

Mission and Ecumenism and The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and all the East (SOCAE)

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In this short article, and deriving from several earlier valuable sources, some of which have not been translated from their original language of Syriac/Aramaic, I intend to provide a very succinct historical overview of the origin, language, relics, dogma of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and all the East (SOCAE). Thereafter, I will attempt to talk about some of the efforts exerted by SOCAE, her Patriarchs and her forefathers over the centuries, until this day and time in relation to missionary and for the unity of the Holy Church.

As we all know, Christians were first called as such in Antioch, and this event in the history of Christianity is recorded in the Book of Acts (Lamsa, 1933, ACTS 11:26); this leads us to the Foundation of SOCAE which goes back to these early Apostolic days (Issas, 1995; Iwas, 2008; Jacob, 1957; Mar Ignatius Yacoub III, 1974). Indeed, according to the Syriac Orthodox tradition, Apostle Peter Himself established The Holy See in Antioch in the year 37 AD. Therefore, St. Peter is rightly considered the founder and the first Patriarch of the SOCAE.

Despite the several wars that took place in the region, which resulted in destruction of places of worship, migration and uprooting, yet, SOCAE continues to possess some holy relics and celebrates their festivals with solemn processions inside and outside the church. For example, our Lady's Church in Homs is known as the Church of the Lady of the Girdle (Amo Dzonoro) in Homs, Syria, because this church possesses the Girdle of our Lady, which was hand-knitted by her. On August 15, the clergy carry the Girdle in a great procession inside the Church, and the Archbishop blesses the faithful with this Holy Relic. So also, St. Thomas the Apostle's Church in Mosul, Iraq, possesses St. Thomas' Relics, and does the same thing on his festival on the 3rd of July every year (Jacob, 1957; Touma, 1953). These two pieces of relics were endangered with the latest persecution of SOCAE in Syria and Iraq, whereas the Church in Homs was destructed during the ongoing war that started in 2011 in Syria, and the St. Thomas Church in Mosul had the same fate following the 2014 uprooting of Christians from this Iraqi city. However, both relics were saved. In addition, and in 2018, the Church was blessed to receive some of St. Severus relics when the Patriarchal residence that contains a chapel named after this great saint in Atchaneh was consecrated.

The history and the name of SOCAE is also intimately associated with the Arameans or Syrians, the inhabitants of the land of Aram or Syria where Antioch was the capital of Great Syria. There is no doubt that Aramaic was the language of the Jews during the Apostolic Age as well as during several centuries prior to this period and extending as far back as 500 B.C. The Jews even wrote some of their Holy Scriptures in Aramaic or in Aramaic characters. The Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in 1947 by H.E. Mar Athanasius Y. Samuel, then Archbishop of Jerusalem, confirm this fact (Jacob, 1957).

Thus, Aramaic became the common language of that area including Antioch. Later, and just before, and after, the opening of the Christian era, Aramaic underwent a particularly rich progression where a new advanced and developed form of Aramaic known as "Syriac", came to the fore, the language of the amalgamated or unified Syriac People (Issas, 1995; Iwas, 2008; Jacob, 1957; Mar Ignatius Yacoub III, 1974). This language was sanctified being the language that Our Lord Jesus Christ, His Mother Our Lady Virgin Mary "Yoldath Aloho" and the Apostles spoke. It is with pride we mention here that the Aramaic language was the language in which the Gospel was first preached in Judea, Syria and the neighbouring countries (Jacob, 1957).

It is also prudent to mention here that this language 'Aramaic' was the lingua franca until the 7th Century as it was the main language of trade, universities, several of which were ran by SOCAE, whereas St Ephraim the Syrian was the Dean of one of these universities in Mesopotamia, schools in the land of Mesopotamia and Great Syria (Jacob, 1957). This language, therefore, was used as the

liturgical language in this Church. The Aramaic liturgy originally written by St. James, the brother of our Lord and the first bishop of Jerusalem, came to be used for the first time by SOCAE. Hence it was attributed to SOCAE (Jacob, 1957). Further, it is judicious to mention here that the hymns and liturgical prayers that SOCAE go back centuries. For example, St. Jacob of Edessa (708+) would be credited with arranging the hymns that SOCAE clergy and faithful chant during the Holy Week leading to and including the Feast of Resurrection, which he collected and derived from the writings of different saints: (i) St. Ephraim the Syrian (373+), (ii) St. Jacob of Srouj (521+) (iii) St. Shamoun Qoqoyo (Simon the Potter) (514+) and St. Jacob of Edessa (708+).



