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From the Patriarchal

Cell

Of the Church

Of the East

Prayers and Blessings Receive

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judah, in the days of Herod the king, there came Magi from the East to Jerusalem. And they were saying, where is the king of the Jews who has been born? For we have seen his star in the East, and we have come to worship him. (Matthew 2. 1-2.)

There are many references in both the Old and New Testaments concerning the birth of the Messiah. Some of these are awe inspiring, and yet others, such as the story of the Magi, are related in simple human language. But there is one common relationship with all these accounts, namely, the straight forward matter of fact narrative. There is no shadow of doubt in the minds of the narrators that God is speaking through them.

And so the Magi, following the star, have come all the way from Persia to Bethlehem in Palestine, in order to worship the "king of the Jews who had been born", and to offer unto him, their symbolic gift offerings of gold, mur and incense.

PROPHECY FULFILLED

Since this event has not been foretold in the Bible, men have often wondered how did these Magi come to know of this divine act? The only Christian Church that to the best of our knowledge, has given an explanation of this event, is the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East, which is the only Church which has preserved its Apostolic Semitic Christian faith, traditions and culture unchanged to this day, and which in addition to this, the fact of having been established and grown into a universal church within the Persian Empire, no doubt also gave it access to historical facts or traditions which were not known elsewhere.

The following hymn is translated from the Aramaic original as it appears in the book of "Khudra" of the Church of the East, which was started in the beginning of the fourth century and completed in its final form in the eighth century, says: "And the Magi, men of high rank and leaders, twelve princes in all, bringing with them offerings, gold, mur and incense, in honour of the king whose birth was wonderful from a virgin who knew no husband. They opened their treasure and offered their gifts as they had been commanded by their master Zaradosht who had prophesied this event."

Though Zaradosht is not held as a prophet by the Church, since no mention is made of him in the Old Testament but he was no doubt held as such by the adherents of his own faith, namely, the Zoroastrians, and there was apparently some kind of foretelling of this divine event in their religious books or in their tradition, and the fathers of the Church of the East - which is often spoken of as the Church of Persia - were aware of this, and hence a logical explanation of the fact that the twelve holy Magi, the star gazers, had been forewarned by divine providence and thus followed the star which led them to the holy manger.

CRADLE OF CHRISTIANITY

Our purpose in taking for our text the story of the Magi for this our Christmas message, is not to dwell on its theological meaning but rather to remind you, Our Children in Christ, of the fact that the countries of the Middle East, especially Mesopotamia, together with Palestine, constitute the focal point of all the dispensations of both the Old and New Testaments, and wherefrom not only the message of this divine event was carried to the four corners of the earth, but also where the faith, as we have already stated, has been preserved in its purity to this day.

It is to this cradle of the Christian faith that we again this last summer paid our second Apostolic visit, since we established our See in the United States of America, and it is of this visit, we know, that you are anxious to hear.

ARRIVAL IN TEHRAN

It was at the invitation of the diocese of the Church of the East and the Assyrian community in Iran sent us through the medium of the Most Reverend Mar Khananya Dinkha, Bishop in Tehran that we left San Francisco by air to New York, and thence to Tehran where we arrived on the 4th of last May. There we were met at the airport by a great multitude of Assyrians led by Mar Dinkha, and a distinguished delegation representing the various Christian Churches, headed by Mr. Feraydun Huwaida, representing His Excellency the Prime Minister of Iran, who received us most graciously in the name of His Imperial Majesty's Government; and we in like manner, expressed our deep appreciation for the great honour thus accorded us.

From the airport, we then all proceeded to the church and from there to the Bishop's residence, where after the usual exchange of formalities, the representative of the Prime Minister and other guests of honour departed. We were then informed briefly of the programme for the next two months of our stay in Iran. Thus, the official part of our visit had begun.

A message such as this does not permit a detailed account of all the activities which took place on this our Apostolic visit to Iran, Kuwait and Lebanon, but rather only to give you an account of the main points of these events.

AUDIENCE WITH SHADINSHAH

The focal point of our visit to Iran was of course the audience granted us by His Imperial Majesty Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi. This being the third occasion that His Majesty had received us.

We were greatly impressed by the several pertinent questions which His Majesty put to us regarding the welfare of the Assyrian community of Iran, and we assured His Majesty of the gratitude of the Assyrians for the security and equality which they are enjoying together with all the other Iranian citizens. We mentioned especially the freedom and opportunity granted by the Iranian government to the Assyrian community -- and no doubt to other communities also - not only to establish their own community schools and teach their own language in conjunction with the government programme, but also to instruct their own language during a specified period in the week, even where the teachers are paid by the government. But the statement which impressed us most and which was uttered with obvious feeling by His Majesty, was the expression of his hope and the goal of his reign, that all the inhabitants of Iran, may enjoy "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness". We were also received by His Excellency the Prime Minister and other ministers of the state, together with the heads of the Moslem religion, and all of whom received us most warmly.

