

# The Ecumenical Ecclesiology of Mar Ivanios

## Introduction

Archbishop Mar Ivanios, the first Metropolitan of Trivandrum and the first head of the Malankara Catholic Church, could be spoken of as the greatest ecumenist of the twentieth century Church. His vision of ecumenism was large enough to include living love relationship with the whole mankind and nature. For him ecumenism of Churches meant real existential living communion of individual Churches to realize their essential catholicity and oneness which they enjoy along with actual living apostolicity and holiness. Ecumenism of Churches directly affects realization of their essential catholicity and oneness existentially. Churches divided and internally fragmented by constraints of various sorts could regain communion only through mutual recognition and reunion. By reunion Mar Ivanios did not mean absorption or merging of one Church into the other or another Church. Nor did he think of reunion of Churches as submission of *one inferior church to the superior church*.

Ecumenical Ecclesiology of Mar Ivanios has many provoking and theologically well-founded characteristics. He almost described the Malankara Syrian Church as her liturgy. He lived and believed the Church as the spiritual movement of love relationship with Jesus Christ and through Him with God the Father and the world around. Mar Ivanios cherished the traditional vision of the Church as communion of Churches. He discerned reunion of Churches as the only proper way to regain communion of Churches. He found that it is just the realization or actualization of the prayers of his own Church. According to him, communion of Churches necessarily presupposed individuality and internal autonomy of the *communicant* Churches as well as their mutual love and respect. Therefore, while in the Syrian Orthodox Church he took the lead to make his Church equipped with internal autonomy, he enhanced the need of love relationship and communion with the spiritual power of the Patriarchal See of the

Antiochene Syrian Orthodox Church. Mar Ivanios took the lead in his Church's attempt to reinstate the Catholicate so that his Church might eventually enter into meaningful communion with the Church of Rome. Having established the Catholicate of the Malankara Church he took the lead for the reunion of his Church with that Church. It is because of his clear vision of reunion of individual Churches that in his correspondence with Rome he insisted that the Catholicate of his Church with the Synod should be recognized by Rome. Unity of the Churches was one of his main concerns. Nearly half a century before Vatican II, he advocated the most inclusive ecumenical principle: unite in whatever point is possible even with the opponents. Indigenization-inculturation was only a natural way in his ecumenical spirituality. He rightly took Church as mission, and that for the spiritual uplift of his own community and overall growth of the whole humanity, particularly of the ill fated and the marginalized.

## **1.The Church of the given Faith**

Faith is a divine gift, a charism. It includes faith in the Church. The ancient Churches believe *in the Catholic, Apostolic, One and Holy Church*. Malankara Church is one of the ancient churches. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this Church began to adopt the ancient Antiochene Syrian liturgy. In the celebration of the baptism, this Church solemnizes the giving of faith in the church to its individual members.

In the Malankara Syrian celebration of the liturgy of baptism, there is a ceremony in which the sponsor taking in his right hand the right hand of the *candidate for baptism recites in the name of the candidate, the profession of Faith in Christ and in the whole teaching which has been divinely delivered through the prophets, apostles and holy Fathers*. And immediately after that the whole congregation recites the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. It is the common and uniting Symbol of all the Apostolic Churches. It manifests also the taking

upon oneself the service of God after renouncing the service of Satan. The recital is the first solemn and official profession of the Christian Faith. Here God gives the faith and the candidate receives it in the Church. It is also the official transmission of faith by the Church. It is something like uttering the words of the faith Fathers into the ears of the candidate. So the God given gift of faith is transmitted and the candidate is received into the communion of those who profess that faith. The candidate is reborn and received into the one holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ.

Although Mar Ivanios received the baptism in the Orthodox Church, he was given this faith of the one holy Church. The image of the Church infused into him and imprinted in him was that of the one holy Church. However, the Church that celebrated and solemnized the rites for him was keeping itself away from actual canonical communion with other Churches, especially with the Catholic Church, which enjoyed essential catholicity, apostolicity oneness and holiness. As a consequence it was suffering from inner divisions, sectarian violence and civil litigations. Added to that, to some extent at that period it was antipathetic to the bishop of Rome, who held the ministry of unity for the entire Church of Christ. Although the content of faith that the Malankara Syrian Church professed was in agreement with the other Apostolic Churches, practically and existentially it was cut away from full and visible communion with the bishop of Rome and with the other apostolic Churches. On the one hand, the Church recited its faith in the one, holy Catholic and Apostolic Church at the time of baptism, at the Eucharistic Service and at the various hours of the canonical prayers both by the laity and the clergy. On the other hand, it did not have actually the expression of the visible communion with the successor of Peter in Rome, which was according to the Gospel testimony essential to the fullness of the Catholicity and ecclesiality of the particular Churches. Many who were aware of this anomalous situation of the Malankara Orthodox Church, reflected over it. The mother of Mar Ivanios was one among them. One day after a visit and prayer to a certain catholic parish church, she told her little child, that

*we all would have joined that church.* She was in fact referring to the need of getting united with the Church headed by the bishop of Rome. In fact, she was rightly interpreting the faith *in the Church* that they used to profess in the Creed. She knew the history of the Malankara Syrian Church, that her ancestors for the previous 17 centuries were Catholics. She longed for the reunification of the communities divided after the Coonan Cross Oath in 1653. She wanted to realize the essential Catholicity and unity of her Church. It was this ecclesiology that Mar Ivanios as a little child received from his mother. Mar Ivanios, in fact, later confessed that it was his mother who sowed the seeds of reunion in him.

