

For the Sake of this Unique Nation?
By Fred Aprim
September 24, 2003

Many Assyrians hold the dream of national unity dear in their thoughts and hearts. However, modern Assyrian history has proven that the "political thought" has failed to bring the various pieces of the Assyrian fabrics together. Why? The sad reality is that our people were always, and still are largely, driven by church. It is for this reason that early 20th century nationalists like Yusuf Malek, Agha Potrus, Malik Qambar, and others recently, like Afram Rayis, while recognizing themselves as Assyrians from the Chaldean Catholic Church or believing in unity by using compounded name, have failed despite their hard efforts.

A very important question here is: Is this messy issue today really about the name or is it about the control of the Church of the East. The Chaldean Catholic Church synod failed to elect a patriarch in Baghdad for the first time in its 173-years history, as it left it to the Vatican to decide. The synod (August 19 to September 2, 2003) failed after two weeks of heated discussions and arguments to reach a consensus. However, the majority of the bishops returned on September 3, 2003, after such strong disagreements to sign a letter sent to Ambassador Paul Bremer, American Civil Administrator of Iraq, stating that they were a separate ethnicity and demanded a separate representation in Iraqi government and new constitution. Many Assyrians asked, what happened? We thought that the majority within the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq, including Mar Ibrahim Ibrahim of the Detroit diocese, had reached an understanding of unity through this title ChaldoAssyrians!

First, if the readers pay close attention to the list of bishops who signed the letter in question in its Arabic version, they will see that Mar Ibrahim Ibrahim has not signed the letter. Yes, his name is there and perhaps in his own handwriting, however, his signature is missing. The other point I need to make here is that the majority of the twenty-two Chaldean Catholic bishops have been historically strong opponents of nationalizing the church. The words of the Late Patriarch, Raphael Bidawid I on the Lebanese International Satellite TV Station (LBC) in 2000, are still afresh in our ears. Labeling the members of the Chaldean Catholic Church 'ethnically Chaldeans' is a mistake. Are the members of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iran and the Assyro-Chaldeans in Malabar, India ethnically Chaldeans? Were the Nestorians of Cyprus in 1445 ethnically Chaldeans when they adopted this latter title, i.e. Chaldeans, as they converted to Catholicism? We know as well that there was no Chaldean bishop, priest, group, or congregation before the fifteenth century. Thus, the question to ask is, why are certain clergymen and few intellectual making such propositions and claims?

I keep asking myself, what was the motive and force behind this latest third of September letter to Bremer. Some say we cannot ignore the Vatican factor. It is reasonable to consider that the Vatican understands the Chaldean controversy, since the Vatican created it. The Vatican understands that due to sheer numbers and power of the Catholics in addition to the weakness of the Church of the East in Iraq, time is ripe to win the latter church over. Some argue that as long as the Church of the East existed, the Roman Church will always be considered as a substitute in Christianity's global theatre. The Church of the East will always be considered as the real star since it was there before the 'Roman Church'. So, what does this really mean?

On the one hand, two interwoven points made by two groups need to be addressed: One Assyrian group claim that as long as the Assyrian Church of the East existed under such exact title, the Assyrian national movement will struggle to make serious progress as many Catholic and Orthodox Assyrians will refuse to take part in the Assyrian national movement. This group claims that having the name Assyrian in front of the Church title means in reality equating the two titles Nestorian and Assyrian! Since a Catholic does not want to be associated with Nestorius, hence, he/she will refuse to cooperate. The second group claims that as long as the Chaldeans (Catholic Assyrians) are not part of the Assyrian national movement, the movement will struggle in Iraq. They claim that the Assyrian national movement will survive, but it will always struggle, having the congregation of the Chaldean Catholic Church more as its challenger than its defender. Both groups argue that the moment the Church of the East merges with the Chaldean Catholic Church under a title that does not include the name Assyrian and recognizes this religious term Chaldean, the Assyrians, politically, will have better chances to establish a stronger and more powerful voice in Iraq.

The mother Church of the East in Iraq is helplessly getting weaker and weaker. Unless a miracle takes place, this church is destined to die eventually; it is only a matter of time. The question is, are we going to cling to this dying church or are we going to say to ourselves let us get over this pride in a once glorious church and save it for future generations. A friend from Chicago pointed to Ecclesiastes 7:8-9, which teaches us: *"Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; and the patient man in humbleness is better than the proud in spirit. Be not hastily angry, for anger rests in the bosom of the fools."* The Church of the East and the Chaldean Catholic Church are one church that was divided in 1553 and it is time to reunite them again for the sake of the survival of both.

On the other hand, the Assyrian Church of the East is in a big dilemma. The bishops are polarizing the church and the patriarch, for all practical purposes, has lost control over many of them. It seems to me that the present patriarch will reside over the church until his time will come (we pray after long life) and the congregation will live the big chaos in the church with his departure since no one person will be able to hold the church together. Mar Dinkha tried to walk in the path of unity. In 1980, he offered Mar Addai (successor of Mar Toma Darmo) to accept him as Associate Patriarch, however, the plan did not materialize as Mar Addai demanded more authority than what Mar Dinkha was willing to concede. (Read: Mar Aprem George Mookken. *Western Missions Among Assyrians*. Trichur, India: Mar Narsai Press, 1982, p. 142) We know that it was the Iraqi government that blocked any efforts to reunite the two churches. He tried later in 1994, when he signed the Christological Understanding with the Vatican. However, some say that the independence of the new proposed Church (united Assyrian Church of the East and Chaldean Catholic Church) from the Vatican was of great concern. The communications between the Assyrian Church of the East and Chaldean Catholic Church stumbled and reached a dead end few years later. Was it really the independence of the united church from Rome the reason, or was it certain Assyrian bishops, who simply do not want to see the union materializing. Was it the independence of the church or the pride of elder generation Assyrians, who feel that they will be betraying their forefathers by becoming Papal?

