

A Patriarch for the 21st Century

Fred Aprim
Sept 28, 2021

On Monday, September 6, 2021, the synod of the Assyrian Church of the East convened at the patriarchal see in Erbil, Iraq, and elected Bishop Mar Awa Royel to replace the ailing patriarch Mar Gewargis III. One week later Mar Awa III Royel was consecrated as the Catholic-Patriarch of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East. With the choice of a younger patriarch, born in the diaspora and educated in Rome, the Assyrian Church of the East entered a decisive phase in the 21st century. By the end of the 2020s the formation of an Assyrian political leadership and the advancement of the joining of this Church with the Roman Catholic Church is predicted to be dominated by a spiritual leader.



Mar Awa was born in 1975 in Chicago from parents originally from Kirkuk, Iraq. His great uncle, shamasha (deacon) Mansour was well educated. He was invited to make presentations at various Assyrian gatherings. He was a Catholic but was an Assyrian first. Patriarch Mar Dinkha took Awa, 16, under his wings and personally elevated him from a sub-deacon, deacon, cor-bishop, archdeacon and finally in 2008 to a bishop. After completing his graduate studies in the United States, Mar Awa

received his licentiate (2001) and doctorate in sacred theology (2007) at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Vatican, where he was enrolled as a scholarship holder of the Catholic Committee for Cultural Collaboration of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.¹

Mar Dinkha will be remembered for initiating and signing the 1994 Common Christological Declaration with Pope John Paul II. Several phases of the dialogue and understanding between the Vatican and the Assyrian Church of the East have continued since then. Under Patriarch Mar Gewargis III, the second phase was signed in 2017 and the third in 2018. The current fourth phase of this dialogue is focusing on the themes of Ecclesiology, and of church imagery in the Syriac and Latin Patristic traditions, which will continue under the leadership of Patriarch Mar Awa III.

In September 2015 Mar Dinkha was succeeded by Mar Gewargis III who did not desire the position but was forced to accept it. Mar Gewargis is from the Asheeta Tyari tribe, the same tribe as that of Patriarch Mar Addai, patriarch of the Ancient Church of the East. The leaders of the Assyrian Church of the East believed that Mar Gewargis as patriarch could bring the Ancient Church of the East faithful to follow the Assyrian Church of the East, but that did not materialize. The highlight of this patriarchy was the return of its See to Mesopotamia.

Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Council, sent a letter to Mar Awa expressing his joy over his selection for the patriarchal position.² Later, Cardinal Koch represented His Holiness Pope Francis at the enthronement of Mar Awa III in Arbil on September 13. Cardinal Koch read a message dated September 9 from Pope Francis on the occasion. The Pope wrote, “we hope that one day all the followers of Christ will find themselves fully united in the reconciliation which the Lord earnestly desires. He added, I pray that the relations between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East will grow ever closer not only in the fraternal spirit of cooperation, but also through deepening the theological dialogue that will enable us to grow in communion and to be a witness before the words to the saving truth of the Gospel.”



¹ <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2021/2021-09-09-mar-awa-royel.html>

² <http://www.christianunity.va/content/dam/unitacristiani/Cardinale/2021/2021%2009%2009%20Koch-Awa.pdf>

Cardinal Koch then conveyed a few words of his own on the occasion. He stated: “I would like to express the closeness of Pope Francis to your Holiness, to your Church and to all the Christians of Iraq, a country very dear to the heart of the Holy Father who accomplished only a few months ago for the first time in history a first visit of the Bishop of Rome to Mesopotamia. It is this land that the Assyrian Church of the East has its roots and the return of its See to Iraq accomplished by your predecessor Mar Gewargis III mark the greatest milestone in its history.”

Only two months earlier, during the Synod of the Bishops of the Chaldean Church in Baghdad (August 9 – 14) the participants unanimously decided to correct a historic error and give up the previously used designation "Patriarchate of Babylon of the Chaldeans" and replaced it with the "Chaldean Patriarchate".³

Discussions on social media have since focused on where the Vatican is guiding Patriarchs Louis Sako and Awa III . Few argue that a full communion with the Vatican is in the making and that the Assyrian Church of the East will have a new role in the Kurdish controlled region of northern Iraq and the Middle East. Questions remain in regard to the position of the Chaldean Catholic Church if and when the unification of the Assyrian Church of the East and the Catholic Church takes place. What will the political scene look like then?

