Fiftieth Death Anniversary of Archbishop Mar Ivanios (1882-1953)

After fulfilling his gigantic task of establishing the full ecclesiastical communion of the Malankara Apostolic Church with the Roman Primatial See of St. Peter\(^1\) in 1930 and guiding the community for 22 years, Mar Ivanios entered the glory of God on July 15, 1953. This year (2003) the Malankara Catholic Church remembered this great Apostle of Unity of the 20\(^{th}\) century in a special way. During the recent visit of the Malankara Catholic Bishops to the Pope for their Ad limina visit, the Holy Father remembered it and made a special mention of it:

“Indeed, it is fitting that as your community celebrates the Fiftieth Anniversary of the death of Archbishop Mar Ivanios, a tireless apostle for unity, you find yourselves at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul praying with Christ, ut omnes unum sint.”\(^2\)

Mar Ivanios’ ecumenical vision was far ahead of the vision of his contemporaries. He believed in mutual respect and mutual communion. In Roman Catholic circles, the ecclesiology prevalent in those days was different from the one since the Second Vatican Council. Also the members of his own Malankara Orthodox Syrian hierarchy could not understand the significance of the full communion with the Church of Rome. Therefore, Mar Ivanios could not fully realize his vision of Church unity. He, in fact, was fully convinced of the need of full, visible and canonical communion with the successor of St. Peter, Chief of the Apostles, in the ancient See of Rome for the full ecclesiality of any Church. He was instrumental in opening a path for the St. Thomas Christian communities to get united once again, as it was for 17 centuries, since the time of St. Thomas the Apostle. Most of the Malankara Orthodox leaders misrepresented him and his ecumenical Movement before the people and did all they could to hinder the progress of this divine action. Generally the Syro-Malabar hierarchy and the faithful of that Church supported the Movement.
The Roman Catholic Bishop of Quilon or Kollam, Msgr. Benziger (+1942) of blessed memory, gave all encouragement and even before the Movement of Mar Ivanios, started ecumenical activities among the non-Catholics in several places in the diocese of Kollam. But, sad to say, many others, including some religious, misunderstood the Movement of Mar Ivanios and tried to misrepresent it in the highest ecclesiastical circles. Some of their expressions were similar to those of the Orthodox. His Holiness Pope Pius XI made mention of it to Mar Ivanios at the time of his visit to Rome in 1932. Margaret Gibbons writes:

“On four successive days Mar Ivanios was admitted to private audience. It was during the fourth audience that he received a shock; the Pope greeted him kindly as usual, then looking quizzically at him said: “I have had a basketful of mail about you—all unfavorable”. Mar Ivanios burst into tears: would his enemies not leave him in peace even here? Seeing his emotion, His Holiness soothed him, “My son”, he said, “you will find good news awaiting you on your return to India”.

The civil authorities, in the person of the fanatic Hindu C. P. Ramaswamy Ayer, tried his level best to crush this movement. He literally chased Mar Ivanios from one place to another in Trivandrum/Thiruvananthapuram. He wanted to chase him in ignominy. He confiscated for one reason or other the places purchased by Mar Ivanios. He would not permit to build churches and presbyteries and would not grant permission for burial places for the Malankara Catholics. He, the Divan in Travancore, decreed that such institutions should
be erected only with the permission of the government. When applied, permission was not often granted on the basis of one or the other reason.

But His Holiness Pope Pius XI of blessed memory was very generous towards the Movement and established the hierarchy for the reunited community. The application for the establishment of the Malankara Catholic hierarchy was made in May, 1932 and the decree was issued on 11th June, 1932. “Pope Pius XI with his own hands conferred on Mar Ivanios the sacred Pallium—despite those baskets of mail”, says Margaret Gibbons, the biographer of Mar Ivanios.\textsuperscript{1} Together with the love of His Holiness, the Catholics in Europe and America were very generous in helping this young community in every way. And in His mercy, God blessed this movement most abundantly. Now the Malankara Catholic Church has developed into a living and dynamic Church. That is why Pope John Paul II declared before the Malankara bishops during their Ad Limina visit:

“We are mindful of the multiple blessings that have been bestowed on your Church in a relatively short time. You have become one of the fastest growing Catholic communities in the world, boasting large numbers of vocations to the priesthood and religious life”.\textsuperscript{2}

Mar Ivanios found the Truth and he embraced it and he invited the Malankara faithful to follow him. Those who were convinced of it, became Catholics. In his Last Message to the faithful before his death, Mar Ivanios wrote, “Be proud of being Catholics”. Pope Pius XI impressed Mar Ivanios very much.

