

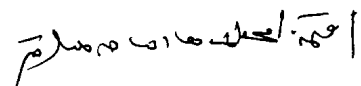
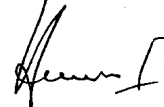
THE SECOND MEETING
OF THE HEADS OF THE
ORIENTAL ORTHODOX CHURCHES
IN THE MIDDLE EAST

ST. EPHREM MONASTERY, MA'ARAT SAYDNAYA,
DAMASCUS, SYRIA
FEBRUARY 10-12, 1999

COMMON DECLARATION

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We, **Pope Shenouda III**, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark, **Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I**, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East and **Catholicos Aram I**, Catholicos of the Armenians of the Great House of Cilicia, and the members of the Standing Committee H.E. Metropolitan Bishoy, H.E. Metropolitan Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, H.E. Metropolitan Theophilus George Saliba, H.G. Bishop Sebouh Sarkissian and Archimandrite Nareg Alemezian, also H.E. Metropolitan Athanasius Ephrem Barsoom, H.E. Metropolitan Abraham, H.E. Severius Melke Murad, H.G. Bishop Serapion and H.G. Bishop Julius Kuriakos who are with us, give thanks to God for bringing us together. We have gathered together for the second time as Heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in the Middle East to re-affirm our unity of faith and our common ministry in the life of our people in the Middle East and all over the world, and explore together the most efficient ways and means to strengthen our common presence and witness in the region.

Shenouda III  

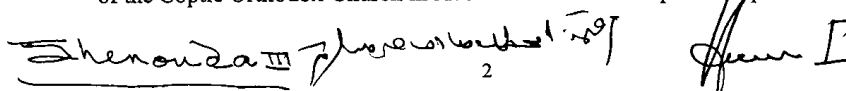
On the basis of our previous Common Declaration made on March 11, 1998, at the Monastery of Saint Bishoy in Wadi El Natroun, Egypt, we assessed our work together after our last meeting and we studied issues and concerns of common interest with the firm commitment of deepening our unity of faith. Hereunder we mention briefly some of the issues, perspectives and decisions which acquired an important place in our deliberations:

First: Congratulations

- (a) Pope Shenouda III and Catholicos Aram I congratulate His Holiness Patriarch Zakka I for his election as one of the presidents of the World Council of Churches. We are confident that His Holiness will efficiently represent the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Middle East in the WCC.
- (b) Pope Shenouda III and Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I congratulate His Holiness Catholicos Aram I for his re-election as moderator of the Central Committee and the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches. They deeply appreciate the significant role of His Holiness in the ecumenical movement and his continuous efforts to secure a more active participation of the Orthodox Churches in the WCC.
- (c) We congratulate His Excellency Mr. Hafez El-Assad for his re-election as President of Syria for a new term praying Almighty God to grant him long and prosperous life and continuous progress to beloved Syria.

Second: Theological dialogues

- (a) *Official dialogue with the family of the Eastern Orthodox Churches.* We decided to follow up the results of this dialogue and encourage the close co-operation between the two Orthodox families in the ecumenical movement. We consider important the publishing in national languages of the texts and explications of the agreed statements, as well as the findings of the Sub-Committees.
- (b) *Dialogue with the Anglican Communion.* We welcome the decision of the Lambeth Conference in 1988 and in 1998 to upgrade the standard of the dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox Churches from the level of Forum to official theological dialogue. We hope that the other Churches of the Oriental Orthodox family will also agree with us to give an official character and status to our dialogue with the Anglican Communion. A comprehensive program must be prepared for this dialogue by a preparatory committee.
- (c) *Dialogue with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.* We received a progress report about the dialogue and especially about the last meeting in Ma'arat Saydnaya, January 10-15, 1999, discussing ministry/priesthood. We noted the points of agreement and the points of disagreement between the Oriental Orthodox and the Reformed. We encourage the continuation of this dialogue according to a well-elaborated program and agenda.
- (d) *Non-official dialogue organized by Pro-Oriente.* In the context of our unofficial dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church organized by Pro-Oriente (Vienna, Austria), our attention was called to the question of the legal recognition of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Austria. We heard an updated report on the new

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is 'Shenouda III' with a flourish underneath. The signature on the right is 'Ignatius I' with a flourish underneath. A small number '2' is written between the two signatures.

law of recognition of churches and religious groups, and the ongoing consultations concerning this matter. By expressing our deep concern we feel that unless the problem is properly solved, the present situation may have its negative repercussions to our collaboration with Pro-Oriente. The legal recognition of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Austria similar to the Armenian Orthodox Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church is important. It is our expectation that the Roman Catholic Church of Austria will help to give a proper solution to this matter.

- (e) *Dialogue with the Seventh Day Adventists.* We received a proposal from the Seventh Day Adventists to start a theological dialogue. We did not consider appropriate to respond positively to this invitation because, first, the faith held by the Seventh Day Adventists does not correspond to the teachings of the Apostolic Church, and second, because of their active involvement in proselytism.

