Reflections on the Ecumenical Movement
The Ecumenical Vocation of the
Malankara Catholic Church
In the New Millennium

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Introduction

The ecumenical vision of the Second Vatican Council and the priority given to the ecumenical activities by the recent Popes, especially by John Paul II, the present pope, has borne abundant fruits. The three types of ecumenical activities, namely relation with the Eastern Churches, relation with the Western Churches and ecclesial communities, and joint activities with the World Council of Churches, are of prime importance for the Catholic Church. Today for the Catholic Church, ecumenism is not one of its activities, but one of the chief priorities, and the Church is fully engaged in ecumenism with an irrevocable commitment. There is no question of moving away from the ecumenical goal of the Second Vatican Council. In all the recent documents of Pope John Paul II, there are references to Ecumenism. This is echoed in the speeches during his pastoral visits in the various countries and to the churches.¹

When one compares the lengthy span of separation and the short period of recent ecumenical contacts, one is wonderstruck at the outcome of ecumenism: the better relationships among the Churches, close contacts, repeated coming together of Church leaders, participation in the synods and assemblies of the Churches by the representatives of the other Churches as observers, exchange of gifts, documents and publications, and official theological dialogues on national and international levels.² Definitely the Spirit of God is moving the hearts and minds of the divided Christians to come to the unity willed by Christ. He is the One to unite humankind in
Himself. Today there is a great aversion for the sin of separation: division is a great scandal to the cause of Christianity; it is counter-witnessing to Christ, and a great hindrance to the Gospel message, especially in countries where there is a multi-religious situation. Among several churches, the dialogue of love has struck down the barriers of prejudices, the fences of misunderstanding and the walls of isolation, created down through the centuries. Many churches have passed from the stage of confrontation to the levels of coexistence, cooperation, and commitment. They aim at visible communion and work for it. They renew themselves with ardent joint prayers, and peaceful joint ecumenical ventures. One can be happy with the ecumenical outcome, and hopeful that the ecumenical movement will reach its goal in God’s time and in the manner God wills.

**The Christological Agreements:**

Agreements arrived at and joint communiqués issued by the Churches prove reveal the progress the Churches have made towards the goal of Christian unity.

The Christological Agreements (1) between the Catholic Church and the several Oriental Orthodox Churches, and (2) between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East are landmarks and milestones in the ecumenical movement and the history of the Christian churches. Modern man has realized that neither Ephesus (431) nor Chalcedon (451) is a reason to remain separated. The Pro Oriente foundation of Vienna has played a significant role in achieving the Christological agreements. In fact, the Vienna Christological formula paved the way for the official agreements between the leaders of the churches. The distinctions widely accepted in the Catholic circles, between the content of faith and the formulations of that faith, and between unity in faith and plurality in expressions have helped to accept the various formulations of the churches regarding the central mystery of Christianity, namely the Incarnate Lord. It is an agreed fact today that the so-called non-Ephesene churches and non-Chalcedonian churches also have the same faith in the Incarnate Lord as the Ephesenes and the Chalcedonians. The Catholic Church has now
accepted the *one nature* (*mia physis-one kyana, one qnoma*) Christology of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, and is convinced that the Monophysite heresy is not visible in the present day non-Chalcedonian churches. The one nature or one *qnoma* is understood to be referring to the one Person of the Incarnate *Logos* and not referring to the duality of natures. Those who hold the one nature expression do not deny the humanity in Christ nor his divinity. They believe that Christ is God and man. In the same way, the Oriental Orthodox Churches have come to the correct understanding of the Chalcedonian formulation in its total historical background. In the Chalcedonian sense “*in two natures*” (*en duo physesin*) do not refer to the duality of persons, but to the actuality of the two natures, namely humanity and divinity. Formerly, the anti-Chalcedonians held the opinion that the Chalcedonians taught the doctrine of two persons in the one Christ. This they did basing on the pre-Chalcedonian understanding of *physis*. At Ephesus, St. Cyril identified *physis* with *hypostasis* and *prosopon*, all referring to the one person. They did not take into consideration the terminological change and development of Chalcedon. But now things have changed.

