



Our Churches and our peoples have undergone many trials. Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III on the Assyrian Church of the East and its ties with Russia



The Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East, His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III, has headed this ancient church for only two years and has already visited Russia twice. In November 2023, the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin signed a decree awarding the Catholicos "for his great contribution to the preservation and development of spiritual and cultural traditions, strengthening peace and harmony between peoples" with the Russian state award - the Order of Friendship. In an interview with the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate (No. 3, 2024), His Holiness Mar Awa spoke about the close ties between the Russian and Assyrian peoples, the dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, and the goals of his ministry.

Assyrians in Russia in the time of Nicholas II

- Your Holiness, the Assyrian people have longstanding close ties with the Russian people, which was especially evident in the late 19th century and during the First World War. The best proof of this fact is your ancestors who served in the Russian army during those years. Tell us about them.

- My maternal great-grandfather, Shmuel Khan, became a full Cavalier of the Cross of St. George. His father, my great-great-grandfather, Bejan, according to our family legend, also received the St. George Cross. He came from Targavar district, from the Urmia county¹, where in the late 19th century there was a Russian vice-consulate, and in the early 20th century - the Russian military presence and the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Urmia. Bejan was killed by the Kurds in 1907.

Shmuel Khan was a commander of the Targavar Assyrians' squad and served on the Persian-Turkish border. During World War I, in September 1914, he defended Urmia against the Kurds. In his detachment were 250 Assyrians, and with them was a detachment of 60 Cossacks. At the beginning of the siege, the Cossack commander was killed by a sniper, and Shmuel Khan took charge of the united detachment. The fighting went on for almost three days, and the Kurdish attack was repelled. Later he took part in a retaliatory expedition of Russian detachments, the Kurds were driven back. He then commanded the 3rd separate Assyrian cavalry centuria [a hundred men] as part of the Assyrian units fighting in the Russian army.

Shmuel Khan died on the 3rd of March 1918 (according to the Julian calendar, which Assyrians used then; 16 March according to the Gregorian calendar) together with the Assyrian Catholicos Mar Shimun XIX. During the First World War, His Holiness the Catholicos had communication with Emperor Nicholas II through Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich and conveyed words of support to the Emperor in the war with the Ottoman Empire. The Assyrian people were then living in the Ottoman Empire and were fighting for autonomy. Nicholas II responded by conveying words of gratitude for the support and expressed his hope that the Russian people would free the Turkish Christians from oppression. When the Russian Civil War broke out in 1918, the Assyrian people were still resisting the Turks, but the Entente countries pressured the Catholicos to negotiate with the Kurds. Catholicos Mar Shimun was invited to a reception with the Kurdish leader Simko Shikak. Shmuel Khan accompanied him. It was the Saturday before Lent: he warned the Catholicos that there might be provocations, and he was right. Almost all the Assyrians at the reception were shot, more than a hundred people were killed, and among them were the Catholicos and my great-grandfather. In 2014, a monument to Patriarch Mar Shimun XIX was unveiled on the grounds of the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary ("Mat Maryam") in Moscow.

Shmuel Khan's son Avimalek is also connected with Russia: he studied here, became an officer and commanded an Assyrian cavalry unit of two hundred horsemen fighting on the Russian side on the southern flank of the Caucasus Front in Persia. His niece Florence is my mum.

Given that my ancestors lived in Russia, I have a special appreciation for Russian culture. The personality of Emperor Nicholas II, who had contacts with my predecessor, and his family are of great interest to me. Of Russian writers, L. Tolstoy is of particular importance. In his novels he analysed the spirituality of Russia, of the average believing Russian, and I find that very interesting.

Assyrian parishes in Russia

- Today, the life of Assyrians in Russia is centred around the parishes of the Assyrian Church, the main of which is the Moscow church of the Blessed Virgin Mary ("Mat Maryam"). Your visit in 2023 was timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of that parish. What is its significance in the life of Assyrians in Moscow?

- The Moscow parish of the Assyrian Church began to take shape back in 1996, when Metropolitan Mar Gewargis of Iraq (later His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Gewargis III, now retired) laid the foundation stone of the church. However, bishops and priests had come before, and the church community itself was formed in the early 1990s.

