

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2004

John 14: 23-31

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To those organizing the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Adapting the text

This material is offered with the understanding that, whenever possible, it will be adapted for use at the local level. In doing this, account must be taken of local liturgical and devotional practice, and of the whole social and cultural context. Such adaptation should normally take place ecumenically.

In some places ecumenical structures are already set up for adapting the material. In other places, we hope that the need to adapt it will be a stimulus to creating such structures.

Using the Week of Prayer material

- For churches and Christian communities which observe the week of prayer together through a single common service, an order for an ecumenical worship service is provided.
- Churches and Christian communities may also incorporate material from the week of prayer into their own services. Prayers from the ecumenical worship service, the “eight days”, and the selection of additional prayers can be used as appropriate in their own setting.
- Communities which observe the week of prayer in their worship for each day during the week may draw material for these services from the “eight days”.
- Those wishing to do Bible studies on the week of prayer theme can use as a basis the biblical texts and reflections given in the “eight days”. Each day the discussions can lead to a closing period of intercessory prayer.
- Those who wish to pray privately may find the material helpful for focusing their prayer intentions. They can be mindful that they are in communion with others praying all around the world for the greater visible unity of Christ’s church.

The search for unity: throughout the year

The traditional date for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is **18-25 January**. Those dates were proposed in 1908 by Paul Watson to cover the days between the feast of St Peter and the feast of St Paul, and therefore have a symbolic meaning. In the southern hemisphere where January is a vacation time churches often find other days to celebrate the week of prayer, for example around Pentecost (which was suggested by the Faith and Order movement in 1926), which is also a symbolic date for the unity of the church.

But the search for Christian unity is not limited to one week each year. We encourage you therefore not only to be flexible concerning the date but also to understand the material presented here as an invitation to find opportunities throughout the whole year to express the degree of communion which the churches have already received, and to pray together for that full unity which is Christ’s will.

John 14: 23-31

Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.”

(New Revised Standard Version)

“My peace I give to you” (Jn 14: 23-31)

Introduction to the Theme

We seldom pray for that which does not involve us; and we pray most fervently for that which concerns us deeply, that which touches upon the people and the world we know. And yet prayer also expands the human heart. Saint Isaac the Syrian speaks of the merciful heart as one which burns with great compassion for all people, for every created thing. Grippled by a “strong and vehement mercy”, a compassion “without measure in the likeness of God”, such a heart offers up prayer from the midst of all suffering, offers up prayer even for those who do one harm, for “enemies of the truth” (Homily 81). Today’s world needs such expansive merciful hearts, such prayer rising from the midst of the groans of humanity, of the whole created world.

The quest for peace in the Middle East, a quest shared by many other peoples in other parts of the world, forms the particular backdrop of the celebration and meditations for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity for 2004. As peace in our world remains elusive and is obstructed at every turn, the search for peace, and the profound hopes which are entwined in that search, form a vital part of the prayer which rises from our hearts to the merciful heart of God in our day.

We all want peace. It is human to find fulfilment in it and long for it from the depths of our hearts. Yet the path which leads to peace is not so self-evident, nor is it well-trod. Our hope is that the third millennium will be a millennium of peace, a millennium of return to faith in God. The Arabic word for peace is *salaam*; the Hebrew word, from the same Semitic lineage, is *shalom*. In the Middle East, as in all contexts where the adherents of different religions live side by side, constructive relationships between religious traditions - built on dialogue and a common pursuit of peace and justice, rooted in a shared recognition of the dignity of every human person - are an essential pre-requisite if we are to be blessed with the gift of peace. In turn, a spirit of reconciliation and common mission among Christians and Christian communities is foundational to the pursuit of peace. Our common concern for the establishment of peace should serve to draw us more closely into communion with one another.

The biblical concept of peace is richly expressive and multi-faceted, suggesting wholeness and well-being, happiness and security, integrity and justice. Our Christian faith tells us that true peace is given us only if we follow God’s ways, as set forth in scripture, and if we take up the path to peace proclaimed and lived by Jesus Christ. “He is our peace” (Eph 2: 14), and as his disciples, our unity must be a reconciliation *in him*. The witness to peace of a fragmented Christian community is fraught with ambiguities; an inner contradiction weakens our ability to spread Christ’s peace. By contrast, unity among the churches gives power and credibility to our witness, setting convincingly before the world the vision of a universal reconciliation in Christ. Reconciliation among the churches is a way to peace and gives integrity to its proclamation. We all share in the responsibility of seeking the unity which will bear authentic witness to Jesus’ peace; just as we all are called, in diverse ways but inspired and encouraged by the same Spirit, to be artisans of his peace and reconciliation in the world.

The Eastern churches have lived through unique and difficult historical circumstances. These ancient churches, and the countries that are the birthplace of Christianity, have often been deprived of peace. They have longed for it through the generations, and have persistently prayed

to obtain it. Their present situation leaves these churches longing for peace more than ever before, and their patrimony and heritage, traditions and rites urge them to ask fervently for that peace in their prayers. That is why they have chosen the theme of peace for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

For the churches of the Middle East today, living side by side as a minority within their culture, with their multiplicity and their many mixed marriages, the work of ecumenism is not an abstract ideal but a vital need. Only through fostering an ecumenical spirit are they able to exist meaningfully. Unity and peace are their most heartfelt concerns, their paramount and all-pervasive dream. A common struggle has brought them together and a vision of the future serves to unite them. Peace is their daily worry, their abiding hope.

In the early days of Christianity the Christian community was *one*, and while incarnating that unity has never been easy, the early church stands through the centuries as the primary model of a community that could live in peace and proclaim that peace effectively. It is not so today: we are not yet fully united, and our witness to peace is compromised accordingly. Those who wish peace would do well to pray and strive for unity. Mindful of this relationship, the church is called to pray for peace *in unity* and for unity *in peace*.

The choice of this year's theme also results from the conviction of the churches of the Middle East that Christians throughout the world, by undertaking this prayer ecumenically, would be standing in solidarity with the hopes and sufferings of the people of this region. Their request is reminiscent of the apostle Paul, travelling about, collecting gifts for the mother church of Jerusalem; today the gift being sought is the prayer and spiritual support of sisters and brothers united in a common desire for peace.

Peace means putting things back in their natural and God-given order. It touches on all relationships and all manner of relationships. Paradise has often been depicted as a peaceful life between God and God's people, between each person and his or her neighbour, between the human race and the created world. Peace exists only where there is justice. By contrast, sin is that which causes a breach in these relationships. Sin disperses, justice unifies. Our daily actions and the choices we make have repercussions, for good or evil; through them we inevitably draw nearer to or distance ourselves from God and our neighbour; we obtain and spread peace, or dissipate and rupture it. In the East, people greet each other by wishing them *peace*, because that is the best one could wish another, the best relationship one could entertain with one's neighbour, the human right one strives most to protect.

God the Father is the God of peace, who reconciled us by the blood of his only Son (2 Cor 13:11). In the eucharistic anaphoras of the Oriental churches, the people proclaim "a mercy of peace, a sacrifice of praise", thus remembering the mercy of God shown forth in his self-revelation and self-gift in Christ, who lifts us up to share in the peace which only God can give. Jesus came to build his peace on earth and to give it to us (Jn 14:27), and he calls his church to be leaven for a new paradise, universalizing that true peace which he so desires to give to the world. Liturgical rites, worship and adoration, in their variety of forms, all search for the reconciliation of human beings with God, with one another, with the universe and within ourselves. As such, *prayer for peace* includes a strong interior dimension: calling forth the conversion and opening of our hearts, that we might bear within us Christ's mercy; fostering the

childlike trust that God is bringing forth for and within us what we cannot create for ourselves; bearing fruit in charitable works carried out in thanksgiving to God and in order to foster reconciliation and a peaceful life with our neighbours far and near; inviting perseverance in asceticism and inner purification; and, as already suggested, necessarily linked to the longing and striving for unity in all spheres of human life.