In the same way, the Catholic Church understands correctly the *two qnome* (*two kyane, two qnome, one parsopa of filiation*) Christology of the Assyrian Church of the East. The Assyrian formulation is a further development of the Chalcedonian position. Chalcedon made a distinction between *physis* on the one side and *hypostasis-prosopon* on the other side. Accordingly, there are two *physes*, but *one hypostasis and one prosopon* in the one Incarnate Lord. But the present Assyrian position is placing *physis* and *hypostasis* on the one side, referring to the duality of natures in actual existence, and *prosopon (parsopa)* on the other side, referring to the one ontological person. The Assyrians do not divide Christ into two persons and hence they do not teach the *Nestorian heresy*. By the expression *two qnome* they refer to the very same fact, which is taught by the Catholics by the expression *in two natures*. Hence it is possible for the heads of these Churches to come to Christological consensus with the Catholic Church.
Thus the great scandal of the fourth century, the ecumenical scandal, is removed, at least for the major part of Christians. The Oriental Orthodox churches have made joint statement on Christology with the Eastern (Byzantine) Orthodox Churches also. These discussions and agreements have enabled the leaders to think and articulate: “we have become almost one church.” The Catholic Church has accepted the ecclesiality of the Eastern Churches and it recognizes their sacramental system and sacramental theology. These Churches (Catholic and Orthodox) have rediscovered the already existing deep bonds among them. So for the Catholics, the new expression to designate the Eastern Churches-Oriental Orthodox, Assyrian and Eastern Orthodox- is Sister Churches. In the view of the Catholic Church, their bishops are appointed by the Holy Spirit to be pastors of a portion of the Church of Christ.

**Possibility of Agreements in Other Fields**

The agreements in basic dogmatic issues encouraged the Churches to come closer. These agreements promote the common witnessing and the ecclesial globalization enables the Churches to look more and more into those elements that unite them rather than the separating elements. Basing on the vast areas of agreements it is necessary to go further to remove the still existing points of disagreements, which are based more on non-theological factors. The still existing theological issues could be considered either as plurality of expressions or one-sided growth in the isolated existence down through the centuries. They have to be tackled in serious theological discussions by experts. The non-theological factors often stand in the forefront and they are, in fact, hindering specifically the full communion among the Churches. If the Churches can come to an agreement in Christology, it is all the more easy to come to common understanding regarding other matters of disagreement. Only goodwill and time can remove these barriers.

The ecumenical goal is very clear to us: the visible unity manifested in the common celebration of the one Eucharist of Christ on one altar and the common participation in it. But the way and manner of this full visible
communion is hidden from our eyes. It is almost an accepted fact that the methods of communion of the past are no longer a model for the future. One has to take the models also from the first millennium and not from the second millennium alone. Besides one has to take into consideration also the present world situation and the development of the Churches down through the centuries. One cannot simply and blindly go back to the first centuries and take the models from there. One cannot also take the present day ecclesial structures as they are functioning now. But the starting point and the point of reference should be biblical and patristic, i.e., one should go to the authentic sources.

Eventually all the churches must be prepared to change their present mode of functioning a little bit for the common witnessing and joint functioning. Every Church has to be prepared for a *kenosis*. This should not be asked of one Church alone, but all have to be ready for that. The bigger Churches have to be models in this process of *kenosis*. The smaller churches have to go out of their isolation; they have to break several of the man-made shells of the past. Every Church has, during the division, separation and isolation, developed one sided and partial solutions to the mysteries. This is all the more true regarding ecclesiology. The over-centralized governing system of the Roman Catholic Church, the ecclesial life of the Oriental Orthodox Churches without a common head and without adequate mutual communion and contact with other churches, and the exaggerated conciliar system of the Eastern Orthodox Churches to the extent of pushing aside the authority of the ecumenical Patriarch to that of a mere *primacy of honor* among equals have to be reexamined. The Churches in a concerted endeavor have to evolve in common a new mode of coexistence, recognizing one another and entering into mutual communion, even when all the related issues are not fully solved.

There is still a long way to go. What appears to be impossible could be removed in the twinkling of an eye. What appears to be so easy, may take years or decades to be solved. God is working with men and in time. What is required above all, is charity and patience, to wait for the
Lord with a contrite heart because of the sin of separation. Various kinds of developments in the Churches cannot be ignored. In the same way the mode of relationship among the churches prior to the separation has to be taken seriously. The theological terminologies and ways of thinking of the various Churches have to be respected and should be given serious thought.

