

Mar Ivanios and the Background of the Reunion Movement

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Introduction

The Ecumenical Movement in the Malankara Orthodox Church during the first half of the 20th century is historically known as the *Reunion Movement*. In the nineteen twenties leaders of the Malankara Orthodox Church initiated a Movement for a visible, full and canonical communion with the bishop of Rome and through him with the whole Catholic Church. It is called *Reunion* because of the following reason. From the Apostolic times till 1653 the Thomas Christian community was united as one Church with one liturgical tradition and ecclesial allegiance. It was the one holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ in this part of the globe. Because of the undue interference of the Western Portuguese Missionaries during the 16th century, there occurred a split in the community and one group eventually lost its full catholicity and entered into communion with the non-Chalcedonian Jacobite Syrian Church of Antioch/Syrian Orthodox Church. This lost full Catholic communion was reestablished in 1930. Hence it is called *Reunion*: reunion to full, canonical and visible catholicity and communion. The leadership for this Reunion was given by *Mar Ivanios of Bethany*, a bishop in the Malankara Orthodox Church. He was deputed by the then bishops of the Orthodox Church to negotiate with Rome for a full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. This article is trying to see the background of this Reunion Movement of 1930 and the role of Mar Ivanios in this gigantic endeavour.¹

Ever since the Coonan Cross Oath (1653 January), the fake ordination to episcopacy of Archdeacon Thomas by twelve priests on the basis of a fabricated document by Ittithomman *Cathanar*(1653 May) and the acceptance of the Jacobite bishop Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem(1665), the Puthenkur community of the Thomas Christians

in Kerala was in crisis and turmoil.² The separation of the Malankara Christians in 1653 from the rule of the Portuguese missionary bishops was meant for upholding the autonomy, individuality, and Oriental traditions of this ancient Apostolic Church. But unfortunately, it led one section to merge with the West Asian non-Chalcedonian Jacobite Syrian Church (today known in the ecumenical circles as the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch) and consequently to lose its own identity and age old East Syrian or Persian liturgical traditions and eventual alienation from the Catholic Church. The community came to be known as the *Puthenkuttukar* (people of the new allegiance) and thus lost its full visible Catholicity, one of the constituent elements for the ecclesiality of any Church. After this alienation, this community suffered several subsequent divisions.

¹ Cr., G.Chediath, *Ecumenism in India: Studia Oecumenica I*(2001),Opole,p.143-154; *Archbishop Mar Ivanios and Ecumenism: Studia Oecumenica, II* (2002)243-257; *An Outstanding Figure of the 20th century in India-On the fiftieth Death Anniversary of Archbishop Mar Ivanios(1882-1953): Studia Oecumenica III*(2003)201-212.

² Cf. G. Chediath, *The Malankara Catholic Church*, (Bethany Sisters' Publication) Kottayam,2003.

Divisions in the Puthenkur Community

1) In **1772** a very small group was forced to separate from the main body of the Puthenkur community and today they are known as the **Thozhiyur Church**.

2) In **1836**, after the *Second Mavelikkara Synod*, another group left the Puthenkur community and is today part of the **Madhya Kerala Diocese of the Church of South India**.

3) In **1889** a third group, called the *Reformed Jacobites*, had to leave the community and today they are known as the **Mar Thoma Church**.

4) In **1912** another group, after the excommunication of the Malankara Metropolitan Vattasseril Mar Dionysius (recently he is declared a saint by the Orthodox Church), by the West Asian Jacobite Patriarch Mar Abdalla and the establishment of the Catholicate by the senior Patriarch Mar Abd al-Msiha, formed the *Metran Kakshy* and today they are known as the **Malankara Orthodox Church**.

5) One section of the Puthenkur community even today continues as the Jacobites. In **2002** they formed a registered society with the name **Yakobaya Suriani Christiani Association Sabha (Jacobite Syrian Church)**. And since 1912 there was constant civil litigations, between the *Metran Kakshy* (Orthodox) and the *Bawa Kakshy or Kurillos Kakshy* (Jacobites)¹ in the name of the temporalities of the Church. The Jacobites consider themselves (since 1876) part of the Antiochene Jacobite Church, while the Orthodox faithful (since 1912) stand for the autonomy of the community.

