The fifth meeting of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East has been held



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With the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' and His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III of the Assyrian Church of the East, the fifth meeting of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East was held on 17-21 June 2024 in Saransk and Krasnoslobodsk on the territory of the Mordovian Metropolis (Republic of Mordovia, Russian Federation).

The delegation of the Moscow Patriarchate included: Co-Chairman of the Commission His Grace

Bishop Kliment of Krasnoslobodsk and Temnikov, Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov), Secretary for Inter-Christian Affairs of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, and S.G. Alferov, an employee of the Department for External Church Relations.

From the side of the Assyrian Church of the East, the meeting was attended by: Co-Chairman of the Commission His Grace Bishop Mar Elia Isaac of Baghdad, representative of the Assyrian Church of the East in Russia Chorbishop Samano Odisho, representative of the Assyrian Church of the East in Armenia Bishop Nikodim Yukhanaev, rector of the Assyrian parish in Rostov-on-Don Priest Ephraim Alkhas, representative of the Moscow community of the Assyrian Church of the East Deacon Roland Bidjamov.

The meeting resulted in the adoption of a joint communiqué which states the following:

"The participants of the meeting noted with gratitude the many useful labours carried out by His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III during his tenure as Co-Chairman of the Commission from 2015 - 2021 and congratulated His Holiness on his election as Primate of the Assyrian Church of the East.

Members of the Commission welcomed the assumption of office of its co-chair, Most Reverend Bishop Mar Elia Isaac of Baghdad.

The **meeting** reviewed the results of the Commission's activities since the previous meeting on 13 - 18 November 2019 in Thrissur, Kerala, India, which included the meeting of the Commission members held on 15 November 2022 in Moscow under the chairmanship of His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III, and discussed further cooperation in the following areas:

1) Contacts at the highest level. Coordination of interaction on inter-Christian and international platforms.

We cherish the friendly relations that have existed for many centuries between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East. In today's reality, these relations have taken on even greater significance.

The Commission considers the visits to Russia of His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III of the Assyrian Church of the East and his meetings with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus' on **November 11-16, 2022** and **October 24-November 1, 2023**, during which decisions were made

that set the agenda for inter-church dialogue and the Commission's activities, to be historically important.

Members of the Commission on the part of the Moscow Patriarchate noted the high value of the efforts made by the Assyrian Church of the East and personally by His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III in defence of the Russian Orthodox Church and its Primate against attempts to discriminate against them in the international arena. At the same time, the Moscow Patriarchate expresses its unwavering solidarity with the Assyrian Church of the East in the face of the current threats to it.

We will continue to support each other, including on the international and inter-Christian platforms and in the public arena.

2) <u>Media co-operation.</u>

It is recognized as important to continue joint work on the preparation of educational video materials about the history and contemporary life of our Churches, their translation into Russian, Assyrian, Arabic, and English, and their broadcast on church and secular channels.

For example, in March 2021, the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate prepared a video dedicated to the history and contemporary life of Christians in Iraq, as well as the work of the Moscow Patriarchate in the Iraqi direction. An English version of the video was posted on internet resources.

The interviews with His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III, dedicated to the history and current situation of the Assyrian Church of the East, which were published in Russia, had a significant impact.

With the assistance of the Commission, the most important events in bilateral relations were covered in church and secular media.

3) <u>Student Exchange.</u>

Student exchange between theological schools remains an important and constant element of cooperation between the two Churches.

From 2020 to 2023, a representative of the Russian community of the Assyrian Church of the East, Deacon Arthur Avdyshev, successfully completed the master's program at the Moscow Theological Academy.

In June 2024, a cleric of the diocese of Iran, Armenia, and Georgia, Priest Addai Nazlu, graduated with honors from the bachelor's program at the Moscow Theological Academy.

The Commission considers it advisable to continue cooperation in this area. In 2024, Priest Ephraim Alkhas will be enrolled in the Ss. Cyril and Methodius Institute of Postgraduate Studies, and Deacon Arthur Avdyshev will be enrolled in the Postgraduate Program of the Moscow Theological Academy.

