

# The Malankara Catholic Church and Ecumenism

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The Malankara Catholic Church is one of the Particular (Individual, *sui juris*) Churches in the Catholic communion. It has its beginning with the preaching of St. Thomas, one of the Apostles of our Lord. From the beginning till the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was an undivided Church. It was the one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ in this part of the globe. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there was a revolt against the latinization policy of the Western Portuguese missionaries and it is known in history as the *Coonan Cross Oath* of 1653. Eventually a section of the Thomas Christians, the forefathers of the present day Malankara Catholics, joined the non-Chalcedonian Syrian Orthodox Church in West Asia and became Jacobites. Thus the group drifted away from the full, visible and canonical communion with the Catholic Church. But there were continuous efforts from the part of this section to reestablish the lost full communion. The other section of the Thomas Christians who continued under the Western missionaries also tried in this regard. But the attempts did not bear ample fruits chiefly because of the pre-Vatican mentality of those days and the opposition from the part of the missionaries working in India.

## The pre-Vatican mentality

It had certain characteristics and was different from the post-Vatican mentality of the Catholic Church. The Christian Church in the Western Patriarchate considered itself as **the** Catholic Church, considering all the rest as non-Catholic. That is, it identified itself with the Church of Christ. There was one-sided growth in ecclesiology. This was the case of all the Churches in isolation. There emerged a very centralized administrative system in the West. As a result of the formation of the Papal States, the Pope had absolute authority in all the affairs of the Papal States. As the Patriarch of the West and as the temporal ruler of the Papal States, Pope had a very prestigious position among the European rulers and faithful. With the colonialism of the 16<sup>th</sup> century,

the Western missionaries went to the Asian, African and American countries and there also the Latin Church established its own dioceses. Thus geographically the Latin Church became worldwide. But still it was a Church having one ecclesial tradition, namely Roman or Latin. It did not have the full communion with the other Christian Churches.

The Western missionaries entered into missionary activity among some of the Orientals in order to “convert them to the true Church for the salvation of their souls”. Thus there originated the Eastern Catholic Churches of the Byzantine tradition and others in the East. These missionaries believed *in uniformity* and tried to merge these non-Latin Churches into the Latin Church, keeping the bare minimum of external liturgical diversities. They appeared to be Orientals, but their Seminary training was done chiefly by the Western missionaries and their spirituality was Western. The missionaries imported the Western pious practices among them. As a result of this type of formation, there emerged a mentality among the Oriental Catholics, which upheld everything Western and Latin superior to the Eastern traditions. Their philosophy and theology were those of the Latin Church. In general, latinization was the general policy in those days. The Church was considered in a monolithic pattern. Eastern mentality was not at all taken into serious consideration on many occasions. It was not given its due honor and status. The Western mentality was to consider these Eastern Churches as *Rites*, namely part of one monolithic Church, having slight liturgical diversities. Although many of these Churches were of Apostolic origin, they were considered mere Rites. The autonomy of these Churches ignored. This mentality prevailed till the Second Vatican Council. Many of the theologians, since the General Synod of Lyons in 1274, were uniformists. They believed that unity is uniformity and for them plurality or diversity was the root cause of all evils in the Church. One typical example is the expression, “*Varietas mater est et initium discordiae*” (Variety is the mother and beginning of all discords) of the Dominican Master General Cardinal Humbert, who dominated the General Synod of Lyons in 1274