**Setbacks to Ecumenical Movement**

There are a few unexpected issues which made the relationship among the churches more difficult: such are the *ordination of women to priesthood and episcopacy* in certain traditions, and the *accusation of proselytism and rebaptism of the Catholics* by some churches, and *withdrawal of some churches from all kinds of ecumenical activities*. The ordination of women was not in the tradition of the Apostolic Churches. But the Churches of the Reformation do not find it unnatural or contrary to the development of times. It is a thorny issue for all the Apostolic Churches in their relationship with the Anglicans and others.

The collapse of atheistic communism brought with it several problems for all the churches in the former Soviet Union and the East European countries. There was a vast *flow of sects* from Europe, America and Korea to these countries. But the activities of the Catholic Church were spoken of by Russian Orthodoxy as *proselytism*. In fact the official activity of the Catholic Church was to hinder the too enthusiastic Catholics from proselytizing. It was to have a controlled pastoral care for the Catholics in the former Soviet Union. Catholic Church is totally and irrevocably committed to ecumenism in the version of Second Vatican Council. But it is misrepresented in the former communist countries, partly because of their ignorance regarding the change of attitude of the Catholic Church since the Vatican Council and partly because of their Catholic brethren there in those countries who were also equally ignorant of the new ecumenical outlook of the Catholic Church. Some were, in fact, too enthusiastic, but they are now controlled by the enlightened.

The *Coptic Orthodox- Catholic relationship* is yet to be improved. The Coptic Orthodox Church in the eyes of many has taken a very negative
attitude towards the Catholic Church, even after so many years of ecumenical encounters and signs of good will from the part of the Catholic Church. They insist on rebaptizing the Catholics who join the Coptic Orthodox Church. Some Churches seem to go back to their isolation and take leave from all ecumenical activities. Some take a contrary stand and try to block, at least in the eyes of many, the ecumenical activities.

Churches, which are numerically small, and having a clannish nature, devoid of much external contact, who lived for centuries of isolation, also after so many years of dialogue, present themselves uneccumenical. They seem to prefer to do the will of the clan and are incapable of coming out of their particular circumstances. From the point of view of the Catholic Church, these separated brethren by themselves cannot come to the full communion willed by Christ. They are not yet blessed by the unity of the one Church of Christ.

**New millennium**

We have stepped into the new millennium with renewed hope and expectations. The new millennium has its own problems. We have our own new problems, which all the churches have to answer together. The modern world is asking the same questions to all the Churches: “Why did God become man? Why did Jesus come to the midst of men? What is the meaning and relevance of Incarnation for today’s man? Why did God reveal Himself to man? What can Christianity offer to the various problems facing the modern man?” As Churches we have to show the relevance of Christ and his message for the man who is worried over his multitude of problems. Although the atheistic communism is no problem today, the atheism of consumerism and capitalism is still dangerous and threatening the very core of humanity. And the international terrorism in new forms is a new phenomenon of the new century.

As Christians we all carry the burden of yesterday, the burden of history and the burden of the past. The good news is shrouded in the burden of the past. We are so much immersed in our past burdens that we often seem to forget the good news and appear as if we stand for the burden of
the past and for the prejudices of the past and formulations of the past. Past history is dear to us in so far as it is authentic for today’s man. If they are not authentic and meaningful, one is to be prepared to do away with the unnecessary burdens and accretions. We who have entered in the new millennium should free our coming generation from the heavy burden of the past: burdens of man-made traditions and accretions, burdens of one sided development and growth, burdens of anti-Christian attitudes and prejudices. We are in need of a new generation; we need a line of great leaders with a new vision.

Our world mission calls us to be united. Ecumenism is imperative because we have a mission in the world. Especially in India, where we have a multi-religious situation, we require a united common witnessing to the Truth, the Truth who came to liberate man from falsehood, the Light that came to enlighten every man, the Way, the only Way to the Father.

