

Unity of the Church:

Father Mattá al-Miskīn and the Coptic-Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical process

By Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt



Introduction

Jesus Christ prayed for the unity of his followers in a prayer that is recorded in John 17:21-23:

May they all be one, just as Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me. I have given them the glory you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one. With me in them and you in me, may they be so perfected in unity that the world will recognise that it was you who sent me and that you have loved them as you have loved me. (*The New Jerusalem Bible*)

This prayer of Jesus Christ underlines the great importance of unity for the Church. In this paper I describe and interact with some of the writings of Father Mattá al-Miskīn (1919-2006) on the subject of Church unity. His views are relevant as, for decades, Mattá was the spiritual father of the popular Monastery of St. Macarius (Dayr Anbā Maqār) in Wādī al-Naṭrūn in Egypt.¹ He wrote a series of articles and booklets on

¹ Father Mattá al-Miskīn (Matthew the Poor) was born Yūsif Iskandir in Banha (Egypt) in 1919. In 1944, he graduated in Pharmacy from the University of Cairo. After leading a wealthy lifestyle he entered the monastery of Saint Samuel the Confessor in Mount Qalamūn in 1948. He decided to move out into Wādī al-Rayān in the late 1950s, to live as a recluse in the spirit of the ancient Desert Fathers. His community expanded to 12 by 1964. They were sent by Pope Kyrillos VI to Wādī al-Naṭrūn in 1969 to develop the monastery of St Macarius. At that time only six frail fathers lived near the road between Cairo and Alexandria. Mattá and his companions cared for them while reconstructing the monastery. The administrative, agricultural, institutional, and printing/publishing developments at the renewed Monastery of St Macarius were staggering. By 1981, there were over 80 monks in the monastery. When Mattá died in 2006, there were 130 monks.

this issue. These are *Christian Unity* (1965), *Christ of the Whole World* (1970), *One Christ & One Catholic Church* (1972), *The Church and its Ability to Unite* (1975) and *True Unity will Inspire the World* (1984).² It seems that after this last booklet Mattá lost his interest in the ecumenical process. However, even after his death, the Monastery of St. Macarius continued to spread his views, both in Egypt and beyond.

Decades of Ecumenical Hope

For understanding Mattá's thinking about Church unity, it is necessary to be aware of the context in which he developed his views. He wrote his articles during years with much progress and stalling in ecumenical dialogue between the non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches on the one hand and the Chalcedonian Churches on the other hand. This dialogue focused on the Christological creeds, but the sacraments, general ecclesiology and pastoral matters were also discussed.³

In 1962, a *Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical and Social Services* was established by Kyrillos VI, the Coptic-Orthodox Pope. Bishop Samuel oversaw its work until his death in 1981.⁴ In 1985, Bishop Serapion succeeded him and in 1995 Bishop Youannis became responsible for the ecumenical work of the Copts.⁵

Ecumenical meetings became truly serious for the Copts in 1964. In that year, 30 theologians from Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches met for three days in Aarhus (Denmark).

² Matta El-Meskeen, *Christian Unity* (Cairo, 1997 – but published first in Arabic in 1965), Matta el-Meskeen, 'Christ of the Whole World', in *St Mark Monthly Review* (Cairo, January 1970, and translated into English in January 1982. The translation can be found on the website www.stmacariusmonastery.org/carticle0003.htm, accessed 19 May 2009.) Mattá al-Miskín, 'The Church and its Ability to Unite' (Cairo, 1975). Matta el Meskeen, *One Christ & One Catholic Church* (Cairo, 1980 – but published first in Arabic in 1972, in the Lebanese magazine al-Nūr); Matta el-Meskeen, *True Unity will inspire the World* (Cairo, 1988, 2002 – but in Arabic 1984).

³ For the Copts, the dialogue with the Chalcedonian-Orthodox Churches was much more important than the ecumenical contacts with any other Church. Therefore we only look at this pan-Orthodox dialogue here.

⁴ Bishop Samuel died on 6 October 1981; he stood close to president Anwar al-Sādāt at the military parade during which Sadat and many surrounding him, including the bishop, were shot dead.

⁵ Maged Attia, *The Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement* (Cairo, 2001), p. 14.

They signed a common declaration in which they agreed, among other things:

Our inherited misunderstandings have begun to clear up. We recognize in each other the one orthodox faith of the Church. Fifteen centuries of alienation have not led us astray from the faith of our fathers. [...] On the essence of the Christological dogma we found ourselves in full agreement. Through the different terminologies used by each side, we saw the same truth expressed.⁶

These were hopeful conclusions, and meetings held in Bristol (United Kingdom, July 1967), Geneva (Switzerland, August 1970) and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia, January 1971) continued in the same optimistic manner. In Geneva, the theologians from both sides concluded together:

We have become convinced that our agreement extends beyond Christological doctrine. [We] have rediscovered, with a sense of gratitude to God, our mutual agreement in the common tradition of the One Church in all important matters of liturgy and spirituality, doctrine and canonical practice, in our understanding of the Holy Trinity, of the Incarnation, of the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit, on the nature of the Church as the Communion of Saints with its ministry and Sacraments, and on the life of the world to come when our Lord and Savior shall come in all His glory.⁷

They also agreed that three major issues would still need resolving, namely the meaning and place of certain Church councils (that is, Chalcedon and after), the lifting of the historic *anathemas*, and juridical matters related to unity of the Church at local, regional and world levels.⁸

There was a sense in Geneva that the ecumenical meetings should move beyond the informal and unofficial level. They wanted the meetings to become formal and official as meetings of Churches that recognize one another *as Church*.⁹ This was repeated in Addis Ababa in 1971: 'It is our hope that the work done at an informal level can soon be taken up officially by the Churches, so that the work of the Spirit in bringing us together can now find full ecclesiastical response.'¹⁰

⁶ Maged Attia, *The Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement* (Cairo, 2001), p. 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

In March 1972, a small ecumenical meeting of representatives of the Greek-Orthodox Antiochene Church, the Syriac-Orthodox Antiochene Church, the Coptic-Orthodox Church and the Armenian-Orthodox Church met in Lebanon. These Churches agreed that the previous meetings had ‘bridged the chasm’ that had separated sister Churches. They stressed social, historical, cultural and political causes for the divisions of the fifth century, and they also said that ‘squabbles over semantics’ had played a role.¹¹ The proposal of these Churches was:

What is only missing [...] is the official declaration of the heads of our Churches that unity is a reality based on logic and openness of mind. [...] As regards faith and doctrine, this prospective declaration would be sufficient for sharing the mystery of the one godly altar, which is our communion in the Blood. This would also apply to the Sacraments of Baptism, Myron, Marriage, Priesthood and all the other Mysteries and Rites. [...] In accordance with this official declaration, all the obstacles that still stand against unity must be overcome. All abuse and offensive terms must be put aside so that effective co-operation in the spiritual and pastoral domains would take place.¹²

After this, there followed 13 years without progress on the ecumenical plane between the Orthodox Church families. Interestingly enough, it was in 1973 that the Coptic-Orthodox Church entered into a serious series of ecumenical deliberation with the Roman-Catholic Church.