Since the consecration of Mar Dinkha as patriarch in 1976, the Assyrian Church of the East has been troubled and challenged on many levels. While many think that the church flourished in the Diaspora under the leadership of Mar Dinkha IV, the reality is otherwise. The only reason that the church has expanded in the Diaspora is because more and more faithful of the Church left the Homeland and reached the West. These new arrivals replaced the departing members or those who stopped attending the church. The faithful members of the Assyrian Church of the East in the homeland have dwindled to a dangerously low numbers threatening its existence where it was founded in Mesopotamia. This was planned by both the regimes of Saddam Hussein and Barzani. Meanwhile, Mar Dinkha celebrated his life in Chicago as he circled himself with his tribal friends who were his secretary, confidant, advisor, etc. These included: Dr. Odisho Khoshaba, Fraidon Darmono, Archdeacon Gewargis Toma, Fr. Antwan Lachin, Fr. Shlimon Hezkiel and many others. He kept the See of the Church in Chicago and enjoyed his lavish annual anniversaries and birthday parties.

Only history will prove that for almost 40 years Mar Dinkha played a role in killing the Assyrian national spirit, by courting Barzani and supporting and empowering Kurdish-backed and paper-thin political parties.⁴ Mar Dinkha added the name “Assyrian” to the church title and caused serious damage to the Assyrian national movement, also causing further and more dangerous distancing of the Chaldean Catholic Church and Assyrian (Suryan) Orthodox Church.⁵ Mar Dinkha's moves have all been linked to Barzani's directions in distancing the various Assyrian denominations farther. While the various patriarchs claimed that they sought genuine cooperation and unity, they did not at the end.

In the most critical period of change in Assyrian history (1976-2015), Mar Dinkha stood against the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), never supported their activities, and did not even support the schools that the ADM built in northern Iraq. The ADM continued to be supported by the Assyrian

³ http://www.fides.org/en/news/70676-ASIA_IRAQ_Patriarchal_note_explains_why_the_reference_to_Babylon_in_the_name_of_the_Chaldean_Patriarchate_has_been_removed

⁴ https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BAGHDAD3958_a.html

⁵ <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2021/FINAL%20-%20Church%20of%20the%20East%20or%20Assyrian%20COE%20.pdf>

people in Iraq in every election, while Mar Dinkha undermined it. Mar Dinkha personified tribalism by supporting his tribal politician friends in northern Iraq that have been Barzani's puppets, including, Sarkis Aghajan, Romeo Hakkari, Fawzi Hariri, Ninef Matran Hariri and others. Mar Dinkha proudly supported Assyrianism in Chicago, but never defended it when visiting northern Iraq. Everything Mar Dinkha did was to damage the ADM in Iraq and no one can deny that fact. Mar Dinkha's aim was simply to keep those Assyrians in the West happy with his "Atouraye" speeches in Chicago, San Jose, Los Angeles, Sydney, etc. But he never stood proud or defended his "Atouraya" (Assyrian) and "Atour" (Assyria) while in northern Iraq. He said: "We do not interfere in politics", but supported Sarkis Aghajan and the al-Majlis al-Sha'bi (Barzani's People's Council) and enthusiastically referred to Aghajan as "raabi Sarkis". Most Assyrians do not even know that as a bishop of Iran, Mar Dinkha broke his church laws and secretly visited Barzani in northern Iraq. This was not the only time that he did break his church laws. In 1973 and with the 6 bishops meeting in Beirut, Lebanon, he broke his church laws again.⁶ Why was Mar Dinkha selected patriarch in London when the Church had no bishop (diocese) in England (the official consecration ceremony took place in Baghdad)?

Mar Dinkha's weaknesses were his lack of a formal education and being unable to control his bishops as many of the bishops simply did what they pleased. This disarray in the church was originated earlier because the bishops' direct or indirect involvements in the events led to the assassination of Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun in 1975. The original 6 bishops that were involved in the 1973 mess covered for each other. The Bishops who came later exploited the weakness of their patriarch and ran with it. They witnessed how close Mar Dinkha was to Barzani and his regime and they too began to praise the Barzani family and the KRG as the Barzani support for the various churches continued. The trend of support and praise for the Barzani continued after the passing of Mar Dinkha.