Co-Chairman of the Commission, His Grace Bishop Mar Elia Isaac of Baghdad, proposed including the Nisibis College of the Assyrian Church of the East in Sydney, Australia, and the Saransk Theological Seminary in the bilateral student exchange programs.

4) <u>Academic co-operation.</u>

During the reporting period, projects for cooperation in the academic field have seen significant development.

At the Moscow Theological Academy, with the participation of the Commission, the translation into

Russian of the monograph by His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III, dedicated to the history and theology of the sacraments of the Assyrian Church of the East, has been completed and is currently being edited (the release of the Russian edition is scheduled for the end of 2024). The Commission recognizes the exceptional importance of this monograph, which is intended to become a fundamental source for the study of the history and theology of the Assyrian Church of the East.

In the Russian Orthodox Church, a new course titled "Ancient Eastern Churches" has been established at the Saints Cyril and Methodius Postgraduate and Doctoral School with the assistance of the Department for External Church Relations. A significant part of the program is devoted to the history and theology of the Assyrian Church of the East. The author and lecturer of the course is a Commission member S.G. Alferov.

In 2023 – the first half of 2024, more than 20 thematic sessions were held as part of the course with the participation of the clergy and staff of the Assyrian Church of the Holy Virgin Mary in Moscow. These included:

– Joint colloquiums on topics such as "The Role of the Assyrian People in the History of the Russian State," "The Activities of the Commission for Dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East," and "The Centuries-Old Brotherhood of Assyrian Christians and Orthodox Peoples of Historical Rus'."

– Meetings in honor of the feast day of the Great Martyr George the Victorious and Victory Day, with joint colloquiums on the topics "The History of Assyrian Volunteer Units in the Russian Imperial Army during World War I" and "Assyrians – Soldiers of the Red Army and Heroes of the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic War. The Contribution of the Assyrian People to the Victory of Our Homeland."

– On February 26, 2023, a joint colloquium of representatives of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, students of the Saints Cyril and Methodius Postgraduate and Doctoral School, and the leadership of the Assyrian parish in Moscow, discussing topics such as "The

Peculiarities of the Doctrine, Liturgical, and Statutory Life of Assyrian Christians."

– On October 1, 2023, a meeting of the students of the "Ancient Eastern Churches" course with the representative of the Assyrian Church of the East in Russia, and a joint colloquium discussing topics such as "The Theological, Liturgical, and Cultural Heritage of the Assyrian Church of the East."

– On February 28, 2024, a meeting within the framework of the new educational program "East-Syriac Liturgy" based on the joint course of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ss Cyril and Methodius Institute of Postgraduate Studies "Ancient Eastern Churches." Two seminars were held at the Assyrian Church of the East in Moscow: "The History and Statutory Peculiarities of the Nineveh Fast" and "The Order of Services during the Nineveh Fast."

– On April 21, 2024, the lecturer of the "Ancient Eastern Churches" course conducted a session for the staff of the information and educational portal "ACOE.RU" at the Assyrian Church in Moscow on the study of the liturgical tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church. The topic of the session was "The Origin and Order of the Passia Service."

– On April 25, 2024, a meeting within the framework of the "East-Syriac Liturgy" program. A seminar was held on the topic "Evening Prayer on Weekdays during the Holy Forty Days. Statutory Peculiarities."

The Commission recognized the importance of continuing to systematize this course and eventually presenting it as a textbook.

An additional area of cooperation is the exchange of lecture courses by teachers of church disciplines. In the 2024/25 academic year, it is possible to organize a lecture course by a teacher from the Assyrian Church of the East in one of the Russian theological schools. The topics of the lectures would include the history of the Assyrian Church of the East and the Assyrian church heritage.

Interaction in the scientific and theological field is becoming increasingly relevant, including on current challenges. These include issues in the fields of bioethics, morality, and pastoral theology.