The parish was officially established in 1998. My predecessor, His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV, consecrated this church dedicated to the Most Holy Mother of God during his visit to Moscow. During all these years the parish has been growing, living a liturgical life, developing and

improving. Subsequently, other Assyrian communities appeared in different parts of the country: the parish of the Great Martyr George in Krasnodar, the parish in Rostov-on-Don. The significance of the Moscow parish is extremely important: it is a representation of the Assyrian Church of the East in Russia, uniting many representatives of our people living in the Russian Federation. In addition to regular services, it is a true centre of the Assyrian community in Russia.

- In 2024, Assyrians living in Russia will celebrate two more anniversaries - the 10th anniversary of the consecration of the Church of the Great Martyr George the Victorious in Krasnodar and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the village of Urmia in the Krasnodar region. What are these places?

- These are significant places for us, and there are plans to solemnly mark those dates. The Church of the Great Martyr George the Victorious was built in 2008 and solemnly consecrated in 2014 by His Holiness Catholicos Mar Dinkha IV. I accompanied His Holiness on that visit and also participated in the consecration. Now, an Assyrian parish lives and develops around that church.

The Kuban village of Urmia is historically very important for us. At the end of XIX century pogroms of Assyrians had begun in the Ottoman Empire. More than a hundred thousand Assyrians were killed or forcibly converted to Islam. That continued until 1923. Then, 100 years ago, many of our ancestors left historical Urmia and moved to Russia. Some of them settled in Kuban. Our ancestors named the new settlement Urmia, in memory of their homeland. A farm was formed in the new place, and later a kolkhoz appeared. Our community still exists there. This place is very significant for us, because our ancestors transferred there the memory from our native places, from the territory of Iran and Turkey, and tried to recreate our home there.

- As part of your visit in 2023, you first went to a small Assyrian community in Vladimir. How did it come into being?

- We are very grateful to Metropolitan Tikhon of Vladimir and Suzdal, who received us during our visit to Vladimir. It should be said that Assyrian communities in Russia appeared more than a century ago. Assyrians settled in different cities and regions of the Russian Empire: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Tiflis, in Yerevan province and even in such remote places from the centre as Kotlas. The small community and parish in Vladimir have existed for about a hundred years and came into existence after the First World War. The community consists of 35 people, but throughout its existence it has carefully preserved Christian traditions and the heritage of the Assyrian people, passing its experience from generation to generation.

The basis of the inter-Christian dialogue

- Your Holiness, there is an official dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. Could you please tell us what topics are addressed in the interaction between the Russian Church and the Assyrian Church?

- The dialogue officially began in 2014. It was a joint decision of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and my predecessor, His Holiness Catholicos Mar Dinkha IV. For seven years, from its founding until 2021, I was a member of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. It is now active, doing a lot of work on the interaction between our Churches. We have not yet delved into theological issues, but I do believe that theological consultations within the framework of the commission's activities are necessary for us to discuss issues that have been and

partly are canonical obstacles between the two Churches in the past and now. We need to exchange ideas, discuss and analyse historical events, canonical problems, and the theological understanding of each side of the nature and hypostasis of Jesus Christ.

- What does the Dialogue Commission do?

- First and foremost, the commission addresses issues of humanitarian, social, ethical problems facing our Churches. Especially in the sphere of Christian morality, which is important both for society and for the world as a whole. The Russian Orthodox Church is part of the family of Eastern Orthodox Churches, and we have much in common that we can discuss and agree on. On the agenda are the problem of the individual and humanitarian issues, upholding traditional values, student exchange and academic co-operation, and the situation of persecuted Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere.

We also have common programmes of youth activities. In the summer of 2023, the first World Youth Congress of the Assyrian Church of the East was held in Erbil, Iraq. The forum gathered more than three hundred participants from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Iran, India, Great Britain and a number of countries of continental Europe, as well as from the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. We plan to hold such conventions every three years. Generally, each diocese holds its regional youth congress once a year. And in 2019 we have decided to hold a united, worldwide congress. We are glad that we were finally able to realise this. Such congresses are necessary so that young Assyrians, scattered around the world and raised in Europe, Russia, America, Asia, could visit their historical homeland in the Middle East, get acquainted with each other, join the spiritual traditions and culture of their ancestors, visit the land where their parents and grandparents lived, [lands] where ancient churches and monasteries are located.