Consider these examples of bishops' over-rated praise:

1. In a meeting of bishops with Masoud Barzani during the earlier synod in Arbil, this conversation took place:

Mar Meelis: "All Assyrians have a special love in their hearts for your Excellency."

Masoud Barzani: "By God, that is a mutual feeling."

Mar Meelis: "This feeling is from the days of Mar Dinkha who had a good relationship with you."⁷

2. A recent interview by Kurdish Satellite TV station Zagros with Archbishop Mar Meelis Zaia was shared on September 20, 2021 on Facebook. In the second part of the interview, Mar Meelis responded to the host by saying: "I stress that in the upcoming years you will witness more visits [to the Kurdish region], because people's perception about the region is changing as we have prosperity, civilizational development, cultural development and this reflects one thing which is that the human being in this [Kurdish] region has freedom and lives in this democracy that does not include such things as "you are Muslim", "you are Christian" or you are such and such. You are the son and daughter of this land and this land will serve you and everything you see here is to serve you, serve mankind. I am very happy as I witnessed this development that has been going on in the past year in Arbil, which is extremely

⁶ The 6 bishops attending the illegal September 6 to 13, 1973 meeting in Beirut Roman Catholic monastery, the monastery of Christ the King were: Mar Dinkha bishop of Iran, Mar Narsai de Baz bishop of Lebanon, Mar Aprim Khamis bishop of Basrah, Mar Youkhana Philipos Aziz bishop of Arbil, Mar Youkhana Oraham bishop of Syria, and Mar Daniel Yaqu bishop of Kirkuk.

The 3 bishops that did not attend citing the meeting illegal were: Mar Yousip Khnaneesho, Metropolitan of Iraq, Mar Sargis bishop of Baghdad and Mar Timatheus, archbishop of India.

⁷ <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2021/It%20Takes%20Courage%20to%20Tell%20the%20Truth.pdf>

pleasing. I have always been a believer that the [Kurdish] region will develop – develop yet more, and the region will acquire a very strong international standing as we witness through all events and aspects, whether civilizational wise, cultural or civic. I always wish and I always have this outlook [about it].⁸



Why are the leaders of the Assyrian Church of the East so proud of spreading the suspicious and nothing less than treasonous propaganda about the oppressive Kurdish region and the KRG? Assyrian activist and journalist Khlapieel Bnyameen made a statement about this last interview by Archbishop Mar Meelis. In the first part of his statement, Mr. Bnyameen said that Mar Meelis was not truthful with his answers on Zagros. He brought several examples of KRG oppressive policies, Islamization policies, political marginalization and interference in the internal affairs of the Assyrian people and political groups by forcing on the Assyrians their representatives in the KRG parliament. He mentions, for example, about the most recent story of a minor Assyrian girl who was forced to convert to Islam just because her father had converted to Islam. Islamization of a Minor law forces minors to convert to Islam if their father did. He also said that he could accompany Mar Meelis and travel from Arbil all the way to Daralog (Deraluk) [close to the Turkish borders]. Mr. Bnyameen said that Mar Meelis will hear an earful of complaints from Assyrians in all the villages that are in-between, whether about their lands that have been confiscated by the Kurds, how unfairly the KRG deals with the Assyrian parties or about other oppressive policies. In the second part of the statement, Mr. Bnyameen gave specific examples that show conflicting statements by the various bishops of the Assyrian Church of the East. He requested that the policy and statements by the church should be unified and centralized.⁹

