

## TRADITION AND TRADITIONS IN THE ORIENTAL CHURCHES: A CRITICAL APPROACH

Rafiq Khoury<sup>♦</sup>

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### Abstract

This article deals with the importance and the richness of the oriental patrimony, in a particular way in the context of the oriental Churches of the Middle East and their societies. But, at the same time, it draws our attention to its dangers, due to a fixist way of dealing with it, which prevents the oriental Churches from facing the present time and its challenges, as it prevents them from taking part in the process of developing their societies. The oriental patrimony is called to develop its large possibilities in shaping today the vocation and the mission of the oriental Churches. That takes place when they actualize their patrimony according to the needs and the aspirations of the oriental Churches today. In that context, the oriental patrimony could be a positive factor in the ecumenical movement, in the mission of these Churches, a creative element in the building up of their societies, and a real, effective and dynamic presence in their societies. In this way, this patrimony can be a memory and a prophecy.

The decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (OE), promulgated in 1964 by the Second Vatican Council on the Oriental Churches, is considered

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<sup>♦</sup>**Rafiq Khoury** has a PHD in Pastoral Theology from the Lateran University in Rome (1978), with a specialization in Religious Education. He was professor in the *Department of Religious Studies* at Bethlehem University (Palestine) between 1987 and 2000. His main areas of interest are the questions related to the Christian presence in the Middle East, and the development of a local Palestinian theology, on which he has written many articles. His main books: *The incarnation of the Churches of the Middle East in the Arab World* (1998) and *Towards an Incarnate Theology in the Middle East* (2012). He is a member of Al-Liqa center, which promotes Muslim Christian relations and a Palestinian local theology.

as a decisive and appreciative step taken by the Universal Church towards the Oriental Churches. This decree cannot be separated from several similar documents promulgated throughout history, the Apostolic Letter of Pope Leo XIII, *Orientalium Dignitas* (1894) being one of them. However, this appreciation knew many fluctuations in the past. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church nourished some suspicions towards the Oriental Churches due to the debates of the past and which led to several forms of what is called *Latinization*.

The present decree is a sort of break with these practices, “owing to contingencies of times and persons” and invites the Oriental Churches to “take steps to return to their ancestral traditions” (OE, 6) in the “fidelity to the ancient Eastern tradition” (OE, 24). Moreover, the different council documents do not hesitate to use very positive language to describe the attitude of the Church towards the oriental tradition, such as “high esteem,” “high regard” and “due and rightful praise,” (OE, 5) “living witness” of a tradition, “that has been handed down from the Apostles through the Fathers,” “venerable antiquity” (OE, 1), “a treasury” (UR, 14), “riches” (UR,16), which reflect the “genius” of the Oriental Churches (UR, 14). All this opened the way to the concept of unity in diversity, fully accepted today as a foundation of ecumenical work: “Far from being an obstacle to the Church’s unity, a certain diversity of customs and observances only adds to her splendor” (UR, 16).

This renewed consideration of the oriental heritage was indubitably a powerful impulse to further studies of it for the good of the whole Church, on the scientific and the hierarchical levels. The latter is formulated in diverse documents, the Apostolic Letter *Orientalium Lumen* (OL), published by Pope John Paul II in 1995, being the most important in the post-Council period. At the same time, it stimulated a deeper and refreshing awareness of the oriental Christians themselves to their own tradition. In fact, we notice more and more conferences, symposiums, researches, studies, in the different Churches dealing with their own heritage or with the oriental one in general, which is supposed to give fruitful results in the life of the Oriental Churches.

In this article, we deal with a specific problem, which is the attitude of the Oriental Churches towards their own tradition, with its possibilities, but also with its dangers. That is why this article is a critical approach, aiming to put the oriental heritage in the context of

the actual dynamic of renewal of these Churches, mainly in the Middle Eastern context.<sup>1</sup>

### Tradition and traditions

The glory of the Oriental Churches is the long experience of continuity throughout history, the fidelity to the oriental tradition. That is why these Churches are called “the Churches of tradition.” To a greater and greater extent, the Roman Catholic Church is discovering the immense riches of that tradition, which extends to the different realms of Christian life (the formulation of faith, theology, spirituality...) and which includes “elements of great significance for fuller and more thorough understanding of the Christian experience” (OL, 5). This tradition is described by Pope John-Paul II as “a way of accepting, understanding and living faith in the Lord Jesus” (OL, 5), so that “Eastern Christians have their own way of perceiving and understanding, and thus an original way of living their relationship with the Savior” (OL, 5). “This is articulated in the historical and cultural patrimony of each Church, shaped by the witness of the martyrs, fathers and saints, as well as by the living faith of all Christians down the centuries to our own day” (OL, 8).

