

The Syriac Churches in Dialogue

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His Holiness Pope John Paul II once made a distinction among the ancient Christian Churches. He called the Syriac Church the First Church, the Greek Church the Second Church and the Latin Church the Third Church. Our Lord, His Apostles and His immediate and original disciples spoke Syriac. The Gospel message was first introduced among the Semitic population in Palestine and Syria through the medium of Syriac. So the Churches of the Syriac tradition are considered by the Pope as *the First Church*. Eventually the Gospel was announced through the medium of Greek to the Hellenistic communities, both Jews and non-Jews. This is *the Second Church*. In the third stage the Good News was announced to the Latin population through the medium of Latin. It constituted *the Third Church*.

According to the modern division on the basis of ecclesial tradition also there are three basic types of Churches in Christianity. They are the Syriac, the Greek and the Latin. All the three traditions developed chiefly in the Greco-Roman ambient. But the Syriac tradition is closer to the Gospel world and basically Semitic. It has its root in the Bible and in the biblical ambient. The Syriac Church spread in a vast area. Thus the Good News of Jesus Christ spread through the medium of Syriac language and Semitic culture in today's Eastern and South Eastern Turkey, Armenia, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, parts of Iran and Arabia,. Among the Syriac Churches, one can include also the ancient Apostolic Church of the Thomas Christians in India. The main centers of the Syriac Churches were Antioch on the Orontes, Edessa in the Euphrates-Tigris valley and Kodungalloor in Kerala.

Until recently Christianity was identified with the Latin culture and Western theological system. Many may acknowledge also the

Greek culture and Greek theological system and development. For them Christianity is either the Latin West or the Greek East. Until the Second Vatican Council many in the Latin world were unaware of the Syriac heritage and tradition in Christianity. The great encounter of East and West, South and North in the Second Vatican Council enabled many to have a new openness to the rich Syriac heritage, equally vital and important in Christendom. The Council was an eye opener for many bishops and theologians regarding the rich heritage coming from the Syriac tradition. So during the post-Conciliar period, many serious minded theologians are turning to find the treasures, hidden in the Syriac Churches. Still many ecclesiastics, even the important ones, in India are unaware of the Syriac heritage and Syriac Christianity. The responsible ecclesiastical authorities in the Roman Catholic Church made several appeals for making serious application to the study of this important section of Christianity, especially in the context of two flourishing Syriac Catholic Churches existing in India.

Christianity had its origin in Asia. Syriac Christianity is Asiatic and the Syriac liturgy is more Asiatic than the other two types of Christianity. Its traditions, Church life and ways of thinking are closer to the biblical world and more akin to the Asiatic mentality.

We mentioned earlier that one can speak of three centers of the Syriac Christianity. The first and most important centre in antiquity of Syriac Christianity was *Antioch*, the capital of the Roman Province Oriens (East). Antioch was the third major city in the Roman Empire. Although in the cities of Syria many could handle Greek, in the villages Syriac was the spoken language of the masses. After the fall of Jerusalem, Antioch became the chief centre of Christian missionary apostolate. Almost all the Apostles passed through Antioch. Peter and Paul were there. Peter stayed for long at Antioch. It was at Antioch that the Disciples of Christ were first called *Christians*. It was St. Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch, who called for the first time the Church of Christ, *Catholic*. The liturgical developments also took place at Antioch and it was from there that the Christian liturgy spread

to the other centers. The second centre in ancient times was Edessa (Urhai) in Mesopotamia. Edessa is called today Sanliurfa in South Eastern Turkey. In Antioch and Edessa, today there is no Syriac Christian community. In Urfa it is said, there is not even a single Christian today. Just like Urfa, Antakya (Antioch) also is now in Turkey. The third centre of Syriac Christianity was *Maliankara/Kodungalloor* in Kerala. Although there is no flourishing community at Kodungalloor, the St. Thomas Christians in India belong to the Syriac tradition. It is one of the living Churches in all Christendom. So there are three branches of the Syriac Church, namely Antiochene, Mesopotamian and Indian.

The Syriac language in liturgical usage had two variations: the West Syriac (Antiochene) and the East Syriac (Mesopotamian and Indian). This variation originated only in later centuries. On the basis of liturgy, there are West Syriac and East Syriac liturgies. West Syriac liturgy originated in the Roman Empire while East Syriac liturgy developed in the Persian Empire or in the Persian-Roman border. There is no evidence to show that the Indian Syriac Church developed a liturgy of its own. It inherited the East Syriac liturgy form Persia. It was the liturgy of the undivided Thomas Christians for more than 17 centuries. Although there is a strong Semitic identity for the Thomas Christians in India, one is not sure of the percentage of the Syriac speaking first Christians here. However Syriac was the liturgical language all through the centuries and the Thomas Christians in India had great attachment to the Syriac language and heritage. The Syriac Churches in the Roman Empire were entangled in the theological controversies and it had its effects in the Syriac Churches outside. The Indian Church had its immediate contact with the Churches in Persia, and it followed their liturgical traditions.