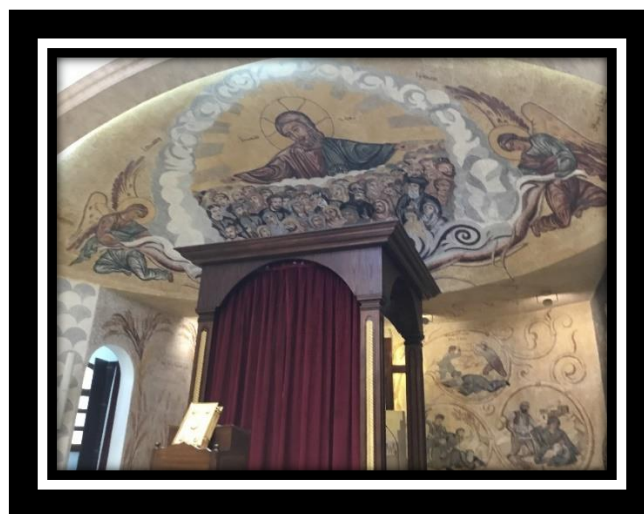
St. Ephraim the Syrian (373+)

St. Jacob of Edessa (708+)

St. Jacob of Srouj (521+)

St. Ephraim and St. Yacoub images derived from <http://soca.cjb.net> and Syriac Icon of St. Jacob of Srouj

Such a longstanding and ancient church as SOCAE has played a great role in spreading Christianity in the East, and in the world for that matter. SOCAE's missionary work goes back to the first century, stories that can be traced back and read throughout the book of ACTS (Lamsa, 1933e.g. ACTS 1:4, ACTS 1:8, ACTS 1: 15-26, ACTS 6: 1-8, ACTS 8:1, ACTS 11:26). Further, deriving from (e.g., Bar Ebroyo, 1200 (Approx.); 2003; Barsoum, 1956; Barsoum, 2000; Eusebius, 300; Hollerweger, 1999; Iwas, 2008; Moringiello, 2006; Rabo, 2014; Touma, 1953) Issa et al., (2012) took the reader in a historical journey through the old manuscripts, valuable books and volumes of history, liturgy, research and scholarly articles, which might not have all been translated into English, providing a historical insight in the way Christianity expanded throughout the East, highlighting the missionaries that took place in early Christianity. Will expand on this issue later in the paper.



St. Severus the Great Patriarchal Chapel in Atchaneh Lebanon showing the SAYFO icon – also in this chapel the relics received from Pope of Alexandria at the hands of Aphrem II in 2018 are placed (photo taken by T. Issa in April 2019)

SOCAE enjoys the greatest prestige in the history of Christendom and can justifiably claim the wealthiest liturgical and musical heritage, besides a proud theological and missionary record (Iwas, 2008; Jacob, 1957; Mar Ignatius Yacoub III, 1974). SOCAE had suffered uncountable, innumerable, and untold hardships and tragedies including massacres from her inception and throughout the centuries at the hands of emperors, kings, colonialism, and ruling parties.

There is no place in this short article to talk about the persecutions that SOCAE was faced with, but three prominent, contemporary and very recent examples of such horrific persecution would be:



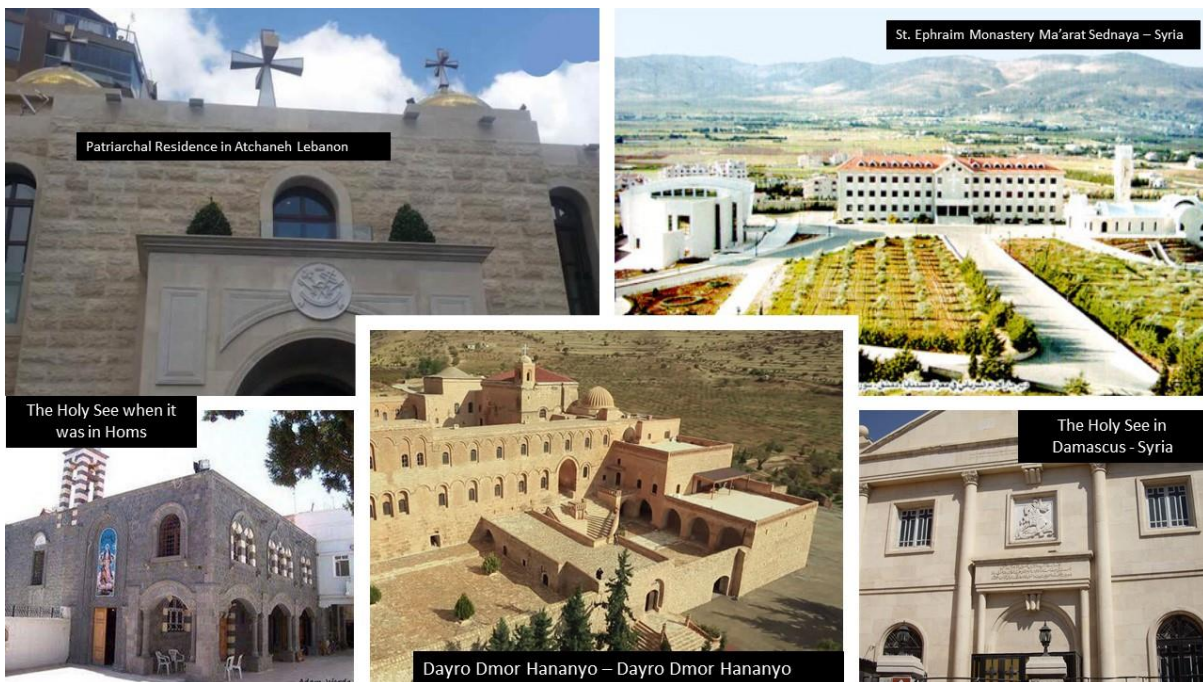
SAYFO logo and icon officiated by the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch on the Centenary of SAYFO (The Syriac Genocide) also the cover of the book on SAYFO by the Issas.

- (i) 1915 “SAYFO” persecution at the hands of the Ottoman Empire (Aphrem II, 2014) – in 2015 SOCAE commemorated the Centenary of this event in the life of the church and the faithful.
- (ii) the colonialization of Mesopotamia, that led to the division of this land into different countries, and the role this colonialization had played in assisting the Western Churches to have a foothold in the Middle East and India which resulted in the reduction of numbers of the church followers in these regions.
- (iii) the 2014 persecution that took place in Northern Iraq, and Syria at the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Issa et al, 2017), the effects of which continue to be felt as SOAEC now deals with
 - a. the reduced number of Syriac Orthodox and Christians in the homeland of Christianity, what is known the cradle of Christianity (i.e. the Middle East),
 - b. the destruction of livelihood of several of SOCAE community members, and all inhabitants of the land as a direct result of uncertainty and ongoing war.
 - c. the demolition of churches and monasteries, for example, to this date, and since 2014, SOCAE is unable to rebuild the eight churches/cathedrals in Mosul, Iraq that were damaged, ruined and demolished by ISIS.
 - d. the killing and the abduction of priests and bishops, whereas one of SOCAE prominent archbishops H.E. Mor Gregoreous Youhanna Ibrahim Archbishop of Aleppo, and his brother in Christ Bishop Youhanna Yaziji of Aleppo, who were abducted in April 2013. On the 23rd of April 2020, the church will mark the 7th anniversary of their abduction. We continue to pray.



