

Synodality and its implementation –
A theological “topos” for the Church in East and West

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Synodality in the Syriac Tradition

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Introduction

Thank you for the kind invitation extended to me by Prof. Astrid Kaptijn, to speak at this International Conference organized at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. In my address today, I shall talk about synodality in the Syriac Orthodox Tradition in the context of moral discernment and ethical decisions that are to be made.

First, I shall give a brief account of the Syriac Church to situate it in the historical context. Second, I will say few words about Canon Law in the Syriac tradition. Next, I shall reflect about synodality and its implementation in the Syriac Orthodox Tradition. Finally, I will offer some concluding remarks on the subject under consideration.

The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch belongs to the Oriental Orthodox family of Churches. It forms a distinct Oriental Christian tradition. It exists alongside Greek and Latin tradition. Its importance and significance within Christian tradition stems from the fact it is rooted in the Biblical/Semitic world out of which the Bible and Christianity sprang. Earliest Syriac tradition up to the fourth century is Semitic in character, and is free from the later influence of the Greek culture and thought patterns.

It is important to recognize Syriac tradition as something quite distinct within Christian tradition. And since it is distinct, this means that it has its own contribution to make to Christian tradition. This does not mean that the Syriac, Greek and Latin traditions are rivals, each contending for primacy; rather we should understand each tradition as complementing the others: each has its own special contribution to make to Christianity. In other words, one tradition should not try to dominate the others, thus creating serious imbalance, which leads to the impoverishment of the Christian tradition. Instead, each tradition should recognize the value of the other traditions, and thus be enriched by them.

It is also important to bear in mind that Syriac Church faced many persecutions and horrific massacres throughout its history, especially, the Genocide of 1915, during the First World War, in

which the Syriac, Armenian, and Greek Christian population of Anatolia were massacred at the hands of Turks and Kurds in the last years of the Ottoman Empire. In the Syriac oral tradition, 1915 is referred to as ‘*Sayfo*’, ‘[the year of] the Sword’, or ‘Firman’, ‘[the year of] the Firman, an official decree by the Ottoman Sultan to kill the Christian population living within its extensive territory.

These and many other horrific events led to the dwindling as well as the dispersion of many members of the Syriac community in the various countries of the Middle East, and subsequently through the Western world where today one finds sizeable diaspora community in Americas, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Furthermore, the terrible events also had a major impact on social conditions and, consequently, on canon law development in the Syriac Orthodox tradition. In the Syriac-Orthodox tradition, the Syriac polymath, Catholicos Bar Hebraeus (1226-1286) wrote *Nonocanon-Hudoye* as a collection of canon law and a digest of past Syrian Orthodox Church canons. However, he augmented this collection with rules and canons he selected from other schools of thought. He made a distinction between the two groups by labeling the second as *Hudoye* (or Guides).¹

After Bar Hebraeus, there was a period of stagnation in canon law due to the troubled history of the Syriac Church in the Levant. It wasn’t until the very late 19th and early 20th century that canon law received its share of revival as part of the revival of the Syriac Church throughout the 20th century. One of the main personalities of this revival was Mor Ignatius Aphram Barsoum, Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church who had brought into focus the rich cultural heritage of the Syriac Orthodox Church, and the deep spiritual, historical and ecumenical foundation of its canon laws.²

It is against this background that I would like to consider the synodality and its implementation in the Syriac Tradition. In doing so, I shall consider three related areas as parameters for an authoritative moral discernment in the Syriac tradition, namely, sources of authority, structures of authority, and finally the dynamics of authority.

1. Sources of Authority

In the Syriac Tradition, Scripture is used as a foundation and the primary source of inspiration in relation to other sources for moral discernment. In addition to Scripture and Church Tradition, the other ‘key’ sources considered for moral discernment and are employed in such a process include prayer, conscience, reason, *oikonomia* (ܐܝܟܢܐܘܡܝܐ), the human culture, philosophy and related sciences.