After the Arian crisis, one could notice divisive forces working in the Syriac Christianity in Syria. It took a new shape after the Ephesene crisis of 431 and the Chalcedonian crisis of 451. After the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the vast majority of the Syriac speaking population in the country side in Syria moved to the anti-Chalcedonian camp

and eventually it divided the Syriac Christianity into two definite camps namely, Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians. The Syrians in Mesopotamia were accused of Nestorianism and were called *Nestorians*, while the Syrians who followed Severus of Antioch and Jacob Burdana and opposed Chalcedon were called *Severians* or *Jacobites*. In subsequent centuries, the divisions in West Asia among the Syriac Christian population entered among the Thomas Christians in India also. Originally the Syriac Christians in Persia and India were neither Ephesene nor non-Ephesene, neither Chalcedonians nor non-Chalcedonians. They had nothing to do with the theological controversies of the Syriac Christians in the Roman Empire. Thus by the 5th century the Syriac Christianity began its fragmentation and mutual accusation. Some accepted the Council of Chalcedon of 451 and they were called the *Melkites*, meaning the King's party; some rejected it and were called *Acephaloi* (the headless ones), *Severians* and *Jacobites*. Others, especially those in the Persian Empire, were falsely called *Nestorians*. In later years because of its contact with the Persians, the Indian Syriac Christianity was also called *Nestorian* by the Europeans.

The Churches of the Syriac Tradition¹

The following are the present day Syriac Churches: ²

(1) Antiochene (West Syriac)

1. Syriac Catholic Church-	124,000	faithful
2. Maronite Catholic Church-	3,107,000	faithful
3. Syriac Orthodox Church-	500,000	faithful

(2) Mesopotamian (East Syriac)

1. Chaldean Catholic Church –	383,000	faithful
2. Assyrian Church of the East-	365,000	faithful
3. Ancient Church of the East-	54,000	faithful

(3)	Indian (Thomas Christians)		
	1. Syro-Malabar Catholic Church-	3,753,000	faithful
	2. Malankara Catholic Church-	405,000	faithful
	3. Malankara Orthodox Church-	10, 00,000	faithful
	4. Malankara Jacobite Church-	10, 00,000	faithful
	5. Malankara Marthoma Church-	700,000	faithful
	6. Thozhiyur Independent Church-	5,000	faithful
	7. Church of the East (Trichur) –	15,000	faithful

¹ J. Madey, “The Churches of Syriac Tradition”: *Studia Oecumenica* 2(2002)259-272.

² Roberson R.G., *The Eastern Christian Churches-A Brief Survey*, Bangalore, 2004. There is difference of opinion about the number of the faithful of the Malankara Jacobite and Malankara Orthodox Churches. According to some both the groups together would be approximately 1.3 to 1.5 million. J. Madey gives the number of the Malankara Orthodox as 1 million.

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5 (1989)208-219 gives 1.5 million; *St. Ephrem's Theological Journal* 2/1(1998), p.46 gives the number of the Malankara Orthodox as 657, 000 and Jacobite faction as 643,000; total 1.3 million. This latest number may be closer to objectivity. Anyway the number given by Roberson is not correct.

Regarding the number of the faithful in each Church, there may be difference of opinion. Among these Churches, the two pillars of the Syriac Churches are the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church and the Maronite Catholic Church. Among the Syriac Churches these two are the most numerous and dynamic. The Syro-Malabar Church has an unparalleled missionary dynamism. It sends its missionaries to all over India, some countries in Africa, South and North America, Europe and the Pacific islands. The Syriac Church of Mesopotamian origin underwent great suffering under the Arabs, the Turks, Mongols, the Ottoman and the Kurds. It was united but isolated in the mountains of Hakkiari for a long period. During the 16th century a group of these Christians entered into full visible communion with the Roman Catholic Church. The rest continued in the mountainous regions of Kurdistan under great difficulty. In 1968 there was a split in that Church and at present there are two groups under two Catholicos-Patriarchs. The Syro-Malabar and the Maronite Churches were always Catholics. The Melkite Church in the Antiochene Patriarchate was originally a Syriac Church and was Chalcedonian and Catholic and in visible communion with the Roman Church. But during the subsequent centuries they moved closer to the Byzantine Church, adopted the Byzantine liturgy and became Byzantine Orthodox and they lost their full communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

From the Church of the *Puthenkuttukar* in Kerala there emerged the Thozhiyur Church (1772), the Marthoma Church (1889), the Orthodox Church (1912), the Malankara Catholic Church (1930) and the Jacobite Syrian Church (2002). The *Church of the East (Trichur)* in India originated after 1908 from the *Pazhayakur* community. The Malankara Catholic Church is the result of the ecumenical initiatives of one of the Orthodox bishops, Mar Ivanios of Bethany. This is the only ecumenical attempt during the 20th century which is crowned with success. Of course the leaders from the Roman and Malankara Churches were guided by the ecclesiology of those days. Among the above mentioned Churches, the Syriac Catholic, Maronite, Syro-Malabar, and Malankara Catholic Churches are in full, visible and canonical communion with the Roman Catholic Church. Since the

Marthoma Church in Kerala had made corrections in the Syriac liturgical texts in the light of Protestant theology and do not respect the Syriac tradition sufficiently, many do not consider them as a Syriac Church. The Churches of the Mesopotamian family, the Syro-Malabar Church and the Church of the East (Trichur) use the East Syriac in their liturgy. All the other Churches use the West Syriac. Even today there are a few places in South Eastern Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria where the faithful speak the various dialects of Syriac in their families.