Prayer for peace also prepares us, as individual Christians and as church, to undertake the prophetic mission which belongs intrinsically to the body of Christ: to be instruments and artisans of peace and justice, of a new humanity, in our broken and war-riddled world. Active commitment to the pursuit of peace and justice is the fruit of the Holy Spirit working within us. This is not a human project, but the work of God; and as the scriptures are quick to relate, God's peace is not the world's peace. The prophets Isaiah (2:4) and Micah (4:3) speak of a time when nations "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks". This vision of turning instruments of war into those which build up the community continues to inspire Christians to be skilled in the tools of dialogue and non-violent resolution of conflict in the pursuit of peace with justice, using means which fully cohere with the end we seek, as Jesus himself did. Micah and Jeremiah also give witness to a prophetic tradition of crying out against hypocrisy and a false rhetoric of peace, railing against those "saying 'peace, peace' when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14), those "who cry 'Peace'" when their own needs are met, but declare war against those who put "nothing into their mouths" (Mic. 3:5). Many Christians and Christian communities in our day have entered into public discourse about the means to bring about peace, at times challenging political and ideological platforms and policies of "peace" which are built upon violence, injustice, oppression of others. In some parts of the world, the prophetic witness of confronting narrow or false definitions of peace with the biblical vision is not possible, or comes at great personal and communal cost. These places occupy a special place in our prayer for peace.

In the year 2004, Christians throughout the world once again have a common date for the celebration of Easter. The paschal mystery is the source of our hope, the wellspring of our mission, the promise that peace is possible. We are reminded that while violence, injustice and hatred may thrive for a time, it is God's power to transform death into life, to bring reconciliation from all that seems to undermine it, which will ultimately prevail. As we celebrate Easter on the same date this year throughout the Christian world, may our celebrations throughout this holy season be an incentive to share more deeply the hope and joy, as well as the mission, which rises out of the tomb with the Risen Lord. The year 2004 also falls within the World Council of Churches' *Decade to Overcome Violence*, an initiative which invites our prayer and calls for our commitment to work for peace.

Through the worship service and the biblical texts and meditations for the eight days, the biblical vision of peace will be set forward and reflected upon from diverse perspectives, with the hope of drawing Christians together in opening up the rich treasures of our heritage in order to be better instruments of Christ's transforming peace in the world. The gospel text for the worship service is John 14: 23-31, part of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples before he is put to death. In this paschal context, Jesus assures his followers that if they keep his word, he and the Father will make a home in them. He offers them the gift and promise of peace: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you". In taking leave of his disciples, Jesus tells them something of how they are to be bearers of that peace for all the world, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This same Johannine text provides a starting point for the reflections of the eight days, unfolding and reflecting on the implications of the Christian understanding of peace. All peace, within the church and in the world, has its foundations in God's creative and life-giving love for us (day 1). In revealing the Father's love to us, Jesus promises to bring his disciples an interior peace and serenity even amidst turmoil (day 2). Those who hear Jesus' words and take them to heart become bearers of his peace (day 3). This is the work of the Holy Spirit, bringing peace and forgiveness, and enlivening us to place our minds and hearts at the service of a world longing for peace (day 4). While the world seeks peace and security through strength and the exercise of power, Christ's peace comes through humility and service, seeking to overcome evil with good (day 5). To walk the path of discipleship is to live increasingly free from fear and anxiety, ever mindful that God's love is greater than anything which opposes us (day 6). Trusting in Christ's resurrection and awaiting his coming again in glory, Christian life is to be lived against a horizon of hope, while standing in solidarity with those whose lives are scarred by doubt, fear and sorrow (day 7). Authentic peace, the peace which God longs to give us, brings joy, but it also obliges us to pour ourselves out for others, so that all might share in that peace (day 8).

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Preparation of the material for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2004

The initial draft of this material has come to us from Christians who live and make their witness in the ancient city of Aleppo, Syria.

We offer sincere thanks to those who worked on behalf of the churches in Aleppo (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) to prepare these texts in their initial form: Mgr Gregorios Youhanna Ibrahim (Metropolitan, Syrian Orthodox Church), Mgr Boulos Yazdji (Metropolitan, Greek Orthodox Church), Mgr Antoine Odo (Bishop, Chaldean Church), and Mgr Boutros Marayati (Archbishop, Armenian Catholic Church; coordinator of the local group and representative to the international preparatory group).

The material reached its present form at a meeting of an international preparatory group named by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of the Catholic Church, and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. The group met at the Pastoral Secretariat in the headquarters of the Episcopal Conference of Sicily. We wish to thank Mgr Carlo Di Vita and his entire staff for their warm welcome and friendly support of our work.

The group was grateful for the opportunity to visit the "Centro Paolo Borsellino" in Palermo, Sicily and to receive an explanation of its important social and educational work.

Worship

“My peace I give to you” (Jn 14: 27)

Introduction

The theme of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity for 2004 and for this ecumenical worship service have been proposed by the Christian churches of the city of Aleppo in Syria. Ecumenical relations there are very much alive and occasions for celebrating together are frequent.

This celebration intentionally takes up the model of ecumenical celebration regularly used by the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches of Aleppo, and is characterized by a doxology of praise at the beginning, prayer of repentance, an importance given to biblical teaching, sung intercessory prayers and invocation of the Holy Spirit.

The prayers which make up this worship and those proposed in ‘Additional Prayers’ have come from different liturgical traditions of these Oriental churches. Most of the prayers used in the order of worship come from the Syriac liturgical tradition.

It would be an act of spiritual ecumenism to use only the prayers proposed without seeking to modify them, to enter into the movement of this celebration, following its order and keeping its essential liturgical elements. It could also be an occasion, if that is possible within the local ecumenical situation, to invite representatives from the Orthodox and Oriental churches to participate in the worship and to reflect together on how to adapt these proposals.

But some communities will certainly experience some difficulty in making all the prayers and certain expressions their own. We therefore propose - as an alternative - rather than rewriting the oriental prayers, that they should either be shortened, or that others be chosen from the additional prayers offered, or that prayers from a more familiar tradition be used. Whatever the choice made, if the structure, the order and each element from the worship are maintained, the essence of the celebration will be discernible and the spiritual goal achieved: not of imposing the prayers of one liturgical tradition, but of permitting the assembly to enter with faith into the spiritual experience of our sisters and brothers of the East. The spiritual unity of all Christians who wish to pray for peace in the world in this year 2004 and for their communion in faith in the Risen Christ, who is its source, will be clearly evident.

This is the order of the worship with notes on the relation of its diverse elements with the theme:

- The congregation sings a **hymn of thanksgiving** to the Lord and prepares with a prayer of repentance to listen to the word of God. To our hearts this prayer brings inner peace, fruit of God’s mercy, and attentiveness to his word.
- The **liturgy of the word** is the largest part. It is a proclamation of peace as God’s gift to humanity, as a promise from Jesus to his own disciples becomes reality in the mystery of his cross and resurrection and is consummated by the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church.

According to the teaching of Paul to the Ephesians, and following the example of his pastoral care as an apostle towards the members of the newly established local churches, we are called upon to love each other in the communion of the Holy Spirit. This mutual love between Christians and between churches, of which ecumenism is an essential part, lends credibility to our witness and our specific engagement as Christians in seeking peace in the world.

- The **sign of peace**, placed in the middle of the worship - between bible readings and the creed followed by intercessions - should be given particular emphasis as well as the renewal of commitment from all present “to keep the unity of the spirit by the ties of peace, in order to become one body...”. Several proposals are made to express and encourage the members of the congregation to make this sincere, renewed commitment to fostering peace and the reconciliation of Christians.
- A **symbol of peace** could be incorporated, for instance palm branches, a dove, or the lighting of candles; but a rainbow is to be preferred. This symbol could be emphasised from the beginning of the worship. It could be referred to in the sermon, made a central part of the celebration and taken up again in the dismissal.
- It is also an idea to **invite people to testify** as to how they are active or have been active in the service of peace. The positive ecumenical situation in Aleppo itself is a testimony to be heard in the course of the worship.
- Opened with **thanksgiving** to the God of peace the worship closes with a **prayer to the Holy Spirit**, precious treasure and source of peace.
- The ministers present from the local churches, whether or not they have actively participated in the worship could give the **final blessing** together. The dismissal could, among other things, emphasize the fact that common prayer finds its fulfilment at the very heart of life. Our ecumenical worship services and the benefits they bring in the life of the world increase the communion between Christians: a prophetic announcement of the Gift of Peace.