The importance of the Church in making a moral discernment is that the Tradition complements the Scripture, and provides a parameter/direction in making a moral discernment. Here, the Tradition is

¹ Bar Hebraeus, *Book of Guides (Hudaye) or Nomocanon*. Baby Varghese (trans.), (Malankara Orthodox Church Publications, 2014), 9-11.

² Khalid Dinno, “The Synods and Canons in the Syrian (Syriac) Orthodox Church in the Second Millennium: An Overview” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 17 (2017), 34.

to be understood as all that has been received and handed over from the past through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Syriac Church uses a hermeneutical method which is deeply contemplative, based on a close reading of the Scripture, with an eye to the telling mystic symbol or ‘type’ in terms of which God chose to make revelations to the Church.

The biblical text, beyond its apparent simplicity, is open to multiple meanings, which create a complexity of which Ephrem, the fourth century Syriac Father and Doctor of the Universal Church is a creative interpreter. In his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, the harmony of the four Gospels, Ephrem says:

If there only existed a single sense for the words of the Scripture, then the first commentator who came along would discover it, and other hearers would experience neither the labor of searching, nor the joy of discovery. Rather, each word of our Lord has its own form, and each form has its own members, and each member has its own character. And each individual person understands according to his capacity, and he interprets the passages as is granted to him.³

The concept of the impossibility of reducing the meanings, because of the complexity of the text and that of the reader’s situation, is again repeated in another passage of the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, where Ephrem, addressing God, exclaims:

Who is capable of comprehending the extent of what is to be discovered in a single utterance of yours? For we leave behind in it far more than we take away from it, like thirsty people drinking from a fountain. The facets of God’s word are far more numerous than the faces of those who learn from it.⁴

Thus, the “biblical word” and “those who meditate upon it” possess many “facets”. Consequently, this gives rise to the variety of interpretations as two criteria of the hermeneutic fruitfulness of the biblical text: one intrinsic to the text, and the other extrinsic. Ephrem explains this double richness, intrinsic and extrinsic, by using two images, namely, that of a fountain, and a mirror.

Regarding the intrinsic fruitfulness of the text, Ephrem employs the image of a fountain. He explains:

God depicted his word with many beauties, so that each of those who learn from it can examine that aspect of it which he likes. And God has hidden within his word all sorts of treasures, so that each of us can be enriched by it, from whatever aspect he meditates on. For God’s word is the Tree of Life [cf. Gen 2:9] which extends to you blessed fruits from every direction; it is like the Rock which was struck in the Wilderness [cf. Ex 17:6], which became a spiritual drink for everyone on all sides:

³ Sebastian Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition* (2nd rev. ed.; Gorgias Handbooks, no. 7. Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2006), 66.

⁴ Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, 66.

“They ate the food of the Spirit and they drank the draft of the Spirit. [1 Cor 10:4]”.⁵

As to the second criterion, the fruitfulness extrinsic to the text, Ephrem employs the image of a mirror. This is very beautifully expressed in his *Letter to Publius*. He addresses his correspondent:

You do well by not allowing the shining mirror of your Lord’s holy Gospel to fall from your hands. It reflects, in fact, the image of all those who look at it and reveals the similarity of all those who scrutinize themselves in it. While it preserves its own nature, and does not suffer any alteration, remaining remote from spots and free of dirt, nevertheless, when colored objects are placed before it, it changes its aspect, without changing [itself]. Before white objects it becomes like them, before black objects it assumes their aspect, before red objects it becomes red like them, before beautiful objects it becomes beautiful like them, and before detestable objects it becomes ugly like them.

From what is said above, it becomes clear that the pages of Scripture do not only reflect the face of God, whose narrative and teaching it contains, but also the face of the person who reads it.

Scripture, then is the pearl of many reflections, the inexhaustible fountain, the mirror that reflects ever new images according to the person who is before it. The Scripture is a living and open world, which no one can seal or close. Neither the person who reads and contemplates it devotionally, nor the clergy who explain it to the faithful in the context of a liturgical celebration in the Church.

