf. Hos 11:8–11). He does not want the death of the wicked, but that he may turn from his evil way and may live (cf. Ezek 18:23). Jesus is the full representation of God's mercy, as he affirmed himself: *"It is not those who are well who need the doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"* (Lk 5:32). He finally gave his life and poured out his blood for the forgiveness of sins (cf. Mt 26:28). In communion with his own mission, Christ gave the apostles and their successors power to forgive sins (cf. Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18; Jn 20:22s.). By virtue of this mandate and authorisation sins can be forgiven by the ministry of the Church, even after baptism. This ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted to bishops and priests. They received the authority to absolve by a sacramental act of absolution and reconciliation.

The sacramental administration of reconciliation exists in the liturgical tradition of both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. Constitutive elements of this reconciliation are repentance, confession, penance, absolution and conversion (cf. Mt 3:8). Different practices developed within both liturgical traditions for the administration of reconciliation, giving priority either to the private or to the communal character of reconciliation. The communal confession of sins and the ministerial proclamation of forgiveness during the

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<sup>20</sup> The liturgical admission into monastic life was ranked by Patriarch Mar Timothy II among the 'Razeh' or 'Sacred Mysteries'. In the actual liturgical practice of the Assyrian Church of the East, following the list of 'Razeh' or 'Sacred Mysteries' of Mar Abdisho, admission into monastic life is a liturgical rite, that is not considered as a sacrament. In a similar way, in the Catholic tradition, the consecration of virgins and the rite of religious profession are ranked among the sacramentals.

<sup>21</sup> In ancient times, the Assyrian Church of the East observed a unique type of 'Proto-monasticism' known as the *Bnay/Bnath Qyama*, or the 'Sons/Daughters of the Covenant.' This ancient form of religious life consisted of men or women living a consecrated life in their homes and among the community of faithful. It pre-dated the formal monasticism instituted by St. Anthony of Egypt, and it is the type observed by St. Ephrem and Aphrahat the Persian Sage.

<sup>22</sup> In recent years attempts in the Assyrian Church of the East at revival of monastic life have begun in Iraq and in India and the United States.

celebration of Holy Qurbana or Holy Eucharist retains a particular penitential importance in both liturgical traditions; Christian conversion and reconciliation find in fact their source and nourishment in the Eucharist. The practice of personal confession and absolution exists in both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, at least for grave sins. In the Catholic Church, the 'private' practice of penance favoured a regular frequenting of the sacrament of personal confession. Although less customarily or frequently, the Assyrian Church of the East also practices personal confession and sinners at any time can ask for it.<sup>23</sup>

### ANOINTING OF THE SICK

Illness and suffering have always been part of human reality. In the Holy Scriptures illness is associated with human sin and with confidence in God. On the one hand, all sufferings on earth are associated with Adam's sin (cf. Gen 3:16–19; Rom 5). On the other, it is before God that the faithful lament in their illnesses, and it is from God, the Master of life and death, that they implore healing. Prayer of healing in time of sickness is recommended together with repentance for sin (cf. Sir 38:9–11).<sup>24</sup> Jesus Christ gave surprising priority to bringing healing to the sinners and the sick. His compassion and healing of every kind of infirmity became a resplendent sign that the Kingdom of God was at hand (cf. Mt 11:1–5). Already during his public ministry, He sent his disciples with a mission to heal the sick (cf. Lk 10:9). And after his glorification, He mandated the apostles to continue such a healing ministry: "*Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation. He who believes and is baptised will be saved... In my name . . . they will lay their hands on the sick, who will recover*" (Mk 16:15–18; cf. Jas 5:14–15).

The liturgical traditions of both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East tradition make provision for the anointing of the sick. This anointing has to be administered by an ordained minister, namely a bishop or a priest. The efficacy of this anointing is attributed to the healing power of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is not only indicated by the corresponding prayers, but also by the fact that the oil has to be blessed by an ordained minister and that the anointing is accompanied by the Sign of the Cross. Those elements are an expression of the sacramental character of this anointing rite.<sup>25</sup>

As the liturgical prayers of both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East indicate,<sup>26</sup> the effect of this anointing is manifold: healing of the

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<sup>23</sup> Private confession was increasingly more practised by the Chaldean Church and the Syro-Malabar Church, bringing their liturgies into line with the Latin tradition.

<sup>24</sup> God's healing presence is not partial but complete; it tends to restore human life in all dimensions of its being weak and wounded. According to the Holy Scriptures, healing of evil and sin is considered as the most fundamental healing a human person can receive from God (cf. Mt 9:1–8; Mk 2:1–12; Lk 5:17–26).

