

“These past days, on my way through Nineveh (i.e. Mausil) I went to look for the patriarch of Babylon,¹ whom they call Mar Ilyas (Elias)—it is true that this journey only served to make it clear to me that this man has no inclination or desire for union with Holy Church. His ordinary residence is at a place called Alkush (Alkosch) two days’ journey away from Nineveh, in the monastery which they call Rabban Hurmuz; but seven months ago, because of persecution by the Kurds he withdrew to a village called Tal Kaif, some three leagues distant from the town (Mausil) and there I went to find him. First, having greeted him, I explained to him the object of my visit was to renew the union with the Pope and Holy Church, which his predecessor (who was his uncle) had sought with such zeal and at such cost, when in the time of the pontificate of Paul V he sent his archdeacon Adam to Rome and on the latter’s return summoned the synod of his whole community, in which all unanimously agreed to the union and to submission to the Holy See.

“It was about 40 years ago or a little more that that happened, and this patriarch remembers it well, because he is now a man of 70 years of age, and he became patriarch at 35. He told me, further, that he well remembered Fr. Thomas Novara, who on the Pope’s instructions took part in the synod in question, which had so happy and good an ending.

“His reply to me was that those were other times, when they were not so hard pressed by the infidels as they are at present. I rejoined that without any difficulty or molestation from the infidels he could renew the union by writing to the Pope: that we would be at his service for the writing of the letter, and obtain a favourable reply for him. For an excuse he alleged that he was without his seal, which had remained at Alkush, when he quitted that place. I urged him once more and said that his signature would be sufficient; but he showed no desire to write. A priest, named Joseph, a man of some credit and repute among them, showed himself well disposed and on the following day took it on himself to discuss the matter with the patriarch again, and he too urged that the latter might write, even if he had not the seal. But the patriarch persisted in making excuses, alleging that it would be inconvenient that he should begin to write letters not bearing his seal, since anyone could then write or forge letters in his name.

“For your Reverence should know that it is an oriental characteristic that they cannot distinguish differences of handwriting as we can, and so it is the seal which differentiates, and guarantees the genuineness of letters. The truth is that the whole difficulty lay in his having no wish” (for union) “as one easily perceived from the chilliness and little interest he displayed when he heard this business mentioned. May God give a better desire to his successor!

“This future successor is his nephew, because with them, as also among the following of Mar Simeon, the patriarchate is restricted to one family and passes always from uncle to nephew: and, even if he be only a child of some six years, he is brought up in perpetual abstinence from meat from his mother’s womb: in this, as in all the rest of their observances, they are like our Chaldaeans of Mar Shimun. What is very good for us is that he admitted to me that he had no communication with Mar Shimun, and they do not even exchange letters of greeting, but each attends to his own affairs, without regard for the other.

“I discovered also in this village of Tal Kaif one abuse—too great a number of priests: for although this village was rather small, there were, according to what they told me, more than fifty and some so poor and so ill-kept that one would rather take them to be poor cowherds than priests. For among them (the Chaldaeans) there is no distinction in dress between ecclesiastics (even the patriarch) and laymen, as I remarked at Rome in the report I was ordered to make.

“The Christians of Nineveh (Mausil) are of a greater goodness and docility than any other Christians in these countries. There are about 500 families in this town—300

¹ The old title of the ancient Persian church was ‘Katholikos of Seleucia’.