This is the hermeneutical method by which St Ephrem constructs his thoughts about God, to take up the triad of an exegete, theologian, and poet. Ephrem’s thought is dynamic, transfused through the power coming through his poetic verse. We thus see all the coherence both of the formation of his thought and of its expression. This is a theology that leaves room for God’s and man’s complexity, as Scripture itself demands through its double fruitfulness, intrinsic (divine) and extrinsic (human).

2. Structures of Authority

The term “synodal” would probably best describe the structure of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch. Within this structure, “His Holiness the Patriarch is the supreme head of the Church and its holy Synod, and the general administrator to its religious, spiritual, and administrative affairs. He supervises Archdioceses religious, administrative, and financial matters.”⁶ Furthermore, the Constitution of the Church states that “[t]he Holy Synod, headed by His Holiness the Patriarch, is the supreme religious, spiritual, legislative and administrative authority of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch.”⁷ In that capacity, it is the Patriarch who convenes the holy synod and presides over its meeting sessions, sanctions, and announces its decisions.⁸ The holy synod normally convenes every year at its Patriarchal See, currently in Damascus. However, due to inevitable

⁵ Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, 66.

⁶ *Constitution of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch*. Article 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Article 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Article 13 and 14.

circumstances such as war and conflict in the country, the synod convenes outside the Patriarchal See, and as deemed necessary by His Holiness the Patriarch. The Patriarch sets the agenda for the holy Synod and invites all the diocesan bishops to send any relevant items that they may have to be included in the agenda. The process in which decisions of the holy Synod are reached and decided upon is either through majority voting or by consensus depending on the nature of topic in question. The approved decisions of the holy Synod then are communicated in writing through the Patriarch by sending letters to all the bishops, members of the holy synod, who then send it to the churches within their jurisdiction to be announced and acted upon.

In the Syriac-Orthodox model, the regional Church structure is typically composed of archdioceses and dioceses. Each Arch(diocese) has its own Council which is representative of clergy and laity, and convened and presided over by the bishop. This Council exercises prescribed legislative, administrative and judicial functions. The Council may also have its own committees, and other bodies. The Council is the deliberative body for administrative, cultural, social, economic and patrimonial matters, composed of representatives of clergy and laity elected by the parishes.

The relationship in terms of authority between local, national, regional and worldwide structure of the Syriac Church is synodal. As mentioned above, the Patriarch is the supreme head of the Church and her highest authority. He is the one who calls for a holy Synod and invites the diocesan bishops, members of the holy Synod, beforehand send the relevant topics and items to be added to the agenda of the holy Synod. It must be stated that although the holy Synod is called by and convenes under the auspices of the Patriarch and attended only by the diocesan bishops, the priests and the laity through the (Arch)diocesan Council are also involved in the process of the decision making and in some cases, they may even influence the decision of the holy Synod. This is simply because in the last century, in addition to the Canon Law, the Church Constitution specified the establishment of parish boards within each diocese with membership consisting of laity, under the presidency of the metropolitan or bishop of the diocese. Parish boards have been strong features of lay participation in the twentieth century church, and by-laws regulating their functions were enacted and modified over the years. The By-Laws enacted by the Synod held at Mor Mattai Monastery (Iraq) in 1930 were subsequently updated to better serve community needs. The last version issued in the twentieth century was “The Unified By-Laws of the Local Parish Councils adopted at all Archdioceses of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch”, which was decreed by the holy Synod on March 31, 2000. The by-law embodied a century old tradition of a functioning civil participation in non-theological church matters, and communal activities working in close coordination with Church leadership. This tradition in joint administration found relevance in the diaspora where this is a common tradition.⁹

The (local) Church is represented in the holy synod by the bishops. Normally, the bishop before attending the holy synod meets with the diocesan clergy and the lay members of his Archdiocesan Board. Based on the outcome of the meeting, the bishop will send any relevant item to be included on the agenda of the holy Synod. However, the inclusion of the item(s) is decided upon by the Patriarch. Certain items are excluded or left to be addressed in a subsequent synod or dealt with separately depending on the urgency and relevance of the topic. The obligatory character of the synodal decisions and their implementation, in practice, depends on how realistically and fully deal with the question or topic under consideration and thereby provide the necessary guidelines and recommendations.