These various factions of the Syriac Church lived in isolation and mutual mistrust. Although they had a glorious tradition of the Fathers in the early periods, they could not contribute substantially to the world Christianity later. From the fifth century onwards, there was hostility between the West Syrians (non-Chalcedonians) and the East Syrians (Persians). There were mutual accusations, misunderstandings and misrepresentations. Even after so many centuries, the attitudes remain basically the same, especially among the West Syrian Jacobites. They still consider the Church of the East as Nestorian and its echo is still seen in their prayer books. The Assyrians on their part have decided in their Synod to remove all unwelcoming expressions against other Churches from their liturgical texts. The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and the Malankara *Puthenkur* community were in continuous conflict from the 19th century onwards. It became acute in the 20th century with the *Vattippanakkes*. It continues even today. The Jacobite Patriarchs used the weapon of excommunication against the following Malankara Metropolitans: Mathews Mar Athanasios (+1877), Vattasseril Mar Dionysius (+1934) and Augen Mar Timotheos (+1975). The Antiochene Jacobites were chiefly responsible for the split of the Thozhiyur Church, the Marthoma Church, and the split into Orthodox and Jacobites. They were responsible also for the various civil litigations and the present developments in the Jacobite –Orthodox community. There is one section which accepts the Patriarch and another, though theoretically, legally and constitutionally accepts the Patriarch, in all practical matters repudiate his authority. The civil litigation has a history of more than 175 years.¹

In the Church of the East there are two factions since 1968 and even today they could not heal the wound of division in that Church. There are various tribal factors for this division among them. But the two groups of the Church of the East of Trichur/Kerala became one in recent years. In fact the division had its origin in Trichur with Mar Thoma Dharmo. The Assyrians and the Chaldeans also did not have much mutual contact for many years in the past. So all these Syriac Churches were living in isolation for long.

Theological Contribution of the Syriac Churches²

During the first three centuries of Christianity, the Syriac speaking Church leaders produced the Syriac version of the Bible and some other minor writings. During the fourth century we find Aphrahat with his *Demonstrations*, Mar Aprem, the Harp of the Holy Spirit (+ 373), with his poetical contributions. He was the greatest of the Christian Syriac poet theologian. He lived in Nisibis and Edessa in Mesopotamia.

From the 5th to 7th centuries we have Cyrillona, Mar Balai, John the Solitary of Apamea, Jacob of Serugh(+521) the finest Syriac poet after Mar Aprem, Mar Philoxenos of Mabbug(+523), who wrote theological treatises in Syriac, Isaac of Antioch, Sergius of Resh'aina(+536), Simeon of Beth-Arsham(+548), Cyrus of Edessa, Thomas of Edessa, John of Ephesus, Barhadbeshabba 'Arbaya, Barhadbeshabba of Halwan, Shubhalaran, Mar Babai the Great(+628) with his Christological Treatise *Liber de Unione*, Martyrius, Isho'yahb II and John of Sedre(+648). These authors lived mostly before the Arab invasion of the Roman and the Persian Provinces. They lived mostly under the Sassanid and Byzantine rulers, coming from the West Syrians (Antiochenes) and the East Syrian ambient in Mesopotamia.

From the 7th to the 13th centuries, the Syriac Christians in West Asia lived under the Umayyads (7-8thc.), the Abbasids (750-1100), Seljuks

(11th-12th c.), Mongols (13th c.), and later under the Mamluks and Ottoman rulers. It was a period of great devastation and destruction through war and later by the Black Death. On the one hand the East Syrian Church had great missionary dynamism during the early period of the Arab rule; on the other hand the utter destruction of several ecclesiastical centers took place during this **(Footnotes)**

¹ From the time of Cheppatt Mar Dionysius (1825), there are distinct groups in the Puthenkur community. The first civil litigation had its beginning between Cheppatt Mar Dionysius and Mathews Mar Athanasios.

² S. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, Kottayam, 1997.

period. Many of the Syriac writers engaged in translating the Greek works first into Syriac and then into Arabic. From the 8th century onwards many preferred to write not in Syriac but in Arabic. The Maronite and Melkite Church writers preferred to write in Arabic. And most of the literature in Syriac came from the East Syriac and Syriac Orthodox circles. During the 8th and the 9th centuries there was great intellectual activity among the Syriac speaking Christians under the protection and encouragement of the Arab rulers. These Christians played an important role in the transmission of Greek philosophy and sciences to the Arab world through their translations and commentaries. Most important of these was Hunayn Ibn Ishaq. Many of these texts of Greek origin eventually reached Western Europe by way of translations from Arabic to Latin made in Spain in the 12th century. Syriac scholars were an important link in the transmission of the Greek philosophy and science to Western Europe.

The important writers during this period: Severus Sebokht(+666/7), Gabriel of Qatar, Abraham bar Lipeh of Qatar, Isho‘yahb II (+659), Isaac of Nineveh, Shem‘on d-Taybutteh, Dadiso‘ of Qatar, Johannan bar Penkaye, Jacob of Edessa, George bishop of the Arab Tribes(+724), John Dalyatha (Saba), Joseph Hazzaya, Abraham bar Dashandad, Theodore bar Koni, Timothy I (+823), Isho‘ bar Nun(+828), Job of Edessa, John of Dara, Isho‘dad of Merv, Thomas bishop of Marga (9th c.), Isho‘dnah (9th c.), Moshe bar Kepha (+903), Elijah of Anbar (10th c.), Elijah of Nisibis (+1046), Dionysius bar Salibi (+1171), Michael Rabo (+1199), Johannan bar Zo‘bi (12/13th c.), Jacob Severus bar Shakko(+1241), Bar Ebraya(+1286), Abdiso‘ bar Brika (+1318) and Timothy II (+1353).