## **General Background of the Communion in 1930**

It was in this background in the West that Mar Ivanios entered into ecumenical negotiations with the Roman Catholic Church. The Coonan Cross Oath of 1653 was a reaction against the Western Portuguese missionaries, who did not at all respect the *autonomy* of this ancient Apostolic Church. The Thomas Christians always wanted to uphold the God-given autonomy of their Church. They had the consciousness that their Church was never part of any other Church, but it was the one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ. It might not have always maintained the contact with other Christian Churches. That it did not have continuous contact with the other Churches did not mean that it was not Catholic and was not the Church of Christ in India. When the Portuguese missionaries, according to their then Western mentality, tried to make it *Roman Catholic* (= Latin) and latinize and merge it with the Church in the Western Patriarchate, there occurred the resistance. They wanted to preserve their centuries old liturgical traditions, authority of the Archdeacon, who was the local leader and the autonomy of the community. They did not want to alter their laws, customs and traditions. But, alas, in 1876 a section, the forefathers of the Malankara Catholics lost all these. Their liturgy was changed. The West Asian Jacobites changed altogether the East Syrian Liturgy and introduced the West Syrian liturgy in all the parishes. The Church was made part of the anti-Chalcedonian Syrian Jacobite Church in West Asia. The Patriarch Peter III divided the Malankara diocese (*Idavaka*) into seven dioceses and established a Malankara Association and a *Managing Committee* in order to weaken the authority of the Malankara Metropolitan and thus he tried to destroy the autonomy of this Church.

### **One group stood for Autonomy**

Mar Ivanios knew that a section among the Puthenkuttukar, under the leadership of the Malankara Metropolitan Vattasseril Mar Dionysius, stood for autonomy. That group thought that in order to regain the autonomy the establishment of the Catholicate was necessary. But

the West Syrian Jacobite leadership was opposed to such an idea of giving autonomy to the Puthenkur Malankara Christians. In spite of such opposition, that group managed to establish it in 1912, by the senior Patriarch Mar Abd Msiha. But the events did not develop, as they wanted. In 1913 the first Catholicos died and the group could not install another one till 1925 because of the civil litigation with the other group and of the thought of some that the Malankara Church was under the Jacobite Patriarch. The Second Catholicos also died in 1928.

When the group around Mar Dionysius and Mar Ivanios entered into ecumenical contacts with the Roman Catholic Church in 1926, they demanded three things:

- 1.The Catholicos and the Synod should be recognized; i. e., the autonomy of the Malankara Apostolic Church.
- 2.The bishops should have authority over their faithful, wherever they are.
- 3.Liturgical and other ecclesial traditions should be respected and should not be changed. i.e., the integral Oriental traditions should be preserved without any change.

### **Autonomy not recognized**

From their part, the Malankara bishops pledged that they would enter into full, visible and canonical communion with the Pope, the successor of St. Peter, the Chief of the Apostles in the ancient Apostolic See of Rome. According to the pre-Vatican mentality of the Western Church, it was impossible to recognize the autonomy of this Apostolic Church. So the first demand was rejected. All the rest were granted. The Pope recognized the Malankara Church as a *Rite* in the Catholic communion. Mar Ivanios was very sorry about it. He demanded again and again the recognition of the autonomy. Since it was not recognized, the Catholicos could not enter into the communion and give leadership

to this movement. At that time, communion meant subjection to the Pope. Since Mar Dionysius won the civil litigation, he withdrew from further ecumenical negotiations and was even opposed to it.

### **Communion-a Gigantic Task**

In spite of these setbacks, Mar Ivanios entered into full, visible and canonical communion with the Catholic Church. It was a great and gigantic task that he achieved. God has sent a giant to accomplish it (Margaret Gibbons, *Archbishop Mar Ivanios*, p.103). God opened a path through his instrumentality for the full communion of all the separated Thomas Christians, who were eager for the visible and canonical communion with the Roman Catholic Church. He achieved a communion in accordance with the mentality of those days. But his objective was autonomy in communion. Through him, God fulfilled the earnest desire of millions of Thomas Christians and showered his gift of unity.

