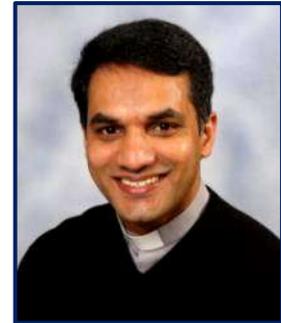


## The Reality of the Catholic Eastern Churches and their Vocation to Ecumenism according to Vatican II

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#### Introduction

The Second Vatican Council profoundly changed the orientation of theology and it desired and promoted new impulse to the renewal of Christian life for the entire Church. But the Council has not ended its vision in mere pastoral pragmatism, although it is known as the pastoral council, rather it emphasised the re-discovery of tradition. It has unleashed a revolutionary return to the Church's sources, and set Catholic Christianity on its still-unfinished journey of renewal and reform.<sup>1</sup> This was the decisive break which the council brought in. Eamon Duffy states:

At the heart of the "New Theology" of de Lubac, Congar and

the other theological midwives of the Council, was a passionate call to *rediscover* the Tradition. They set about freeing the Church from narrow

<sup>1</sup> Ivereigh, A. (ed.), *Unfinished Journey: The Church 40 Years after Vatican II*, New York/London, 2003, 1

straitjacket of a debased neo-scholasticism by opening up the riches of the deep tradition of the Church, in the Scriptures, the liturgy, the Fathers.<sup>2</sup>

The recovery of the sources and the greatest fidelity to the ancient traditions are the hallmark of Catholic Eastern Churches, according to Vatican II, in view of their special task of fostering the unity of all Christians, especially Eastern Christians.<sup>3</sup> The very existence of Catholic Eastern Churches has an ecumenical dimension. But to find themselves in this realm of responding to these issues, they need a stronger sense of their own identity; they need to establish their contact with their own deepest resources. For, “ecumenism does not mean worldwide, nor does it refer to a kind of internationalism without any local identity or roots in the situation”.<sup>4</sup>

Hence in the background of the vision of the Council and the task it entrusted to the Catholic Eastern Churches, we make a search into the reality of the Catholic Eastern Churches. Furthermore this study on the question over the identity, existence and vocation of the Catholic Oriental Churches has got an ecumenical dimension. In the concluding part of the article we analyse the role of Syro Malabar Church and her ecumenical vocation in view of her identity as a Catholic Oriental Church.

### **The Reality of Catholic Eastern Churches**

The Catholic Eastern Churches are a reality within the Catholic Church. Despite all kinds of obstacles and difficulties, those Churches exist indeed. Their presence in communion with the Roman Church makes us aware that the Catholic Church is much more than the Roman Catholic Church. Madey says:

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<sup>2</sup> Duffy, E., *Tradition and Reaction: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Renewal*, in Ivereigh A. (ed.), *Unfinished Journey: The Church 40 Years after Vatican II*, New York/London, 2003, 59

<sup>3</sup> Cf. OE 6, 24

<sup>4</sup> Philip, T. V., “Church History in Ecumenical Perspective”, *The Ecumenical Review* 4, 1987, 417

The Oriental Catholic Churches are making the Universal Church more Catholic than the Roman Catholic Church would be able to do. They are not Roman, but in communion with the Roman Church, as the Apostles were not Peter, but in communion with Peter.<sup>5</sup>

The most important achievement of Vatican II was its new ecclesiological approach concentrated on the understanding of the Church as a *Communio Ecclesiarum*. Starting from the constitution *Lumen Gentium* and in the decree on Ecumenism it finds its clear expression in the decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*:

The Holy Catholic Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, is made up of the faithful who are organically united in the Holy Spirit by the same faith, the same sacraments and the same government and who, combining together into various groups which are held together by a hierarchy, form separate Churches or Rites. Between these there exists an admirable bond of union, such that the variety within the Church in no way harms its unity; rather it manifests it (OE 2).

The Council expresses unequivocally the position and the rights of the Eastern Churches and their valuable heritages in the Universal Church. While releasing a separate document on the Catholic Eastern Churches, which became a complement to the Decree on Ecumenism, the Council manifested the hope for a corporate reunion of the Eastern Churches presently not in union with the Church of Rome.

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<sup>5</sup> Madey, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* More than Twenty Years after, Kottayam, 1987, 18

“Vatican II has awakened the conscience to recognize the individuality of the oriental Catholic churches, but this individuality has to be rediscovered by certain Orientals themselves. It goes beyond rites and rights; it goes into the depths of the ecclesial being of each individual Church and its respective members.”<sup>6</sup> This quest for ones own identity and mission has to be considered as the core of the renewal launched by the Council.

