

**“EAST-WEST MEETING 2002”**

**MINSTER ABBEY – RAMSGATE  
ENGLAND**

**12 – 18 SEPTEMBER 2002**

**A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF  
ECUMENICAL ACTIVITIES  
IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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**GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHBISHOP OF ALEPPO, ALEXANDRETTA AND DEPENDENCIES  
OF  
THE GREEK ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATE OF ANTIOCH  
- SYRIA -**

# **A Brief Account of Ecumenical Activities in the Middle East**

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

It is an honor to me to address such an assembly and to present a brief account of the ecumenical activity that is taking place in the Middle East. Our presentation will follow the diagram given below:

- 1) the necessity that falls on the shoulder of the different Christian communities to work together for the unity of Christians;
- 2) the current situation of the ecumenical activity within the sea of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, with highlights on some of its aspects;
- 3) some difficulties hindering the dialogue between the different Christian communities;
- 4) some requirements for the dialogue and a vision for the future;
- 5) and, at the end, a concluding word.

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## ***I – THE NECESSITY OF THE WORK FOR THE UNITY OF CHRISTIANS***

It is good that, while beginning to develop our presentation, to start with the Bible. In fact, the ecumenical activity stems from the word of Christ that He addressed to His disciples to be one (John 17:21).

It is a word that Christ gave in testimony to His disciples when he was about to go to His passion (John 17:14). It is a word that Christ characterizes to be the “truth” (John 17:18). Being Himself the Truth, He revealed it to the world as being the true and complete revelation of His love. Being also the Way, He revealed His life as love poured in abundance. It is the love that gathers Him to the Father and that was the subject of His prayer to Him in order that this love would be poured in the heart of His disciples and that it would be the norm and, even more, the breath of their soul.

Within the frame of this biblical context, the unity, to which all Christians are aspiring, cannot be but the fruit, mainly, of repentance, i.e. a way towards the fulfillment in the truth and love in Christ. The perfection in this attempt, i.e. of repentance, is an undeniable sign of our union to the Body of Christ. Then, the ecclesial unity is shown in its most ontological expression.

Commanded by Christ, not only through the Scripture, but also through His prayer, a prayer that did not stop to be fulfilled throughout the History of salvation, the work towards the unity of Christians within the ecumenical activity, becomes, on the one hand, a witness, and on the other hand, a realization of Christ’s will on His Church, One, holy, Catholic and Apostolic. Consequently, working for the unity of Christians is a necessity that falls on the shoulder of Christ’s disciples in the modern world.

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The realization of this Christian witness becomes more urgent within the multi-confessional composition in the Middle East. In fact, the current situation is characterized, at the pastoral level, by many interactions, one of which is the mixed marriage that take place between the different Christian communities.

On the other hand, these same communities are nowadays facing different problems, as a consequence of the current economical and financial situation in our countries. It is a situation that explains in some way the insecurity that the youth are experiencing. Indeed, the immigration of the youth, seeking for social security, work and a promising future, constitutes one of the crucial problems for all the Christian communities.

It is clear that a collective witness and a common agreement between the different Christian communities, at all levels, is not only a necessity, but also a decisive priority that enables them to face all the problems, mainly because of the fact that these communities are integrated in an Arabic context, with a Moslem majority.

Within the same frame, and in regard to the globalization that is taking place on an international scale, these communities are motivated to formulate a response and an example, which might reveal the authentic Christian message, and not a mere Christianity subject to the capitalization and the secularization.

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## ***II – THE CURRENT ECUMENICAL SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST***

Aware of the responsibility of carrying out a true Christian witness in the Arab world, we will try to present the current situation of the ecumenical activity as it is taking place in the sea of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch. Our presentation will be confined to a selection of some examples, some of the most significant, in order to give a clear idea about this witness. The chosen examples will reflect the degree of collaboration and coordination between the different Christian communities at three different levels:

A) that of the ecclesial Hierarchy,

B) that of the Faculties of Theology,

C) and finally, that of a more or less unique city, in regard to the ecumenical activity, i.e. the city of Aleppo.