Third: The Orthodox Church of Eritrea

- (a) We learned that the Coptic Orthodox Church has signed a protocol with the Orthodox Church of Eritrea which was approved by the Holy Synods of these two Churches. This protocol recognizes the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Eritrea. We welcome the formation of this new autocephalous Church.
- (b) We express our concern in view of the continuing war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. We express our full solidarity with our sister Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches, and we pray for the immediate cease-fire and permanent peace based on just settlement of the conflict.

Fourth: The Middle East Council of Churches

- (a) As the Seventh General Assembly of the Middle East Council of Churches will be convened in Lebanon, April 26-30, 1999, we have decided to propose the name of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III for re-election as a president of the Council from our family. We express our deep appreciation for the ecumenical efforts and commitment of His Holiness.
- (b) We congratulate the Council on the occasion of its Silver Jubilee recognizing its ecumenical achievements in our region.
- (c) We gave due consideration to the question of membership in the Middle East Council of Churches in light of the application for membership of the Assyrian Church:

[1] We re-affirm our strong attachment to the Christology of the Oriental Orthodox Churches which is based on the Christological teachings of St. Cyril of Alexandria and is summarized in his well-known formula of "One nature of God Incarnate Logos."

[2] We re-state the rejection of our Churches of the teachings of all heretics, including Nestorius and his followers, and we reiterate anathemata uttered against them.

[3] We re-affirm the ecumenical commitment of our Churches to engage responsibly in theological dialogue and ecumenical relations and collaboration with all the churches for the full and visible unity of the church.

Shenouda III *Shenouda III* *Shenouda III*

On this basis, and in view of the family-structure of the Middle East Council of Churches, we do not oppose to the membership of any church in the Middle East Council of Churches provided that it is in line and in accordance with the constitution, rules and procedures of the Council.

Fifth: *The World Council of Churches*

We re-affirm our ecumenical commitment to our fellowship within the WCC. The Council is called to play an important ecumenical role in promoting the visible unity of the church. We welcome the decision of the Eight Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare, in December 1998, to form a Special Commission to ensure a full and active Orthodox participation in all aspects and at all levels of the life and witness of the World Council of Churches, including the decision-making bodies. We invite all Orthodox Churches to send their representatives to the meetings of this Special Commission.

Sixth: *The co-operation between our Churches in pastoral matters*

To ensure and develop closer contacts and co-operation among the clergy of our Churches at the local level, we recommend the following:

- (a) To form joint committees.
- (b) To facilitate the mutual use of church-buildings wherever and whenever it is necessary.
- (c) To distribute the Directory prepared by the Standing Committee to all our parishes and communities in various countries, to enable our faithful to find the nearest church to them.
- (d) In case of family problems, the church which officiated the sacrament of matrimony is responsible for any matter related to this marriage (e.g. annulment, permission of re-marriage, etc.).

Seventh: *Oriental Orthodox youth*

To achieve closer links among our youth, we decided to form an Oriental Orthodox Youth Sub-Committee to prepare a special program for joint youth activities under the supervision of the Standing Committee. The first meeting of the said Committee will take place in the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, Antelias, Lebanon, in July 1999.

Eighth: *2000 Great Jubilee*

- (a) By the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we will celebrate the 2000 Jubilee of His Nativity at our next annual meeting during February 26-28, 2000, in the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, Antelias, Lebanon. We have instructed the Standing Committee to prepare a special program for this celebration, including a joint liturgical text.

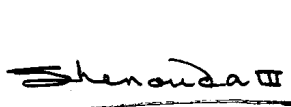
Shenouda III *Handwritten signatures in Arabic script*

- (b) In the same year the Coptic Orthodox Church will celebrate the 2000 Jubilee of the visit of the Holy Family to Egypt. All churches are invited to attend this important celebration and visit holy places in Egypt visited by the Holy Family.
- (c) Also, on the occasion of the 2000 Jubilee the Syrian Orthodox Church will have celebration in St. Ephrem Monastery in Ma'arat Saydnaya, Damascus, Syria, August 25-September 10. We invite our faithful to take part in this celebration.

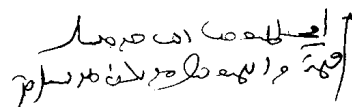
At the conclusion of our meeting, we joyfully render our thanks to Almighty God who has promoted and sustained our endeavors. We ask Him to always assist our efforts for the well being of our Churches, for the unity of all Churches and the salvation of the world.

We thank the Church of Antioch for its love and kind hospitality. We also thank all who prayed and worked with us for the success of this meeting.

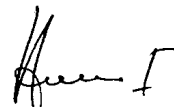
Glory be to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.



Pope Shenouda III



Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I



Catholicos Aram I