From 1930 onwards, many thousands of Thomas Christians from the various Puthenkur communities followed Mar Ivanios and entered into visible communion with the Catholic Church. The Malankara Catholic Church spread the message of *catholicity and communion*. Whoever wanted to be away from civil litigation and to lead peaceful Christian life, became Catholic. It was the courageous steps of Pope Pius XI, that made this communion a reality. There was strong opposition from several quarters, both from the part of the Orthodox-Jacobite Church, from the part of the secular rulers and even from some Catholic brethren. But Pope Pius XI of blessed memory did not at all consider any of the objections. In the case of Mar Ivanios, the Pope did not also follow all the formalities of the Roman Curia. As the guardian of unity, with extended hands, he embraced Mar Ivanios with the words, “*My Son, you are my good son. Welcome a big welcome.*” In later life on several occasions Mar Ivanios remembered with tears of joy of this memorable event. Even at his deathbed he remembered it. By this loving gesture, Pope Pius XI was embracing all the Thomas Christians who cherished the full visible communion

with the Catholic Church. The Pope sanctioned the demands and requests of Mar Ivanios, even without consulting the Curial officials. It was the great generosity of Pope Pius XI and the earnestness of Mar Ivanios that made the communion in 1930 a reality.

### **1932-1962**

From 1932 to 1962 the community grew into a dynamic and living Christian Church. Archbishop Mar Ivanios, the great champion of communion passed away in 1953. Under the leadership of Pope Pius XII, the territory of the diocese of Tiruvalla was extended to the North and to the East. His Eminence Cardinal Eugène Tisserant, the then Secretary of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, played a leading role in realizing it. He will be remembered with gratitude in the history of the Malankara Catholic Church. Numerically the Malankara Catholic Church grew considerably during these years.

### **The post-Vatican Roman Catholic Ecclesiology**

With the Second Vatican Council, there is a marked difference in the attitude and ecumenical relationship of the Roman Catholic Church towards the other Christian Churches. The Catholic Church does no more identify itself with the Church of Christ. On the contrary it considers that the *Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church*. It avoids any exclusive claim that it alone is the Church of Christ. It no more calls the other Churches heretical or schismatic. They are now called *Sister Churches*. Latin theology is no more the norm and criterion to judge other theologies. It does not demand any more uniformity but it accepts legitimate diversity and plurality in the forms of expression in Liturgy, Catechesis, Church life, Church government, and Spirituality and Canonical discipline. It made a distinction between the *content of faith* and the *formulation of faith*. It acknowledges that there is *Hierarchy of Truths*. It publicly acknowledges that there were mistakes from the part of the Catholic Church towards the other Churches and asked pardon for its faults. It told publicly that it pardons every Church which had offended it in any way in the past. It assured that the mistakes in the past would not be repeated in the future. It

clarified that unity is not the merging of any Church in another Church, but it is communion of Churches. It believes firmly that division in the body of Christ is a grave sin. Unity is the gift of God for His Church. Human beings do not determine the nature or the time of union. It is with God according to His divine plan. And in fact only God knows the mode and time of this communion. In other words, there is no pre-planned model for unity in the future. We do not make the unity of the Church. We receive it as a gift from God. We prepare ourselves through *dialogue of love* and *theological dialogue*, change of attitudes and conversion of hearts and personal and common prayer. The Catholic Church believes that for the full, visible and canonical communion, the ecumenical relationship at the time of separation among the Churches should be taken into consideration. Even though the Churches can no longer go back to that state fully anymore because of time and persons, that element cannot be discarded. All the Churches should have a will to pardon and to reevaluate their Ecclesiologies which they have developed in isolation.

Moreover, Catholic Church firmly believes that on basic tenets of Faith the Eastern Churches uphold the Orthodox faith. Even those remaining apparent differences could be considered as diverse formulations of this one faith and could be solved under divine providence. They are no more sound reasons for remaining isolated and separated. With the Eastern Apostolic Churches, the Catholic Church is in *almost full communion*. “We have become almost one Church” are the words of the Pope. Catholic Church does not persuade anybody from the Eastern Churches to join it. The Orthodox Churches are not mission fields of the Catholic Church. For the sake of salvation, one is not invited to join the Catholic Church. At the same time, Catholic Church does not hinder anybody, who wants to join the Catholic Church, but respects the freedom of conscience of the individuals. The Churches are invited to get united because it is the will of Christ and that division is sinful and counter *witnessing*. Catholic Church makes a distinction between *full communion* and *partial communion*. With the Eastern Apostolic Churches, Catholic Church is in *almost full communion*; i.e., Catholic Church is