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He loved the Pope immensely. When Mar Ivanios knew about the death of Pope Pius XI, he went to the chapel, knelt before the altar and literally cried like a little child. During his lifetime Mar Ivanios often remembered the words of this saintly Pope: “Welcome a big Welcome”. Even at his death-bed Mar Ivanios remembered the encounter with tears of joy. The communion of the Malankara Church with the whole Catholic Church became a reality mainly because of the great ecumenical interest of Pope Pius XI and the earnestness of Mar Ivanios. The Malankara Church and the world at large is yet to know the greatness of this Messenger of Unity. May his prayers bring abundant blessings upon this community and upon all of us.

Archbishop Mar Ivanios ordained Benedict Mar Gregorios as his successor on 29th January 1953 and on 15th July of the same year he slept in the Lord. In November of the same year Eugene Cardinal Tisserant of blessed memory visited the Churches in Kerala as the Secretary to the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. He was accompanied by Fr. Placid CMI., a great lover of the Malankara Catholic Church and a friend of Archbishop Mar Ivanios. His Eminence brought a part of the relic of St. Thomas from Ortona, in Italy and placed it in the shrine at Kodungalloor, where St. Thomas landed first. The visit of H.E. the Cardinal was not just a routine visit. He came here with a definite purpose. He wanted to have first hand information about the Churches here and to have personal knowledge of the ecclesial situation here. His visit was historic in many respects. Cardinal Tisserant was very learned in Church History and Canon Law. He knew several languages. He studied the history of Christianity in India and wrote a book on the same. He had special interest in the St. Thomas Christians.
and their growth. He said once, “I love your Church because I know your history”. Yes, he knew its history. When he went through the history of the St. Thomas Christians, he realized how it was misunderstood, mistreated and enslaved by the missionaries. He knew how it was labeled Nestorian in order to enslave it. He knew how a section of it suffered for 400 hundred years under the Latinizing policy of the Western Portuguese missionaries. He knew how another section lost its visible communion with the See of Peter in Rome and got entangled with the West Asian non-Chalcedonian Church and eventually fragmented because of the undue interference of the Protestants and the Jacobites, just as the undue interference of the Portuguese missionaries. He knew very well how these communities got alienated and how they tried, down through the centuries for the restoration of that lost communion and how it was systematically hindered by those with vested interests.

He realized the territorial restrictions imposed on the Syro-Malabar Church which was always Catholic and which remained always faithful to the See of St. Peter in Rome in spite of several hardships. He accepted the fact that in the independent India, thousands of St. Thomas Christians of all groups had migrated to the various parts of India. So after his studies, he issued orders to the effect of extending the territorial jurisdiction of the Syro-Malabar Church to South, East and North. The eparchy of Changanassery was extended up to Kanyakumari (coextensive with the R.C. dioceses of Kollam, Trivandrum and Kottar), the eparchy of Trichur was extended to the territory of the R.C. diocese of Coimbatore and the eparchy of Thalassery was extended to the R.C. dioceses of
Mysore and Mangalore. The Knanaya diocese of Kottayam got personal jurisdiction in all these places. The Malankara Catholic Church also got extension to these places. It was a great step forward in the growth of the two Apostolic Churches of oriental tradition in India. At that time His Eminence had to meet great opposition both from his own colleagues, from the Latins in India and even from the Syro-Malabar faithful, who were under the Latin bishops. But His Eminence loved the Church of Christ and history proved that his decision was wise.

In 1953 itself the new eparchy of Thalassery was erected. From the Thalassery eparchy, there are now the new eparchies of Mananthavady (1973), Thamarassey (1986), and Balthangady (1999). From the Syro-Malankara eparchy of Tiruvalla, the eparchy of Bathery was bifurcated (1978). It was just one step. But unfortunately it was not continued in the other parts of India, except in the Bombay-Pune region. In 1988 when the eparchy of Kalyan diocese was erected for the Syro-Malabar Church, the Malankara Church was not at all considered. After the visit of Cardinal Tisserant, several other dignitaries of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches visited the Churches of oriental tradition in India, without doing anything tangible to these Churches, and that too after the Second Vatican Council.

