

Ecumenism in Aleppo

Presentation by Metropolitan Paul

Aleppo 2007

I. Aleppo City

Aleppo (Arabic: حلب [ʕalab]) is a city in northern Syria, capital of the Aleppo Governorate. The city has a population of around 1.9 million, making it the second largest city in Syria after Damascus. Aleppo is one of the oldest inhabited cities in history. It knew human settlement since the eleventh millennium B.C. through the residential houses which were discovered in Al-Qaramel Hill. It was known to antiquity as Khalpe, Khalibon, to the Greeks as Βέροια (Veria), and to the Turks as Halep; during the French Mandate, Alep was used. It occupies a strategic trading point midway between the sea and the Euphrates; initially, it was built on a small group of hills in a wide fertile valley on both sides of the river Quweiq (قويق). The province or governorate extends around the city for over 16,000 km² and has around 3.7 million inhabitants.

The main role of the city was as a trading place, as it sat at the crossroads of two trade routes and mediated the trade from India, the Tigris and Euphrates regions and the route coming from Damascus in the South, which traced the base of the mountains rather than the rugged seacoast. Although trade was often directed away from the city for political reasons, it continued to thrive until the Europeans began to use the Cape route to India and later to utilise the route through Egypt to the Red Sea. Since then the city has declined and its chief exports now are the agricultural products of the surrounding region, mainly wheat and cotton, pistachios, olives and sheep.



Location of the governorate of Aleppo within Syria

History

The name Halab is of obscure origins. Some proposed that Halab means the metals of iron or copper in Amorite languages since it was a major source of these metals in antiquity. Halaba in Aramaic means white, referring to the color of soil and marble abundant in the area. Another proposed etymology is that the name Halab means "gave out milk," coming from the ancient tradition that **Abraham** gave milk to travelers as they moved throughout the region. The colour of his cows was ashen (Arab. *shaheb*), therefore the city is also called "Halab ash-Shahba" (he milked the ash-coloured).



A front view of the Aleppo Citadel

Because the modern city occupies its ancient site, Aleppo has scarcely been touched by archaeologists. The site has been occupied from around **5000 BC**, as excavations in Tallet Alsauda show. It grew as the capital of the kingdom of **Yamkhad** until the ruling **Amorite** Dynasty was overthrown around **1600 BC**. The city remained under Hittite control until perhaps **800 BC** before passing through the hands of the **Assyrians** and the **Persian Empire** and being captured by the Greeks in **333 BC**, when **Seleucus Nicator** renamed the settlement Beroea, after **Beroea** in **Macedon**. The city remained in Greek or **Seleucid** hands until **64 BC**, when **Syria** was conquered by the **Romans**.

The city remained part of the **Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire** before falling to **Arabs** under **Khalid ibn al-Walid** in **637**; in the **10th century** a resurgent Byzantine Empire briefly regained control from **974**

to **987**. The city was twice besieged by **Crusaders**—in **1098** and in **1124**—but was not conquered. It came under the control of **Saladin** and then the **Ayyubid** Dynasty from **1183** and remained until taken by the **Mongols** in **1260**. Returning to native control in **1317**, decades after the **Battle of Ain Jalut**, it became part of the **Ottoman Empire** in **1517**, when the city had around 50,000 inhabitants.

On **August 9, 1138**, a **deadly earthquake** ravaged the city and the surrounding area. Although estimates from this time are very unreliable, it is believed that 230,000 people died, making it the **fourth deadliest** earthquake in recorded history.

The city remained Ottoman until the empire's collapse, but was occasionally riven with internal feuds as well as attacks of the **plague** and later **cholera** from **1823**. By **1901** its population was around 125,000. The city revived when it came under French colonial rule but slumped again following the decision to give **Antioch** to **Turkey** in **1938-1939**.

Aleppo was named by the Islamic Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) as the capital of Islamic culture in 2006.

Design



Inside the suq

There is a relatively clear division between old and new Aleppo. The older portions were contained within a wall, 3 miles in circuit with seven gates. The medieval **castle** in the city -- known as the **Citadel of Aleppo** -- is built atop a huge, partially artificial mound rising 50 m above the city. The current structure dates from the **13th century** and had been extensively damaged by earthquakes, notably in **1822**.

As an ancient trading centre, Aleppo also has impressive *suqs* (shopping streets) and *khan* (commercial courtyards). The city was significantly redesigned after **World War II**; in **1952** the French architect **Andre Gutton** had a number of wide new roads cut through the city to allow easier passage for modern traffic. In the **1970s**, large parts of the older city were demolished to allow for the construction of modern flat blocks.