recognizing the basic Apostolic faith, Holy Orders and other Sacraments and the Apostolic succession of these Churches. The Western Protestant Churches also are related to the Catholic Church in varying degrees. It is the affirmation of the Catholic Church that there are more uniting elements among the Churches than the separating elements. But at the same time, it realizes that there are still weighty differences in doctrine still existing between Catholic Church and the Western Protestant Churches. Catholic Church is today even prepared to discuss the ministry of unity of the bishop of Rome. It is trying to solve all the remaining problems through fraternal discussions. It upholds today that unity is necessary only on the essential things. It is trying to understand the varying formulations of the other Churches and is seeing whether they are complementary.

### **Malankara Catholic Church (1953-94)**

Ever since Metropolitan Benedict Mar Gregorios took up the leadership of the Malankara Catholic Church in 1953, there were drastic changes taking place in the Church and in the world at large. He guided the community at a period of transition. That period coincided with the renewal of the Second Vatican Council. He was a member of the Preparatory Committees for the Second Vatican Council, of the Ecumenical Council and the Post Conciliar Synods of Bishops. Just as Mar Ivanios was misunderstood and misrepresented by his own former friends and colleagues, during this period also, the ecumenical commitment of the Malankara Catholic Church continued to be mis understood and was misrepresented before the masses by some. But like Mar Ivanios, Mar Gregorios was a very great man in India and outside India. He was President of the Catholic Bishops' Council in Kerala and Catholic Bishops' Conference in India. He filled the hearts and minds of the citizens in Trivandrum. He was a committed ecumenist. He imbibed the change of mentality of the Second Vatican Council and tried till the end of his earthly life to present it and establish better relationship with all, especially with the other Christians. He was also one of the leading figures in the erection of the *Nilackal Church* and *Nilackal Ecumenical Center*, jointly owned

by all the Episcopal Churches in Kerala. One should expect better ecumenical relations among Christians during this period. Once Mar Gregorios led a high level delegation of the leaders of the various Episcopal Churches to Rome, Geneva and other important Christian centres in Europe.

## **Setbacks**

There were ecumenical setbacks from the various quarters.

(1) First of all, not all the Malankara Catholics imbibed the new change of attitude and mentality of the Second Vatican Council. Many continued to think in accordance with the pre-Vatican categories. They could not convince others that the Malankara Catholic Church stood for the unity of all the Thomas Christians and through the unity, the evangelization of the vast sub-continent. There arose a kind of lethargy in regard to ecumenism. Some even fell victim to the false propaganda of those with vested interest that the ecumenical activities of 1930 were against the ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council! To some extent these people failed to project the new ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. Once the first generation of the Malankara Catholics passed away, those who came after them acted like the ministers of an established Church. Some how they forgot that this Church had a very special ecumenical mission in Kerala and outside. It was not made known to others in a proper way in the new spirit.

(2) Secondly many of the members of the Latin hierarchy in India continued to uphold the mentality of the middle ages. That is to say, they continued, and still continue the pre-Vatican ecclesiology. They still considered the Oriental Apostolic Churches as *Rites*, as appendix to the monolithic Latin Church. They are not at all prepared for a change of mentality in accordance with the Council and the post – Vatican documents. They continued to be uniformists. Even the highest ecclesiastical authorities could not convince them of putting into practice the teaching of the Council. In the Indian context they all failed to uphold the post-Vatican newness of life; many went back to

the fourth Lateran Synod of 1215 and its Canon 9. They systematically opposed the pastoral care of the Orientals outside the restricted area in Kerala, and the missionary activities of the Apostolic Malankara Church. As a block they succeeded in hindering the hierarchical growth of the Malankara Church. Thus the documents of the Vatican Council and the post Vatican documents regarding the equality of the various Churches in the Catholic communion remained as fine documents for the press and as positive quotations to be cited in future in the doctoral dissertations. It has created a great ecumenical scandal.

