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



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On the 31st of October 2023, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' met with His Holiness Mar Awa III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, at the Patriarchal and Synodal Residence in the Danilov Stavropegial Monastery in Moscow.

The meeting was attended by members of the official delegation of the Assyrian Church of the East: His Eminence Mar Afram Athneil, Metropolitan of Syria; His Grace Mar Narsai Benyamen, Bishop of Iran, Armenia, and Georgia; Rev. Chorbishop Samano Odisho, Parish Priest of Mart Mariam Church in Moscow and member of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East; Rev. Fr. Peter Pavlov, Parish Priest of Krasnodar; Rev. Fr. Ephraim Alkhas, Parish Priest of Rostov-on-Don and member of the Dialogue Commission, Rev. Dn. Roland Begamov, member of the Dialogue Commission.

The Russian Orthodox Church was represented by: Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate; Bishop Kliment of Krasnoslobodsk and Temnikovsk, Co-Chairman of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East; Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov), Secretary of the DECR for Inter-Christian Relations and Secretary of the Commission for Dialogue; S. G. Alferov, an employee of the DECR Secretariat for Inter-Christian Relations and a member of the Commission for Dialogue.

Welcoming His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III and the members of the delegation accompanying him, the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church said: "I recall with a warm feeling our last meeting, which took place in this same hall in 2022 and left very good impressions. The trip to Russia was the first visit after your elevation to the high Patriarchal Throne. And during the current visit we warmly welcome you and are happy that the occasion for your visit is the anniversary of the Assyrian community in Moscow."

Recently, Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III led celebrations in honour of the 25th anniversary of the consecration of the Mart Mariam Church in the Moscow, the Representative Office of the Assyrian Church of the East in Russia. "This church plays a very important role: it helps Assyrians living in Moscow to unite and preserve their faith," His Holiness Patriarch Kirill emphasised. He highly appreciated the work of the representative of the Assyrian Church of the East in Russia, Chorbishop Samano Odisho, in the care of Assyrians living in the Russian capital and his contribution to the development of inter-Church relations.

The good relations that have developed between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, as well as between the Primates of the two Churches, are of particular importance at the present time, "when many ties are being broken under the influence of political forces, aimed, among other things, at bringing the Churches of the East under various external influences," Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' noted.

Referring to the deep historical ties, he said: "Our peoples have always lived in peace and supported each other to the best of their ability. Knowing the many sufferings of the Assyrian people, Russia helped as much as it could, because your sufferings were more often than not sufferings of loyalty for your faith and for your Fatherland."

His Holiness stated that the Assyrian Diaspora in Russia plays a great role in this process: "In relation to your people living in Russia, I even hardly use the word "Diaspora" - Assyrians have become an organic part of the Russian people and Russia itself".

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill dwelt in particular on the situation in the Middle East: "People are dying there now. A different one, and this time, it seems to me, very dangerous conflict has arisen in this holy place. We know that often those conflicts, those political upheavals are very painful for your people. In the recent past, the people of Iraq have been through a terrible war and are just beginning to return to a peaceful life. And now, once again, a conflict is breaking out in the Holy Land. That conflict, involving Palestinians and Israelis, is claiming many lives and creating an explosive situation throughout the region.

The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church expressed his wish and hope that, despite the existing differences in assessments of what is happening, Christians throughout the world, especially those who have a direct relationship with the Holy Land, will be able in the current situation to raise their voices together in defence of peace and tranquillity in the region. "That's what that land deserves, at least in the twenty-first century, people there can live in peace," His Holiness believes.

He also recalled that such aggravations often lead to an exodus of civilians fr om the region, and very often those refugees are Christians.

"For almost ten years yet another very heavy and dangerous conflict has been taking place, about which I would like to speak in particular. That conflict is developing today very dramatically on the Ukrainian land, which is close to my heart and the heart of every Russian person," Patriarch Kirill went on to note.

The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church cordially thanked the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East for speaking openly about the desecration of Orthodox shrines in Ukraine and for raising his voice in defence of those who have been unjustly persecuted, including Ukrainian hierarchs, in particular the illegally detained Metropolitan Jonathan of Tylchin and Bratslav.

Having stated that Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III is one of the few religious leaders who criticizes the sanctions policy towards the Russian Orthodox Church and Russia (and who also expressed this position at a meeting with the Pope in the Vatican, as well as in other ways and means), His Holiness Patriarch Kirill thanked him for his courageous position.