The youth delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church was also present at the congress. We were happy to receive guests from Russia, and they enjoyed their time in Iraq. They were able to experience the ancient homeland of the Assyrian Church.

- What, in your opinion, are the foundations common to the Russian and Assyrian Churches?

- There are many common grounds for our dialogue. Firstly, the Apostolic faith. Secondly, the common moments in the history of our two peoples, who had to defend their faith and protect their identity against enemies and persecution. There are many more things that bring us together than those that divide us. Two peoples and two Churches, we have gone through many historical stages together, suffering, defending our faith, defending the right to our faith. The only difference is the experience. We do not have a homeland called Assyria. We once did, many centuries ago. But it is in our hearts.

- The publishing house of the Moscow Theological Academy is preparing for publication a translation of your book. What is it about?

- The book is an introduction to the sacramentology of the Church of the East and is intended for theological schools. The original idea was to make it a manual for pastors. In the process of writing, the book became more theological. It deals with the seven sacraments of the Assyrian Church, ancient liturgical texts, and the works of the holy fathers on liturgical topics. Special attention is given to two unique sacraments that exist only in the Assyrian Church - the sacrament of the Consecration of leaven and the sacrament of the Sign of the Cross. For example, the Sanctification of the leaven is linked to the tradition that after the Last Supper Christ gave the Apostle Thomas some of the leaven for baking the Eucharistic bread, and since then it has been regularly replenished in the sacrament of the Sanctification of the leaven. The consecrated leaven itself is used to prepare the bread for the Eucharist.

The book is currently being translated into Russian. In addition, it has already been translated into Armenian and published in Armenia; there is an Arabic translation prepared in Iraq.

Preserving the faith and the people

- As Primate of the Assyrian Church, what do you see as the main goals of your ministry?

- One of my most important aspirations as Primate of the Assyrian Church - and I hope with God's help I will be able to fulfil it - is to find answers to the challenges of our Church, our people and our faith. Most of the faithful now live in the diaspora; our numbers in the Middle East are very small compared to other religious groups. And this is a challenge for us - how do we preserve our Christian faith, our Assyrian identity? Particularly in the diaspora. Yes, in the Middle East we are fighting for ourselves, Assyrians have a long history of struggle and persecution for their faith and tradition. But even in the diaspora, we face the challenges of maintaining our identity. How do we maintain our faith, how do we maintain our Christian morality in the face of all that is happening in the world, all the societal and social changes sweeping the Western countries? To be able to meet this challenge is a great feat. I always try to remember what I need to especially focus on in my ministry.

Of course, the relationship of our Church with other Churches on many different levels and platforms is also very important to us. We are in official dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church and with the Roman Catholic Church, but we also have very good relations with other Churches, in particular with the Syriac [Oriental] Church. Inter-Christian relations are very important. When I was a bishop, I headed the Department of External Church Relations, so it has always been part of my work and my ministry.

- What helps you in your ministry as Primate of the Church and spiritual leader of the Assyrian people?

- God, to Whom I am eternally grateful for our faith, our holy theological heritage, our liturgical practice, the history of our people, our Aramaic language. All of these [things] give me the strength to continue in ministry. When I study our faith, immerse myself in history and theology, I draw strength. I visit our communities around the world, meeting Assyrians in different countries, in different social and cultural circumstances. The Assyrian life in Russia is different from [that of the] Assyrians in the United States, Australia or the Middle East. This diversity also gives me much experience and strength, and I thank God for that.

His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III Deacon Alexander Cherepenin spoke with me

The Assyrian Church of the East is derived from the Christian communities that emerged in the first century in the territory of the Parthian Empire (Mesopotamia). According to tradition, it was founded by St. Thomas the Apostle from the 12, St. Thaddeus, the Apostle from the 70 and his disciple St. Marius the Apostle. The Assyrians were one of the peoples who adopted Christianity in the territory of Parthia, but they were the only ones who have preserved the Christian faith in the region ever since.