In the context of Vatican II, Yves Congar published an essay on *Tradition and Traditions*,<sup>2</sup> in which he distinguishes, as the title indicates, between *tradition* and *traditions*:

From all the above we can draw the following conclusions: when early Christian writers speak of tradition they mean primarily a Christological explanation of the Old Testament and the ecclesial understanding of the central mystery of Christ and the Church as witnessed to by the

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<sup>1</sup>That is why we often refer to the pastoral letters of the Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East. In 1991, an ecclesial organism was created in the Middle East called the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East, which gathers the six Oriental Catholic Patriarchs, in addition to the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. They meet regularly every year to discuss issues common to the Christians of the Middle East. They usually also publish common pastoral letters on various issues (ten until now). The most important letters for our subject are: the second (*The Christian Presence in the Middle East, Witness and Mission*, 1992) (CP), the fourth (*The Mystery of the Church*, 1996) (MC), and the fifth (*The Ecumenical Movement*, 1999) (EM).

<sup>2</sup>Yves M.-J. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions, An Historical and a Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough, New York, 1966. The book was originally published in two volumes each entitled *La Tradition et les Traditions*, the first volume being subtitled *Essai Historique* (1960) and the second *Essai Théologique* (1963), Paris.

Scriptures. When they speak of apostolic traditions transmitted orally they have in mind liturgical and disciplinary practices.<sup>3</sup>

These *liturgical and disciplinary practices* are called by John-Paul II “*the uses and customs belonging to each Church*” (OL, 8).

Y. Congar emphasizes another distinction: the *divine* and the *human*.<sup>4</sup> The *divine* has God as subject through the Church, whereas the *human* has the community as subject, in its responses to the Word of God according to times and places, *hic et nunc*. Whereas tradition is absolute and normative, traditions are relative and changeable.

These distinctions are not a purely intellectual exercise. In fact, they have deep repercussions in the context of the Oriental Churches, in their awareness of themselves, their relation to other Churches, and even their relation to the world. When these traditions “are considered as absolutely unchangeable, there is a sure risk of Tradition losing that feature of a living reality” (OL, 8).

In that context, the forth Pastoral Letter of the Eastern Patriarchs says:

Our traditions are therefore divine-human. They are both the fruit of grace and the efforts of our ancestors in the faith. Because they are human, we must start by saying that several temptations threaten us. The most serious of these dangers is “the spirit of the world.” Our fathers and our mothers in the faith, in particular our martyrs and our spiritual authors, who were servants of the Holy Apostolic Tradition, are the living witnesses to the loyalty of the Church to his Lord, against the temptations of the spirit of the world. What is this spirit of the world? It is confessionalism and is also to observe the letter of the rites of our liturgies or brag about their beauty, while our hearts are far from what we honour (cf. Mk 7:7); It is to “set aside the commandment of God to be attached to mere human precepts” (Mk 7: 8)... (MC, 13).

### **Tradition and Contextualization**

The Oriental Churches — as all Churches — were shaped by history. It is true — and fundamental — to remember that the Church is a divine — a Trinitarian — initiative. But this initiative takes place in history. Therefore, it is conditioned by time and place, which leave their prints on the Church’s physiognomy. The Word of God entered history to become a historical word. The interaction between the initiative of God and the responses of the Church throughout history led to the development of a huge patrimony, which we call tradition.

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<sup>3</sup>Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 63; see also 287.

<sup>4</sup>Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 257-270. Cf. also LG, n. 8.