Recently the Western scholars are giving more and more attention to the contributions of these Syriac writers. Much of the Syriac literature is already published and translated through the *CSCO*, and *Patrologia Orientalis* collections. Every four years there is a *Symposium Syriacum*, where many of the Syriac scholars from all over the world take part and give their contributions. In the same way every four year there is a *World Syriac Conference* under the auspices of SEERI

at Kottayam. There are also attempts to make available the translations of these Syriac texts into modern languages. Formerly they were mostly translated into Latin. This new interest in Syriac literature has created a new theological situation and positive interest in the Syriac Christian literature. Still the Syriac Churches continued to live in isolation until very recently. The Churches of Syriac tradition in the Catholic communion may be an exception to it to a certain extent. There arose eminent scholars among the Syriac Catholic Churches and substantial contribution from their part.

Now we shall speak about the Ecumenical activities of these Syriac Churches

¹ Pro-Oriente Foundation, ed., *Syriac Dialogue*, I-VI, Vienna, 1994-2004; G. Chediath, "The Pro-Oriente Syriac Commission and Ecumenical Dialogue with the Assyrian Church of the East": *Christian Orient* 18/4(1997)175-184; Idem, "Pro-Oriente Syriac Dialogue": *Studia Oecumenica* 2(2002)27-42; Idem, Syriac Churches in Dialogue: *The Harp* XI-XII (1998-99)87-98.

(1)The Pro Oriente Syriac Commission and its activities¹

It is in this background that the Pro-Oriente Foundation in Vienna formed a Syriac Commission in 1994. The present author raised this issue in his doctoral dissertation already in 1978 and raised it once again during a meeting at Vadavathoor and gave the impetus for the formation of such a body. The official representatives of the eight major Syriac Churches and the members of the Pro-Oriente Foundation are the members of this commission: the Syriac Orthodox, the Malankara Orthodox, the Assyrian; the Syrian Catholic, the Malankara Catholic, the Chaldean Catholic, the Syro-Malabar Catholic, and the Maronite Catholic have representation in the Syriac Commission..

The following are the members:

1. Catholic:

1. Archbishop Mikhael al-Jamil, Syrian Catholic
2. Archbishop Boulos Matar, Maronite
3. Archbishop Mar Joseph Powathil, Syro-Malabar
4. Archbishop Louis Sako, Chaldean
5. Fr.Geevarghese Chediath, Malankara Catholic

2. Assyrian:

6. Bishop Mar Bawai Soro

3. Oriental Orthodox:

7. Archbishop Mar Gregorios Yuhanna Ibrahim, Syrian Orthodox
8. Fr.K.M.George, Kondothra, Malankara Orthodox

4. Pro Oriente (Catholic):

9. The President of the Pro-Oriente
10. Fr.Frans Bouwen, Jerusalem
11. Prof.Peter Hofrichter, Salzburg
12. Secretary of Pro-Oriente.

There were already 17 meetings of the *Syriac Commission* since its formation in September 1994 at Kaslik/Lebanon. This commission is

the unique platform for the Syriac Churches to come together and to discuss the matters pertaining the Syriac culture and heritage. It enables these Churches to exchange their views on various issues and it helps these Churches to come closer for full and visible communion. Since it is unofficial, the participants are free to express their views and no binding decision is being taken there. Normally the Commission meets once a year and at times twice. After centuries of separation these Churches are trying to rediscover their common Syriac heritage.

(a) Dialogue on “Nestorian matters”¹

The Syriac Commission first focused its attention on the Assyrian Church, which was sidelined in the post-Vatican ecumenical discussions. For a long time the members of this Church did not participate in any ecumenical discussion. There was no attempt from the part of the other Churches also to bring them to the ecumenical sphere and to initiate a dialogue with them. Even in the MECC, they were kept outside. There was a kind of ecclesial apartheid towards them. So the Commission under the auspices of the Pro-Oriente Foundation took the daring step to study the issues relating to the Assyrian Church. The Commission unofficially opened all the old closed chapters on Nestorius, Nestorianism and the Nestorian Church. There were so far seven Syriac Dialogues: the first three were on Christology (1994, 1996, 1997), the next three were on Sacraments (2000, 2002, 2003), and the 7th one on Petrine Ministry (2004). The third Dialogue was in Chicago (1997) and the 7th one was at Changanachery (2004). All the other meetings were in Vienna. In addition to the members of the Syriac Commission, there were experts from all over the world and specially invited observers. Papers were read from the Catholic, Assyrian and Syrian Orthodox Church families. Normally there were three Papers each from three sides on almost all the topics. The participants could observe the complementarity of the views coming from the various Church traditions. Since all the participating Churches were from the Syriac Church family, they could more easily understand the Syriac theology than those coming from others. One could find openness from the part of the participants and a genuine desire to understand each other.

