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The Role of the Petrine Ministry in the Ecumenical Relationship between the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and the Catholic Church



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General Introduction

The splits, conflicts, disunity, enmity and competition among the Churches have tarnished the image of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church founded by Jesus Christ in the course of many centuries. The Church of Christ flourished in the early centuries all over the world in local Churches which were established by the apostles and their disciples and lived in communion with each other. The necessity of defining the apostolic faith in the midst of diverse theological expressions, heresies and misleading theological tendencies created a chaos in the ecclesial arena in the Roman Empire. On the one hand heresies were defeated and schisms occurred; on the other hand diverse theological expressions and terminologies of the various theological schools did not get due recognition and acceptance and were suspected and condemned by the Ecumenical Councils. The excessive ecclesial politics and the undue authority of the Roman Emperor to interfere in ecclesial affairs, even in the definition of faith and the organization of ecclesial life, worsened the situation. A uniformity-oriented unity of the Church was his chief concern and primary priority in ecclesial politics. The Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) caused major splits in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church only due to misunderstanding, arrogance and uniformity-mania. The next division occurred in 1054 and the Byzantine Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church started a new phase of independent growth.

The Eastern Orthodox Churches developed an Ecclesiology of the autocephalous Churches on the basis of the Communion Ecclesiology and the Oriental Orthodox Churches also developed their own Ecclesiology without having any communion with the Church of Rome. The Church of St Thomas Christians in India too developed her own Ecclesiology “the Law of Thomas” since its establishment by St Thomas, the Apostle and it grew further in communion with the Church of the East in Persia. Her geographical isolation did not offer her any chance to enjoy the communion of other Churches including that of the Roman Church in practical terms. The divisions in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church paved the way for the disappearance of the Communion Ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic Church. A new centralistic papal monarchy based on the theory of the Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome came into existence in the

Roman Catholic Church. The development of the unilateral Roman Ecclesiology was detrimental to the ancient Communion Ecclesiology of the undivided Church of Christ. The climax of the Roman Ecclesiology was the definition of the jurisdictional papal primacy and the papal Infallibility in Vatican Council I in 1869–70. The Vatican Council II proved to be a necessary anticlimax of the growth of the Roman Ecclesiology by re-discovering and re-affirming the Communion Ecclesiology of the first millennium. The Catholic Church launched a new move called ecumenism to realize the prayer of Christ “that they all may be one” through the implementation of the Communion Ecclesiology. The Vatican Council documents LG and OE are the theoretical declaration of the Catholic Church which ensured the status of the Catholic Oriental Churches as Individual Churches with their right to restore their entire rite with autonomous hierarchies. The restoration of the status of the Catholic Oriental Churches in accordance with the ancient Communion Ecclesiology of the undivided Church of Christ is seen as the first step in the project of the re-establishment of the unity of the Church of Christ.

The other Christian Churches had already launched upon an innovative ecumenical movement in 1920s and it became an organized body under the name of the World Council of Churches in 1948 even before the Catholic Church took the initiative to strive for the Christian unity. Eastern Orthodox Churches, Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Church of the East, innumerable Protestant Churches and all possible Christian sects and denominations joined the WCC for achieving Christian unity. Being a founder-member of the World Council Churches, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is one of the pioneers in the field of international ecumenical movement. She has been active in the ecumenical movement since 1930. Paulose Mar Gregorios describes it in the following words: “The Indian Orthodox Church has taken an active part in the Ecumenical movement ever since 1930. In general the Oriental Orthodox had accumulated a good deal of ecumenical experience already by the time Pope John of beloved memory opened the doors and windows of the Roman Catholic Church to let in the ecumenical wind”¹. The Oriental Orthodox Churches re-established their communion and started functioning as a family of Sister Churches since 1965. Thereafter the family of the Oriental Orthodox Churches set new priorities with the goal of achieving communion with the Byzantine (Eastern) Orthodox

1 Paulose Mar Gregorios, *Ecumenical Priorities: an Oriental Orthodox looks at the Ecumenical Movement today*, The Star of the East, No. 1, Issue 1, 1979, 12.