He also gave a positive assessment of the areas of work and topics of discussion within the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, the activities of which began eight years ago. The next meeting is scheduled for early 2024. His Holiness suggested that the issues of assistance to Christians in the Middle East and inter-church co-operation in the media environment should also be discussed within the framework of the Commission's

work.

In addition, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' noted an important area of interaction between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East in the contacts in the academic sphere. This year, for the first time, a representative of the Assyrian Church of the East graduated from the Moscow Theological Academy with honours. The second student from this Church, a cleric from the diocese of Iran, Armenia and Georgia, is also completing his studies. "We are ready to lovingly receive your next students for training," His Holiness emphasised. He also made special mention of the training course "Ancient Oriental Churches", established this year, which is read at the Postgraduate Institute of Ss. Cyril and Methodius.

Speaking about the diversity of contacts between the two Churches, Patriarch Kirill mentioned that, in particular, in August of 2023 a delegation from the Russian Orthodox Church took part in the celebrations in Iraq dedicated to the opening of the new Central Residence of the Catholicos-Patriarchs of Assyria and in the First World Youth Congress of the Assyrian Church. "Those solemnities, I think, were of historical significance for your Church and for bilateral interaction, including in the area of youth work," His Holiness said. "- I believe it is necessary to develop our joint activities, especially in the sphere of youth contacts. We are open to your proposals, and we will also work out our positions so that this promising and useful area of work is filled with real and necessary content".

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' also cordially greeted the rectors of the Assyrian parishes in the Russian cities of Krasnodar and Rostov-on-Don who accompanied Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III.

"Your Holiness, beloved brother in Christ! I offer glory to our Lord God for the second official meeting with Your Holiness at the Patriarchal Residence in the glorious city of Moscow," the Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East said in his reply. – "We remember with great gratitude our first meeting in November last year after we assumed the duties of Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East in Iraq and throughout the world. And today, we are happy to see Your Holiness preserved by the Lord God."

Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III shared the joy of the re-consecration of the altar of the Mart Mariam Church (Holy Virgin Mary) of the Assyrian Church of the East in Moscow on the 29th of October. The foundation stone of that church was laid in 1996 and the consecration took place on the 27th of September 1998, which was performed by the venerable Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Kh'nanya Dinkha IV. "That day is considered to be the official date of the beginning of the spiritual activities of the community that ministers to the faithful of the Assyrian Church of the East in blessed Russia," emphasised Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III. – "By God's grace and with His help, this spiritual activity is

developing, including through the zealous service of the rector of the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Chorbishop Saman Odisho, deacons, parish council and all parishioners. Thus, that church has gone down in history and is the firstborn of all the churches of the Assyrian Church of the East in blessed Russia".

"We cannot forget the benefits and good fruits of the official dialogue between our two Churches that began in 2014, when Your Holiness and our predecessor as Patriarch, Mar Kh'nanya Dinkha IV, met and wisely, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, decided to establish a joint Commission for Dialogue between our two Churches with the aim of drawing closer to each other as brothers in Christ to work together in many important areas of the two Churches," Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III also noted.

In particular, he spoke about cooperation in the field of higher theological education: "Within its framework, Priest Addai Daniel is currently working on a bachelor's programme at the Moscow Theological Academy, and Deacon Arthur Avdyshev received this year a master's degree in theology and is now studying with us in Iraq. Such steps bear many fruits and provide an opportunity to better understand the teachings of our Churches." His Holiness the Catholicos-Patriarch also mentioned the planned publication of the Russian translation of his book on the Seven Sacraments of the Church in the near future, expressing hope that this work would be used as a source on the theology of the Assyrian Church of the East at educational institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East expressed his special gratitude to the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate and the members of the Dialogue Commission on the part of the Russian Orthodox Church: "First, I would like to thank the Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate and the members of the Dialogue Commission on the part of the Russian Orthodox Church… I would like to thank His Eminence Metropolitan Anthony, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, with whom we met with great joy for the first time during our visit last year. And also to express great gratitude to His Grace Bishop Kliment, who has been co-chair of the Dialogue Commission on the Russian side since its establishment, and with whom I myself have personally worked with great joy and mutual understanding as co-chair of the Commission in the rank of bishop. And we thank Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov), who helped us a lot and worked hard to develop the Commission's activities and to organize our meetings and sessions, as well as S.G. Alferov, an energetic staff member of the DECR and a member of our Dialogue Commission. Many thanks to all their colleagues who lovingly work with us to bring our Churches closer together".

