



His Holiness Patriarch Kirill meets with Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East



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On November 15, a meeting took place, at the Patriarchal Residence in the St. Daniel Monastery in Moscow, between His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East Mar Awa III.

Present at the meeting were members of the official delegation of the Assyrian Church of the East including Mar Narsai Benjamin, Bishop of Iran, Armenia and Georgia; Mar Abris Tyari, Patriarchal Auxiliary Bishop in Erbil; Chor-Bishop Samano Odisho, representative of the Assyrian Church of the East in Russia; Rev. Ephraim Alkhass, personal assistant to His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III; Rev. Nikodim Yukhanayev, clergyman of the Diocese of Iran, Armenia and Georgia; Rev. Peter Pavlov, rector of the church of the Assyrian Church of the East in Krasnodar. There were also Adday

Nazlu, a student of the Moscow Theological Academy and cleric of the Diocese of Iran, Armenia and Georgia; and Deacon Ronald Bidjamov, a member and expert-adviser of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East.

Participating in the meeting from the Russian Orthodox Church were Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate; Bishop Clement of Krasno-Slobodsk and Temnikov, co-chairman of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East; Hieromonk Stephen (Igumnov), DECR secretary for inter-Christian relations and secretary of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East; and Hierodeacon Peter (Akhmatkhanov), a staff member of the DECR.

Greeting the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill said, 'It is your first visit to our Church in the capacity of Primate of the Assyrian Church but you have been to Russia before. In 2014, when your predecessor of the blessed memory, Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV was in Moscow, you accompanied him. Your present visit already in a completely different capacity is of great importance for the relationships between our two Churches'.

The Primate of the Russian Church noted that the relationships between the Russian and the Assyrian nations are deeply rooted, 'It happened so that thousands of Assyrians found themselves in the territory of Russia due to difficult and tragic events, and they joined the life of our country without conflict, organically and peacefully. As is known, Assyrians took part in both World War I on Russia's side and in the Red Army during our struggle with fascism. Interaction without conflict and common life of Russians and Assyrians in Russia testify to the spiritual community of our nations. Moreover, in the modern time, good relations have been established between our two Churches, which was manifested at international platforms as well. We see in you friends like-minded in many things, as well as a Church with which we has always acted together and cooperated'.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill drew attention to the fact that the bilateral relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church have been developing in the educational sphere as well.

Already now two of your students attend our theological schools, and we are ready to support your students so that they may have a good theological education in Russia. Our theological schools have held and may continue holding in future various academic colloquia with the aim to introduce them to the life of our Church and to organize our cooperation. A few days ago, such an event was held in the Sretensky Theological Academy, and we highly appreciate the fact that you were able to take part in it', His Holiness said.

He also noted that cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East could be carried out in the context of bilateral contacts, as well as on the international arena.

‘I would like to stress that the positive atmosphere of our interaction and cooperation, including on platforms of international organizations, is of very positive significance today and plays an important part in our dialogue with Protestant and Catholic world communities’, His Holiness stressed.

Speaking about the current level of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, Patriarch Kirill stressed that the friendly relations of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Assyrian Church of the East have acquired a special importance in this difficult time for the whole world.

‘I would also like to touch upon some circumstances sad for us, as they concern events taking place today in the territory of our Church and to mention the situation that has developed in Donbas and Novorossiia. By the way, there are also Assyrians who reside on that territory. It is quite evident that this conflict has political causes’.

According to His Holiness, some political forces in the West, who have assumed a radical anti-Russian position, are purposely seek to impede the work of the Moscow Patriarchate on the international level, to deprive it of the right to speak out and the opportunity to bear witness in the world.

‘If the West seeks to limit our Church’s contacts with Western partners, then the question about reasons arises. Why? During ‘the cold war’ there was less agreement between the USA and the Soviet Union but contacts were not limited, including in the area of Christian relations: our delegations used to come to the USA and Americans used to come to us, and we discussed both theological and political issues. And now considerable efforts are taken to limit the opportunities of our Church to be in dialogue with Western Churches. It is a very different picture today’, Patriarch Kirill stated.

Recently, at the General Assembly of the World Council of Church in Karlsruhe, FRG, President Karl-Walter Steinmeier in his speech tried to make pressure on the delegation of our Church and the whole Assembly. It is unprecedented interference of a secular authority in church organizations. It is with understanding and gratitude that I took the position of the WCC Assembly as it disagreed with Mr. Steinmeier, He failed to exert pressure on the Assembly and discriminate the Russian Church while an unprecedented decision has been made now - to keep out the Patriarch from the territory of the European Union. There was nothing like this even during ‘the cold war’. A question arises why? If they are right and I am not right, then invite me to television, enter into dialogue with me and prove your case. They are afraid to do so because rightness is on our, not their side. Their position is very weak - the position of isolationism is always weak. And we are open to communication with both those who love

us and those who do not love us', said the Primate of the Russian Church.

Speaking about the relations between the Assyrian Church and the Russian Church, His Holiness stated with regret that the Assyrian Church of the East, whose religious and historical center is located in the lands of ancient Mesopotamia, remains one of the Christian communities most suffering in the world. His Holiness shared his remembrances of his visit to Iraq in 2002. He said that during his visits to churches and monasteries he saw the peaceful and calm life of the Assyrian people in those days.