<sup>25</sup> The anointing of the sick does not appear on the list of *'Razeh'* composed by Mar Abdisho (cf. note 5). In the Assyrian tradition, however, the liturgical texts used for the celebration of the anointing of the sick, as well as the teaching documents explaining its meaning, display the same elements which are considered as constitutive for its sacramental character in the Catholic tradition.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. this prayer of the Church of the East for the oil of the sick: "O true Healer whose word is full of all well-being, aid, care and healing; O Lord let your grace dwell on this oil and make it

body and the soul, sanctification of the Church and fortification of the person. The manifold effects of this healing anointing are noted by the apostle St. James: “*And if he is sick, let him call the presbyters of the Church and let them pray over him, and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall heal the one who is sick, and our Lord will raise him up...*” (James 5:14–15).

## FUNERAL

Christian communities pray for their beloved dead. They pray God to forgive their sins, that he may welcome them with mercy and generosity into His Kingdom. They beseech God to receive them with all the righteous at the banquet of the Lamb. They remember them and pray for their eternal rest and joy during Holy Eucharist. They consider these prayers also as a thanksgiving to God and a reminder for the living.<sup>27</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

Sacramental life and theology is multiform in its nature, because it is the quest for understanding the mystery of faith in human categories and celebrating this faith in forms that are characteristic of each culture and nation. In general, the sacramental life and theology of the Catholic Church developed in a Greco–Roman context. As to the Assyrian Church of the East, its sacramental life developed in lands, which never were ruled by the Roman Empire, either by the Western or by the Eastern Empire. It developed in a predominantly Semitic and Syriac theological context, very close to the background of the primitive apostolic communities.

During many centuries, due to massive and sometimes very painful historic situations, the Church of the East could not communicate in a normal way with the rest of Christianity, situated within the Greco–Roman area. Some later developments in sacramental theology and practice, which gradually were adopted in the Greco–Roman area, did not affect the Assyrian Church of the East. Remaining extremely faithful to its proper apostolic origins, however, the Assyrian Church of the East conserved and developed its sacramental patrimony, stemming from the apostolic age. This patrimony represents a unique source and testimony for the whole Church.

A comprehensive approach to sacramental life confirms, indeed, that Christian life in both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East is structured by one sacramental reality. While celebrating sacramental rites according to different liturgical and cultural traditions, in essence, they both share the same sacramental faith and the same sacramental life. Their sacramental rites can therefore be considered as complementary expressions of a unique divine reality, unfolding its

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to be a helper and healer of all our illnesses, a reliever of our pain, tensions and hardship, a cure for our wounds, a cleanser of our infirmity, may we find in it the cure for our illnesses, now and forever. Amen”.

<sup>27</sup> In virtue of its liturgical, spiritual and pastoral meaning, the liturgy of funeral was ranked by Patriarch Mar Timothy II among the ‘Razeh’ or ‘Sacred Mysteries’. Nevertheless, in the actual liturgical practice of the Assyrian Church of the East, following the sacramental list of Mar Abdisho, funeral is a liturgical rite, that is not considered as a sacrament.

wonderful richness in a diversity of ecclesial traditions. The principle of unity in diversity can thus be applied, not only regarding the formulation of doctrine, but also regarding the celebration of sacramental life in both the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East.

In their *Common Christological Declaration* of 1994, the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East declared themselves united “*in the confession of the same faith in the Son of God who became man so that we might become children of God by his grace*”. That common heritage of faith was received, maintained, taught, confirmed and clarified by the Holy Spirit in both traditions, especially through their respective sacramental and liturgical heritages. Sacraments being sacraments of faith, the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East are now able to declare themselves also united in celebrating the same faith “*in the Son of God who became man so that we might become children of God by his grace*”, and in dispensing the same salvific mystery, through their respective sacramental and liturgical traditions.

To be full and entire, communion between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East not only presupposes unanimity concerning the content of faith and the celebration of sacraments, but also concerning the constitution of the Church, as written in the *Common Christological Declaration* of 1994. Accordingly, both the *Common Christological Declaration* of 1994 and the present *Common Declaration on Sacramental Life* lay the foundation for the third phase in our theological dialogue, namely, on the constitution of the Church. When brought to a good end, the third phase will have completed the agreement on faith, sacramental life and the constitution of the Church, and the way will be open for the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East “*to celebrate together the Eucharist, which is the sign of the ecclesial communion already fully restored.*”<sup>28</sup>

24 November, 2017

.....  
His Eminence Cardinal Kurt Koch  
*President of the Pontifical Council  
for Promoting Christian Unity*  
CO-CHAIR

.....  
His Beatitude Mar Meelis  
*Metropolitan of Australia, New Zealand  
and Lebanon*  
CO-CHAIR

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<sup>28</sup> This present ‘Common Statement on Sacramental Life’ and the common sacramental understanding of our two Churches does not allow for the con-celebration of the sacraments and rites of the Church by their respective clergy.