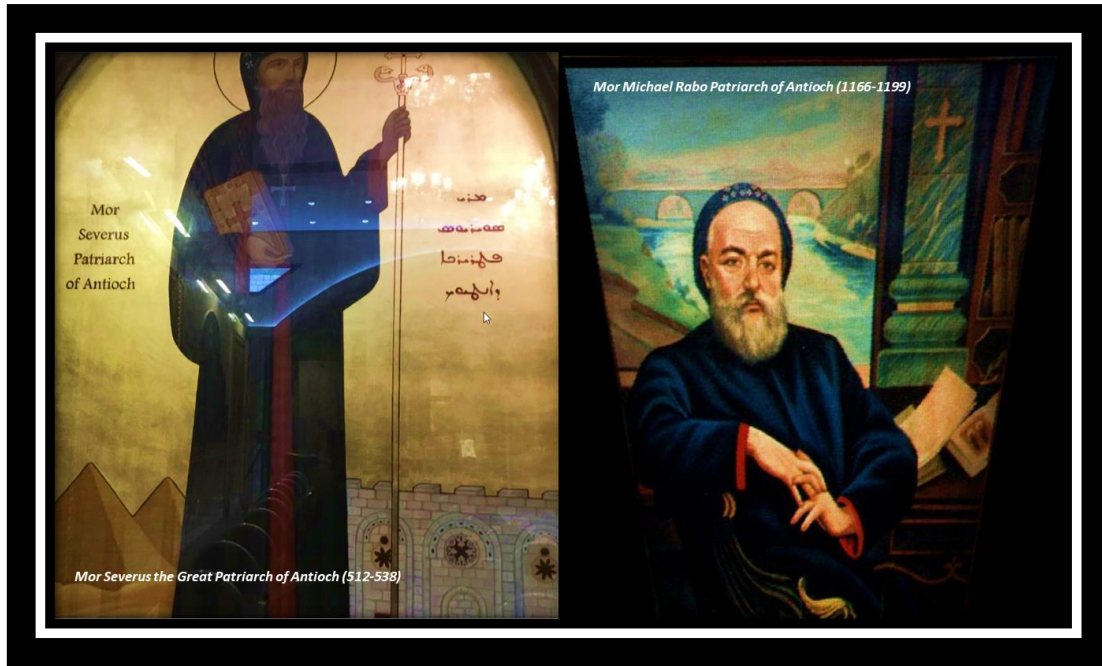
An image taken from the <http://soca.cjb.net> website that was included upon the abduction of H.E. Mor Gregorious Youhanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yazigi on 23rd April 2013

Add to all this the suffering of SOAEC as a result of the repeated transfer of the See of the Patriarchate from one locality to another due to political and other events; whereas the Holy See of Antioch and the Patriarch of Antioch himself moved from Antioch to different places in the neighbouring region.



Images of the places where the Holy See of Antioch was moved to

This sad event took place during the reign of Patriarch Mor Severus the Great in the year 518, with the uncertainty going on until the time of Mor Michael Rabo (1166-1199) when the Holy See finally settled at Mor Hananyo Monastery (Deir Al-Za'faran – Dayro Dmor Hananyo) which is located in South Eastern Anatolia near Mardin – Turkey.



Images sourced from <http://soca.cjb.net>

The Holy See of Antioch remained at Dayro Dmor Hananyo until the year 1932 and the last Patriarch of Antioch to live in this monastery was the Saint and the Thrice Blessed Elias III (1932+). When his successor Patriarch Aphrem I (1933-1957), took the reign he was forced to re-establish the Holy See in Homs, Syria at Amo Dzonoro Church (the Church of Our Lady's Gridle). Further, and in 1959, during the reign of the Thrice Blessed Yacoub III (1980+) the Holy See of Antioch was transferred to Damascus (the capital of current Syria) where it continues to be until this day. Historians declare that the survival of this Church was nothing short of a miracle (Iwas, 2008; Jacob, 1957; Mar Ignatius Yacoub III, 1974; Rabo, 2014; Yacoub III, 1953; 1963).



Images sourced from <http://soca.cjb.net>

SOCAE, as well as much of the vast province of the Holy See of Antioch, rejected from the very beginning the council of Chalcedon (Iwas, 2005). SOCAE maintains firmly One Person and One Nature for Christ after the union. SOCAE's dogma states that the Incarnate Son and Word of God was really

crucified and He suffered and died in manhood by the separation of His soul from His body and He was buried in the tomb, whereas His Godhead was separated neither from His soul nor from His body, while he was on the cross or in the tomb. It is extremely important to stress here that the sufferings did not touch His Godhood. On the third day, he rose from the dead (Iwas, 2008; Iwas, 2005; Jacob, 1957; Mar Ignatius Yacoub III, 1974). Further, SOCAE uses the expression of “Theotokos” “Yoldath Aloho” or “God-bearer”, to refer to Our Lady Virgin Mary, after the example of St. Cyril of Alexandria and the third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (431). SOCAE’s Holy Fathers emphasised these teachings against both the Chalcedonians and Nestorians (Iwas, 2008; Iwas, 2005; Jacob, 1957; Mar Ignatius Yacoub III, 1974).