**Forty Years after the Vatican Council**

The Second Vatican Council strongly emphasized, in its documents, the equality of all the Churches sui iuris in the Catholic communion. But this equality in the Pastoral Care and Missionary Obligations remains a dream or an ideal yet to be realized in the Catholic communion at least in the case of the two apostolic Churches in India.
. Originally the Metropolitan of the undivided Thomas Christians was the Metropolitan of All India and the Archdeacon was the Archdeacon of All India. Eventually its jurisdiction was restricted to a very tiny narrow strip of land between the two rivers Pampa and Bharathapuzha. Cardinal Tisserant removed the barrier a little bit. But the vast Indian sub-continent continues to be an untouchable land for the two Churches of oriental tradition regarding their missionary activity. One could understand the situation, if it was happening before the Second Vatican Council. But it is difficult to understand it today, 40 years after the Vatican II. The pre-Vatican period did not consider seriously the Eastern mentality and the identity of the Eastern Churches. The Eastern Churches were “rites, having but diverse liturgical traditions. Everywhere there was a tendency for uniformity; and diversity was considered as division. Things have changed very much with the Second Vatican Council. There is the ecclesiology of communion. But many of the leaders of the Church in India hold a pre-Vatican, nay Lateran IV ecclesiology of “one territory, one bishop, one jurisdiction” and are still supporting the view of Cardinal Humbert, who dominated the General Council of Lyons II in 1274, namely “Varietas mater est et initium discordiae”. Such leaders still uphold the 9th canon of Lateran IV (1215). Even the few parishes of the Malankara Catholic Church, established here and there with great difficulty and at the mercy of the R.C. bishops, are under them. The Coonan Cross Oath (1653) was precisely against the rule of the Latin bishops over the Malankara faithful. There are more than 100 R.C. bishops in
India. Why is it that at least one bishop with personal jurisdiction is not appointed for the Malankara faithful throughout India and another one for the Syro-Malabar faithful.

This anti-Oriental attitude had done great harm to the ecumenical cause of the Catholic Church. The present writer is a member of the International Theological Commission for dialogue with the Malankara Orthodox Syrian and Malankara Syrian Orthodox Churches and a member of the Pro Oriente Syriac Commission. If nothing tangible has been achieved in the ecumenical discussions with the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church since the beginning of the theological dialogue, it is mainly because of the attitude of the R.C. bishops towards the two apostolic Catholic Churches of oriental tradition in India. Who will believe the words, when one sees clearly contrary actions, especially from the part of responsible persons. There are enough statements and exhortations, but there is no sufficient action.

Forty years have passed since the Second Vatican Council and the two Oriental Catholic Churches in India are continuing their cry for mercy. These two Churches are kept as museum pieces. They are restricted to a very tiny part of India in the vast Indian sub-continent. One requires the courage of a Pius XI and a love of a Tisserant! How many years should we wait for another one? How many years more should the Oriental Catholics wait for meeting out justice? How many articles were written and how many petitions were sent! But it is a pity that colonial mentality of “one territory one bishop,
one jurisdiction” of Lateran IV (1215) prevails. In such a situation how can one think that the non-Catholics in India would enter into genuine ecumenical negotiations with the Roman Catholic Church! They enjoy the freedom to take care of their faithful, in the whole world. Nobody is preventing them. Why should they submit their basic right to another?!
The R.C. bishops, priests and faithful in India should change their attitude towards the two Indian Oriental Churches. They must be prepared to study the history of these Churches and respect them as Churches in communion with and not under their Church. Pope John Paul II, in his recent allocutions to R.C. bishops from India during their Ad limina visit reminded them of this obligation.

To the bishops of Bombay, Nagpur, Verapoly, Gandhinagar ecclesiastical provinces and of the Archdiocese of Goa-Damao, the Holy Father said on 3rd June, 2003:

“During my pastoral Visits to India, I have been impressed by the many expressions of Christianity in your nation. The presence of the Latin and Oriental traditions in such close proximity is a great source of strength and vitality for the Church. At times the relationship can be a challenge to your communities, as you strive to work together to find concrete ways of ministering to God’s people. As I mentioned to the Syro-Malabar bishops from your country, it is important to persevere in strengthening
bonds with your brother Bishops of the Oriental Rites through an efficacious inter-ritual dialogue, in order to overcome any misunderstanding which may occasionally arise. This is especially the case in spheres concerning evangelization and the pastoral care of Oriental Catholics in India (cf. Ecclesia in Asia, no. 27).”

During another audience to the R.C. Bishops from the Agra, Delhi and Bhopal Provinces on 6th September, 2003, the Pope said:

“Preparing today’s priests requires that seminarians be educated in the many different traditions of our Catholic faith. This is especially true in India which is fortunate to have Oriental and Latin Catholics in such close proximity. The numbers of Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Catholics present in your region challenges all the faithful to respect the needs and desires of those who celebrate the same Faith in different ways (cf. Address to the Syro-Malabar Bishops of India, 13th May, 2003). ‘As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace’ (1 Pt 4,10). This sharing can be accomplished by inter-ritual dialogue, education, joint projects and an experience of the different liturgical traditions of Catholicism. It is my hope that the Latin and Oriental Bishops will continue to work together in harmony with a shared spirit of love for Christ and his universal message of salvation. ‘As
children of the one Church, reborn into the newness of life in Christ, believers are called to undertake all things in a spirit of common purpose, trust and unfailing charity'(Ecclesia in Asia, no. 27). The same commonality of purpose is important in the ongoing ecumenical dialogue with our separated brethren. All Catholics are responsible for fostering the work of Christian unity. Although the Eastern Churches are directly involved in ecumenical dialogue with their sister Orthodox Churches(cf. ibid.), Latin Rite Catholics must also take an active role in this exchange by participation in ecumenical discussions and activities. At all times we must keep in mind that dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some ways it is always an exchange of gifts (Ut Unum Sint,n. 28).”  