Undue External Influence-Cause of the Divisions

Undue interference of the outsiders, factionalism within the community, and lay domination were the main reasons for these splits in the Puthenkur community. The undue interference of the Western Portuguese missionaries in the daily life of the St. Thomas Christians resulted in the Coonan Cross Oath (1653). The undue interference of the Anglicans and other Protestants from the West resulted in the *Mavelikkara Synod*, (1836), separation of a group, and the eventual

formation of the Reformed Jacobites (Marthomites). Its contribution is the **Trusty System**, by which the temporalities of the *Puthenkur* community came under three trustees: the Malankara Metropolitan, a priest representative and a lay person. The undue interference of the Jacobite Patriarch Peter III, resulted in **the Malankara Association and Managing Committee**, formed in the Mulanthuruthy Synod (1876) and the excommunication of the Reformed leaders and the alienation of the *Reformed Jacobites (later called Marthomites)*.

Lay Domination- another reason

Lay participation in the affairs of the Church was in the genuine tradition of the Thomas Christians. But as it was introduced by the Jacobite Patriarch in 1876, with the interference of the lay people in every thing connected with the life of the Church, resulted in restricting and weakening the authority of the *Malankara Metropolitan*. The new establishments, namely the *Trusty System*, the *Malankara Association* and the *Managing Committee*, paved the way for the undue lay domination in the *Puthenkur* community. The Jacobite Patriarch forced this community to be part of his Jacobite Church, which it was never before, and brought it under his authority.

Attempts for Regaining Unity

The St. Thomas Christians, both the *Puthenkuttukar* and the *Pazhayakuttukar (today's Syro-Malabar Catholic Church)*, ever since the separation, were trying their level best to reunite into one Church as they were in the previous seventeen centuries. Down through the centuries the leaders of both groups attempted, in varying degrees, for this purpose. But as long as the Western missionary bishops ruled the *Pazhayakuttukar*, all the attempts were unsuccessful because of the manipulations of the missionaries in influential circles. During the colonial period, it is said that the colonial powers had great influence, under the name of *Padroado*, in the various Roman Decasteries.

19th Century Turmoil

After the separation from the *Pazhayakur* community, the separated group was in constant turmoil. Nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed terrible factionalism. After the death of Mar Thoma VI, also called Mar Dionysius I, (+1808), there was utter confusion. And it continues even today. Mar Thoma VI desired earnestly the reunion of the two communities and in fact he entered into full, visible and canonical communion with the Church of Rome. But he could not continue in communion because of the intrigues of the Western missionaries. The validity of the ordinations of Mar Thoma VII, Mar Thoma VIII and Mar Thoma IX were questioned by one section of the community. Consequently the bishops sought the help of the *Thozhiyur bishops* for ordination and the Thozhiyur bishops ordained thus four successive bishops of the *Puthenkur* faction.

Then followed a series of events, detrimental to the unity of the *Puthenkur* Church. Those given below are the most important ones.

- (1) The questioning of the validity of the Episcopal ordination of Cheppatt Mar Dionysius by Athanasius, a certain Jacobite bishop from West Asia.
- (2) The re-ordination of some of the priests under him and their interdict by Mar Dionysius.
- (3) The separation of the Anglicans and the *Puthenkuttukar* in 1836 and the joining of a group of faithful in the Anglican Church.
- (4) The intrigues of a group under Mathews Mar Athanasius against Cheppatt Mar Dionysius, the ruling Metropolitan.
- (5) The civil litigations between Cheppatt Mar Dionysius and Mathews Mar Athanasios.
- (6) Mathews Mar Athanasios becomes the Malankara Metropolitan and Pulikkottil Mar Dionysius was ordained bishop by the Patriarch.

- (7) The excommunication of the ruling bishop Mathews Mar Athanasius and his adherents by the Jacobite Patriarch Peter III and the ensuing civil litigations.
- (8) Eventual separation of the followers of Mathews Mar Athanasius and the formation of the Marthoma Church.