(3) Since 1930 the Malankara Catholic Church was growing in diverse ways. It had a very humble starting. And Pope Pius XI was very generous to accept it into Roman Catholic communion even when there were only Mar Ivanios and Mar Theophilos as bishops to enter into communion. And even when the Malankara Catholic hierarchy was established in 1932, there were not considerable faithful. But in the divine Providence it grew into a big community of believers who wanted really to enter into full visible communion with the Catholic Church. But as the community grew numerically and as time went on, there was not the hierarchical growth for the Church. Mar Ivanios and even before him all the Fathers of the Malankara Church in all their writings to other ecclesiastical leaders were demanding the autonomy of the community. Those who guided the Church failed to realize the need for the autonomy or rather the later leaders were unaware of the need of the autonomy of the Church. They were also happy with the pre-Vatican ecclesiastical structures. As a Church, the situation of 1930 continues even today. As things stand, any move for autonomy will be very strongly opposed by a section of the bishops in India. They will continue to oppose the two basic duties of the Church, namely the pastoral care of the Malankara emigrants by the Malankarites themselves under their own Hierarchy and the missionary activity of the Malankara Catholic Church outside Kerala.

(4) As a result of this retardation of the hierarchical growth of the Church, the Orthodox has a very faulty idea about the ecumenism of the Catholic Church. What they see in the Indian context is not a

post-Vatican ecclesiology, but a pre-Vatican, nay a Fourth Lateran ecclesiology of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the day-to-day life of the Catholic Church in India, they neither see any newness of attitude, nor a new ecumenical outlook. They do not see that the Malankara Catholic Church enjoys its autonomy. They see this Church as an extension of the Latin Church. They see it as another Province of the Latin Church, like the Latin Province in Kerala. Of course; there is just some liturgical diversity. That is precisely the pre-Vatican mentality. Hence they begin to disbelieve the Documents and Pronouncements from the part of the Roman Catholic Church and become non-committed in the ecumenical dialogues. This is the ecumenical tragedy in India.

(5) From the part of the Orthodox themselves, there are elements which are opposed to any genuine Christian unity. From the very beginning of the Reunion movement in 1930, some Orthodox were trying to present this Church unity as a merging with the Roman Church and as a going away from the *Mother Church* to a foreign Church. Some tried their level best to make it a failure. Some even instigated the civil authorities to prevent its growth. A typical example is the case of C. P. Ramaswamy Ayer, the *Divan* in Travancore in those early days of the Movement. He was brought by the Patriarchal group (Bawa *Kakshy*) to plead against the other group (Metran *Kakshy*) in the civil litigation. Some Orthodox tried to tarnish the image of Mar Ivanios and a lot of false ideas were spread among the masses. But we forget and forgive all those who did all these. We want to purify our memory. We do not want to remember them any more. We confide them to the mercy of God. God was very kind and generous towards us and He blessed this community superabundantly. Our sole aim is the reunion of all the Thomas Christians, as they were seventeen centuries together. Even if some Orthodox continues to spread false ideas about us, we do not react. We find some of their leaders who take part in international ecumenical meetings, blaming the Malankara Catholic Church in time and out of time and finding fault with it and accusing it of proselytism. We do not believe in proselytism. But we do believe in the communion of all the Thomas Christians. We try to spread the message of unity and that too in line with the Second Vatican

Council and the post-Conciliar documents. We do not go back to the pre-Vatican ideologies. Always we stand for autonomy in communion. This is our God-given mission.

