Introduction

One of the great contributions of Archbishop Geevarghese Mar Ivanios (+1953) to the Malankara Church and to the Christian community at large is his vision of *Sanyasa (monasticism)*. Single-handedly he established a way of life namely, *Bethanian Sanyasa (Bethany monastic establishment)* which is in perfect harmony both with the tradition of the Christian Church and with the spirituality of India. His vision of *Sanyasa (monasticism)* enriched the tradition of the ancient Church in India and it also rejuvenated the church-life, which was thirsting for a spiritual revival. Therefore, today, any account or history of the Church in India would be incomplete without the history of the religious communities he founded.

In his historic attempt to revitalize the Puthenkur faction of the ancient Malankara Church, the founding of *Sanyasa (monastic)* way of life is a milestone. He belonged in the beginning to the Malankara Jacobite/Orthodox Church, having its ties with the Jacobite Syrian Church of Antioch. The Malankara Jacobite Church was in a state of decay because of the factionalism within the community. Eventually he founded the Bethany Sanyasa and it led to his full and visible communion with the Catholic Church.

Why and how did he turn to monasticism for the spiritual renewal of his Church? The answer to this question reveals the depth of Mar Ivanios’ theological vision and spiritual conviction. In the trajectory of the development of his idea of *Sanyasa* we can observe that Mar Ivanios, as a priest in the Orthodox faction, realized a two-fold function of *Sanyasa*, i.e., personal and communitarian. According to Mar Ivanios, *Sanyasa* not only helps the individual to achieve his personal goal, but also the community, in which the *sannyasi (monk)* lives, to purify itself from the influence of the undesired elements by which it suffers¹. In fact he visualized *Sanyasa* as the only means or even as a...
last resort to save his Church from the fathoms of spiritual death into which it had succumbed. The whole story of his vision of *Sanyasa* begins with his life and stay in Serampore College as a Professor of Economics.

**The Trajectory of a Great Vision and its Realization**

The historical details of Mar Ivanios life are already discussed by several writers and therefore details regarding the dates and events may not be repeated here. Here the focus of attention is mainly on the *darsana (vision)* of this great visionary.

How did Mar Ivanios’ come to the idea of *Sanyasa (monasticism)*? In his autobiographical book, *Girideepam*, he mentions that he had a liking for the life of *Sanyasa* from the very childhood. But he also adds that this desire took shape into a definite conviction and programme

1See the very first sentence of Mar Ivanios’ (and also Bethany’s) autobiographical book, *Girideepam*, (3rd edition) Bethany Publications, Kottayam, 1980. Here onwards this will be referred as *Girideepam*. All the quotations given in this article are translated from Malayalam to English by myself.
3*Girideepam*, p.1
only when he was in Serampore. His life at Serampore, which is the watershed of his ideological growth, provided him a chance to look at his own Church and its pathetic situation, from a distance. It was a Church whose spiritual life was hampered with civil litigation and hatred, power politics and internal fights. In order to save the Church from these decaying trends, he planned out a programme. The trajectory of the development of his reflections, which led him to Sanyasa (monasticism) consists of three phases.

First, he thought that if there were enough well educated people, especially a group of well-educated clergy in the Church, they could change the fate of the Church. In order to achieve this goal, he brought many young people to Calcutta. He spent his salary from the University for their education. Gradually the number of these young people increased and some of them were sent to Allahabad and Madras Universities. Out of the fifty young people who were directly under his training at Serampore University, thirteen became Malpans (teachers in the Seminary) and six students, Bishops in his Church. He also sent some girls to Barisole for higher education and the first members of Bethany Convent were from this group. Though this attempt had made its own impact on the church life, the desired goal still remained as a distant dream.