The very proof that the Catholic Church takes the existence of the Catholic Eastern Churches seriously is this Vatican II Decree dealing with them. Koodapuzha writes:

The title of the decree of Vatican II on the Oriental Churches *-Orientalium Ecclesiarum-* may be considered a turning point in the Western attitude in the terminological evolution in ecclesiology. For the Orientals the Church is a particular form and coherent expression of the faith life, which they experience. For them a Church can never be levelled down to a mere rite.<sup>7</sup>

The ecclesiological position of the Catholic Eastern Churches within the communion of the Catholic Church is being expressed further in the same document:

They are consequently of equal dignity (*pari pollent dignitatem*), so that none of them is superior to the others as regards rite(*ceteris praestet ratione ritus*) and they enjoy the same rights and are under the same obligations (OE 3).

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<sup>6</sup> Madey, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 18

<sup>7</sup> Koodapuzha, X., “The Impact of the Vatican Council II on the Syro-Malabar Church and the Present Challenges in Implementing the Councilor Teachings”, in Kannookadan, P. (ed.), *Syro-Malabar Church Forty Years After Vatican Council II*, Kochi, 2007, 74; here he recalls the transition that took place in a century of time in the attitude. For in 1862 Pope Pius IX established the *Sacred Congregation for the Affairs of the Oriental Rites*. But the decree of Vatican II speaks of Oriental Churches.

The Catholic Eastern Churches were encouraged to return to their own traditions, ending a period of Latinization and opening a new appreciation of variety within the universal Church.<sup>8</sup> Although the council had affirmed positively the position regarding the existence of the Catholic Eastern Churches, it was not welcomed with a same tone by the Orthodox Churches. They considered these Churches, though these possess the same tradition as their orthodox counter parts, as the outcome of the *soteriological exclusivism* of the Catholic Church and its method for the search for unity called *Uniatism*.<sup>9</sup> Some rays of changes in the ecclesial relationship were witnessed in the last decades of the twentieth century. The Balamand document of 1993<sup>10</sup> was an example for that. It stated:

Concerning the Catholic Eastern Churches, it is clear that they, as part of the Catholic Communion, have the right to exist and to act in response to the spiritual needs of their faithful.<sup>11</sup>

A positive understanding of the presence of the Catholic Eastern Churches is expressively to be found in the documents of Vatican II. When the council speaks of its desire that the Catholic Eastern Churches may flourish and execute with new vigour the task entrusted to them (OE 1), it uses the word *munus* to specify the word task instead of the traditional word *missio*.<sup>12</sup> The Council is here very particular to avoid any misunderstanding

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<sup>8</sup> It was a landmark in the historical development of the Catholic Eastern Churches that the council brought forth a particular document dealing the nature and purpose of the Eastern Churches, which are in communion with the Roman Church. The Decree on Catholic Eastern Churches ("Orientalium Ecclesiarum") was approved on November 21, 1964, which stated that variety within the church does not harm its unity and that Eastern Catholic churches should retain their own traditions.

<sup>9</sup> Bouwen, F., "The Current Theological Discussion of the Problems of Uniatism and Proselytism within the Framework of the Theological Dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox", in Stirnemann, A. (ed.), The Vienna Dialogue, Booklet 7, Vienna 1995, 94-95

<sup>10</sup> This is a Document published by the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church VII<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session, held in Balamand School of Theology (Lebanon), June 17-24, 1993 on the subject: "*Uniatism, Method of Union of the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion.*"

<sup>11</sup> Balamand § 3

<sup>12</sup> Ecclesiarum igitur Orientalium, quae huius traditionis testes sunt vivi, sollicitudinem gerens, haec Sancta et Oecumenica Synodus cupiens ut eadem floreat et novo robore apostolico concreditum sibi munus absolvent,

from the part of the Orthodox Churches regarding the presence of the Catholic Eastern Churches and their task as Eastern Churches parallel to the Orthodox Churches. The council on the other hand states that the so called *Uniatism* is not more the will of the Catholic Church; rather the communion is its ultimate goal.

