

Ecclesiology of Archbishop Mar Ivanios

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Introductory Remarks

Ecclesiology in the modern understanding of the word is a theological discipline having the Church as the object of its study and investigation, aiming at the elaboration of a full and consistent doctrine of the Church. Archbishop Mar Ivanios has not written any such work on ecclesiology. His ecclesiological approach is that of the West Syrian Church, more specifically of the Syrian Orthodox or Jacobite Church. This Church, like all pre-Chalcedonian Churches, has not developed any ecclesiology in the modern sense of the word. Ecclesiology in the modern sense appeared late in the Christian thought. It began in the West with scholastic theology and that towards the Middle Ages. If at all any such theology arose, as it happened with the work of Bar Ebraya on the Church after the 13th century, it happened because of the influence of the Western Church.

The Fathers and the theologians of the Church up to the Middle Ages never composed any treatise on the Church. The reality of the Church is presupposed in the proclamation of the Gospel and cannot be separated from the whole dogmatic structure of which it forms the existential foundation. In other words, their theology was ecclesial in dimension. The Church was a reality in the life of the faithful and not merely an optional institution to which occasionally people paid homage to or which people, in their spare moments, discussed. Because of this, the experience of the Church, given as a gift of the Father through the Son, regenerated by the Spirit, conditions the whole of Christian reflection. This essential connection and inter-dependence between Patristic theology and the experience of the Church is often ignored, because the Fathers do not “theologize” about the Church. But the reason for this is, that the Church for the Fathers is precisely

not the “object” but always the “subject” of theology, the reality which makes it possible to know God and in Him, Man and the World, the Life and consequently the truth about all reality. The appearance of ecclesiology as a separate discipline is the fruit of *doubt*, of that need for justification which is inevitable and indeed “normal” in a theology which is itself conceived as “justification” – rational or philosophical, legal or practical – of the Christian faith and which as we know it only too well today leads to confusion because it is rooted in the evaluation of the Church in terms of the world, of its philosophy, of its trends and needs, and thus ultimately to a surrender to the world and consequently to an “alienation” of theology from the real Church and her real life.

Even from the beginning of Christianity, the Church was presented to the world as the proclamation and the presence of salvation brought by Jesus Christ. In Ephesians (3:4) the Church is seen as the “mystery of Christ” because in it is realized the eternal plan of the Father, inaugurating on the Cross the union of humanity, Jews and Gentiles, in the Church and leading it to the consummation where “God will be everything to every one (1 Cor. 15:28). The mystery implies that the saving Incarnation takes effect in the Church through the preaching of the *Word* and through the Sacraments thus leading it to the glory of heaven.

For the early Fathers the whole Scripture spoke of Christ and his Church; they saw the Church through the imageries of the Bible (people, body, temple, spouse, flock, vineyard, kingdom, field and net) and the typological interpretation of the Old Testament. We see that the Christianity of the Fathers was essentially ecclesial, of the Church. Man works out his salvation in the Church with the help of her “mysteries”; personal faith itself received through adhesion to the Church’s tradition, is saving only through the effective participation in her communitarian and liturgical life. Keeping these general remarks which are common to all the traditions of the early Church, we shall now proceed to deal briefly with the concept of the Church in the thought of Archbishop Mar Ivanios which is in the tradition of

the Jacobite/Syrian Orthodox Church, to which he belonged and which he preserved in the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church.

Since Archbishop Mar Ivanios belonged to the West Syrian (Syrian Orthodox) patrimony, we shall first deal briefly with the West Syrian patrimony and then with the ecclesiological vision of Archbishop Mar Ivanios.