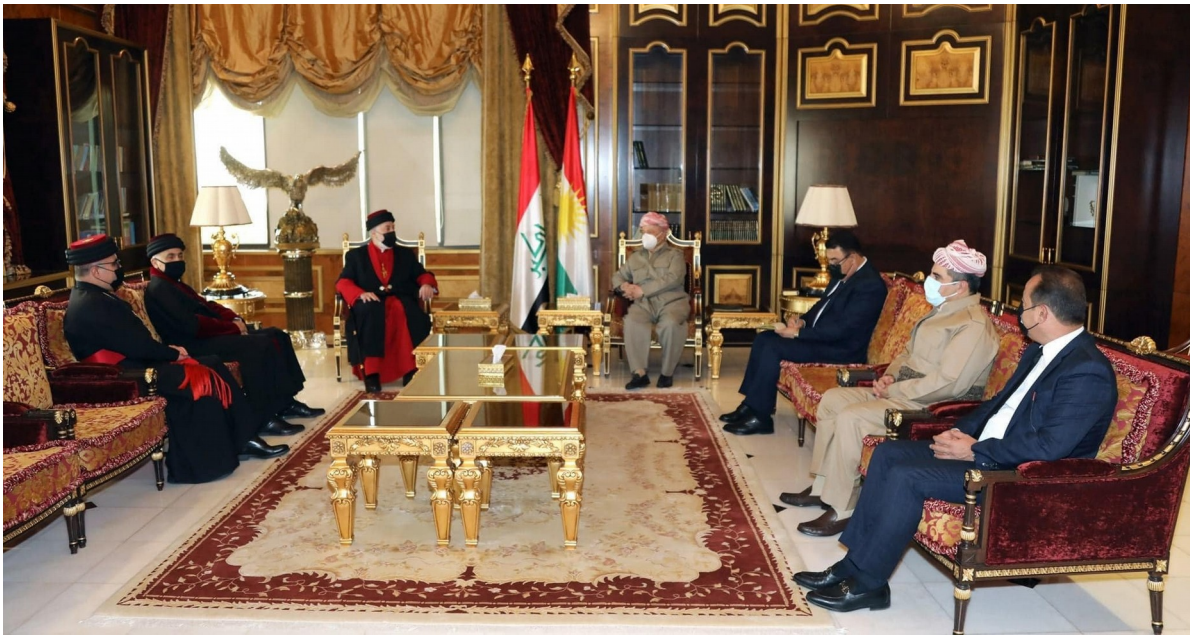
Mar Meelis statements are outrageous and absolutely false. The region of the KRG is an apartheid system, because one population (Kurds) dominates all the other population whether in privileged rights, military, land, or economy. The KDP has created few puppets from non-Kurds to give the impression

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/ashur.giwargis/videos/3150018958561121>

⁹ <https://www.atour.com/news/assyria/20210912a.html>

that it is running a democratic system. The Barzani ensured that his support for the various churches was on individual bases and by this the Kurds ensured that the various patriarchs remained divided.

In his first speech after his consecration, Patriarch Mar Awa III said that he will be following in the footsteps of his predecessor patriarchs Mar Dinkha IV and Mar Gewargis III by asking the congregation to be good citizens, respect and obey the laws of the countries they reside in. But, and at the same time, he added, all the laws instituted in those countries should be just, humanly and be equally applied to all people under their rule regardless of the people's ethnicity (nationality) or religion. He then said: "We promise to take part in the progress of this blessed country in all aspects of civic society and to spread peace and coalition between all the people of the blessed country of Iraq." "One of our important task as patriarch", he added, "is to build bridges between the various churches in Iraq. We will also seek cooperation and communication on the International level."¹⁰



If we analyze the statements made by the new patriarch and the statements made by people close to him, we could predict that the Church is planning for a closer involvement in the national affairs. This may be seen as a very dangerous move. As the world moves stronger towards the separation of church and state, our churches cannot go backward and try to bring back the old temporal power and hand it into the hands of the patriarchs. The Assyrian intellectuals, nationalists, politicians, and people at large must oppose this anticipated destructive path. We would all like to see the Assyrian Church of the East and the other Assyrian churches flourish. However, this will only materialize by having fair, humble, devoted, inclusive, and spiritual church leaders. I hope that the new Patriarch Mar Awa III will do contrary to what certain Assyrian nationalists are predicting, that he undoes the unforgiving damage done by Mar Dinkha, and correct the path of this ancient Church. We hope that Mar Awa III will prove many out there that they are wrong, that he will not interfere in political matters, but take positive steps as a facilitator in bringing the various Assyrian groups together.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHbXGL0PQaQ>