However even today after so much studies and excavations regarding the identity and theological tradition of these Churches they do feel a kind of inferiority towards the Latin and also to their Oriental counterparts. On the other hand the Orthodox do not seem to be ready to credit the Catholic Oriental Churches with a special ecclesial character of their own, distinct from their being part of the Catholic communion. The Orthodox cannot recognize them as a distinct Sister Church. In spite of their recognition of the Catholic Oriental Churches, it is stated in the Balamand Document likewise:

The Catholic Eastern Churches, who have desired to re-establish full communion with the See of Rome and have remained faithful to it, have the rights and obligations which are connected with this communion.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Vision: Model and Bridge for Unity?**

It is a matter of concern in the context of the document of Vatican II *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* whether the Catholic Eastern Churches were and are or can be a model and bridge in the world of Ecumenism. The origin of the Catholic Oriental Churches was the fruit of a certain ecclesiology which is called *uniatism*, but likewise the fruit of the big desire of many Orientals to

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praeter ea quae ad universam spectant Ecclesiam, capita quaedam statuere decrevit, ceteris ad providentiam Synodorum orientalium nec non Sedis Apostolicae remissis. (OE. 1)

<sup>13</sup> Balamand § 16; Despite these agreements it is to be noted that the Balamand Agreement was not recognised by all the Orthodox Churches. There were vehement criticisms against the very attempt and to interpret it as a trap set by the Catholic Church against the Orthodox. Cf. Romanides, J., "Orthodox and Vatican Agreement, Balamand, Lebanon, June 1993", *Theologia*, Vol. VI, 4, 1995, 570-580

fulfil their grand hope: the unity of the Church.<sup>14</sup> The very existence of the *Uniate* Catholic Eastern Churches has always been considered by the Orthodox as one of the major obstacles to any sincere theological confrontation with the Roman Catholic Church. While expressing this common conception of the Orthodox regarding the Catholic Eastern Churches Schmemmann, an orthodox theologian, respects to a certain extent the role of them as bridges. Commenting on the document *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* he wrote:

It is one more step, and a decisive one, toward the recognition of the Eastern tradition as “equal in dignity” to that of the West. Of utmost importance is its emphasis on the temporary character of its provisions – “until such time as the Catholic Church and the separated Eastern Churches come together into complete unity.” This seems to indicate a rather significant shift in the very understanding of the function of the Eastern Catholic communities called now to serve as bridges to, rather than substitutes for, the Orthodox East.<sup>15</sup>

Bishop Tawfiq, a Coptic Catholic theologian illustrates this concept of the Catholic Oriental Churches as a “bridge” in following words:

The Catholic Oriental Churches are quite conscious that their reason of existence is to be bridges (links) for exchange and intercourse, passages of union between the Orient and the Occident. History is a witness to that. It was mostly the refusal from the

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<sup>14</sup> Tawfiq, M., “The Role of the Oriental Catholic Churches in the re-Establishment of Unity between the Orient and the Occident”, in Stirnemann, A & Wilflinger, G., *The Vienna Dialogue on Ecclesiology*, Booklet 7, Vienna, 1995, 115

<sup>15</sup> Schmemmann, A., “A Response”, in Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, London, 1972”, 387

side of the Orthodox Churches to acknowledge them and the limits which the West set to them, that had restricted their role of a mediator and a link between East and West.<sup>16</sup>

The Catholic Oriental Churches are the visible signs of the theological pluralism in the Catholic communion and their main function is to serve as the basis of a theological pluralism in the Church. “Within the Catholic field they are witness of unity in diversity, and within Orthodoxy they are witness of Catholicity. Their function is to bring Orthodoxy as well as the Latin West to appreciate the Universality of the Church.”<sup>17</sup> This is the bridge building role. This role of the Catholic Oriental Churches is recognised or affirmed in other words in the Balamand document when it speaks of the Practical rules in search of the communion:

The first step to take is to put an end to everything that can foment division, contempt, and hatred between the Churches. For this the authorities of the Catholic Church will assist the Catholic Eastern Churches and their communities so that they themselves may prepare full communion between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.<sup>18</sup>

This vocation of the Catholic Oriental Churches calls for a renewal in their life and existence as true Oriental Churches. This call for renewal must lead them to the realisation of the lost traditions characteristic of their oriental nature. This tampering of their true tradition was caused in the name of the

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<sup>16</sup> Tawfiq, M., “The Role of the Oriental Catholic Churches in the re-Establishment of Unity between the Orient and the Occident”, in Stirnemann, A & Wilflinger, G., *The Vienna Dialogue on Ecclesiology*, Booklet 7, Vienna, 1995, 115

<sup>17</sup> Edelby, N., “Between Orthodoxy and Catholicism;” in Maximos IV Sayegh, *Eastern Churches and Catholic Unity*, Freiburg, 1963, 71

<sup>18</sup> Balamand § 21

Catholic model.<sup>19</sup> The Catholicity of the East is not to be assessed and determined by checking how far they resemble their Latin brothers and sisters.<sup>20</sup> In this search for the true identity we must also assert and accept the fact that renewal is not a naive modernisation. Historical origins must be adopted responsibly today against the horizon of the future. As Easterners a serious loyalty to their own Tradition is to be considered as important by the Catholic Oriental Churches.