Then, came the unconfirmed news from Baghdad. The perhaps rumors claimed that there was some sort of communication between certain bishops of the Chaldean Catholic Church participating in the Chaldean Church synod and Mar Giwargis Sliwa, Archbishop of the Church of the East in Baghdad and Mar Addai, Patriarch of the Ancient Church of the East. Mar Addai and Mar Giwargis presumably have told the Chaldean bishops 'NO' to the compound title ChaldoAssyrians; they stated that they were Assyrians and that they will not accept any compromise about the Assyrian name. The next day, the Chaldean bishops met again and decided to write the letter to Ambassador Bremer. I personally question if this ever took place and doubt it strongly. It seems to me that the furiousness of certain Chaldean bishops have reached a degree they could not bare with any longer. The reason being is that all news agencies, newspapers, magazines, and international satellite stations, keep mentioning about the 'Assyrians' or 'Assyrian Christians' and ignore the title Chaldean. This has been swallowed bitterly by some Chaldean bishops. Furthermore, the Kurds have not rested. Rumors have it that the Kurds have been bribing certain clergymen in return for creating this mess. While Assyrians and Chaldeans were busy fighting these petty arguments among each other's, the Kurds have secured their grip on northern Iraq and turned it to the so-called Iraqi Kurdistan. Twelve years ago, a fellow Assyrian and a dear friend of mine met with Archbishop Paul Karatas after he fled north of Iraq after the uprising in 1991. He ended in Istanbul and was a guest at the Chaldean Diocese and the archbishop for few days. The archbishop asked him where was he from? My friend answered 'Barwar.' They talked about Kurdification of northern Assyrian towns and villages and the archbishop said, fifteen years from now the Kurds will control all of Barwar as well; just like they have controlled other Assyrian regions in north of Iraq. I think the Archbishop is a prophet.

Fellow Assyrians,

The way I see it, the Assyrians and the Chaldeans must re-unite for the sake of existence in Iraq in general and north of Iraq (Assyria) in particular. We need each other in order to survive in a very hostile world. Continuous name calling by one side against the other on various discussion forums and other media outlets is not going to help. In fact, such practices give the excuse needed by the separatists to continue in their devilish campaign. Furthermore, we should refrain from negative reaction towards the September 3

letter because what is important is its outcome. The way I see it, such moves are useless; let us be patient. The American Administration in Iraq knows well who really struggled and who suffered, it was for that reason that the seat in the Iraqi Governing Council was given to the Assyrian Democratic Movement. The Coalition Administration in Iraq want to keep us under one seat and united. The Western world was shaken after September 11, 2001 and the future of Christianity in the Middle East has taken serious considerations. Some argue that the civilized world is going to assure that Christianity is alive and protected in the Middle East and the Moslem world after what happened. It has begun in Sudan and the tide will extend to other regions where for centuries the Christians have been oppressed and persecuted.

There is a difference between making a point through a scholarly and civilized manner and between expressing nothing but emotional outburst and using bad language while making a point. The prior could convince the reasonable among society; the latter inflames the situation, as it turns to a matter of stubbornness. Every one of us must put the future of our people as a whole ahead of his/her own interest. To every clergymen and laymen, men and women I say, seats are tempting, however, for a true Christian and nationalist alike there should be no higher seat than the seats of Assyria and Jesus Christ. Let us work in the path of re-uniting this broken home and church ... let us pray together for:

One Language called Syriac

One church called Church of the East or even Chaldean Church of the East.

One nation called Assyrian

This composition will preserve all titles and satisfy most of our people. We cannot satisfy everybody, however, we must try to bring as many as we can under one umbrella while trying as hard as we can to safeguard true history.

The saying goes; if there is good will, there is a solution. There is no reason whatsoever why we cannot bring our broken communities together. The reason why we cannot iron our differences has always been because of few individuals, few individuals whose only advantage is that they decided to get involved while the majority of society decided not to be active. Just think about that, we are allowing few unholy clergymen, opportunists, and ill at heart to keep us torn apart. We have individuals who have no true vision or serious national dreams; however, they have made a name for themselves by living on other's mistakes. We have been losing to the Kurds in our ancestral homelands; we lost our lands, homes, and population because Assyrian organizations have not been fighting the real enemy. A person that chooses division over unity is not a child of Christ; an organization that has no vision, real national agenda, solution for the Assyrian question, or alternative for the nation's problems, yet tries to get publicity from putting other organizations down is not worthy to be called as Assyrian organization. An Assyrian leader who has failed for years to lift a finger against the atrocities of the Kurds in northern Iraq but finds it so natural to bash fellow Assyrians is not a son of Assyria.

When are the people going to stand up and stop this mockery in Assyrian political and religious affairs?
When are we going to stand up and say enough is enough to the Assyrian mediocre national movement that is ruled indirectly by Kurds and Arabs? Why are we not helping ourselves when there are nations that want to help us? When are we going to wake up? When Assyria is buried officially and the so-called Kurdistan is proclaimed the land of the Assyrians!

Unity of our Syriac-speaking people in Iraq is our demand; we accept no other option.