Having thus completed these important visits, we started with our pastoral programme of conducting religious services, receiving hundreds of Assyrians and representatives of other denominations, both Moslem and Christians and visiting the various Assyrian communities in Iran.

VISIT TO ASSYRIAN COMMUNITIES

ABADAN

On May 25th, we left Tehran by plane to Abadan, the site of the world famous oil refinery, where several hundred Assyrians now live and work, and where they have built themselves the largest community centre built by Assyrians any where in the world; and have also built their own school. The school is attended not only by Assyrian children but also by the children of several prominent Moslem officials in Abadan, including the children of the governor of the state.

The reception accorded us by the Assyrians of Abadan, irrespective of denominational differences, was the warmest possible, and included many activities. We finally parted with them on June 1st with a heavy heart at a large farewell gathering held in the courtyard of the school, and practically all of them, forming an endless motorcade, accompanied us to the airport whence we returned late at night at Tehran, where we were again met by a large number of Assyrians.

ISPHAHAN

On June 2nd, we left Tehran by car to Ispahan, where we stayed for two days as guests of the Anglican Bishop in that city. This visit was primarily intended to see this beautiful and historic city of Iran, with its many magnificent mosques and other historical monuments. Here we saw a

perfect and complete copy of the charter written in the Kufi script and granted by Khalif Ali, the great Imam of Islam, to the Church of the East. And we later learned that a thirteenth century copy of the New Testament in the Persian language, also found in the city of Isphalan, now rests as a valued and historical treasure in the parliament building in Tehran. This New Testament was no doubt copied from earlier translations made by the Church of the East for the benefit of the vast number of Persian speaking Christians within the Church, from the very beginning of its history.

HAMADAN

On June 8th, we left Tehran by car for the city of Hamadan, in Northern Iran, where we were met some twenty miles outside the city by several hundred Assyrians - men, women and children alike, who had come in chartered busses and private cars to welcome us, and thus we entered the city accompanied by a grand motorcade.

Here, again, we were accorded the warmest reception possible, often expressed with deep emotion, but we shall later speak of the functions which took place during these visits.

KERMANSHAH

In the afternoon of June 9th we left Hamdan for Kermanshah, followed by several Assyrians who accompanied us about fifty miles of our way to Kermanshah. About forty miles distance from the city of Kermanshah, close to the famous Assyrian sculptures of Besitooon - most likely deriving its name from the Assyrian word "beth-istuny", namely between two pillars, for it is so naturally situated between two perpendicular rock formations - we noticed in the distance a large gathering of people and as we later found out, these were the several hundred Assyrians who had travelled by cars and busses to greet us. The meeting again between us here was most touching and inspiring. From here accompanied by a seemingly endless motorcade, we proceeded to the city itself.

Here we must also mention a singular act which impressed us very much, for it bespeaks of how highly the Christianity of the Church of the East has been held throughout the centuries by the Moslems of the Middle East, or indeed, throughout Asia. As we came in view of the Assyrians gathered at Besitooon, three Moslem soldiers signalled our car to stop. Having gotten an affirmative answer that it was we in the car, they just came silently, kissed our hand and went away. We witnessed several other instances of equal faith and respect among the Moslems of Iran.

As we have already stated that it is not possible to relate all the activities and functions which took place during this our visit to the Assyrians of Iran, so that we shall close this our narrative by our departure from Tehran for Kuwait on July the 6th, when we were bidden God's speed by hundreds of Assyrians, led by the Bishop Mar Dinkha.

KUWAIT

We arrived in Kuwait, the same day in the evening, and were there too met by a large number of Assyrians from Iraq and Iran, working in the Kuwait Oile Company, together with the clergy of the Roman Catholic and

Armenian Churches. Here also we were received with great warmth and devotion; performed the necessary religious services and attended various functions.

LEBANON

On July 9th, we left Kuwait by plane for Beirut, Lebanon, where we arrived at 8:00 A.M. There we were met by a distinguished delegation led by Mr. Ghaleb Turk, Administrator of the Mount of Lebanon, representing His Excellency the President of Lebanon, a bishop of the Chaldean, Roman Catholic Church, and several clergy of the Church of the East and other churches, together with several thousand Assyrians now living in Lebanon.

This was indeed a great honour accorded us by the government of Lebanon, as was also in the case of Tehran and elsewhere, and bespeaks of the esteem in which this ancient church and the Assyrian people are held in these countries.