Vatican II was a pastoral council as it was drawn up and all of its documents have this purpose. But the word pastoral is not an antithesis to dogma or to tradition. It is the outcome of the enduring relevance of Tradition or Dogma. The tradition must be given a new and living impact, and has to be interpreted pastorally. But it demands a unity between tradition and living. The Church is the concretization of the memory of God's salvific plan which we call tradition. The Church, which has its origin, structure and destiny in the Trinitarian God, is a unity in diversity of different apostolic traditions, a communion of communions, a Church of Churches.<sup>21</sup> Church, as the guarantee and guardian of apostolicity, has the prime and God-given duty to guard and foster the orthodoxy and orthopraxy in the light of her apostolic tradition.<sup>22</sup> In this realm of communion the Catholic Oriental Churches have, in fact, the task, to present to the West, and to encourage it to look closer on the theology, the spirituality and the values of the East.<sup>23</sup>

### **Ecumenical Obligation of the Catholic Oriental Churches**

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council wished to base dialogue on the communion which already exists, and it draws attention to the noble reality

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<sup>19</sup> This Catholic model was considered as synonym to the Latin tradition until Vatican II, which embarked a new horizon of ecclesiological vision which we witness specially in the documents of LG, UR and OE.

<sup>20</sup> Lang, J. P., "Eastern and Catholic", *Diakonia* 17, 1982, 24

<sup>21</sup> Vellanickal, M., "Biblical Theology of the Individual Churches", *CO*, Vol. I, No. 1, 1980., 129-142.

<sup>22</sup> Powathil, J., "Church as Tradition", in Pallath, P. (ed.), *Church and its most Basic Element*, Rome, 1995.,101

<sup>23</sup> Tawfiq, "The Role of the Oriental Catholic Churches in the re-Establishment of Unity Between the Orient and the Occident", 116

of the Churches of the East: "Therefore, this Sacred Synod urges all, but especially those who plan to devote themselves to the work of restoring the full communion that is desired between the Eastern Churches and the Catholic Church, to give due consideration to these special aspects of the origin and growth of the Churches of the East, and to the character of the relations which obtained between them and the Roman See before the separation, and to form for themselves a correct evaluation of these facts" (UR 14).

The concern for restoring unity pertains to the whole Christians and "the Catholic Church embraces with hope the commitment to ecumenism as a duty of the Christian conscience enlightened by faith and guided by love".<sup>24</sup> This commitment is now and again reiterated by the Church to its faithful. It has been directed to the catholic Eastern churches in a special way by Vatican II as a duty in virtue of their very existence.<sup>25</sup> Certainly the Eastern Catholic Churches, in the spirit of the Decree on Ecumenism, will play a constructive role in the dialogue of love and in the theological dialogue at both the local and international levels, and thus contribute to mutual understanding and the continuing pursuit of full unity (OL 24).

This in other way explains the very obligation and duty of the Catholic Oriental Churches, which they are entrusted being part of the Catholic communion. As we already mentioned above the Catholic oriental churches are treated by the orthodox as hindrances in the way of ecumenical endeavours. This idea is also shared by many Catholic theologians too, though not open. Despite these factors the fathers of the Vatican Council emphasised the ecumenical mission of these Churches declaring that they

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. UUS 8, also 6-9 and 15-16

<sup>25</sup> OE 30

have a special duty in the work of reconciling East and West.<sup>26</sup> Patriarch Maximos IV underscored this duty of the Catholic Oriental Churches:

The oriental catholic churches are, for Christian unity, a mighty and indispensable factor. In spite of our small number, we are fully conscious of being charged with a great mission.<sup>27</sup>

According to the decree on Catholic Eastern Churches the oriental catholic churches are obliged to promote the unity of all Christians, especially of the eastern Christian. The decree envisages this specific task in its fivefold aspect in accordance with the principles announced in the decree on ecumenism.

### **Prayer**

Unity is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Dialogue can develop only in a context of sincere and committed spirituality. The spiritual ecumenism is to be regarded as the soul of the whole of the ecumenical movement.<sup>28</sup>

The commitment to ecumenism must be based upon the conversion of hearts and upon prayer, which will also lead to the *necessary purification of past memories*. With the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Lord's disciples, inspired by love, by the power of the truth and by a sincere desire for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation, are called to *re-examine together their painful past* and the hurt which that past regrettably continues to provoke even today (UUS 2).

