



❖ *The Holy Synod of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East* ❖

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARIAT

Synodical Statement Concerning Christian Marriage and Issues of Human Sexuality

I. Introduction

1. The breath of the Holy Spirit brought forth divine illumination in the Sacred Scriptures and the orthodox Tradition of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of Christ in order that we human beings may live as the perfected image and likeness of God, whom we encounter as our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ. In the life in Christ, by which all humanity “...might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Peter 1:4), we have a pattern of holy and sanctified life given us by the same Christ whose death, burial, and resurrection is the ultimate image of perfected humanity and divine love. As the apostles preached, the evangelists proclaimed, the martyrs confessed, the fathers taught, and Christians of the ages have believed, there are only two life-styles in which Christian life may mature towards salvation and sanctification in Christ: “...either perfect holiness [consecrated celibacy] or legal marriage which is adorned with the purity of procreation of children.”¹

2. Therefore, this synodical statement is intended to be a clear and definitive statement from the Church’s highest authority concerning matters related to the proper understanding of Christian marriage, and the divine and ecclesiastical laws dealing with divers issues of human sexuality and Christian morality. The faithful of the Church, therefore, are called to adhere to the teachings found herein with the full assent of their will and mind, receiving them for the advancement of their life in Christ and for the spiritual good of their souls.

II. The Role of the Holy Synod as Teachers and Pastors of the People of God

1. As the pastors of our respective diocesan churches, we the Synod of the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Assyrian Church of the East are bound by our arch-pastoral ministry to speak not of our own mind, but exclusively as custodians of the sacred and perfect Deposit of Faith, which was

¹ Synod of Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Aqaq (486 AD), Canon 3. This and all subsequent quotations from the *Synodicon Orientale* are those of the late Fr. Michael J. Birnie’s English unpublished translation, *The Eastern Synods*.



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“...once and for all delivered unto the saints” (Jude 1:3). This very same Deposit of Faith was handed down to us by the Holy Apostles and cultivated by the cooperation of our forbearers through the breath and seal of the Holy Spirit. We do not have the authority to change, add to nor decrease from this apostolic Deposit of Faith. As the Holy Synod, and also as individual chief shepherds of our local churches, we do not legislate a new teaching, for our divinely-protected role is not in guiding the Church according to our own wisdom, or heading our particular conscience. As the Holy Synod, we uphold without reserve the exposition of eternal Christian truths in the voice of Sacred Tradition and have not the desire to neither reconsider the teachings of our fathers, nor to legislate fundamental changes in Sacred Tradition. What the Church has always practiced and believed is what any legitimate and true member of the church today—be they from the ranks of the priesthood or a layman—must practice and believe; to do otherwise is to cease being a faithful and obedient member of the Assyrian Church of the East. We are called by our ministry and particular charism as arch-pastors of the saved flock of Christ, the holy Church, “...which he purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

2. Our apostolic authority is not to determine the Law of Christ, for we have but one Lord Jesus Christ who is the Life-Giver and who gave us his own life upon the Cross as the enduring meaning of the law we received from him through the immutable and divinely-inspired Sacred Scriptures, the Holy Eucharistic Liturgy, the Hours of Daily Prayer, and the full weight of written and unwritten Sacred Tradition. However, as pastors we lovingly not only teach the fullness of the faith to our children in Christ, but we also must practice the mercy of Christ by a firm resolution to never reduce the beliefs or practices of the Church and providing paths to repentance for those challenged by Christ’s teaching through pastoral exhortation, admonishment, teaching and the allowance of a clear process for the absolution of transgressions.

3. We who are arch-pastors of the People of God have been entrusted with the apostolic charism to prayerfully guide our flocks according to the rule of life we have received from the Holy Spirit, in humble Christian obedience. Keeping with our faith and the Sacred Tradition of Christ, we cannot reform or change the faith by applying human personal convictions, acts of conscience, or our own will in an effort to change or manipulate the will of Christ. We are the Shepherds of the Church as those most explicitly called to prayerful obedience, and as such we also call the sons and daughters of the Church to the same.