From 4-10 May 1973, Shenouda III visited Pope Paul VI in the Vatican. The two Church leaders signed a common agreement on 10 May. They made clear how close their views are in regard to the humanity and the deity of Jesus Christ, but they also confessed that there were differences:

We humbly recognise that our Churches are not able to give more perfect witness to this new life in Christ because of existing divisions which have behind them centuries of difficult history. In fact, since the year 451 AD, theological differences, nourished and widened by non-theological factors, have sprung up. These differences cannot be ignored. In spite of them, however, we are rediscovering ourselves as Churches with a common inheritance and are reaching out with determination and confidence in the Lord to achieve the fullness and perfection of that unity which is His gift.¹³

¹¹ Ibid., p. 35.

¹² Ibid., p. 37.

¹³ Ibid., p. 79.

The two church leaders created a Joint Commission for further studies. The first meetings of that commission were held from 26-30 March 1974 in Cairo. During those meetings, the different views of the nature(s) of Christ were discussed. In meetings in Cairo from 27-31 October 1975, the differences in ecclesiology were discussed. In August 1976 the issue of the nature(s) of Christ was discussed again, this time in Vienna (Austria). The Churches seemed to be coming close to an agreement:

When the Orthodox part rejects all duality in Jesus Christ, it is intended to say that every act of Jesus Christ is in fact the act of God the Word incarnate and not that some of His acts be attributed to His Divinity alone as it might seem. When the Catholics confess their faith in Jesus Christ, then they do not deny what the Orthodox say, but they want to emphasise that in Him are preserved all the properties of the Divinity as well as all the properties of the Humanity, a fact which the Orthodox profess incessantly.

When the Orthodox confess that Divinity and Humanity of Our Lord are united in one nature, they take “nature”, not as a pure and simple nature, but rather as one composite nature, wherein the Divinity and Humanity are united inseparably and unconfusedly. And when Catholics confess Jesus Christ as one in two natures, they do not separate the Divinity from the Humanity, not even for the twinkling of an eye, but they rather try to avoid mingling, commixtion, confusion or alteration.

We both confess in the union the reality of the humanity of Our Lord, for the salvation of mankind could not be but the act of the Divine Word incarnate. The Divinity did not and could not forsake the Humanity for a moment neither during the time of crucifixion nor any time after. In the Eucharist, the faithful always partake of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, a fact that stresses the reality of His Humanity. On the other hand, we stress the reality of the Divinity of Our Lord; the Word Who was and still is the very God incarnate. For this reason the resurrection of Our Lord is a conclusive evidence of His Divinity. This explains the most illustrious importance we give to the feast of Resurrection

This is our faith in the mystery of the Incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the economy of our salvation. In this we all agree.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 93-94.

More meetings were held in 1978, but the ecumenical process was slowing down. In June 1979, Pope Shenouda wrote a letter to Pope John Paul II in which he mentioned that both Churches ‘confess and profess in essence almost the same teaching’ regarding the Christology. However, in ecclesiology ‘only very little real progress has been reached.’¹⁵ The lack of progress made Shenouda write:

This is why we thought it appropriate to delegate an official delegation of six members of the official Commission, in order to enhance the negotiations between our two Churches, which seem to have stopped at a point without reaching further steps of real progress in the achievement of the unity of our two Churches, in Faith, and to see what would be their conception of the future relations between the two Churches and the practical steps to be taken at present and in the near future to fulfill the unity in Faith of the Church of Christ.¹⁶

These words of Shenouda show that he was seriously interested in ecumenical progress. However, as he was banned to his monastery in 1981 by the Egyptian government, and as Egypt went through serious internal upheavals in the early 1980s, the Coptic-Orthodox Church was not in a position to proceed with international Church relations as it did before.

In December 1985 a new series of meetings began in Chambésy (Switzerland); those who met were representatives of all Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches, delegated by their Churches to take up the theological dialogue, on an *official* level now. With the Roman-Catholic Church, the first serious meetings were held again in February 1988 in Egypt.

As all articles and booklets by Mattá were written before 1985, this is not the place to further describe the ecumenical processes of the Copts. Mattá may have lost interest because of lack of progress and, suffice it to say, full communion has not been reached between the Copts and any other Church.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 102-103.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁷ Jean Corbon, ‘Ecumenism in the Middle East’, in Habib Badr and others (eds), *Christianity, a History in the Middle East* (Beirut, 2005), pp. 879, 881.

Tensions between Mattá and the Coptic Patriarchs

Important as background to Mattá's views was that he seems to have run into trouble with the Popes Yusab II, Kyrillos VI, and Shenouda III.¹⁸ It is alleged that Mattá was suspended twice, first by Yousab II in 1955, and then again by Kyrillos VI from 1960 to 1969. This last suspension was, if the stories about this matter can be trusted, for his book *The Church and the State*, in which he called for a total separation of the two. Some say that what is called his '1960s suspension' was because of Mattá's objection to the Coptic Church signing the Roman-Catholic *Declaration of the Innocence of the Jews from the Blood of Christ*.

When Shenouda was elected as the new Pope in 1971, Mattá also ran into problems with him, even though Mattá had been Shenouda's confessor-father in the 1950s. In 1957, Shenouda acknowledged his debt to his teacher Mattá, whom he called 'my father monk'.¹⁹ What caused the distancing between the Church leaders? In 1971, Mattá and Shenouda were both seen as candidates for the Patriarchal throne; Shenouda was chosen. The two men also represented different monasteries; Shenouda was the abbot of the Monastery of Anbā Bishoi in Wādī al-Naṭrūn, in which all formal ecumenical meetings were held. Both were also prolific writers, each having a large following of devout Copts. These issues may have played a role in distancing the two leaders, though the concrete political and spiritual views of Mattá and Shenouda were probably the really divisive matters.

By 1981 it had become clear that the views and leadership styles of Mattá and Shenouda were hard to reconcile. *TIME-magazine* of 28 September 1981 wrote:

When Egyptian President Anwar Sadat cracked down two weeks ago on religious militants who oppose his regime, one of his targets was the Coptic-Orthodox Church. Sadat abruptly stripped the Coptic Pope, Shenouda III, of his authority, banished him to a desert monastery, and ordered the arrest of some 125 Coptic clergy and lay activists. The world was shocked, but many members of the Church hierarchy were considerably relieved. For at least a year, they had been concerned that the Pope's controversial leadership was leading the Christian community into serious trouble with Egypt's

¹⁸ See http://orthodoxwiki.org/Matta_El-Meskeen. (10 March 2009).

¹⁹ In the introduction to the first edition of his book *Intalāq al-Rūḥ* (Cairo, 1957), published in English as *The Release of the Spirit* (1990).

newly assertive Muslim majority. The climate of sectarian strife had resulted in several violent incidents in the past three months, including three days of communal rioting in a Cairo slum housing project that caused at least 17 deaths.

