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Meeting of the Holy Father Francis with His Holiness Mar Gewargis III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East

Address of the Holy Father

Common Statement of Pope Francis and Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Gewargis III

This morning, His Holiness Mar Gewargis III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, paid a visit to the Holy Father Francis. After a private meeting, Pope Francis and the Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Gewargis prayed together in the *Redemptoris Mater* Chapel of the Apostolic Palace. Finally they signed a Common Statement.

The Catholicos-Patriarch was accompanied by the members of the mixed Commission for theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East.

The following is the Holy Father Francis address to the Patriarch Mar Gewargis III during the meeting and the text of the Common Statement:

Address of the Holy Father

Your Holiness,

Dear Brothers,

“Peace and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Eph 6:23*). With these words of the Apostle Paul, I greet you and, through you, the members of the Holy Synod, the bishops, the clergy and all the

faithful of the beloved Assyrian Church of the East.

Two years have passed since our first encounter, but in the meantime I had the joy of again meeting Your Holiness in Bari last 7 July, at the Day of Reflection and Prayer for Peace in the Middle East, which you too had so greatly desired. Indeed, we share the great suffering resulting from the tragic situation endured by so many of our brothers and sisters in the Middle East, who are victims of violence and frequently forced to leave the lands in which they have always lived. They tread the *via crucis* in the footsteps of Christ and, though belonging to different communities, they are forging fraternal relationships among one another and thus becoming, for us, witnesses of unity. Shortly we shall join in prayer for an end to all this suffering and implore from the Lord the gift of peace for the Middle East, above all for Iraq and Syria.

We share a particular reason for thanksgiving to God: the Joint Committee for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. Just one year ago, I had the joy of receiving its members on the occasion of the signing of the Common Statement on 'Sacramental Life'. The Committee, itself the fruit of dialogue, shows that practical and disciplinary differences are not always an obstacle to unity, and that certain differences in theological expression can be considered complementary rather than conflicting. I pray that the work of the Committee, which in these days enters a third phase of study on ecclesiology, will help us to take one more step on our journey towards the much-desired goal of being able to celebrate the Sacrifice of the Lord at the same altar.

This journey propels us forward, yet it also demands that we continue to preserve our historical memory, in order to draw inspiration from the witnesses of the past. This year the Assyrian Church of the East, together with the Chaldean Church, celebrates the seven-hundredth anniversary of the death of Abdisho bar Berika, Metropolitan of Nisibis, one of the most famous authors of the Syro-Oriental tradition. His works, particularly in the area of canon law, are still fundamental texts of your Church. I rejoice that Your Holiness and the distinguished Members of your Delegation are taking part in the international colloquium organized on this occasion by the Pontifical Oriental Institute. May the study of this great theologian help to make better known the richness of the Syriac tradition and to receive it as a gift for the entire Church.

Your Holiness, dear brother, with affection I wish to express my gratitude for your visit and for the gift of being able to pray together for one another today, making our own the prayer of the Lord: "that they may all be one... so that the world may believe" (*Jn 17:21*).

Common Statement of Pope Francis and Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Gewargis III

1. Praising the Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we, Pope Francis and Catholicos Patriarch Mar Gewargis III, raise our minds and hearts in thanksgiving to the Almighty for the increasing closeness in faith and love between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Catholic Church. Our meeting today as brothers echoes the words of the blessed Apostle Paul: "Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (*Eph 6:23*).

2. In recent decades, our Churches have grown closer together than they have ever been over the centuries. From the time of their first meeting in Rome in 1984, our Predecessors of blessed memory, Pope Saint John Paul II and Catholicos Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV, embarked on a journey of dialogue. We are most grateful for the fruits of this dialogue of love and truth, which confirm that a diversity of customs and disciplines is in no way an obstacle to unity, and that certain differences in theological expressions are often complementary rather than conflicting. It is our prayerful hope that our theological dialogue may help us to smooth the path to the long-awaited day when we will be able to celebrate together the Lord's sacrifice on the same altar. In the meantime, we intend to move forward in mutual recognition and shared witness to the Gospel. Our common Baptism is the solid foundation of the real communion that already exists between us: "in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (*1 Cor 12:13*). Walking together in trust, we seek the charity that "binds everything together in perfect harmony" (*Col 3:14*).