This tradition was particularly formed in the first centuries. That is why it assumes a special importance for the Churches, and these first centuries are considered by them as their Golden Age. Here it must be said that the Oriental Churches lived a unique experience, and it may be one of the richest experiences, as they developed a rich patrimony in different historical periods and in connection with a variety of cultures. The first centuries constitute a foundational experience, which shaped the different Oriental Churches and remain vivid in these different Churches today. That is why a remarkable effort is invested to remember these centuries, to study them and renew the experiences that evolved then in order to live from them and give life through them. This effort is surely praiseworthy, necessary and decisive.

But in all this, there is also a danger, to which the Oriental Churches very easily succumb, and that is "fixedness". In other words, we come back to the old, we fix it and transport it as it is into our times. In this sense, tradition becomes a prison, which prevents us from facing the challenges of the present and the demands of the future. This fixedness leads to a double alienation: *historical* and *geographical*. By *geographical* alienation we mean that we are materially living in modern capitals (New Delhi, Cairo, Damascus etc.), when in fact we are living in our imaginations in old capitals that no longer exist (such as Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, Edessa etc.). By *historical* alienation, we mean that we materially live in modern times, when in fact we are living in our imaginations in the first centuries in which we try to find a comfortable refuge, which "protects" us from facing the difficulties and the possibilities of the present.

What we need is a contextualization<sup>5</sup> of our patrimony in order to respond to the challenges of the present. We know that most of the Oriental Churches live in countries of the South (India, the Middle East...) which face huge problems and challenges. How can our patrimony respond to these problems and challenges? This is the problem. After discovering our patrimony and studying it, a fundamental question remains unanswered: how do we delve our patrimony as a function of the questions, expectations and aspirations of our peoples today? Thus, our patrimony can be an inspiration

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<sup>5</sup>See: Fadi Daou, "Les limites et les chances d'une théologie contextuelle dans les Lettres Pastorales des Patriarches Catholiques d'Orient," in *Quo Vadis, Theologia orientalis?*, Actes du Colloque "Théologie Orientale : contenu et importance," Ain Traz, avril 2005, CEDRAC, Université Saint Joseph, Beyrouth, 2008.

rather than a prison, with which we may contribute to the life of our suffering peoples. Tradition is, at the same time, a *memory*, a *call* and a *prophecy*. As *memory*, it is continuity and a source of inspiration. As a *call*, it helps us to face the challenges of the present. As a *prophecy*, it helps us to open new doors to the future. We cannot but refer to the fourth Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East ("The Mystery of the Church"), which insists, on the one hand, on fidelity to the riches of our tradition, but, on the other hand, invites us to the contextualization of "*our old traditions*" in "*our daily life in the present time*" to respond to "*the demands of our life today and to our hope in the future*" (4). In this way, tradition does not prevent life, but promotes and animates it (see: MC, 2, 4, 11, 12).

### **Tradition and Inculturation**

Inculturation is a new theological concept, which was particularly developed after the Synod of 1974 on evangelization. In his Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), which followed the Synod, Pope Paul VI insisted on the concept to point out the relations between inculturation and evangelization through the local Churches:

[Nevertheless] this universal Church is in practice incarnate in the individual Churches made up of such or such an actual part of mankind, speaking such and such a language, heirs of a cultural patrimony, of a vision of the world, of an historical past, of a particular human substratum. Receptivity to the wealth of the individual Church corresponds to a special sensitivity of modern man.

Let us be very careful not to conceive of the universal Church as the sum, or, if one can say so, the more or less anomalous federation of essentially different individual Churches. In the mind of the Lord the Church is universal by vocation and mission, but when she puts down her roots in a variety of cultural, social and human terrains, she takes on different external expressions and appearances in each part of the world (62).

After emphasizing the relations between the universal and the individual Churches, Paul VI continues:

The individual Churches, intimately built up not only of people but also of aspirations, of riches and limitations, of ways of praying, of loving, of looking at life and the world, which distinguish this or that human gathering, have the task of assimilating the essence of the Gospel message and of transposing it, without the slightest betrayal of its essential truth, into the language that these particular people understand, then of proclaiming it in this language...

The question is undoubtedly a delicate one. Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life (63).