(b) Christology¹

Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) were the two milestones in the Christological controversies. At the end of the three Dialogues, it became clear that the controversy in these two Synods were resulting from misunderstanding and lack of charity. All the participating Churches in the Dialogue accepted *the content of faith* of both Ephesus and Chalcedon. There was difference only on the use of terminology. Once the terminology of the various groups was clarified, it became clear that the Churches were not far away from each other, but was very close to each other. Ephesus insisted on the oneness of Person. Chalcedon insisted on the duality of the natures in the one Person. This is the faith of all the three participating Syriac Church families. When the Syriac Orthodox Church used the expression *one nature (mia physis)* it had in mind the understanding of St. Cyril of Alexandria. *One nature* for Cyril meant one person. Oneness did not mean the mingling of the two natures as Eutyches taught. In the same way when the Assyrians spoke of *two qnome*, they were referring to the actuality of the two essences in the one Lord Jesus Christ, and not meaning two persons. Hence the Chalcedonian expression *in two natures (en duo physesin)* did not mean two persons but was pointing to humanity and divinity at the same time.

(c) Terminological Clarification²

There was a terminological clarification: The three crucial terms in discussion were *kyana*, *qnoma* and *parsopa*. In the Trinity all the Syriac Churches have the same understanding regarding these three terms. Thus in the Trinity there is only one divine nature (*kyana*) with three *Qnome* and three *Parsope*. Coming to Christology, there was difference in the understanding of the terms. In the West Syriac tradition, *qnoma* had the same meaning as they had in the Trinity. *Qnoma* meant person. So, for them in Christ there is only one *Qnoma*, the *Qnoma* of the Logos. Moreover, they identified *kyana*, *qnoma* and *parsopa*, just as St. Cyril of Alexandria did. But the East Syriac tradition, made a distinction.

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Syriac Dialogue*, II, 193.

They placed *kyana* and *qnoma* on the one side and *parsopa* on the other side. For them *qnoma* had a different meaning in Christology than the meaning they had in the Trinity. For them there are *two kyane* and *two qnome* in Christ while *the parsopa of Filiation (Person)* is one. There are two *kyane* in Jesus Christ (humanity and divinity), there are two actual essences concretely in Christ (that He is God and man). There is duality in him and the duality is on the level of nature, or actual existence. But the uniting element of the two natures in Christ is the *Parsopa of Filiation* of the Second Qnoma of the Trinity, the Word of God. The two natures are united in the Person of the Word. So the Syriac terminology used by the East and West Syriac Churches had different connotations. Until this terminological clarification, each side viewed the other side with its own particular understanding of the terminology and not with the eye of the other. When each group was viewed with the eyes of that group, the truth became clearer to all. So it became clear that the so called Nestorians did not teach the heresy of Nestorianism, the so called Monophysites did not teach the heresy of Monophysism. The Roman Catholic Church and the other Chalcedonians did not teach the Nestorian heresy. It was a surprising revelation for many.¹

In the same way, the participants made a distinction between the heresy of Nestorianism, the teaching of Nestorius, and the teaching of the Church of the East (Assyrian Church)². Denying the title Mother of God (*Theotokos*) to the Blessed Virgin Mary, dividing the Savior into two ontological persons, and considering the union of the two as a moral union constitute the Nestorian heresy. According to many modern scholars, this heresy was not taught by Nestorius. The Church of the East never in its history taught the Nestorian heresy. This Church was not founded by Nestorius. It repudiates even the appellation, *Nestorian*.³

There was discussion also of the anathema pronounced by some Churches of the saints venerated by other Churches. Thus the Anathema pronounced against the Antiochene Fathers in the fifth Ecumenical Council also came under discussion. The Third Syriac

Dialogue focused especially on Theodore of Mopsuestia who died in the communion of the Catholic Church in 428 and was condemned in 553.⁴

(d) Sacraments⁵

During the next three dialogues (4-6) the topic of discussion was Sacraments in the Syriac tradition. It became clear at the end that all the Syriac Churches have the same basic understanding of the Sacraments. Regarding the number of the Sacraments and enumeration, there are differences in the various traditions. It was made clear during the

¹ G. Chediath, "The Three Crucial Terms in Syriac Theology", p. 59-66.

² *Syriac Dialogue*, III, 139.

³ Recently Pope John Paul II told: "All the Christian Churches must humbly acknowledge their grave responsibility for the marginalization and the sufferings endured by the Assyrian Church throughout the centuries: the pejorative epithet "Nestorian" (often synonym of heretical) with which they have referred to this Church until recent times, is no longer acceptable and must be definitely abandoned" (*Information Service*, 91(1996/1-2)25).

⁴ *Syriac Dialogue*, III, 139.

⁵ *Syriac Dialogue*, IV-VI:

Joint Communiqués IV, 118-120; V, 148-151; VI, 203-206.

discussion that these did not constitute a difference in the theology of the Sacraments. In the Syriac Churches there is no clear distinction between Sacraments and Sacramentals as in the West. The expression *Raza* was found to be more appropriate for the mysteries in the Church than the expression *Sacraments*. *Raza* denotes, a communiqué clarified, a visible sign endowed with a hidden power as a means and vehicle of salvation. *Raze* provided the means for salvation for the entire Christian community effected through the ministry of the ordained priesthood. Under *Raze* the Syriac Churches include both the Sacraments of the Church and the Sacramentals. They do not make such a distinction. Moreover the East did not develop a sacramental theology as the Western Church did. However, there is no essential difference from the Western tradition in the basic understanding of the underlying meaning and theological content of the various *Raze*. According to the joint communiqué of the 4th Consultation, “Sacraments are celebrations of *mdabrantha* (economy of salvation), namely God’s plan in Jesus Christ to save humanity by offering His divine grace through those rites which the Church recognizes as *holy raze*. Jesus Christ, by his own sacrifice on the Cross, made atonement for our sins and brought about reconciliation with God. Thus He brings God’s forgiveness and redemption to the world and renews God’s covenant with all humanity. Through the celebration of *raze*, the Church is built up as the body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The believer is given participation in the death and resurrection of Christ and in the life of the Kingdom to come”.¹

