



Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East gave an interview to RIA Novosti



His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III spoke in an exclusive interview with RIA Novosti about the relationship between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Russian Orthodox Church, the Assyrian community in Russia and other countries and the obstacles to Christian unity.

- Your Holiness, how was your meeting with Patriarch Kirill? What conclusions and agreements did you come to?

- This meeting with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, like all our meetings, was very fraternal. His Holiness, as always, received me and the delegation in a very cordial spirit. Of course, we also talked about the current state of the official bilateral dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East - this commission (bilateral dialogue commission - ed.) meets once a year. An overview of the work over the past few years was presented. Emphasis was placed on two things. Firstly, the student exchange of theological schools at the level of bachelor's and master's degrees in theology, and secondly, the cooperation of our Churches in the field of youth ministry. We also discussed, of course, the situation of Christians in the

Middle East and the sad events in Ukraine, especially with regard to the canonical Church, and other issues.

Did you touch on the situation in Israel, Palestine and the Gaza Strip during the meeting?

- Yes, we were talking about Israel and Palestine, about the current conflict. We all suffer when we see what is happening there, especially when we see what innocent people, children, are going through. We pray for an immediate ceasefire, for both sides to be able to sit down at the negotiating table, to discuss the issues and see what prospects there are for both sides to get what they seek, which is statehood and respect for the rights of both peoples.

- You have already touched on the issue of student exchange. Are there future priests of the Assyrian Church studying in seminaries of the Russian Church, and will their number increase in the coming years?

- I think their number will grow. For example, right now we have a priest who is preparing to enter a bachelor's programme in theology at the Moscow Theological Academy. There is an Assyrian deacon who was born in Russia. He has completed his Master's degree at the Ss. Cyril and and Institute of Postgraduate Studies. So we hope that we will have two or three more students, also priests, who will also study at that Institute, and that the deacon will continue his studies at the postgraduate level to get his PhD.

Another priest has just arrived from the USA and is serving in Rostov-on-Don to pastor our community there, which currently has no church. He used to serve under my guidance in the Diocese of California. I would like to bless him for his doctoral defence in the next year or two.

- So the issue of the church in Rostov-on-Don is being resolved?

- It is in the process of being resolved, and we of course thank the Moscow Patriarchate for its assistance through the Department for External Church Relations. They are also looking into this issue. In 2014, when I travelled to Russia with my predecessor Catholicos, he laid the foundation stone for the new Church of St John the Baptist (in Assyrian, Mar Yuhannan Maamdana). Unfortunately, some obstacles arose and we were not able to realise its construction to the end. So now we are returning to this issue, we need to build a church so that our Assyrian community could gather around it.

- During your trip you visited Russian monasteries in the Vladimir Metropolis. Is the tradition of monasticism now preserved in the Assyrian Church of the East?

- Unfortunately, at present we have no male monks in the Church. We have a convent in our archdiocese in India. But I hope that in the future we will be able to resume [the institute of] monasticism. Of course, the Assyrian Church throughout its history was very, very active in monasticism, but as a result of persecution it was practically destroyed, you could say wiped out. So now that the Church is recovering its strength, we hope that in the future we will be able to revive the monastic tradition.

- When you talk about the persecutions that weakened the strength of the Assyrian Church, what kind of persecutions are we talking about? Is it what has been happening in the Middle East in recent years with the terrorists of the Islamic State or in the 20th century? Or, perhaps, earlier?

- Persecution has been present in all periods of our history, but it has become particularly frequent since the First World War. From 1915 to 1918, two-thirds of our people were killed in parts of the Ottoman Empire or forced to leave it through Urmia (a city in western Azerbaijan - ed.) and settle in the lands that would later become Iraq. There was another massacre in the Kingdom of Iraq in 1933. And, of course, in 2014, the fateful events of the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria caused a huge damage to our people. Many fled the country because of it. We hope that we will never see anything like that again so that we can be strong again as a Church and as a people.

- Have the Assyrians who left the Middle East settled in Russia?

- As far as I know, very few of them arrived in Russia after the proclamation of ISIS. Predominantly the resettlement of Assyrians in Russia is connected with the period of the First World War and even the time before it. That is, they moved from 1915 to 1918, in the 20s and 30s, but after the emergence of ISIS - only a few. So here in the Russian Federation, our community is a historical community.

- And how does the Assyrian community in Russia feel now? Does it feel, above all, safe?