Boyhood of Mar Ivanios

When Mar Ivanios was born (1882), there was utter confusion in the Jacobite Church. He was baptized in the Jacobite Church and his baptismal name was Geevarghese (George). There were two definite groups at that time in the Jacobite Church in Kerala: Jacobites and the *Reformed Jacobites* (eventual *Marthomites*). They were having civil litigation since 1879. Each side tried to win over to their side as many parishes as possible. The Marthomites had just one bishop, Thomas Mar Athanasios, while the Jacobites had seven bishops, six of them ordained by Patriarch Peter III in 1876-7. It was a scandalous situation. The mother of Geevarghese, knowing the actual story of the Malankara Christians, used to tell her child that they were all Catholics for centuries and the true Church of Christ is the Catholic Church. It went very deep into the mind of the child. There was falsification in the manuscript of the Church law. Every body knew about this falsification of the *Hudaya Canon* (the collection of canon laws of the Jacobite Church) in view of the civil litigation between the Jacobites and the Reformed Jacobites. Finally in 1889 the *Royal Court Verdict* went against the Reformed Jacobites and their bishops had to lay down all the Episcopal *insignia* and go empty handed from the Court. Eventually they organized into another faction, *the Marthoma Church*. Sad to say, they moved closer to the Protestants. Most of the people who joined the Marthoma Church were people who came under the influence of the *Revival Movement* of 1850 in Kerala. They kept the external form of the Antiochene liturgy, but adopted the Lutheran and Anglican theology. Even though the Reformed Jacobites were defeated in the litigations, there were strong

groups in many of the parishes, which supported the *Revival Movement*.

The 20th century Conflicts

Even after the separation of the Marthomites from the Puthenkur community, those who remained were not all united, though they were all known as the Jacobites. There were those who supported unduly or enthusiastically the Jacobite Patriarch, willing to submit to him in all matters, and considering themselves as part of the Jacobite Church of Antioch. There were also those who were against the undue interference of the Jacobite Patriarch and stood for the local autonomy. The Jacobite Patriarch, on his part, demanded that all the temporalities of the Church should be brought under him. In 1909 Vattasseril Mar Dionysius succeeded Pulikkottil Mar Dionysius as the Malankara Metropolitan and in the same year Geevarghese was ordained a priest, and he was known as Fr.P.T. Geevarghese or *M.A.Achan*. The arrival of the Patriarch Mar Abdalla in 1909 and his excommunication of Mar Dionysius on the sole reason that he did not submit the temporalities of the Church to the Patriarch irritated many in the land. Then the group around Mar Dionysius installed a Catholicos in 1912 with the help of the senior Patriarch Mar Abd al- known as the *Malankara Orthodox Church*. From 1909 till 1913 Fr.P.T. Geevarghese was very closely associated with the events in his Church. He was the main instrument in the establishment of the Catholicate and was fed up with the activities of the Patriarch Mar Abdallah and with the litigations. He wanted to keep away from the quarrel and lead a contemplative life.

Both the *Metran Kakshy* and the *Bawa Kakshy* were Jacobites in varying degrees. But even as a priest, Fr. P.T. Geevarghese wanted to break the ties with the Jacobite Patriarch Abdallah, because he knew that the Jacobite Patriarch was not the legitimate head of the Malankara Church. Mar Dionysius could not or did not repudiate the authority of the Patriarch, from whom he received the Episcopal ordination. In spite of the excommunication from the part of the Jacobite Patriarch,

he adhered to the Patriarch, and till his death he was a Jacobite. That may be one of the reasons why he did not install another Catholicos in 1913, when the first Catholicos died. That may be one of the reasons why he went in 1923 to Mardin to get reconciled with the Jacobite Patriarch. That may be the reason why he included the name of the Patriarch in the Constitution. That may be the reason why he withdrew support to the ecumenical negotiations with Rome, when he won the civil litigation. He was not a committed ecumenist, but he was neither a committed Jacobite like his opponents (the *Bawa Kakshy*). He, in fact, stood for the autonomy. But he did not think that it was impossible under the Jacobite Patriarch.