Population and religion



Narrow street in the Christian quarter

While more than 70% of Aleppo's inhabitants are **Sunni Muslims** (mainly **Arabs**, but also **Kurds**, and other diverse ethnicities relocated there during the Ottoman period, most notably **Circassians**, **Adyghe**, **Albanians**, **Bosnians**, **Bulgars**, **Turks**, **Kabardins**, **Chechens**, and others), Aleppo is home to one of the richest and most diversified **Christian** communities of the Orient. Christians belonging to a dozen different congregations (with prevalence of the **Armenian**, **Greek Orthodox** and **Syriac Orthodox Church** denominations) represent between 4-6% and 20% of its population.



St. Simon (Samaan) church is considered to be one of the oldest remained churches in the world.

The city has many **mosques** including the **Madrasa Halawiya**. A temple that once stood on the site was rebuilt as Aleppo's great **Byzantine** cathedral founded by **Saint Helena**, mother of **Constantine the Great**, which contains a tomb associated with **Zachary**, father of **John the Baptist**. During the **Crusades**, when the invaders pillaged the surrounding countryside, the city's chief judge converted St. Helena's cathedral into a mosque, and in the middle of the **12th century** the famous leader **Nur al-Din** founded the **madrasa** or religious school that has encompassed the former cathedral. The **Jami al-Kabir** or "Great Mosque" was originally built by the **Umayyads**, although the present structure begun for Nur al-Din dates from **1158** and a rebuilding after the **Mongol** invasion of **1260**.

Notable people

- **Paul of Aleppo, 17th century** Archdeacon of Aleppo, traveler and chronicler.
- Patriarche **Christophore** friend of Khalife Sayef Al Daouleh.
- Patriarche **Elias 4th**. (**a street name**)
- Metropolitan **Elias Yousef** (**a street name**)
- **Francis Al Marrash**
- **Kostaki Homs** poet. (**a street name**)
- **Fathi Sakkal** social Care.
- Chessplayer and writer **Phillip Stamma** was born in 1705 .
- **George Tutunjian**– Famous **Armenian Revolutionary Songs** performer.

- **Levon Ter-Petrossian**, former president of the Republic of Armenia.
- **Ali Sadreddine Bayanouni**, deputy leader of the **Muslim Brotherhood** in 1977.
- **Muhammed Faris** (born 1951), first Syrian **cosmonaut**.
- **Moustapha Akkad**, film producer and director, born in 1935.

Photo gallery



The National Park is in the heart of the city



Citadel of Aleppo is the most famous monument in the city



The amphitheatre inside the citadel



the Byzantine hall inside the citadel



Old Aleppo (view from the citadel)



Ar-Rahman (The Gracious) mosque in Al-Sabil neighborhood



Aleppo in 1912, centered on its citadel mound



The Church of Prophet Elias

II. Aleppo, an Ecumenical City

I. Historical survey

Christianity was introduced very early into Aleppo. Ecclesiastically the city depended on the Apostolic See of Antioch (80 km away), where the disciples of Christ were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). Tradition says that regions of Aleppo and Mounbouj were evangelized by the apostle, Simon the Zealot.

The first **Christian community** of Aleppo existed for three centuries without an official hierarchy owing to persecution by the pagan Roman government. St. Symon the Stylite is the Patron of the city for our Archdiocese, its 1500th jubilee has been celebrated in ecumenical activities in Aleppo, the year 1991. There were also several martyrs, the most renowned being the two saints, Serge and Bacchus, whose the 1700th jubilee took place in 1997, and the two doctors, Cosmos and Damien,



whose we celebrated the 1700th Jubilee on 2006, Martyr Yousef (Joseph) Halabi, Martyr David (1666). St. John Chrysostom a Doctor and great Father of the Church, common Saint in West and East, is the next St. to celebrate its 1600th jubilee, etc.

After the official recognition of the Christian religion at the beginning of the 4th century, the church of Aleppo was constituted as a suffragan **eparchy of the See of Antioch**; it was at that time that churches were built, and convents set up with a flowering of hermitages and monastic cells.

The ancient churches of Aleppo, the deserted towns and the ruined churches around the city are the best witnesses from this period of the blossoming of Christianity in the area, such as the church of St Simon the Stylite, and the churches of Mouchabbak, Qalb Laouze and Qorechet.

Aleppo's monastic life reached its peak between the 4th and the 5th centuries. The renown of the *stylites*, "the chosen of God", spread beyond the region. The stylites included the women Marana and Kira from the era of Bishop Acace of Aleppo (378-432).

The variety was tangible in Aleppo because of the close proximity of the ancient Byzantine, Armenian, Maronite and Syrian churches.

