



Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

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Embracing the Cross Plenary

Keynote Address by His Holiness

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and Supreme Head of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church

at the Conference of World Mission and Evangelism

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Your Excellencies, Reverend Clergy, dear brothers and sisters,

We would like to thank the moderator and director of the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism for inviting us to participate in this Mission Conference in Arusha, Tanzania. Also, we would like to thank our host, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), particularly the presiding bishop Dr. Frederick Shoo for their hospitality.

Mission of the Church

The mission of the Church is the salvation of the souls. Therefore, the universal Church constantly seeks to spread the gospel of Christ among all the nations, in order for the world “to know Christ and the power of His resurrection” (Philippians 3: 10), so they may believe in Him as the Savior and Redeemer. The Church offers a haven for those who seek to grow spiritually and to better understand the purpose of life beyond the material existence.

In Christianity, “God is Love” (I John 4:8); therefore, Christians’ mission is to spread the culture of love among all those who are around them. It is the love for God, reflected in the love of the neighbor. Since love is a relationship, the mission of the Church is to correctly build these relationships. Every believer is invited to strengthen his relation with God, a relation of sonship and adoption. God initiated this relationship through his act of sublime love by dying on the cross for our sake; it is our call as Christians to show our love to God by obeying His commandments and carrying the cross of witnessing to Christ in our daily lives.

Likewise, Christians are called to love their neighbor, without personal profit of any sort. It is the love based on self-sacrifice, emptying one’s self, and giving unconditionally in accordance with our Lord Jesus’ words to His disciples: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) Moreover, a close connection exists between love and service; our Lord affirms that “whoever wishes to be great among you, must be your servant” (Matthew 20: 26). He Himself gave us an example of this serving ministry by washing the feet of His disciples though He is the Lord and Master (cf John 13:1-5). Thus, we understand the mission of the Church to be that of ministering to the world in order to sanctify it.

In today’s world, people seem to be focused on themselves; it is easy to be drawn to self-centrism and egoism. However, nurturing one’s basic spiritual needs should not lead to narcissism or self-centralism. Nurturing one’s basic spiritual needs is a healthy way to seek spiritual growth “until we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”. (Ephesians 4: 13) We are then called ‘disciples of Christ’.

Discipleship and Persecution

School students, innocently in their beautiful minds, always dream to be like their teachers, that is to be good disciples who would reach what they think is 'full knowledge' that their teachers have.

In Christianity, we are called to be good disciples of Christ. We see in our Lord's teachings a model to follow. Therefore, in good faith and with strong conviction, we aspire to imitate the Lord. As Christians, we know that discipleship is a responsibility great enough to consume other worldly desires. It is the way we embrace the cross of our Lord and cast off the pursuit of what is vain in the world. Discipleship is to dedicate one's self entirely for Christ.

The resonating words of our Lord: "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also" (John 15: 20). These words show the great cost of discipleship. With witnessing to the Lord both in word and in deed, comes persecution and tribulation.

Christianity is not welcomed in the world because it puts people out of their comfort zone. It challenges their worldly philosophical convictions with the simplicity of the word of the Cross "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (I Corinthians 1: 18) "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness" (I Corinthians 3:19). It invites to walk the path of the cross which is an uncharted territory by the majority. It is to let go of the love of material things and to hold to spiritual rewards promised in the world to come. Therefore, Christians face rejection in their societies. Severe forms of rejection lead to persecution where hatred is expressed in the forms of violence and the desire to exterminate. Christians throughout the world are victims of persecution; large numbers of Christian communities in all continents face persecution on a daily basis. It comes in different forms and varies greatly: it can be the lack of freedom of religious beliefs, or actively killing innocent children or families while they are peacefully praying or worshipping the Lord. In the Middle East, in our homeland as Syriac Orthodox Church, our people have faced many tribulations and genocides throughout the centuries. Some 100 years ago, a massive genocide in the Ottoman Empire aimed at eliminating Christianity from the land of its birthplace. More than half a million Syriac speaking people were massacred in the most horrible ways, together with the Armenians, Greeks and other religious minorities. We continue to suffer from persecution in Iraq and Egypt. In Syria, terrorist groups such as ISIS, Al-Nusra and others, have targeted Christian congregations and completely destroyed many of our churches.

Recently, we visited the Syrian city of Deir El Zor after it was liberated from the terrorist groups; the city had a small population of Christians from different denominations before it was attacked by the terrorists. When the terrorists entered the city, Christians were forced to leave their homes and jobs fearing for their lives. They sought refuge in neighboring cities. During our visit, we met the only Christian man who stayed in the city for the entire time, deprived from the freedom to pray in the church or to practice his Christian faith.

We were shocked to see the extent of destruction that took place in the city. The terrorist groups destroyed the city's historical 'suspended bridge'. They destroyed all the churches in the city. For the first time after more than 5 years, we were able to celebrate the divine liturgy in the city; we did that on the ruins of our Syriac Orthodox St. Mary Church there, with pages from old manuscripts and liturgical books under the rubble.

As a sign of our commitment to our humanitarian mission, we opened a clinic to help the poor get the medical assistance needed, serving 2 dozens Christians who have returned, but mostly thousands of Muslim brothers and sisters.

Despite this discouraging situation, we continue to preach forgiveness. We continue to be witnesses of Christ in this world because we have faith in His words: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:10)

We also implemented many projects of relief and development throughout Syria and Iraq, in the most destroyed places. We are still assisting, with our humble means, the people suffering from the terrorist attacks in Syria. In Damascus, we are offering help in the relief to the families which were forced to leave their houses, escaping the dangers of the continuous attacks by the terrorists. We are with them, feeling their pain and sharing their daily sufferings. Around our residence, an innocent child – Elias – was killed by a mortar over a month ago, his parents were severely injured. His family buried his remains without telling his mother, whose medical condition was so critical that they feared the sad news might complicate it further. Facing the cruelty and beastly behavior of those who desire to sow hatred and war, the Syriac Orthodox Church, as a witness of Christ, along with the other sister churches, is trying to offer hope to all the victims of such inhuman behavior. We are faithful to our call to be ‘ambassadors of Christ’, i.e. witnesses to the gospel of peace and love.

How Can We Continue to Embrace the Cross?

During this turmoil in the Middle East, a great number of Christians have left their countries. In order to better understand the importance of Christian witness and how to preserve its existence in our part of the world, we wish to highlight the following:

- a- Our presence is a necessity not only for Christianity to continue in the land where it was born, but also for the people of the area. Christians have always been an essential element of reconciliation and bridge building among different ethnic and religious components of the region.
- b- We need to bring hope to our people that they still have a future in their homeland by tending to their needs, both in terms of security and financial help. For that, all churches in Syria have been actively engaged in relief efforts as well as in developmental projects to create job opportunities for our people.
- c- Interreligious dialogue on the academic level alone is not sufficient; we need to initiate joint activities such as workshops, seminars and camps among Muslim and Christian young people.
- d- We need the support of our brothers and sisters throughout the world in 2 main areas: i) in terms of advocacy and ii) development.
- e- Christians can survive only under secular governments where they could be treated based on the principle of citizenship with equal rights and obligations.

Conclusion

Mission in the Church has evolved: from witnessing in word to witnessing in deeds and blood. The Church today is faithfully embracing the Cross of Christ, and follows Him to the Calvary trusting that, from death, life is given in Him.