Fr. P. T. Geevarghese, on the other hand, was a committed ecumenist, as is clear from the later events. He disliked civil litigations. He was very sorry about the scandal of division in Christianity. He realized that it is a serious wound in the body of Christ. He wanted to realize the will of Christ, "*that all may be one*". He sought peace and tranquility. So when an opportunity was presented to him, he chose it and left for Serampore as Professor of Church History in the Protestant University. There he committed himself for deep study, life of prayer, penance and contemplation. He prayed for his Church, did penance for its sake, and sought ways and means for the progress and peace of his Church.

Serampore(1913-1919)

The years in Serampore as Church History Professor were decisive for Fr. P. T. Geevarghese. He read more and more books in Church History and had opportunity to evaluate objectively and impartially the history of Christianity in and outside India. He studied thoroughly the origin and development of the Jacobite Church in West Asia and its introduction in Kerala after 1665. He reflected over the relationship of the Thomas Christians to the Jacobite Church during the 19th century and the recent events under Patriarch Mar Abdallah. He realized that the West Asian Jacobite Church (Syrian Orthodox Church), then living under the Ottoman Turks, had only a marginal and sectarian existence

and that it was not at all missionary oriented at that time. He realized that it was the Jacobite prelates, who came here from West Asia and lived here during the second half of the 19th century, who partly alienated the *Puthenkur* and *Pazhayakur* communities. He realized that the full and widespread introduction and use of the Antiochene liturgy in India was only very recent, namely with the *Synod of Mulanthuruthy* in 1876. He asked himself why the Malankara Apostolic Church should remain as part of a sectarian Church, which separated itself from other ancient Churches with the Council of Chalcedon (451). Why can't it join the main body of Christianity, namely the Catholic Church, with which it was in communion till 1653. Finally he realized that as long as the *Puthenkur* community remained under the Jacobite Patriarch, there could never be peace, unity and prosperity. It was his firm conviction concerning the autonomy of the Church that enabled him to give the leadership to establish the Catholicate in 1912. But contrary to his ideals, the *Metran Kakshy* did not appoint another one till 1925 and both sides went to the court for litigation. It must be affirmed very clearly that the Jacobite Patriarch was thoroughly opposed to the idea of an autonomous Catholicos in India.

The Monastic Ideal

He knew the importance of monasticism in the renewal of the Church. So, as a priest, he started a kind of monastic life, even when he was at Serampore. In 1919 he resigned his teaching post at Serampore and came to Perunad and started monastic establishments for men. He was then known as *Abo Geevarghese*. Monasticism was totally absent in the then Jacobite Church in India. There were a few isolated monks in the West Asian Jacobite Church. But as a living force to give leadership for the renewal of the Church monasticism was absent there. *Abo Geevarghese* loved the Church and aimed at its renewal. Before establishing his monasteries in Kerala, he went around the villages and cities of India and the *Ashrams/Monasteries* of Hindu

monks and received first hand experience of the Indian way of monastic life. He adapted a lot from the Hindu monasticism in its forms of expression. Through the Bethany Monastic Establishment he succeeded in renewing the Church in some quarters in Kerala. In 1925, when he became the bishop of Bethany, he adopted the name Mar Ivanios. Later he started the Bethany monastic establishment for women at Tirumulapuram/ Tiruvalla in Kottayam district.

Bishop of Bethany (1925)