Despite the schism amongst the churches following the Council of Chalcedon, our Patriarchs and forefathers were extremely keen to re-unite the Holy Church, thus worked extremely hard, exerted every effort towards achieving this goal. This paper is too short to advise of all the great works of our forefathers and patriarchs pursuing the unity of the Church, but as exemplars we provide a brief of what Mor Severus the Great (538+) and Jacob Baradaeus (Mor Yacoub Burd’ono) (578+) did in the early centuries, later will provide a brief of what our contemporary Patriarchs, including our current Patriarch HH Moran Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, the Supreme Head of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church, continue to do for the unity of the Holy Church through the ongoing dialogues, joint declarations, speeches and Apostolic Bulls.

Mor Severus the Great (538+): One of the SOCAE patriarchs (512-538) who worked relentlessly to unite the Holy Church, the main achievement of this Patriarch would be the reinstatement of the relationship between the Holy See of Antioch and the Holy See of Alexandria. Several other efforts were exerted by this Patriarch including holding councils to discuss the issues that might have contributed to the differences, and separation amongst the brethren. One of these councils was the council held in (513) with the support of Mor Philoxinius of Mabough (522+) that brought together all the oriental bishops and patriarchs, reaching an agreement on the Nature of Jesus, and their rejection of the Council of Chalcedon that he took to the Patriarch of Constantinople Timothy, and a copy to the Patriarch of Alexandria Mor John (Youhanna) the second (Yacoub III, 1970).

The Byzantine ruler at the time advised against what came in this agreement out of fear on what might happen to the Empire, here, Mor Severus insisted on the contents of this agreement (Yacoub III, 1970). He also held another council in the following year (514) in Tyre – Lebanon, communicating the outcome to all the Patriarchs. However, and despite his great efforts for unity he was faced with immense persecution as there were calls from the rulers then for him to change the contents of the first agreement, but St. Severus insisted on keeping the contents as they were, even if this meant leaving Antioch, ending in Egypt rather than changing any word of that agreement that identified the true Syriac Orthodox Church’s dogma.

Whilst in Egypt, Mor Severus continued to run the affairs of the Holy See of Antioch through his famous letters, that contained guidelines and directives which he posted through his assistants for the running of the affairs of the Church (Yacoub III, 1970). Mor Severus went into eternal sleep as Patriarch of Antioch on 8th February 538 in Egypt, away from his Holy See of Antioch where his last resting place is located. On a positive note and in June 2018, the current SOAEC Patriarch H.H. Moran Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, the Supreme Head of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church, and in coordination and collaboration with Pope Tawadros the second of Alexandria was able to bring some of Mor Severus relics to the Patriarchal Chapel in Atchaneh, Lebanon some 1480 years following his eternal sleep.

Further, another personality of SOCAE and this time from the forefathers who also worked relentlessly for the unity of the Holy Church would be St. Jacob Baradaeus (Mor Yacoub Burd’ono) (578+). Issa (2000) in a brochure issued by St. Ephraim Syriac Orthodox Church in Perth, Western Australia on the occasion of the 1500th anniversary of the birth of Mor Yacoub Burd’ono and the pious Empress

Theodora, provided some insights into the works and efforts of this saint, quoting the famous Syriac Historian Mor Gregorius Youhanon Bar Hebrew (1286+) when describing this great saint stated:

“He achieved great successes in every place he went to, either as a visitor or a supporter to any group. He was continent, ascetic, poor, hard worker even to the stage of suffering pain. He was strong valiant and he was swift of foot like Ashael (Lamsa, 1933,2 Samuel 2:18). He toured the East granting the Priesthood to the Orthodox, and in several instances, he used to wear old rugged clothes in order to escape the persecutors at the time. He ordained two Patriarchs and one Mapheryono (Catholicos), twenty bishops, and two thousand priests.” (Issa, 2000, p. 1)



Image of a painting of St. Jacob Baradaeus (Mor Yacoub Burdo'ono) and Empress Theodora in Ravenna, Italy, both images taken from <http://soca.cjb.net>

Talking about St. Jacob Baradaeus (Mor Yacoub Burdo'ono) would enhance the discussion on missionary at SOCAE that was highlighted briefly at the beginning of this paper, thus, this would be the best time to talk further about the missionary in the early years of Christianity according to the SOCEA:

In an attempt to shed some light on the missionary narratives in the Syriac tradition, Saint-Laurent (2015) analysed seven missionary stories written between 300 and 800 CE, from the Syriac tradition: The Acts of Thomas, The Teaching of Addai, The Acts of Mari, The Life of Simeon of Beth Arsham, The Life of Jacob Baradaeus (two versions), and The Life of Aḥudemmeḥ, and those narratives received interest by several scholars. However, this article does not allow the extensive discussion on this valuable work, but Saint-Laurent analysis are extensive, and highlighted the following missionaries:

- **St. Thomas missionary to India:** Our Lord Jesus Christ commissions Thomas to travel to India to convert its people. Thomas journeys there by way of the trade routes as a servant enslaved to merchants.
- **The Teaching of St. Addai: Founding a Christian City:** Addai (who is the twin of Thomas) is one of the seventy-two ordained by Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is considered the definitive missionary patron for Edessa (Modern Urfa).

- **Mari as Apostle to the Church of Persia:** The Syriac missionary who travelled throughout the Eastern Roman Empire, turn south from Edessa (Modern Urfa) to the heart of Mesopotamia.
- **St. John of Ephesus (507-89) as Hagiographer and Missionary:** Because of his own extensive missionary activity at the behest of Justinian and Theodora, John's hagiographical collection exhibited a penchant for missionary themes. According to the Thrice Blessed Yacoub III (1980+ (Jacob, 1957; Touma, 1953) it is well known that this Church carried the torch of the Gospel to all the parts of the East, where she guided in the true path thousands and thousands of the children of different nations, namely, Arabs of various tribes, Persians, Afghans, Indians and Chinese. The Church contributed as well to the conversion of the Armenians. In the sixth century the church attracted to the fold of Christ a great number of people from Ethiopia and Nubia through the efforts of a priest called Julian, and eighty thousands of the inhabitants of Asia Minor, Carya, Phregia and Lydia, through the efforts of St. John, the famous bishop of Ephesus.
- **Legends of Simeon of Beth Arsham, Missionary to Persia:** John of Ephesus fit Simeon's life into the narrative typology of the itinerant missionary, attributing to his subject the virtues of simplicity, intelligence, asceticism, zeal, and political savoir faire.
- **Hagiographical Portraits of St. Jacob Baradaeus (Mor Yacoub Burd'ono):** The hagiographic portraits of these itinerant missionaries became emblems of the churches and monasteries that traced their roots to them. As highlighted above Empress Theodora together with the Ghassanid federate king Harith Bar Gabala asked the Patriarch Theodosius to commission Jacob Baradaeus, bishop of Edessa (Modern Urfa) to ordain priests, bishops, and patriarchs to resuscitate the dwindling numbers of religious leaders at the time. The SOCEA survived by expanding the church outside the Roman Empire. The extraordinary work of St. Jacob who can be described as the advocate, defender and champion of the Orthodox Faith (i.e. the faith recognised by the three Councils Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431)) solidified the Orthodox faith and helped save SOCEA from extinction due to persecution and SOCEA with her sister oriental churches are forever indebted to this great Syriac Orthodox Saint. It is unfortunate that there are some erroneous historic accounts by some historians and orientalist who by error would refer to SOCAE as Jacobite Church, which is simply incorrect and misleading claim (Issa et al, 2017).
- **Aḥudemmeḥ among the Arabs:** churches of the East and West Syriac traditions flourished outside the Byzantine world in the region that is present-day Iraq, under the rule of the Sasanian shahs.

However, through the colonialization of several of these countries, missionaries from other Christian denominations with the support of occupying and colonising countries managed to change the demography within SOCAE, thus reducing the number of the faithful of SOCEA in some countries in the East. Further, it is very sensible to note here that due to the ongoing persecution, SOCAE concentrated on her survival rather than being active in missionary in the follow-on years. However, in the 60s the Thrice Blessed Yacoub III (1980+) appointed Raban Mousa Salameh (Bishop thereafter) to Brazil, and currently SOCAE has H.E. Boulos Touza who continues the missionary work in Brazil helping the poor and the needy.

Furthermore, recently, some members of the Catholic Church in Central America were attracted to the rich tradition of SOCAE and have joined the church (Iwas, 2013). In November 2019, HH Aphrem

II, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, the Supreme Head of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church paid His first Apostolic visit to the faithful in Central America.