Order of Worship

Opening

It is recommended that at the beginning of the worship its structure - of hymns, music and readings of God's word - should be briefly presented.

For the responsive prayers, it is recommended that several readers be involved.

The rainbow could be an artistic evocation produced by the local community.

The offering, should be taken up at the most suitable moment in the service, and can be presented as a sign of that ecclesial unity and peace which is impossible without sharing and justice.

L: Worship leader

C: Congregation

R: Reader

L: In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

C: *Amen.*

Opening hymn: *(song of praise)*

Some of the congregation, for example the different readers and worship leaders preceded by the children, can enter in procession, the Bible carried at the head. The procession will pass below the rainbow, which should be appropriately positioned in the worship space.

Prayer of praise from the Syriac liturgy *(use in full, in part, or choose another.)*

L. In your light we shall see light, Jesus full of light; you are the true light which illumines the whole creation; enlighten us with your joyous light, splendour of the Father in heaven. Pure and holy one who dwells in the habitations of light, keep us from evil passions and thoughts of hatred and grant that we may do deeds of justice with purity of heart.

On this holy day which has brought us together we implore you to grant unity to your church: keep us in the fullness of your peace.

C. *Amen.*

L. Let us thank God the Father, Lord of all, let us adore his only Son and glorify his Holy Spirit in giving our life into his keeping and begging for his mercy.

C. *Have pity on us, O God, merciful and good.*

Prayer of repentance from the Syriac liturgy *(use in full, in part or choose another)*

L. Have mercy upon us, omnipotent God. We praise you, we bless you, we adore you. We beseech you, Lord God, be favourable unto us. O bountiful God, friend of all, have mercy upon us.

C. *Lord, have mercy.*

L. We remember your death, Lord Jesus, we proclaim your resurrection, we await your coming in glory. Be merciful to all.

C. *Lord, have mercy.*

L. For all our petitions, we ask you to show forth to us your graciousness, O you who are the friend of all, grant that we may go forward this holy day and all the days of our life in peace and fear of God. Take away from us, from all your people and your church all jealousy, all temptation, all diabolical works. Deliver us from the plotting of the wicked, from visible and invisible enemies. And grant us in abundance good and profitable deeds, for you have given us the power to crush the snakes, scorpions and all enemy powers. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil through your grace, your goodness and your love for all shown forth in your Son, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory, honour, power and praise, and also to the Holy Spirit who is of the same substance, who gives life, now and always and forever and ever.

C. *Amen.*

L. Lord our God, answer our prayers, help us and save us. Accept our prayers and our petitions and in your mercy remove from us all condemnation, chastisement and anger. Grant us security, peace, and the happy and peaceful end which you grant to the children of peace. Give us the Christian end which you desire for us and which is worthy of your divine majesty that we may render to you grace and praise now and for ever.

C. *Lord receive our prayer for pardon and our repentance.*

L. May we receive from God the forgiveness of our faults and sins, now and for ever.

C. *Have mercy on us Lord God, forgive our faults and their faults, our negligence and their negligence, errors committed wilfully or not, consciously or unconsciously. Amen.*

Bible Readings:

Isaiah 57 : 19-21, 60: 17-22

Psalm 72: 1-8

Romans 15: 30-33, 16: 1-16 [OR Ephesians 2: 13-18]

Gospel reading: John 14: 23-31

Sermon

(Moment of silence)

Prayer for peace and sharing of peace from the Syriac liturgy *(to be used as given or another may be chosen)*

L. Make us worthy, Lord our God to refresh our souls and to fill our hearts with the new wine of your Paraclete.

C. Fulfil our prayer, Lord.

L. Awaken our hearts with the light of your grace and free them from the shadows of sin; lighten our spirits with the spiritual rays of your Holy Spirit .

C. Fulfil our prayer, Lord.

L. Make us worthy, Almighty Father, to exchange a sign of peace each with his or her neighbour with a holy kiss, through the love of our Lord and our God.

C. Before you, Lord God, we bow our heads in adoration.

Song *(during which the congregation exchange the Peace)*

Nicene Creed

L. Let us listen to God with wisdom and proclaim:

C. I believe in one God...

Intercessions from the Syriac liturgy of Antioch *(to be used as given, or in part, or another may be substituted. Time may be allowed for free prayers.)*

R. Let us make our petitions to God Almighty, Father of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ:

We pray you Lord, in your graciousness, friend of all, remember your one, holy universal and apostolic church .

C. We pray for the peace of the one, holy, universal and apostolic church.

R. Bless these creatures spread from one end of the world to the other, all the peoples and flocks. May your peace come down from the heavens into all hearts, bring peace to this generation, and fulfil us with your grace. Our government, the army, the chiefs of state and the peoples, our neighbours, the immigrants and the expatriates, clothe them with all peace, O King of Peace. Give us your peace, for all things come from you. May we belong to you O God our Lord, for we know only you. Your holy Name is that which we proclaim. May our souls live in your Holy Spirit. May the deathly power of sin not prevail upon your servants nor upon any people of the earth.

C. Kyrie eleison

R. Let us pray to God Almighty, Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We beg your graciousness, O friend of all. Remember our gatherings in the name of our holy church, bless them and let them spread throughout all the earth.

C. We pray for this church.

R. You have reconciled the creatures of the earth with those of heaven and you have made them one. You have accomplished your plan in the flesh and as your body rose into heaven you filled the universe with your divinity and you said to your disciples and to the holy apostles: "I leave you peace, I give you my peace". Now O Lord of peace and of security, grant us these blessings, purify us from all sin, from all duplicity, from all hypocrisy, from all evil, from all machinations and the memory of evil shrouded by death. Clothe us with your perpetual peace so that we may keep the trust of the apostolic faith and may live united by the ties of charity.

C. Kyrie eleison

R. May security and prosperity without end reign upon all the surface of the earth; decree for us your peace, that we may all become, in the unity of the faith, a perfect being measuring up to the plenitude of Christ.

C. Kyrie eleison

R. Bless, O Lord, the peace of your church, all your people and all your creatures. Pacify and reconcile all enemies and warring peoples, that their spears may be transformed into pruning hooks and their lances to plowshares and that they may learn war no more. And keep them all in your name.

C. Kyrie eleison

R. Lord save your people and bless your inheritance, watch over and keep it for ever. Maintain it in the true faith in glory and dignity all its days: establish it in the love and peace which surpasses all things.

C. Kyrie eleison

R. O Holy Spirit, make us worthy of contributing to the sanctification of your heavenly treasures and of offering to you in purity and holiness a true adoration here and in all places, now and all the days of our lives, that your good news may be proclaimed unto the ends of the earth.

C. Kyrie eleison

The Lord's Prayer (*each in his or her own language*)

Renewal of commitment

C. Lord, as you have taught us, we bow down before you in all humility, gentleness and patience, supporting each other with love and trying to keep the unity of the spirit by the bonds of peace, that we may become 'one body and one spirit', according to our common calling and vocation. With one voice, repenting of our divisions, we commit ourselves to working together for reconciliation, peace and justice, and we stand together in imploring you: help us to live as your disciples, overcoming selfishness and arrogance, hatred and violence; give us the strength to forgive. Inspire our witness in the world, that we might foster a culture of dialogue, and be bearers of the hope which your gospel has implanted in us. Make us instruments of your peace, so that our homes and communities, our parishes, churches and nations might resonate more fully with the peace you have long desired to bestow upon us. Amen.

Testimonies:

Participants may come up one after the other to give their testimonies. In narrative form they can recount how they are or have been witnesses of men and women at the service of peace around them or how they themselves have found in Christ the power to reconcile, to contribute to peace between people, between the churches.

A worship leader can either comment on the symbol of peace chosen, or briefly conclude the testimonies and introduce the hymn to the Holy Spirit, giver of peace.

Hymn *(on the theme of peace in the Holy Spirit)*

Invocation to the Holy Spirit

God the Comforter, Spirit of truth, treasure of treasures and source of life, who shares all gifts and grants divine grace, God of peace and of security, come, dwell in us, purify us from all sin. Create in us a pure heart, renew in us a firm spirit. O Spirit of peace and of love, Spirit of chastity and purity, Spirit of piety and holiness, Spirit of wisdom and intelligence, Spirit of counsel and power, O merciful and good Holy Spirit, grant us that font of tears which washes our hearts of all impurity, that you may condescend to make them your dwelling place. Come light in us the fire of your divine Love, rekindle in us the spirit of charity that we may live in you forever. Amen.