I. The West Syrian Ecclesial Patrimony

As we have remarked above, for the early Syriac Fathers, as for all the other Fathers of the Church, the whole of Scripture spoke of Christ and his Church. In the Old Testament the revelation of the Kingdom had been conveyed by figures of speech. In the same way, the inner nature of the Church was now to be made known to us through various images. Since the Church is a mystery, it cannot be exhaustively defined, but its nature is communicated by studying the various biblical metaphors. Four groups of images may be noted viz. the Church as the flock of Christ, the Church as the vineyard of God, the Church as the Temple of the Holy Spirit and above all the Church as the Spouse of the Immaculate Lamb. These images taken from the different spheres of human life (pastoral life, agriculture, building and matrimony) magnificently supplement one another and indicate in different ways Christ's tender love for, and intimate union with the Church. The Syriac Churches preserve a sense of awesome and inexpressible mystery, which surrounds and connotes the celebrative aspect of the liturgy. The Syriac Churches have a spirituality drawn directly from the sacred Scripture and liturgy and consequently a theology less subjected to strictly rational categories. The early Syriac Fathers and theologians did not compose any treatise on the Church, as we understand about the present day ecclesiology. The reality of the Church is presupposed in the proclamation of the Gospel and cannot be separated from the whole dogmatic structure of which it forms the existential foundation. In other words their theology was ecclesial. It is not possible to find any systematic treatise on the Church among the early Syrian Fathers. One can find only occasional

assertions and numerous scattered remarks of theologians, historians and comments and passages in their liturgical books. The Syriac liturgy is in fact a monument of love and enthusiasm of the people of the Syriac tradition for the Holy Church, the Spouse of Christ and the Mother of the children of God. One can find there, often in poetic form, most abundant materials on the manner in which the Syrians conceived the intimate essence of the Church. This is found, especially, in the *Book of Common Prayers (Shi'mo)*, in the Office of the Dedication of the Church, of Epiphany, of the Apostles, in the liturgy of Baptism, Ordination and Marriage. One or two examples may be cited:

1. "He (The Lord God Messiah) dwells in heaven, in the Church which is His house in the throne, in the Church building, in the Chariot of the Cherubim and in the Sanctuary. He has made the Church His abode and His dwelling place. Her beauty is beyond description. The heavenly powers have surrounded her. Isaiah has compared her to a tabernacle.... She is an attractive fortress, she is the ship of the Gospel, she is the stable city, she is the established town, strong tower, Holy Mountain; she is progressively engaged in sublime things."¹

2 "We remember Moses the fountain-head of prophecy and Simon head of the Apostles. Moses is the head of the Old, Simon of the New, both resemble one another and God dwelt in them. Moses brought down the tablets of the law, Simon received the keys of the kingdom; Moses built the earthly tabernacle. Simon built the Church, for the Old and for the New. Glory to you, O! Lord, halleluiah. May their prayers assist us."²

3. "Simon Peter was catching fish in the sea, when his Lord called him and said to him: Come Simon, and I will give you a catch of the Spirit and you will draw men from death to life; and on you, Simon, I will build the Holy Church and the bars of Sheol shall not be able to prevail against it."³

4. "The architect (King) of heaven and earth built the Church and made it His dwelling place, He entered into it and lives there. Let all

those who want to converse with Him enter inside it, for He dwells there... O! Lord, who gives growth to the Church, have mercy on us. The Holy Church who is the spouse of the Messiah is full of blessings, like the Paradise. In it are Baptism, the holy bones of the Martyrs and Altar of Sacrifice. The priests who give the Medicine of Life are also there".⁴ The Syriac liturgy presents the union of Christ and the Church through an Oriental imagery of courtship and marriage when it speaks of the feast of the nuptial and of leading the bride to the nuptial chamber, by which the conjugal union was sealed. The nuptial chamber is heaven; the bridegroom prepares it and causes his spouse to enter there. The nuptial feast is the image of eternal happiness; all men are called to its delights, which never end.

From the beginning, Jesus associated his disciples with his own life, revealed the mystery of the Kingdom to them and gave them a share in His mission, joy and sufferings. Christ provides for growth; He makes us grow towards him as our head (cf. Col. 2/19; Eph 4/11-16); He provides in his Body the Church, the gifts and assistance by which we help one another along the way of salvation.

¹ From the *Sedro* of the *Ramso* of the Consecration of the Church.