On November 24–25, 2023, a cleric of the diocese of Iran, Armenia, and Georgia of the Assyrian Church of the East, Priest Dariyavosh Azizyan, participated in the 5th International Interfaith Conference "Church Care for the Mentally Ill: A Modern View on Religious Experiences in Norm and Pathology," held at the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate. A report was presented on the topic "The Role of Prayer in Supporting People with Mental Disorders."

Promising platforms for the development of cooperation in this field are the annual International Christmas Educational Readings and scientific conferences held by the Assyrian Church of the East and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Thus, His Grace Bishop Mar Elia proposed that delegates from the Russian Orthodox Church be sent to participate in the international conference organized by the Assyrian Church of the East in the context of the celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea (scheduled for July – September 2025 in Erbil). It is important that members of the Commission be involved in such projects.

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East are ready to coordinate their response to modern challenges concerning issues of morality, traditional values, family, bioethics, etc.

The source base stored in the archives of the Russian Federation is of great importance for studying the historical heritage of the Assyrians and the Assyrian Church of the East. Systematizing these materials is an urgent task. The first step in this direction could be the compilation of a catalog of relevant manuscript and printed sources of the Saint Petersburg Theological Academy.

On May 30, 2024, a thematic section on "The Church of the East and the Council of Chalcedon" was organized as part of the 1st International Conference of the Moscow Theological Academy "Chalcedonian Christology and Attempts to Comprehend It."

5) <u>Youth Ministry.</u>

A significant event was the participation of a delegation from the Moscow Patriarchate in the First World Youth Congress of the Assyrian Church of the East (Erbil and Dohuk, Kurdistan Region, Iraq) from August 5 to 12, 2023. The delegation held meetings with His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III, members of the Holy Synod of the Assyrian Church of the East, representatives of Christian communities in Iraq, and the leadership of the General Consulate of the Russian Federation in Erbil.

On January 25, 2024, representatives of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Moscow community of the Assyrian Church of the East participated in events under the direction "Church and Youth" held at the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation (within the framework of the 32nd International Christmas Educational Readings). Reports on cooperation between the two Churches in the field of youth ministry were presented.

From April to June 2024, a series of meetings took place between representatives of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Synodal Department for Youth Affairs, and members of the parish youth association of the Assyrian Church of the East in Moscow.

The Commission will petition for the invitation of a delegation from the Assyrian Church of the East to the next International Youth Congress of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 2025, it is also possible to hold the Second Summer Institute in Russia for a group of youth from the Assyrian Church of the East from various countries around the world.

It is important to include representatives of the youth of both Churches in the participants of events conducted by the Commission in various areas of its activities.

6) <u>Assistance in pastoral care of the believers of the Assyrian Church of the East in Russia.</u>

There is a specific practical need to assist in organizing pastoral care for believers of the Assyrian Church of the East residing in Russia.

In October 2023, with the blessing of Metropolitan Tikhon of Vladimir and Suzdal and in agreement with the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Assyrian community of the city of Vladimir was provided with a space in the building of the Vladimir Diocesan Administration for regular worship services.

In June 2023, with the blessing of His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III, Commission member Priest Ephrem Alkhas was appointed rector of the Assyrian parish of Saint John the Baptist in Rostov-on-Don and arrived in Russia in the same month. On June 3, 2024, a meeting took place between Metropolitan Mercury of Rostov and Novocherkassk and Priest Ephrem Alkhas.

The Assyrian Church of the East expresses gratitude to the Don Metropolis and Metropolitan Mercury of Rostov and Novocherkassk for their support in developing the Assyrian church community in Rostov-on-Don.

Special thanks for their support in this matter are expressed to the Department for External Church Relations and personally to its Chairman, Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk.

7) <u>Humanitarian and social projects.</u>

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East continue to implement joint projects in the field of providing humanitarian aid to those in need.

In April 2022, the Moscow parish of the Assyrian Church of the East participated in collecting humanitarian aid for the residents of Mariupol as part of an action led by Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov) of the Interreligious Working Group for the Protection of Believers' Rights against Discrimination and Xenophobia of the Council for Interaction with Religious Associations under the President of the Russian

Federation.