Churches². Meanwhile the Catholic Church also started an ecumenical movement by establishing official Dialogue Commissions to achieve the unity of the Christian Churches after the historic event of Vatican Council II.

The Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church entered into an ecumenical relationship in 1980s. A Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church was constituted as the direct result of the meeting of the heads of the two Churches, His Holiness Pope John Paul II and His Holiness Moran Mar Baselios Marthoma Mathews I in Kottayam in 1986. "The Joint Commission was assigned the task of discussing and establishing the areas of agreement as well as to find avenues where the two Churches could come to a better understanding. Its first meeting was held in 1989 and resulted in the historic declaration on Christology. The agreement stated that while the two Churches had developed their Christologies in their own historical contexts, there was no essential disagreement in their belief in the One Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, perfect God and perfect Man. Since then, the Joint International Commission has been meeting every year and over the past twelve years, alternatively being hosted by the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (Sophia Centre, Kottayam) and the Catholic Church (Spirituality Centre, Manganam). It has resulted in a better appreciation of the history, practice and beliefs of the two Churches. The dialogue process is undertaken through the working of Sub-commissions in four main areas: Sacramental Theology, History of the St Thomas Christians, Inter-Church Marriage and Common Witness of the Church. While all the discussions have not resulted in such momentous agreements as the Declaration on Christology, it is a matter of encouragement that substantial areas of convergence in beliefs on various issues have been recorded"³.

The goal of the constitution of the Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the MOSC is the achievement of eventual full communion. Fundamental things about the faith do not make any hindrance to the efforts to Christian unity, but the constitution and the governmental form of the Churches are the obstacles on the way to the realization of unity through ecumenical dialogue⁴. It applies also to the MOSC which professes

2 Ibid. 12.

3 John Panicker/Xavier Koodapuzha, Preface to Xavier Koodapuzha/John Panicker (ed.), Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Kottayam, 2001, 12.

4 Peter Kistner, *Das göttliche Recht und die Kirchenverfassung*, Berlin, 2009, 11: „Der kirchlichen Einheit stehen heute offenbar weniger die Sachfragen des Glaubens im

the same fundamental Christian faith that the Catholic Church professes and the major obstacle to unity appears to be the concept of the Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome. The concept of the Petrine ministry is a major topic which is yet to be discussed in detail. Though this topic has already figured in the consultations of the Dialogue Commission, a detailed discussion on it is required for the further course of the ecumenical dialogue. Being a Catholic religious priest from Kerala/India, the homeland of the St Thomas Christians, belonging to the Syro Malabar Church, one of the Individual (*sui iuris*) Churches in the Catholic Communion, I have had a special interest in treating this topic in the framework of my doctoral dissertation.

0.1 The Scope

The office of the Petrine ministry is a pivotal aspect of the Ecclesiology of the Catholic Church. What the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Church of the East and the Protestant Churches have vehemently opposed in the history of the Church as well as in the consultations of the ecumenical dialogue is the concept of the Petrine ministry of the Catholic Church. Pope Paul VI admits that the papacy of the Catholic Church is an obstacle to the unity of the Christian Churches: “That we, who promote this reconciliation, should be regarded by many of our separated brothers as an obstacle to it, is a matter of deep distress to us. The obstacle would seem to be the primacy of honour and jurisdiction which Christ bestowed on the Apostle Peter, and which we have inherited as his Successor” (No. 110)⁵. The MOSC is not an exception to the general attitude of the Christian Churches outside the Catholic Communion. The topic “the Role of the Petrine ministry in the Ecumenical Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church” has special scope for a doctoral dissertation because, (1) The MOSC does not accept the concept of the Petrine ministry of the Catholic Church, (2) The Joint International Commission for Dialogue between

Wege, sondern die konfessionellen Unterschiede der Kirchenverfassungen. Bezeichnenderweise sind es öffentliche Äußerungen von Päpsten, die den kirchenverfassungsrechtlichen Kern des ökumenischen Anliegens bestätigt haben: Paul VI., der sein Amt als schweres Hindernis auf dem Weg zur Einheit verstanden hat, und Johannes Paul II., der in der Enzyklika „*Ut unum sint*“ zum Dialog über eine Erneuerung des Petrusdienstes eingeladen hat“.