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III. Christian Marriage and Human Sexuality

1. Marriage as a natural human relationship, across different cultures and religions, has always been about the creation of families for the ordered and thriving continuance of the human race. Christian marriage particularly, is that and greatly more. It begins with the sanctification of God through his Church in the Rite of Betrothal and Crowning (Marriage Liturgy) but is consummated in a life lived not merely for the mutual benefit of husband and wife, but in order to serve and love the natural and biological offspring of marriage. As such, only a heterosexual union of a man and a woman is open and responsive to the conception and care of children can constitute Christian marriage.

2. Marriage which is distinctly after the ordinance of Christ, according to Mar Abdisho of Nisibis, is entered into for the sake of domestic care and labor of the husband and wife, for the rearing of children in the fear of the Lord, and in order to temper and curb temptation.² Further, lawful marriage is the source of domestic harmony and the submission of the husband and the wife, by testimony (i.e. witnesses to the Betrothal and Marriage) and priestly prayer, and it is fulfilled in the natural union and mingling of husband and wife towards the procreation and nurture of their offspring: "...a man leaves his parents, who gave him life, and is joined to his wife, and that one flesh—father, mother and child—results from the commingling of the two. The child is born from the union of their seed, so the three are one flesh. Our relationship to Christ is the same: we are become one flesh with Him through communion, more truly one with Him than our children are with us, because this has been His plan from the beginning."³ This union gives mutual help to both the husband and wife by the sustenance of their earthly lives by completing that which is lacking, and for the procreation of children as their posterity.⁴

² Mar Abdisho of Nisibis, *Book of the Pearl*, Part IV, Chapter VIII: 'On Matrimony and on Virginity.' For the English translation see: Mar Eshai Shimun, editor and English translation, *The Book of Marganitha (The Pearl): On the Truth of Christianity* (Thrissur 1965) pp. 62ff.

³ Mar Ioannes Chrysostom, 'Homily 20: On Ephesians 5:22-23,' quoted in: Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson, eds. & trans., *On Marriage and Family Life* (Crestwood, NY 1986) p. 51.

⁴ Mar Abdisho Bar Brikha (of Nisibis), *The Order of Ecclesiastical Judgments*, Memra III, Chapter I.



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3. Human sexuality is given by God our Creator as a special gift for the uniting of man and woman inseparably in holy wedlock, and for the procreation of the human race, which is a sanctification of the human person who is resolved to cooperate with God in the sacred act of procreating in love. Abuse of the human person and reduction of human dignity by all other kinds of sexual behavior—premarital, extramarital, or homosexual—constitute a grave sin against the Creator’s intention of the gift of human sexuality, and a break with the Body of Christ, the Church: *“Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the Kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid”* (I Corinthians 6:9-10).

4. As the Holy Fathers of the Church of the East throughout her history have attested, Christian marriage is a *“...joining of a man to one wife in honest and lawful marriage”*⁵ The synodal laws further declare: *“God ordained for the marvelous sustenance of the constitution of our [human] nature and for the procreation of our posterity, a bond of love in the pure and lawful intimacy of a man with his wife, but not indiscriminately in the likeness of beasts, but in an orderly fashion, which is suitable for rational beings...”*⁶ In preserving the healthy and sacred order of uniting man and woman, the Church’s Rite of Marriage mediates the help of God to the couple and guards the experience of marriage from corroding into a disfigured and sinful state of brokenness.

5. As the Holy Church has in past times, again we reaffirm the eternal truth of Christian marriage as an inseparable bond between one man and one woman, both of whom come together for the begetting of children in a common sacred struggle to live perfectly in the light and love of Christ Jesus. Therefore, the union of the husband and the wife, by divine positive law, is intended to last everlasting and to be monogamous. The Sacred Scriptures declare this clearly and unequivocally: *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh”* (Genesis 2:24; cf. Matthew 19:4-5). In holy matrimony, the man and the woman, who are

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Synod of Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Aba I, the Great (544 AD), in his synodical letter “Concerning the Conduct of Honest Ways.”