In the 17th century, merchants flooded into the Syrian metropolis. Consulates were established to protect their interests. accompanying them also came many religious **missionaries** came to "proselytize" the oriental and Original churches. The founders of five religious Oriental Orders originated from Aleppo, each establishing convents in Lebanon.

In the **18th century** a painful event developed in Aleppo, in favour of unity with Rome, resulting in the Armenian, Byzantine and Syrian

churches each splitting and **divided** into two communities: Orthodox and Catholic (the problem of Uniatism).

The Chaldean and the Latin communities were constituted in the 19th century. Later, as a result of the efforts of Protestant missionaries, two Evangelical communities, one Armenian and one Arab, were created.

Till the beginning of the 20th century relations between the churches were not cordial because of the wounded memory of division, but a number of social and national factors led the Christians to come together over the course of the years, until the advent of a new period of fraternal ecumenical relations, inaugurated by the historical embrace between Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem. And since the soil was quite fertile in Aleppo, already known for its rich religious traditions, the seed of unity found a natural place to grow, to ripen and bear fruit up until the present.

This is why during the past 35 years Aleppo has known a rapid evolution in ecumenical relations between the local Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches. It was the religious leaders who contributed to the creation of that ecumenical climate according to the directives of their respective synods, without ignoring the fact that the laity also imposed an ecumenical spirit in an environment where unity among Christians is of primary importance.

2. Aleppo today

Aleppo is a city of 3,500,000 people. Christians are in a minority, forming 6% of a mainly Muslim population. Arabic is the official language, but among the Christians there are some who speak Armenian and Syriac. Aleppo has eleven Christian communities recognized as “*taifeh*”; three Orthodox eparchies (Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox

of Antioch, Syrian Orthodox of Antioch), six Catholic eparchies (Greek-Melkite, Armenian, Syrian, Maronite, Chaldean, Latin), and two Protestant communities (Armenian and Arab).

It is clear that all religious leaders, although they live in the same territory, have jurisdiction only over “the people” of their own communities. All communities have their statutes recognized by the State and are juridically independent regarding marriage certificates, ecclesial courts, worship services, property management, administrative boards, etc.

One practice specific to Aleppo is (in the whole Muslim Arabic Republics) the closure on Sunday of several private schools, factories and shops, although the official holiday is Friday. That shows clearly the huge influence of Christians in the social life. Christians who work on Sundays are given free time to attend their religious services. Liturgical celebrations and the main ecclesial events, such as marriages and baptisms, take place on Sundays, and the actual attendance of Christians exceeds the official percentage.

There are 36 churches operating in Aleppo, besides 17 chapels and 21 convents. The faithful (120.000) are assisted by more than 120 priests, religious and pastors and 90 consecrated nuns. Aleppo, remains a source of priestly and religious vocations, and is the see of three minor seminaries and three youth formation programmes.

Charitable, educational and cultural institutions patronized by the churches, as well as schools, hospitals, clinics, old people’s homes, orphanages, etc., contribute greatly to the social development of the city and serve all without discrimination.

This mosaic of Christian communities finds its unity thanks to the fact that religious leaders meet regularly - on the last Saturday of every month - to discuss pastoral questions and to take common decisions on social issues and unforeseen situations. They are now committed to

rejecting all means of proselytism, to help one another safeguard the interests of the churches, and to bear witness before the Muslims. They have a Council of Heads of Aleppo's Christian Communities which has its own secretariat, makes statements and issues general directives, and ecumenical activities.

3. Internal ecumenical relations

Motivated by this ecumenical spirit, the churches of Aleppo have been able to achieve significant progress in three ways: spiritual sharing; pastoral agreement and collaboration in charitable works.

a. Spiritual sharing

Bishops and priests participate in baptisms, marriages, engagements and funeral ceremonies in the various churches. Often, these celebrations become ecumenical events, making a positive impression on all the faithful.

The culmination of Aleppo's ecumenical relations is reached each year during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The local ecumenical commission takes care of the celebrations and also prepares the booklets to help the faithful to participate in the prayers. The first celebration brings the faithful together. The second gathering is for young people. The third gathering for prayer assembles the whole clergy and is followed by a fraternal "agapé". A special ecumenical celebration, in the Armenian language, is organized by the three Armenian communities of the city, who also celebrate together commemorations of national or religious events.

It should be noted that the priests of the various communities (more than 120) know each other and enjoy good relations. As a result, an ecumenical yearbook has been published for all the communities of Aleppo.

b. Pastoral understanding

There is real understanding at the pastoral level between the various churches of Aleppo. In fact, they all recognize the baptism of the other churches, as well as mixed marriages. It is the custom for a wife to worship with her husband's faith community. Applications for passage from one church to another, however, are only seldom accepted, for valid reasons.

