

Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East

Commission on Inter-Church Relations and Education Development

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JOINT COMMUNIQUÉ of the Fifth Non-Official Syriac Consultation “Sacraments in the Syriac Tradition – Part II”

1. In its task to enable ecumenical encounter and to promote theological understanding, the PRO ORIENTE Foundation (Austria) had invited participants from all the Churches of the Syriac tradition for the Fifth Non-Official Syriac Consultation, which took place from February 26 to March 1, 2002, in Vienna, to continue its discussion on sacramental life in the Syriac tradition.
2. Participants came from eleven different Churches and twelve countries. The Syriac traditions were represented by the Assyrian Church of the East, the Ancient Church of the East, the Chaldean Church, the Syro-Malabar Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Malankara Orthodox Church, the Maronite Church, the Syrian Catholic Church, and the Malankara Catholic Church. Present there were also an observer of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, expert scholars, and staff of PRO ORIENTE.
3. All participants warmly welcomed the initiative of PRO ORIENTE to continue this unique ecumenical dialogue among the Churches of the Syriac tradition. The presence on the first day of H.E. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of PRO ORIENTE, was a great honour. The visit to the Cistercian Monastery of Heiligenkreuz near Vienna, where they were welcomed by Abbot Gregor Henckel-Donnersmarck, and the opportunity to share and experience a Catholic monastic Office was particularly appreciated. The vice-president of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Austria, Chorbishop Emanuel Aydin, also participated in the excursion.
4. An enriching innovation at this Fifth Syriac Dialogue was to begin each day with a short service of prayer, each arranged according to a different Syriac tradition (Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, Malankara Catholic, Church of the East, Maronite and Syrian Catholic).
5. This Fifth Consultation focused on rites which are identified and listed differently as *raze/roze* by the individual Syriac Churches. In the course of the meeting the following papers and comments were read and gave a good basis for discussion:
 - Marriage (presented by Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim and Fr. Pierre Youssif, commented on by Chorbishop Michael J. Birnie)
 - Anointing of the Sick (presented by Fr. K.M. George and Mar George Alencherry, commented on by Fr. Khoshaba M. Georges)
 - Holy Leaven/Malka (presented by Mar Bawai Soro, commented on by Fr. Baby Varghese and Fr. Louis Sako)

- Sign of the Cross (presented by Mar Yakoob Danil, commented on by Mar Cyril Aphrem Karim and Fr. Elias Khalifeh-Al Hachem).
6. The subject for the **first day** was „MARRIAGE“. The marriage service has basically the same structure in all the Syriac liturgical traditions and indeed the prayer for the Blessing of the Rings is essentially the same. Furthermore, all these traditions make use of the same Pauline lection, from Ephesians 5 where marriage is explicitly stated to be “a great *raza/rozo* concerning Christ and his Church”.
 7. The liturgical rites themselves, reinforced by the instructions given for pastoral guidance of the intended partners, indicate clearly the two main foundations required for the sanctification of marriage in all the Syriac traditions, namely the presence of a priest and, on the part of the couple, a commitment to lifelong love, and to procreation. Of central importance, too, is the couple’s mutual covenantal exchange of consent. Implicit in all the traditions there is to be seen an underlying concern for the welfare of the family.
 8. All the Syriac Churches teach the indissolubility of marriage (Mt 19:6). In common with the other Eastern Churches the Syriac Churches do not lay stress on the concept of marriage as a contract. The Syriac Churches have never made any clear distinction in language between divorce and annulment. In practice, the only grounds recognized for divorce are adultery (based on Mt 5:32). In the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Malankara Orthodox Church and the Church of the East marriage may be dissolved, and remarriage may be granted for pastoral reasons (on grounds of *oikonomia* as in the Eastern Orthodox Byzantine tradition). In the Eastern Rite Catholic Churches marriages may be annulled in certain exceptional circumstances.
 9. Some attention was also given to the presence or absence of marriage from the various listings of seven *raze/roze* found in certain Syriac sources from the 13th century onwards. It had already been recognized in the Communique of the Fourth Syriac Consultation that, although the terms ‘sacrament’ and ‘*raza/rozo*’ overlap, they are by no means synonymous and coterminous; as a result it is often preferable to translate the latter as ‘mystery’, or to leave it in transliteration. While originally the term, in the plural, had referred only to the Eucharistic Mysteries, from about the 5th century it had been extended to certain other liturgical rites as well. The identity, however, of these other rites varied in the different liturgical traditions. It was not until the 13th century, however, that (under Latin influence) the idea of using the symbolic number seven to enumerate the *raze/roze* came into practice. This innovation has proved to be appropriate in the context of Latin liturgical tradition where a distinction is made between Sacraments and Sacramentals. When applied to the Syriac traditions, however, where no such distinction is current, its use has led to problems, and as a result different listings have come to be made in the different Syriac Churches. The problems arising from this have been highlighted by the Assyrian Church of the East’s recent synodal decision (2001) that reaffirms the list of seven *raze* which the great 13th/14th century canonist Abdisho had provided in his *Marganitha* (The Pearl; IV.1): this list does not include marriage, although later in the section which discusses the *raze* he in fact includes marriage. Abdisho’s inconsistency over this matter, and the fact that subsequently Timothy II specifically includes marriage in his Commentary on the *raze*, clearly shows that Abdisho’s list of seven *raze* is not to be understood as an exclusive one which would deny the ‘sacramental’ character of marriage. In the same way, Bar Ebroyo’s exclusion of marriage from his list of five *shumloye* (*Mnorath Qudshe* VI.2) certainly does not mean that marriage is not understood as a *rozo*