Mar Ivanios later came to the conviction that Malankara Church has forgotten and forsaken its God given mission. It was like the salt in Jesus’ parable, the salt that lost its saltiness and was thrown out and trampled under foot, and like the lamp, which was kept under the bushel basket (Mt. 5/13-14). He realized that though the Christians of Kerala and in India at large received the Good News from St. Thomas, the Apostle in the first century itself, they utterly failed in preaching this Good News to the people in their motherland, whereas the European missionaries came all the way from Europe after the 16th century and they started doing what the Christians of the land could not do during the previous centuries. He considered that the missionary activity is the very life of the Church and its foremost duty. A Church, which forgets this mandate, is no more a living Church. Thus he recognized that education alone is not sufficient to revitalize the Church. This is the second phase of his search into the
causes of the problems in his Church. He thought that perhaps a Missionary Congregation is the answer and the need of the time in his Church. He even decided where exactly he must start his missionary endeavours. He thought of choosing Punjab as his mission field. He speaks about this, in detail, in *Bethany Yogam Report*, which is a short historical account of Bethany, published from Ranni-Perunad Ashram in 1925. However, one of the prominent lay leaders of the Malankara Church and a close friend of Mar Ivanios, Advocate Mr. E.J. John, discouraged him from going to North India, when his presence and services were much needed in Kerala for his Church.

Moreover, Mar Ivanios realized that unless and until an ever-burning God experience is not acquired, the missionaries themselves might go after worldly pleasures and values in the course of time. “Saintly deeds come from saintly people. Therefore saintly life is more important than charitable works.” This thinking gave him the conviction that “Having God is better than serving God.” It means that unless and until one does not have real God-experience one’s works cannot be from God or for God. He gradually arrived at the conviction that only a Sannyasi (monk) can become a good missionary in the true sense.

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6Girideepam.p.55

7Ibid.p.56-57

8Bethany Yogam Report, p.71

9Ibid.p.71
The life of Sanyasa (monasticism) itself is the proclamation and witnessing of Gospel values\(^1\). This third and last phase of his search for the solutions to the problems that gripped the Church gave birth to a new life in the Malankara Church. The founding of the Bethany Ashram at Ranni-Perunad thus added a new chapter in the history of Malankara Orthodox –Jacobite Church. Now let us see the salient features of his vision of Sanyasa (monasticism).

The Concept of Sanyasa as Yaaga (sacrifice)

Mar Ivanios always compares the concept and values of Sanyasa (monasticism) with those of Yaaga (sacrifice). When we go through the writings of Mar Ivanios, this striking feature of his vision of Sanyasa easily captures our attention. The homily given by him on the occasion of the religious profession of the first batch of the members of Bethany Ashram is the best example:\(^1\)

“Sannyasi is a sacrificial animal. It has to pass through four stages before it is sacrificed. First the animal is selected and separated from the herd. Secondly, it is brought to the entrance of the temple and tied up there. Thirdly, on the day of sacrifice the devotee comes to the temple and slaughters and flays the sacrificial animal and cuts it into different pieces. The blood is collected separately and the devotee hands them over to the priest and the priest takes them to the altar of the Lord. Lastly, the priest burns the flesh on the altar of the Lord and dashes the blood on the altar. Jews had different types of sacrifices but Sarvanga Homa Yaaga (holocaust) in which the whole animal is offered is considered better than any other offering. As far as the other offerings are concerned, some share is kept apart for the priests and devotee and only one portion is burned on the altar. But holocaust is not like that, everything is completely offered to the Lord. Sanyasa is nothing but this, a complete offering.”