All private schools, confraternities and catechism centres have an ecumenical character. It is noteworthy that the catechism books used in all schools of Syria have been written by an ecumenical commission. That project was a precursory move in the area of ecumenism.

It should also be noted that the Protestant led "Bible society", and the Institute of Theology of the Catholic Catechism Society, as well as the Orthodox movements, all work for the promotion of the ecumenical spirit. Furthermore, all material published on behalf of the churches of Aleppo, such as the diocesan bulletins and the parish leaflets, is characterized by an ecumenical spirit.

Several ecumenical inter-confessional commissions operate in collaboration with the Middle- East Council of Churches (for youth – for family – for promoting women's affairs – for health...).

A new church was recently (in 2002) consecrated in a new district of the city, serving both Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics; this church will be open to all Christians.

One of our common pastoral concerns is the problem of emigration, which weighs heavily on the Oriental churches. We fight against this plague in a spirit of ecumenical solidarity. Our plan is centred on three lines:

- i. We have roots in the Arab countries: hence the importance for us to take care of pertinent archaeological sites and to encourage groups of young people to visit the ancient churches in ruin and to study the history of our churches of the Orient.

ii. We have a common history with our Muslim brothers and sisters: hence the importance of our presence and of our common life in one and the same homeland.

iii. We have privileges which are not found in other countries: hence the importance to caution Christians against succumbing to the lure of developed countries.

c. Charitable collaboration

As we have already mentioned, the churches of Aleppo are notable for their collaboration in the humanitarian and charitable fields, providing assistance to old people, orphans, poor people, families in difficulties, handicapped persons... while hospitals and clinics have adopted an ecumenical line of conduct by making no distinction between people of different confessions.

In Aleppo, spiritual communion is concretely embodied in the communion of charity.

We are still hoping to start a theological and doctrinal dialogue, thus far absent from our ecumenical relationships which, as indicated, are limited to the spiritual, pastoral and humanitarian areas.

Moreover, we are still looking for ways to unify the date of **Easter**, a central concern among the faithful. At present, some churches celebrate Easter according to the Gregorian calendar, others according to the Julian calendar, which is a scandal when we pursue unity.

We have also been disturbed by the creation of a new, independent ecclesial community in Aleppo, which does not participate in ecumenical activities, as it refuses to recognize the baptism of the other churches and is expanding through an offensive form of proselytism.

The First Communion, till it remains a real problem to be solved. While the Orthodox give communion with the Baptism immediately, the Catholics delay it, in this case some problem of proselytism appears in the Christian private schools, which have children from all Churches.

4. External ecumenical relations

Several bishops and leaders of Aleppo's religious communities have official relations with international ecumenical councils and authorities, and take part in bilateral theological dialogues with sister churches. This involvement is also beneficial for our local ecumenical relations.

Among these councils:

_ The World Council of Churches has organized various meetings in Aleppo. The most important of these had as its theme the unification of the date of Easter. The event has become known as the "Aleppo Consultation".

_ The Middle-East Council of Churches has found a fertile ground for ecumenism in Aleppo; for that reason, it has set up an office dealing with Christian education, and it organizes various ecumenical activities in the interests of family, youth and women (these activities include, in the first place, courses of pedagogic formation).

_ The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity keeps up with the ecumenical activities in the city and has sent several representatives with a view to promoting dialogue among sister churches of the Orient, and reviving the process of unity.

It should also be noted that all visits to Aleppo made on various occasions by the patriarchs, are opportunities for ecumenical events. One of special importance it was that of H. B. Archbishop of Athens Christodoulos on 2003 invited by our Archdiocese.

III. Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Activities-Aleppo:

Since our coming to Aleppo, we have done much to encourage ecumenical activity within the Archdiocese. A number of innovative steps have been taken to redress themes that have long been of great importance to all Christians. Today, as a result of these developments, we can see a fresh ecumenical impulse not only within Aleppo itself. Among some of these activities, we can enumerate the following:

- **The Women's Committee:** It organizes the annual gathering of women's organizations from all churches in Aleppo. It is the only gathering of its kind and convenes every year.

- **Youth involvement:** Many young people in our church are taking an active part in ecumenical conferences and camps organized by the Middle East Council of Churches.

- **The Children and Family Committee:** Within each christian community member in the Middle East Council of Churches, there is a committee that is involved in children and family care. The representatives of these committees meet on a regular basis and seek ways to strengthen and support the family unit within the Church, through the bias of the Education Department of the Middle East Council of Churches. Discussions are being held to broaden plans for the development of family support systems within this ecumenical context.