'I understood that in the territory of Iraq adequate conditions were created at that time for peaceful co-existence of Christians and Muslims. And since I was a witness to such a way of life, now my heart is pained by the information about all the problems existing in Iraq. We know that very many Christians have left Iraq. And those who remained in the land of their ancestors do not at all live in peaceful conditions', His Holiness said.

At the same time, Patriarch Kirill noted that the Moscow Patriarchate takes with hope some changes that have happened in recent years in northern Iraq where the See of the First Hierarchs of the Assyrian Church of the East has been restored.

'We pray and are ready to work together with you so that peace and tranquillity may be further build up in the land of Iraq and that the life of your Church may develop safely and calmly', His Holiness assured.

Speaking about the work of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill thanked Patriarch Mar Awe, who until recently co-chaired the Commission, as well as Bishop Clement of and Temnikov for their work in this field.

His Holiness gave a high value to the work of the Commission, referring specifically to the cooperation in rendering humanitarian aid.

'I would also like to draw your attention to the close cooperation between the Department for External Church Relations and the Assyrian community in implementing information-education projects, His Holiness continued, 'We know that your Church has an information portal in Russia publishing various kinds of materials introducing the Russian-speaking audience to the life of your Church. I would like to stress the positive influence this portal has also made on the development of our bilateral relations.

Speaking about the presence of the Assyrian Church in Russia, His Holiness gave a high value to the work of the rector of the Assyrian church of the Most Holy Virgin Mary in Moscow, Chor-Bishop Samano

Odisho who has maintained active cooperation with the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, and thanks to it, the Assyrian church community has established good relations with the Russian Orthodox Church.

In conclusion, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill expressed hope that fraternal relations binding the Moscow Patriarchate and the Assyrian Church of the East will continue developing for the good of the two Churches and two nations.

In his turn, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East thanked the Primate of the Russian Church for the warm welcome and wished His Holiness God's help in his Primatial ministry. 'We remember you in our prayers and remember your work before the Lord, the work of your faith, your love, patience and the love of Jesus Christ', he said.

'The aim of our today's meeting with you, Your Holiness, is to continue fostering the relations we already have between our Churches. It is not for the first time that our nations and our Churches meet. Over a century ago, we already had relations with the Russian Orthodox mission in Urmia. Therefore, we meet now as neighbours and brothers who have been together for decades', said the head of the Assyrian Church.

His Holiness Mar Awa III also recounted the meeting between the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV in 2014 in Moscow, which initiated the theological conversations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. According to the head of the Assyrian Church, after the meeting of the two First Hierarchs, bilateral relations between the two Churches began successfully developing, in particular, a Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East was formed.

'Today I would like to recollect with joy the work that has been carried out by the Commission, to recollect Bishop Clement, who co-chaired the Commission together with me. We worked in the spirit of Christian love and profound mutual understanding. I cannot but point to the considerable work carried out by Hieromonk Stephen (Igumnov). I would like to thank all the staff of the Department for External Church Relations who worked before and who work with us today. We are glad to see His Eminence Metropolitan Anthony. We work in the spirit of fraternal love'.

The Catholicos-Patriarch also informed Patriarch Kirill about the appointment of the new co-chairman of the Commission - Bishop Eliya Times of Bagdad. 'On behalf of the Holy Synod members and I personally promise that we will in all possible ways support this Commission so that it may fulfil its goals', Patriarch Mar Awa said, 'We express enormous gratitude to Your Holiness for the support you give us all this time'.

The head of the Assyrian Church expressed special gratitude to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill for the support the Russian Orthodox Church gives to Christians in the Middle East.

‘The situation in Iraq, which has developed since 2002, has had destructive consequences for the Christian presence in that country’, the Catholicos-Patriarch said, ‘Since 2002, the persecution of Christians and hostile attitude to them have increased. There are also greater differences between Christians and Muslims, between all the residents of the country. The situation has come to the appearance of terrorist organization ISIS, which has delivered a terrible blow on Christians in both Syria and Iraq. This organization planned to exterminate all Christian Assyrians as natives of this country. In 2014, they destroyed churches in Mosul in the Nineveh Plains. The people of our nation, who had lived in that land for ages, were driven out. And in 2015, they banished Assyrians who lived in the Khabur River region in north-eastern Syria. Our people were taken hostages. Thank God, most of them were set free but some of them suffers martyrdom’.

Patriarch Mar Awa stated that Christianity in Iraq is under the threat of extinction as the number of Christians in the country has decreased by 1,5 million.

‘As Christians we wish to live in peace with all our neighbours without difference in faith. However, at the same time we demand that our rights as Christians who above all have the right to confess their faith, as well as other social and vested rights be sealed in Constitutions and laws of the countries of residence. Once again we thank Your Holiness for using the opportunities available to the Moscow Patriarchate to remind the governments of the world and the whole world about this duty’, Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III said.

In conclusion, the head of the Assyrian Church and his delegation expressed gratitude to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and all the staff of the Moscow Patriarchate for the hospitality, love and support.

‘We pray to the Lord God that He may grant blessing to Your Holiness in all times, so that God’s mercy may always help you in these difficult days, so that the Lord may bless your apostolic ministry as First Hierarch of the Church, so that you may take pastoral care of the flock entrusted to Your Holiness’, said Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III.

The fraternal conversation of the Primates and those accompanying them continued during a reception given by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia in honour of the high guest.

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