² From the *Lilio* on Monday, in the Book of Common Prayer.

³ *Lilio* on Thursday.

⁴ *Lilio* Sunday.first Qaumo.

The Syriac word *Rozo/Raza* for the Church and the Sacraments corresponds to the Greek word *Mysterion* (Sacrament).

The study of symbolic names, such as people, body, temple, spouse, flock, vineyard etc applied to the Church and the titles such as apostles, ambassadors, heralds, fishermen, shepherds, etc. applied to bishops and priests give us nothing that can be called an ecclesiology (in the modern sense) of the early Syriac tradition. The use of symbolisms is without doubt liturgical, and consequently can be called theological in the sense of *theologia prima*; if we are to look for implicit ecclesiology in the writings of the early Syriac Fathers much of what is relevant is contained in these images. The one great truth they express is certainly a truth about the Church. It is that Christ shared some of these functions with men and they are exercised still in the Church. The only begotten Son of God, the second Adam, “Life-Giver” – these He could not share. But the apostolic ministry in Christ’s function as Head of the Body, as Spouse of the bride, as Apostle sent forth, as Priest and key bearer, Shepherd, Steward, Farmer, Physician He could share. The symbolism expressed in the titles ‘Rock’/ Kepha, the Building on the Rock, the Temple, etc. express the idea that Christ’s work as Witness, Healer, Guide and Helper is continued in the sacramental society of the Church. The early Syriac authors have a high sense of the Episcopal office and its continuity with the apostolic college. Likewise, they have striking passages on Peter’s primacy, but nothing much on this being handed on to the bishops of Rome. As independent Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch gained standing, the members of the Jacobite Church tended to apply the Petrine texts to the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch. Recently even autocephaly is attributed to some of the Churches with Syriac heritage¹. If the Church is the bride of Christ she is the mother of those to whom Christ has, by his death, procured eternal life.

¹ Thus for example the faction of the Syrian Orthodox Church which call itself now as Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church.

The ecclesiology of the West Syrian Church is very similar to that of the Catholic Church. The liturgical prayers reveal that for them Church is one, holy, Catholic and apostolic. Church is a sacramental communion and the sacraments of the Church are the means of Christian life.

I.The Concept of the Church according to Archbishop Mar Ivanios.

Archbishop Mar Ivanios has not written any systematic treatise on the Church. But it is clear from some of his letters, speeches and sermons that he accepted the West Syrian ecclesial patrimony as described above. In a letter written by him on 21.07. 1928 to Archbishop Edward Moony, who was the Apostolic Delegate to India, he says that the Jacobite Church is not a Church, which has fallen into heresy but a dissident or separated Church. The Archbishop writes:

“The reasons for the separation of the Jacobite Church from the one Church of Christ do not have any relation with any heresy; the primacy of Peter is distinctly and very clearly stated in our documents, thus for example: ‘The net of St. Peter, the Catcher of fish, draws souls from death to life. He is the Rock on which the Church is built. He carries the key of the Kingdom of heaven. He is the Prince of the Apostles and the Teacher of the bishops in matters of faith’.¹

In the same letter he refers to a prayer in the *Book of the Common Prayer* expressing the Primacy of Peter² . He goes on to say in his letter that the bishops of Rome are the real successors of Peter. Peter died in Rome, crucified upside down. The fact is repeated in many documents of the Syriac Church. The Archbishop quotes from the canon of the Jacobite Church the following passage:

“There should be four Patriarchs in the four parts of the world. The Patriarch of Rome should be the head and Chief among them.”³

Again he says: “Our canons and prayers clearly articulate that Peter died a martyr in Rome and that the Pope of Rome is the head of the Patriarchs”.