(e) Petrine Ministry²

The latest Dialogue started with the Petrine ministry in the Church. There is supposed to be more discussion on the topic in the forthcoming *Dialogues*. But the Pro-Oriente has received a communication that the Syrian Orthodox are withdrawing from all the Pro-Oriente activities. So the future of the activity of the Syriac Commission is in suspension for the moment.

The contribution for ecumenism of the Pro-Oriente foundation is immense. All the Syriac Churches profited greatly from their ecumenical initiative. If the participating Churches are withdrawing for one reason or other, it will be a great loss for them and for the other Churches too. The Pro-Oriente foundation brought together previously all the Oriental Orthodox Churches for a dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church and the main topic discussed there was Christology. In this discussion, the Syrian and Malankara Orthodox Churches also were present. Now it is reported that the Oriental Orthodox are withdrawing en block from all such pro-Oriente activities.

(2) Catholic –Assyrian bilateral Theological Dialogue³

The Pro-Oriente Dialogues were unofficial and were multilateral. But since 1994 there exists an official theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of East. In 1994 both the Churches could sign a joint declaration on Christology, the thorny issue regarding the alienation of the Assyrian Church from other Churches for

¹ *Syriac Dialogue*, IV, 119; V, 149-150; V. Pathikulangara, *Mysteries of the Church*, Kottayam, 2004.

² The 7th Syriac Dialogue held at Changanassery was on Petrine Ministry.

³ Mar Aprem, *Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV*, p. 58-62; 87-90; 273-276.

the USA. Patriarch Bidawid of the Chaldean Church and Patriarch Mar Dinkha of the Assyrian Church jointly participated in the consecration. The synod in connection with that consecration decided to take steps to seek ways and means for establishing full unity between these two branches of the one Church of the East. They have agreed upon the publication of liturgical books and catechetical books jointly. It was also decided to organize jointly pastoral programs and to establish a common Seminary in the USA for the formation of priests. They established a joint commission for unity. There are six members from each side. It is a great step forward in Ecumenism. In order to facilitate this cooperation, both have decided for limited Eucharistic communion between them.

(4) Assyrian-Ancient Church of the East Dialogue

The one Church of the East (the Seleucian, Persian, or the so called Nestorian Church) witnessed a split in 1968. The reason for the split was more tribal. There are now two Patriarchs and practically they function as two autonomous Churches. One Patriarch resides in Iraq (Mar Addai-Ancient Church of the East) and the other in Chicago (Mar Dinkha IV-Assyrian). The Assyrians are the majority. Both together come about 0.4 million faithful. The Catholic Church has its ecumenical relationship with the Assyrian Church of the East, and not with the Ancient Church of the East. Practically the latter has no ecumenical contact with any Church. As a result of the Dialogue among these two branches, the two groups in India reached an agreement in 1995. Both the factions jointly accepted Mar Dinkha IV as their Patriarch and became part of the Assyrian Church.¹ As a consequence they adopted the Gregorian calendar. The leaders in the other countries are also trying to reunite the two factions. Tribal and petit interests are hindering the reunion often.

(5) Cooperation and Dialogue among the Syriac Churches in Kerala/India.²

There is a wide range of cooperation among the Syriac Churches in India-among the Churches of the St. Thomas tradition. The Heads of the Episcopal Churches meet often to discuss issues of common interest. Formerly in several parts of Kerala, there were regional or local ecumenical groups working regularly. In recent times, it has become less and less. Some of the Professors who gave leadership to such ecumenical activities have died or retired. There were ecumenical gatherings in connection with the Holy Year on regional basis. Ever since the first meeting in 2000, there have been such gatherings in certain regions once a year. It helps for mutual understanding and mutual cooperation.

(a) The Nilackal Church and the Nilackal Trust

There was cooperation in the construction of the Nilackal Ecumenical Church and the administration of the Nilackal Ecumenical Trust. All the Syriac Churches in Kerala are members of the Trust. Every year there are certain regular celebrations at Nilackal. It is indeed a great achievement that the various Syriac Churches could construct a common Church and continue the ecumenical activities jointly under the auspices of the Nilackal Trust.

¹ *Ibid.* p.90-92; 127-129.

² J. Madey, "Wie steht es um die Oekumene in Kerala (Indiens)?" : *Ekumenizm I integracia*, 9 (2003), Opole , ed. P. Jaskola-R. Porada, p.83-89.

(b) Meetings for the discussion of the Common social and political issues

The Christian leaders in Kerala meet often to deal with the problems confronting the Community. In such matters they take a common stand and present their voice in common. Such gatherings are very effective. Almost all the leaders of the Syriac Churches participate in such gatherings.

(c) Common Pilgrimage

A few years ago the heads of the Syriac Churches made a pilgrimage to Rome, Geneva and to other important Christian centers in Europe. They visited the Pope and the Headquarters of the WCC. It was an enriching experience for all of them and contributed to better relationship among them. It enabled them to know one another better.