Blessing

Final hymn

Day 1

Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them (Jn 14 : 23)

The love of God, the foundation of peace

Deut 7 : 7-11	He is the faithful God who maintains his love for a thousand generations
Ps 25 : 2-10	Be mindful of your mercy and of your love for they are eternal
1 Jn 4 : 7-12	God is love
Lk 15 : 1-2, 11-32	He ran and put his arms around him and kissed him

Commentary

In the parable of the prodigal son it is through the love of the father that the younger son regains his former status. This same love calms the agitated thoughts and pacifies the troubled heart of the elder son. Both of them comprehend the desire for reconciliation within the love of the father and their obedience to this desire gives to their household a foundation of peace.

The profound desire of Christians is to accept Christ's invitation to confidence and peace based on the love of the Father. This love which is their common heritage is also the cement of their unity.

Like the sons in the parable, they each keep that identity which has been shaped by their history, and which is constantly renewed by faithfulness to the word of the Father. They are motivated by their common search for the divine peace which they want to share and which pours forth from the Only Son over all humankind.

When Christians establish their dwelling place in God, they go deeper into his word which becomes alive and effective. They enter into communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, thus discovering the fruit of the love of God.

Prayer

We thank you, Lord, for the love with which you have loved us.

Grant us the grace to welcome this love in confidence that it may become a source of peace for the church and for the world, and may be recognized by all humanity. Amen.

Day 2

We will come to them and make our home with them (Jn 14: 23)

Inner peace, calm and serenity

Song 3: 3-5

Do not awaken love until it is ready

Ps 3: 3-7

I wake again for the Lord sustains me

Eph 4: 1-6

One God and Father ...who is above all and through all

Mk 6: 45-51

He got into the boat with them

Commentary

The peace in the hearts of the disciples comes from the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ with them in the boat. It is this presence which brings calm and serenity to the whole church, and is bestowed on those who live out their own vocation struggling alone in the desert of contemplation and equally on those who serve in the world, even to the extent of giving their life for their neighbour.

Through their wholehearted engagement in action or contemplation, such Christians seem to follow a path far removed from the common calling of Christians; but in fact they join the company of the faithful at the very heart of their worship. Neither passive nor dreamers, they carry within themselves the church and the church is honoured by their spiritual struggle. With their brothers and sisters in baptism they find the strength to witness serenely to the promised presence of Christ who brings them into the communion of the trinity.

Humanity longs for the presence of men and women of peace. Christians are called to witness to peace through the gentleness, humility and patience of God, who is present in the life of each person.

He or she who lives out these words of God- "we will come to them and we will make our home with them" - can become, through that peace, a privileged agent of Christian unity.

Prayer

Lord, shore up my trembling spirit on the rock of your commandments and, in the same way that you calmed the storm through the power of your presence, calm the waves of my agitated life, leading me into the vessel which is your church. Give me that faith which reminds me that you are present with us even now and until the end of time. Amen.

Day 3

The word that you hear (Jn 14: 24)

Christ, Word of the Father

Deut 30: 11-14	The Word is very near to you...
Ps 85 (84): 2-14	(The Lord says) "Peace for his people and his faithful"
2 Cor 1: 18-22	Every one of God's promises has found a 'Yes' in his person
Lk 10: 38-42	She listened to what he was saying

Commentary

The Son never ceases to receive from the Father. His will seeks that of the Father, to utter a 'Yes' which brings peace to the world. For it is peace which God desires for humanity. And when Jesus travels among us those who listen to him receive the very Word of God. "Love and truth come together, justice and peace embrace one another". Facing the hostility of men and women, the Word counters with the love of God for humanity. Through the silence of the cross, he has united all peoples in himself and has introduced us into the peace of God.

This Word who is so accessible to humanity penetrates deeply into the hearts of those who take the risk of welcoming him. Thus, when Martha and Mary offer him hospitality they taste this word, experiencing a great peace: "this word which you hear is not mine but that of the Father who sent me". This 'best part' would produce a fruitful legacy, and the apostles, following after Christ and on his behalf, would in turn be called to be artisans of reconciliation and peace.

This Word is today offered to our churches and when we welcome the living Christ in our common liturgies of the word, or in our joint actions in the service of others, we are led to reconciliation. We come together in him with the blessing of our common Father and our churches become better servants of the Word and witness to the peace of God at work.

Prayer

O Lord our God, in Jesus Christ
Your only Word
You have put hatred to death.
Through his death, in the silence of the cross
You have reconciled human beings to one other and to yourself.
Transform our words of violence into words of peace
And give us the grace not to refuse the cost of this universal reconciliation. Amen.

Day 4

The Holy Spirit will teach you and remind you of all I have said to you (Jn 14: 26)

Peace, fruit of the Spirit

Jer 31: 31-34	I will put my law within them
Ps 51 (50): 10-17	Sustain in me a willing spirit
Gal 5: 22-25	The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace
Jn 20: 19-23	Peace be with you ... Receive the Holy Spirit

Commentary

The day the Holy Spirit came down upon them, the terrified apostles, who were hiding and not knowing what to do, suddenly saw opening before them a new doorway into understanding how God had become human in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit was given to them, so that they might understand and remember.

The Holy Spirit taught the disciples what depth of humanity is revealed in authentic communion with God. The Spirit of peace and reconciliation breathes over the church and renews it, even where there is sin, so that it can witness to this work of the Spirit. The Spirit of truth, knowledge and wisdom inspires resources within the different churches, that they may make known **what** has been taught to them of the divine life and its fruit, which is peace.

Through the Spirit the disciples remember not so much their sins, but the pardon and peace Jesus offered to humanity. Everything about his life - his life-changing words, the actions through which he cured wounds - becomes present and real, given to humanity once again. Each is invited to peace with God, to be at peace with him or her self, at peace with the other.

The churches receive this invitation while participating in humanity's struggle for peace, a struggle which prepares them for unity, this other fruit of the Spirit. The peace between our churches can witness to the One Spirit which inhabits them, which teaches them and which brings to their minds all that the One Lord has taught them.

Prayer

O Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit
One God,
God of truth, peace and justice
Open our minds
Enlighten our spirits
Lead us to welcome the spirit of truth in our churches
That it may guide us towards true peace. Amen.

Day 5

I do not give to you (my peace) as the world gives it (Jn 14: 27)

Peace and violence: God's peace and the world's peace

Is 11: 1-17	They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain
Ps 119: 161-165	Great peace have those who love your law
Rom 12:18-21	Overcome evil with good
Jn 12: 12-19	Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord

Commentary

The relationship between God and fallen human beings has been broken by sin. We have to struggle to survive by hard work and are faced with suffering, illness and the inevitability of death. Human life is often motivated by selfishness and rivalry, and people living in fear and enmity have lost the gift of peace. Many deny the existence of God and seek to control the world for themselves.

In the Old Testament we read of the ways in which people sought their own security by building walls and oppressing the neighbouring nations while waiting for the “Day of the Lord”. According to the Old Testament prophets, peace was the sign of the last days and the Messiah was the king of the expected peace. For his part the prophet Isaiah designates more clearly the expected Messiah as “the suffering servant of God”, the “Prince of Peace” who would bestow his everlasting peace built on charity and sincere repentance.

In the New Testament Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey and thus reveals himself to the crowd as Prince of Peace. Before Pilate he says solemnly that his kingdom is not of this world. Christ is our peace and through him we are reconciled with God the Father. He commands us to love one another as he and the Father love us and so we can be reconciled with our fellow human beings.

In our own day we can be tempted to build up our own security through the oppression of others and the amassing of weapons of war. To do so is to seek a false kind of peace which is contrary to the will of God. We should make peace by seeking reconciliation with one another and building up understanding and justice. We must not seek revenge but leave the final judgement to God.

If we are to call for this kind of peace in our international life, then we must demonstrate it in the life of our churches. Christians must seek to understand one another and work and pray for the unity of the church. Such peace and unity is the work of the Spirit in us.