- Of course. Assyrians have been living in Russia for about two centuries now, and lived in Russia back in the days when it was the Russian Empire. So they feel safe, integrated into Russian society, but also retain their traditions and their faith.

- Are there many Assyrians living in Russia now, given that there are about 400,000 of them in the world? How many churches and parishes do they have now?

- We have three parishes in Central Russia. In addition, we have communities and parishes in Armenia and Georgia. In terms of numbers, if we take all the post-Soviet states, including the Russian Federation, there are about 30-35 thousand people living in them, according to a rough estimate (we do not have a census or an exact number).

- Are Assyrians persecuted in the world today, are they seeking refuge in Russia?

- Going back to the events related to ISIS, in 2015 about 230 of our tribesmen were kidnapped by that organisation in Syria in the Khabur River Valley, where 34 Assyrian villages are located. Most of the Assyrians of those who lived in Syria have left - many, many Christians have left Syria altogether. I know that at the beginning of the war, in 2011 or 2012, Russia issued about 50,000 visas to Syrian Christians, there was an initiative on the part of the Russian government to accept them. They didn't move to Russia purposefully, but I think if they had come, they would certainly have been accepted. If they decided to do so, I am sure that they would certainly be able to live in safety and preserve their faith and traditions.

- How do Assyrians and the Assyrian Church feel about modern Iraq?

- In the case of Iraq, the country is now beginning to pick up the pieces and organise itself after 2003, when Saddam Hussein's regime fell. It has been twenty years since then. Unfortunately, the country is still politically unstable. But the best region for Christians has been Kurdistan, where our Patriarchate is now located in the capital of Erbil. Other regions of the country, unfortunately, are less stable. But in general, Iraq still needs to find political stability, security and safety. And our people are now leaving, so since 2003, since the fall of Saddam, their number has significantly decreased. This is a very sad fact for us and a great tragedy. We want our people to stay because Assyrians - as Assyrians and as Christians - have been in this land for many millennia. There has been Christianity in Iraq since the very first century, since apostolic times, so now we are faced with the problem of how to keep our people in the country.

- How are relations with Muslims in Iraq? Are there common humanitarian programmes in which the Assyrian Church and Iraqi Muslims participate together?

- Of course, there have been many humanitarian programmes. The Assyrian Church of the East has a charitable organisation, the Assyrian Church of the East Relief Fund, and we have helped Muslims in Iraq wherever there is a need. We hold conferences, dialogues and various meetings in the country, especially in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, in Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, as well as in other parts of the country. Communication happens quite often. So we are on good terms with our Muslim neighbours. And in general, we are together bearing the burden of what the country is going through, because all Iraqis are really suffering right now.

- Is the Russian Orthodox Church involved in dialogue and assistance?

- The Russian Orthodox Church has made its contribution both in Iraq and in Syria. Predominantly in Syria.

- It is said of the Assyrian Church of the East that it belongs to the pre-Ephesian tradition (before the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus – ed.). Is it the only Church to profess it? And if so, with which Churches does it maintain prayerful communion?

- You are right, the Assyrian Church of the East is referred to in contemporary dialogue as the pre-Ephesian Church. We are indeed a unique Church in the sense that we are not formally in communion with any other Church. We are neither in the family of the Orthodox Churches, nor in the family of the Ancient Oriental Churches, because the Ancient Oriental Churches are pre-Chalcedonian: they recognise the Council of Ephesus (3rd Ecumenical Council of 431 - ed.), but not the Council of Chalcedon (4th Ecumenical Council of 451 - ed.). For them it is a point of separation. For us, on the other hand, the point of separation, if you will, is the Council of Ephesus. But even so, there were no formal anathemas between us and the Russian Orthodox Church, we did not experience the Great Schism of 1054. We never participated in it. Actually, our Church, being in the Persian Empire, was never part of the Ecumenical Councils. We received news even about Nicea and Constantinople (about the first two Ecumenical Councils - ed.) only after several decades. So

because of this, if I may call it so, isolation or remoteness from the Roman Empire, the correlation of doctrine with the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils became a problem for us only later, when we had to either accept or not accept the Councils.

- So it was an isolation, not schism?

- There is no formal schism. Rather, it is an isolated status where the Church simply continues to exist on its own.

- So, perhaps we can hope that one day the Assyrian Church of the East can return to prayerful communion and unity with the Russian Orthodox Church and perhaps with other Churches of the ancient Eastern tradition and the Orthodox family?

