

The Name, The Church and the Ultimate Challenge

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January 07, 2003

Introduction

Certain voices had risen lately requesting the drop of any argument concerning the name issue and the Chaldean controversy. We have to admit that there is a problem, whether caused by few individuals or by certain institutions and for one reason or another. This problem obviously is more complicated than many have thought and it is not going to be resolved on its own; therefore, it needs to be addressed thoroughly. It is stated that when there is good will there is always a solution. But, it is obvious too that there are few opportunists and ill-hearted individuals among us who desire to keep this issue unresolved and have our people separated in these most crucial times. Many clergy avoid getting involved in this matter since they believe in the separation of state and church. Unfortunately, everybody does not subscribe to this policy. Certain bishops have been leading the separation movement since the early 1990s and as the latest letter from Saad Marouf, and bishops Ibrahim Ibrahim and Sarhad Jammo to President Bush dated December 3, 2002, indicate clearly. Unfortunately, the health of our aged and beloved patriarch, Mar Raphael I BiDawid, is preventing him from confronting this separatist group. All this explains why the unity issue between the Church of the East and Chaldean Catholic Church in specific has been halted with the exception of general meetings concerning theological concerns that have continued.

Fact is that we cannot stay on the sidelines; a true Assyrian cannot but be greatly concerned about this on-going misunderstanding. The Assyrians have fought for some 100 years to protect their rights and preserve their national name. For almost two centuries the Catholic Church had been, and successfully, expanding at the expense of the Church of the East as more of the latter's members had become Catholics and hence Chaldeans. Still, there was no serious attempt to stop that bleeding since the process in general stayed exclusively in a religious frame. Others argue too that there was nothing that anybody could have done because of the power behind the Catholic movement in the Middle East. But when this religious name Chaldean turned officially into a political and national agenda in the last few years, the Assyrians had no alternative but to react, some too aggressively than others.

Few have implied that many Assyrian nationalists and activists had consistently abused and attacked this title Chaldean. This is absolutely false since there has been no such treatment and if few have, it was only after the fact that this religious title was elevated to an ethnic designation and linked to the ancient Chaldeans of southern Mesopotamia. Historically, there is no link between the ancient Chaldeans of southern Mesopotamia (today's southern Iraq) and modern-day Chaldeans living predominantly in northern Iraq. The Bible says: "Behold the land of the Chaldeans; this people was not, till the Assyrians founded it for them that dwell in the wilderness ..." (Isaiah 23:13). Meanwhile, the Syriac Dictionary has given the translation for the title Chaldean as an astronomer and astrologer (P. Payne Smith "Thesaurus Syriacus". In "A Compendious Syriac

Dictionary”, edited by J. Payne Smith, Eisenbrauns, 1998). The ancient Chaldeans, some argue, were not a people rather a group of professionals within the Babylonian society. Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that in the past two centuries or so the two religious so-called Nestorians and Chaldeans groups, have to a great extent, indulged in unforgiving acts of labeling and attacking each other in the Mosul plain. It was never a one sided activities of insults and mal-treatment, whether those unfortunate activities were inflicted directly or indirectly. One cannot forget what the Catholic missionaries had done to build this wall of isolation between our communities since 19th century and little beyond.

If we were to analyze our affairs in the last 200 years, one can conclude easily that the name and the church issues are interwoven and one can hardly separate them. Therefore, allow me to present our dilemma from these two different yet connected sides:

I. The Name Issue

There is no doubt today among the vast majority of our people that the title Chaldean was initiated in the Mosul plain (Iraq) in 1830 and earlier in Diyar Bakir (Turkey) in 1681 and 1552 and before that in Cyprus in 1445 as a starting point. The title Chaldean is a name that already existed in the Bible side by side other ancient titles. When the Vatican was in the process of selecting a new title for the Nestorian converts to Catholicism, it picked the Biblical title Chaldean. Some argue that this move by the Vatican was political designed to break up the Church of the East into smaller rival groups in order to control it and later destroy its glorious history.