Prayer

Lord God of peace, Source of all consolation, grant us the gift of your Holy Spirit in our lives. In a world which seeks security through violence and war, make us messengers of your peace. As members of your church, the body of Christ, forgive us the sin of our divisions and give us the courage to seek that unity which is your gift and your will and in which lies our peace. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Day 6

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (Jn 14: 27)

Do not be afraid

Is 43: 1-7	Do not fear, for I am with you.
Ps 23: 1-6	I fear no evil; for you are with me
1 Jn 4: 16-21	There is no fear in love
Mt 8: 23-27	Why are you afraid, you of little faith?

Commentary

For the second time in the conversation after the last supper, Jesus invites his disciples to confidence and to peace. The disciples are filled with sadness, fear and the wish to withdraw from the harsh realities before them. Two thousand years later we meet the disciples in their fears and anxieties: What will the future bring? What changes and what troubles? From where can we find the courage to face them? We are afraid to be left alone, to have nobody and nowhere to turn when we are in despair and when the storms of life seem to consume us. We fear that we are not loveable and that love is an achievement and peace is a reward and that, if we fail, love and peace will be taken away from us. But Jesus through his love and thoughtfulness, frees us from this fear. While travelling the long road of conversion we become increasingly convinced that this love is greater than anything which could frighten us. It is through Jesus that we get to know and to understand that peace is a free gift of God which is offered to human beings, and it is their freedom to accept or to refuse it.

For those who allow God's unconditional love to become the foundation of and a living reality in their lives, it is an experience of liberation. Although this liberation does not mean that all struggles and sufferings will be removed from their existence, it does mean that they are enabled to act and to live without fear. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me", as the psalmist describes this existential experience.

When God relates to us by giving us love and peace he also relates us to each other; we are related in and through him. We are sisters and brothers. The acceptance of God's love will only become visible in our lives and in our world when we make it visible through the love we have for each other. This is not only true for individual Christians but also for our churches and different traditions. Wherever we build up our identities against each other we not only destroy our human relationships and bring division instead of reconciliation but we also disconnect from the very source of life and peace, from God.

The storms which shake our world are too strong for Christians and churches unwilling to stand up against them as sisters and brothers united in Christ and led by the Holy Spirit, who is not a spirit of fear but of love and encouragement.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, on the lake one word from you was sufficient to soothe the fear of the apostles and appease the fury of the waves; in the middle of the storms of this world, grant to your church and to the men and women of the whole world the grace to hear your word, “Be not afraid”, and let it become an encouragement that we may act in peace where there is hate and bring reconciliation where division prevails. Amen.

Day 7 I am going away and I am coming to you (Jn 14: 28)

Waiting for the glorification of Christ

Hab 2: 1-4	I will stand at my watch-post
Ps 130: 1-8	My soul waits for the Lord
Rm 8: 18-27	For the creation waits with eager longing
Mt 25: 1-12	Keep awake therefore

Commentary

Jesus speaks about his leaving and promises at the same time his coming again. With these words Jesus indicates to his disciples that his way will lead through the darkness of passion and death to the glory of his resurrection. With Easter the glorious revelation of the coming new creation becomes visible. We trust in the resurrection of Christ and we are waiting for his final glorification. This is the hope of salvation and peace for all humankind and the whole earth. This hope unifies us as Christians and is a vital source of nourishment for our life. This hope is grounded in God’s word and promise. Like Habakkuk we are waiting for God to fulfil his word. Like the psalmist we are looking at God’s faithfulness.

We wait in hope and solidarity with this world. Many people ask for God’s presence. They are without hope, full of doubts, fear and sorrows. They see injustice, grief and violence and cannot believe in a future of justice and peace. As people who wait, Christians share the cries and tensions of this world. We do not merely stand beside it. We often feel our powerlessness, and ask questions about God’s concealment from us. In hearing the cries of the world, we hear the longing for God’s peace, for the freedom of the children of God. The unity of Christians would be a strong sign for the world of the full birth of a new humanity.

Christ’s promise inspires us to trust in his power and truth. The story of the bridesmaids encourages us to a hope patient in Christ and in readiness. The time may be long but the day will come when the risen Lord will return and release us from all pain and suffering. Waiting for Christ’s glorious revelation is an opportunity for witness and mission. It is a time for love and peace, for reunion and reconciliation. It is an occasion to share and support each other. So the hope in our heart for which we are longing will become visible and credible: the victory of God’s peace and the victory of God’s love will be made manifest.

Prayer

God, you reveal your glory in the life and in the power of your risen Son. We pray together, that your kingdom will come.

We long for the glorious day of Christ's revelation when the kingdom of death and tears will end and your kingdom of peace, justice and love will be established forever. Amen.

* * * *

Day 8 Rise, let us be on our way (Jn 14:31)

Going forward in the peace of Christ

Am 5: 10-15	Hate evil and love good, and establish justice
Ps 16: 8-9	I keep the Lord always before me...
Eph 5: 8-21	Live as children of light
Mt 25: 31-40	Just as you did it to one of the least...you did it to me

Commentary

Christ has shown the way to peace by accepting the cross for he knew that the ruler of this world had no power over him. His invitation to rise and be on the way is another way for him to bring us into the paschal mystery of his cross and resurrection. There is an intimate link between the offer of peace that Jesus makes to us and how we internalize and live this in the world. Can we be at peace – can we be in peace as long as one of the least suffers injustice, hunger, nakedness, in short anything less than the dignity that is theirs as a work of God's creation? The message of the prophets is clear: authentic "shalom–peace" is where integrity and wholeness are found, where good is sought and where justice is established.

All who have accepted Christ and have clothed themselves in light seek all that is good and right and true. Indeed, when they receive the poor and feed the hungry and are peace makers for the sake of justice, it is Christ's light that shines from within them since they have died with Christ and risen with him.

In the end, both as churches and as individual Christians, we will be called to make an accounting of how we have become at one – in peace – with those who have no peace because they lack the essentials of human dignity. Christ's offer of peace creates a communion with him and the Father since by accepting it we accept to live in him and he in us. This communion accomplishes the reconciliation between earth and heaven, between us and God. This gift of peace is both a challenge and a pledge: a challenge because it obliges us to learn how to pour out ourselves thereby creating space for the other. The gift is a pledge, since it is the seal of Christ's abiding presence in our hearts; the best quality of peace is joy.

Prayer

Triune God, you have revealed to us that the works of darkness and injustice have to be conquered by the dying and rising of Jesus. Jesus' offer of peace encourages us to imitate him in breaking the

bonds of inhumanity, of injustice, of hatred, of disunity. Strengthen us with your Spirit of peace that we may always hate evil, love good and establish justice. Do not allow us to cry "Peace" when we are comfortable but declare war against those who go hungry and live in precarity. Enable us to find your peace in humble and courageous service of the least of these who are members of your family. Amen.

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Additional Prayers from Oriental Liturgies

Byzantine Church of Antioch:

From Morning Prayer

In the early dawn our soul turns to you, for your commandments illumine the earth. We have desired to fulfil all charity and holiness living in the fear of God. For it is you our true God that we glorify. Hear our prayer and fulfil our desires. Lord remember all who pray to you, each by his or her name and save them by your might. Bless your people, sanctify your inheritance. Give peace in your world, to your churches, your servants and to all your people. For your name, worthy of all honour and praise, is blessed, O God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever and ever. Amen *(Second of the 12 prayers of Matins)*

Prayers for peace from the liturgies of St John Chrysostom and St Basil

In peace, let us pray to the Lord

- Lord, have mercy.

For the peace from above and the salvation of our souls, let us pray to the Lord

- Lord, have mercy.

For the peace of the whole world, for the welfare of the holy churches of God and the unity of all let us pray to the Lord

- Lord, have mercy.

Let us pray to the Lord for an angel of peace, a faithful guide, guardian of our souls and of our bodies

- Grant this prayer, O Lord.

Let us pray to the Lord for that which is good and useful to our souls, as well as the peace of the world

- Grant this prayer, O Lord.

For the completion of our lives in peace and repentance.

- Grant this prayer, O Lord.

For a Christian end to our lives, peaceful, without shame and without suffering, and for a good account before the judgement seat of Christ, let us ask the Lord

Grant this prayer, O Lord.

