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GEEVARGHESE CHEDIATH
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THE ECUMENICAL VISION OF MORAN MOR BASELIOS CYRIL CATHOLICOS (1935-2007)

Moran Mor Baselios Cyril (Malancharuvil) was the first Major Archbishop of the Malankara Catholic Church (February 10, 2005 – January 18, 2007). The Malankara Church entered into full, canonical and visible communion with the successor of St. Peter in Rome, on 20th September 1930 through Mar Ivanios, the then Metropolitan of Bethany in the Malankara Orthodox Church. The Malankara Catholic hierarchy was established by Rome in 1932 and Mar Ivanios (†1953) became its first Metropolitan. He was succeeded by Mar Gregorios (1953-1994) and Mar Baselios, first as Administrator and then Metropolitan (1994-2004). On 10th February 2005 the Malankara Catholic Church was raised to the canonical status of Major Archiepiscopal Church by His Holiness Pope John Paul II. At present Mar Baselios Cleemis (Thottunkal) is the Major Archbishop. According to the Indian and Syriac tradition, the Major Archbishop, as (*pater et caput*)¹ is called Catholicos.

The Malankara Church, separated from the full communion from the Catholic Church after the unfortunate events (the Coonan Cross Oath and the fake ordination of Mar Thomas the Archdeacon by twelve priests in 1653), was trying to reestablish the lost full communion. Down through the centuries there were

¹ Cf. J. MADEY, *The Catholicos of the Malankara Catholic Church*, „Studia Oecumenica” 5 (2005) 111-126.

attempts for reunion and the crowning of these attempts was in 1930 with the reunion of Mar Ivanios with the Roman Apostolic See. Since then the Malankara Catholic Church was promoting the cause of unity of the various separated Christians in Kerala and other parts of India and also inviting to the Catholic fold those who had not yet received the Gospel message. Moran Mor Baselios Cyril Catholicos followed the footsteps of Mar Ivanios and Mar Gregorios, his predecessors, in his ecumenical endeavors. He realized fully that the Lord came to reunite the scattered humankind (Gen 11,9) in Him and to recreate the new man by uniting in Himself. He is the Omega point, where the distinctions of caste, colour, language and nationality disappear. In Him there is no distinction between Greeks and non Greeks, Jews and non-Jews. All are united in Him as His members. This is what happened at Pentecost. On that day 3000 people were united to His body (Acts 2,41). Our Lord has entrusted this mission to His disciples with the commandment of love, unity and concord, He sent them to the world (Jn 13,35). This is the message the disciples have to preach: the message of love, unity and concord among the nations and people. With this message of love first St. Thomas (A.D.52) and then St. Francis Xavier (1542) came to India.

From the 17th century onwards there arose in the Church in India a period of domination of the Western missionaries over the natives and as a result there was a situation of lack of love, mutual distrust, quarrels and finally division. This division in the Apostolic Church in India continued for centuries. All the attempts for reconciliation failed due to one reason or other². On this scene appeared in the beginning of the 20th century, Mar Ivanios, Metropolitan of Bethany (1882-1953) of the Malankara Orthodox Church with his message of love, concord, harmony, peace and unity. He invited to the Catholic fold all the Christians in this land, especially the members of his Orthodox-Jacobite Church, who were entangled in unending civil litigations and inner conflicts. His great ambition was to unite the people in India in Jesus Christ and in His Spirit. He wanted to weld up the broken relationship with the Catholic Church and put an end to the isolated and marginalized existence of his own community. He invited all people of good will to the sheepfold of love. Many people listened to him and inherited the love, tranquility and peaceful prayer life in the parishes and genuine Christian experience. Mar Gregorios also treaded the same path and led many who were disposed to the voice of the Spirit. Mar Baselios also was called by God to continue this divine mission of unity.

The unity of those who believe in Jesus Christ is in accordance with the will of the Lord and is necessary for the proclamation of the Gospel message. They

² For details see ARCHBISHOP CYRIL MAR BASELIOS, *The Syro-Malankara Church*, Trivandrum 1997, 33-98; X. KOODAPUZHA, *Christianity in India*, Kottayam 1998, 131-156; G. CHEDIATH, *The Malankara Catholic Church*, Kottayam 2003, 47-92.