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A) In the first place, we would like to underscore the consultation role played by the *Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Lebanon* (APECL, created in 1967). In fact, it became a custom that this Assembly would invite, to the closing session of its synodal work, the primates of the communities nonparticipant in the Assembly. Moreover, this Assembly would invite our Holy Synod to take part in this last session of their synodal work, whenever the political and social situation urged so, mainly concerning the dramatic evolution of events during the war in Lebanon. On the other hand, such consultations used to take place regarding the major events of the Arab world. The presence of our Patriarchate within this witness was appreciated at all levels.

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B) In the second place, we would like to speak about the role of collaboration and coordination played by *ATIME – Association of the Theological Institutes in*

*the Middle East* (created in 1967),— where all the Faculties of theology belonging to different Christian communities (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) in Lebanon are member. This Association is promoting the collaboration and the coordination between all the faculties of Theology. The presence of such an association constitutes a major link between the students of Theology. The common activities between students, that are taking place throughout all the academic year, is a particular witness at the level of the ecumenical activity.

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C) In the third place, we would like to speak about some particular aspects of the ecumenical activity in the second city of Syria, i.e. Aleppo, from which I come. In fact, the city of Aleppo forms a mosaic of Christian communities, i.e. Orthodox (with the following denominations: Greek, Armenian and Syriac), Catholic (with the following denominations: Greek, Armenian, Syriac, Maronite, Chaldeen and Latin) and Protestant (with the following denominations: Armenian and Arab). Eleven different Christian communities have an organized church structure in Aleppo, and many of them have some health and educational institutions. Even though the city has a strong Islamic character, the spirit of good neighboring and conviviality is prevailing regarding the relationship between the Christian and Islamic communities. Fraternity, cordiality, mutual respect and cooperation are the principal characteristics of the current situation in Aleppo.

On the other hand, at the level of the Christian inter-communal relationship, a council has been created, in order to discuss different pastoral problems, to take common decisions concerning social issues, and to handle urgent situations. This council is known by the name of “*The Council of the Christian Communities in Aleppo*”. The presence of such a council helps to defend the interests of the different communities. It constitutes an appreciated witness in front of the Moslems. This council has its own secretariat and some minor publications.

On an internal level, ecumenical relationships can be observed regarding the following issues:

- a) the celebration of the world week of prayer for the unity of Christians,
- b) the pastoral agreement regarding mixed marriage,

c) and, last but not least, common pastoral worries, mainly that of the immigration of the youth; the embodiment of Christians in their Arab environment; common activities between the youth of different communities; exchange of educational and catechetical programs.

Furthermore, the unification of the Easter celebration date represents, particularly in a multi-confessional environment as Aleppo, is the object of great expectation for all the Christian communities. As a matter of fact a permission has been granted by the Vatican to the Catholics resident in the Middle East to celebrate Easter according to the julien calendar instead of the gregorien. Some consultations took place and resulted into a positive response, which the resident Catholics in the Middle East expressed as a promise at Damascus, during the pontifical visit to Syria, in May 2001. Unfortunately, some parties could not keep their promise, a fact that generated into a general deception. Nevertheless, all the Christians have the hope that their expectation will be fulfilled not before long.

In a further extent, regarding the external ecumenical relationship, we would like to underline the involvement of many of the bishops and chiefs' communities in many international ecumenical councils and associations, and participation in different international conferences and dialogues. Some of these major councils are:

a) the *World Council of Churches*, which has organized many meetings in Aleppo, mainly that related to the unification of the Easter celebration date, known as "Aleppo Conference";

b) the *Middle East Council of Churches*, which has inaugurated an office in Aleppo that takes care of the Christian education and organizes ecumenical activities concerning the family, the youth, and the woman;

c) the *Pontifical Council for the Promotion for the Unity of the Christians*, which is following the ecumenical activities in Aleppo, and who has sent many delegations in the aim of promoting the dialogue and pushing forward the process of unity.