Father Matta el Meskin, one of Egypt's most influential Coptic clergymen, told TIME Correspondent Robert C. Wurmstedt last week, 'I can't say I'm happy, but I am at peace now. Every morning I was expecting news of more bloody collisions. Sadat's actions protect the Church and the Copts. They are from God.' From God they may have come, but Matta played a large part in their shaping. The abbot of St. Macarius monastery near Cairo, Matta was summoned to Alexandria by Sadat a week before the crackdown. Sadat and Matta discussed ways of defusing the looming crisis. Sadat asked Matta how far he could push Shenouda. The abbot says he outlined Sadat's limits in dealing with the Pope. When the ouster was decided on, it was Matta who submitted the names of five bishops who would collectively take over the Pope's functions.

Shenouda, says Matta, is the best educated Pope in Church history. But, he adds, 'Shenouda's appointment was the beginning of the trouble. The mind replaced inspiration, and planning replaced prayer. For the first years I prayed for him, but I see the Church is going from bad to worse because of his behavior.'

As Matta puts it: 'All of us are in this dilemma, [because] Muslims feel Shenouda is a threat to Islam and the Koran. He was working against the line of the government and moderate Muslims.'²⁰

Mattá's words about Shenouda, 'The mind replaced inspiration, and planning replaced prayer', seem to be a good summary of Mattá's criticism of the ecumenical process Shenouda was involved in, as we will see. Even into the 1990s, the related discussion about *theosis* continued between both leaders and their followers.²¹

²⁰ Sara Medina 'Egypt's Copts in Crisis', in *Time Magazine* (Monday, Sep. 28, 1981), see www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,953135,00.html (10 March 2009).

²¹ http://orthodoxwiki.org/Matta_El-Meskeen (accessed 20 June 2009).

Christian Unity

Within a year after the Aarhus meetings, Mattá wrote his booklet *Christian Unity* (1965). It is therefore unavoidable to see this booklet, at least in part, as Mattá's comments on those meetings. He opened it with a Trinitarian prayer based on John 17:21-23. 'We give thee thanks that thou has vouchsafed unto us men to know the consubstantial unity between thee, thy Son, and thy Holy Spirit to which thou has called us by the prayer that thy Son made unto thee: "That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us."' By opening in this manner, the unity of the Church is put in the context of the communion of the Holy Trinity.

Unity of the Church is necessary for its witness to the work of God in human nature, 'a nature prone to corruption and disintegration because of sin and selfishness', and it is necessary for the witness of the Church in the world, 'that the world may believe that it has no other hope but in the person of Jesus Christ'.²² So, Mattá connects Church unity with the witness to Jesus Christ in the world. He does not work this out in this first booklet.

Mattá was critical of the ecumenical efforts of his days, because he believed that the ecumenical discussions had begun on a wrong basis and could not lead to the desired result of true unity. He considered the lack of unity the result of 'weakness of faith and lack of charity'.²³ Mattá describes the Churches as lukewarm and faltering and 'openly practicing separation and withdrawal from God'.²⁴ The Churches place 'ideological, political, and racial controversies' above 'the demands of conscience, faith and love.' They 'stifle the voice of Christ in our hearts, in order to satisfy the world and man'.²⁵ This may have been Mattá's manner of showing his desire for more progress toward Church unity, but it was also a rather uncharitable description of the Churches, especially when seen in the light of the hopeful outcomes of the meetings in Aarhus.

'The search for unity is now conducted along lines based upon reason and at the same time exposed to the ebb and flow of emotion: it is a sort

²² Matta El-Meskeen, *Christian Unity*, p. 3

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

of “spiritualized” scientific research’, Mattá wrote.²⁶ ‘Should we divest ourselves of our individual “me” and the ecclesial “me” as much on the conscious as on the subconscious level, unity would without question become a reality’, says Mattá.²⁷

He also held that nobody is able to detach himself of all the traditional, logical, canonical and sacred aspect of his ‘me’. He specifically mentioned the Church leaders involved in ecumenical processes: those who represent the ‘me’ of their Churches. Mattá suggested a solution, though: ‘But, when the Lord is truly and factually present, all existence of “self” will vanish and Christ will become the “me” of all.’²⁸ According to Mattá, this approach lifts the ecumenical process above the level of ‘Churches [making] mutual concessions to each other, [as] they will surrender everything to God.’²⁹

True unity, Mattá held, can only be found when the Christian truly seeks God:

Yet, as all have not the same awareness of God, unity is not approached from the same angle; it expands or contracts within men in proportion as their hearts are in relationship with God. [...] It flows, as a *necessity*, as an *inevitable* and direct consequence, from the union of man with God. This is a well-known law of spirituality.³⁰

For Mattá, ‘unity without the divine presence is nothing more than an idea, a matter for discussion, or a vain longing; but in the presence of God unity becomes real and visible, overflowing and life-giving, and many live in it.’³¹ The Churches must first attain unity as the living reality in God, and only then will they be able to, rationally, solve their differences.³² Therefore, the search for unity should start with a complete renunciation of ‘me’ and all emotions, and an ascent to God. Only in the presence of God, Christians are able to truly unite with others, because love for God is the source for love for other people; true union is only

²⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

³¹ Ibid., p. 12.

³² Ibid., p. 13.

possible if people ‘encounter each other in the presence of God and not just of one another’.³³

Unity is not a subject which can ever be examined theoretically; unity is initially a divine essence and consequently a truth. [...] It is seen by everyone in its totality in a single flash, for it is simple. One cannot see it outside God or without him, for he who sees the attributes of God, of necessity sees God. [...] God inhabits the heart and manifests himself there; the heart is filled with the attributes of God and comprehends unity in its depth and in its truth.³⁴

Mattá often uses the words ‘that they be one in us’ from the prayer of Christ in John 17. ‘Unity will be a living fact when all are in God.’³⁵ Unity, therefore, is not a *means* to access God, but the *result* of meeting with Him, and any other approach is rejected as unspiritual by Mattá.³⁶ In the ascetic and mystical theology of Mattá, the heart is the center of God’s presence and his work in man; the heart is the place where Christ dwells, and it is therefore the place where man meets with God. Emotional or mental efforts are only seen to have value when inspired by God in the heart. Apart from this inspiration from the heart, emotions and mental efforts are dangerous impulses, as they elevate man and lower God.³⁷

‘Inspiration never neglects reason, but reason always lacks inspiration’, says Mattá. ‘We do not want to neglect the search for unity on the intellectual plane, for the mind points out human failings and then passes judgment on them, that is its function, and its concern with analysis is profitable for a little; but unity is an edification of the soul. [...] This is the concern of the spirit: the spirit forgives and pardons, loves and unites.’³⁸

This mystical view of Church unity evolving more or less automatically from the individual’s personal unity with God, from the presence of God, and from immediate spiritual vision, is questionable. Mattá never explains how the automatism works; he certainly does not seem to take the concept of sin, residing even in the most saintly heart, very seriously.