Syriac Church of Antioch:

Anaphor of James, the brother of our Lord (from the Divine Liturgy of St James)

L. Account these our unworthy selves to be worthy of this salvation, that freed from all guilt and united together by the chain of love we may greet one another with the holy and divine kiss of peace and that we may offer glory and thanks to you and to your only Son and to your Holy Spirit, all holy and good, and adorable and life-giving, who is of one substance with you, now and forever, world without end.

C. Amen. Bless us, Lord

L. Peace be with you all.

C. And with your spirit.

L. Let us give peace to one another with a holy and divine kiss in the love of our Lord and God.

C. O Lord our God make us worthy of this peace.

L. And after this divine and holy peace has been given, let us bow our heads before our merciful Lord in adoration.

C. We bow our heads before you, our Lord and our God.

Anaphor for Christmas Sunday from Saint James of Saroug, doctor of the church

L. Lord God, whose serenity is infinite and peace unshakeable, and whose love cannot break its ties. By your grace, you created human beings to be incorruptible; and when they disobeyed your orders because of the jealousy of the devil they were condemned to death. Through the coming of your only Son our Lord and our life-giving God, you have filled the earth with heavenly peace, that peace which angel hosts proclaimed, saying 'Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill to all'. Fill our hearts with your goodness, purify us now from all stain, all dishonesty, all mortal jealousy, from all evil and all wickedness.

Make us worthy to exchange the peace in purity and with a holy kiss; to commune in the heavenly and everlasting gifts which you have given us through Christ, our Lord. By him and through him you are glorified and praised, now and forever and ever.

C. Amen. Bless us, Lord

L. Peace be with you all.

C. And with your spirit.

L. Let us give peace to one another with a holy and divine kiss in the love of our Lord and God.

C. O Lord our God make us worthy of this peace.

L. And after this divine and holy peace has been given, let us bow our heads before our merciful Lord in a sign of adoration.

C. We bow our heads before you, our Lord and our God.

Armenian heritage:

Prayer to the Holy Spirit (by Saint Gregory of Narek)

I pray to your everlasting, powerful Lordship, O powerful Spirit

Send down the dew of your sweetness,

Grant to my soul and to my spirit which dominates my senses, the benefit of the fullness of the grace of your abundant mercy.

And till the able field of my hardened, earthly heart that it may receive and propagate the spiritual seed.

We confess that it is through your supreme wisdom that our gifts flourish and grow within us.

For it is you who consecrates the apostles, who inspires the prophets, teaches the doctors, makes the dumb to speak and opens the closed ears of the deaf.

That is why he who is of the same nature as you, who is of one body with the Father who is the first born Son accomplishing all things with your aid, you have proclaimed God, equal in essence to the Father.

Give me, a sinner, also the grace to speak with confidence of the life-giving mystery of the good news of your gospel

To walk in the way and with the rapid stride of the spirit

Across the infinite space of the testaments you have inspired.

And at the moment I undertake to explicate your word in public

May your mercy precede me

To inspire me in due time of that which is worthy, useful and pleasing to you.

For the glory and praise of your divinity

And for the full edification of the universal church.

And cover me closely with your right hand

And strengthen me with the grace of your compassion.

Dispel from my mind the sombre mist of forgetfulness

Chasing with it the shadows of sin

That I may be lifted up with the sharpness of my intelligence

From life on earth towards the heights.

Spread within me once more the bright and wondrous rising

Of the knowledge of your divinity, O great one

That I may be worthy to do and to teach, to be a good example to my listeners, friends of God.

To you be all glory, with the all powerful Father and the Only Son our salvation,

Now and for ever and ever. Amen

Chaldean Church:

From the Oriental Chaldean Rite : Offertory Song from Mass of the Lord's Circumcision

May my peace be in you. Glory to God. Peace and safety on earth; joy and hope to all humanity, without distinction. Such is the good news of the birth and mission of Christ, yesterday, today and for ever.

How beautiful are the steps of the messengers of the good news of peace! Christ has called us to live in love, far from dispute: neither to oppress, to be jealous, to humiliate, nor to judge. He has called us to act with goodwill to wipe away all discord. And the Lord will reward our efforts. Happy are the peacemakers! That is the teaching of Jesus Christ. Peace cannot reign without

friendship, sincere dialogue. Love, justice, truth and equality are the guarantees of lasting peace. “My peace I leave you, my peace I give to you” . O Lord of peace, may we live in respect of each other, in a spirit of truth and affirmation, rejecting all jealousy, overcoming evil with patience, wiping it away with pardon and bringing in the reign of peace through goodness.

* * * *

Aleppo, an Ecumenical City

Introduction

The city of Aleppo is located in the North of Syria. It has been known since antiquity as a point of encounter for the various civilizations that followed one another, and as a crossing-point for commercial caravans, connecting the Far-East and the West, the North and the South. The impressive citadel and the ancient souks (markets) of the old town bear witness to its past.

Aleppo was also known as “Borée”. An ancient tradition explains that Aleppo – *halab* in Arabic – comes from the word *halib*, which means milk. Tradition has it that Abraham passed through the city and had his cows milked there!

1. Historical survey

Christianity was introduced very early into Aleppo. Ecclesiastically the city depended on the Apostolic See of Antioch (80 km away), where the disciples of Christ were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). The historian Michael the Syrian reports on a tradition according to which the regions of Aleppo and Mounbouj were evangelized by the apostle, Simon the Zealot.

The first Christian community of Aleppo existed for three centuries without an official hierarchy owing to persecution by the pagan Roman government. There were several martyrs, the most renowned being the two saints, Serge and Bacchus and the two doctors, Cosmos and Damien.

After the official recognition of the Christian religion at the beginning of the 4th century, the church of Aleppo was constituted as a suffragan eparchy of the See of Antioch; it was at that time that churches were built, and convents set up with a flowering of hermitages and monastic cells.

The ancient churches of Aleppo, the deserted towns and the ruined churches around the city are the best witnesses from this period of the blossoming of Christianity in the area, such as the church of St Simon the Stylite, and the churches of Mouchabbak, Qalb and Qorechet.

Aleppo’s monastic life reached its peak between the 4th and the 5th centuries. The renown of the *stylites*, “the chosen of God”, spread beyond the region. The stylites included the women Marana and Kira from the era of Bishop Acace of Aleppo (378-432).

This Christian presence was shaken and put in jeopardy several times over the centuries, first under the Roman and later the Byzantine governments, because of Arius’ heresy and the rejection of the Chalcedonian Council. After the Muslim conquest, the Christians were put under *zimmah* (tutelage) by the conquerors.

At the end of the Crusades, and following the invasions by the Seljukians, the Mamelukes, the Tatars and the Mongols, the situation stabilized in the 15th century when Syria was taken over by the Ottomans. They recognized several Christian communities as socio-cultural entities which enjoyed a certain degree of internal autonomy: *millet*.

The Christians, divided according to their origins and traditions, learned to live side by side. This situation was tangible in Aleppo because of the close proximity of the ancient Byzantine-Melkite, Armenian, Maronite and Syrian churches.

In the 17th century, merchants flooded into the Syrian metropolis. Consulates were established to protect their interests. Accompanying them also came many religious missionaries who contributed to a new spiritual expansion. The founders of five religious Oriental Orders originated from Aleppo, each establishing convents in Lebanon.

In the 18th century a trend developed in Aleppo in favour of unity with Rome, resulting in the Armenian, Byzantine-Melkite and Syrian churches each splitting into two communities: Orthodox and Catholic.

The Chaldean and the Latin communities were constituted in the 19th century. Later, as a result of the efforts of Protestant missionaries, two Evangelical communities, one Armenian and one Arab, were created.

At the beginning of the 20th century relations between the churches were not cordial, but a number of social and national factors led the Christians to come together over the course of the years, until the advent of a new period of fraternal ecumenical relations, inaugurated by the historical embrace between Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem. And since the soil was quite fertile in Aleppo, already known for its rich religious traditions, the seed of unity found a natural place to grow, to ripen and bear fruit up until the present.

This is why during the past 35 years Aleppo has known a rapid evolution in ecumenical relations between the local Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches. It was the religious leaders who contributed to the creation of that ecumenical climate according to the directives of their respective synods, without ignoring the fact that the laity also imposed an ecumenical spirit in an environment where unity among Christians is of primary importance.