- This is indeed our hope, especially in our bilateral dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church. I hope that we will reach the day when we can have mutual communion and recognition of the sacraments. Of course, as far as the Russian Church is concerned, since it is part of the Eastern Orthodox family, the restoration of communion should be a decision of the Eastern Orthodox family. But I do not believe that there are theological obstacles that can prevent this from happening. Nevertheless, we must discuss theology and Christology and clarify these things. With the Ancient Oriental Churches we may have to work more, because our Christology is dyophysite (the Christological concept according to which the Divine and human natures are recognised in the Person of Jesus Christ. It is held by Orthodox Christians - ed.), and not Miaphysite (the doctrine of unity without confusion and separation of the Divine and human natures in Christ, which is held by the Ancient Oriental Churches - ed.). In this sense we are closer to the wording of the Council of Chalcedon. But we still hope that one day we will be able to open a dialogue with the Copts and with the Ancient Oriental Churches in general.

- That is, as far as I understand it, there are no rigidly established canonical obstacles to communion and unity.

- In relation to which Church?

- Russian, in particular, but generally Orthodox. And separately to the Ancient Oriental Churches.

- I don't think there are any such obstacles. Definitely, in the case of the Orthodox, we have to look at the Christological formulations of the Council of Ephesus. Certainly there were condemnations at Ephesus that our Church subsequently decided not to accept. By acceptance I mean the formal reception of those formulations. As far as the ancient Oriental family of Churches is concerned, there is of course the Council of Chalcedon: although we did not formally accept it, we confess the canons of the Council of Chalcedon. And some Christological or theological formulations have become part of our canonical tradition, though unofficially, but they are there. So we are much closer to the Chalcedonian formulations, especially on the two natures in Christ.

- At your liturgy in the Moscow parish of the Assyrian Church, quite a few Russians were visible. How are marriages concluded between representatives of different communities, for example, between an Assyrian husband and a Russian wife, or vice versa? Is it necessary to receive the blessing of the bishop for this?

- As for me, I wouldn't be able to tell them apart because there are Assyrians who look very Russian. I could also give them communion, thinking that they are Assyrians. But, as a rule, we do not receive believers from other Churches. As for our local parish, if at least one of their parents is not Assyrian, we probably won't administer the sacraments.

- How do the believers of the Assyrian Church and you personally perceive the events in Israel, Palestine and the Gaza Strip? Do Assyrians and Christians in general in the Middle East feel threatened by the consequences that war can lead to?

- We are all grieving over what is happening in the Gaza Strip and praying, as I have said, for an immediate ceasefire for the sake of the innocent people who are dying. But there is a fear that what is happening in the Holy Land will spill over into the Middle East. For example, we are seeing activity in southern Lebanon, in Syria, in Iraq. Of course, people are afraid, because in the Middle East politics are fluid, despite the established borders. What happens in one country tends to affect neighbouring countries. So there are fears that the conflict will spill over into Iraq, Lebanon, Syria. That would be catastrophic.

So we believe that both sides should come to the negotiating table with the mediation of third countries or the UN, which could force them to come to the negotiating table, cease fire, release the hostages and level the situation.

- There is a growing number of anti-Semitic actions in the world. Do Christians in the Middle East, in particular the Assyrian Church, feel threatened not only by the war itself, but also by the growing wave of xenophobia and extremism?

- Anti-Semitism or any other form of extremism must of course be condemned, whether it is religious extremism or ethnic extremism. These are not views that a Christian can share. On the other hand, for example, during the events of 9/11, there was a rise in extremism against the Muslim community in various parts of the West. Both are to be condemned, it is wrong.

When anti-Semitism grows in predominantly Muslim countries, Christians in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East are afraid because we are a minority in the Middle East. It is natural that if one minority group is threatened, others feel threatened as well. It affects both our feelings and our security. Extremism does not improve the situation.

Both sides need to sit down and talk intelligently about what is going on so that both sides can get the rights to which they are entitled. Both Israelis and Palestinians, of course, have the right to exist as nations, as peoples and as states. And that, I hope, can be the goal, but it must be achieved by peaceful means, not by military

action, not by the inhumane taking of children and women hostage. This should be condemned in the same way that attacks on civilians gathered for an event should be condemned. These are not human actions, they are inhuman massacres.

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