³³ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 10-11.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

Also, his view is rather individualistic, as everything revolves around the individual believer and how God works in his heart.

A more balanced view of the process toward Church unity can be gained by also taking the scriptural notion into consideration that only with all saints, will Christians be able to truly know God, as, for instance, described by St Paul in Ephesians 3:17-19. This supposes a more bifocal and dialectical approach to the process toward Church unity. Indeed, on the one hand, the individual's relationship with God is important for Church unity, and this relationship positively impacts his or her efforts toward unity. But on the other hand, the actual painstaking intellectual efforts in the search for unity with 'all saints' also deepens the individual's and the community's relationship with God. Hence, progress toward attaining unity is not only a matter of the individual heart, but also of hard work of the mind and the soul, of meetings and discussion..

Mattá could not believe that the ecumenical movement of his time was the outcome of a true spiritual renaissance; he therefore had to explain why there was such an insistent 'urge for unity' as evidenced, for instance, by the meetings in Aarhus.³⁹

According to Mattá, these were efforts towards unity because of man's unspiritual 'instinctive longing for friendship', hence, not from the spiritual heart, but from the carnal mind.⁴⁰ The emotional 'instinct' for unity appears to be in accord with the desire of the Spirit, says Mattá. Therefore it is a dangerous motivation because 'it works unconsciously for the benefit of the flesh', for the 'benefit of personal glorification. [...] God, in the process, becomes merely secondary.' He compares these ecumenical efforts with the building of the tower of Babel. Mattá does not consider this a theoretical option; he writes that the 'me' is indeed the 'source of division which reigns [...] in a special way within the Church.'⁴¹ Mattá also wrote that those involved in the ecumenical processes had 'not surrendered wholly to God', and they saw unity as something external, 'as a matter for discussion and not within himself'.⁴²

Mattá correctly warns against wrong, selfish motives in the ecumenical movement. This is something all individuals and churches must

³⁹ The common statement after the meetings in Aarhus (1964) can be found in Maged Attia, *The Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement* (Cairo, 2001), pp. 18-21.

⁴⁰ Matta El-Meskeen, *Christian Unity*, p. 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7-8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

avoid. On what basis Mattá decided that the Copts involved in the ecumenical discussions were not fully surrendered to God, he does not say; the statement sounds rather presumptuous, even though it may also be an utterance of frustration with the formalities and the slow speed of the process toward unity. It seems reasonable also to see his views in the light of his own conflict with the Church's leadership; when he wrote his criticism, he was still suspended by Pope Kyrillos VI and an outsider to the ecumenical process.

Mattá held that for a Church that is weak, like one 'exposed to injustice, persecution or poverty', the temptation to search for unity with other Churches 'in order to gain strength', is tempting and dangerous. He obviously thought of the situation of the Coptic-Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Churches in Communist Eastern Europe. In such situations 'it becomes extremely difficult for that Church to distinguish in its thinking between the divine unity demanded by God, and the unity of the many demanded by the instinct of self-preservation.'⁴³ This excessive focus on pure motives seems unhelpful, as it does not take into consideration that even the purest heart is tainted by sin, and that God can use even that heart to reach his goals.

This search for strength by unity with others is in Mattá's view the opposite of what the unity of God entails. 'Christian unity is a state of "divine weakness over against the world" – like that of their Master, who surrendered his infinite power to be crucified by anyone who wished and in whatever way they wished'. Christian unity that is not based on Biblical premises is misleading, as it lulls people into believing that they do well as they are stronger, while 'in fact the temporal weakness of the Church is its most precious possession. It is its glory and its strength.'⁴⁴

Christ of the Whole World

In July 1967 another round of ecumenical deliberations was held in Bristol; these were, like the previous talks in Aarhus, rather positive in tone but, beyond those talks, nothing happened. Two-and-a-half years later, in January 1970, the Monastery of St. Macarius published a Christmas

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 15-16.

message by Mattá that seemed to relate to the ecumenical process, or rather, the lack thereof.⁴⁵

Based on Colossians 1:15-20, Mattá spoke of the cosmic relevance of Christ, who had 'become the Christ of the whole world, the Christ of the entire human race. [This] very faith of ours makes us responsible for the unity of human nature, which is in Christ with all its peoples and nationalities, languages and religions, doctrines and communities. We are responsible for maintaining its unity in our hearts, in our feelings, in faith and trust, in our very being as Christians.'⁴⁶

The initial context of these words of Mattá was presumably his desire to see his fellow Copts show their Christian love for their Muslim compatriots:

[Our] consecration to the world now will remain handicapped and powerless until the moment when we accept that we die, and our blood be shed with the blood of Christ, not for the sake of those we love, but for our enemies and those who are strangers to us and our beliefs, and for all those who hate us and the whole world.

This is the highest form of consecration to the Christ of the whole world for the unity of all the peoples and nations of the earth. This is the first and greatest vocation of Christianity in the world: that we should die for the world, making no distinction between one man and another. This is the message that has been hampered and restricted by iron chains of selfishness, sectarianism, racism, and religious and national prejudice.⁴⁷

It is hard to see how that with such an attitude to all peoples and religions, Mattá did not also imply the need for love for the Churches involved in the ecumenical process. This cosmic view of the Lord Jesus Christ led Mattá to conclude that He was not confined to the Church:

We all know the Christ of the charitable organizations and the Christ of the Church congregation gathered around a fine priest. But now is the time for us to discover the Christ of the street, the people's Christ, the Christ of all the people, both those who have come to know Him and those who know Him not, the Christ of the wicked and the righteous, the good and the evil,

⁴⁵ Matta al-Miskin, 'Christ of the Whole World', in *St. Mark Monthly Review* (Cairo, January 1970); for the translated article, see www.stmacariusmonastery.org/carticle0003.htm.

⁴⁶ www.stmacariusmonastery.org/carticle0003.htm.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

in every city and village, in every people and nation, in every part of the world—the Christ of the whole world. [...] Christ is greater than the corner of the house where you pray, greater than the meeting hall, and the Church building, and all the Churches.⁴⁸

The logical conclusion of this was that Christ was not confined to the Coptic-Orthodox Church; it is reasonable to assume that Mattá shared some of his impatience with the ecumenical process of the Orthodox Church families. Without being explicit, that is what Mattá seemed to imply when he said that ‘Christ refused to be the prisoner of principles, ideas, opinions and names’: ‘Each one of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.”’ He also said that ‘Christ refused to be the prisoner of places or sacred rites’ and of ‘a sect or community’, and he did not want ‘to be the prisoner of a land or people or to be restricted by the limits of nation, race or color’.⁴⁹

One Christ and One Catholic Church

Mattá wrote his next booklet, *One Christ and One Catholic Church*, in 1972, after two more rounds of ecumenical deliberations between the Orthodox Church families. These were held in Geneva (August 1970) and Addis Ababa (1971).⁵⁰



He was clearly impatient about a lack of progress and described that period as being ‘tinged by sectarianism’. The Churches were ‘apt to think whenever we utter the words *We believe in one catholic Church* that the oneness referred to applies to the sect or dogma to which the Christian member belongs, such as being Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic or a Protestant.’⁵¹ He called this ‘narrow-minded’

and ‘parochial’.⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ There was a fourth round of talks in Lebanon, in March 1972. It is possible that Mattá wrote his booklet after these meetings. With the Roman-Catholic Church, ecumenical relationship did not begin before 1973, so Mattá only reacted to inter-Orthodox meetings.

