

AN OPEN LETTER

To the venerable Church leaders participating in the 70th

ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS OF THE CATHOLICATE

Venerable fathers in God,

We greet you all very sincerely to Kerala, the cradle of Christianity in India. We appreciate your good-will visit to our church although we are not in communion with all the churches you represent. On this great occasion of your presence among us we turn to you for light and help on some matters of pressing concern for us.

I. First, we implore you, venerable prelates, to use your influence to bring about peace in our strife-ridden community in Kerala. Our leaders of the Orthodox Syrian group seem determined to continue the litigation for church properties held by the Patriarch's party, in spite of the advice earlier given by the High court of Kerala that we should settle our dispute out of court as becoming the followers of Christ. While the Patriarch's party is publicly committed to an equitable division of asset, our party is on war path. We fail to understand how our leaders can reconcile this with the spirit of Christ or with the explicit injunction of St. Paul against litigations among Christians. (Cor. Vi/1-8)

We, perhaps, represent only a minority in the Orthodox Syrian Church, but we cannot pretend our party is right when it is wrong. The Churches and properties our party is now fighting for were all built up and acquired by several generations of people loyal to the Patriarch of Antioch. They continue to be owned largely by such people to-day. (To cite only one example, in the Mulanthuruthy church where a vote was taken recently under the supervision of the High Court of Kerala, only about 300 people were found favouring our party while over 2000 wanted to be with the Patriarch). What Christian or even human right have we to grab that which properly belongs to our brethren ?

Some of our Metropolitans seem to be deeply bothered about world peace and global disarmament. At the same time they sharpen their tools to fight their brethren nearer home. What a caricature of Christian speech and action. We humbly, pray, respected Church Fathers, that you will impress upon our Metropolitans and our Catholicos that ecumenism is not just a commodity for export and their charity should begin at home. If, through a fair division of assets, the two parties in our church can co-exist in peace, that might eventually lead to unity under one Catholicos in communion with the Patriarch of Antioch.

II. The Second group of our concerns is mainly theological. We turn to you, venerable Fathers, for light in this area as our own leaders have only succeeded in confusing the issues. In the recent past our Metropolitans and our Catholicos and some of our learned priests have been

teaching us through their speeches and writings three things about the bases of the Orthodox Syrian church under the Catholicos. One is that ours is an autocephalous church; the other is that because our church has an apostolic foundation through St. Thomas, our Catholicos is sitting on the throne of St. Thomas; the third is that St. Peter had no primacy among the Apostles and that Thomas and Peter were equal in authority. (By implication the Patriarch, who is on the throne of St. Peter, can have no greater authority than the Catholicos, who is on the throne of St. Thomas). All these raise serious theological problem for us.

(a) Does a local church become *autocephalous* when it has some difference of opinion with the supreme head of the Church? Can autocephaly be conferred on a regional church through the speeches and articles of a few metropolitans and priests? It is significant that the founders of the Orthodox Syrian group in Kerala, lay and ecclesiastical, had never even dreamed of autocephaly for our church. This coinage is a recent import among us. If some of our Metropolitans, for their own good reasons proceed to tell us that our ecclesiastical affinity is with the Lutheran Church or that the Russian K.G.B. are agents of the Kingdom of God (K.G.?) What are we to make of such discoveries?

What, indeed is the Christian basis for autocephaly? Is it that there should be separate, independent churches for people who belong to the same race or culture, or speak the same language or are ruled by a single secular authority or are confined to a particular geographical area? We had been brought up to believe that in Christ we transcend all these human barriers, but now our leaders confuse us with their politicized theological thinking.

Our Church has no liturgy of its own: no theology of its own. We have in fact accepted every detail of the theological and historical positions of the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Patriarch of Antioch. For instance, we are anti-Chalcedonian only because the Jacobite Patriarch had taken up that position.

How can such a group as ours pretend to be autocephalous? Have we anything by way of liturgy, sacraments, common prayers, pankeeza, canon laws, church traditions and theology that we can call our own? These are the very essence of the life of an individual church, but in all these we have always been totally dependent on the Jacobite Patriarch. Is autocephaly, then, venerable Fathers, when the local dignitaries of our own church are free to load it over our people in such a way that it becomes worse than foreign domination? Our claim for autocephaly appears hollow indeed.