Here again, we must say that the Oriental Churches experienced a most “successful” process of inculturation in history, in the different historical periods and with the different Eastern cultures. Pope John Paul II underlined this process in his Encyclical Letter *Slavorum Apostoli* (1985) on the occasion of the eleventh centenary of Saints Cyril and Methodius, which he recalls in OL:

As I have pointed out at other times, one of the first great values embodied particularly in the Christian East is the attention given to peoples and their cultures, so that the Word of God and his praise may resound in every language. I reflected on this topic in the Encyclical Letter *Slavorum Apostoli*, where I noted that Cyril and Methodius “desired to become similar in every aspect to those to whom they were bringing the Gospel; they wished to become a part of those peoples and to share their lot in everything” [No. 9, AAS 77 (1985) 789-790]; “it was a question of a new method of catechesis” [11, 1c., 791].

In doing this, they expressed an attitude widespread in the Christian East: “By incarnating the Gospel in the native culture of the peoples which they were evangelizing, Saints Cyril and Methodius were especially meritorious for the formation and development of that same culture, or rather of many cultures” [21, 1c., 791]. They combined respect and consideration for individual cultures with a passion for the universality of the Church, which they tirelessly strove to achieve. The attitude of the two brothers from Thessalonica is representative in Christian antiquity of a style typical of many churches: revelation is proclaimed satisfactorily and becomes fully understandable when Christ speaks the tongues of the various peoples, and they can read scripture and sing the liturgy in their own language with their own expressions, as though repeating the marvels of Pentecost.

At a time when it is increasingly recognized that the right of every people to express themselves according to their own heritage of culture and thought is fundamental, the experience of the individual Churches of the East is offered to us as an authoritative example of successful inculturation” (7).

Inculturation is a natural process, because the Christian community is “from the same yeast of this portion of humanity she is sent to” (MC, 12), and it is an indication to the vitality of the Gospel and its capacity to address history and to incarnate “in the different cultures,” through which “we live the mystery of Christ” (MC, 8). In the East, this process

gave “*spiritual fruits in the social and cultural environment in which the Church was implanted*” (MC, 12) “*in the different fields*” (MC, 11).

If this was a fact in the past, it needs to be pursued today. Inculturation is not a static process. It is a process in an ongoing history and in an ongoing culture, with the ongoing fermentation of the Spirit. This process of the past requires a new effort of inculturation today. The second pastoral letter of the Patriarchs in the Middle East (*Christian Presence in the Middle East, Witness and Mission*), after describing this process of inculturation in the past, in its different periods, calls for the pursuit of this process in the present: “The return to a patrimony like this is a powerful stimulus to meet the present urgent needs of our Churches” (CP, 31), in a creative realism within the context of our peoples today (CP, 32-33), in a double fidelity, to our past and to the demands of our peoples today.<sup>6</sup>

### **Tradition and Identity**

The tradition of the Oriental Churches is a cultural identity reference, which shaped their physiognomy in the past and still shapes it today. Through the characteristics of this identity, these Churches continue to unfold their presence and mission, in authenticity and openness. However, this way is not without real dangers. One of them is to transform this cultural reference to a narrow nationalistic one which separates the Church from its environment, ecclesial and national. In reality, that was the case sometimes, when this patrimony was transformed into a sociological and ethnic reference, affirming an identity against other surrounding identities. We know that this trend results in interminable struggles, as is the case in many parts of the world today (the Balkan countries, for example, and elsewhere). When the cultural reference becomes an ethnic one, it ends in closing in on self, preventing us from developing our identity into mission. That is the danger which the second pastoral letter of the Patriarchs of the Middle East warns against:

Presence is situated between two opposing pitfalls: marginalization and dissolution. Marginalization nullifies our mission and dissolution produces the same effect as regards to our identity since authentic presence is a guarantee for both, mission and identity. Presence deepens

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<sup>6</sup>See: Fadi Daou, “L’inculturation au Moyen-Orient: une matrice d’Églises locales?,” dans *Irénikon*, T. LXXIV/2), (2001/n. 2) 203-220.



our faithfulness to God, to ourselves and to our society God has given us as a space to our earthly pilgrimage (17).

That coincides with what John Paul II says:

From this model we learn that if we wish to avoid the recurrence of particularism as well as of exaggerated nationalism, we must realize that the proclamation of the Gospel should be deeply rooted in what is distinctive to each culture and open to convergence in a universality, which involves an exchange for the sake of mutual enrichment" (OL, 8).