⁵¹ Matta el-Meskeen, *One Christ & One Catholic Church*, p. 1.

The most central celebration of the unity of the Church is through the sacraments, because that is where the faithful are together brought into union with the mystical body of Christ, 'thus becoming one body and one spirit'. Partaking of the flesh of Christ should unify races and peoples, and abolish all barriers among people.⁵³ If this unity is not achieved by the partaking of the one body, then 'the sacraments become no more than a formal existence, thus leading up to intellectual and dogmatic discord.'⁵⁴ This was a controversial statement in the context of the Coptic-Orthodox Church with its high view of the Sacraments, but it fitted very well in the mystical thinking of the monk who focused on the very immediate relationship between the heart and God.

According to Mattá, the first problem in the lack of ecumenical progress is that Christians do not realize the infinite and transcendental nature of the Church. 'The Church is the new creation: a new heaven, a new earth, and a new man.'⁵⁵ He writes that the Church is 'greater than man, his concepts, his structures, his dogmas'.⁵⁶ The Church 'is from the nature of Christ – out of which has been formed the Church', and from this nature the Church derives its wholeness.⁵⁷ Why does the Church not live by its own catholicity? Mattá says:

[It] is plain and simple: she has not yet conceived her divine concepts as pure and elevated above logic or human reason; i.e. her concepts are still under articulate and philosophical interpretations. [This approach hinders] the vision of the serenity of the *catholic nature of Christ* which has the exquisite power of total reconciliation and of unification [...] that surpasses the capability of any nature in itself, and not merely ideas, principles and dogmas, being thus founded upon the forgiveness, purification, justification and even the sanctification of every man by the blood of Christ which is capable of redeeming the sins of the whole world. It is as if the Church has not yet discovered the powers inherent in the blood of Christ and the working potentiality of his flesh and the depth of his love and righteousness.⁵⁸

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 3

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 4-5

These words show that, in Mattá's view, the real issue is a lack of spiritual vision. The urge to attain ecclesiastical catholicity and unity is:

[...] not merely theological zeal nor idealism nor even remorse; but should be out of our own faith, our own love, that is to say out of the newness of our new birth which is from heaven and which can by no means be made effectual to us, nor can we abide in it apart from the catholicity of the Church and its unity. The new man can never live as a separate part in relation to others, nor as a broken part, nor in a spot of hatred or hostility against other parts.⁵⁹

The lack of unity, in Mattá's view, is the result of Christians not understanding the nature of Christ as revealed in the Church. Every schism, in his view, is caused by the fact that 'we have mundanely approached the Divine through a fallen mind. [Man] has started to deal with ecclesiastical matters through an ethnocentric and racist mind'.⁶⁰

The solution Mattá offered is that Christians must 'possess the mind of Christ', accept 'the nature of Christ deep in his heart', 'renounce their own will', 'deny their passions and hatred, and curb their minds and bodies to the work of the Holy Spirit'.⁶¹ If Christians do this, then 'will the Church remain one, unique and catholic to all people, orthodox in every thought, void of any sectarianism or division', and then 'will be manifested the mystical flesh of Christ'.⁶² Only then will there be a 'gathering of hearts, principles and ideas'.⁶³ 'Whenever every soul within the Church spiritually, faithfully and earnestly yields through fervent repentance to God, and whenever every Church yields as such, thence will the Church be one through the grace of God, and will Churches be one through the power of the Holy Spirit'.⁶⁴



Mattá's focus on spiritual vision of the heart as the source for true unity of the Church is wholly in line with the view of the Desert Fathers;

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

⁶² Ibid., p. 5.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 6.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

that real vision, in the heart, is the sole basis for truly knowing God and serving him. It is likely that, as in his first booklet, he here criticized his own Church leaders for their role in the ecumenical process. In the ecumenical deliberations, the meager Coptic-Orthodox presence was noticeable. The impression one gets is that the enthusiasm among the Copts for the ecumenical process was less than that among the other non-Chalcedonian Orthodox. Maybe we should see Mattá's focus on the need for true vision instead of formulas and intellectual discussions in this context as well: the Coptic-Orthodox have tended to treasure and defend their theological uniqueness fiercely.

In this context it is also understandable that Mattá had to defend himself against the accusation of wanting to give up on the theology of the Copts. What is needed is not another theology, says Mattá, but the right *application* of theology; God is the Father of *all* mankind, and Christ is the Redeemer of *all* who call on His name. This ought to instill in Christians the love for *all* mankind.⁶⁵ This basis for his ecumenical views was also found in his article on *Christ of the Whole World*.

Maybe the accusation that he was easy in giving up his Orthodoxy was also the background for Mattá to use the *miaphysite* theology of the Coptic-Orthodox Church as the true basis for Church unity. He viewed the Church as 'analogous to the concept of Christ's nature which is indivisible, unconfused and unchangeable'. As Christ is 'whole in his temporal and eternal, his local and universal existence, so is the Church also single and catholic.'⁶⁶ So, according to Mattá, 'whosoever is in the Church is necessarily [and] inevitably [...] one because of the catholicity of the Church.'⁶⁷

This approach of looking at the analogy between the indivisible nature of Christ and the nature of the Church for arguing the unity of the Church was not helpful. In the first place, a focus on the Coptic-Orthodox *miaphysite* view of the nature of Christ was in general not a helpful start for ecumenical thought, as it is exactly the most divisive difference between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Churches. Secondly, the *miaphysite* concept as such can also easily lead to confusion between *unity* and *uniformity* as the desired outcome of the ecumenical movement, if the analogy is maintained.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 6-7

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

In the search for Church unity the concept of the Church as the body of Christ is more beneficially used by pointing to the belief that the Church, as the body of Christ, participates in the communion of the Trinity. Those who through Christ participate in this life of communion with God are per definition participants in communion with one another, and should express this in the life of the Church. In his first booklet, *Christian Unity*, Mattá had expressed this view by opening with a Trinitarian prayer.⁶⁸

Mattá placed the unity of the Church in the context of its witness to Christ in the world. 'How is Christ to be manifested in the Church but through the oneness of thought, will, desire and sense common among the children of the only God [and how] is it going to be proved to the world that God is one but through the oneness of those born from Him? And how is the world to verify that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son but through the oneness of sonship of those who believe in Him?'⁶⁹ Like in his first booklet, he did not develop this thought.