Throughout 2023 and the first half of 2024, the parish of the Assyrian Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Moscow participated in collecting humanitarian aid for the new regions of Russia as part of the actions of the aforementioned Interreligious Working Group.

On January 26, 2023, a representative of the Moscow community of the Assyrian Church of the East, N. S. Yukhanov, participated in a round table discussion on the topic "Social Service of Religious Communities – Interfaith Exchange of Experience" held at the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate (as part of the 31st International Christmas Educational Readings).

On January 25, 2024, a representative of the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Deacon Tengiz Ashkashidze, participated in a round table discussion on the topic "Social Service of Religious Communities – Interfaith Exchange of Experience" held at the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate (as part of the 32nd International Christmas Educational Readings).

8) <u>Church Culture Initiatives.</u>

In recent years, a number of interchurch projects in the cultural sphere have developed, prompting the need to highlight it as a separate area of activity for the Commission.

During the Christmas and Easter periods of 2023 and 2024, receptions in honor of Easter and Christmas were held at the Assyrian Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, featuring concerts of Russian and Assyrian Easter and Christmas hymns.

On June 2, 2024, the choir of the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary participated in the First Festival of Spiritual Music of the Peoples of the Christian East, organized by the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Saints Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute of Postgraduate Studies, and the Russian and New Nakhichevan Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

At the same time, with the participation of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate and the parish of the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, an exhibition was set up at the "Tapan" museum located at the Armenian Transfiguration of the Lord Church Complex in Moscow. This exhibition features a collection of Assyrian church art, including elements of clergy vestments and publications in classical Syriac.

The Assyrian side expressed its readiness to provide venues for similar events in Iraq.

9) <u>Theological Counselling.</u>

The Commission noted the necessity of initiating theological consultations between the two Churches in the context of the bilateral cooperation that has been observed over the past eight years.

To begin such consultations, a systematic analysis of the teachings of the Assyrian Church of the East is required, especially in the areas of Christology and sacramentology. In this regard, it is important to once again emphasize the fundamental significance of the monograph by His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Awa III on the history and theology of the Assyrian Church of the East, the Russian translation of which will be published at the end of 2024.

The Assyrian side expressed its intention to send a working document to the Russian side of the Commission by the end of the current year. This document will outline the key provisions concerning the history and doctrine of the Assyrian Church of the East. It will serve as the basis for the first round of bilateral theological consultations within the framework of the Commission. Based on the results of these consultations, a list of specific dogmatic and historical-cultural issues, which are a priority for subsequent consideration, will be determined.

Final Clauses

We thank our Lord Jesus Christ for the holding of the fifth session of the Commission on the days when, according to the ancient Alexandrian Paschal calendar, the celebration of His Divine Ascension and the commemoration of the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council take place. The Commission held substantive and fruitful negotiations, demonstrating complete mutual understanding on each of the issues on the agenda.

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During the session of the Commission, its members met with Metropolitan Zinovy of Saransk and Mordovia and the head of the Republic of Mordovia, A.A. Zdunov, participated in the scientific and practical conference "The Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East: Christian Traditions of Dialogue" organized by the Saransk Theological Seminary, and visited the holy places and historical-cultural landmarks of the Mordovian land.

The members of the Commission express their gratitude to Metropolitan Zinovy of Saransk and Mordovia, the head of the Republic of Mordovia A.A. Zdunov, and Bishop Kliment of Krasnoslobodsk and Temnikov for the high reception and hospitality extended by them.

The next session of the Commission is scheduled for May 2025 in Erbil. Next year, we will be celebrating several significant dates – the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea, the 80th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War, and the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Commission. In this regard, it is planned to hold a joint round table with sections dedicated to each of these three anniversaries, a photo exhibition on the work of the Commission, and a possible trip to Northern Iraq by one of the leading choirs of the Russian Orthodox Church to conduct concerts of Russian spiritual and folk music.

The results of the Commission's activities will be presented for approval to the Holy Synods and the Primates of both Churches.

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