should be one, so that the world may believe. This was what Mar Baselios basically believed and tried to put into practice in the daily life. He says in one of his speeches: „In the course of history, all the different ecclesial traditions have suffered wounds of division and separation”³. He continues, „That Christianity remains divided today is a painful fact, and even a most scandalous one, contradictory and detrimental to the very message it is called to proclaim” Then he quotes the decree on Ecumenism of the Vatican II council⁴. His aim was not to take away a few people from the other communities and increase the number of the community where he was the head. On the other hand, those who proclaim the name of the Lord should be united and they should proclaim him in one voice and thus enhance the proclamation of the Gospel and to His witnessing. The aim is the unity of the sheep, the Lord redeemed through His blood. Then there is no distinction between „our people and your people”. All are the people of God. The Christian Church itself is meant for all people and it includes all. Its purpose is ultimately the growth and progress of all mankind. That is why it is Catholic. He says in the same speech, „the Church of Christ is one and God wills that it should remain one. The real mission and task of the Church is to render Christ present in our world, to bear witness to Him, by being the sacrament of Christ, and the sacrament of unity, as an effective symbol of unity in and for the world” Mar Baselios Cyril stood for these values.

The hierarchical head of the Malankara Catholic Church considers that among the ancient Apostolic Churches (Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox and ancient Church of the East) there is no basic difference in the content of faith, but the apparent differences are differences in terminology. There can be difference in the emphasis which each Church gives to the values, and according to the hierarchy of values it is legitimate to tolerate the emphasis given by various Churches. These terminological differences or emphasis do not affect in any way the content of faith. He thinks with the Church and its teaching in the Second Vatican Council and recognizes the mysteries (sacraments), imposition of hands, apostolicity and ecclesiality of the ancient Churches. There could be and there is diversity and plurality in theology, in the administrative set up, catechetical instruction and liturgy and even in the form of spirituality. The Malankara Church believes in the unity of Christians, but it does not believe in uniformity. It believes in the communion of Churches, but it does not believe in the merging of any Church in another Church. What is necessary according to him among the Apostolic Churches is mutual recognition and mutual respect. Down through the centuries all the Churches had one sided growth and developed one sided ec-

³ The quotations in this article are taken from a Paper presented by Mar Baselios in 1999 (September 29-30) at the Missiological Congress in Parana (Argentina).

⁴ *Unitatis redintegratio* (UR) 1.

clesiologies on the basis of their isolated existence. This isolation is echoed in the ecclesial life, too. With this isolation, many Churches have inherited a lot of prejudices. Some of the Churches have largely deviated from the Apostolic foundation while others have slightly. The Churches which have moved away from the Apostolic foundation have to come back to the authentic foundation. All the Churches must be prepared for self examination and inner conversion. He does not think that any one of the various theological formulations is the only formulation of the Catholic Church. Each Sister Church can have its own formulations. It is in accordance with the nature of the Church.

There should be unity, because division is sinful. There should be concord because division is against the will of the Lord. But the how and when of the unity is with the Lord. It is hidden from our eyes. The Lord of Glory will shower the grace of unity when there is conversion and inner renewal of the Church. Therefore spiritual ecumenism should be practiced first and foremost.

In this world of today, filled with prejudices, he tried to remove the false fear and prejudices through dialogue of charity. During the international theological dialogue with the Malankara Orthodox and the Malankara Jacobites in Kerala (two factions of the Oriental Orthodox Church in India), he dealt with them with full respect and self control. He showed special interest in listening to them and in understanding their viewpoints. In the same way he took special effort in making them understand the Catholic way of presentation of various doctrines. He used to present them in a simple language and did not present the truths partially or in a covered language. He understood them and he had no fear of fully presenting the Catholic dogmas, of course in a language intelligible to them. He says, „The fundamental aim of Ecumenism is to regain the unity of the Church by healing the wounds”. There are of course hurdles in the path of ecumenism. He says, „A closer study of the present situation of division among Churches reveals that apart from the doctrinal differences, prejudices and misunderstandings play a great role in keeping the communities away from one another preventing them from closer contact and mutual acceptance.

This is a major hurdle in carrying out the ecumenical mission. Another problem is that unfortunately the ecumenical movement is often misunderstood than understood.. There are many who are apprehensive of it or opposed to it. It is not a method of unification and absorption of local Churches on the basis of might and power. At the same time ecumenism should not be mistaken for a complacent coexistence of different Christian Churches in their state of division and disunity or in their present positions that contradict each other”.

He also speaks of the goal of ecumenism: „Ecumenism has a very profound goal, namely the attainment of total communion of all the Apostolic Churches, in which communion alone, the mystical Body of Christ is fully present.” Then he continues to describe the ecumenical activities in the 1920s in India: „It may

be mentioned here about the importance of the Church unity attempts carried out by the Malankara Catholic Church, which may be characterized as the best ecumenical movement of the 20th century. It was an important event in the proper direction towards attaining the fullness of the ecclesial communion between the Apostolic See of Rome and the Apostolic Malankara Church”.