**The Malankara Catholic Church**

The Malankara Catholic Church came into existence in its present form in 1930 with the historic Reunion of Mar Ivanios of blessed memory with the Roman Catholic Church. It was an encounter of two ancient Apostolic Churches, the Roman Church and the Malankara Church. The Church in India, founded by St. Thomas, one of the Apostles of our Lord, remained as the one holy Catholic Church like any ancient Apostolic church till the 17th century, and precisely till 1653. There was no division in the community. Because of the historical situations in the 17th century, there were problems in the church and eventually there emerged two factions in the church: the *Puthenkoottukar* and the *Pazhayakoottukar* (the Syro-Malabar Church). The *Puthenkoottukar* eventually entered into relationship with the non-Chalcedonian Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch in West Asia. There were several divisions in this group during the last 350 years. Mar Ivanios belonged to one of these groups, namely the *Metran Kakshy* (the Bishop’s party), eventually known as the **Malankara Orthodox Church**. Mar Ivanios desired the reunion of the various groups of the ancient church of St. Thomas, as it was before the
separation in the 17th century. As a bishop of the Malankara Orthodox Church, he made it clear in a speech immediately after his Episcopal ordination in 1925 at Niranam. He further pointed out that this is precisely the will of the Lord for His Church, “that they all may be one” (John 17:11). This common witnessing of all the various Christian churches of the ancient St. Thomas Church is for the proclamation of the Good News to the vast multitude in the Indian subcontinent. He expressed that we have a God-given task: the evangelization of India. This can be done effectively only by a common witnessing and by presenting Christ, as united Christians. He appealed to all Christians in Kerala for ecumenism, and that too, thirty years before the Second Vatican Council. He was a prophetic and charismatic leader who was very much pained at the division of the St. Thomas Christian Church into various factions. He succeeded in initiating an ecumenical movement in his own section of the church and in other groups in Kerala. Thus there emerged the Malankara Catholic Church as a result of the Reunion Movement. In his endeavor he was not persuaded by external forces. He was not influenced by missionaries of the Latin Church. It was an ecumenical movement, which came from within the community. Since the time of division of the community into two in the 17th c., there were constant attempts from both sides to bring the two factions together. The 1930 reunion is the culmination of these attempts down through the centuries since the division. People from the various factions of the St. Thomas Christian Church joined Mar Ivanios and became members of the Malankara Catholic Church. After the communion with the Roman Catholic Church, the reunited group entered into a very rigorous missionary activity. Thousands of people from the various non-Christian communities accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior. This ecumenical movement is the only ecumenical activity, which was crowned with success in the 20th century. Mar Ivanios opened a door for the reunification of the churches in Kerala and in India. He made it possible for the Thomas Christians to come together in full and canonical communion. And this was a great achievement. He was true to his ecumenical vocation, his God-given task and mission. During
his lifetime he could succeed in instilling an ecumenical spirit in the minds of the divided Christians in Kerala. After giving leadership for 23 years to the Malankara Catholic community, Mar Ivanios died in 1953. His motto was, “that all may be one”. He worked for it till the last moment of his earthly life and he continues to intercede for the divided Christians “that all may be one”.

**Second Vatican Council and the mission of the Church**

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, one can note the change of attitude of the Catholic Church in the field of ecclesiology. There is a remarkable change in the attitude of the Catholic Church towards the other Churches and ecclesial communities. A new type of ecumenical relationship is taking shape and a new type of communion is emerging among the Christian Churches. The Malankara Catholic Church has to be imbued with the new spirit of the Second Vatican Council and the post-conciliar developments. The leaders of the Malankara Catholic Church have to be ambassadors of Christian unity. Just as Mar Ivanios gave the leadership in 1930 according to the ecclesiology of those days, there should emerge a new leadership with prophetic and charismatic vision to open the eyes of many for a new type of full communion. According to the understanding of the Vatican Council, the local churches, Catholic and non-Catholic, living in a particular region, should work together wholeheartedly for the full communion among themselves. We have the general principles of ecumenism and the ecumenical guidelines of the Catholic church (1993) and a lot of ecumenical documents coming out of joint meetings. Basing on them, there is ample opportunity for the Malankara Catholic Church, both the leaders and the faithful, for putting into action the will of the Lord for His Church. The Malankara Catholic Church is not just one of the Christian Churches in India. It is a united and uniting **bridge church**. It should be a bridge between orthodoxy and Catholicism in this part of the globe. It should witness to both. It exists, following its Lord, to unite. It has a unique mission. Although ecumenism is the primary mission of all the churches, the uniting church in Kerala, namely the Malankara Catholic
Church, has a primary duty to witness to the full unity of the Church and give leadership for the unity. This Church cannot maintain the outdated ecclesiology. It has to stand for the Catholicity of the Church and at the same time for the maintenance of the individuality of the churches. The Church of St. Thomas in India, because of the historical vicissitudes, has a complex history. It is not an easy task to bring the churches for closer cooperation and eventual full communion. But nothing is impossible for the Lord of the Churches.