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initially two, become one in a sacred bond that is inseparable save by death, being joined by God himself, in a union that man ought not be put asunder (cf. Matthew 19:6). Both man and woman must be free of a prior marriage, for the Church does not allow serial bigamy, and Christ has ordained that marriage is eternal except for the case of death or adultery. Moreover, neither man nor woman may be related in such a way that violates the ecclesiastical marital canons regarding kinship, nor can one be a non-Christian or one who has undertaken a vow of celibacy dedicated to the Lord.

6. In the Proclamation of the Gospel according to St. John the Evangelist, Christ blessed marriage by the action of his first sign of Messianic ministry when he turned water into wine at the Wedding Feast at Cana. The life-long commitment of marriage establishes the fidelity and stability of the family unit which precedes sexual/reproductive activity—the natural end of which is progeny. For this reason, the Church cannot condone the practice of cohabitation before marriage as living in conformity to Christ's Gospel.

IV. Procreation and Sterility

1. As the Church takes great care and concern for her children when they contract their marriage, so it is eternally bound to marriage as fruitful and participant in the divine work of procreation. The Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Isho'yahb I addresses the necessary desire for children without which no true commitment for Christian marriage is possible.⁷ Thus, marriage by its very nature requires the desire, openness and welcoming spirit for the conception of offspring by the natural and holy congress of a man and a woman, bound together inseparably in holy matrimony. As the Scriptures declare: *"For children are the heritage of the Lord; the reward of the fruits of the womb"* (Psalm 127:3).

2. Moreover, the desire to eliminate children from marriage, intentionally and by design, cannot be sanctified by the Church. Similarly, a 'union' between two people of the same gender or sex who have no natural and God-given physical capacity to procreate according to human nature cannot be blessed or accepted under any circumstance in this the Church of Christ. Thus, the

⁷ Synod of Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Isho'yahb I of Arzon (587 AD), Canon 20.



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Holy Synod emphatically declares that any one from among the ranks of the priesthood who attempts to bless such a 'union': of two persons whose unnatural union precludes any natural offspring conceived of one another—namely of man to man, or woman to woman—contrary to the divine law and the canons of the Church, is by the very act interdicted and utterly stripped of any priestly rank and authority to minister in the Church and to pastor the People of God.

3. The Sacred Tradition of the Church and canonical legislation dogmatically declare that God the Creator and Author of life binds together the physical union of man and woman, confected by the sacred blessing of Christ's priesthood in lawful marriage. This sacred bond is the source of the great joy of procreation as a singular, chaste, and true life in Christ. With the fathers of the Church, who but reflect the larger tradition of the Sacred Scriptures and Holy Tradition, we hold that marriage is not only between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman, without canonical impediments, contracted before a priest according to the sacred rites of the Holy Church, but that the common life of the couple must seek to be fruitful in bearing children.

4. Nevertheless, some couples discover that while desiring children, they are unable to bear children. The teaching of the Church in no way discourages or denigrates such marriages. The couple that is open to children in the commitment of sacred Matrimony has the full blessings of an undefiled marriage bed. Furthermore, in such circumstances, the desire to conceive and the self-sacrificial parental drive may be well applied not only to great acts of charity and service, but also to raising children who deserve good parents.

5. Thus, the canons of the Church do not distinguish between the absolute inviolability of a naturally fruitless marriage from that of a naturally fruitful one. In such circumstances where the physical conception of life is not possible due to a physical defect in one or both spouses, the will of God must be sought in prayer and fasting. When the human body one has been given—one's own or one's spouse'—is not capable of reproduction, remedy is limited to improving and healing the integral capacities of the two spouses within the marriage to conceive, without recourse to outside partners in conception or to conception outside of the bodies of the spouses.