(6) Ecumenical Cooperation under the auspices of SEERI.

The St. Ephraim Ecumenical Institute at Baker Hills, Kottayam (SEERI) is an ecumenical institute under the auspices of the Malankara Catholic Diocese of Tiruvalla. It provides opportunity to all the Syriac Churches in Kerala and also outside to come together and share their interests. SEERI provides opportunity for studies in Syriac language, literature and culture. The Institute for Syriac studies of the M.G. University, Kottayam is situated at SEERI. The Students of Syriac language and literature can have Diploma course, M. A. Degree and Ph.D. in the Syriac language at SEERI. The students from all the Syriac Churches make use of the facilities provided at SEERI. The teaching staff at SEERI comes from all the various Syriac Churches. SEERI conducts every fourth year a *World Syriac Conference*, in which experts come from all over the world. Among the teaching staff of SEERI there are also international scholars from the various universities. Because of its fame, the Pro-Oriente wanted to conduct the latest Syriac Dialogue (2004) at SEERI. But it was transferred to Changanachery because of the opposition from the part of some Malankara Orthodox leaders.

(7)Catholic-Malankara Orthodox Dialogue¹

The theological Commission was constituted in 1988. From 1989 there are official theological dialogues between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Church (Kottayam group). The Commission meets once a year and so far there were 16 Consultations. The Catholic participants are from the Malankara Catholic, Syro-Malabar and Latin Churches in India and the official representatives from Rome.

¹ E.R. Hambye, "Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue": *Christian Orient* 10/4(1989)163-164; Joint Statement: *Christian Orient* XI/4 (1990)197-198; G.Chediath, "The Catholic-Malankara Orthodox Dialogue": *Christian Orient* 19/4 (1998)153-159; Idem, "The Catholic Malankara Orthodox Dialogue": *Het Christelijk Oosten*,52(2000,1-2)145-152; Idem, "Reflections on the Ecumenical Movement," *Christian Orient* 24/4 (2003)185-195; Idem, "Ecumenism in India": *Studia Oecumenica*, I (2001)143-154; Idem, "Archbishop Mar Ivanios and Ecumenism": *Studia Oecumenica*,2(2002)243-258.

The Catholic members are:

1. The Secretary of the Pontifical Council for the unity of Christians (a bishop)
2. Another member of the same Council (a priest)
3. Archbishop Mar Joseph Powathil
4. Bishop Mar Kuriakose Kunnassery
- 5 Archbishop Cyril Mar Baselios
6. Bishop Patrick D'Sousa
7. Fr.Geevarghese Chediath
8. Fr.Mathew Vellanickal
9. Fr.Xavier Koodapuzha
10. A Latin priest (either from Europe or from Kerala)

There are also 10 participants from the Malankara Orthodox Church. Often they change some of the representatives. Most of them were from the Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam. The first Consultation had a scholarly achievement. It could formulate a joint statement on Christology on the basis of the Pro-Oriente Vienna Christological formula of 1973. It was submitted to the authorities of both the Churches and was approved and made public on June 3, 1990. After that there were annual gatherings and discussions. There was a discussion on interchurch marriage. But so far no agreement could be reached. In a divided Christianity, any agreement for interchurch marriages will have its defects. But the agreement should be in accordance with international standards and local traditions. There must be readiness to give and take and to take into consideration the serious pastoral problems involved in modern times. The Catholic side insisted that at the time of marriage no one should be forced to abandon his/her original Church membership and join another Church. Since there is equality of man and woman, the girls should not be asked to join the Church of the boys at the time of marriage. On this point the Orthodox could not agree. They demanded that according to the practice in Kerala, the girls should follow the Church of the boys at the time of marriage. After so many years, no solution could be found on this point. There are still persistent prejudices in the

Orthodox circles against the Roman Catholic Church and the Malankara Catholic Church. The theological dialogue should be preceded by the dialogue of love. As long as such prejudices persist, no amount of dialogue will bear much fruit. It seems that there are still wounds caused by the past events. They have to be healed. Unless they are healed, the dialogues will not progress. In order to heal the wounds of the past, people should not live in the past. They have to live a new life in Christ every day. That is what the Christian Churches are made for. There should be a forward looking attitude. Some of their recent publications have caused serious damage to the cause of Ecumenism. One does not find the earnestness and enthusiasm today among the members as it was in the beginning of the dialogue in 1989. After so many years of dialogue one may observe and comment that there is more alienation, estrangement and suspicion today than in 1989. Some make use of the international forums to accuse the Catholic Church, especially the Malankara Catholic Church of proselytism and misrepresent the facts. As long as such attitudes continue, the progress of ecumenism will be very slow. Secondly the situation of the two Oriental Catholic Churches in the Catholic communion in India is in no way a model for the Orthodox. These two Apostolic Catholic Churches are restricted to a tiny strip of land in South India. They are not free to take care of their faithful wherever they are and to do evangelical works. They have to depend on the mercy of the local Latin bishops. The Second Vatican Council has clearly declared the equality of the Churches in the Catholic communion. But in the Indian context, they are simply ignored by the majority of the ecclesiastics. This is a great hindrance to any serious ecumenism in India.¹

(8) Catholic-Syrian Orthodox Dialogue (in India)

