

Special Features of Syrian Orthodox Ecclesiology

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1. Introduction

Ecclesiology as a part of the Dogmatic Theology is a vast subject. In this conference I think the intention is not to analyse the theories and definitions on Ecclesiology. Many of the definitions about the church are common to all Christian communities and therefore I need not make a survey of that. We have assembled here to hear the views of the different churches on ecclesiology to search for ways and means of ecclesial communion. I am asked to speak on Syrian Orthodox Ecclesiology. Actually I have never thought of a Syrian Orthodox Ecclesiology, till I got the invitation to present a paper in this subject. Here my intention is not to present a full-fledged doctrine on Syrian Orthodox Ecclesiology but to make an attempt to clarify the differences and agreements in Syrian Orthodox and Catholic points of view on Ecclesiology and to point out the special features of the Syrian orthodox Ecclesiology.

2. Orthodoxy – The meaning of the word

Orthodox means to have the right faith. Orthodox Church thus means the church, that possess' the right faith. We already know the early history of Christianity and the history of Ecumenical Councils. After the great split in the Christian Church the Church in the East was called Orthodox and in the West was called Catholic. Orthodox and Catholic are technical terms for the churches in the East and West, but if we take the meaning of these two terms they are at the same time attributes claimed by all the episcopal churches.

We can also give another meaning to, this word. The relation of the word Orthodox to the verb Doxazo is often neglected, Doxazo means to glorify. Orthodoxy is not only right faith and right teaching, but also right praising and glorification of God. This right praising of God is realized in the life of the Church, in the worship of God and in the celebration of the sacraments. The right faith finds its expression in the living reality of praising the Lord. According to Orthodox point of view the Church is to be understood primarily not as an authoritative teacher of faith, but as a fellowship of faithful, who pray and praise God. This type Orthodoxy can also be called Orthopraxy. Orthopraxy means the practice of right faith in the life of the church.

3. From local Church towards the Universal Church.

We will examine a special feature of the Orthodox Ecclesiology. That can be done in comparison with the Ecclesiology of the Catholic Church. There is an important difference between the Ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. The difference is in the understanding of the structure of the church. The ecclesiology of the Catholic Church has got a deductive way of approach ... It begins with the view of the Universal Church and then tries to explain the meaning and existence of the local church. The local church is understood only as part of the one Universal Church, carrying all the consequences as part of the Universal Church. From Universal Ecclesiological principle and background begins the

teaching about the church in West. The apostolic throne of St. Peter is theoretically and practically the starting point. The Catholic Ecclesiology begins from the top and goes down to the bottom. It is like a pyramid and the Pope of Rome as the Supreme head of the church is placed on the top. He is the Symbol of unity of the Church. The orthodox churches have adopted a different way of approach. For them the starting point of ecclesiological thinking is not the universal Church but the local church and from their it reaches the Universal Church. This way of approach is called inductive. According to Orthodox Ecclesiology every local Church is an expression of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. All the qualities and attributes of the Universal Church are immanent in the local church also. Church as a historical reality finds its realisation here and now through the local church. If the local church is considered only as a part of the universal church then something is lacking in it always. Only the local church has got immediate relation to the people of God and to this world. The local church under the bishop must be able to fulfil the entire mission for which the church exists in this world. If it is so the fullness of the church must be realised through the local church.

4. The bishop as the symbol of unity of the church: A Syrian Orthodox perspective

According to Ignatius of Antioch the leadership of the bishop gives the Church actual ecclesial character. This relation is so inseparable just like the relation between the Church and Jesus Christ. As the head of the Eucharistic community the bishop is the symbol and image of the one and single High-priest Jesus Christ. The oneness of the church is reflected through the bishop. Because of this function of the bishop the episcopacy of the church in the whole world represents the oneness and unity of the church. It is not a composition of the different part of the Church to form the whole, but realization of the whole in one part. The local church with its bishop represents the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Therefore every bishop is a successor of the apostles of Jesus Christ. According to Ignatius the bishops appointed in the whole world are of one mind in Christ (Eph 3:2). Here we face a fully ecumenical conception about the church. Cyprian sees in the oneness of the episcopacy the unity and fullness of the local church. Every bishop and the church under him is church in its fullness and visible expression of the universal Church.