“Sannyasi (monk), who is similar to the sacrificial animal, is set apart by himself. He comes to the Ashram, which can be compared to the premises of the temple, on his own will. He remains there, expecting the day of sacrifice (day of religious profession), the Sannyasi beheads himself. The knife is the triadic vows; then he
submits himself to his superior who receives him in the name of God. A *Sannyasi* must be flayed and cut into pieces and be purified. The mere observation of the vows alone will not make one a Sannyasi. He must be offered as a sacrifice on the altar of the Lord. He is laid on the altar along with Jesus Christ and His sacrifice is an ongoing process till the end of his life”

The concept of sacrifice is Mar Ivanios’ favorite example when he speaks about the fundamental values of religious life. In his *Guidelines to Religious Life (Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi)* he repeats the same insight:

“*Sanyasi* offers his life to God as a sacrifice. Sacrificial animal must be slaughtered by the triadic vows. It must be consumed in the fire of the Practice of Obedience”

He believes that the Holy Spirit of our Lord is revealed in the Holy Church, which is the mystical body of Christ, through the people who opt for a life of sacrifice. Therefore, Mar Ivanios reminds us the Pauline invitation: “I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12/1). He considers that the religious or *Sannyasi* who live accordingly are the “genuine children of the holy Church and its authentic representatives”. Jesus who offered himself, as a pleasing sacrifice to his heavenly Father is the role model of a *Sanyasi*. He points out again that “Jesus offered himself as a burnt-offering. In that complete sacrifice our personal offerings are strengthened by its virtues” Mar Ivanios affirms:

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13 Cfr. Lev.1/1ff.
14 *Girideepam*, p.138-139
*Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi*, p.19
21 *Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi*, p.14
22 *Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi*, p.132
23 *Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi*, p.117
24 *Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi*, p.136
“The foundation of Christian *Sanyasa* is the Incarnation of Christ, the Son of God, and His sacrifice on the cross. A *Sannyasi* lives his life by imitating and obeying Christ. A *Sanyasi*’s religious oaths and offerings are nothing but the essence of his sacrificial obedience”\(^{21}\).

Unambiguously he teaches:

“For a *Sannyasi* (religious), to be offered as a complete burnt-offering is an essential aspect of his religious life (*Sanyasa*). His religious vows reveal what is this *Sanyasa Yaaga* (Religious Sacrifice) and how this is to be offered”\(^{22}\).

He also points out that the function or role of Holy Rule of a religious congregation in the life of its members is nothing else:

“The Holy Rule trains and helps us to offer ourselves as a complete burnt-offering along with Christ himself”\(^{23}\).

According to Mar Ivanios,

“The offering of oneself by religious vows is the most complete and perfect Yaagam that can be offered by a creature before God”\(^24\).

All these passages from his writings reveal that for Mar Ivanios Sanyasa (monasticism) is nothing but a burnt-offering for which Christ himself is the model because “Jesus is the first Sannyasi lived on this earth who gave Himself as a complete and perfect offering to the Heavenly Father. …Therefore, He is the source, foundation and ideal model of Sanyasa”\(^25\). A Sannyasi must accept Christ as his model and this will remind him of His commitment and surrender to the will if God. A Sannyasi is not for himself and therefore he must sacrifice his self-interests for the sake of God and His people.

**Sanyasa is the Sneha Marga (way of love)**

Mar Ivanios who felt and touched the heart of Indian Sanyasa envisages it as a Marga (way) in addition to the threefold traditional margas of Bhagavat Gita, namely, Karma Marga (way of good deeds), Bhakti Marga (way of devotion), and Jnana Marga (way of knowledge). He calls Sanyasa as the Sneha Marga (way of Love). This is another example for his great vision, which makes him a pioneer of Indian Theology.

In the opening passage of *Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi* he declares:

“God is love”. God created man out of love. God alone, whose essential form is love, is the absolute end of man. Man achieves this end only when he becomes perfect in his love towards God and in his love towards his fellow-men for the sake of God. God calls man in order to achieve this noble end. God provides the necessary grace to those who accept this call and are ready to submit themselves, in order that they may attain this end. Man attains this absolute end through the Sneha Marga (way of Love)\(^26\).

According to Mar Ivanios, love of God alone is the sole purpose of monastic life\(^27\). Therefore, community life has the advantage of practising this virtue, namely love. “The advantage of community life over solitary life is that life in community helps religious towards
perfection in love and other virtues”\textsuperscript{28}. The Canons and holy Rules are to be obeyed in the spirit of one’s love towards God\textsuperscript{29}. He says, “Love is the law of life for the \textit{Sanyasi}”\textsuperscript{30}.