⁹ Dinno, “The Synods and Canons in the Syrian (Syriac) Orthodox Church in the Second Millennium: An Overview”, 32.

It is also to be noted that no other Christian communities of the region get involved into the synodal deliberations (as guests, as observers). However, the hierarchs may unofficially consult and discuss with members of other Christian communities about relevant or similar issues/topics which are dealt with in their respective Churches. In the case of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in the Middle East, before the war began in the region, the Patriarchs of the Armenian (Cathloicosate of Cilicia), The Coptic Church of Alexandria, and the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch met regularly and officially to deal with a number of contemporary issues and topics common and relevant to their Churches especially in the Middle East and often spoke with one voice on social and theological issues.

Furthermore, it is to be mentioned that the relations between Church and State do influence the work of the synod. In the Middles East and elsewhere, the government regime to certain extent interferes with the Church and the work of the synod. This is done by the State to exercise control and power over the people through the Church and her governing body.

3. Dynamics of Authority

To an extent the local context affects the structures and processes for moral discernment. Because of the nature of the universality of the Church and the dispersion of her faithful throughout the world, the Syriac Church is doing moral discernment in a worldwide context with room and relevance for the local and national context.

The Church is inevitably bound up with the society and culture within which it is situated. The differences between different dioceses in different parts of the world are therefore likely to be more pronounced in this area than in the sources and structures of authority. Some relatively common features might nonetheless be tentatively identified.

What is distinct about the Syriac tradition's structures and processes for moral discernment is her therapeutic rather than judicial approach in dealing with the brokenness and infirmity of the human nature. This might be best understood in the context of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) where the emphasis is put on the healing of the prodigal son through the unconditional love of the Merciful Father. This act of mercy and unconditional love does not only bring healing and restoration to the broken wayward son but also make him sit at the right hand of the Father to nourish his soul and body from the banquet set before him and thereby rejoice with the Father and all those invited to the wedding feast.

Having said this, now I would like to elucidate this with an example from the Syriac tradition, on how St Ephrem inspired by the holy Scripture itself created women choirs in the Church to sing praises to the Lord, something which was then prohibited given the Pauline instruction in the First Letter to the Corinthians that "women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says."¹⁰

¹⁰ 1 Cor 14: 34.

In the Syriac tradition, St. Ephrem (c. 306-373) who had an ecclesiastical rank of a deacon is acknowledged as the greatest Syriac poet and a marvelous rhetor and excellent biblical commentator. In addition to these many qualities of Ephrem, one may also add that he was a man of great vision with a gift of reading and interpreting the signs of the times, especially with regards to the education and instruction, the role and ministry of women in the Church. Jacob of Sarug, (c. 451-521), another distinguished Syriac poet whose reputation is second to that of Ephrem, composed a metrical homily on Ephrem¹¹ in which Jacob devotes a great part of his homily to the theme of Ephrem's ministry among the Syrian women. This is a remarkable feature considering how little is heard about the role of women in liturgical worship in the early Church. Here, I shall consider some of the important themes found in the homily to explore his contributions to the Church in hymnody and women's role in a liturgical context.

In his homily, Jacob dwells on the fact that Ephrem was an author who wrote specifically for women. Therefore, drawing a parallel between Moses and Ephrem, he says:

The wise Moses caused the virgins
not to hold back from the praise that was requisite;

Likewise, the blessed Ephrem, who became a second Moses for women folk,
taught them to sing praise with the sweetest of songs.¹²

And a little further on:

The blessed Ephrem saw that the women were silent from praise
and in his wisdom, he decided it was right that they should sing out;

So, just as Moses gave tambourines to the young girls,
thus, did this discerning man compose hymns for virgins.

...