The Good, the bad and the Ugly

Generally speaking, the members of the Chaldean Catholic Church are pious and ardent Christians. Certain conditions in Iraq have kept them from being involved in the national affairs with the exception of a political elite that has been associated with the Iraqi Communist Party for decades. Many well-to-do Catholics in Iraq have been in good terms with the various Iraqi governments, a policy that did pay off in the short run as they were left alone and treated relatively well compared to the members of the Church of the East. In the long run though, the policy had proven to be disastrous. The Chaldean Catholic Church consequently had abandoned its Syriac language and the community in general has been Arabized. This has alarmed all true nationalists among our communities, but we have lacked any solution that could be implemented to reverse the cycle. Such nationalists understand the dilemma we are in. This wholesome group understands history well and realizes that the majority of the members of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq look at themselves as Chaldeans simply due to seven or eight generations of erroneous understanding.

On the other hand, we all understand the fact that there is a serious conflict between the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East that stands in the way of any serious conciliation despite the 1994 Declaration of Understanding signed between the Vatican and the Church of the East. Additionally, and at a remote corner there is that

very small separatist group that worked hard to create the Chaldean as a separate ethnicity than Assyrian in the 2000 U.S. Census and had succeeded according to the latest information provided by the Census Bureau.

Sadly, the Chaldean Catholic Church and Chaldean National Federation have not declared their CLEAR and OFFICIAL stands from this separatist movement! Is the Chaldean Catholic Church as a whole involved in this movement from behind the scenes? I do not know, but it seems that there is an internal struggle within the Chaldean Catholic Church regarding this issue. Few claim that this separatist movement is nothing but a blackmail tool by the Chaldean Catholic Church to force the Church of the East into unification under the Vatican conditions, i.e. a total submission of the Church of the East under the Vatican supremacy.

Of course when we talk about bad apples in society we are not singling out certain members of the Chaldean Catholic Church because there has been certain individuals among the Assyrians themselves who have been used by the various Iraqi governments throughout the modern history, such as malik Khoshaba, his son Yousip Khoshaba, Shlimon de Matran, Q. Kanja, W. Shawil and few others who have caused much unrest and division in the Assyrian community.

How was the Chaldean national movement initiated?

The U.S. 2000 Census issue that had started secretly in early 1990s by a very few members in the Chaldean Catholic Church sought official separation from the Assyrians. This has coincided with the rise of Assyrian movement in Iraq. At the top of those supporting the Chaldean name was Bishop Sarhad Jammo, then Fr. Jammo. He had written an unsubstantiated and weak article and submitted it to the Census Bureau in which he tried to boost the Chaldean name as an ethnic title separate than Assyrian. We had to understand that in the USA it is one of the easiest things to acquire a unique ethnic designation and category. The system and its requirements are loose and vague and they keep the doors wide open for unauthorized manipulation and tampering. We have to understand that ANY minority group of people in the USA could acquire such status, i.e. unique ethnic group, if it speaks a language other than English and had unique culture and traits different than the American majority. The question is whether this newly created Chaldean ethnic group was different than the original Assyrian ethnic code? That is the issue, which the Census Bureau failed to address carefully and completely.

That is why that separatist group initiated their movement in the USA. They had planned to acquire the separate ethnicity status in the USA and later export the recognized term to other regions in the world and particularly to Iraq in order to undermine the Assyrian national movement, as it is obvious today.