3. On our pilgrimage towards visible unity, we experience a common suffering, arising from the dramatic situation of our Christian brothers and sisters in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria. The significance of the Christian presence and mission in the Middle East was once more clearly highlighted at the Day of Prayer and Reflection held in Bari on 7 July 2018, when the Heads of Churches and Christian communities of the Middle East gathered to pray and speak with one another. The Good News of Jesus, crucified and risen out of love, came from the Middle East and has won over human hearts down the centuries, due not to worldly power but the unarmed power of the Cross. Yet for decades now, the Middle East has been an epicentre of violence where entire populations endure grievous trials every day. Hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children suffer immensely from violent conflicts that nothing can justify. Wars and persecutions have increased the exodus of Christians from lands where they have lived side by side with other religious communities since the time of the Apostles. Without distinction of rite or confession, they suffer for professing the name of Christ. In them, we see the Body of Christ which, today too, is afflicted, beaten and reviled. We are profoundly united in our prayer of intercession and in our charitable outreach to these suffering members of Christ's body.

4. Amid such suffering, whose immediate end we implore, we continue to see brothers and sisters who tread the way of the cross, meekly following in Christ's footsteps, in union with him who reconciled us by his cross "and thus put hostility to death in himself" (cf. *Eph* 2:14-16). We are grateful to these brothers and sisters of ours, who inspire us to follow the path of Jesus in order to defeat enmity. We are grateful to them for the witness they give to the Kingdom of God by the fraternal relationships existing among their various communities. Just as the blood of Christ, shed out of love, brought reconciliation and unity, and caused the Church to flourish, so the blood of these martyrs of our time, members of various Churches but united by their shared suffering, is the seed of Christian unity.

5. In the face of this situation, we stand together with our persecuted brothers and sisters, to be a voice for the voiceless. Together we will do all we can to alleviate their suffering and help them to find ways to start a new life. We wish to affirm yet again that it is not possible to imagine the Middle East without Christians. This conviction is founded not simply on religious grounds, but also on social and cultural realities, since Christians, with other believers, greatly contribute to the specific identity of the region: a place of tolerance, mutual respect and acceptance. The Middle East without Christians would no longer be the Middle East.

6. Convinced that Christians will remain in the region only if peace is restored, we lift up our earnest prayers to Christ, the Prince of Peace, asking for the return of that essential "fruit of justice" (cf. *Is* 32:17). A truce maintained by walls and displays of power will not lead to peace, since genuine peace can only be attained and preserved through mutual listening and dialogue. We therefore call once again upon the International Community to implement a political solution that recognizes the rights and duties of all parties involved. We are convinced of the need to guarantee the rights of every person. The primacy of law, including respect for religious freedom and equality before the law, based on the principle of "citizenship", regardless of ethnic origin or religion, is a fundamental principle for the establishment and preservation of a stable and productive coexistence among the peoples and communities of the Middle East. Christians do not want to be considered a "protected minority" or a tolerated group, but full citizens whose rights are guaranteed and defended, together with those of all other citizens.

7. Finally, we reaffirm that the more difficult the situation, the more necessary is interreligious dialogue grounded in an attitude of openness, truth and love. Such dialogue is also the best antidote to extremism, which is a threat to the followers of every religion.

8. As we meet here in Rome, we pray together to the Apostles Peter and Paul that through their intercession God may bestow his abundant blessings on the Christians of the Middle East. We ask the Most Holy Trinity, model of true unity in diversity, to strengthen our hearts so that we may respond to the Lord's call that his disciples be one in Christ (cf. *Jn* 17:21). May the Almighty who has begun this good work in us bring it to completion in Christ Jesus (cf. *Phil* 1:6).

From the Vatican, 9 November 2018