## **2.Church as a spiritual Movement**

Mar Ivanios viewed the Church as a spiritual movement, a spiritual relationship of love that climaxes in unity. He placed unity by love at the center of the relationship between individuals and the Church as well as between hierarchs of the Churches. For him love-relationship with Jesus Christ must be at the center of relationship in the Church and in the world. This is achieved practically through the reception of the sacraments of the Church, especially the holy Eucharist. The holy Eucharist enables the faithful for a mystical union with our Lord and through Him with the Father. In one of his speeches in 1922 at Tiruvalla as a priest in the Orthodox Church, he demonstrated the relationship between God, Incarnation of our Lord, the Church, the Sacraments and the created realities. There he demonstrated that life in the Church is the true way for mankind to live in Jesus Christ, and thereby in the Father and in proper relationship with the created things. Incarnation is the way that the Father has made for uniting mankind. And Christ's humanity is the way for our communion with the Father. In the world his body is the Church, and through her we get united with him. "A lover of Christ", says Mar Ivanios in the same speech, "is the one who lives and grows in Him, tasting him more than ever before and remaining in the truly God-given Church; such a one lives as a true Christian". It is through the Sacraments that a believer lives and remains in Christ and in the Father. In the Sacraments we taste and

share the love of Christ for mankind. The body of Christ, the Church, is a community of love that tastes Christ's love and gets united with Him. It should be made manifest, said Mar Ivanios, in the hierarchical communion or relationship with the Syrian Antiochene Patriarch also. In 1925 he said, "let the Catholicos installed by the bishops of the Malankara Church, try to strengthen the love relationship with the Patriarch installed by the bishops of Turkey." The primary duty of the Catholicos would be to make all efforts to be united in love and communion with the Patriarchal see of Antioch. In order to realize it there should be mutual esteem and mutual charity and cooperation from all parts of the Church. The love relationship should govern mutual relationship. There should be humility from all sides to get the necessary reconciliation among the various groups and factions in the Church. Even in the name, Ivanios(John), which he adopted at the time of his Episcopal ordination in 1925, is indicative of his option for love. John is known to be an apostle of love.

It was this priority of love that forced him to start the Bethany Monastic Movement. He was quite convinced that only through the self-sacrifice and total dedication to God in a monastic way of life that he could make any renewal in his own Church. He compared a monk to an ox for sacrifice. The self-sacrifice and humble way of life of the clergy as well as the laity would do miracle in the transformation of the community and society at large. He challenged the leadership of his Church to turn to this way of sacrificial life. He believed that monastic life should give priority to "earning God". It makes the Church fitted with and be energized above all by the love of God to serve him and the fellow men in His name. Mar Ivanios insisted that the Christian community in Kerala must adopt ideals that are holier and more sacrificial than those that it is said to have followed in the past. Through the Bethany monastic establishment Mar Ivanios created a culture of Christian love, selfless service and life of sacrifice and humble way of life.

### **3. Believing Church and praying Church**

Mar Ivanios believed firmly that what one prays must be his faith and it should be reflected in the daily life of the Church. When the Malankara Church adopted the Antiochene liturgical traditions, it adopted also its faith formulations. According to the prayers of the Antiochene Syrian Church, Peter has a primary service in the Apostolic College. It is the basic faith of the Antiochene Church that Peter is the first of the Apostles and that he has primacy to preside in love and to strengthen his brethren. Christ founded his Church on St. Peter and he asked Peter to confirm his brethren. After the Resurrection, Christ entrusted the care of the entire Church to Peter. Peter is the source of unity and visible symbol of unity. He has the ministry of unity in the one Church of Christ. Although there is ample evidence for it in the prayers of his Church, Mar Ivanios saw an inner conflict within his Church in this regard. A Church, which is practically not in full, visible and canonical communion with the successor of Peter in Rome, and in this sense a sectarian Church, and not the Catholic Church cannot do the mission entrusted to it by the Lord of the Church. Prayer and Faith is going in one direction and the actual reality is in another direction. This has to be rectified. This is one of the motives of Mar Ivanios for the Catholic Communion.

### **Conclusion**

Mar Ivanios saw that there is only one Church, the body of Christ. It is founded on St. Peter. The Malankara Orthodox Church is a sectarian Church, separated from the Catholic Church after 1653. As a result of the division and separation from the Catholic Church, there was sectarian violence and civil litigations down through the centuries. As a primary step for the reunion with the Catholic Church, Mar Ivanios insisted on the importance of love relationship with Jesus Christ, Church and Churches' hierarchical leaders and the members. For the same purpose of regaining reunion with the Catholic Church he wanted to regain the autonomy of the Church. For that he gave the leadership to establish the Catholicate and the synod. And then he

turned his attention to the communion with the successor of Peter in Rome. And in 1930 he succeeded in reestablishing the communion with it. Thus he made the actual existence of his Church in accordance with the prayer and faith of his Church. The life of Mar Ivanios teaches also that the mothers in the families shall be the best teachers of ecumenism to their young children.