5. The Synod as the supreme spiritual authority

The supreme spiritual authority of the Syrian Orthodox Church is vested not in a person but in the council of all the bishops called the Universal Synod. In Nos.3 and 4 we have dealt with the position of the local church. The above mentioned thoughts about the local church and synodality of the universal Church are complementary to each other. In the Syrian Orthodox church the Universal Synod is the supreme spiritual authority and the Patriarch of Antioch is the president of the Universal Synod.

6. The Throne of St Peter and The Patriarch of Antioch

The Supreme visible spiritual head of the Syrian Orthodox Church is the Patriarch of Antioch. He is considered as the successor of St Peter and as such he is seated on the throne of St Peter in Antioch. In the first century Antioch became the main centre of the Christians,

when they were persecuted in Jerusalem. St Peter as the leader of the apostles became the head of the church in Antioch. According to Eusebius St Peter is not only the founder but also the first bishop of the church in Antioch. Therefore the bishop of Antioch became naturally the successor of St Peter and the Syrian Orthodox Church firmly believes in this Perrine succession.

7. Eucharistic Ecclesiology

The Ecclesiological teaching of the Orthodox Church can be explained only in relation with the Eucharistic theology. According to St Paul the Church is the Body of Christ and Jesus Christ is the Head of the Body. We can now put the question-where we will be able to find the concrete expression and realization of the Body of Christ? The celebration of the Eucharist in the local church under the leadership of the bishop is the particular moment, in which the concrete and visible expression of the Church as the Body of Christ is realized here in this world. At the time of the celebration of the Eucharist the Church as the Body of the Christ meets together to participate in the Eucharistic Body of the Christ. Here we find the full expression of the Church. The bishop as the celebrant represents the heavenly High priest Jesus Christ and the people of God behind him is his body. The Church as the Body of Christ is fully realized at this particular moment. Here we find also the realization of the two types of communion and relation, that is horizontal and vertical. On the basis of this we can call the Orthodox Ecclesiology as Eucharistic Ecclesiology.

8. Pneumatic Ecclesiology

Not only the creed of the universal Church, but also the New Testament represents a pneumatic ecclesiology. Unfortunately during the last few centuries the pneumatic ecclesiology was not fully interpreted and explained. In the West the Church was defined mainly from the point of view of incarnation. The Church was considered primarily as an institution with its own hierarchy and authority. The charismatic and pneumatological aspects of the Church were forgotten. But in the modern times sincere efforts are being made in the East and West to uphold the pneumatic ecclesiology. The Church is defined now as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and the Sacrament of the Holy Spirit.

The Syrian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox churches in general emphasize the pneumatological dimension of the Church. This emphasize is based on the Bible and Creed of the Church. According to St Luke the Pentecost just after the resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ marked the birthday of the Church. The primitive Church functioned fully according to the direction of the Holy Spirit. According to St Paul the Church is one body and Holy Spirit is the soul of the body (Eph 4:4).

Let us now examine the confession of faith in our Creed. The basic confession in the third article is "I believe in the Holy Spirit". If we examine the Greek original the definite article is not found. This means that the term Holy Spirit is here used primarily not in the Trinitarian context but in soteriological context. Here the Holy Spirit is mainly the gift of God for the Church. This does not mean that the Trinitarian context is left out. Confession of faith in the Holy Spirit and in the Church is inseparably connected. Through the Holy Spirit the resurrected Lord himself is present in history through his presence in the church and its works

as the power and principle of the new history to form the new heaven and earth. Therefore the confession of faith in the spirit and in the Church go together. According to the creed the starting point of ecclesiology is pneumatology. The idea of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit indicates the Eucharistic fellowship in which the Christians all around the world are bound together to be one Church. In this sense the Holy spirit is the gift given by God as bond of unity through the Eucharist. As the soul of the Church the Holy Spirit Joins all the believers together and the Spirit is the bond of unity of the universal Church.