2. Aleppo today

Aleppo is a city of 1,500,000 people. Christians are in a minority, forming 10% of a mainly Muslim population. Arabic is the official language, but among the Christians there are some who speak Armenian and Syriac. Aleppo has eleven Christian communities recognized as *taifeh*; three Orthodox eparchies (Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox of Antioch, Syrian Orthodox of Antioch), six Catholic eparchies (Greek-Melkite, Armenian, Syrian, Maronite, Chaldean, Latin), and two Protestant communities (Armenian and Arab).

It is clear that all religious leaders, although they live in the same territory, have jurisdiction only over “the people” of their own communities. All communities have their statutes recognized by the State and are juridically independent regarding marriage certificates, ecclesial courts,

worship services, property management, administrative boards, etc. One practice specific to Aleppo is the closure on Sunday of several private schools, factories and shops, although the official holiday is Friday. Christians who work on Sundays are given free time to attend their religious services. Liturgical celebrations and the main ecclesial events, such as marriages and baptisms, take place on Sundays, and the actual attendance of Christians exceeds the official percentage.

There are 36 churches operating in Aleppo, besides 17 chapels and 21 convents. The faithful are assisted by 98 priests, religious and pastors and 75 consecrated nuns.. Aleppo, remains a source of priestly and religious vocations, and is the see of three minor seminaries and three youth formation programmes.

Charitable, educational and cultural institutions patronized by the churches, as well as schools, hospitals, clinics, old people's homes, orphanages, etc., contribute greatly to the social development of the city and serve all without discrimination.

Moreover, Aleppo is distinguished by its spirit of conviviality and neighbourliness with the Muslims. Relations between religious leaders and among the people, Christians and Muslims alike, are fraternal and cordial, marked by reciprocal respect and cooperation in the social area, and by shared participation in national duties. Christians have their representatives in the parliament, in the official and administrative bodies; they enjoy full civic rights and are equal in the eyes of the law. In these contexts they are called to bear witness before their fellow citizens through their good conduct, their righteousness and their unity.

This mosaic of Christian communities finds its unity thanks to the fact that religious leaders meet regularly - on the last Saturday of every month - to discuss pastoral questions and to take common decisions on social issues and unforeseen situations. They are committed to rejecting all means of proselytism, to help one another safeguard the interests of the churches, and to bear witness before the Muslims. They have a Council of Heads of Aleppo's Christian Communities which has its own secretariat, makes statements and issues general directives.

3. Internal ecumenical relations

Motivated by this ecumenical spirit, the churches of Aleppo have been able to achieve significant progress in three ways: spiritual sharing; pastoral agreement and collaboration in charitable works.

a. Spiritual sharing

Bishops and priests participate in baptisms, marriages, engagements and funeral ceremonies in the various churches. Often, these celebrations become ecumenical events, making a positive impression on all the faithful. The culmination of Aleppo's ecumenical relations is reached each year during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The local ecumenical commission takes care of the celebrations and also prepares the booklets to help the faithful to participate in the prayers. The first celebration brings the faithful together. The second gathering is for young people. The third gathering for prayer assembles the whole clergy and is followed by a fraternal "agapé". A special ecumenical celebration, in the Armenian language, is organized by the three

Armenian communities of the city, who also celebrate together commemorations of national or religious events.

It should be noted that the priests of the various communities (more than 95) know each other and enjoy good relations. As a result, an ecumenical yearbook has been published for all the communities of Aleppo.

b. Pastoral understanding

There is real understanding at the pastoral level between the various churches of Aleppo. In fact, they all recognize the baptism of the other churches, as well as mixed marriages. It is the custom for a wife to worship with her husband's faith community. Applications for passage from one church to another, however, are only seldom accepted, for valid reasons.

All private schools, confraternities and catechism centres have an ecumenical character. It is noteworthy that the catechism books used in all schools of Syria have been written by an ecumenical commission. That project was a precursory move in the area of ecumenism.

It should also be noted that the Protestant led "Bible society", and the Institute of Theology of the Catholic Catechism Society, as well as the Orthodox movements, all work for the promotion of the ecumenical spirit. Furthermore, all material published on behalf of the churches of Aleppo, such as the diocesan bulletins and the parish leaflets, is characterized by an ecumenical spirit.

Several ecumenical inter-confessional commissions operate in collaboration with the Middle-East Council of Churches (for youth – for family – for promoting women's affairs – for health...).

A new church was recently consecrated in a new district of the city, serving both Orthodox and Catholics; this church will be open to all Christians.

One of our common pastoral concerns is the problem of emigration, which weighs heavily on the Oriental churches. We fight against this plague in a spirit of ecumenical solidarity. Our plan is centred on three lines:

- i. We have roots in the Arab countries: hence the importance for us to take care of pertinent archaeological sites and to encourage groups of young people to visit the ancient churches in ruin and to study the history of our churches of the Orient.
- ii. We have a common history with our Muslim brothers and sisters: hence the importance of our presence and of our common life in one and the same homeland.
- iii. We have privileges which are not found in other countries: hence the importance to caution Christians against succumbing to the lure of developed countries.

c. Charitable collaboration

As we have already mentioned, the churches of Aleppo are notable for their collaboration in the humanitarian and charitable fields, providing assistance to old people, orphans, poor people, families in difficulties, handicapped persons... while hospitals and clinics have adopted an

ecumenical line of conduct by making no distinction between people of different confessions . In Aleppo, spiritual communion is concretely embodied in the communion of charity.

We are still hoping to start a theological and doctrinal dialogue, thus far absent from our ecumenical relationships which, as indicated, are limited to the spiritual, pastoral and humanitarian areas. Moreover, we are still looking for ways to unify the date of Easter, a central concern among the faithful. At present, some churches celebrate Easter according to the Gregorian calendar, others according to the Julian calendar, which is a scandal when we pursue unity. We have also been disturbed by the creation of a new, independent ecclesial community in Aleppo, which does not participate in ecumenical activities, as it refuses to recognize the baptism of the other churches and is expanding through an offensive form of proselytism.

4. External ecumenical relations

Several bishops and leaders of Aleppo's religious communities have official relations with international ecumenical councils and authorities, and take part in bilateral theological dialogues with sister churches. This involvement is also beneficial for our local ecumenical relations.

Among these councils :

- The World Council of Churches has organized various meetings in Aleppo. The most important of these had as its theme the unification of the date of Easter. The event has become known as the "Aleppo Consultation".
- The Middle-East Council of Churches has found a fertile ground for ecumenism in Aleppo; for that reason, it has set up an office dealing with Christian education, and it organizes various ecumenical activities in the interests of family, youth and women (these activities include, in the first place, courses of pedagogic formation).
- The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity keeps up with the ecumenical activities in the city and has sent several representatives with a view to promoting dialogue among sister churches of the Orient, and reviving the process of unity.

It should also be noted that all visits to Aleppo made on various occasions by the patriarchs, are opportunities for ecumenical events.

Pope John Paul II's visit to Syria, May 5-8, 2001, has certainly given a fresh boost to the ecumenical spirit and charitable atmosphere among the churches. Although circumstances did not permit the Holy Father to visit Aleppo, the whole city, with its religious leaders and a large number of faithful went to the capital city of Damascus to welcome him and take part in the celebrations presided over by the Pope, and in the ecumenical encounters in his honour.

Conclusion

In closing our general review of ecumenical relations in Aleppo, we thank God for the journey we have undertaken together and we offer him our distress at what is still separating us, trusting that the Lord, Creator of all unity, will turn our desire for unity into reality. "Now to him who by

the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Eph 3:20-21).

(This description of the local ecumenical situation was prepared by the local preparatory group and is published under its authority.)

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Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Themes 1968-2004

In 1968, materials officially prepared jointly by the WCC Faith and Order Commission and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity began to be used.