Since 1989 there has been an official theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church in India. During the first meeting itself, the participants could formulate a joint statement on inter-Church marriage. It was submitted to the Heads of the two Churches, to the Pope and to the Syrian Orthodox

Patriarch of Antioch. It was approved and published on 25th January, 1994². This agreement took into consideration the urgent pastoral need to assist at increasing inter-church marriages. It respects the freedom of the couples to maintain the membership of their original Church. It does not force any one to abandon his/her Church and join another Church at the time of marriage. It allows limited Eucharistic communion in either of the two Churches. The agreement is followed by a few *Pastoral Guidelines*. According to the Canonists, this is one of the best interchurch agreements. Ever since it has been approved by the two Churches, it is applied for the inter-Church marriages among the Catholics and the Jacobites. The underlying principle for the formulation of this document is the understanding that there is basic agreement regarding the content of faith among these Churches. Secondly the common declaration between the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and the Pope of Rome in 1984 paved the way for such cooperation in pastoral matters. Behind all these there is the common understating that the two Churches have become *almost* one Church. On fundamental matters of Faith, there is agreement. The remaining matters are chiefly ecclesiological and both the Churches believe that they could be solved. After the first meeting, there has been every year a common meeting of the delegates of the two Churches for two days to discuss the common interests and issues. The Catholic Church has good and friendly relation with the Jacobite Church in Kerala.

(9)Cooperation in the West Asian Syriac Churches³

There are various types of cooperation among the Churches in the West Asian countries. There are the following Conferences and means of cooperation and dialogue: Conference of the Middle East Catholic Patriarchs, Conference of the Oriental Orthodox Patriarchs, the MECC, and the Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic Official Dialogue, the Oriental Orthodox-Eastern Orthodox Dialogue, Oriental Orthodox-Anglican Dialogue and the Oriental Orthodox-Russian Orthodox Dialogue. In all these forums the Syriac Churches are actively engaged in and give their contribution.

(10) Cooperation and Dialogue in the USA.

The Syriac Churches in the USA cooperate with the other Churches there in theological and pastoral matters and there exist ample cooperation among them.¹

(11) Cooperation in the WCC

The Syriac Churches are members of the WCC. They also contribute their share in the ecumenical process. Under the auspices of the WCC the theologians of the Oriental Orthodox and the Eastern Orthodox Churches entered into theological dialogue a few years ago and they have arrived at a Christological consensus. Both these Church families have arrived at a formula of deeper cooperation and unity. But so far it is not signed or implemented.

(12) Roman Catholic-Oriental Orthodox Official Theological Dialogue

Recently a new Dialogue has started officially between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. Until recently the Roman Catholic Church was having theological dialogues with each of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. But with the Byzantine Church, the dialogue was with the Byzantine Church as a family. A similar dialogue has its beginning last year with the Oriental Orthodox Church. In this Dialogue the Malankara Orthodox and the Syrian Orthodox Churches are also partners. But for the last year's first meeting the Malankara Orthodox representatives were not present. Moreover the three Oriental Orthodox Churches, namely, the Coptic Orthodox, the Armenian Orthodox in Lebanon and the Syrian Orthodox Churches have decided that in the future all the ecumenical agreement with any other Church will be taken in common. In the light of this new development, there may be a reconsideration of the Dialogue taking place with each individual Oriental Orthodox Church.

Setbacks

(1)As long as there is tension existing between the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and the Malankara Orthodox Churches, there will be setbacks in the ecumenical endeavors.

(2) In the same way the division in the Puthenkur community into Jacobite and Orthodox and the continuing tension, civil litigations and antagonism are causes for further setback.

(3)The prejudice of some Malankara Orthodox against the Roman Catholic Church, and the Churches in the Catholic communion hinders very much the ecumenical progress among the Syriac Churches in India. (4)The persisting prejudice of some leaders of the Malankara Orthodox Church regarding the Malankara Catholic Church and its activities and their attitude and comments in international circles regarding this Church are very detrimental to any genuine ecumenism. There are a lot of misrepresentations of facts.

(5)The attitude of the Indian Latin bishops towards the two flourishing Oriental Catholic Churches in India is in no way conducive to any genuine ecumenism. The hindering of the pastoral care of the Oriental faithful outside the boundaries of the Oriental dioceses by the Latin bishops and the hindrance for missionary activity in ones own home land is in the eyes of the other Syriac Churches a great scandal to Ecumenism.

(6)The isolation of the Assyrian Church by the Copts and the way in which the Syrians follow the Copts are going to be a hindrance for the Ecumenical activity of the Syriac Churches. The Copts have cunningly trapped the Syrians by forming a mini union in the Oriental Orthodox family.

(7)The internal division in the Church of the East and their disunity will terribly affect any genuine ecumenism. Both the factions of this Church have a lot of tribal elements which hinder any genuine ecumenism.

(8)The failure in understanding the post-Vatican Roman Catholic ecclesiology by the Assyrians and their persisting fears owing to their past history and tribal prejudices are also hindering the ecumenical cause of the Church of Christ.

(9)The Catholic Churches in India have not succeeded in convincing the Orthodox Churches in India that there is a post Vatican “ecclesiology and is very much different from the Pre-Vatican Roman Catholic Ecclesiology. On the contrary their activities pave the way for the confirmation of their prejudices regarding the Catholic Church.

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