Later, we were also received by His Excellency the President of Lebanon, and had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of His Beatitude, the Patriarch of the Maronites and other distinguished religious leaders of that community which though having lost the knowledge of the Aramaic (Assyrian) as a spoken tongue, yet to this day it uses it in its liturgy; thus retaining this common bond between our two historic peoples.

CONCLUSION

As we have pointed out earlier in our message that it was impossible to relate in detail all the events of this our apostolic visit, we shall, therefore, here briefly recount those which we consider most important and especially, such events that impressed us most and led us to draw a conclusion as to the changes which have and are taking place in the social and religious structure of the Middle East; and the resulting influence of the efforts being made by all the Christians and especially by the recent Vatican Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church.

First of all, we must fill the gap in our account of the visits to the various destinations where our people now live. In every one of these places which we visited, there were endless engagements and functions. These included regular days of receptions, during which we received and spoke to several thousand Assyrians, together with prominent leaders of the Assyrian community.

One of these functions which we wish especially to refer to as an example of the freedom and opportunity which the Assyrians now enjoy in Iran is the banquet given in our honour just before our departure from Tehran, by Mr. Shmoel Yosip Zadeh. This banquet he gave at his private residence in Tehran and to which he had invited over four hundred guests, both Assyrians and non Assyrians. At this function we also decorated several Assyrians who had helped generously toward the building of the new school which the Church of the East has erected in Tehran. There are several other Assyrians in Iran who have also prospered in various degrees.

Here we must also mention the fact that because of ill health, the Most Reverend Mar Khananya Dinkha was unfortunately unable to accompany us on these historic visits to our various communities in Iran, and this saddened us. But we were accompanied on all these trips by several prominent members of the Church of the East in Iran, including the Honourable William Ibrahimi, member of Parliament, representing Assyrians in Iran. These men, as did also the Committee of the Assyrians of Lebanon, rendered us the most devoted service which we shall never forget, and we invoke upon them God's blessing.

HOLY SERVICES

We also celebrated the Qurbana Qaddisha (Holy Offering, Communion) three times in Tehran and in every one of the other Assyrian communities which we visited, and the total number of communicants were in the thousands, and these were not only members of the Church of the East but also Christians of other denominations; Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Armenians and Protestants. In Beirut, where we celebrated Qurbana in the Church of Mar Gewargis, the occasion was attended by prominent officials of the Lebanese Government, the representatives of the various churches and among the more than two thousand communicants were several members of the Maronite Church. The service was also televised throughout Lebanon.

ECUMENISM IN PRACTICE

However, the most important fact from the ecumenical point of view, or perhaps more correctly to say, Christian spirit in action, which took place during this our Apostolic visit was the fact that both in the city of Kermashah in Iran and in Kuwait where we do not have our own Churches, the Roman Catholic Churches in both of these places were placed at our disposal and it was there that we celebrated our liturgy. In Kermanshah, this gracious act was performed by the Reverend Qashisha Auraham Yosip Ilyas, priest of the Assyrian Chaldean Uniates, and in Kuwait, by the Very Reverend Mons. Victor San Maguel of the Latin Rite.

This Christian-like act on the part of these two honoured priests is more important than all the theological dialogue which is now taking place between the various Christian Churches and denominations, and we believe that such acts of Christian love and charity are the most practical way in bringing about the unity which the Lord and Master of the Church himself prayed for to His Father "that they may be one even as we are one".

A WISH UNFULFILLED

Having taken for our text the story of the Magi, it is appropriate that we should mention the fact that though we had full sanction from the Iranian Government to travel freely all over Iran; in fact, the kindness of that government was so great that wherever we went we were visited by the governor and the general of the police of the state concerned; but unfortunately, we did not find it feasible to visit Rezieh (Urmi) where as is well known, the Magi who came back from their worship of the new born king, established their place of worship and which the Church of the East has to this day in the small church of Martmaryam (Our Lady Mary) and where several of them were buried. It is our prayer that such a visit may be possible in the future to this most ancient centre of our church and people.

We were also unfortunately again unable to visit the Assyran community in the Khabour in Syria, and it is our earnest desire that we may be able to visit these also, when opportunity permits.

However, it gave us great joy to see so many priests and leaders of the community who had made the hundreds of miles of arduous journey all the way from the Khabour to Beirut just to see us, and we wish them all God's blessings for this act of love and devotion which we shall never forget.

Let us all therefore on this holy day, go in spirit with the Magi and offer with them our worship and thanksgiving for God's wonderful dispensation for our salvation and the salvation of all men, and with the angelic host raise our praise to Him who was born on this day, "praise to God in the highest, on earth peace and good hope to all mankind." May His peace reign in all the world.

Grace and mercy of our worshipful God be with us all, amen.

Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII,
Catholicos Patriarch of the East

Written in the Patriarchal Cell,
San Francisco, California, U.S.A.
Christmas 1966