in the tradition of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch; it is in fact specifically included in Patriarch Barsom's listing of seven *roze*.

10. Although listings of seven *raze/roze* may sometimes be helpful in a certain theological and catechetical context, it needs to be clearly recognized that the adoption of a fixed number of *raze/roze* is inappropriate in the context of all the Syriac Churches, seeing that the Syriac term includes not only Sacraments but also Sacramentals. Recognition of this at once also explains the presence in Abdisho's list of Holy Leaven and the Sign of the Cross: since these are both *raze* of Christ himself, it is only to be expected that Abdisho should give them precedence over marriage. This means that the different listings of seven *raze/roze* in the different Syriac traditions is of no particular consequence. What matters is the substance of what each particular *raza/rozo* conveys; in the case of marriage, since St Paul already described it as a 'great *raza/rozo* concerning Christ and his Church' the liturgical rite which effects this can also be considered as a *raza/rozo*.
11. The subject for the **second day** was 'ANOINTING OF THE SICK'. Mindful of Christ's command to his disciples that they should heal the sick as well as proclaim the Kingdom (Lk 9:2), and of the directive in the Letter of James (5:14-15) that the priests of the Church should pray over the sick and anoint them with oil, all the Churches have made, over the centuries, a variety of liturgical provisions in response to the ever present phenomenon of human sickness, both spiritual and physical. From early on in Syriac tradition one of the recurring titles of Christ is "Physician" (*Asya/Osyö*), and the imagery of healing has always been, and still remains, very prominent in the liturgical texts of all the Syriac Churches.
12. Although the early history of the anointing of the sick in the Syriac Churches is very obscure, it is at least clear that different developments took place in different geographical areas and in different cultural and ecclesial contexts. Thus the laying on of hands by the priest might be used alongside, or instead of, anointing with oil; and in the Church of the East the use of *Hnana* (a mixture of oil, water and dust from the tomb of a saint or martyr, specifically blessed by a priest) is also found. What is essential to realize is that, behind the great variety of rites and fluidity of usage, there lies a common fundamental element: a liturgical action whereby a priest conveys divine grace of healing and forgiveness of sins to a sick person (whether or not using oil), whether or not in a eucharistic context.
13. On the **third day** two topics were discussed: the HOLY LEAVEN ("MALKÄ") and the SIGN OF THE CROSS, both of which are considered by the Church of the East as *raze*, and which Abdisho includes within his list of seven *raze* in his *Marganitha*.
14. In any discussion of the *raza* of the Holy Leaven it is essential to concentrate on the theological sense and function of the rite, rather than its 'sacramentality'. The various narratives concerning the origin of the Holy Leaven have a twofold role: (1) to link in a pictorial way the Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper with the Piercing of the Side of Christ (John 19:34, a verse which has always been central in Syriac tradition for a theological understanding of Baptism and Eucharist); and (2) to link the Institution of the Eucharist in a tangible way with each individual Celebration of the Eucharist. This indicates that the function of the Holy Leaven is essentially to serve as a *raza* of unity. Furthermore, this *raza* of unity has two different dimensions (1) diachronic, emphasising unbroken continuity of the rite, and indicating apostolicity; and (2) synchronic, emphasising ecclesial *communio* (and in western terminology, also legitimacy).