While answering the enquiries of the representative of “*Fides*”, a News Agency, Archbishop says:

“It is the Catholic Church which in practice manifests the doctrine of faith that the Church is the living body of Christ; it is also the Catholic Church which labours in the world for the sole purpose of the salvation of individuals and community.”¹

In a letter dated January 31st 1931 addressed to the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch, Archbishop writes:

“Our Lord Jesus Christ has established only one Church and that on St. Peter. The keys of that kingdom He entrusted with St. Peter. He also gave him authority to confirm his brethren in the true faith. The authority to govern the Universal Church was also given to St. Peter. The true successor of St. Peter is the Pope of Rome, who is the Supreme Pontiff (High priest) of the Kingdom of Christ and through God’s inspiration the *centre of unity of the Church* in the world, and the guardian of the Apostles’ Catholic faithOur Lord established the Church on a rock and that rock is Peter. And since the Pope is the true successor of St. Peter, anyone who attempts to accomplish anything regarding the salvation of people, independently of the Pope is getting separated from Jesus Christ”.²

In the same letter the Archbishop reminds the Patriarch of the Canon of the Jacobite Church in the first *Pasoka* (section) of the 7th chapter of the Hûdaya Canon of Bar Ebraya: “ that there should be four Patriarchs in the four corners of the world and their head and leader should be the Patriarch of Rome”.³ He also entreats the Patriarch to think deeply on the primacy of St. Peter and his successors in Rome, and on the fact that the primacy has been recorded in the authoritative documents and books of the Jacobite Church. He requests him to take steps to heal the wounds in the body of Christ, by separation.⁴ In a letter addressed to Apollinarius, the Archbishop of the Russian Church in the United States of America, Archbishop Mar Ivanios wrote about the circumstances, which led him to the Reunion with the Catholic Church. In this letter he goes on to say that Our Divine Lord

established in this world only one Church. It is one and indefectible. Since unity is an essential quality required for the Church, indivisibility is an essential requirement. In the history of the Church one finds that only after the separation, some of the leaders tried to justify their separated position from the Catholic Church. But we all know that Jesus Christ in His high-priestly prayer (Jn. 17) prayed for the unity of the Church. The Pope of Rome is the successor of St. Peter and the leader of Christians in this world and the Supreme Head of the Universal Church. The papacy is the foundation of the existence of the Church and the Pope is the centre of unity of the Church. The Universal Church is a communion of different Individual Churches, which have autonomy, but not autocephaly. Archbishop Mar Ivanios reminded the bishop that it is high time for the separated Oriental Churches to reestablish communion with the Holy See and thus enable the Church of Christ to carry on its heavenly mission fruitfully and with courage.

¹ *Ibid.*2.p.19-20.

¹ *Ibid.*vol.2. p.6.

² *Ibid.* vol.2. p.15-16.

³ *Ibid.* vol.2.p.15.

⁴ *Ibid.*vol.2.p.16.

Again he wrote about this to Fr. Barnabas, a Russian Orthodox priest in New York in 1931 as follows:

“Our divine Redeemer has established only one visible Church in this world. That Church is the one indivisible, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The individuals, which make up the Universal Church should be one in faith, in the sacraments and governance. She shines in the world as the Kingdom of God unified in faith and in the sacraments and consequently as the One Spouse of Jesus Christ. In order to be unified with this Church neither you nor I, who are the children of Oriental Churches, need reject our ecclesial traditions, liturgy and our spiritual patrimony. The foundation stone of the Church, namely Peter and the architect of the Church Paul have their resting place in Rome. Holy Father Pope represents these apostles as the founding Fathers of the Church of Christ. So for you and me and for our Churches, it is necessary to remain in communion with the Church of Rome.”¹

Archbishop Mar Ivanios was quite convinced that Our Divine Saviour established only one Church. The Jacobite Church contended itself to be that one Church. But Archbishop Mar Ivanios had some hesitations about the claim that Jacobite Church is the one Church established by Christ. Even from the period of his professorship at Serampore College he manifested his hesitation. In his Church history classes at Serampore College during the years 1913-1919, he expressed his mental reservation on this subject. One day a Jacobite deacon asked him in the class: “What is the Church instituted by Jesus Christ?” Is it the Jacobite Church or is it the Catholic Church?” The Professor Rev. P.T. Geevarghese (later Mar Ivanios) gave the following answer: “We see very many proofs from the Holy Bible and the Church History to show that the true Church must be only one; but it is not possible to say that it is the Jacobite Church. To answer the question whether the Catholic Church is the real Church of Christ one needs to study further about the question.”²

But it is evident from what we have shown about the conviction of Mar Ivanios about the unity of the Church that he came to the

conclusion that the Catholic Church is the one and only Church of Christ. He was also convinced that the Pope of Rome is the Supreme head of the Catholic Church.