The Church and its Ability to Unite

In 1975, Mattá wrote an article entitled *The Church and its Ability to Unite* in which he argued that the Church Fathers saw the unity of the Church as focused in the *bishops* of the church in the first place. He concluded that:

Therefore, it is not possible to consider Church authority a product of rules and regulations, but rather it originates to the Church directly from God in the person of Jesus Christ, the true leading head of the Church.⁷⁰

Mattá argued also that for the church fathers of the first centuries, the church was in the first place the 'home of inspiration, of the Spirit and the power of God.' He explained, for instance, that for St. Ignatius, the church was the:

⁶⁸ Matta el-Meskeen, *Christian Unity*, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Matta el-Meskeen *One Christ & One Catholic Church* p. 6.

⁷⁰ Mattá al-Miskin, 'The Church and its Ability to Unite' (Cairo, 1975).

...sole source of grace because it has the Spirit of peace and love whom she dispenses in the Sacraments (mysteries). That's why whoever severs the bond of love loses the power of the Sacraments (mysteries). Therefore the first measure of the Church's spirituality and its universality and unity according to St. Ignatius resides in love, one towards the other.⁷¹

This was Mattá's approach to church unity. It was related to each bishop individually, and it began with the inner disposition of love for God and all Christians; formal meetings of the ecumenical movement were only secondary in his view. Mattá's view, to focus church unity in bishops and not in formal processes or in leadership formally appointed by the patriarch, may have been an act of defiance by Mattá, who of course was a bishop himself.⁷² It is more likely that in this context, he addressed the Roman-Catholic views of Church unity, as the Coptic-Orthodox Church had entered into discussions with Rome in 1974.

For Rome, Church unity was defined by being connected formally with the Pontiff in the Vatican. Mattá writes against this idea. Unity is based in each bishop individually and how they relate to one another, and the basis for this is not formal, but is a matter of spirituality and theological content and faith in the first place. He wrote:

The Fathers of the fourth century and those before them, in particular the Apostolic St Athanasius, were more concerned with the orthodoxy of the Church than its universality, since their faith, love and life were more centered on its essence than its form. However, in the west, 'catholicism' replaced 'orthodoxy' with no regard to anything else. But the term 'orthodoxy' remained to all the Fathers the term that carried the meaning of its heritage, tradition and faith.

As to us Copts, orthodoxy continued to be the comprehensive concept of the Church, which means that the essence became the only guaranteed expression of the Church, as if we are experiencing the mind of St. Athanasius, rather the mind of Christ, and living his exile, rather our cross, since the ill-fated Chalcedonian Council. For Egypt is still crucified by the Christian world, and Athanasius is still moving between the wilderness and Upper Egypt running away from his persecutors.⁷³

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Seen against the backdrop of the ecumenical processes the Copts were involved in, this last statement is harsh; Mattá accuses the Roman-Catholic Church of persecuting the Coptic-Orthodox. With this statement he does not only accuse the Roman partners of not being serious in the ecumenical process, but he also seems to criticize the Copts who were involved in the ecumenical meetings, of wasting time.

True Unity will inspire the World

In Mattá's next booklet on Church unity, *True Unity will inspire the World*, written in Arabic in 1984, he proposed some concrete steps for unity of the Orthodox Church families, and more than in his earlier writings, he spoke of the beneficial results of unity of the Church. He focused, again, on the need for true spiritual vision as a precondition for unity. Mattá did not use the analogy between the indivisible nature of Christ and the nature of the Church, again, for arguing the unity of the Church, but he placed the reality of Christian unity within the life of the Holy Trinity:

Christ places the dimensions of the power of his unity with the Father and the Father's unity with him to give a form and identity to the unity he asks for us in him and in each other: 'That they also may be in us.' Seeing that this unity is beyond our capabilities and outlook, he continues to plead for it beseeching the father himself. And still, by means of his blood, he makes fervent supplications.⁷⁴

It is noteworthy that Mattá seems to define the doctrinal and canonical differences between Churches mostly in national terms; that can be expected from someone who writes about an ecumenical process between the Orthodox Churches, which are mostly people Churches; the Coptic-Orthodox Church itself is a good example of this. To define differences in mainly national terms also creates a helpful opening in ecumenical relations:

Christ settled among all peoples, assuming their appearances and distinctive features, and giving in return his life. For in Africa Christ appears as if he were black, in northern nations as if he were fair [etc], but among all of

⁷⁴ Matta el-Meskeen, *True Unity will inspire the World*, p. 25.

them Christ is one and the same: Christ of Calvary, the grave, the resurrection, Christ of the whole world. For this reason it is futile for Churches, in their intense desire for Christian unity, to try and alter the expression of the doctrine of any Church either by omission or addition, lest we be like one who wants to obliterate the identity of man in order to come up with a Christ without humanity.⁷⁵

This is no reason for Mattá to give up on the search for unity through prayer conferences, study sessions, discussions, and review of thought; unity should be sought for in the *essence* of faith and doctrine, that is Christ himself, and not in the *formulations* of faith and doctrine. Mattá describes this as a matter of ‘spirit’ and ‘law’. Christ is not asking for unity to the letter, but unity of the spirit, and not unity of thought and opinion, but unity of love, says Mattá. If efforts to find unity have ‘law’ as the starting point, ‘then in its light it will seem to us that we, without a doubt, are always in the right, while the others, without a doubt, are always in the wrong.’ With that approach, Mattá believes the search for unity is certain to fail.⁷⁶ He was, presumably, describing his view of the manner in which the Coptic leadership handled the ecumenical process.

Mattá says that dialogue on doctrine and on the unification of various points of canon law must begin by first ‘living together in the essence of doctrine’. That essence he describes as ‘Christ himself, [...] based on love, sacrifice, redemption, and total relinquishment of self to the extent of assuming the role of a servant.’⁷⁷

Mattá wonders how any Church can be content with the fact ‘that it exists separated from another Church that bears the same body of Christ. Is Christ not one? Christ bore all the wounds, suffering and hardship: Christ who died on the cross in order that he might be raised up to draw *all men* to himself, this Christ, borne by all the Churches, is he one and the same? Who are *all men* I wonder? The Chalcedonians or the non-Chalcedonians? Easterners or Westerners? The people of the North or of the South? The white or the black?’⁷⁸

The Church has grown ‘weak and feeble with regard to spirituality and pure piety’, says Mattá. ‘Each Church suffers from self-infatuation.’⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 15-16.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

According to him, this ‘collapse and division of ideas within the Churches’ was the result ‘of a series of events traversing the history of the great schism from the 5th century onward which we have unjustly inherited from the dissensions, division, and disputes of Chalcedon’.⁸⁰ Mattá speaks of the tragic divisions due to Chalcedon, and what he finds most painful is that in his own time in many ecumenical meetings

[...] theologians have come to the conclusion and stated in recommendations for the proposed union, that this dreadful schism that has lasted 1500 years, and which has left a legacy of weakness, helplessness, and disgrace on the whole Christian world - this schism had absolutely no justification whatsoever!⁸¹

In spite of his criticism of the rational approach in the search for unity between the Orthodox Churches, Mattá seemed more optimistic than previously: ‘A streak of hope has begun to appear in the eastern sky announcing that Christian unity is regaining its spiritual power.’⁸² Maybe the actual progress in the meetings created some enthusiasm?