It was very clear for Mar Ivanios that the ultimate end and sole purpose of \textit{Sanyasa} is the union with God and the \textit{Marga} (way) for it was that of love. Therefore, in the Holy Rule of Bethany Ashram (Order of the Imitation of Christ), which he founded, it is clearly stated (3b):

The realization of the charism of Indian \textit{Sanyasa} is by imbibing and safeguarding the inner spirit and lifestyle of Indian spiritual tradition in order that the rich Indian culture and \textit{Sanyasa}, which tends to \textit{union with God, might be made perfect in Christ}. The simple life of Jesus who lived always united with the Eternal Father in prayer and went about doing good to all, is imitated with the detachment and simplicity of Indian asceticism.

\textsuperscript{26}_{\textit{Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi}}, p.9
\textsuperscript{27}_{\textit{Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi}}, p.10
\textsuperscript{28}_{\textit{Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi}}, p.11
\textsuperscript{29}_{\textit{Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi}}, p.12
\textsuperscript{30}_{\textit{Girideepam}}, p.137
The members of our Congregation should always remember that it is the essential nature of our inherited spirituality and religious life to strive to attain union with God, the Lord of all and foundation of all goodness and try our best to live constantly in Him and with Him. They must, as much as possible, realize that glorious ideal in their lives.

The soul of Christian Sanyasa, according to Mar Ivanios, is love. The commitment and service, which a Sanyasi undertakes in his life, is out of love- a love towards God and his fellowmen. His inspiration is nothing but the eternal love, which is expressed by our Heavenly Father in His only Son, Jesus Christ, in whom the whole world is united to Him. Mar Ivanios teaches, “The spirit of Christ is the spirit of unlimited love (1Jn.15/13). Love towards God and His loving people are the activity of this spirit. This spirit has only one desire, that is to do the will of God (Jn.14/23-24)” 31.

Today the relevance of Sanyasa, according to Mar Ivanios, lies only in giving a meaningful witness to the love of God in this world.

The world needs to see the spirit of true Christianity. The world must be brought closer to God by revealing the true love of Christ in each generation of mankind. In order to reveal his love, which culminated in His self-sacrifice who else shall Jesus depend on other than the Sannyasis? Whom shall He choose other than Sannyasis? Where else can Jesus reveal the wholeness of life, which can be lived according to His will other than in the lives of these Sannyasis? Whom has He regarded worthy, in order to reveal his own love-the love, which He has towards His Father and to the whole humanity? Whom can Jesus depend on to realize His love in each generation of mankind? Are they not His own Sannyasis who are filled with His Spirit, grace and power, i.e., the Sannyasis who have no one else other than Jesus to rely upon?32.

Mar Ivanios understands the meaning of the three vows, namely, poverty, chastity and obedience, as the meaningful expression
of Christian love- a love for the true treasure of eternal life- a love for God. The vows help the Sannyasi to liberate himself from the bondage of selfishness and the love for the values of this world to the values of the kingdom of God. Regarding the vow of poverty he says:

The practice of the vow of poverty must be for the sake of the love for Christ.
If you have some thing in abundance you must be afraid of that abundance. God’s love, heavenly blessings and religious virtues are the only things, which you can have in abundance33.

When Mar Ivanios speaks about the vow of chastity, he observes that in practicing the vow of chastity a Sannyasi is practicing the love towards Christ and experiencing the love of Christ. He refers to the love of John, the forerunner of all-Christian “Brahamacharees”, who reclined next to Him at the Last Supper (Jn.13/23-25), the one whom Jesus loved (Jn.13/23; 19/26) and to whom Jesus entrusted his mother (Jn.19/27).

Mar Ivanios highlights the love between Jesus and John as the model for the love into which a Sannyasi must be liberated and he compares their love with the love that should be maintained between a Sannyasi and the Church.