Here, we mention that the visits, paid by the Primates and Patriarches of the different Christian communities to Aleppo, are always an occasion of an ecumenical manifestation. In this perspective, we would like to make a small account of events since October 2001, in which our Archdiocese was directly involved, such as the visits, respectively, of Cardinals Duprey, Kassidy and Kasper of Vatican City, as well as of Bishop Tsiptert of the Protestant Church in

Germany. Moreover, our Archdiocese has organized two public conferences concerning the visit of the Pope John-Paul II to Syria and that of the Patriarch Ignatius IV to Rome in 2001. The purpose of these conferences was to inform the faithful of all the communities about the latest development in the dialogue. The audience was a large one and was attended by all the chiefs of the Christian communities. Among the lecturers was Mr Tarek Mitri.

In a different perspective, we would like to mention the agreement that took place between the Orthodox Church and the pro-chalcedoniens few years ago, which allows the sacramental administration of faithful of the other community, when the community in question lacks for priests, as this is a reality that is encountered in many places overseas.

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### ***III – SOME DIFFICULTIES HINDERING THE DIALOGUE***

Although we tried in this presentation to highlight the positive aspects of the ecumenical activities, yet we need to speak about some difficulties that are destabilizing the relationship between the different Christian communities. In fact, if the proselytism of the old days have eclipsed, unfortunately it has flourished in our days disguised into various forms on the pastoral and educational level.

Indeed, schools became an intelligent tool through which proselytism is exercised in our country. The problem arises with the practice of the First Communion at school, a practice that involves all Christian students. The problem is later on extended on the level of the catechetical work and all sort of artistic sportive and collective activities. Such an environment creates a great stimulation to students to get more and more involved in their scholar environment. Consequently, they are more and more alienated from their root and the community to which they belong. It seems that the missionary work, besides its educational work, is engaging somehow an “illicit” activity with te youth of our communities. It seems that it primarily aims less towards providing a service, than towards exercising control over an increasing number of faithful belonging to other communities. It is a fact that can hardly be overcome in the current social and economical situation, and the establishment of the equilibrium in the use of the educational tool seems to be unreachable. Consequently, misusing the educational tool in such a way, a use that we want to believe to be unintentional, is causing an increasing intensity, which is

harmful to the attempts of restoring a pacific relationship between the different Christian communities. This reality has been amazingly depicted by His Beatitude the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Ignatius IV, in the message delivered in Damascus at the reception of His Holiness the Pope of Rome, John-Paul II, during the visit of the latter to Syria in May 2001.

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#### ***IV – SOME REQUIREMENTS AND A VISION FOR THE FUTURE***

Right away, we would like to underline the importance of the face-to-face dialogue. Being conscious of such a condition, we were always encouraging the participation of all the communities in the *World Council of Churches*. It is indeed necessary to undertake such a dialogue, carried out by the mutual respect to the communities involved in this Council. Mutual respect means explicitly the absence of any kind of proselytism. Any dialogue is to take place on a round table, where mutual respect and fidelity to the agreements stated at different places are honored and respected.

At this stage, let us note that the *Edict of Balamand* has already recognized that Uniatism in the East was a historical mistake, since such a movement cannot, at any rate, constitute the ideal form and way to reach the unity of the Christians. Still dialogue and Meeting are the most appropriate means to reach this goal.

Another document that interests us in approaching our subject, is the message addressed by His Beatitude the Patriarch of Antioch to His Holiness the Pope, during the last visit of the latter to Syria, in May 2001. Indeed, this message constituted a work paper that stimulated the Pope to invite the Patriarch to Rome in order to discuss it. This message, characterized by its frankness and its eagerness to promote a sincere as well as a fruitful dialogue, was of good and positive impact on the relationship between Orthodox and Catholics.

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#### ***CONCLUSION***

In conclusion, we would like to draw the attention towards the role that the monastic communities could have. We think that it is time to promote such a presence within the ecumenical movement, since these communities, with their spiritual experience, are better positioned to undertake a dialogue under the

basis of mutual comprehension and understanding. Such an endeavor, involving the monastic communities, will be much more fruitful than all the international conferences and meetings.

At the end, we would like to thank you for your attention and we wish all the success for this meeting.