It is also interesting to note that, in his earlier booklets, Mattá said that he did not believe that common agreements could be reached as there was no sign of deep conversion. But now, such common agreements seemed close, so Mattá stressed that such agreements *in themselves* are not enough. ‘A precise statement of faith in Christ, openly and unanimously confessed, even if it is inspired by the heavenly Father, is insufficient to unite disciples, or Churches in the unity of communal sharing in Christ and in the work of love, sacrifice and death with him.’ He shows the example of Peter’s perfect confession and how that did not deter him from denying Christ. (Matthew 16:23, 18:1)⁸³

A standardized statement of faith is not enough for reaching true union among the Churches, says Mattá, because ‘the schisms have acquired far reaching consequences with regard to the Church’s spiritual life, sense of identity, heritage, temporal existence, and even to the extent of her political orientation’.⁸⁴ Conversion is urgent, as the ‘state of our behavior with regard [to] Christ is at odds with the true Christ. This is the

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

⁸² Ibid., p. 18.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 28.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

poisonous root of division which will continue to nourish separation and schism no matter how many times we agree upon a beautiful and correct statement of faith.⁸⁵ The problem in his opinion is not the creedal statements, but the Christian life of the Churches, or the lack thereof:

Each Church sees itself as being indisputably the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, for it has the most correct and most precisely defined faith! As for the self-denial that should accompany faith, and the return to the mentality and consciousness of childhood in the power of simple faith in Christ, to our shame we must say that these things are neither found in today's Churches nor are any Church delegates allowed to act upon these commandments. Therefore we do not have a Church that can act as Christ did – denying itself, bearing the cross and dying to the sin of division – and thus gaining life for itself and for others.⁸⁶

Mattá is convinced that all efforts and recommendations, the work of decades, have not provided and cannot provide the motivation that will cause every Church to take up a Christ-like stance. 'This is a matter far beyond intellectual dialogue, long meetings and academic solutions.' Mattá remained skeptical of positive outcomes as long as the meetings were 'unofficial'; the Churches had not retracted the excommunications of each other and therefore assumed the absence of the Holy Spirit among their ecumenical partners. 'Since the Churches are still facing age-old excommunication, any and all meetings are held in the official absence of the Holy Spirit; such meetings can do no more than open up old wounds and increase the pain.'⁸⁷

We believe that even if Christ himself appeared to them and stood among them, allowing them to feel him and touch him it is still highly possible that doubt would remain. [...] It is the Holy Spirit alone, who has been commissioned from the beginning to destroy all that is old and decaying in the heart and mind of man, to destroy all that conflicts with the love of Christ and that delays the progress of the Church along the path to eternal life.⁸⁸

Mattá proposed three steps to express the life in Christ, as the true foundation for dialogue:

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 30-32.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

1. The Churches should simultaneously reciprocate in lifting all excommunications from one another. Such excommunications are against the will of the Spirit. This has happened through the ignorance that each Church has had for the spirit and conscience of the other, and also because of their adherence to the letter and not to the spirit of the law. [...]
2. There has to be a mutual and simultaneous recognition of doctrine between the Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian Churches on the basis of essence and not of contents; that is to say by reason of the tenets of salvation and eternal life which both of them propound as being through Jesus Christ who is the single active principle in both of them despite difference in doctrinal wording.
3. Discussion of doctrinal contents has to be entered into and vagueness removed by explanation, not by deletion or insertion, regarding doctrinal points that have been handed down to each Church by means of tradition. Such a discussion would provide a formula of reconciliation which would be in harmony with the unity of fellowship and the Spirit without any violation whatsoever to the history of doctrine and the concomitant circumstances surrounding its writings and councils. That is to say that, between the Orthodox, who are now in conference with one another, there should take place a mutual and simultaneous recognition of soundness of doctrine at each extreme, as well as an acceptance of the fellowship in Christ, or rather freely accepting Christ himself in our fellowship; it should also happen that we receive Holy Communion from one cup [...] on the basis of the living Christ dwelling in the heart of each Church.⁸⁹

According to Mattá, this submission of the Churches to the authority of the Holy Spirit constitutes ‘the most difficult and the most consequential step that the Churches have faced since their foundation’.⁹⁰ The direct impact of the lifting of the excommunications will, according to Mattá, be ‘the removal of obstacles that impede the Holy Spirit from the work of renewal within the Churches’. Parallel to this, the sharing of the Eucharist is a precondition to real unity, as ‘the acceptance of the power of Christ’s blood [...] alone has the potential to cast out enmity and to perfect reconciliation in one body.’⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 18.

Unity in the Orthodox Churches ‘will nourish the whole community with a new understanding of divine love, [...] even to the point that the love of Christ will not be the domain of ascetics and hermits only. The Orthodox Church will thus be capable of proclaiming her message throughout the world in divine love and passion for Christ as in the first days.’⁹² Mattá believed that this love and passion would have an important impact on the world: ‘[The] attainment of unity of the Orthodox Churches will create new forces of evangelization in order to reconcile the world that is estranged from God.’⁹³

The Churches’ return after 1500 years of enmity will be tantamount ‘to a sign of communal repentance.’ Mattá considers this ‘a colossal power that will make the heavens rejoice, and will be instrumental in bringing days of relief from suffering and days of peace for the good of the whole world.’⁹⁴ This last statement indicates that Mattá believed in the cosmic impact of unity between Christians. ‘Has the time come for the restoration of all things according to the fulfillment of God’s will?’⁹⁵

There will be released in the world a power of this very reconciliation sweeping away the remaining obstacles which burden mankind’s heart and mind to the point of exhaustion, whether at the level of the Church or the individual.⁹⁶

The world is tormented by divisions, but ‘the Church is [presently] neither able nor qualified nor commissioned by God to pray for or bear the burden of the divisions that torment the world while she herself remains divided’, says Mattá: s

A long as she is divided against herself, she is not strong enough to bear the world’s current burdens – and yes it is she alone who bears their responsibility. The reconciliation between the Churches is urgently needed by the world now.⁹⁷

In the Orthodox Churches, the ‘doctrine of sharing’ (koinonia) is a central dogma. In Orthodoxy, the desire for unity is actually the fulfill-

⁹² Ibid., p. 21.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 22.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

ment of this communality, says Mattá. ‘The Church insists that she is a spiritual family. [...] If we consider the divine and spiritual concept of unity, we find that it is one of the features that is lacking in the life in the western world at this time. That is to say that in the West individualism is tyrannizing society, family life, religion, worship, and work.’⁹⁸