The efforts of the SOCAE's patriarchs and forefathers have been ongoing, whereas SOCAE is currently a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC), this happened since 1960, during the reign of the Thrice Blessed Yacoub III (1980+), SOCAE is an active member of WCC, whereas the Thrice Blessed Zakka I (2014+) acted as one of the Presidents of the WCC, the current Patriarch Aphrem II, acted as a member of the Central Committee and the Executive Committee when Archbishop of Eastern States of USA. In addition, there are several dialogues, discussions and meetings held with different Christian families.



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These two images were sources from <http://soca.cjb.net>



HH Aphrem II, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, the Supreme Head of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church (the 12rd Patriarch of Antioch since St. Peter)

With regards to the ongoing negotiations, and discussions, the official website of the Department of Syriac Studies (2015) provides details of the number of dialogues and the years those were and continue to be held between:

- SOCAE, and the oriental churches,
- SOCAE, and the Catholic Church,
- SOCAE, and the Eastern Orthodox Church,
- SOCAE, and the Anglican Church
- SOCAE, and the Protestants

All these discussions, negotiations, official communiques and declarations were and continue to be aiming for the unity of the Holy Church of God.

It is not only meetings, negotiations, consultations and official declarations, but in speeches and apostolic bulls, our Patriarchs have always called for building bridges, peace, establishing fruitful dialogues always seeking unity of the Holy Church of Christ.

From the contemporary history, exemplars can be provided from a speech given by SOCAE Patriarch HH Aphrem II in the opening of the General Synod of the Church of Sweden and another quote from HH's speech in Athens from which we provide the following two quotes:

“We thank the Church of Sweden for its active role in the life of the ecumenical movement which seeks the visible unity of Christ’s Church here on earth for we know we will be united in heaven.” (HH Aphrem II, 2018b)

“May our Lord Jesus Christ grant us to taste of His goodness and celebrate our belonging to His one Church unified altogether around the same Eucharistic table of life.” (HH Aphrem II, 2018a)

Add to this, the latest Apostolic Bull issued by H.H. Moran Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, the Supreme Head of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church, (Aphrem II, 2020) for the Great Lent had called for unity providing a theological case for church unity starting with Jesus prayer for those who believe in him, deriving from the Holy Gospel according to St John, and the first Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians (Lamsa, 1933, John 17:21, 15:13 and 1 Corinthians 1:12). Then, HH moves to talk about Christ's cross as a symbol of the unity of the faithful deriving, and once again, from the first Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, and the Holy Gospel according to John (Lamsa, 1933, 1 Corinthians 1:13, Galatians 3:28, and John 10:16), urging that all Christians adhere to the teachings of Our Lord Jesus Christ where all will be one flock with one shepherd. HH then shifts to talk about the dangers of the divisions of the church quoting from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew (Lamsa, 1933, Matthew 12:15), however re-assuring all of us that despite the division in the church, the Grace of God preserved the church, though a great schism came to exist among Christians and resulted in their fighting each other.

In this Apostolic Bull, HH provides a discussion about the foundations of unity, highlighting that some might take church unity for granted, but it is difficult, HH, and once again, takes refuge in the Holy Gospel according to St. John and the first Epistle to the Corinthians and St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (Lamsa, 1933, 1 Corinthians 12:27, John 12:24, Galatians 5:22), whereas there is a need for sacrifice on all parties including the faithful. HH goes on to provide a brief discussion on how working together might bring the unity of the Holy Church.

Finally, HH concludes this Apostolic Bull by thanking God the Almighty that the church now enjoys unity, albeit imperfect, highlighting some of the positive points or positions where HH note that the

church is united, such as where all faithful (in the East and the West) are praying for peace, and together pray for the return of the Archbishops of Aleppo, Yaziji and Ibrahim, who were abducted in April 2013 with no news to date.

This paper provided a very succinct historical overview of the origin, language, relics and dogma of SOCAE. Thereafter, talked about the efforts exerted by SOCAE, her forefathers and her Patriarchs over the centuries until this day in relation to missionary and the unity of the Holy Church. Indeed, endless gratitude and appreciation is due to all the SOCAE forefathers and patriarchs, past and present, some of whom are now amongst our saints and martyrs, for the extensive efforts exerted and continue to be exerted in the field of Christian unity calling on all to continue to pray for the unity of the church, in the hope that such unity will materialise and soon. We pray.

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