

## PROMOTER OF ECUMENISM & RECONCILIATION IN PRO ORIENTE

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Since 1980, Mor Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim has been an energetic promoter of church unity within the Foundation Pro Oriente. In 1989, the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo was declared an honorary member of the Austria-based Foundation. Until his disappearance Mor Gregorios was in continuous contact with us, always full of ideas, energetic and urging us to step forward on the way towards reconciliation and ecumenism.

Two weeks before the third session of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) came to an end with the passage of the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), the then Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Franz König (1905-2004), on the advice of some Austrian intellectuals, decided to found Pro Oriente. The Foundation - an institution of the Catholic Archdioceses of Vienna and not an official tool of the Roman Catholic Church or the Vatican - intends to contribute to ecumenical dialogues at an unofficial level. This approach prepared the ground for the official dialogue with the Byzantine Orthodox Church, and contributed substantially to official agreements with the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The idea has been that Pro Oriente's work, because it is "unofficial", makes it possible for Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox theologians to confer frankly with their Roman Catholic colleagues in order that important historical and theological research on the common heritage of the Churches of East and West as well as personal encounter could occur on this level to support official relations.

Especially on two levels, Mor Gregorios' contributions have been invaluable, extremely substantial and formative: The unofficial Dialogue between theologians of the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, and the Dialogue within the Churches of Syriac Tradition.

Mor Gregorios knew very well that results of the Pro Oriente dialogues are achieved because theologians and representatives of the various churches, faithful to their traditions and heritages, have come to the conviction that the topics discussed are points of consensus or at least emerging consensus. Moreover, as is well known, some of the results have been incorporated in documents officially accepted by the Churches. The unofficial status did not reduce the sense of responsibility towards the Churches; on the contrary, the sense of responsibility was strong.

In 1971 Pro Oriente started a series of five unofficial ecumenical consultations between Oriental Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians in Vienna, continuing 1973, 1976, 1978, and 1988. These consultations were followed by so-called Study Seminars (On Primacy 1991, On Councils and Conciliarity 1992, On Ecclesiology 1994, Authority and Jurisdiction 1996) followed by Regional Symposia in Wadi Natrun, Egypt (1991); Kerala, India (1993); Kaslik, Lebanon (1994); and Kröffelbach, Germany (1997). The aim of these Symposia was to inform a wider public - bishops, priests, theologians, laypeople - about the results achieved in the Vienna dialogues. Mor Gregorios has been decisively involved with substantial studies in all the Study Seminars as well as in the regional symposia. He appeared to be an erudite scholar as well as a brilliant communicator of ecumenism.

In 1994, Pro Oriente began to study the Syriac tradition, together with the history and theology of the Church of the East, and started a series of "Syriac Consultations". The special quality of this dialogue was the participation of all the Syriac Churches: The Assyrian Church of the East, the Ancient Church of the East, the Oriental-Orthodox Churches (Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, Malankara Orthodox Church of India), and the respective Oriental Catholic Churches (Chaldean, Syrian, Maronite, Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara Churches). The common Syriac tradition appeared as a basis and willingness to understand and reconcile the theological positions of the other by means of intense and profound study. Mor Gregorios has been one of the masterminds of this dialogue. For more than a decade (1994-2005) and with six consultations, Pro Oriente has been facilitating mutual exchange between the Syriac churches with this dialogue and has, therefore, contributed to a better understanding of the spiritual, liturgical, patristic and theological treasures that derive from their traditions.

Remarkable, from a theological point of view, was the third Syriac Consultation in Chicago, 1998. In the final Communiqué, the discussion on mutual anathemas and condemnations is summed up as follows: "Regarding the issue of the anathemata of the past, pronounced by synods and hierarchs in the context of controversies that have divided our Churches, we dedicate ourselves to the search for appropriate ways to lift them especially from liturgical texts, as an act of love and mutual respect... Furthermore we agree not to use polemical language in our descriptions of persons, institutions, and doctrinal formulae of our sister Churches." Already at the beginning of this consultation, participants were informed that the Holy Synod of the Assyrian Church made the decision to remove all condemnations against persons like Cyril of Alexandria and Severus of Antioch from their liturgical books. It demonstrates the ecumenical vision and the capacity of hermeneutical thinking that Mor Gregorios, appealed at this Consultation that

also condemnations against Saints of the Church of the East like Nestorius or Theodore of Mopsuestia should be removed from the liturgical books and that Church history ought to be rewritten in an ecumenical spirit.

In 2006, it was decided to dissolve this successful enterprise due to various problems of the Syriac Orthodox Church and its relation to the family of Oriental Orthodox Churches in the Middle East on the one hand and because of internal tensions within the Assyrian Church of the East on the other hand. However, Pro Oriente decided to go ahead with further research projects in the Syriac tradition. In the discussions, Mor Gregorios' input was essential to give birth to the idea to start a new endeavour called "Pro Oriente Studies of the Syriac Tradition," i.e. scholarly Syriac studies that should be of common concern for the living East and West Syriac tradition, whether they are in the Middle East, in India or in the Diaspora. A Pro Oriente Forum Syriacum has been formed - its naming came from the Metropolitan of Aleppo - which is a team of expert scholars from the various Syriac Churches, which chooses topics for research and the appropriate method to study them. This includes the scholarly exchange in academic conferences called "Pro Oriente Colloquia Syriaca". Therefore, in 2007, a new series of ecumenical Colloquia started with topics of common concern.

At its meeting in July 2008 in Aleppo, at the invitation of Mor Gregorios, the Pro Oriente Forum Syriacum decided to organise the Second Colloquium Syriacum on "Syriac Christianity in the Middle East and India today: Contributions and Challenges." By elaborating the contribution of Christianity to the Societies in the Middle East and in India, the Forum Syriacum planned to strengthen the presence, the service, and the witness of Syriac Christians in the Middle East, India and around the world. At the invitation of the Maronite Archbishop of Beirut, Mor Boulos Matar, a meeting of the Pro Oriente Forum Syriacum took place in November 2012 in Harissa, Lebanon. Our working days in Lebanon in 2012 also included a Study Seminar, which was a reflection and discussion about the purpose and goal of our studies with the Churches of Syriac Tradition in the new political, religious and ecumenical contexts. The intense reflections brought us to the topic of another Colloquium Syriacum with the title "Towards a Culture of Co-Existence in pluralistic societies in the Middle East and in India." Mor Gregorios Yohanna came to Harissa on difficult routes from the then encircled and mostly isolated Aleppo. Having the war in Syria in mind, in our meeting in Beirut, he said: "I believe that changes in the area make everybody feel that the Christians are the losers, like in Iraq, my question is, what can we do for all these countries? What can be done for the culture of citizenship and co-existence?" The Forum Syriacum embraced the idea and the scholars at the Colloquium, which was developed further at Vienna in November 2013. However, Mor Gregorios, the ecumenical creative thinker and spin doctor of the Pro Oriente Forum Syriacum, is still absent since his abduction on 22 April 2013.