6. Therefore, the Church cannot condone the use of bodily fluids or tissues from outside of the couple to overcome such circumstances of impotence or barrenness, nor can Her children seek to



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do more than increase fertility as a medical remedy. Actions such as the production of embryos outside of the body, any of which might be destroyed, are condemned as destroying human life as well as overstepping the limits of human medical wisdom in not accepting the frailty of the human condition and seeking to accept divine wisdom in how God grants human beings his gifts in various capacities. A true Christian's openness to the will of God may lead them to adopt children who are in need of God-fearing parents and a wholesome home. Again, there is an equal blessing and joy in the marriage of those who are, by the nature of their bodies, fruitful in procreation as those who are not, for the intention and desire of both such cases is but a reflection of the natural gifts bestowed in different capacities by God in His handiwork of humankind.

V. Marriage as a Sacred and Sanctifying Bond

1. We maintain the absolute requirement of the priestly blessing and ecclesiastical sanctification of the union of man and woman. As God's blessing upon the path of the married, marriage in the Church is both a sacred and a practical commitment that ensures a joyous and fruitful life. As the holy Fathers assembled under the Patriarch Mar Isho'yahb I in 587 proclaimed synodically that chaste and lawful marriage is given so that the "...members of the household, through the discipline of Christian law, will be diligent according to the will of God."⁸ By limiting sexual union of man and woman to the state of canonical marriage in the Church, the children of the Church enjoy the discipline and guidance granted by an authentic life in Christ. As spouses take their commitment to each other seriously by the witness of fellow believers and the blessing from God, they are not reduced in their joy and freedom, but gain liberty from sin and infidelity to both each other and to Christ. Conversely, to reject the blessings of marriage is to be unfaithful both to each other and to Christ, in whom exclusively will they find the fullness of joy and blessedness.

2. Our canonical tradition commands that couples living together as if they were united in holy matrimony but outside of the blessings given through the mediation of the priesthood, the cup of blessing and the holy Cross, and witnessed to by the baptized faithful, place themselves not only outside of the communion and fellowship of the Church but also deprive themselves of the rich blessings given in marriage from Christ himself as the eternal Bridegroom of the Church, His

⁸ See Canon 13 of the same synod, titled, 'Concerning chaste and lawful marriage which is comely to members of the household: that they should be married as it has been commanded, lawfully and not as beasts.'



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Bride—whom he sanctified by the sacred washing and by the proclamation of the Word (cf. Ephesians 5:25-26), and for whom he laid down his own life. In such circumstances, the correction of unions that are not blessed by the Church and outside the bounds found in the divine Word is necessary for salvation. While those who not only fall into fornication (sin outside the bonds of marriage), but practice systematic fornication (co-habitation outside of the bonds of marriage) rarely do so in a conscious rejection of Christ and his teaching, such enduring acts of fornication amount to distorting the Christian way of life.

3. In cases of unions described in this Synodical Declaration as being outside of the legitimate and holy Christian practice of the Church's children, the couple is to approach their priest and make preparations to correct this incompatible way of life and return to a lifestyle appropriate for those who partake of Christ's Body and Blood in honesty and repentance. The priest is to allow for their spiritual remedy and correction, be it through entering into lawful marriage or separating from union of the flesh. A time period for the corrective actions is allowed as determined in consultation with their pastor, at the conclusion of which time they are restored to communion with the 'mystery' (i.e. sacrament) of Absolution, given the penitents sincerity in having acted to correct their sin.

VI. The Divine Call to Repentance and to Living Proper Christian Morals

1. St. Paul the Apostle teaches that *"God our Savior desires that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of truth..."* (I Timothy 2:4). Christ calls us all continually to repentance and is ever ready to give us His love and forgiveness, so that in addressing these issues of human sexuality and proper Christian morals, each one must also realize his or her own sins. The holy Church, therefore, does not approach Her children in animosity but in a charitable spirit and in a prophetic voice of love. As fathers in Christ, we remind our spiritual children that we are not to condemn anyone but must always seek to make the Gospel known with as respectful and loving a heart as possible.