Mattá also believed that ‘from being united to another Church, each Church can gain potentialities for progress and spiritual heights that could never be attained by a Church alone’.⁹⁹ For Mattá, true unity of the Church, the body of Christ, means the attainment of the full stature of Christ. If the Church is truly one, Christ will be revealed in it as the Transfigured Lord; this can ‘only be realized in the oneness of communal sharing.’¹⁰⁰

If the Church thus reveals its glorious Lord, it becomes a mystical instrument for evangelizing the world ‘without a word being spoken or a voice being raised’. Mattá believes that ‘the Churches will reveal Christ himself to the world through their unity in divine love. Unity will be fulfilled and will take place through the death of the ego of each Church, in order that Christ’s self may live in them all’.¹⁰¹

Christ awaits the coming of this unity that is both voluntary and obligatory so that by it he may be transfigured before the world. In our present schism, it is as if Christ were dead and hidden from the world, buried in the frozen wastes of the divided Churches. [...] We truly believe that if the Church truly lives in Christ and in the Father, and if the Church is purified through keeping the commandment of unity and love, the world will see Christ as he is and will be thus purified. It will be drawn to him and will then follow him.¹⁰²

Mattá did not deny the need for outstanding theologians on the path to unity, but he preferred to focus on the role of saintly Christians. The last words of his booklet said:

Regardless of how much we may try to lay the responsibility of unity and change upon the shoulders of the Church, in the long run the burden will fall upon the saints of the Church. If truly we demand that the process of unity

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 27.

begins immediately, then we must fix our eyes on the elect and the gifted who exist in the Church, despite their efforts to escape being seen by men.¹⁰³

This focus on the role of saintly believers is fully in line with Mattá's stress that true unity will not be attained through formal and intellectual discussions about creeds and canons. He believed that true ecclesial unity could only develop from the hearts of the devout followers of Christ who have a spiritual vision of Christ and the Church, and who unite with each other in common worship of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Mattá al-Miskīn was convinced of the importance of Church unity, as that would be a great testimony to Jesus Christ in the world and it would unleash eschatological blessings to the world. He was, however, very critical of the ecumenical processes the Coptic-Orthodox Church was involved in. This may have been induced by the fact that he was an outsider to those processes and because of his sensitive relationship with the consecutive Patriarchs of the Coptic Church, but the central reason was that he had a spiritual approach that did not have much sympathy for the theological discussions in Joint Commission meetings.

Mattá bases Church unity in the Holy Trinity, in accordance with what the Lord Jesus Christ says about this in John 17. This shows that Church unity is spiritual through-and-through. Mattá believed that true Church unity could and would only result from all individual Christians having the same spiritual vision as the Desert Fathers. This is a highly individualized view of the Christian life that, in my opinion, clashes with the *koinonial* view of the Trinity that Mattá accepted as the basis for true unity. I also believe his view is too optimistic as he assumes that the individual can, on his own and without the community of the Church, attain perfection.

The fact that Mattá called for the immediate lifting of all *anathemas* between the Chalcedonian and the non-Chalcedonian Churches was a fine example of his desire for unity with all Churches, and wholly in line with his individual approach. He did not believe that details of Christol-

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 34.

ogy had to be hammered out before true unity was possible; instead, he held that organizational and theological unity would be the result of individual piety. He also differentiated between the *essence* of the individual relationship with God and the *theological description* of that relationship. As each true believer shares in the essence, theology should not separate, seemed to be his point.

Mattá's focus on the individual and his vision of Christ as the basis for Church unity is a crucial corrective for Christians who see Church unity in terms of theological and organizational agreements. However, I find his view one-sided, as he undermined the efforts of those involved in the nitty-gritty of ecumenical processes; Mattá basically told them that their hard labor was intrinsically doomed to fail; he believed it would not lead to unity.

I believe that Ephesians 3:17-19 creates a good basis for arguing that the ecumenical process needs both the individual commitment to Christ of those involved and the committees that together search for ways to express truth and faith. Paul prays that Christ may dwell in the hearts of the believers in Ephesus, but he also underlines that only with all believers together, can one truly know the love of God. This creates the image of a dialectical process where the faith of individuals and the faith of the community of all Christians strengthen one another in the search for more Christian unity. Hence, in order for the Church to be one, there is a need for individual growth in the faith, but there is also work to be done for the Church communities *as* communities.

Appendix

In 2009, the website of the Monastery of St Macarius the Great showed that it continues to treasure the views of Father Mattá al-Miskīn on Christian unity:

In our monastery we live out fully the unity of the Church in spirit and in truth, in anticipation of its visible attainment ecclesiastically. Through our genuine openness of heart and spirit to all men, no matter what their confession, it has become possible for us to see ourselves, or rather Christ, in others. For us, Christian unity is to live together in Christ by love. Then divisions collapse and differences disappear, and there is only the One Christ who gathers us all into His holy Person.

Theological dialogue must take place, but we leave this to those who are called to it. For ourselves, we feel that the unity of the Church exists in Christ and that we therefore discover in Him the fulness of unity in the measure in which we are united to Him. 'If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation' (II Cor. 5:17). And in this new creation there is no multiplicity but "one new man" (Eph. 2:15). Although we practise our Orthodox faith, and are aware of all the truth and spiritual riches it contains, we still recognize that in Christ 'there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all' (Col. 3:11). While wounds in the Body of Christ exist, we would offer our lives daily in sacrifice for the reconciliation of the Churches.

We have found in the religious life the best means of attaining union with Christ and hence the best way of fulfilling that new creation which gathers men 'of every nation, race, people and tongue' (Rev. 7:9) into unity of spirit and heart.¹⁰⁴

Bibliography

Matta El-Meskeen, *Christian Unity* (Cairo, 1997, published first in Arabic in 1965)

Matta el-Meskeen, 'Christ of the Whole World', in *St Mark Monthly Review* (Cairo, January 1970, and translated into English in January 1982.

Matta el Meskeen, *One Christ & One Catholic Church* (Cairo, 1980, published first in Arabic in 1972, in the Lebanese magazine al-Nūr)

Mattá al-Miskīn, 'The Church and Its Ability to Unite' (Cairo, 1975)

Matta el-Meskeen, *True Unity will inspire the World* (Cairo, 1988, 2002, published in Arabic 1984)

Maged Attia, *The Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Movement* (Cairo, 2001)

¹⁰⁴ www.stmacariusmonastery.org/eabout.html (8 March 2009)

Jean Corbon, 'Ecumenism in the Middle East', in Habib Badr and others (eds), *Christianity, a History in the Middle East* (Beirut, 2005)

Pope Shenouda III, *The Release of the Spirit* (1990), published in Arabic as *Intalāq al-Rūḥ* (Cairo, 1957)

Sara Medina 'Egypt's Copts in Crisis', in *Time Magazine* (Monday, Sep. 28, 1981), see www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,953135,00.html (10 March 2009)

www.orthodoxwiki.org/Matta_El-Meskeen. (10 March 2009)

www.stmacariusmonastery.org