For the new designations by the Census Bureau in 1999, check the link below:

<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/CodeList/ACS/1999/Ancestry.htm>

And then in 2000 records, check the link below:

<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/CodeList/ACS/2000/Ancestry.htm#Area7>

Misconceptions and the Failed Promises

In preparations for the Census 2000, the argument used by the pro-slashed camp that fooled the Assyrian side represented by the Assyrian American National Federation, Assyrian Universal Alliance and the Assyrian Academic Society, all headquartered in Chicago, was that this category would boost our numbers and hence we would have been eligible for grants from the Federal and Local governments and it would thus empower us all. The official reports from the 2000 Census Bureau had shown that the “Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac” has gained a little over 25,000 votes over the figures of the 1990 census where Assyrian only was used. The 25,000 or so additional votes could have easily been there originally due to the substantial increase of Assyrians immigration to the USA since the Gulf War. Therefore, Assyrians, and in reality, gained almost nothing from the slashed solution except the dilution of their ethnic name. Furthermore, the slashed solution promised a united ONE NATION but it did not deliver for the simple fact that there was no intention of unity from the beginning; this was a movement of separation from its inception. In the last two years we have witnessed the creation of many copycat versions of the Assyrian institutions and history such as the Chaldean history, Chaldean language, Chaldean Aid Society, Chaldean flag, Chaldean Democratic Union, Chaldean Nation newspaper, and finally all crowned with the announcement of the new so-called Chaldean nation. Why they missed the Chaldean National anthem I am not sure, but it seems that an anthem needs certain creativity unlike most of the others that could be created in one draw of a pen! Additionally, a Chaldean National Congress is called to convene this week and few individuals from certain localities around the world will gather to put the foundation for this new entity. Are these signs of the promised ONE NATION?

The two positive things in all of the Census mess are the fact that:

a. In the race category, the Assyrian race remains a unified code (112) in the U.S. Census records. Check the link below.

<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/CodeList/ACS/2000/Race.htm>

b. In the language category, the Syriac remains a unified code too (779). Check the link below.

<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/CodeList/ACS/2000/Language.htm>

II. The Church

There is great misunderstanding about the Assyrian Church of the East and Chaldean Catholic Church, so let us shed some light on this issue.

Is the Assyrian Church of the East Assyrian?

There is a very small group among the members and clergymen of the Assyrian Church of the East who represent themselves as the only heirs to the Assyrian name and history.

The few clergymen among this small group are cautious and skeptical about any serious dialogue with the Catholic and other Orthodox churches. But the majority of the educated Assyrians do NOT subscribe to this thought. The fact that the Church of the East is universal in nature proves the fact that “Assyrians” do not have some sort of copyrights to the “Church of the East”. This I say despite the fact that today the Church of the East is almost exclusively Assyrian, if we exclude the isolated Karala Hindu and the very small Seattle and Sacramento American congregations. Hence, arguing about this matter over and over is useless since history does not support the thought. But if that was the case, some argue, why not then remove the Assyrian name from the title of the Church since the name Assyrian was added officially only in 1976 by Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV? Others respond to this by stating that nationalizing the Church is not something new. The Armenians call their church the Armenian Orthodox Church and the Greeks call it the Greek Orthodox Church even when the latter has congregations in Syria and Israel for example, who are not Greek ethnically. Therefore, the Assyrian Church of the East is no different. The question is whether removing the Assyrian title from the Church of the East would promote other denominations to accept the Assyrian name? This is not easy to answer as some argue again. Fact is that the Assyrian Church of the East is not claiming the Assyrian name rights to itself and that other churches could simply follow suit; i.e. others can rename their own churches as the Assyrian Catholic Church and Assyrian Orthodox Church, similar to the existing Assyrian Presbyterian Church. Who is stopping them? Could we as Assyrians benefit by removing the Assyrian name from the Church of the East? I personally do not see how, still, I would not mind it personally if indeed it guaranteed benefits to all Assyrians.