The sea was historically located in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the capital of the region. When the Sassanid Empire adopted Zoroastrianism as the state religion, Christians began to be persecuted. A few decades

after the Third Ecumenical Council, in which the Assyrian Church did not participate due to its geographical isolation from the rest of the Christian world, it found itself out of eucharistic communion with the Churches of the Roman Empire - Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. From the V century, the [Assyrian] Church carried out active missionary work in the territories of India, China, Mongolia, Central Asia, Yemen, Qatar. Since 652 it was under the rule of the Arabs.

Due to their education, Christians became the cultural elite in the Arab Caliphate and later in the Mongol Empire. The Assyrian Church flourished in the XII-XIII centuries: in addition to a wide geographical coverage, influential politicians became members of the Church; in particular, Sartaq Khan, son of Batu Khan, was its member. In the XIV century, after a series of numerous mass pogroms, the decline of the Church occurred, and its borders were reduced to the territories of Kurdistan, Syria and India. The invasion of Tamerlane greatly undermined the position of the Assyrian Church. From the XVII century the capital of the Church became the settlement of Qudshanis in Turkey, and Assyrian Christians formed their own millet (an officially recognised self-governing religious community) in the Ottoman Empire. In the late 19th century, Assyrians dreamed of establishing autonomy or a state of their own. During the First World War, the Assyrian people were persecuted by the Turkish authorities: many and many thousands were killed or died as a result of forced relocation. A significant number of Assyrians left their historical homeland during those years, people were scattered all over the world. In 1954, the Patriarch was exiled and for a long time his see remained in the USA.

Today the Church consists of the dioceses of Iraq, Iran and Russia; India and UAE; Syria; Australia, New Zealand and Lebanon; Europe; Eastern USA; Western USA; California; Canada. Since 2021, the Primate of the Church is His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III. Since 2015, the residence of the Catholicos is in Erbil, Iraq. The [Assyrian] Church unites about 400,000 believers.

The Assyrian Church of the East confesses the Nicene Creed and recognises the first two Ecumenical Councils. The doctrine is based on the tradition of the Antiochian theological school; among the theologians honoured are Diodorus of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius of Constantinople. Because of the veneration of Nestorius, historiography has come to assume that the Assyrian Church professed Nestorianism. However, the Church itself rejects this view, citing the Book of Heraclides, the last work of Nestorius, in which he sets forth a doctrine significantly different from the Nestorianism condemned at the Third Ecumenical Council. At this point it is difficult to speak of a systematised dogmatics of the Assyrian Church of the East; its theological heritage is scattered. There existed two major theological schools, the Edessa and Nizibis schools. Notable among the major theologians are the Venerable Ephraim the Syrian, the Venerable Jacob of Nizibis, Aphrahat of Persia, Narsai of Nizibi, Babai the Great, and others. The traditional Christological formula was fixed by Babai the Great in the seventh century: "two natures, two Qnomas in one person and one will of Christ."

His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III (born 1975) is the Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East since 13 September 2021. He is a native of Chicago. He graduated from Ignatius Loyola University of Chicago in 1997, University of Saint Mary of the Lake (Illinois, USA) in 1999, the Pontifical Oriental Institute (Rome, Italy) in 2001 (Licentiate) and defended his doctoral dissertation in 2007.

At the age of 16, in 1991, he was ordained a subdeacon, and in 1992, His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV ordained him a deacon. In 2006, he was ordained to the rank of Chorbishop (archpriest), and two years later he was elevated to the rank of an archdeacon (protopresbyter).

In 2008, he was ordained a bishop and became the first American-born bishop of the Assyrian Church of the East. Since 2015, he was Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Assyrian Church, and since 2016 -

co-chair of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East.

On the 8th of September 2021, at a meeting of the Holy Synod in Erbil, he was elected Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East. The enthronement took place on the 13th of September 2021 at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Ankawa.

¹ Urmia is one of the nineteen historic cities of Iran and is estimated by scholars to be 3,000 years old.

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