From the beginning, this one Church has been marked by a great diversity, which comes from both the variety of God's gifts, and the diversity of those who receive them. Within the unity of the people of God, a multiplicity of peoples and cultures is gathered together. Among the Church's members, there are different gifts, offices, conditions and ways of life. Holding a rightful place in the communion of the Church, there are also Particular/Individual Churches that retain their own traditions. The great richness of such diversity is not opposed to the Church's unity. Yet sin and the burden of its consequences constantly threaten the gift of unity. And so the Apostle Paul exhorts Christians to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" Jesus Christ is the sacrament of God and the Church is the sacrament of Christ. This truth was well known to the Fathers of the Church. Jesus Christ was sent by God the Father to give salvation to the world, in order that men are united with the life of God. Jesus accomplished this task through his life, especially through his passion, death and resurrection. The Church is where people participate in the paschal mysteries of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the meaning of the sacrament of God and the Church is the sacrament of Christ.

Archbishop Mar Ivanios does not use the word sacrament to Jesus Christ, but he says that Jesus unites human beings in his life, through His work of salvation. In order to enable man, a composite of soul and body, to unite with God, the **Word** of God became a man with soul and body. Jesus Christ is perfect man and perfect God; this is the fundamental principle of Christianity. No one has ever seen God, but God, the only the Son of God, made him known. He is the one who is in and with the Father" (John 1/18). Through the incarnate God we can enter into His divinity, his human nature being the only way to do it. Instead of our natural relationship with the first Adam, God bestowed on us a relationship with Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, who is the Way, the Truth and Life. For us in order to have communion

with God, God the Word became man. Thus we can unite with God in our body and soul. For this we unite ourselves with the risen Lord with His glorious Body. Thus, Jesus Christ becomes the Sacrament of our salvation.¹

After his death, Jesus Christ rose from the dead and with his glorious body he ascended to his heavenly Father. “I shall be with you till the end of the world,” he said. Accordingly he lives in his Church with his glorious body, and thus makes us his body, which is the Church. We unite with Jesus Christ through the Church, which is his body, and there we grow into Jesus Christ, and thus we become mature in accordance with the measure of his perfection. Spiritually and bodily, i.e. visibly and invisibly we receive Jesus Christ into us. For this he has established the Church, which is the locus of the mysteries, which are called sacraments. The Church is a mystery: that is to say that she is also the sacrament. She is the total locus of the Christian sacraments and she is herself the great sacrament, which contains and vitalizes all the others. In this world she is the sacrament of Christ, as Christ himself, in his humanity, is for us the sacrament of God.

(Footnotes)

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cf. his teaching on the sacraments when he was a deacon, Inchackalody

Archbishop Mar Ivanios

Vol. I, p. 51-58.

The Church is the sacrament of Christ; which means, to put it in another way, that there is between the Church and Him a certain relation of mystical identity. Here again we encounter the Pauline metaphors and the rest of the biblical images, which the Christian tradition (especially the Syriac tradition propounded by Syriac Fathers like Mar Aphrahat, Mar Aprem, Mar Jacob of Serugh, etc) has continually explored. One and the same intuition of faith expressed throughout Head and members make one single body, one single Christ; bridegroom and the bride are one flesh. Although he is the head of the Church, Christ does not rule us from without; the Church should awaken in us the life of Christ. The Church is his fulfillment and “fullness”(Eph. 1/23). She is the tabernacle of his presence, the building of which He is both Architect and Corner Stone; she is the ship and He the Pilot, she the deep ark and He the central Mast. She is the Paradise and He its Tree and Well of Life. He who is not, in one way or another, a member of the body does not receive the influx from the Head.