He says:
Just like John who reposed on the chest of Jesus, a Sannyasi reposes in Jesus in his holy contemplation; and just like John took care of mother Mary, a Sannyasi is supposed to take care of his mother Church34. The life of chastity is nothing else but elevating to God all one’s abilities to love35

31 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.16
32 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.117-18
33 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.97
34 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.96
35 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.124
The Sannyasi who keeps the vow of obedience has that love which transforms the will of the superior into his own will. This type of love must instinctively evolve in a Sannyasi. It is possible only by the abundance of grace. A Sannyasi is supposed always to co-operate with the will of his superior in the spirit of love\(^{38}\).

In short Mar Ivanios considered Sanyasa as a Sneha Marga (way of Love), which takes one to his absolute end of life, namely, the union with God. It is very interesting to observe how beautifully he explains the spirit of the three religious vows in the light of love. According to him love is the essential form of all three vows. This understanding gives a positive dimension to the sacrifice one makes in the observance of these vows. Therefore, the one who observes these three vows is not loosing anything but grows in this Christian love. He points out that religious life is the best possible way to live the Christian love and therefore, of course it is a Sneha Marga (way of Love).

**Sannyasi and His Relation to God, World and the Church**

One of the often quoted aphorisms of Mar Ivanios may cause some misunderstanding that he undermined the charitable activities of the church and reduced Sanyasa to a fleeing away from the world. But it is not true. What he said could be translated in different ways. For instance: (i) Having God is better than serving God (ii) Attaining God is more important than the works of God (iii) Attaining God is more noble than the good works. If we take all his writings together in the light of his life, it will be very clear that Mar Ivanios never advocated any anti-world or any otherworldly theory. For Mar Ivanios Sanyasa is never a fleeing away from the world but a meaningful commitment and involvement in this world in the spirit of the love of God and without selfishness. It is true that he advocated a detachment from the fruits of work but he was concerned with the well being of his fellowmen and of the whole world. This concern for the humanity stems from his deep relation to God. He exhorts:

\(^{38}\)Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.106-7
God alone is a Sannyasi’s law of life and enabling power to observe the law\textsuperscript{39}.
God alone must be a Sannyasi’s beloved and joy\textsuperscript{40}.
God alone must be the asset and the treasure of a Sanyasi\textsuperscript{41}.
We perform all our religious duties, together with our God\textsuperscript{42}.
Just like a fish, which remains always in the water, a Sannyasi must always be in the presence of God\textsuperscript{43}.
If a Sannyasi has an asset of a penny, he is not worthy of a penny\textsuperscript{44}.
When one has God as his asset and at the same time if he longs for other assets, he is greedy\textsuperscript{45}.
All the above-mentioned aphorisms and similar ones of Mar Ivanios reveal his ardent relationship with God. But this relationship with God does take him away neither from this world nor from his fellowmen. On the contrary it leads him to them in a more meaningful way with more responsibility and commitment. Love and commitment to one’s own fellowmen is part and parcel of Mar Ivanios’ Sanyasa darsana, for he writes:
The overflowing love towards God and one’s own fellowmen is deeply inherent in the religious vows\textsuperscript{46}.

Searching God in Sanyasa only for one’s own sake and not for the sake of the neighbour is one of the temptations a Sannyasi faces in his life. We may mistakenly think that we love God because we experience happiness in our prayer and meditation. But we have received the commandment from God that one who loves God must love his neighbour as well. A Sannyasi is a co-worker in God’s work of salvation of the world. Therefore, we must examine ourselves and see how much time we spend in praying for our brethren and in serving them. We must think how far we sincerely spend our time in the service of our brethren just like Jesus served them, and we must truly love them\textsuperscript{47}.
Son of God gave himself completely for the service of God. This includes serving men for the sake of God. So also a Sannyasi’s service for God includes service for men. All these exhortations very clearly reveal how seriously Mar Ivanios took this world and his fellowmen and conceived the service towards them as a Christian responsibility. He has proved this through his life. When the first Bethany Ashram started at Ranni Perunad,