**Hurdles**

There are still persistent prejudices among some members of some Christian churches. There are still fears and anxieties in the minds and hearts of some. It appears that some, in fact, are afraid of a full communion. The numerical inequality among the churches is an important factor for the fear and anxiety. The actual life situation of the Oriental Catholic Churches in India is an added reason for the fear of an eventual full communion of the Orthodox. After the Second World War and the independence of India, life has changed in the Indian subcontinent. People move about everywhere. The members of the two Oriental Catholic Churches also could be seen in every big city in India. Since the Second Vatican Council, these two Oriental Catholic Churches in India, namely the Malabar Catholic and the Malankara Catholic Churches are demanding to put into effect the principles of the Ecumenical Council in regard to the pastoral care of the faithful of their churches outside their traditional territories. But so far it is being denied. Although there were directives from the highest authority in the Catholic Church, it is not yet put into reality. If such is the case for the Oriental Catholic Churches in their own homeland, what is to be expected at the eventual communion of the Orthodox? This is a very serious question to be tackled immediately. It was raised more than once in the most important assemblies of the Catholic Church by responsible men. The Oriental Catholic Churches do not demand any infringement on the rights of the other churches in the Catholic communion. It only seeks for the pastoral care of its own faithful according to the directives of the Second
Vatican Council. The principles of the second Vatican Council should never remain as paper documents only. Just as recently an eparch each is being appointed for these two catholic churches for North America and Europe, there should be an eparch appointed for the faithful of the Malankara Catholic Church living outside Kerala (in India). He could very well be another auxiliary to the Archdiocese of Trivandrum. The same could be done for the Malabar Catholics. The leadership of the Malankara Catholic Church should thus try to remove the biggest hurdle in the path of ecumenism in India.

The Malankara Churches are very closely co-operating in recent years on the level of priests, bishops and the faithful. There are some rare exceptional cases where prejudices still persist; anti-ecumenical attitudes take precedence over genuine Christian love, and counter-witnessing to the Gospel values thwart the cause of Christ. As Christians we are a people full of hope. Hence we look for a better future for the betterment of our noble country and the Church of Christ.

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1 See the references in the regular publication of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Information Service* (=IS)
In the ecumenical circles, there are two types of dialogues: dialogue of Love (charity) and dialogue of Truth (theological dialogue): *Unitatis Redintegratio* (=UR), No.4; *Ecumenical Directory* (1993), n. 61a; p. 172. J. Madey, *Ecumenism, Ecumenical Movement and the Eastern Churches*, Kottayam/Paderborn, 1987, pp. 102-126


8 *Syriac Dialogue* II, Vienna, 1996, p. 193

9 Christine Chaillot -A. Belopopsky (ed.), *Towards Unity: The Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches*, Geneva, 1998


11 *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* 25-27; *UR* 15-18

12 “Uniatism, Method of the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion,” Balamond/Lebanon, 1993; *IS* 83:96-99

13 The ancient Indian Church had only one liturgical tradition (East Syrian), and was united as one Church and community till the 17th century. The tragic events in the 17th century led to the division of the community in to two major groups: *Pazhayakoottukar* (people of the old allegiance) and *Puthenkoottukar* (people of
the new allegiance). The *Pazhayakoottukar* continued the age old liturgical tradition and allegiance. They are today known as the Syro-Malabarians. The *Puthenkoottukar* came under the influence of the West Asian non-Chalcedonian Syrian Orthodox Church. They abandoned the age old liturgical tradition and allegiance and adopted West Syrian liturgy. So they came to be known as *Puthenkoottukar* or the people of the new allegiance. This usage continued in the subsequent litigations between the two groups. *Puthenkoottukar* were eventually divided into several factions. They are: the two groups of the Jacobite Church, namely *Malankara Orthodox* and the *Syrian Orthodox*, the Marthomite, *The Thozhiyoor, a section of the CSI, the evangelicals* and finally *the Malankara Catholics* since 1930


17 See *Christian Orient* 7(1-2) 1988