He could live and work with all the Churches and ecclesial communities in Kerala in cooperation, concord and in a brotherly spirit. When he became the Archbishop of Trivandrum, he opened the Cathedral to the Orthodox for the blessing of a marriage. The Catholicos of the Malankara Orthodox Church himself blessed the marriage. For a long time he was participating in the international theological commission for the ecumenical dialogue with the Malankara Orthodox and also with the Malankara Jacobites. The present author also was from the very beginning till very recently a member of the Catholic participants.

Many quoted a statement which he made in an ecumenical Congress at Genova: „Those Churches which have no missionary thrust will have no enthusiasm in ecumenical matters”. For Mar Baselios the concern for unity was his primary concern, it was not one of his concerns. He walked through the path of the second Vatican Council and in all earnestness and enthusiasm, without counting its immediate effects. He also argued for the visible communion and often told the Churches to be committed to the ecumenical cause. This attitude is still lacking among some of the Churches in Kerala. He tried to give to the priests and faithful of the Malankara Catholic Church the new ecumenical understanding of the Council. He contributed substantially to the common declaration between the Pope and Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch for the Inter-Church Marriage agreement⁵, without renouncing one’s own ecclesial allegiance.

He was committed to guide the Malankara Catholics through the new ecumenical path of the Second Vatican Council. But unfortunately some of the publications of the Malankara Orthodox Church, tried in the past to present a falsified and non objective picture of the ecumenical outlook of the Malankara Catholic Church and its head. But he was the leader of those who expect a better future. He will be with those who desire for goodness. He supported every good initiative for the cause of Christian unity. He is a guiding figure for all those who are earnestly intended in the ecumenical activities. He speaks of the liberty of conscience of individuals to change their allegiance and says that it is not against ecumenism: „It may be stated that ecumenism primarily envisages ecclesial communities and spiritual traditions. Change of ecclesial allegiance of individuals or groups arising from genuine convictions does not stand in the way of ecumenism. Such change aims at answering the immediate and individual needs of souls in

⁵ Cf. J. MADEY, *The Ecclesiological and Canonical Background of the so-called »Kerala Agreement«*, „The Harp” 11-12 (Kottayam 1998-’99) 99-112.

concrete situations, the reality or the urgency of which cannot be ignored under the pressure of the efforts for unity made at a different level, namely at the level of the Churches. In fact promotion of Christian unity takes place on both the levels, but the two aspects are clearly distinct, and not opposed. Vatican II places both of them in the same movement worked out and guided by the Holy Spirit”⁶.

Ekumeniczna wizja Katolikosa Morana Mor Baseliosa Cyryla (1935-2007)

Streszczenie

Po przyjęciu pełnej kanonicznej jedności z Rzymem przez metropolitę Bethany Malankarskiego Kościoła Prawosławnego Mar Ivaniosa w 1930 r., ustanowiono katolicką hierarchię malankarską. Metropolita Mar Ivanios stał się pierwszym metropolitą Malankarskiego Kościoła Katolickiego. Metropolita Mar Baselios był jego drugim następcą i zarazem pierwszym Arcybiskupem Większym (od 2005 r.), czyli Katolikosem (wg tradycji indyjskiej i syryjskiej).

Jak jego poprzednicy, Mar Baselios kontynuował ekumeniczne wysiłki zjednoczenia wszystkich chrześcijan indyjskich. Celem jego nie było wyrywanie jak największej liczby wiernych z ich własnych wspólnot, by powiększyć tę, której przewodził. Przeciwnie – głosił jedność Kościoła Chrystusowego, do której wzywani są wszyscy chrześcijanie, szczególnie ze Starożytnych Kościołów Apostolskich (katolicy, prawosławni, orientalni prawosławni, wierni Starożytnych Kościołów Wschodu). Uważał, że pomiędzy Starożytnymi Kościołami Apostolskimi nie ma podstawowych różnic we wierze, lecz różne rozłożenie akcentów. Wedle jego rozumienia, jedność nie oznacza jednolitości, a komunია Kościołów nie oznacza rozpułnienie się jednego w drugim.

Katolikos Mar Baselios widział podstawowe zadanie ekumenizmu w odzyskiwaniu jedności Kościoła przez gojenie ran podziału. Celem zaś jest osiągnięcie pełnej komunii wszystkich Kościołów Apostolskich. Mar Baselios do końca swych dni był aktywnym członkiem komisji ds. dialogu z Kościołami Malankarskim Prawosławnym i Malankarskim Jakobickim. Prowadził Malankarski Kościół Katolicki w duchu ekumenizmu Soboru Watykańskiego II i był dla wszystkich wzorem zaangażowania w dzieło jedności chrześcijan.

P. Kantyka

⁶ UR 4.