the very first day all the arrangements were made to start an orphanage in the same premises of the Ashram. Whenever they had nothing to eat the normal practice was to give whatever remains to the orphans and the Sannyasis to observe a fasting. When Mar Ivanios wrote the Holy Rule of his order he proposed six fields of apostolic works. Charitable works and educational works were given due priority among them (see H.R.202-216). The educational institutions he started give witness to this great vision. He dares even to hold the “extreme” position that the relevance of Sanyasa lies in bringing this world “…closer to God by revealing the true love of Christ in each generation of mankind”. The ecclesiology of Mar Ivanios is that Church is the salvific presence of God in this world. His Sanyasa Darsana is enriched by this ecclesiology. We must keep in mind that the historical fact of the whole question of founding a religious congregation Arch Bishop Mar Ivanios emerged because of just one reason, that is, to save the Church from its deteriorating situation.

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39 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p. 10-11
40 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.11
41 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.11
42 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.117
43 Girideepam, p.137
44 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.86
45 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.91
46 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.21
47 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.115
48 Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi, p.130
Mar Ivanios never envisaged his religious order as another Church within the Church, but as a source of its spiritual life. After the re-union he even asked the members of Bethany Ashram to suspend its own activities to certain extend and to take up the responsibilities of the parishes, till enough priests are available for the work. For him, outside the Church there is no relevance for a religious congregation. This is very clear from his teaching:

*Sannyasis* are the true children and the real representatives of the Holy Church52.

Cross is the recognized end of Christian religion. The Holy Church takes up the cross and follows Jesus solely because of the absolute love. Religious Congregation is the heart of this Holy Church53.

Just like John on the chest of Jesus, a *Sanyasi reposes* in Jesus, in his holy contemplation and *just like John took care of mother Mary, a Sannyasi is supposed to take care of his mother Church*54.

In his allegory to explain Sannyasi’s love towards the Church, he compares it with the love between Jesus and John and, Mary and John. Here both his theological insights and poetical imagination reach their sublime point, which is typical to Oriental Fathers like Mar Aprem and Mar Jacob of Serugh. The explanation is with such an ease so that the initial awe of the reader gives way to the spiritual insight of Mar Ivanios which is really transformative in its nature.

According to Mar Ivanios, the asceticism of a *Sannyasi* finds its fullness in his involvement in divine things and in his witness to God in this world. The ideal form of this involvement can be exercised in the Holy Church.

49 *Girideepam*, p.88
50 *Girideepam*, p.102-103
51 *Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi*, p.117
Conclusion

The *Sanyasa Darsana* (vision of monasticism) of Mar Ivanios is not analyzed exhaustively here in this short article. For instance, his concept of “Thauna” reveals a lot of theological insights; his analysis and teachings of the religious vows deserves a separate study. Here we have tried to highlight a few salient features only of his vision of religious/monastic life, which have a lot of originality and relevance in our own times. Both the newness and depth of his insights are really compelling and demand our attention.

The concepts like *Sanyasa Yaaga* and religious life as *Sneha Marga* (way of Love) are few instances of the treasures waiting for a serious reader of Mar Ivanios. We can allocate them as our theological heritage. We can observe three lines of influences in the writings of Mar Ivanios, namely, Syrian, Western and Indian. What we have analysed in this article is only the Indian side. But Mar Ivanios had a broadminded global outlook in shaping his own theology. His oriental heritage and the wide knowledge of Syriac literature were enriched by his Indian approach and what he had learned from the West. Therefore, we can see an excellent blend of the Oriental theology, Indian spirituality and the Western scientific approach in his writings. Most of the writings and insights of this great mind are yet to be explored.

52 *Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi*, p.17
53 *Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi*, p.17
54 *Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahayi*, p.96