

THE CHURCH

Hello my friends, and hello to the organizers, especially Doctor Martin Hafner. I thank him for inviting me.

As we have two hours, we are going to talk about two different topics. During the first hour, we are going to talk about Eastern Churches. Then we'll talk about Islam in the Eastern world and in Europe.

At the beginning, the Church was only one because Christ had founded only one Church. He gave the keys of the Church to Peter. The apostles went away, as Jesus had ordered them, to announce the Gospel to all nations. And the Lord, among the events of life, follows his plan of Salvation in spite of all events and all revolutions that happen in life; God goes on working without our being aware. During the first persecution that Herod, king of Judea, led against the Christians, they had to leave Jerusalem to go to Antioch. This is how Christians applied Jesus' sentence when he said: "if you are persecuted in a town, go to another one!" It is useless to oppose violence, we must choose another means, a non violent one, to shelter (protect ourselves) against men and injustice. The Christians went to the big metropolis of Syria, Antioch. So saint Peter founded the first big Church after Jerusalem; the see of Antioch became his see. The first Christians of Antioch announced the Gospel throughout Syria. Saint Peter remained at least two years in Antioch, then he left – we don't know why – to go to Rome. We also know that saint Mark went to found the Church of Alexandria; this is why we speak of saint Mark's see in Alexandria. So we now have three main towns founded by the apostles: Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria. With the departure of saint Paul for Rome, we have a fourth one. Here are the four apostolic sees of the Church. In 313, Constantin the Great became the Emperor of East and West. He became the great king of Christianity because he gave to the Christians the right of building churches and of going everywhere in the world in order to preach the Gospel.

Before, it was the underground Church, in the catacombs. Because Constantinople was the emperor's see, it was necessary to consider it as an apostolic see! As Rome was the emperors' see, Constantinople was called the second Rome. The first apostles left the Eastern world and went throughout the world. We know that saint Paul travelled throughout the East; first he went to Damascus, then to Arabia, and finally towards pagan peoples, towards the Gentiles, that is to say above all towards Greece which was the centre of philosophical thought at that time. He was a great thinker, a great theologian, a great speaker although he said that he could not speak. He used the means of his time, the human means of science and philosophy, to bring Jesus' message to the most educated and developed peoples of that time, that is to say Greece. In the Acts of the Apostles, it is written that he went to the centre of Athens, to the Areopagus, where the philosophers held their speeches and discussions. How could he talk to these great philosophers to tell them that Jesus is God, the Savior, the one who comes to save the world, whereas they are big scientists? What sort of speech could reach them? He passed by the centre of this town and he admired especially some big statues dedicated to the glory of the gods of Athens and Greece, divinities. They had a supreme god, Zeus, and all the other divinities, Apollo... He found a statue dedicated to the unknown god. Here was the starting point from which Paul initiated his speech to speak in a philosophical way to the thinkers of that time. He said: "I have seen in your pantheon a statue dedicated to the unknown god. So there is a god whom you don't know, you the wise men, doctors and philosophers; in spite of your intelligence, you are still ignorant of important things. This god is called Jesus, this god who comes from heaven and who has become a man like you and me". But, as usual, the word of truth is not always recognized and accepted! There are always skeptic people, people who disdain the others because they are the most intelligent ones. But others think more deeply and understand that maybe he is right. This is why this word, this seed that he has thrown into the hearts and into the conscience of people is going to bear fruit. We know that in a few years saint Paul's word gave fruit. And Greece became totally Christian. But not only saint Paul was Jesus' apostle and messenger; there was also saint Thomas. In the Christian tradition, and above all in the Eastern one, saint Thomas crossed the Eastern world and went to Edessa. We know that Edessa was a radiating and very important centre of the Church and of the Christian thought. Saint Thomas had two disciples: Thaddai and Mari, who went to Arabia, Persia and India. According to the tradition, in the Church of Antioch, we say that Thaddai and Mari went to Iraq. There still exists what is called the Chaldean liturgy of Thaddai and Mari. This concerns the Chaldean Church. Thaddai and Mari went to evangelize Persia, Iraq and probably Arabia. Then, they went on till India. So saint Thomas and his disciples evangelized this region of the East, the present Iraq, Persia and also India. The Church of Antioch also brought the message to Armenia and Arabia, among Arabian tribes. We know that this whole region (Syria, Iraq)

spoke Aramaic. The Church of Antioch (Syrian) had bishops in Arabia. The literature of Syria (Aramaic) knew its golden age at the end of the 4th century / beginning of the 5th century: the literature of the Fathers of the Church be they theologians or poets. The whole region of the East, from Greece onwards, became Christian: Turkey (Asia Minor), Syria, Arabia till the peninsula of the present Emirates such as Qatar (where the Church had a see); also the island of Cyprus, the island of Malta. Europe became Christian thanks to apostles or missionaries coming from Italy, through France, till Germania. Whereas in Egypt there was another tradition of the Church, another way of thinking the theology, what we call the "thought of Alexandria" (where there was an important theological and philosophical school: Saint Justin, Philo, Origen...). This theology is marked by another way of considering the Holy Scripture, more allegoric and spiritual, whereas the theology of Antioch is more realistic; it considers things as they are, without looking for another meaning behind.