Practically speaking, for each one of us, Christ is thus His Church. We may think of her particularly under the aspect of the hierarchy, remembering Christ’s words: “He that hears you hears me; and he that despises you despises me”. The words of St. John Chrysostom help us not to separate ourselves from the Church of Christ: “Do not separate yourself from the Church! No power is as powerful as she. The Church is your hope; the Church is your salvation; the Church is your refuge. She is other than heaven and bigger than earth. She never ages and her vitality is eternal¹.

These words, I am sure echo the conviction of Archbishop Mar Ivanios who took the name Ivanios because of his conformity with the theological conviction of St. John Chrysostom.

God has willed that the Word of God who has become man to be the mediator between God and human kind (Tim.1/5). In other words, the human nature of the Messiah is the way willed by God for men to have communion with the Triune God. The human nature of the

Messiah is the way willed by God to be united with the divinity. The way willed by God for us sinners composed of body and soul to be united with divinity is the sinless Messiah composed of body soul.² The risen Saviour is with us till the end of the world. He is in the Church, which is His Body, of which He is the head. We unite with Jesus by being in the Church of Christ. We should receive Jesus into our body and soul, thus becoming the dwelling place of the Triune God. In order to do that he has established the divine mysteries called sacraments. These sacraments are the means by which we unite with the mystery of Christ or the sacrament of Christ. In the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist and in the celebration of the feasts of our Lord, we are given a living relationship to certain events in the life of Christ: the life, death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus Christ, His ascension to heaven, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the “last and great day of Pentecost” -a relationship which makes the Church a constant witness and participant of these events, of their saving, redeeming, life-giving and life-transfiguring reality. The Church (with each one of us as its member) has no other experience but the experience of these events; no other life but the “new life” which they always generate and communicate. The faith, thus, is not only not detachable from her experience, but is indeed that experience itself – the experience of that which “we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands” (1Jn1/1). For none of these events can be known in the rational meaning of that word, nor even believed in outside the experience which reveals their reality and makes us “witnesses to these things”. The Church’s faith as teaching and theology is rooted in faith as experience. Her *lex credendi* is revealed in her life (liturgy): her norm of faith is stated in her liturgy.

¹ P.G 52:402

² Cf. Inchackalody, *op. cit.* 1.57.

The ecclesial fruitfulness of the sacraments, especially of the Eucharist, can be better understood if we ponder on the inmost nature of the Church herself. The Church is variously described as the Body of the Christ, the sacrament of unity and the communion of believers in Christ. The image of the Church as the Body of Christ¹, referred to by Archbishop Mar Ivanios originates with St. Paul, who declares that all the members of the body, though many are one Body in Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). St. Paul clearly understands that the unity of the ecclesial body has its source in the Eucharistic body of Christ. “The bread which we break” he asks, “is it not the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10/16-17). The statements about the sacraments and the Church in the speech of Mar Ivanios about the sacraments and their relation to the Church implies that the Eucharist in which the Lord gives us his body and makes us one body, forever remains the place where the Church is generated, where the Lord himself never ceases to be found anew; in the Eucharist the Church is most compactly herself – in all places, yet one only, just as He is only one.

Unity is of the essence of the Church. Christ bestowed unity on His Church from the beginning. This unity subsists in the Catholic Church. Christ always gives His Church the gift of unity, but the Church must always pray and work to maintain and perfect the unity that Christ wills for her. This is why Jesus himself prayed at the hour of his passion and does not cease praying to the Father, for the unity of his disciples: “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us”. The desire to recover the unity of all Christians is a gift of Christ and a call of the Holy Spirit. The highest exemplar and source of this mystery is the unity in the Trinity of persons, of one God, the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. As St. Cyprian says, the Universal Church is seen to be “a people brought into unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”.

¹ *Ibid.* 1.61-62.