5 John Paul II, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 1964, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam_en.html, 12.5.2011.

the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church has not yet taken it up for a detailed discussion, (3) a solution to the problems arising from the disagreement over the concept of the Petrine ministry is indispensable for the unity of the Christian Churches.

0.2 The Methodology

Though the topic lies in a multi-disciplinary milieu, the chief methodology used for the treatment of the present topic is dogmatic-juridical-historical. The goal of this doctoral dissertation is to find ways and means for a full communion of the MOSC and the Catholic Church by solving the problem of the jurisdictional papal primacy which still remains the biggest obstacle on the way to full communion. The chief concern of the topic is the re-constitution of the office of the Petrine ministry at the universal level in a future Universal Church by re-introducing the original concept of the Petrine ministry which is rooted in the Scriptures, in the common tradition of all the Churches in the early centuries and in the writings of the Fathers of the Church. The role of the Petrine ministry in the future Universal Church is dealt with here in the framework of the ecumenical dialogue between the MOSC and the Catholic Church. The MOSC belongs originally to the ancient undivided Church of St Thomas Christians and the ecclesiological roots of the MOSC are beyond doubt in the “Law of Thomas”, the ecclesial heritage of the St Thomas Christians. A dogmatic approach to the topic in a historical framework has been adopted in this work.

0.3 Limits

One of the major limits of this doctoral dissertation is that the MOSC does not possess a fully developed and systematically ordered Ecclesiology. The MOSC has not developed the concept of the Petrine ministry in the Ecclesiology; because the concept of the Petrine ministry has never been part of her Ecclesiology. The availability of the quantity of the material is a real problem since very less research has been done on this topic. The literature on the St Thomas Christians, especially on the MOSC, was mostly in Malayalam, the official language of the State of Kerala of the Indian Republic. The English translation of the Malayalam texts has been made by me. On the one hand the innovative nature of the topic is inspiring, but on the other hand the newness of the topic points to the limited quantity of material for the research.

0.4 The Division of the Work

The work is divided into three parts and again each part is divided into chapters. Part 1 deals with the position of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in her ecumenical relationship with the Catholic Church. Chapter 1 is on the Ecclesiology of the Church of St Thomas Christians in the pre-Portuguese period. There are areas on which both the MOSC and the Catholic Church agree and disagree. Chapter 2 analyzes the two historic events, namely, the Diamper Synod (1599) and the Coonan-Cross Oath (1653) which caused the division of the Church of St Thomas Christians. Chapter 3 is a study of the Ecclesiology of the MOSC. The position of the MOSC on the question of the jurisdictional primacy of the Catholic Church is studied in chapter 4.

Part 2 studies the primacy in the view of the Catholic Church. Chapter 1 is an exposition of the arguments of the Catholic Church in answer to the objections of the MOSC against the papal primacy. Chapter 2 deals with the concept of the Petrine ministry in Vatican I and II. Chapter 3 evaluates the development of the concept of the Petrine ministry in the post-Vatican pronouncements of the Catholic Church.

Part 3 explores the chances for an extensive rapprochement between the positions of the MOSC and the Catholic Church on the Petrine ministry. Chapter 1 is a critical analysis of the Vatican Council document OE both in theory and practice with respect to the Syro Malabar Church. Chapter 2 analyzes the new suggestions made by various dialogue commissions from all over the world to attain unity on the point of the Petrine ministry. Suggestions for a possible ecumenical rapprochement between the MOSC and the Catholic Church on the point of the Petrine ministry are made in chapter 3. A general conclusion is made at the end of it in order to summarize the ideas, arguments and suggestions to improve the ecumenical relationship between the MOSC and the Catholic Church.