During the first six centuries, the Church is united, it has only one chief. The thought of Rome running the universal Church, with only one administration, did not exist yet. There was the Primate of Rome, who was the chief of the Church, who controlled the dogma and its integrity. All councils were always presided by the pope or his legate, otherwise they were not legitimate. But the liturgy, the local right, were left to each patriarchate. There was no centralization from the Vatican, as there is now, to give the same canon law, the same language, the same song to the whole Church, as we could see in Europe during the Middle Ages. We have seen that the emperor, the « basileus », was indeed the chief of the Church, the one who summoned the councils (of Nicaea, Constantinople, Chalcedon, Ephesus...). He invited all the bishops and paid their fees. Unfortunately, this control, this authority of the Emperor upon the Church had negative consequences; because every time there was a council, there was a schism.

At the council of Ephesus (431), we find the first schism, Nestorianism. Nestorius was condemned as a heretic because he denied that the Virgin Mary was the mother of God. Whereas the majority of the Council Fathers defined the dogma of "Theotokos" at that council: it means "Mother of God", not in the sense of "progenitor" (in German "Gebärerin"). When we say that Mary is "mother of the Church", it does not mean that she gave birth to the Church! On the Cross, when Jesus said to John "here is your mother", he didn't say: "here is the woman who begot you". The Virgin Mary is our mother but she is not our "Gebärerin, Theotokos", the one who gives birth. In Arabic, we have two words:

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It is important to pay attention to these nuances, to these subtleties of the language. The Nestorians are quite Catholic. "Mother of God"? Mary is neither the mother of God the Father, nor the Mother of the Holy Spirit. She is the mother of Jesus as a man. She is the mother of the son of God, mother of Jesus man who is God. God cannot be born! She is the mother of Jesus, as a human being.

Now, we are rehabilitating Nestorius and the Nestorians. They are not heretical. It was really a useless question! This is why this expression "mother of Jesus" is better accepted by Muslims because they cannot imagine God being born from a woman. How can a God be born of a woman? They cannot understand that. They can understand that Jesus, as a man, may be born from a woman. A Muslim cannot accept the expression "mother of God" but accepts perfectly well "Mary, mother of Jesus who is God". God the Father has no mother, neither has the Holy Spirit! It is not an error to say "holy Mary, mother of God". But the theologians want to win the others, so they fight with each other! Everyone wants to be right and we, the faithful, are in between.

Now, the only obstacle that still exists between the Catholic Church and the other Churches (Monophysite and Nestorian) is the primacy and the infallibility of the Pope.

By strength, the emperor imposed the thesis of the majority, of rather Greek theologians, and he provoked the splitting apart of the Church and divisions. Now the body of the Church is dismantled; a part of the Church develops itself independently from the rest of the Church. This is the Church of Iraq and Persia, that we have called the Oriental Church. But this Church has had a remarkable missionary activity: it went to India, to continue the ministry of the apostles, especially of saint Thomas. It went even to China, where we have discovered Christian cemeteries, with inscriptions in Aramaic. Even now, the Chinese are still discovering remnants due to these great missionaries of the East and of the Aramaic world.

A hundred years later, the Christological controversy started again. With Nestorius, the question was about God-man and Jesus God and man. A new question is raised: is Jesus one or two, one person or two persons? The first thesis of Nestorius brings a new controversy around the person of Jesus, his identity and his nature. The chief of this controversy, who said that in Jesus there is only one nature and one person, was Severus of Antioch, a Greek theologian. It is not possible to have two natures in one person; there must be unity in Christ. The other Council Fathers' thesis was contrary: in Jesus, there is one person, there are two natures. Both natures join (hypostatic union – *hypostasis* = *person* – union in the person of Christ). Severus was condemned. He was the patriarch of Antioch; he was dethroned then exiled, on the Emperor's order. Some faithful, adept of the Church of Antioch (Aramaic, Syrian) became schismatic. Part of this Church remained faithful to the king, who supported the contrary thesis. This was called "the king's party", supporting the Greek: "two natures, one person". The faithful divided themselves. This party was called "the Melkites" which means "royalist". My name is Melki but I am not a melkite ☺. The others were called "Monophysites": one nature. But this whole controversy was useless: because selfishness and the desire of dominating the others prevailed more than Truth: they wanted to win, to triumph at all cost. The party that was condemned worked in a human way; it was not a research of Truth but a research of selfishness.

Nowadays, we say: "we are facing a great mystery, the Trinity. We cannot understand how God is a man". How can we understand "a person, three persons"?

This whole controversy split the Church apart for nothing! Now Severus of Antioch is being rehabilitated. It is not necessary to believe in two natures / two persons or one nature / one person; we say that Jesus is true God and true man, that's all. It is the theologians' business, not the people's business as we are totally ignorant of this question.