(b) The claim of our Catholicos that he is sitting on *the throne of St. Thomas* sounds a good thing, but it also raises a few crucial questions. If in fact, our Catholicos sits on the throne of St. Thomas (as the Patriarch claims to sit on the throne of St. Peter), what was the need or relevance of transplanting or transporting a throne from the Middle East? If the throne of St. Thomas is ours by virtue of the Apostolic foundation of our church, that throne must have existed for over 1900 years. Has the Apostolic throne of St. Thomas been superseded by that of the Catholicos's throne brought from the Middle East, 70 years ago? Where is the need for two thrones for our exalted Catholicos? Is he not in danger of falling between the two?

(c) *The primacy of St. Peter* had always been taught in our church until we turned against the Patriarch, who claims to be the successor of the head of the Apostles. It is well known that the common prayers, Penkeeza, Sacramentals, canon laws and theological traditions of the Patriarch's church, which are accepted without any change by us, emphatically support the primacy of St. Peter. Several great Protestant Bible scholars (Oscar Cullman, for instance) now concede that Christ did build his church on St. Peter and that St. Peter acted and was accepted, as the head of the Church, during the Apostolic period. What right or authority do we have to change the foundations laid by Christ? It might also be noted in passing that even in the Patriarchal Bull of Mar Abdul Messiah granting a Catholicate in Malankara, the primacy of St. Peter had been clearly mentioned. If our church leaders are going to make easy judgments in such fundamental church teachings in order to suit their shifting policies, where are we going to end up? Several of the priests and teachers in our Theological Seminary, including Metropolitans, have been trained in Protestant theological colleges and it is not surprising that many of them lack credibility as teachers of Orthodox faith and tradition. These be the custodians of our orthodox faith and traditions!

II. The last point we wish to touch on relates to the context of your visit, *namely the 70th anniversary of our Catholicate.*

Our Catholicate, we are told, was transplanted from the Middle East where it had become extinct centuries ago. The question naturally arises, who is the competent authority to revive an extinct Catholicate and establish it in another part of the world? Can our church, for example, re-establish in Kottaym any Patriarchate that has become defunct elsewhere? Is the authority of the Patriarch of Antioch so supreme that he is competent to do this? It should be noted that Mar Abdul Mesiah had decided on the Catholicate without even consulting the Universal Patriarchal Synod. The situation becomes curiouseer when it is recalled that Abdul Mesiah was not functioning as a Patriarch (he was deposed says the Patriarch's party) when he was invited to Malankara. The fact that Geevarghese Ramban (Vattasseeril) and Paulose Ramban who were sent by the Malankara Church received their Episcopal consecration from Mar Abdulla, the ruling Patriarch, although Abdul Mesiah was then living in a nearby place proves that the church here had looked upon Mar Abdulla as the rightful Patriarch. This is further confirmed by the fact that when Patriarch Abdulla later visited Malankara, the church here have him a royal reception. The seventieth anniversary of our Catholicate inevitably brings to mind all those unsavoury and dubious details associated with its establishment. The 70th year of an institution is of no special significance. Perhaps what really want is an excuse for a colourful show of strength matching that of the Patriarch's recent visit.

Conclusion

It is evident from all available records that the founders of the Orthodox Syrian party had never visualized the Malankara Church as being independent of the *Patriarch of Antioch* except in purely temporal matters. That is why they had drafted a constitution for the church they had unhesitatingly declared that the Malankara Church is a part of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church of which the Patriarch of Antioch is the Supreme head.

We have today strayed far from the path laid by the founders of our group. Our present leaders stand exposed to the ridicule of the world when they declare that they do not consider Mar Ignatius Zakka as the Patriarch of Antioch. Mar Zakka is recognized as the Patriarch of Antioch by the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches; fact by the entire world. In this corner of the earth, however, our leaders continue to proclaim that there is no legitimate Patriarch of Antioch existing now. We should like to know who among you will support this position.

We hope and pray, venerable fathers, that during your brief stay in our midst you will persuade our Catholicos and our Metropolitans to lead our church back to the path of truth, peace and charity. What our church needs most of all today is not a show of pomp and circumstance, but a commitment to truth, an examination of conscience and true humility and repentances.

Yours sincerely in Christ

Sd/-

PROF. N. K. THOMAS
(on behalf of The Orthodox Truth Society)

Kottayam
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