Identity in Communion

The Malankara Catholic Church is a Church in communion with the Church of Rome, however it is not part of the R.C. Church. It is rejoicing in its visible and full communion with the ancient See of St. Peter, the Chief of the Apostles. It is thankful that it could regain the full Catholic communion, but on that basis none of the R.C. bishops can legitimately claim that we form part of their Church or that they have authority over our Church, either on the basis of our communion or on the basis of the documents of Vatican II.

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1 L’Osservatore Romano, no. 24 (1797) 11th June 2003, p. 3.
2 L’Osservatore Romano, no. 38 (1810) 17th September 2003, p. 3.
The Malankara faithful cannot be forced to be under the Latin bishops. It is contrary to the original agreement, where we demanded that we should always be under our own bishops. We believe firmly in communion, but we believe also in our identity in communion. Our R.C. brethren should patiently understand us and our position. We are a ‘Bridge Church’ between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. We have to be what we are, we cannot merge into the R.C. Church. That would be contrary to our vocation and commitment. We have to show the Orthodox that in the Catholic communion the Eastern Churches have an honourable existence and that they will not be treated as second class Churches by the R.C. Church or merged or restricted by the Code of Canon Law that is exclusively for the Church of western (Latin) tradition. The Holy Father has recently reminded all the Churches sui iuris of this ecumenical obligation, especially of the Churches of oriental tradition.

We believe in co-operation, mutual trust and above all charity and service to humanity. Our attitude and views may not be interpreted as sectarianism and selfishness. In India wherever we are, we want to be under our own bishops. We entered into visible communion with the successor of St. Peter with great sacrifice. We have a different history and a particular existence. Let our R.C. brethren patiently, with peace of mind and without prejudice, read our history and the history of the Movement Towards Full Communion called “Reunion Movement”. Kindly pay heed to the Circular Letter concerning Studies of the Oriental Churches by His Eminence William Cardinal Baum, the then Prefect, of the Congregation for Catholic Education (6 January, 1987):¹
“There is still need among Catholics of the Latin tradition for a great deal of knowledge of the peoples, traditions and Churches of the Christian East. This was already recognized decades ago by Pope Benedict XV and Pope Pius XI when they undertook the pioneering work of founding and strengthening the Pontifical Oriental Institute and repeatedly urged Catholics to develop their knowledge and understanding of these questions.”

A sympathetic and impartial reading would definitely lead them to listen to the directives of the Cardinal and to the advice of Pope John Paul II in 1987. Whom shall we appeal but to the common Holy Father, to whose pastoral care all the Churches in the Catholic communion are equally entrusted¹.

¹ Vatican II, Decree Orientalium Ecclesiarum no. 3.
The Pope says in his letter to the Indian bishops in 1987:

“The Second Vatican Council, in speaking of the pastoral duties of bishops, declared that where there are faithful of a different Rite, the diocesan bishop should provide for their spiritual needs, either through the priests or parishes of that Church (Rite), or through an episcopal vicar endowed with the necessary faculties. Moreover, wherever it would be fitting, the latter could also have episcopal rank. The same document went on to say that if, on account of some special circumstances, none of these alternatives was practicable, a special hierarchy could be established for each different Church (Rite), should the Apostolic See judge this to be opportune (Decree Christus Dominus no. 23,3). This last provision - to be employed where circumstances should so warrant - was enlarged upon in the Conciliar document on the Catholic Eastern Churches. There we read: ‘Attention should everywhere be given to the preservation and growth of each Individual Church. For this purpose, parishes and a special hierarchy should be established for each, where the spiritual good of the faithful so demands… All Eastern Rite members should know and be convinced that they can and should always preserve their lawful liturgical rites and their established ways of life’ (Vatican II, Decree Orientalium Ecclesiarum, nos. 4 and 6)”.

This need to be faithful to the traditions and heritage of one’s own Rite can in no way be considered as interfering with the task of the Church to ‘gather into one all the children of God who are scattered abroad’ (Jn 11, 52), or with the mission of the Church to bring about the communion of all persons with the Redeemer.”
After giving some directives, the Pope concludes:

“Let us continue to reflect on the marvellous mystery of the Universal Church and all the Churches or Rites which make up her variety in unity. May the centre of all your pastoral solicitude be the Church’s unity and communion...There is the need for the closest possible communion and collaboration between the different Rites in your beloved country...I have every confidence that it will be given the full support of all the Bishops of the country and that you will do everything possible to educate and form your priests, religious and faithful to accept and cooperate fully in its implementation.”

Geevarghese Chedlath