After the death of the first Catholicos in 1913, the *Metran Kakshy* installed the second Catholicos only in 1925. It was done after a temporary victory for Mar Dionysius in the civil courts. This installation was done without the cooperation of the Jacobite Patriarch, although the *Statikon* (letter of erection of the Catholicate) of Mar Abd al-Msiha stipulated that it should be done with the cooperation of the Patriarch. Vattasseril Mar Dionysius did not take part personally in the installation, nor was there present any bishop of the Jacobite faction. The Second Catholicos was one of the bishops ordained by Mar Abd al-Msiha and the bishops who conducted the installation were also ordained by the same Patriarch. So in the eyes of the Jacobite Patriarch and the Jacobites, the act was illegal and the bishops and the Catholicos were schismatics in the eyes of the Jacobite Church. The same was true in the case of *Abo Geevarghese* who was ordained by the new Catholicos on the following day (May 1), as bishop of Bethany, with the name Mar Ivanios. Even though they all were Jacobites by birth, they were having no allegiance to the Jacobite Church. That is to say, the Catholicos and the three bishops were independent of the Jacobite Church. In 1925 the Patriarch Mar Elias III, wrote to the Jacobite parishes in Kerala, that these three bishops and the Catholicos were excommunicated from the Jacobite Church because they were schismatic¹. *Abo Geevarghese* was ordained the bishop of Bethany, not with the permission of the Patriarch, or was he elected by the *Malankara Association* or approved by the *Managing Committee*. He was ordained bishop of Bethany at a time when several

Dioceses, erected by Patriarch Peter III, were vacant. So Mar Ivanios thought that there was no need to have allegiance to the Patriarch, nor to the other bodies. He was ordained head of an independent and autonomous monastic establishment, not involved in any way in the civil litigations. *Abo* Geevarghese did not write a *Salmuta* (*declaration of faith and obedience*) that he accepts the teachings of the Jacobite Church and the authority of the Jacobite Patriarch. He did not curse Pope St. Leo the Great, as prescribed by the Jacobite Ordination Ritual. So he became a bishop entirely in a new way. He told in anticipation to the ordaining bishops that he would not condemn Pope St. Leo, the Great and they accepted it². So even at the time of the Episcopal ordination, *Abo* Geevarghese kept the autonomy and independence of Bethany. The Jacobite Patriarch condemned this enthronement and ordination and branded them as “laymen with red clothes” and men excommunicated from the Jacobite Church. He told his followers in Kerala that these people have no authority any more in the Jacobite Church.³ Since there was no *Salmuta*, Mar Ivanios was not even under the Catholicos. Later Mar Ivanios writes about his Episcopal ordination:

“We⁴ have become a Remban on the 15th of *Makaram* 1925⁵. It was rather accidental that we were raised to the episcopacy. The Episcopal synod met at Parumala to discuss the installation of Mar Philoxenus as Second Catholicos of the East. At that time we were also present there. The bishops decided that we should become a bishop. We answered: If only the bishops are convinced that I am called by God to be a bishop, I would agree to it. They again insisted that we should become the bishop of Bethany. Accordingly on 19th *Medam*, 1925, we were consecrated bishop”⁶.

Motives for Reunion

Mar Ivanios explained to a gathering at Perunad the reasons why he sought for the full, visible and canonical communion with the Catholic Church.

He says:

“Our Lord Jesus Christ, the unique Savior of mankind established just one Church, his living body. It grew in the world according to the divine plan. In 451 at Chalcedon a small group of bishops disagreed with the vast majority of bishops and separated themselves from this body. Eventually this anti-Chalcedonian group was formed as a separate ecclesial body, but was further divided into several sub-groups, having differing doctrinal tenets. They were later organized by a certain Jacob *Burdaya* and were known after him as *Jacobites*. In Kerala, basing on a false rumor, a group remained separated from the main body, the Catholic Church, and got into touch with the above-mentioned Jacobite Church in West Asia. From the beginning till today, this community has become a field of constant rivalries and civil litigations because of the absence of a common leader, as in the Catholic Church. There arose first the Thozhiyur Church (1772), a few joined the Anglicans (1836), the Marthomites originated in 1889, and in 1912 those who got separated from the Catholic Church were again divided into *Bawa Kakshy* (Jacobite) and *Metran Kakshy* (Orthodox). As a member of the *Metran Kakshy*, we worked hard for its growth and uplift. Our close contact with the Church enabled us to look into the depth of the Church and it forced us to leave for Serampore. We looked for the Church of Christ and we found that it subsists in the Catholic Church and thus we started our ecumenical contacts. If obeying Christ is the primary duty of a Christian, we tried to obey him and we did not think of the difficulties for its realization. The Church is God’s Church and is not to be dealt with according to each one’s whims and fancies. The real body of Christ is the Catholic Church. Those branches separated from the main trunk are destined to dry up. It is this peeping into the inner life of the Church that led us to ecumenical relationship with the Catholic Church. The late Second Catholicos knew it very well and was intent on communion with the Catholic Church. He was very impatient when the reply from Rome was delayed. The present Catholicos also was convinced that this was the only solution to the problems, facing the Jacobite Church. Although we made all the contacts with Rome, we did it as the