(6) The continued civil litigation and factionalism among the Jacobites and Orthodox hinder them from entering into any serious ecumenical dialogue with the Catholic Church. In the same way there is in some at least a mentality which does not give any respect to the history of Christianity in India. Every now and then one finds falsification of history. Some forget conveniently today that the Thomas Christians were for seventeen centuries one Church and one community. Unless there is a will for a new way of thinking from the part of all concerned, ecumenism in India will remain a dead letter.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of the withdrawal of a section of the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church from the ecumenical field and in spite of the denial of Rome to recognize the Catholicos and the Synod, Mar Ivanios entered into visible communion in 1930. In the same way, in spite of the misrepresentation and continued prejudices of some sections of the Christians towards the Malankara Catholic Church and in spite of the opposition from the part of the Latin hierarchy in India in regard to the pastoral care of the Malankara faithful outside Kerala and the missionary mandate, the Malankara Catholic Church is irrevocably committed to *autonomy in communion*. The vocation of the Malankara Catholic Church is to proclaim the *oneness, communion and Catholicity* on the one hand and *autonomy, individuality and Apostolicity* on the other hand. In this we are simply obeying the will of the Lord. There are still restrictions and hurdles in the growth of the Malankara Church. It has to grow to full autonomy in communion. It has to be a model for the Orthodox. It has to be a bridge Church. It has to be a bridge between the Western and Orthodox Churches. That is why its members think differently. But they think in line with the Conciliar teaching and the post-Conciliar teaching of the Holy See. They have an added vocation. The Latin hierarchy has to understand

the special history of the Malankara Apostolic Church and see how it entered into full visible communion with the Catholic Church. In God's providence, it is growing very fast in the ecumenical, missionary and pastoral dimensions. In the words of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II, "*the Malankara Catholic Church is one of the fastest growing Churches in the Catholic communion*".

If the Catholicos and Malankara Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church had decided in 1930 to enter into full visible communion with the Catholic Church together with Mar Ivanios, they could have given the leadership and the attitude of Rome would have been different. But the course of history took a different turn. After 1950 some of the Malankara leaders turned to Ethiopia, Egypt, Geneva and Moscow. And that also did not help them. If they had paid some attention to the successor of St. Peter in Rome, the history of Christianity in this land would have been different. Without a foundation and centre of communion, it is practically impossible to achieve lasting unity, as Christ wants for his Church. In other words, keeping the bishop of Rome out of the ecumenical scene, no full communion of Christianity is possible. But all the ecumenical negotiations are helpful, in the sense that they are stepping-stones for the wider communion.

There will be opposition from some quarters. But just as Pope Pius XI took a courageous step in receiving the Malankara Church into communion, courageous steps are necessary for the implementation of the Conciliar teachings. We demand not for our personal gain, but for the wider interest of the Church and for the promotion of the ecumenical cause of the Catholic Church. The elder brother may grumble when the younger brother is embraced. But Pius XI had the magnanimity to embrace the younger brother. The successor of Pius XI also is *presiding in love* and is the universal head and common Father of all the Churches in communion. At times he has to tell the elder brother, "My Son, whatever I have is yours. You have the whole world as the Latin territory. But these Christians of Apostolic origin are devoid of pastoral care throughout the world. They should have the basic ecclesial right for that and it is only justice that they take

care of the spiritual needs of their faithful. It does not curtail your chances for service to humanity, but enhances when your brother is also with you. Let us rejoice. As a loving Father, I have to do it and I can only do it for them. Nobody else would and could do it. Have compassion on them”.

The autonomy of the Malankara Catholic Church is something yet to be realized. In today’s ecumenical contacts, mere platitudes alone will not help us to go forward. We do not want ecumenical picnic travellers who fly from one ecumenical meeting to another. They may fill files and we may have volumes to read. And as Cardinal Walter Kasper said recently somewhere, “who can read all these documents?” We need action rather than mere words. And we expect that it will be done. One needs to be hopeful. Christianity is a religion of hopes and expectations. We are called to make history and transform the world in the love of our Lord. We do not exist to react, but we have to act. We should show the world at large that we believe in values and we are not afraid of Truth but we honor it and put into practice. Let us be able to hear once again what Pope Pius XI told Mar Ivanios in 1932, “My Son, you will find good news awaiting you on your return to India.”

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## **An Important New Book**

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