When the ecclesial patrimony is transformed into a narrow ethnic nationalistic reference, it veils the face of Christ, takes the place of the Gospel and raises a flag to attack the other instead of living together with them. That is the danger which the Catholic Patriarchs in the Middle East sought to underline. When tradition becomes a nationalistic ideology, the Churches become "*little by little ethnic nationalistic minorities,*" whose concern is "*survival*" and the "*conservation of their nationalistic identity,*" which develops "*the instinct of self defense and survival*" with its repercussions on their "*behavior on the different levels*" (MC, 7). In that case, patrimony "*freezes*" to become "an artefact in a museum" and "a dead letter and a servitude which kills life and doesn't respond to its demands" (MC, 62).

### **Tradition and Ecumenism<sup>7</sup>**

One of the most important acquisitions of the ecumenical movement is discovering unity in diversity. Unity doesn't mean uniformity and diversity is not an obstacle to unity, but requires it. The Oriental Churches are witnesses of the wide diversity within the Church, described by John Paul II as "living interpreters of the treasure of tradition they preserve" (OL, 5; see also UR, 4; MC, 34-36; EM, 7-8).

Now, the problem is how to perceive this diversity and approach it. In *Oriente Lumen*, John Paul II gives some very stimulating indications, when he said, quoting Vatican II, that the different Christian traditions are "to be considered complementary rather than conflicting" (5). Our divisions were the result of our perception of the other caused by "progressive estrangement": "We have increasingly learned that it was not so much an historical episode or a mere question of pre-eminence that tore the fabric of unity, as it was a progressive estrangement, so that the other's diversity was no longer

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<sup>7</sup>See: Fadi DAOU, "Inculturation et unité des Eglises au Moyen-Orient," dans *Irénikon*, T. LXXVII/2-3 (2004/n. 2-3) 316-334.

perceived as a common treasure, but as incompatibility" (18). "We can only thank God with deep emotion for the wonderful variety with which he has allowed such a rich and composite mosaic of different tesserae to be formed" (5). Quoting again Vatican II, he affirms; that the "Church's ideal" remains "the quest for harmony in that genuine plurality of forms" (2). Referring to the different traditions, he recalls "the immense riches that our Churches preserve in the coffers of their traditions" (4). To interpret the different traditions as exclusive and antagonist is to work against the true meaning of unity.

Another obstacle to unity is confessionalism or communitarianism. The Arabic term for confessionalism is *ta'ifa* (confession) and *Ta'ifiya* (confessionalism), realities which are very widespread in the common language of the Churches in the Middle East and their societies. The term is a sociological one and refers to the Church as a human and social institution separate from its divine — Trinitarian — origin. And here we cannot but quote extensively the fourth Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East describing this concept with its consequences, from a paragraph entitled "Faith community and confessionalism":

This is in short the historical and cultural circumstances that led to the birth and growth of our churches in their diversity and specificity, in the East. These same circumstances, difficult and negative, in addition to our sins, led our churches to split and will contain each on itself. They thus became confessional communities (Tawa'if), gnawed by divisions and the overloads that parroted their facial features of Christ. They put out the flame of the spirit in them and brought them to forget that they existed not for themselves but for God, to bring the message of salvation in their workplaces which they were drawn and to which they were sent (MC, 11).

"Confessionalism" is presented as "a dangerous distortion of religion and a flagrant contradiction with the meaning of the Church" (MC, 11).

In fact,

Confessionalism's primary concern is survival, self-esteem and the rights and privileges acquired defense, much more than the growth of the faith itself. It cares for human achievement more than achievements of faith, and external religious events more than the spirit. Traditions, it is a prison which binds the faithful to a past faraway foreign to the present life, without changing that to do a force presence and perpetual renewal. As a result, our churches became groupings that concentrated the most important of their concern in the survival and purely human perspectives. This also resulted in the violation of other ecclesial characteristic: the opening and charity. Confessionalism in fact causes the withdrawing on oneself against the other, citizen or correligionnaire. The other becomes a

stranger, a rival or competitor, despite the fact that he shares the same faith, the same land, the same citizenship and human brotherhood.