He taught the swallows to warble
and the church resounded with the lovely voices of chaste women.¹³

Ephrem, who considers praise as an essential factor in the life of every believer, saw that it was not right for women to be silent from praise. Therefore, he decided that women too should sing out and glorify God with their sweet voices. Consequently, he composed hymns specifically for women and taught them to sing new songs of praise with pure utterance.

¹¹ Paul Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum Syriace* (Paris & Leipzig, 1982), II. 665-78. See now Joseph P. Amar, "A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug," *Patrologia Orientalis*, no. 47, fasc. 1=no. 209 1995.

¹² Amar "A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug," ## 47-48, pp. 36-37.

¹³ Ibid., ## 96-101, pp. 48-49.

In his homily, Jacob, exhorting his listeners to pay attention to the story of Ephrem, also uses “sober inebriation” as a metaphor for the image of liturgical song. He says:

The new wine whose color and fragrance is from Golgotha;
He gave as a drink for men and women to praise.

The fountain of melodies which, behold, has been passed down to all mouths;
With his songs he has intoxicated the earth to meditate on him.¹⁴

Following this, Jacob praises Ephrem for having created the women’s choirs to fight against the errors of heresy and idolatry as well as to offer praise and glory to God. He says:

In you, even our sisters were encouraged to sing [God’s] praises,
although it was not permissible for women to speak in church.

Your instruction opened the closed mouths of the daughters of Eve,
and now, the congregations of the glorious [church] resound with their melodies.

It is a new vision that women will proclaim the Gospel
And behold, they are called teachers in the churches.

Your teaching signifies an entirely new world,
where, in the kingdom, men and women are equal.

Your effort made the two sexes into two harps,
And men and women began simultaneously to sing [God’s] praises.¹⁵

Next, Jacob turns to Exodus 15, to the celebration of the Israelites after the crossing of the Red Sea. Here, Jacob draws a parallel between Moses, who “handed tambourines to the [Hebrew women] in the wilderness,” and Ephrem, who taught the “Aramean women,” that is the Syriac-speaking Christian women, “to give glory with their hymns.” This leads to lengthy comparison of the two acts of salvation:

Greater is this glory than that which was there,
just as the salvation which here is greater than that one.

By that salvation, the sea was torn asunder before the daughter of Jacob;
by this one of ours, tombs are bursting open by the power of our Lord.

...

¹⁴ Amar “A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug,” ## 24-25, pp. 30-31.

¹⁵ Ibid.: ## 40-44, pp. 34-35.

Then, arose the proud bride from the sea
and the Hebrew women beat the tambourines to give glory.

But now that the redeemed Church has bathed in baptism,
with the chants of Ephrem the sisters clap to make joyful sounds.¹⁶

Once having established the superiority of salvation in Christ, Jacob is free to describe at length the power of salvation worked by God through Moses. This portion of the homily culminates with the description of the Israelites' song of praise and thanksgiving to the God who saved them. Enlarging again on biblical account, Jacob says:

[It is] as if these [words] were spoken by Moses
to the chaste women whom he invited to give praise:

“Let you also not be reserved today with respect to praise;
beat the tambourines before the Savior who freed his people.

Not for men alone was salvation that at the sea,
so that they alone should give glory to the One who saved them.

At the sea you crossed over with your brothers and your fathers;
shout out praise with them in a loud voice for your salvation.

You, like your husbands, have seen stupendous deeds and wonders;
with them give glory to God Almighty with your hosannas.

One salvation was accomplished by God for you and for them;
let one praise arise from your mouths”.¹⁷

By way of conclusion, I would like to say that the metrical homily of Jacob of Sarug defends the custom of having women's choirs sing Ephrem's hymns. Jacob points out that this liturgical role for women was invented by Ephrem but the innovation itself is based and inspired by Scripture. Thus, this approach, is probably one of the inspiring and dynamic models for the Church to use in making her moral and ethical discernment in today's complex and dynamic world.

¹⁶ Ibid.: ## 51-59, pp. 36-39.

¹⁷ Ibid.: ## 79-84, pp. 44-45.