2. Our Lord sought out the disenfranchised from the community of faith, corrected the sin, healed the effects of sin, and restored the sinner to full membership in the People of God. Such a restoration always presumes a life marked by repentance of every Christian. All true Christians



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respond to sin with a prayerful movement of the heart in the spirit of the words of St. Paul: *“This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the first”* (I Timothy 1:15). In the Gospel of Christ, the Pharisees and Sadducees are not the models of faith, but rather the repentant sinner is the ideal. So first we must ask our flock and all Christians to always speak in charity and love, without denigration or mockery, towards all human beings and the human condition. It is for the same truth that the Church upholds in her teaching about the sanctity of marriage, that She must also demand dignity and respect for all human persons, and at the same time by virtue of Her divine vocation must perpetually speak proclaim the Truth in love.

3. The faithful of the Church, sanctified and adopted as children of God in the holy waters of Baptism, are called continually to live out their baptismal calling. Having been anointed with the holy Chrism of Unction, we were sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit and as such become living temples of God’s Holy Spirit. Therefore, we are called to a life of continued repentance, renewal and joy in the Spirit. On this account, St. Paul declares, *“...do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of salvation”* (Ephesians 4:30). As a spiritual remedy, the holy Church encourages Her children to take recourse in the sacrament of Absolution (Khusaya) as a medication given by the Holy Spirit and as a means of healing the human soul afflicted by guilt and sin. Confession of sin, repentance and absolution are not only for those who fall under the penalty of canonical censure from receiving Holy Communion, but also for the many different ways the human condition fails to reflect Christ in word, deed and action. While Absolution (Khusaya) is required for such sins enumerated here, it is also a mystery (i.e. sacrament) that is given to all faithful while we live in this fallen world and are all sinners. We strongly encourage the priests of the Church as pastors of the souls of the flock of Christ to invite the faithful to make use of this spiritual remedy, and at the same time to accompany them on their path to repentance and renewal.

VII. Concluding Exhortation and Canon

1. The Assyrian Church of the East remains ever committed to her indelible and absolute orthodox faith. As such, it cannot bless or solemnize any marriage that is not committed to the divinely-inspired Scriptural principles or that is contrary to them, nor do the Church’s sacred ministers



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have the authority to attempt to do so, under any condition. The Holy Eucharist, sacraments and liturgical rites of the Church of the East presuppose a commitment and life lived according to the basic and fundamental moral teachings of and a committed faith in the Holy and Apostolic Church as the only Body of Christ. As such, persons living in any unchaste relationship may not receive Communion (Qurbana Qaddisha), and to do so would be a violation not only of personal honesty but a sacrilege in violating the sacred and holy canons of the Church of the East and the exhortation of the blessed apostles of our Lord (cf. I Corinthians 11:27-29).

2. Finally, we remind our children in Christ that we are not to condemn anyone but must always seek to make the Gospel known in as respectful and loving a heart as possible. May the prayers of the blessed apostles Mar Thoma, Mar Addai & Mar Mari who founded our ancient and apostolic Church, and also the prayers of the saints, martyrs and confessors continually safeguard the holy Church and Her children. The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God the Father, and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and at all times, and forever and ever. Amen.

Therefore, the Holy Synod solemnly decrees:

Whoever does not accept and submit to this decree which we have set down concerning the limits of human conduct, beyond which we cannot extend the blessing of the Holy Church, attested throughout God's revelation in Sacred Tradition, and does not ratify the agreement of these matters with a good mind in which there is no deceit, then if he is a bishop, presbyter, deacon, or other religious who teaches against what we have laid down in simple echo of Christ and his Church, he shall have no fellowship with us and we will abstain from his contact and do suspend the priesthood that he ministers. Thus, he is not permitted to serve in any ranks of the Church. If such a one be a layman, he is barred from the reception of the Holy Mysteries and from communing with the faithful, until he offers repentance from his sin. If after much exhortation of the Church to the obstinate so that he would repent and accept the immutable teaching of the Church, he does not repent and submit to the teaching of the Holy Church, then if he is a cleric, the priesthood which he ministers is interdicted permanently of his priestly rank, dignity and faculties (ܡܠܐܝܚܐ). If he is a layman, he is bound and anathematized.