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<sup>26</sup> OE 24

<sup>27</sup> Madey , *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 150

<sup>28</sup> UR 8

This on the other hand emphasises the fact that the unity is not the result of the human effort. A network of spiritual link between the churches leads them to the consciousness of the need of unity. Thus the Catholic Church underlines the work of the Holy Spirit as the primary agent of ecumenism and the desire for unity will come to fulfilment, whenever and however the lord wills. Here we may have to take into account the yearly prayer observation of the whole Christian world called Unity Prayer Octave and other spiritual and monastic movements which took up the cause of the unity of the churches as their main spiritual obligation.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Example of Life**

The attainment of union is the concern of the whole Church, faithful and shepherds alike. This concern extends to everyone, according to his talent, whether it be exercised in his daily Christian life or in his theological and historical research. This concern itself reveals already to some extent the bond of brotherhood between all Christians and it helps toward that full and perfect unity which God in His kindness wills (UR 5). This involvement of the Catholic faithful is reiterated in the teachings of the Catholic Church. “May each person live ecumenical dialogue as a pilgrimage towards the fullness of catholicity that Christ wants for his Church; harmonising the many different voices in a single symphony of truth and love”.<sup>30</sup> The work for the unity demands a personal commitment of every faithful. “Catholics, in their ecumenical work, must assuredly be concerned for their separated brethren, praying for them, keeping them informed about the Church, making the first approaches toward them. But their primary duty is to make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be done or renewed in the Catholic household itself, in order that its life may bear witness more clearly and

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<sup>29</sup> Here we can cite the example of the Taize Movement begun by Brother Roger Schutz in France. In Kerala we have the examples of the common prayer gatherings of the Episcopal Churches in view of the unity octave and the ecumenical bible conventions and other gatherings. But a movement in a solid manner is still wanting in the Church of Malabar.

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, “Message to the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity”, November 12-17, 2001, IS, 109, 2002/I-II, 11

faithfully to the teachings and institutions which have come to it from Christ through the Apostles”(UR 4).

Catholic Eastern Churches, which represent a particular paradigm of unity in diversity in the Catholic Church, have a special task of example on account this particular vocation.<sup>31</sup> Even though *uniatism* is no longer a model of unity, the Catholic Eastern Churches still accomplish a specific role in an ecumenical perspective.<sup>32</sup> As churches *sui iuris* belonging to the Catholic communion they maintain their eastern identity. The catholic eastern churches thus express the “united but not absorbed” character. But this further relates the particular task of these churches to present them as a criterion for the ecumenical credibility of the Catholic Church.

#### **Religious fidelity to the Ancient Tradition**

The fidelity to the ancient tradition demands the preservation of the same. Whereas the importance of the oriental tradition and the preservation of the same were already discussed in the opening articles of the document (OE 1, 5, 6), the council presents them as the ecumenical task of the Catholic oriental churches. The specific task of the catholic eastern churches in the realm of ecumenism calls for special attention to this aspect of fidelity to once own ecclesial tradition. The decree on ecumenism directs the attention of the churches to this:

The very rich liturgical and spiritual heritage of the Eastern Churches should be known, venerated, preserved and cherished by all. They must recognize that this is of supreme importance for the faithful preservation of the fullness of Christian tradition, and

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<sup>31</sup> CCEO 902-904

<sup>32</sup> But this specific role is not easy to explain in the context of modern concepts of ecumenism. For the Catholic Church itself, though its ultimate goal is the full visible unity of the Disciples of Christ, holds the position that this unity does not mean what could be called ecumenism of return. That is to deny and to reject one’s own faith history. Cf. Benedict, XVI., Pope Benedict XVI and Ecumenism; Address at Ecumenical Meeting: Cologne, IS, 119, 2005/III, 91

for bringing about reconciliation between Eastern and Western Christians (UR 15).