The Independence of the Church and its future

Certain high-ranking clergymen within the Church of the East raise the legitimate concern about the independence of the Church in their arguments if it was to unite with the Catholic Church. We know that the Chaldean Catholic Church is not completely an independent church. Despite the fact that the Chaldean Catholic Church and its patriarch has powers within its defined jurisdiction, confined basically in the Middle East, still, the Vatican has much influence in the decision making of the said church. We have to understand that when the Ottoman Empire recognized the title “Patriarch of Babylon over the Chaldeans” in 1844, it gave the Catholic patriarch powers within the Ottoman Empire borders only. Those powers became in the modern times restrictive as the Catholic Assyrians (i.e. Chaldeans) of the Middle East migrated to the west and fell outside the initial jurisdiction of the patriarch. The relationship between the Chaldean Church dioceses in Europe, America and Australia with the patriarch in Baghdad is complicated and the Vatican plays a crucial role in this relationship. The situation with the Chaldean Catholic Church is somehow similar to many other Catholic churches in the world where their supposed patriarchs are considered cardinals at best as far as the Vatican is concerned, where the Pope is in essence the patriarch and supreme head of the Roman Catholic Church.

Many clergy and laity in the Assyrian Church of the East fears that the latter’s union with the Chaldean Catholic Church will therefore place the new church under the direct

authority of the Vatican. Therefore, the independence and the history of the glorious Church of the East will be undermined. We know that the Vatican for centuries has attempted to make Christianity a western religion. Western sects for millennia and more were state religions; therefore, they had the power to do whatever they wished for so long. The one hurdle the Vatican is desperate to remove is Eastern Orthodoxy and the Church of the East because these churches are the nucleus of Christianity.

Meanwhile, we all know that Christianity in the Middle East is dwindling because of the mass migration of Christians due to oppression and persecution. It is predicted that if the status quo continued then Christianity in the Middle East will almost completely disappear within the next five generations, if not sooner. As few claim, this is where the Pro Oriente comes in to undo this disaster! But at what price one might ask?

The Scenario According to Mar Sarhad Jammo

Many have claimed that Mar Bawai Soro had referred to Mar Sarhad Jammo as a nationalist who believes that the members of the two churches are ONE NATION; still, the latter in every occasion comes short from defining what the name of this ONE NATION is! Those in Mar Jammo's circles argue that because the community has used this title Chaldean for certain generations, therefore, it is not easy to undo the mistake of the past. They add, and since the community is Arabized, they need to get the members of the Chaldean Catholic Church into the Assyrian fold in two steps. First, de-Arabize the community into a Chaldean one and later de-Chaldenize it into the original Assyrian! This to me is dangerous and makes no sense at all. Because when we legitimize the Chaldean name as an ethnic name, there is no guarantee that the switch from Chaldeanism to Assyrianism will ever take place specially after all institutions will be put in place. Furthermore, the Catholic movement is still on the rise and by the time when Chaldeanism is obtained nobody can predict what kind of control Catholicism will have among the Assyrians and with the power of the church and the institutions in place, it would be too late for the Assyrians to do anything in case something went wrong. Many Assyrians argue that knowing where we are standing today and plan accordingly is less risky than standing idle and waiting for the unpredicted future.

The Solution

It is obvious today that Assyrianism and Christianity go hand in hand. The church continues to play a major role in the Assyrian psyche and it has been proven that the two are almost inseparable and one cannot make it without the other. This is due to the reason that Assyrians in general have not yet matured nationally and politically. Therefore, any national solution to bring our separated people together should include bringing the separated Church of the East and Chaldean Catholic Church back together again. This would open the road for yet other future unifications with the Assyrian Orthodox Churches. I am concentrating on Iraqi affairs here since the Assyrian homeland is predominantly in Iraq today.