Personally, I think that Severus of Antioch was right, not the others. From my point of view [some Catholics may disagree with me], I say that if two persons join to form one person in Jesus, it is God who unites himself. Since Jesus is true God and true man, where is his human nature? What has it become? Can both natures exist without a person? If Christ has two natures, the human nature must have a human person. Severus says that Jesus has two natures and two persons, but both natures have united and both persons have united to form one person. I find this thesis quite correct, philosophically speaking.

The third Council, in Ephesus (in 431), defined the divine maternity of the Virgin Mary. In 451, the fourth Council, of Chalcedon, was about the divinity of Jesus and "one person and two natures" (contrarily to the Monophysites' thesis). Let us be clear: the Monophysites say "Christ's both natures, man and God, united in Christ's both persons as he is man and God, in order to form Jesus man and God". I repeat that both theses are true because we are in front of a great mystery that neither theologians nor philosophers can affirm. The only thing that we can say is that Jesus is true God and true man. Everything else is only philosophy! This question was reconsidered by Pope Paul VI: he welcomed the Monophysite bishops and told them: "we have the same faith". So, if we have the same faith, it means that this whole controversy that split the Church apart was useless. Let us just say: Jesus is God, Jesus is man. How did they unite? This is the mystery of the Church. We don't know.

The Nestorians have been rehabilitated in faith. As long as they say that Jesus is God and man, and that the Virgin Mary is the mother of Jesus, it is enough. So they are not heretical, neither them nor the Monophysites. They have the same faith as us. We must not consider only the theology. We must also take into account all the prayers, Mass, the whole liturgy. In the theology, there is "lex orandi, lex credenti", that is to say not only what theologians say but what the people repeat and pray every day. What is this faith? Not the theologians' definition.

We have reached a very important point of the history of the Church that is going to overturn the whole world. On the world scene, a third actor is going to come and to have an impact on the whole world: Islam. Islam is the fruit of this Church. It is a child of our Church. Because Muhammad lived in a Syriac, Aramaic, Christian, Monophysite, Nestorian context. Many Arabic tribes were either monophysite or Nestorian. The Arabs say it themselves. They have known passages of the Ancient Testament and of the Gospel, which appear in the Koran, because of both Monophysite and Nestorian tradition. The Roman, byzantine or Greek world were very far from what they know. All their theological vocabulary comes from our Christian, Aramaic vocabulary. All the expressions, even some prayers, come from our liturgy. For instance, "Christ, the word of God". (We must know Arab and Aramaic to talk about this ☺). At the beginning, the Koran was written by Christians. But it evolved and after 50 or 100 years, others wrote the second part of the Koran and didn't know that any longer.

(+ Semantic explanations in Arabic about « rabbi », « secula seculorum »...).

Now, let us come back to the arrival of Islam. It was born in a Judeo-Christian context. In Arabia, there were Christians and Jews. So it took from both religions. In the Koran, there is the part in Medina and the part in Mecca. In the part of Mecca, there are a lot of chapters talking about Abraham, Isaac, Joseph and many other episodes of the Ancient Testament. Others talk of the Virgin Mary, of the miraculous birth of Jesus who received the spirit of God, the word of God. We think that Muhammad came from a Christian family. His wife's uncle was a bishop in Mecca. His spiritual director was a Monophysite monk, whose name meant "experienced in the knowledge of the Scripture". His first wife, Khadijah, was Christian and, as long as she was alive, Muhammad had only one wife. Only after her death, he had several wives.

He announced that the angel Gabriel appeared to him and asked him to found a new religion in Mecca. But Christians and Jews chased him, saying: "he is a false prophet". Some disciples followed him in Medina. With a group of these people, he attacked Mecca, took all the Jews' properties and killed them. From Medina, he fought against tribes. He constituted an army of Arabs that became very strong. These two periods in Muhammad's life appear very distinctly in the Koran: some chapters were written in Mecca and some in Medina. In the first ones, there is no violence, revenge, war. These chapters are peaceful. What comes from Medina is always warlike; Islam dominates and wins against all other religions. So there are two Korans.

Once he had become strong and after several victories, Muhammad thought of going beyond the Arabic Peninsula, outside the states that surrounded Arabia. The first campaign was directed towards Syria. As the Syrians (Monophysite) were fighting against the king of Constantinople, they thought they were Christians coming to their rescue and they welcomed them and opened their towns without making war. Monophysitism had spread out in the whole region because Severus of Antioch had been exiled in Egypt. The whole Egypt had followed him, as well as Ethiopia (Abyssinia). The Syrians had also evangelized Armenia, which had also become Monophysite.

But how to lead a war, to organize an army, to administrate a town? This was not in the nomads' tradition. They used to live in the desert, without water, without constructions... They needed help to build. The Syrians helped them. They had no culture at all of urban administration. All this was new for them, incredible. A total ignorance. They were able to make "razzias", wars, they had no structure at all, no war machines, and they didn't know how to build palaces. They had to learn everything. The same for philosophy, theology, arts, thought... They needed two centuries to learn that from the Syrians, who knew Latin, Greek, Arabic and Syriac. There were many cultured men, bishops, who were charged by the caliphs to translate all the Greek and Aramaic sciences into Arabic. ■