The sectarian mentality ignores the Church which she claims and the meaning of its traditions. It disregards the church because she sees her as one ethno-religious group among others, and because it closes on itself as we have said, while the Church of Christ is open to everyone, to all people and nation. It disregards the ecclesial traditions, because it often ignores them purely and simply, or it reduces to socio-cultural realities, as do most of the civilian media or sometimes even religious in their reports. They highlight the sectarian mentality and neglect the essential mission of the Church (MC, 11).

Exclusivity and confessionalism are a distorted approach to pluralism and remain an obstacle to unity, and those are not imaginary dangers to our Churches, but real ones.

### **Tradition and Mission**

Tradition cannot be separated from mission. It is well known that the different oriental traditions were born in a context of evangelization of different peoples and cultures. That mission is not limited to the past, but remains their fundamental task in the present. Their tradition has to be thought through the function of the needs of their peoples and societies.

It is remarkable how John Paul II insists on that aspect of the oriental tradition. It puts it continuously in relation with the *“cry of the peoples”*: *“My thoughts turn to our brothers and sisters of the Eastern Churches, in the wish that together we may seek the strength of an answer to the questions man is asking today in every part of the world”* (OL, 3).

In fact,

the cry of men and women today seeking meaning for their lives reaches all the Churches of the East and of the West... The women and men of today are asking us to show them Christ... Letting the world ask us its questions, listening with humility and tenderness, in full solidarity with those who express them, we are called to show in word and deed today the immense riches that our Churches preserve in the coffers of their traditions. Going beyond our own frailties, we must turn to him, the one Teacher, sharing in his death so as to purify ourselves from that jealous attachment to feelings and memories, not of the great things God has done for us, but of the human affairs of a past that still weighs heavily on our hearts. May the Spirit clarify our gaze so that together we may reach out to contemporary man who is waiting for the good news. If we make a harmonious, illuminating, life-giving response to the world's expectations

and sufferings, we will truly contribute to a more effective proclamation of the Gospel among the people of our time (OL, 4).

In the conclusion of his Exhortation, Pope John Paul II comes back to that perspective, calling together the East and the West to *"listen" to "the cry"* of the entire world: "We listen together to the cry of those who want to hear God's entire Word. The words of the West need the words of the East, so that God's word may ever more clearly reveal its unfathomable riches" (OL, 28).

And he ends with this wish: "May the people of the third millennium be able to enjoy this discovery, finally achieved by a word that is harmonious and thus fully credible, proclaimed by brothers and sisters who love one another and thank one another for the riches which they exchange" (OL, 28).

This perspective is taken up by the Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East in their different letters:

Our Christian presence is not a presence for our own sake alone. Christ did not found his Church in its own service... If in the past the Christian communities in the East have turned in on themselves..., today they are called... to open themselves up to the world which surrounds them (CP, 17).

Revive our heritage today has a meaning, if we make of it a spiritual food for our present, and a help to build the world in which we witness and carry our mission. Heritage is not a museum piece which we are proud of. It is a living deposit... that keeps its relevance when we talk to our contemporary world. It is the leaven in the dough. It must be able to respond to the needs, concerns, difficulties and hopes of our world. The vitality of our heritage is valued at its capacity to challenge the mankind of today, in this region of the world in which God wanted us and in this moment of history in which God calls us to live (MC, 62).

Our traditions are *"our way to know Jesus Christ"* (MC, 14) and to proclaim him today so *"that the world may believe"* (Jn 17:21).

## **Conclusion**

The Oriental Churches are invited to a new interpretation of their different traditions to transform them so that they become a source of life for themselves, for the universal Church and for the world of today. We cannot accomplish this by simply repeating the voice of the past and witnessing to something in the past:

This is articulated in the historical and cultural patrimony of each Church, shaped by the witness of the martyrs, fathers and saints, as well as by the living faith of all Christians down the centuries to our own day. It is not

an unchanging repetition of formulas, but a heritage which preserves its original, living kerygmatic core (OL, 8).

When the uses and customs belonging to each Church are considered as absolutely unchangeable, there is a sure risk of Tradition losing that feature of a living reality which grows and develops, and which the Spirit guarantees precisely because it has something to say to the people of every age. As Scripture is increasingly understood by those who read it, every other element of the Church's living heritage is increasingly understood by believers and is enriched by new contributions, in fidelity and in continuity (OL, 8).

Our oriental tradition is situated between "*memory and expectation*" (OL, 8).