- **Common Spiritual Retreats:** For the first time, our Church has organized Spiritual Retreats where clergy from other Christian communities of Aleppo participated at. To date we have held one Retreat in Balamand, Lebanon, where our clergy met with Greek Catholic clergy of Aleppo. Another such meeting was held at our Archdiocese in Aleppo with the participation of Syrian Orthodox clergy.



- **Ecumenical Forums:** We have initiated a series of Ecumenical Forums coordinated by our Archdiocese, **the first**, on the unification of the celebration of Easter, **the second**, on the visit of the Pope to Syria, **the third** on the Visit of the Patriarch of Antioch to Rome and **the forth** on the “official



dialogue between Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches”. Archbishops of Aleppo, clergy and many faithful participated at both events and the talks were followed by lively discussion.

• **A Course in Ecumenism:** A course in Ecumenism has been introduced to the curriculum of the Theological Seminary of our Archdiocese. This course has been co-lectured by a number of bishops, priests and lay people including Metropolitan Yohanna Ibrahim (Syrian Orthodox Church), Metropolitan Butros Marayati (Armenian Catholic Church), Fr. Afadis Bayoni (Armenian Protestant Church) and Mr. Razek Syriani (Middle East Council of Churches).

IV. Ecumenical Invitations and Receptions in our Greek Orthodox archdiocese:

*** Year 2000:**

1. October 21-22: His Eminence **Pierre Duprey**, late president of the Pontifical Office for the unity of Christians at the Vatican, at the Enthronement of Metropolitan Paul in Aleppo.
2. December: H.E. Mgr. **Cassidy** president of the Pontifical Office for the unity of Christians at the Vatican.

*** Year 2002:**

3. March 15- 17: Cardinal **Walter Kasper**, president of the Pontifical Office for the unity of Christians at the Vatican, at the inauguration of St Joseph Church in Hamdanieh (Aleppo).

*** Year 2003:**

4. November 29-30: His Beatitude Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, **Christodoulos**.

* **Year 2004:**

5. March 6: Cardinal **Walter Kasper**, president of the Pontifical Office for the unity of Christians at the Vatican.

V. Ecumenical Relationship of His Eminence Mt. Paul:

- **Representative of Antiochian Orthodox Church** in the official commission of dialogue between Orthodox and Catholic churches.
- **Friend of St Egidio** community: participation, since 2002 up till now, to their annual international conferences in September, and to their annual bishops conference in February.
- **Friend of Focolary Fellowship:** participation to “International Ecumenical Conference of Bishops”, in Istanbul, November 23-December 1, 2003.



- **Friend of Minster Abbey** community, in Ramsgate-Kent, in U.K., and participation to their international meetings: “East-West meeting” (September 2002), “Contemporary Monasticism” (September 2004).

- Friend of TFCC since 2004: September 20-24: the 1st International Conference “Christianity & Culture: facing plurality”, in London – U.K., organized by Trinity Institute for Christianity and Culture – TICC (Church of England). Paper presented: “The Christian vision of unity in a multicultural world – the approach of ST Maxim the Confessor”.

VI. Conviviality:

Aleppo is distinguished by its spirit of conviviality and neighbourliness with the Muslims. Relations between religious leaders and among the people, Christians and Muslims alike, are fraternal and cordial, marked by reciprocal respect and cooperation in the social area, and by shared participation in national duties. Christians have their representatives in the parliament, in the official and administrative bodies; they enjoy full civic rights and are equal in the eyes of the law. In these contexts they are called to bear witness before their fellow citizens through their good conduct, their righteousness and their unity.

- National meetings: A number of meetings have been held on a national level including a major demonstration organized by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Aleppo with the involvement of all the christian communities of Aleppo in support to the Intifada in Palestine. Protestors rallied on August 19th 2001 in front of the Cathedral of St Elijah the Prophet where His Eminence Metropolitan Paul spoke on behalf of all Christians. Another march was held April 26th, 2002.

- September 4-7: the 9th International Conference “The Divine Liturgy according to Eastern and Western Traditions in the light of the ecumenical relationship”, in Assisi –



Italy, organized by the Franciscan Spiritual Pontifical Institute (Antonianum) Rome and the Faculty of Theology at the University of Thessalonica. His Eminence presided over one of its sessions.



- Aleppo capital of Islamic culture: Two bishops are member of the organizing committee.





Conclusion

In closing our general review of ecumenical relations in Aleppo, we thank God for the journey we have undertaken together and we offer him our distress at what is still separating us, trusting that the Lord, Creator of all unity, will turn our desire for unity into reality. “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Eph 3:20-21).

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