

Metropolitan Mar Meelis Zaia Speech in Canada: A Damage Control?

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Metropolitan Mar Meelis Zaia, bishop of Australia, New Zealand and Lebanon of the Assyrian Church of the East (ACOE) traveled to Canada to meet with the church congregation. On Sunday, January 14, 2024, [the metropolitan addressed the Assyrian congregation](#) at the hall of the St. Mary's Cathedral in Toronto.

There has been certain confusion among the congregation within the ACOE worldwide and specifically in Canada after the sudden [resignation/retirement of Mar Emmanuel Yosip](#), bishop of Canada and in Europe after the recent [homily by Mar Odisho Oraham](#), bishop of Sweden and Germany. Archbishop Mar Meelis had reflected some concerns in his own [homily on Jan 6 in Sydney](#). His Grace had referred to the recent retirement/resignation of many bishops and the difficulties of finding new bishops.

Lets consider the following retirements/resignations:

1. Mar Gewargis III, patriarch (not mentioned by the archbishop)
2. Mar Aprem Mokeen, Metropolitan of India
3. Mar Youhannan Yoseph, bishop of India
4. Mar Isaac Yousif, bishop of Dohuk
5. Mar Aprim Khamis, bishop of western USA (effective 1/1/2024)
6. Mar Emmanuel Yosip, bishop of Canada



An explanation and damage control were in order. Mar Meelis made sure not to respond to the homily of Bishop Mar Odisho directly, but it was obvious that part of His Grace's speech was to address a controversial remark made by Bishop Odisho about the ACOE, its congregation's attitude and the attendance in the church.

Metropolitan Mar Meelis spoke about the resignation of Mar Emmanuel Yosip, and said that the church respected the wishes of the bishop for retiring early even though he was only 65. He said that the bishop wanted to keep the reasons to himself, because he did not want to cause any issues and discomfort (*mirri mirrokh*) within the congregation. Metropolitan Mar Meelis mentioned that the retirement age was 75; however, bishops may retire between 65 and 75 for justified reasons.

His Grace, Mar Meelis then mentioned that the church and/or Assyrians have gone through martyrdom inflicted on them by Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Islam and until recently by ISIS. He asserted that the church was resilient and survived. He stated that the Church in Australia through pressure applied on the government processed the necessary papers of 8,582 Assyrians from the [Khabor villages] to come to Australia (Melbourne and Sydney). Other Assyrians from the Khabor were accepted to Sweden and Canada. The US did not welcome many – it did not help in this issue of refugees and immigration.

Fred's note: Mar Meelis mentioned Persians, Turks, Arabs, Mongols but he did not mention the Kurds who historically have committed the most atrocities upon the Assyrians and their churches. Is this to stay in line with the current policy of the ACOE not to criticize the Kurds or Kurdish Regional Gov?

Then Metropolitan Mar Meelis questioned why people complained about having the name Assyrian in the church title. He explained how the name Assyrian was added [in 1976] and how Mar Dinkha began to talk about Assyrianism (*Atourayoota*) in the church as he became patriarch and stated that the name Assyrian in the church title will never be removed even if the whole world stood against the said church. At one point, he turned to the parish priest and told him, “*priest, place the Assyrian flag in the altar*”. He said, *the ACOE reminds us of our Assyrianism*. He asked the gathering, “*what reminds you of your Assyrianism?*” He then said, “*What do we have? No country, no government, no wealth, but one thing reminds us of our Assyrianism and that is the Assyrian Church of the East*”.

Fred's note: Well, the statement is not completely accurate. Many Assyrians are not members of the ACOE, yet they are very proud of their Assyrianism.

Then the archbishop said that it is so foolish for saying that our church will become Catholic. He said, there are fools who say that we will become Catholics so we [bishops] become Cardinals. He said, why would we do that. We are cardinals here is our small church among the few of us. Why do we want to disappear in the 150 Vatican cardinals? He said, this church will never deviate from the teachings of its early fathers. Then he said that people envy this church. Why, he asked? Because, he added, some churches are attended by 10 people. Our churches are full of people. He said, in Sydney, we had a total of 14 sermons on Christmas eve and Christmas day [to ensure that all people were able to participate in Christmas Mass]. He then said, if our church is planning to become Catholic, why would it open a theological school [Nisibis Theological College] for itself. But he sadly asked, how many Assyrian students from Canada, America and Europe registered in this college. He answered, zero. The Ancient Church of the East sent pupils to us to study, but our own churches did not. It is sad that we have to spend \$180,000-190,000 annually to pay teachers for only 4 students.

Fred's note: What is Mar Meelis telling us here? Why are Assyrian parents not sending their children to the theological school? Better yet, why are young adult Assyrians not attending the theological college? The answer is between the lines, which hides the sad sentiment of the Assyrian youth towards the church. Yes, while the church could gather 300 youth in a conference, but where are the hundred thousand Assyrian youth? The younger Assyrian generations are highly intelligent and well educated and can see through the facade that the clergy have built and they do not appreciate it. The youth know what is good and what is not. That is why 0.5% of the youth at best attend such conferences. The ACOE has problems and the Holy Synod must address them to save this 2000 old church and stop attacking those who care for the church and who criticize its leaders. Mar Odisho Oraham knows there are issues and that is why he said what he said in his homily.

Archbishop Mar Meelis reflected some positive remarks about the state of the ACOE. He said that when he came to Australia some four decades ago, the diocese had \$25 in its bank account. Today, he added, the ACOE diocese in Australia has many properties, assets and a promising bank account.

His Grace Mar Meelis regretted that the Assyrian community in Canada did not have a school, a nursing home, etc. He said, we in Australia built 50 apartments for seniors. He asked, *why you do not have a school here*. He said we have the blue print and we can help you to build one. He then spoke very highly of the school the church built in Australia that started with 82 students and has 1,400 today. He blamed many Assyrians in Australia for not registering their children in that school while parents from other churches do. He said that 30% of the students that attend the school are Catholics, our Chaldean brothers. .

Fred's note: My question to Mar Meelis, in northern Iraq, the Assyrian Aid Society established close to 35 Assyrian schools and had over 7,000 students at one time. However, not a single bishop or patriarch from the ACOE visited any of them even when some of these schools were founded before the issue of Mar Bawai was in the picture and when Mar Bawai was the favorite bishop of Patriarch Mar Dinkha. If the Assyrian bishops are so supportive of Assyrian schools, why no one wants to answer this simple question that I and many Assyrians have posed repeatedly.

Metropolitan Mar Meelis advised the congregation to hold elections to chose their church council (motwa). He stressed that it is the law of the church that such motwa be elected and not appointed by the priest for example. His Grace also addressed the issue of donations. He said that these donations stay within the church and the Assyrian community and do not go somewhere else, because the trustees of the ACOE properties are the patriarch and the holy synod. These properties stay within the community unlike many other churches where the properties are under the control of perhaps a board of the Anglican Church or the Vatican. He continued to say that the ACOE patriarch and all bishops sign a document where they agree that they have no personal interest in the church properties upon their retirement or death.

In his lengthy speech, the Metropolitan addressed many other topics. Lastly. But not least, the Metropolitan informed the congregation that they will have the opportunity to meet with Patriarch Mar Awa III soon.

Did His Grace Mar Meelis succeed to convince the attendees and the 25,000 Assyrians in Canada [the population number provided by Mar Meelis at the meeting] that all is well with the ACOE after the recent resignations/retirements of several bishops? Did the Metropolitan succeed to calm the sentiment of the congregation having listened to the controversial homily by Bishop Mar Odisho?