- 1968 To the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1: 14)
Pour la louange de sa gloire
- 1969 Called to freedom (Galatians 5: 13)
Appelés à la liberté
(Preparatory meeting held in Rome, Italy)
- 1970 We are fellow workers for God (1 Corinthians 3: 9)
Nous sommes les coopérateurs de Dieu
(Preparatory meeting held at the Monastery of Niederaltaich, Federal Republic of Germany)
- 1971 ...and the communion of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13: 13)
...et la communion du Saint-Esprit
- 1972 I give you a new commandment (John 13: 34)
Je vous donne un commandement nouveau
(Preparatory meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland)
- 1973 Lord, teach us to pray (Luke 11: 1)
Seigneur, apprends-nous à prier
(Preparatory meeting held at the Abbey of Montserrat, Spain)
- 1974 That every tongue confess: Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2: 1-13)
Que tous confessent: Jésus-Christ est Seigneur
(Preparatory meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland)

(In April 1974 a letter was sent to member churches and other interested parties concerning the setting up of local groups to be involved in the preparation of the Week of Prayer brochure. An Australian group was the first to take up this plan in preparing the 1975 initial draft of the Week of Prayer.)

- 1975 God’s purpose: all things in Christ (Ephesians 1: 3-10)
La volonté du Père: Tout réunir sous un seul chef, le Christ
(Material from an Australian group. Preparatory meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland)

- 1976 We shall be like him (1 John 3: 2) or, Called to become what we are
Appelés a devenir ce que nous sommes
(Material from Caribbean Conference of Churches.
Preparatory meeting held in Rome, Italy)
- 1977 Enduring together in hope (Romans 5: 1-5)
L'espérance ne déçoit pas
(Material from Lebanon, in the midst of a civil war.
Preparatory meeting held in Geneva.
- 1978 No longer strangers (Ephesians 2: 13-22)
Vous n'êtes plus des étrangers
(Material from an ecumenical team in Manchester, England)
- 1979 Serve one another to the glory of God (1 Peter 4: 7-11)
Soyez au service les uns des autres pour la gloire de Dieu
(Material from Argentina. Preparatory meeting
held in Geneva, Switzerland)
- 1980 Your kingdom come (Matthew 6: 10)
Que ton règne vienne!
(Material from an ecumenical group in Berlin,
German Democratic Republic. Preparatory meeting held in Milan)
- 1981 One Spirit - many gifts - one body (1 Corinthians 12: 3b-13)
Un seul esprit - des dons divers - un seul corps
*(Material from Graymoor Fathers, USA - Preparatory
meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland)*
- 1982 May all find their home in you, O Lord (Psalm 84)
Que tous trouvent leur demeure en Toi, Seigneur
(Material from Kenya. Preparatory meeting held in Milan, Italy)
- 1983 Jesus Christ - the Life of the World (1 John 1: 1-4)
Jesus Christ - La Vie du Monde
(Material from an ecumenical group in Ireland. Preparatory meeting
held in Céligny (Bossey), Switzerland)
- 1984 Called to be one through the cross of our Lord (1 Cor 2: 2 and Col 1: 20).
Appelés à l'unité par la croix de notre Seigneur
(Preparatory meeting held in Venice, Italy)
- 1985 From death to life with Christ (Ephesians 2: 4-7)
De la mort à la vie avec le Christ
(Material from Jamaica - Preparatory meeting
held in Grandchamp, Switzerland)
- 1986 You shall be my witnesses (Acts 1: 6-8)
Vous serez mes témoins
(Material from Yugoslavia (Slovenia),

Preparatory meeting held in Yugoslavia)

- 1987 United in Christ - a New Creation (2 Corinthians 5: 17-6: 4a)
Unis dans le Christ - une nouvelle création
(Material from England - Preparatory meeting held in Taizé, France)
- 1988 The love of God casts out fear (1 John 4: 18)
L'Amour de Dieu bannit la Crainte
(Material from Italy - Preparatory meeting held in Pinerolo, Italy)
- 1989 Building community: one body in Christ (Romans 12: 5-6a)
Bâtir la communauté: Un seul corps en Christ
(Material from Canada - Preparatory meeting held in Whaley Bridge, England)
- 1990 That they all may be one...That the world may believe (John 17)
Que tous soient un...Afin que le monde croie
(Material from Spain - Preparatory meeting held in Madrid, Spain)
- 1991 Praise the Lord, all you nations! (Psalm 117 and Romans 15: 5-13)
Nations, louez toutes le Seigneur
(Material from Germany - Preparatory meeting held in Rotenburg an der Fulda, Federal Republic of Germany)
- 1992 I am with you always ... Go, therefore (Matthew 28: 16-20)
Je suis avec vous...allez donc
(Material from Belgium - Preparatory meeting held in Bruges, Belgium)
- 1993 Bearing the fruit of the Spirit for Christian unity (Galatians 5: 22-23)
Pour l'unité: laisser mûrir en nous les fruits de l'Esprit
(Material from Zaire - Preparatory meeting held near Zurich, Switzerland)
- 1994 The household of God: called to be one in heart and mind (Acts 4: 23-37)
La maison de Dieu: Appelés à être un dans le cœur et dans l'esprit
(Material from Ireland - Preparatory meeting held in Dublin, Republic of Ireland)
- 1995 Koinonia: communion in God and with one another (John 15: 1-17)
La koinonia: communion en Dieu et les uns avec les autres
(Preparatory meeting held in Bristol, England)
- 1996 Behold, I stand at the door and knock (Rev. 3: 14-22)
Je me tiens à la porte et je frappe
(Preparatory meeting held in Lisbon, Portugal)
- 1997 We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5: 20)
Au nom du Christ, laissez-vous reconcilier avec Dieu
(Preparatory meeting held in Stockholm, Sweden)
- 1998 The Spirit helps us in our weakness (Romans 8: 14-27)
L'Esprit aussi vient en aide à notre faiblesse

(Preparatory meeting held in Paris, France)

- 1999 He will dwell with them as their God, they will be his peoples
(Rev. 21: 1-7)
Dieu demeurera avec eux. Ils seront ses peuples
et lui sera le Dieu qui est avec eux
(Preparatory material from Malaysia: meeting held in Monastery of Bose, Italy)
- 2000 Blessed be God who has blessed us in Christ (Eph 1: 3-14)
Béni soit Dieu, qui nous a bénis en Christ
(Preparatory material from the Middle East Council of Churches: meeting held at La Verna, Italy)
- 2001 I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14: 1-6)
Je suis le chemin, et la vérité et la vie
(Preparatory material from Romania and meeting held at Vulcan, Romania)
- 2002 For with you is the fountain of life (Ps 36: 5-9)
Car chez toi est la fontaine de la vie **(Ps 35, 6-10)**
(Preparatory material CEEC and CEC, meeting near Augsburg, Germany)
- 2003 We have this treasure in clay jars (2 Cor. 4: 4-18)
Car nous avons ce trésor dans des vases d'argile
(Preparatory material churches in Argentina, meeting at Los Rubios, Spain)
- 2004 My peace I give to you (John 14: 23-31; John 14: 27)
Je vous donne ma paix
(Preparatory material from Aleppo, Syria; meeting in Palermo, Sicily)

Some key dates in the history of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

ca. 1740 In Scotland there was a Pentecostal movement with North American links, whose revivalist message included prayers for and with all churches.

1820 The Rev. James Haldane Stewart publishes "Hints for the General Union of Christians for the Outpouring of the Spirit".

1840 The Rev. Ignatius Spencer, a convert to Roman Catholicism, suggests a "Union of Prayer for Unity".

1867 The First Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops emphasizes prayer for unity in the Preamble to its Resolutions.

1894 Pope Leo XIII encourages the practice of a Prayer Octave for Unity in the context of Pentecost.

1908 The observance of the "Church Unity Octave" initiated by the Rev. Paul Wattson.

1926 The Faith and Order movement begins publishing "Suggestions for an Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity".

1935 Abbé Paul Couturier of France advocates the “Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” on the inclusive basis of prayer for “the unity Christ wills by the means he wills”.

1958 Unité Chrétienne (Lyon, France) and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches begin co-operative preparation of materials for the Week of Prayer.

1964 In Jerusalem, Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I prayed together Jesus’ prayer “that they all may be one” (John 17).

1964 The “Decree on Ecumenism” of Vatican II emphasizes that prayer is the soul of the ecumenical movement and encourages observance of the Week of Prayer.

1966 The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity [now known as the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity] begin official joint preparation of the Week of Prayer material.

1968 First official use of Week of Prayer material prepared jointly by Faith and Order and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity [now known as the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity]

1975 First use of Week of Prayer material based on a draft text prepared by a local ecumenical group.

1994 Text for 1996 prepared in collaboration with YMCA and YWCA.