

Sign of Christian Unity: Ecumenism in Aleppo

by Manoj Mathew

Since the conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus in 34 AD, Jesus was known in Syria. Today, 355 kilometres north of the capital city of Damascus, lies Aleppo where Christian unity is an example worth admiring. The church grew up and spread from Syria, with the preaching of the apostles and today it is a recognised cradle of Christianity. Journeying in the footsteps of martyrs and saints has no better glory than to witnessing the unity of Christians. I visited Syria in the first week of August 2004 and I would like to recollect some experiences of Christian unity in Aleppo.

I met up with Mgr Gregorios Youhanna Ibrahim, metropolitan of the Syrian Orthodox Church who explained the different Church groups that exist in Aleppo, there are six Catholic communities, with their respective bishops: the Greek-Catholics, the Armenians, the Syrians, the Maronites, the Chaldeans and the Latins; and three Orthodox communities: Greek-Orthodox, Armenians and Syrians. There are a few other evangelical and protestant communities. The church leaders often have various exchanges and meetings.

He happily reminded me of the trust of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in the preparation of the initial draft material for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2004. The initial preparatory document was drafted by him and three other metropolitans/ archbishops of Aleppo for the week of Prayer for Christian Unity celebrated from 18-25 January 2004 on the theme My peace I give to you (Jn 14: 23). The Vatican wanted the initial draft of this material from Christians (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) who live and make their witness in the ancient city of Aleppo, Syria.

Ecumenism is also manifested in the evolution of the Catholic Action movement of Aleppo JEC (Jeunesse Etudiante Chretienne) /YCS, whose members are from a variety of churches and communities. There are also many Orthodox priests accompanying the movement in their meeting and formation sessions. The movement is open to all, irrespective of one's spiritual belonging, as are various other schools and educational institutes.

I had the great privilege of attending the wedding service of a former JEC member in the Greek Catholic cathedral of Aleppo and to my surprise I found a few Orthodox priests celebrating alongside the bishop of the Greek Catholic Church. It was the deepest experience I had of the unity among the churches in Aleppo.

"JEC Aleppo is an important archive and reality of the Arab world for Christian unity" said Bishop Jeanbart the metropolitan Greek Catholic Bishop. He himself is a former chaplain of the movement who appreciates the importance of the Christian unity in the movement. "*JEC is a reliable movement, she should start again in a new way focusing on the spirituality and apostolic mission necessary to be a witness of Christ today*", he remarked when asked about the growth of newer movements and association.



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YCS/JEC Members in Syria have great ecumenical understanding

Students do understand the difference between the Catholic and Orthodox churches in Aleppo. The few differences that they know are: The Option of celibacy or marriage for the clergy, church leaders, celebration days of Easter and Christmas, understanding Mary, order of the liturgy, profession of faith, saints. One student says 'The Catholic church is Western' and 'Orthodox Church is Eastern'. The reality is that "It is not a problem in Aleppo" says Salwa Saydi a 16 year old from the Syrian Catholic Church, she further adds "*Why should we care about all these differences in the church, when we believe in the same person of Jesus?*". The word Christian itself was developed in Syria.

The church is very concerned about the emigration of the Christians in search of better job opportunities and living conditions in population that is 70 % Muslim. The majority of Christian young people also appreciate having friends of other faiths but they are cautious about having have any deeper relationships especially with the opposite sex. The differences in the religious teachings, understanding and practices are can open up many arguments so they try not to discuss these in details.

"*I am afraid of Christians being a minority here and a probable conflict in future because of misunderstandings may cause lot of problems*" says George Kahal, a 4th year law student from the Latin Rite, so Christian unity and Inter religious Dialogue and Understanding are very crucial for countries like Syria.