**Christian Churches of the Middle East**

September 12, 2015

**Rev. Fr. Frans Bouwen**

Born in Belgium, Frans Bouwen is a member of the Society of Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) and has lived in the Old City of Jerusalem since 1969. He is editor of the periodical “Proche-Orient Chrétien”, specialised in the history, tradition and present life of the Churches in the Middle East, with a special emphasis on ecumenical and interreligious relations. He is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome, and a member of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue with the Orthodox Church as well as of the International Commission for Theological Dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox Churches. He is at present also vice-moderator of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. He is active in various ecumenical and interreligious dialogue groups in the Middle East and in Jerusalem, and for many years was the president of the local Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church in Jerusalem.

1. Introduction to the Oriental Churches.
2. Initial Impression: diversity and confusion. The churches are sometimes seen as “museum pieces” and relics of the past. What is their history and context?
3. Strategy: to go back to history and see both the *diversity* in the way they received the gospel, and also *division*. No single culture can pretend to grasp it fully. Each culture has its own way to understand God and its own tradition.
4. Origin and Development.
5. How did the diversity come about. We tend to think that uniformity comes first, and then diversity. But in fact it is the opposite. Diversity comes first.
6. The Apostles did not have a prayer book, written testament, or canon law. All was a living tradition. They announced the gospel in the language of the people to whom they went. The one gospel acquired a local color or flavor.
7. This spontaneity and freedom lasted until the midst of the second century. Then the Church was confronted with ways of living that were not in conformity with the Church of Christ. Montanism, and the dispute over the date of Easter, were problems that went beyond the local church.
8. The search for a common way. That is the beginning of the synodal process.
9. Periodic or infrequent consultation was not enough. So the various local churches coordinated, creating structures of cooperation and consultation.
10. Two words: “Eastern” and “Oriental.”
11. Eastern is Byzantine.
12. Oriental is non-Chalecedonian
13. The Centers of Church Organization.
14. What were they in the Roman Empire?
15. Rome. The Roman Rite.
16. Constantinople. Byzantine Rite. Later capital of Byzantine emperor.
17. Alexandria. Coptic Rite. This was main center, before Constantinople.
18. Antioch. Syriac Rite. Capital of the oriental province of the Roman empire.
19. Jerusalem. It had not specific rite.
20. What were they outside the Roman Empire?
21. Armenia.
22. Mosopotamia/Persia. This is the Iran and Iraq of today.
23. Ethiopia.
24. India.
25. Commentary.
26. In the West, there was only one center, Rome. There was little room for diversity. In the East, many important cultures.
27. In Spain, there was a Mozarabic church, plus some diversity in Ireland.
28. Inculturation. The Oriental churches are an example, said Bouwen, of inculturation. Had they not been condemned, it would be easier for Roman Catholics to accept diversity and the inculturation of Christianity in the West
29. Ecumenical Councils.
30. What are the first four?
31. Nicea (325). Defined Christian faith against Arianism.
32. Constantinople (381). Defined the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed represents elements that went back to Jerusalem, and was enriched for a long time.
33. Ephesus (431). This council led to a division, because it condemned Nestorianism. Nestorius was not a Nestorian; Nestorianism (in Persia) defined two identities in Christ, the divine and the human. It was condemned as destroying the incarnation. The descendents of the Nestorian church are today called the Assyrian Church of the East.
34. Chalcedon (451). Defined the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. It was known throughout the Eastern Churches. They never recognized the Apostle’s Creed.
35. The Tension between Byzantine and Persian Cultures.
36. Nestorianism.
	1. Christians were persecuted in the Persian empire. So they said, “We are Christians, but we’re different from our people’s enemy, the Byzantine Christians.”
	2. It took a long time for the term “Nestorian” to be a term of opprobrium.
37. Chalcedonian Consequences.
	1. Copts, Armenians, Syrians, and Ethiopians did not accept Chalcedon’s “two natures, one person.”
	2. Misunderstandings.
		1. “Person” and “Nature” had various meanings.
		2. Persecution. The non-Chalcedonian churches were persecuted.
		3. Chalcedonians insisted on unity, and seemed to be against inculturation.
		4. Franz Bouwen: “It is better to *protect* the truth rather than *express* it.”
	3. Four Negative Adverbs:
		1. Without confusion,
		2. Without mixture,
		3. Without division,
		4. Without separation.
38. Conclusions.
	* + 1. Diversities were interpreted as reasons for division.
			2. The authority of the pope was a source of division.
			3. Rome found it difficult to tolerate diversity.
39. The Reformation (16th century).
	* + - 1. It was a Western phenomenon.
40. But if there had been no separation between the Western and the Oriental Churches, there may have been no separation between Luther and Rome.
41. Today there is little possibility of the East “correcting” the West.
	* + - 1. The Counter Reformation of Trent.
42. The Church of Rome considered the churches of the East to lack elements necessary to be legitimate churches.
43. The Roman Catholic Church started missions to “convert” the Oriental Churches and the Protestant Churches. That led to the “Uniate” churches.
	* + - 1. Uniate Churches.
			1. What are they?
44. Chaldeans (1552).
45. Ukrainian (1595-6).
46. Syro-Malabar Catholic Church (1599).
47. Syrian Catholics (1662).
48. Greek Catholics (Melkites, 1724).
49. Armenian Catholics (1740).
50. Coptic Catholics (1895).
51. Syro-Malankara Catholic Church (1930).
52. Ethiopian Catholics (1961).
	* + 1. Significance. These were the churches that declared unity with Rome after the Protestant Reformation. These churches have common Christological documents. Divisions in the past were based on misunderstandings.
53. Four Families of Church (according to the Middle East Council of Churches). Note: The (Assyrian) Church of the East [‘Nestorians’] are not part of MECC.
	* + - 1. What are they?
54. Eastern Orthodox Church (Byzantine – Chalcedonian).
* Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria.
* Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch.
* Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem.
* Orthodox Church of Cyprus.
1. Oriental Orthodox Church (non Chalcedonian or “monophysite”).
* Armenian Orthodox Church (Antelias – Jerusalem).
* Coptic Orthodox Church.
* Syrian Orthodox Church. There is an agreement between the Catholic Church and this Church. One priest of one church can officiate at another’s church.
* (Ethiopian Orthodox Church). The patriarch does not believe that there
1. Catholic Church.
* Armenian Catholic Church
* Chaldean Church.
* Coptic Catholic Church.
* Latin Church.
* Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church.
* Maronite Church.
* Syrian Catholic Church.
1. Episcopal and Evangelical Churches.
* Episcopal (Anglican) Church.
* Evangelical Lutheran Church.
* Other Evangelical and Protestant Churches.