I believe that a compromise is possible but only when there is a will where all names would be honored and consideration to all aspects addressed. This could happen through the following levels and recommendations for example:

A. Church Level

1. The Assyrian Church of the East and Chaldean Catholic Church should unite under a title such as Syro-Chaldean Church of the East or simply "Church of the East". Combined names such as Assyro-Chaldeans or Chaldo-Assyrians must NOT be considered to avoid future confusions by mixing national and religious titles. Syro-Chaldean meanwhile represents the two titles "Syrian" (Suryan) and "Chaldean" which is still in use in India.
2. The present two patriarchs should keep their positions; one as patriarch of the east and the other as patriarch of the west, with absolutely equal powers until one retires or leaves office for whatever reason.
3. A council of bishops is to be established comprising of equal number of bishops from both churches so there will be no dominating side. This council will in due course elect future patriarchs.
4. With the return of democracy to Iraq, the oppression will be lifted and there should remain no reason why the Church of the East-Old Calendar and the Assyrian Church of the East are not re-united again. The combined numbers of bishops from the re-united church should match with those in the Chaldean Catholic Church to create that Council of Bishops.
5. The present Patriarch of the Church of the East-Old Calendar can be given the title of Head of the Council of Bishops. He in due course could be elected as patriarch of the new Church of the East.

The new church though should preserve its independence some how with a full understanding of a Declaration of Communion with the Vatican ratified and a representative to the Vatican at a Special Ambassador level be appointed. The united church would accordingly reflect great assets and facilities to better serve our people worldwide.

B. National Level

The members of the Chaldean Catholic Church shall return to the Assyrian Mother fold. Everybody from the higher hierarchy to the simple member of the church must then denounce any efforts by separatists to create divisions among the one Assyrian Nation. In preparation for the 2010 Census, measures should be taken to undo any changes that were made in the Census 2000. The merger of the Chaldean Federation in the Assyrian American National Federation should be implemented as well.

C. Linguistic Level

Our language shall be referred to as Neo-Aramaic (Syriac).

Final Thoughts

No one can determine exactly how long the Assyrian glorious history spans; we know it is at least 4500 years old. It would be a great loss to mankind to lose this history. Therefore, we have a moral obligation today to give the Assyrian national movement all the support it deserves in order to face the challenges of the foreseen world future. With unity, we can reach the stars; divided we will stand to lose dearly. It is our decision to make. Well, who holds the key to this unity? Most of the modern world has succeeded to reach an understanding of the concept of the separation of state and church; unfortunately and generally speaking Assyrians with all their denominations have not. This is a fact that we have to admit. The Assyrians continue to live by the eastern spiritual values that are embedded in their inner self. Therefore, I believe, and due to present circumstances, it is the church that has the responsibility to undo the mistakes it had created in the first place. It was the doing of the clergy who separated the mother church and created different and segregated Assyrian communities.

Therefore, I ask: Is the church and its clergymen ready for the ultimate challenge? Could a few clergymen driven by ego and self-glory dominate the will of the majority? The ball is in their court; they have no excuses if indeed they represent the word of God on earth. If so, I challenge all our clergymen, with all their denominations, to subscribe to the words of God by promoting love instead of hate and unity instead of division. I challenge them to move to undo the mistakes of the past guided by true history. I challenge them to begin their halted talks again. I challenge them to take Assyria to the shores of unity, which subsequently will give "the Assyrian" that momentum we need to ascend again as a victorious Assyrian nation among all free nations on earth.

If this is not achievable, I say let's then leave the present determination as is, i.e. accept that there are three different ethnic categories, Assyrian, Chaldean and Syriac. Let every person decide on his/her own his or her preferred affiliation. I believe that with time, our people will discover the facts behind all these questionable movements and through further education and time the truth will be discovered. We Assyrians do not have to worry much; history is behind us and since historically we know that today's Chaldeans have no connection to the ancient Chaldeans, this fact will prevail. With time this newest separation attempt will fall on its face and the members of the Chaldean Catholic Church will turn on those same individuals who created this mess because the educated Assyrians of today are not the simple village people of 200 years ago. Meanwhile, Assyrians must concentrate on issues dealing with Assyrians. This conflict is draining our energies in the wrong channels.

Finally, let me remind the reader that the Pacific Ocean country of Nauru has a population of about 10,000 inhabitants only and it became a member of the United Nations in 1999. Assyria should not be an issue about numbers rather preserving a genuine history and culture.