In its function as a symbol of apostolicity and of unity between the bishop and the parish, the theological significance of the Holy Leaven is not unlike that of the Myron in the West Syriac tradition.

15. The papers on the Sign of the Cross clearly indicated that all the Syriac Churches share in an extremely rich and profound soteriological theology of the Cross. The Sign of the Cross, with its Trinitarian dimension, itself is seen as 'the perfecter and seal of all the *raze/roze*', and without it no liturgical rite would be complete. A contributing factor behind the Syriac Churches' highly developed theology of the Cross may lie in the double sense of the Syriac words *sliwa*, *zqipa/slibo*, *zqifo*, both of which mean 'Crucified One' as well as 'Cross'.
16. IN CONCLUSION, in the course of our study of the Sacraments in the Syriac tradition two things in particular have become abundantly clear:
 - (a) that the Syriac term *raza/rozo* has a far wider meaning than 'Sacrament' in the scholastic sense, and that in the Syriac Churches there has never been any tradition of distinguishing between different categories of *raze/roze*; rather, they are to be understood as representing a continuum, running from the most important to those of less importance;
 - (b) that the various Syriac Churches have developed their sacramental life in differing, but equally legitimate, ways.
17. In connection with the first point, we consider it would be helpful to offer the following preliminary definition:

Raza/Rozo, in a liturgical context, is a symbolic action, founded on the economy of salvation in Christ, which is performed by the Church as a salvific action with eschatological dimensions through the ministry of a bishop or a priest. Through a *Raza/Rozo* life-giving grace (*taybutha/taybutho*) is effectively communicated by the power of the Holy Spirit to a believer who receives this grace through faith and prayer.
18. In a wider ecumenical context, it could well be that the distinctive Syriac concept of *raza/rozo* and the profound symbolic theology of the Syriac Fathers can make a contribution to current reflection on the place of sacramental theology in the context of the present growing concern for creation, seeing that this concept of *raza/rozo* points to the holistic and essentially sacramental nature of the whole of creation in the economy of salvation.

Participants in this consultation feel a special mention should be made of the many essential contributions that the PRO ORIENTE Foundation has been offering the Churches of the Syriac Tradition:

- (1) The Syriac Dialogue consultations and meetings of the Syriac Commission provided by PRO ORIENTE are the only vehicles by which representatives of our Churches are able to come together and dialogue in the spirit of fraternal relations and truth. This encounter between our Churches has taken place for the first time in 1994 after more than 1500 years of separation, alienation and mistrust.
- (2) PRO ORIENTE's efforts in planning and financing our dialogue meetings are highly appreciated by the leadership and faithful of our Churches. During a time when our

Churches in their historic homelands (Middle East and India) are witnessing the rise of fundamentalist prejudice in their societies, PRO ORIENTE's encouragement and support strengthens our resolve to continue our Christian witness.

- (3) PRO ORIENTE's work for and among our Churches has already had positive results in communities of our Churches also present in the Diaspora. Our faithful in these communities are thus much encouraged to learn about their Churches, with their glorious heritage, encouraging them to represent themselves in a better way to other Christians in Western Society.