Break

1. Questions.
	* + 1. Role of Patriarch? In Byzantine Church, the first Patriarch (Bartholomew) has the ability to convoke and preside at ecumenical gatherings. He also has a “right of appeal,” when people of his churches cannot decide among themselves. There is no binding authority of the Byzantine Patriarch over the other patriarchs. The “Pan Orthodox” synod may never come, but it was called for in the 1960s, and may take place in 2016.
			2. Agreements among the Four Families of Churches. The Ethiopian Catholic Church is the only one that refuses to enter into a Christological discussion with Roman Catholics.
			3. Eastern Orthodox would never call themselves “Roman” Catholics. They adhere to the “new Rome,” or Constantinople.
			4. Participation at Vatican II. All of the four families were represented at Vatican II. But the generation of V2 is now old or no longer with us. The influence of the Orthodox was real at V2. Participation was important, but we cannot speak of the consequence today. Patriarch Bartholomew and Franz Bouwen were students together.
			5. Felipe. In Latin America, we do not speak of “Roman” Catholics, but only of “Catholics.” Franz: the same in Italy. No one speaks of “Roman” Catholics. But the term “Roman Catholics” is used in the Netherlands. Franz: In modern Arabic, to speak of “Catholics” means “Greek Catholics.”
			6. Greek Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox priests were kidnapped in Aleppo, Syria, as well as a Jesuit. They have an *ecumene* of life and martyrdom, but the various rites cannot concelebrate.
			7. Can leaders of other rites become pope? No, said Bouwen, because the pope is the “Bishop of Rome,” and should not be the Patriarch of Constantinople or of Antioch. Pope Benedict refused the title of “Patriarch of the West” because that would have made him a peer of the Patriarchs of the East.
2. Christian-Moslem Relations.
3. The Question of Christian “Persecution.”
4. Over-Simplification. We have to be careful when we speak of “persecution” of Christians in the Middle East.
5. Monolithic Thinking. There is a monolithic thinking being imposed. Those who think differently – whether Sunni or Shia, Yazidis or Christians – are vulnerable. Sometimes the minority must resist. But to speak of the “persecution of Christians” is too easy.
6. The Underlying Problem. There are deep problems that underlie the so-called “persecution” of Christians.
7. Muslim Regimes and the Syrian Crisis. Jordan has peace between Muslims ad Christians. One-third of Christians in Lebanon are Syrian refugees.
8. Dictators. There is an ambiguity of dictatorial regimes. When the dictators go, the minorities are vulnerable. It’s not good to speak of “persecution” of Christians when there is also persecution of Sunnis by Shia and vice versa.
9. It’s not purely religious “persecution,” but also “economic.”
10. It is not just “Muslim fundamentalism.” We should not just look at the “symptoms” but at the underlying causes.
11. Frustration. There is a deep-seated frustration in the Muslim world, because the Arab-Muslim civilization has suffered and is now behind. The world has been colonized by the Christian West. The colonization is finished, but the frustration remains, because the humiliation remains. The Muslim world feels threatened by the West. And we feel threatened by Islam.
12. Cultural Fear.
13. Islam feels threatened by the pictures of the West that have infiltrated the Muslim world. There is the role of women. They feel it will destroy family life. They feel threatened by modernity and critical thinking.
14. It has put many things, including religion, in doubt – because critical thinking in the Muslim world stopped in the 13th century. Muslims look back nostalgically to the origins.
15. Perceptions in the West.
16. Fear in the West. The self-defense of Muslims is seen by us as aggression. Why do the rich oil countries not welcome the Syrian refugees? Because they do not want them. But we are still buying oil and giving the World Cup to Qatar?
17. Palestinian Problem. In the Synod of Rome of 2010 said that that non-solution of the Palestinian problem rankles in the Muslim World. When we invade and bomb Isis, we are fighting the symptoms, not getting at the root of the problem.
18. Arab Christians.
19. Fundamentalism and tensions today rule out the possibility of conversion to Christianity of Muslims.
20. Past. At one time, the Shah of Iran had Christians in his family. Bouwen knew a priest and a nun who were Sunnis.
21. Today. Atheism is strong among both Christians and Muslims.
22. Arabicization of Christianity. Many Christians living in Arab-speaking lands may be, for all practical purposes, Muslims.