



## 5th meeting of the Commission for Dialogue between Russian Orthodox Church and Assyrian Church of the East begins in Saransk



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On June 17, the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East began in Saransk with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' and His Holiness Mar Awa III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East.

The Commission is meeting in the capital of the Republic of Mordovia at the invitation of Metropolitan Zinovy of Saransk and Mordovia.

The Moscow Patriarchate is represented by Bishop Kliment of Krasnoslobodsk and Temnikov, co-chair of the Commission; hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov), DECR secretary for Inter-Christian Relations, secretary of the Commission; and Mr. Sergei G. Alferov, a DECR staff member.

The Assyrian delegation consists of Bishop Mar Elia Timrs of Baghdad, co-chair of the Commission; Chorebishop Samano Odisho, representative of the Assyrian Church of the East in Russia; Chorebishop Nikodim Yukhanayev, representative of the Assyrian Church of the East in Armenia; Rev. Aprem Alkhass, rector of the Assyrian parish in Rostov-on-Don; and deacon Roland Bijamov, representative of the Moscow community of the Assyrian Church of the East.

At the monastery of St. John the Theological in Makarovka, the members of the Commission were cordially greeted by Metropolitan Zinovy of Saransk and Mordovia, head of the Metropolis of Mordovia. He told them about history and the present state of Orthodoxy in the region and noted positive experience of cooperation among the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, the Metropolis of Mordovia, and the Government of the Republic in the realization of projects promoting the interconfessional dialogue in Russia. One of these initiatives was the Youth Forum on "Christian Youth in the Media Space" held in Saransk in July 2022 under the aegis of the Christian Interconfessional Consultative Committee. The forum has become a model for the events like that in future.

The meeting of the Commission began at the Monastery's Pilgrim Center. Bishop Kliment of Krasnoslobodsk and Temnikov welcomed the participants, saying: "Mordovia is inseparably linked with more than a thousand years of the Russian world. Together with the Russian Slavs, our indigenous peoples, the Erzyans and Mokshans, were among the builders of the one Russian state together with the Russians and Slavs. They shared all joys and sorrows and affirmed the Orthodox faith in the vast Russian expanses. The ancestors of many outstanding archpastors come from the land of Mordovia, including those of Patriarch Nikon of Moscow and All Rus' and of our Primate, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.

"The Mordovian Volga region keeps the memory of wonderful saints, many of whom are the new martyrs who suffered during the years of godless persecutions in the last century. One of the heavenly patrons of Mordovia is the right-believing Feodor Ushakov, one of the great naval commanders of the Russian Empire, whose life was the epitome of the Gospel commandments.

"In the coming days we will visit holy sites of the Mordovian region. Also, you will have the opportunity to attend celebration of the bringing of the Moscow replica of the Kazan icon of the Mother of God to Saransk."

Bishop Kliment emphasized the high level of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East achieved in recent years and continued to say: “His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III visited Russia on two occasions. The decisions taken at his meetings with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' determined the agenda of our dialogue and the work of the Commission. Last autumn, the Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East received a highest award of the Russian Orthodox Church – the Order of Glory and Honor, 1<sup>st</sup> class. Also, His Holiness the Catholicos was awarded the Russian Order of Friendship by the decision of Russian President Vladimir Putin. With God's help, our Commission works successfully. Next year it will celebrate its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Neither quarantine restrictions nor other circumstances of recent years could hinder it from working.”

Bishop Kliment presented the following agenda of the meeting:

- coordination of cooperation at inter-Christian and international venues;
- cooperation in the media sphere;
- projects in the academic field and in student exchange programs;
- initiatives in the youth field;
- assistance in pastoral care of the faithful of the Assyrian Church of the East in Russia;
- assistance in the realization of joint humanitarian and social projects;
- cooperation in scholarly theological consultations and in the implementation of educational programs.

On behalf of His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III, Bishop of Baghdad thanked the Moscow Patriarchate for the efforts it is making for strengthening the centuries-old friendly ties of Assyrian Christians with Russia and Russian Orthodoxy and added: “Our ancient Church with its history of martyrdom, profession of faith and service to its flock in diaspora, has always enjoyed brotherly support of the Orthodox people of Great Rus'. We thank God that Russia has its own strong statehood deeply rooted in the Christian faith and in following the Gospel truth.”

On the same day, members of the Commission met with Mr. Artem A. Zdunov, head of the Republic of Mordovia. Attending the meeting, which took place at the Republic House, were Metropolitan Zinovy of Saransk and Mordovia and Mr. Dmitry A. Pozdnyakov, chairman of the Government of the Republic, who warmly welcomed the guests and said:

“I am very glad to meet you all in the hospitable land of Mordovia. We have heard a lot about the Assyrian Church of the East and about the rich history of its relations with the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state. We know of personal attention to these relations of our President Vladimir Putin and of our Primate, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus'. I share the opinion of His Eminence Metropolitan Zinovy that the work of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East is especially important today, under challenge of the growing atheistic tendencies in the modern, mostly Western, world. The projects realized by the Commission, especially those of the work with the youth, are of the historical significance. Mordovia is one of the centers of Orthodox culture in the Volga Federal District of the Russian Federation and is glad to contribute to these initiatives pleasing to God.”

Metropolitan Zinovy emphasized in his address: “The special significance of the dialogue between our Churches lies in the unity of our views on such important concept as marriage between a man and a woman established by the Lord, on freedom as a God-given property of the human person and, of course, on man himself as the creation of God. We know that Assyrian Christians have fought for the right to life and for their own identity and suffered great hardships during many centuries. Many Assyrians, and especially those living in Western countries, are facing challenges of the secular society that confuse good with evil and pose an existential threat to universal human values. We must unite our efforts for the sake of affirming the truth of God and caring for the destiny of future generations.”

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The Assyrian Church of the East came into being in the 1<sup>st</sup> century among the Aramaic-speaking population of Mesopotamia, preaching where according to church tradition were Apostles Peter, Bartholomew, Thaddeus and Thomas. The membership of the Assyrian Church is estimated to some 400 thousand adherents, most part of them living in diaspora. This number increased considerably over the last decade due to forced emigration from their ancestral homeland – Iraq and Syria. The Assyrians, like other Christians in the Middle East, have been severely persecuted by terrorist and extremist organizations.

The history of relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East dates back to the time before Peter the Great. The Assyrian community has traditionally played a prominent role in the social life of Russia.

The agreement to establish the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East was reached by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' and His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV during his visit to Russia in 2014.

Pursuant to this decision, a meeting of the joint working group was held in Moscow in July 2015 with the purpose to prepare the dialogue. In October 2015, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church approved the composition of the Commission on the part of the Moscow Patriarchate, and at the same time a similar decision was made by the Synod of the Assyrian Church of the East. The meetings of the Commission took place in Moscow, Russia, in May 2016; in Modesto, USA, in October 2017; in St. Petersburg, Russia, in October 2018; and in Thrissur, India, in November 2019.

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