The “Instruction for applying the liturgical prescription of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches” puts emphasis on this aspect of religious fidelity to once own ancient traditions:

The first requirement of every eastern liturgical renewal, as is also the case for liturgical reform in the west, is that re-discovering full fidelity to their own liturgical traditions, benefiting from their riches and eliminating that which has altered their authenticity.<sup>33</sup>

Relating this aspect to the ecumenical context the document teaches:

In every effort of liturgical renewal, therefore, the practice of the orthodox brethren should be taken into account, knowing it, respecting it and distancing from it as little as possible so as not to increase the existing separation, but rather intensifying efforts in view of eventual adaptations, maturing and working together. Thus will be manifested the unity that already subsists in daily receiving the same spiritual nourishment from practicing the same common heritage.<sup>34</sup>

The Church does not pray in some kind of mythical omnitemporality. She cannot forsake her roots. The rite which includes this aspect of praying with the fathers and the apostles represents the loyalty of a Church to its own

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<sup>33</sup> Instruction, 18

<sup>34</sup> Instruction, 21

roots. They are forms of the apostolic Tradition and of its unfolding in the great places of the Tradition.<sup>35</sup>

### **Better Knowledge of each Other**

This is one of the important aspects in relation to the churches in Kerala. When we analyse the relations between the churches of Syriac traditions in Kerala, the mutual knowledge of these churches are very minimum. This is true especially regarding the Syro-Malabar Church in its relation with other non-Catholic churches, though they all come under the Syriac tradition despite their Indian origins. Discarding once own tradition and identity is for that matter discarding once own existence. The words of Patriarch Maximos IV, one of the active council fathers from orient is true regarding the attitude of some Syro-Malabar Catholics including certain hierarchs:

Certain Catholic Orientals seem to take pleasure in marking their difference in regard to their brethren of the same rite. They forget that they thus cease to be of any utility for the Church, because for the West they are not the East, and for the East they are not the West.<sup>36</sup>

In this context of the dwindling attitude of the Syro-Malabar Church to the whole question of ecumenism and dialogue in virtue of its neglect for the Syriac tradition which is systematic to its identity, the words of Pope John Paul II are of importance:

The Church's commitment to ecumenical dialogue, as it has clearly appeared since the Council, far from being the responsibility of the Apostolic See alone, is also the duty of individual local or particular

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<sup>35</sup> Ratzinger, J., *The Spirit of Liturgy*, San Francisco, 2000, 164

<sup>36</sup> Madey, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 153

Churches. Special commissions for fostering the ecumenical spirit and ecumenical activity have been set up by the Bishops' Conferences and the Synods of the Eastern Catholic Churches. These initiatives are a sign of the widespread practical commitment of the Catholic Church to apply the Council's guidelines on ecumenism: this is an essential aspect of the ecumenical movement. Dialogue has not only been undertaken; it has become an outright necessity, one of the Church's priorities (UUS 31).

### **Brotherly Respect and Collaboration**

Openness to the other ecclesial traditions is an important aspect of the ecumenical dimension of a Church. Sometimes the churches have a tendency to remain as they are, to reject what they are not, to see the fellow churches or sister churches with an amount of suspicion after identifying themselves with the Church. This attitude is rather restrictive and exclusive as against the Church which should be more extensive and inclusive. These features of exclusivism shut the door of communion and ecumenism because of a holier than thou attitude towards the sister churches.<sup>37</sup> Pope John Paul II reminds the Catholic Eastern Churches this aspect of ecumenical brotherhood:

The Eastern Catholic Bishops will not neglect any means of encouraging an atmosphere of brotherhood, sincere mutual esteem and cooperation with their brothers in the Churches with which we are not yet united in full communion, especially with those who belong to the same ecclesial tradition.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Koonammakkal, T., "The Church in the Churches: A Syriac Ecclesiological Perspective," CO, Vol. XVI, 1, March 1993", 34

<sup>38</sup> OL 26

At the same time this openness to other Churches calls forth the fidelity to one's own genuine traditions and authentic sources. Unless the churches remain faithful their own ecclesial heritages they will be diluting the identity. This will in turn result in the loss of its distinctiveness. As an Oriental Catholic Church, the Syro-Malabar Church has an ecumenical dimension in relation to the other sister Churches of the Syriac tradition. However only when it is genuinely oriental can it witness to the fact that it respects all the Churches and their Liturgies.<sup>39</sup> In his book *The Church*, one of the most prominent Catholic theologians of modern times, Hans Küng, underlined that authentic work towards inter-confessional rapprochement, as well as any attempt directed towards better realization of the Church's inner ecclesial nature and mission, should always —start in one's own Church, but with the other Churches in mind.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Ecumenical Task of Syro Malabar Church**

In accordance with the teaching of the Catholic Church ecumenism is not an appendix to the life of the Church, rather it is the very vocation of the Church.<sup>41</sup> “The attainment of union is the concern of the whole Church, faithful and shepherds alike. This concern extends to everyone, according to his talent, whether it be exercised in his daily Christian life or in his theological and historical research” (UR 5). Therefore the Second Vatican Council “exhorts all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism” (UR 4).

