

## Does Christianity Have a Future in the Middle East?<sup>1</sup>

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It is a very great pleasure for me to inaugurate the chair dedicated to the memory of our revered predecessor Patriarch Maximos IV, who raised a clarion call for the Christian East during the Second Vatican Council and gave outstanding witness for the Churches of the Middle East. At the present time, when the region is shaken by terrible convulsions, we may well wonder whether there is a future for Christians in this cradle of Christianity. That will be the theme of our talk this evening. By way of introduction, we would like to remind our listeners of the definition given by the late lamented Neophytos Edelby, Metropolitan of Aleppo, of our identity as Melkite Christians: “*We are Arab, but not Muslim; Eastern, but not Orthodox; Catholic but not Latin.*”

### ***An Open Identity***

Our identity, thus defined, has the merit of being open. It does not shut us into a definition. For a closed identity can become deadly. We see the terrible effect that this can have in the tragedies that beset our region. A closed identity always has a tendency to deny the other person, or at least to see him as a rival. It is defensive by nature and so conservative. It erects walls between peoples, confessions, and religions. An open identity, on the other hand, does not lock anyone into a definition or prejudices. It always strives to look beyond itself.

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It is always ready to engage in or instigate any possible dialogue. It is suited to bridge-building. It is creative.

Needless to say, the condition for this openness is rootedness. It is because I take on fully my own identity that the other person does not seem like a threat. Rootedness and openness are then the two essential poles for the Middle East's Christians if they wish not only to maintain their age-old presence, which would be a fairly "defensive" definition, but above all to work to build up a Middle East where one can live and be at peace, thus contributing to the dialogue of civilizations which is of vital importance for humanity today.

This open identity is historically that of the Patriarchate of Antioch, which inherited the Greek Patristic legacy without being Hellenic but multicultural from the very beginning. Antioch's liturgy, for example, was celebrated in three languages, Greek, Syriac and Arabic; its people were called Melkite for their fidelity to the faith defined at Chalcedon; the patriarchate was speedily integrated into Arab culture after the advent of Islam; and the patriarchate has always kept a lively sense of Catholicity, which made it the pioneer of rapprochement with Rome from the sixteenth century. The Patriarchate of Antioch is not only encultured in the region where it is based, but it is also traditionally the transmitter of cultures. It is in fact in the sphere of influence of Antioch that Melkite and Syriac Christians translated into Arabic the philosophical, astronomical, mathematical and medical heritage of ancient Greece. Brought by Muslims into Spain, it at last reached the Christian West through a final translation into Latin, thus realising an astonishing circuit of sharing and transmission of knowledge around the Mediterranean. All these historical aspects underline the peculiar charisma and mission of our patriarchate: that of being a factor of unification between the Eastern Churches; between the East and the Christian West; between Islam and Christianity; and between Islam and the contemporary West.

### ***I. The Incarnation: Source of all Unity***

The label of “Melkites,” given at first in a pejorative way to the faithful members of the Patriarchates of Antioch and Alexandria, is in fact a glorious title insofar as it refers to the Christological definition of Chalcedon, in 451, which laid the foundations on which rests the whole of Christian doctrine: that of the mystery of the Incarnation, which is none other than a mystery of union, the union of the two natures in Christ. This union of the two natures, a transcendental miracle of diversity in divine simplicity, is the prototype of the communion of wills and hearts in the mystical body of Christ.

The incarnate Word, first-born of a multitude of brothers, first-fruits of the new, regenerated humanity, makes all humans members of one family. As Saint Paul says, “wherefore thou art no more a servant but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ” (Gal. 4:7). We discover through this mystery the origin, essence, goal and incomparable dignity of our human condition, which the Church Fathers express through the well-known term of divinization. “For the glory of God is a living man,”<sup>2</sup> said Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, meaning a man who has attained his full divine stature. Saint Athanasius of Alexandria confirmed it by saying, “God became man so that thou, man, mightest be capable of receiving divinity.”<sup>3</sup> Saint Gregory of Nazianzus made it clear as follows: “Christ became man to unite us to God in his own person.”<sup>4</sup> Only the mystery of the Incarnation can enable us to discover the meaning, worth and dignity of our life, linked as it is to the heavenly life and God himself. Man’s horizon is nothing less than divine life. That is the source of all joy, whether given or received, all altruism and contribution to humanity’s welfare. But this supreme dignity conferred on us by the Incarnation of the Word requires of us in return to bear fruit, serve others and contribute to the building of a civilization of life, working like peacemakers and tireless servants of unity, capable of showing

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<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Book 4, XX, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54:3.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 29:19 and 3813.