representative of all the others. We agreed that we would accept the Pope. We requested that we should have the authority over our faithful, the liturgical texts should not be changed and the position of the Catholicos with the Synod should be recognized.”¹

Negotiations with Rome

We have a letter from Mar Ivanios which demonstrates his inner disposition regarding communion with the Catholic Church. It was written on 14th January 1929² from Tiruvalla to Mr. Mamman Mappila:

“We are fully confident that in each of our steps we are being guided by the good God. I desire earnestly to raise the community in which I was born and brought up to God in order to reform it and lead it to prosperity. May I share with you that I had no personal interest in this matter. I believe firmly that the reunion of the Christian communities must be based on the foundation of the true history of Christianity. I am fully aware that such a reunion is not possible without the Roman Catholic Church. Rome should be the principal partner for this purpose. During this period, the Spirit of God is moving me forcefully to propose me as a sacrifice for this cause. A reform Movement with a noble ideal alone can save this community. I believe fully that God is calling me for upholding such an ideal¹.

¹ *Ibid.* 60-70 (not literal).

² Malayalam Era - 1106.

He continues, “I feel that the Almighty God is calling me to jump into His Ocean of love. In my correspondence with Rome, I have not written a single sentence for my personal gain. I have aimed only at the glory of God’s name, the uplift of the Jacobite community and the reunion of the separated sons of St. Thomas. I have sought for reunion, demanding the acceptance and preservation of our liturgy and traditions, recognition of the episcopacy of our bishops and their authority over our faithful. In our correspondence with Rome, we aimed at the continuous existence of the Catholicate and the reunion of all the bishops of the *Metran Kakshy*. Thus I aimed at opening a door for the reunion of both the *Puthenkuttukar* and the *Pazhayakuttukar*.”¹ As we can gather from these letters, in his correspondence with Rome, Mar Ivanios aimed at three things:

1. Recognition of the integral Oriental traditions.
2. Acceptance of the Catholicos with the Synod and its permanence in the Catholic communion.
3. Acceptance of the Prelates with their right to govern their faithful.

According to the pre-Vatican ecclesiology, Rome did not recognize the Catholicate with the Synod. That meant the full autonomy of the Church in the Roman Catholic communion was not granted. All the other demands were granted. There was also a long delay of four years from the part of Rome for the study of the *Memorandum*, sent by Mar Ivanios. On the other side, from the part of the *Metran Kakshy*, the Second Catholicos who was very enthusiastic about the visible communion with the Catholic Church passed away suddenly in 1928. In 1929 the *Metran Kakshy* won the civil litigation and the third Catholicos turned out to be the founder of the *Malankara Orthodox Church*. Since his position was not recognized by Rome, he did not join the Catholic Church. Vattasseril Mar Dionysius was a Jacobite and till the end he remained a Jacobite. But many of his relatives, who knew very closely the reunion attempts, left him and followed Mar Ivanios.

Conclusion

We were trying to see the background of the reunion movement of the Malankara Orthodox Church. We see how it succeeded in 1930 and why some of the leaders withdrew from the negotiations at the end. We have seen the reasons for the partial success of the movement. We saw how God guided the reunion attempts from the part of Mar Ivanios and how he could open a door for all those who think that the communion with the Catholic Church is necessary for the full ecclesiality of any Church. He, of course, was guided by the ecclesiology of those days; the same indeed was true of the then Roman officials. Now it is the duty of the present day leadership of both the Malankara Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches to enter into fresh dialogue for a full communion according to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and in the light of the post-Vatican documents.

¹ *Ibid.* 408-9.