He addressed His Holiness Patriarch Kirill with words of gratitude for his support in organising the stay in Russia of Priest Ephraim Alkhas and his family, who had been appointed to serve at the parish of St John the Baptist in Rostov-on-Don. The staff of the Department for External Church Relations of the

Moscow Patriarchate was also of great assistance in finding a plot of land for the construction of an Assyrian church in that city.

As the Catholicos of the Assyrian Church of the East noted, he was pleased to see the representative of the Russian Orthodox Church, Archimandrite Philip (Vasiltsev), at the celebration of the opening of the new cathedral in Erbil, Iraq, on the 6th of August 2023, and to receive him at his residence. In addition, a delegation from the Moscow Patriarchate attended the First International Youth Conference of the Assyrian Church of the East, held in Erbil from the 5th to the 12th of August with the participation of 300 young people from those countries of the world in which there are dioceses and parishes of that Church.

He expressed solidarity with the opinion of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' that it is important for the two Churches to co-operate in the field of youth ministry, emphasising: "These links demonstrate the rapprochement of our two Churches as sisters in Christ. We constantly pray that, with God's help, our relationship will be increasingly strengthened in the future."

His Holiness Catholicos Patriarch Mar Awa III also shared his reflections on the situation of Christians in different regions of the world, particularly in the Middle East. "The difficulties and opposition do not cease," he emphasised. Noting that His Holiness Patriarch Kirill has always been a defender of Middle Eastern Christians, the Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East said: "That activity will never be forgotten by us."

"We see that not only the Christians of the East carry the cross of Christ daily, as they did in the past and do to this day, but that countries considered to be countries of freedom can be antithetical to the Church of God and the true believers," His Holiness stated.

"It is with great sadness that we recall the bitter events and injustices perpetrated against the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church," Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III of the Assyrian Church of the East further noted. – "We were greatly saddened to learn that its hierarchs are being condemned and imprisoned, and its churches are being closed and seized by schismatics. And just recently we have learnt that the authorities in that country want to pass laws banning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church for its centuries-long association with the Moscow Patriarchate."

"Great evil is being perpetrated by the godless authorities who have plotted the destruction and ruin of the Church of God in that country," the Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East emphasised. His Holiness the Catholicos-Patriarch strongly condemned "tho se inhuman actions that violate international laws, trampling on freedom of religion and freedom of conscience of all people."

He also expressed confidence that "it is the responsibility of the UN to oversee the situation and to protect the rights of all sons of the Church in Ukraine so that their freedoms as true Christian believers are not trampled."

"We ask in our prayers for the mercy of God, so that the Lord God may protect His true Church in this country from the hands of destroyers and from the insidious plans of schismatics who divide the Church of God, and establish peace, tranquility, proper dispensation and lawfulness in this situation," said Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III.

Addressing Patriarch Kirill, he said: "We pray to God for Your Holiness, for we know what great sadness you personally and the entire Russian Orthodox Church are experiencing in connection with this situation. We pray to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to strengthen you together with the bishops, clerics and truly believing laity who are suffering in this alarming situation."

His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III also emphasised that the Lord bestows beatitudes on all those who are reviled and persecuted for the sake of His holy name.

"Allow me once again to express our great gratitude to Your Holiness for this blessed opportunity to meet with you," said His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III to the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church. – “Especially for the hospitality shown to us throughout our week-long stay in Moscow, as well as our trip to Vladimir, wh ere we met with the Assyrian community of the city, and our visits to Suzdal and Murom." He expressed the hope that His Holiness Patriarch Kirill would visit the Iraqi land in good time.

The Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East asked for His Holiness' prayers for all Christians in Iraq and the Middle East.

At the end of the conversation, in consideration of his outstanding personal contribution to the development of bilateral relations, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus’ presented His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III of the Assyrian Church of the East with a high award of the Russian Orthodox Church - the Order of Glory and Honour (1st degree).

Chorebishop Samano Odisho was awarded the Order of Glory and Honour (3rd degree).

Photos taken by the **Press Service of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus**’

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