The Council put it clearly how this work to be treated in the Church life. The directions of the council are relevant in the context of the historical and liturgical consciousness of the Syro-Malabar Church:

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<sup>39</sup> Koikkakudy, J., “The Syro-Malabar Church as a Major Archbishopric”, CO, Vol. XIV, 1, March 1993”, 51

<sup>40</sup> Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. by Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Burns and Oates, 1967), p. 287.

<sup>41</sup> Ut Unum Sint, 1

Catholics, in their ecumenical work, must assuredly be concerned for their separated brethren, praying for them, keeping them informed about the Church, making the first approaches toward them. But their primary duty is to make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be done or renewed in the Catholic household itself, in order that its life may bear witness more clearly and faithfully to the teachings and institutions which have come to it from Christ through the Apostles (UR 4).

This calls up on the Syro-Malabar Church to rethink about its duty as a Catholic Eastern Church. It calls for a proper ecumenical orientation which leads to an appropriate ecumenical vision. The Council teaches:

Sacred theology and other branches of knowledge, especially of an historical nature, must be taught with due regard for the ecumenical point of view, so that they may correspond more exactly with the facts (UR 10).

This again underscores the need of due attention to the ecumenical formation of the Church. One of the stumbling blocks in the process of regaining a strong sense of identity of the Syro-Malabar Church and of restoration of its traditions is the largely westernised theological thinking pattern. This is largely indebted to the theological and priestly formation in the Syro-Malabar Church which is pre-dominantly western in its character. Thus only an oriental perspective in every aspect of theological formation will bring a new wind in the Church. This would help to create an ecumenical atmosphere in relation to its sister Churches.

In the process of liturgical renewal and adaptation in the Syro-Malabar Church, it seemed to be overlooked that “there is an aspect of givenness and tradition in the liturgy, which cannot be forgotten. We cannot receive an apostolic patrimony apart from the liturgical forms and prayers lived and

prayed down through the centuries forming an unbroken chain of tradition”.<sup>42</sup> In addition to that the absence of proper catechetical and theological formation focusing on the distinctive oriental identity of the Syro-Malabar Church and the ignorance of the richness of the oriental spiritual traditions has vitiated the controversy in the Church. “Though there have been attempts at restoration, renewal and adaptation, the Liturgy was not taught as the source of spirituality and Christian life. Such a catechesis and formation was not given to our priests, religious and laity. The liturgy became rather the point of controversy and hence our priests, religious and faithful are devoid of proper liturgical formation”.<sup>43</sup> And many of the religious and the people at large are alarmingly ignorant of the theology of individual Churches and lack a proper consciousness of their ecclesial identity. Elavanal admits that “our Church in general failed to give proper liturgical formation to the priests and the people of God. Many of the abuses in the liturgy are the results of ignorance about the liturgy”.<sup>44</sup> This in turn restricts the ecumenical openness of this Church towards its sister churches.

Unfortunately the new “Charter for Priestly Formation of the Syro-Malabar Church” handles the matter of ecumenism and ecumenical formation as an appendix to the ecclesial and human formation of the future priests.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless in the section on the “On-going Formation of the Priests” it points out:

Building up of our Church as an authentic Oriental Church in all aspects is the best way to make her contribution in this regard. Hence

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<sup>42</sup> Elavanal, T., “Influence of Vatican Council II on the Liturgical Life of the Syro-Malabar Church”, in Kannookadan, P. (ed.), *Syro-Malabar Church Forty Years After Vatican Council II*, Kochi, 2007., 99

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 92

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 93

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *The Charter for Priestly Formation in the Syro-Malabar Church*, Kochi 2007; the new charter for the priestly formation of the Syro-Malabar Church was promulgated on August 15, 2007, by the Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church; Decree, Prot. No. 636/2007

the priests of the Syro-Malabar Church should be given also an on-going ecumenical formation.<sup>46</sup>

It again reminds the special vocation of the Church in relation to its identity as a Catholic Oriental Church:

Syro-Malabar Church, being an oriental individual Church has a specific role to play in the ecumenical projects of the Church. So it is the responsibility of the priests to take active role in the ecumenical forums in their locality.<sup>47</sup>

In the post-Vatican period the use of Syriac language among the Christians of Kerala, especially among the Syro-Malabar, had fallen into decline.<sup>48</sup> The place of Syriac language in the theological formation of the Syro-Malabar Church is practically nil. Although its use is replaced by vernacular in the liturgy, the revival of it in the theological formation has to be considered seriously. This is true of all the Churches of Thomas Christians or Syriac tradition. For, “the link with their Syrian tradition is now restricted to history and language; if it is broken, the Christians and Christianity of Kerala will have lost their special qualities”.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, we have to consider the words of Kasper:

Ecumenism is ecumenism in truth. That necessitates going back to the sources, above all in Scripture and liturgy. We must communicate once more what constitute the common basis and the common foundation, and make the differences comprehensible from the perspective of that common ground. How can this kind of ecumenical formation occur in the congregations, in the seminaries, at the universities etc.?<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., No. 94

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., No. 96 § 20

<sup>48</sup> Segal, J. B., *Syriac and Churches of Kerala*, CO, Vol. IV, No. 2, June 1983, 83-92

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 90

<sup>50</sup> Kasper, W., “Ecumenism in Transition”, IS, 123, 2006/III-IV, 104-105

Hence, search for unity in the Indian Church cannot neglect its Syriac heritage, because it forms part of the tradition of all the churches of Syriac tradition in India. So, Syro-Malabar Church, in view of its ecumenical mission, has to consider the sister churches of Thomas Christian tradition. Besides that, the ecumenical openness demands a revival and restoration in the process of renewal, and the restoration of one's own identity and tradition.

Regarding the ecumenical commitment of the eparches the Ecumenical Directory gives the direction: "It is the responsibility of each bishop, of Synods of Eastern Catholic Churches and of Episcopal Conferences to issue general directives relating to ecumenical formation".<sup>51</sup>

One of the crises the Church faces in the modern times is that the ecumenical questions have lost their fascination or the kind of enthusiastic ecumenism has strained in the present time. This is very often connected with a lack of catechetical and homiletic instruction. Analysing the situation Walter Kasper writes:

In this situation we are faced with a double task and challenge. Firstly, we have to promote ecumenical education and the reception of ecumenical results. The results of ecumenical progress have not yet penetrated into the hearts and into the flesh of our Church and other churches as well. Ecumenical theology is not present as an inner dimension in theological programmes.

Secondly, we must clarify and renew the ecumenical vision; we need a new ecumenical push and verve. We are in danger of losing a whole generation of young people if we do not give them a vision. This

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<sup>51</sup> ED 55; in the Syro-Malabar Church this aspect of the teaching mission of the Eparch in matters related to Ecumenism was not given its due importance except in the case of Mar Joseph Powathil, who can be called as Church man and champion of ecumenism in the post Vatican history of the Syro-Malabar Church. For a collection of his teachings on Ecumenism; Cf. Powathil, J., *Prabodhakante Vazhiyilude* (Malayalam), edited by Padiath T, Changanacherry, 2007, 225-253

means catechetical, homiletic, theological endeavour, but even more a spiritual renewal and a new start.<sup>52</sup>

The duty of Synods of Eastern Catholic Churches is also referred in the directory with importance.<sup>53</sup> Probably this is an important guideline for the Synod of Syro-Malabar Church for its action for ecumenism. We do not have any kind of examples for mutual interactions of the Synods of the Churches of Syriac Traditions in India. The Synod of Syro-Malabar Church may have to consider the new ways of interactions in the changing ecumenical situations.<sup>54</sup>

“The Catholic Church embraces with hope the commitment to ecumenism as a duty of the Christian conscience enlightened by faith and guided by love. In the present situation of the lack of unity among Christians and of the confident quest for full communion, the Catholic faithful are conscious of being deeply challenged by the Lord of the Church. The Second Vatican Council strengthened their commitment with a clear ecclesiological vision, open to all the ecclesial values present among other Christians. By engaging in frank dialogue, Communities help one another to look at themselves together in the light of the Apostolic Tradition. This leads them to ask themselves whether they truly express in an adequate way all that the Holy Spirit has transmitted through the Apostles”.<sup>55</sup> In the context of this exhortation of Bl. Pope John Paul II I conclude this discussion with some open questions: How far this concept of ecumenical thrust of the Church permeated in the Indian Church? Does anything discourage us to have a positive attitude towards Ecumenism?

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<sup>52</sup> Kasper, W., “Present Situation and Future of the Ecumenical Movement”, IS, 109, 2002/I-II, 14

<sup>53</sup> ED 46-47

<sup>54</sup> In the social and political situation of the churches in Kerala we have the joint actions of inter-church council for Education and some other bodies of Church relations. But we have no instances of a serious encounter of the synods of the churches or the eparches on the issues of ecclesial and theological levels pertaining to the ecumenical relations.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. UUS 8, 10, 16