9. Autocephaly and National churches

In the 19th and 20th centuries the Byzantine Church was forced to think of autocephalous national churches. This idea has emerged mainly out of socio-political reasons. In 1833 the church in Greece was declared as autocephalous national church and in 1850 the Patriarch of Constantinople approved this claim and he became a nominal head of the Greek Church. After that the Church in Jugoslavia, Bulgaria and Rumania also became independent churches. Here we find a formidable difference in the ecclesiology of the Byzantine churches and the Syrian Orthodox Church. The Syrian Orthodox Church does not accept the concept of autocephaly and national churches. The one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church must be able to overcome the political boundaries of nations. The Byzantine concept of national churches is now a days has crept into the ecclesiology of the Oriental Orthodox Churches also. Because the Syrian Orthodox Church does not accept this concept, there arose as you already know a severe schism in the Syrian Orthodox Church in India.

10.The uniqueness of the Syrian Orthodox Ecclesiology

The Ecclesiology of the Syrian Orthodox Church can be compared with that of the Catholic Church mainly in two aspects – that is regarding universality of the Church and the oneness of the Church. As I have already said the Syrian Orthodox Church just like the Catholic Church rejects the idea of independent national churches. Church is universal and therefore it must overcome geographical and political boundaries. The visible oneness and unity of the Church is expressed mainly through the visible head of the Universal Church – The Patriarch of Antioch. The Patriarch is the successor of St. Peter and he is the symbol of continuity and unity of the Universal Church. The search for autocephaly destroys the unity, continuity and catholicity of the Church. This position of the Syrian Orthodox Church shows the uniqueness of the Syrian Orthodox ecclesiology, and at the same time it may be a stumbling block to other Orthodox Churches.

11.Steps towards unity

In 1971 H.H. Pope Paul VI and H.H. Patriarch Ignatius Yakob III met together to strengthen the relation between the Catholic Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church. This meeting led to the joint declaration of the heads of the two churches. They were in agreement that there is no difference in faith they profess concerning the mystery of the Word of God made flesh and became really man even though there were difficulties due to different theological expressions. They also encourage the clergy and faithful of their churches to remove the

obstacles which still prevent complete communion among them. This must be done with love and openness and with mutual respect for each other.

A decisive step towards unity and co-operation with the Catholic Church was taken IN June 1984, when H.H. Pope and H.H. Patriarch met in Rome. The purpose of the meeting was to seek co-operation between the Catholic Church and Syrian Orthodox Church in pastoral field. This meeting brought forth concrete results. The heads of the two churches agreed that both the churches can mutually hear confession and receive communion. This decision was a decisive step towards unity. Among the Orthodox Churches I think only the Syrian Orthodox Church has got communion with Roman Catholic Church. This agreement between the Pope and the Patriarch stand out as a land mark in the history of ecumenism.

12.Suggestions to promote ecumenical relation between the Syrian Orthodox Church and Catholic Church.

a. Co-operation in theological field.

The main theological difference between the Catholic Church and the Syrian Orthodox church was in the definition of Christology. The Christological difference which started with the council of Chalcedon originated due to political reasons and other misunderstandings. That is why the heads of the two churches made the joint declaration, that there is no difference in faith they profess concerning the mystery of the Word of God made flesh. Though the two churches are very close in matter of faith there is little co-operation in theological field. It is high time for us to think about ways and means of co-operation in theological field. As a sign of hope both the churches have appointed commissions for theological dialogue. Mutual exchange of students and professors in theological institutions will help us a lot to understand each other deeply.

b. Co-operation in pastoral field

At present the co-operation between the Catholic Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church in pastoral field is not satisfactory. If both the churches mutually accept the sacraments and if they have got inter-communion why do they not co-operate more effectively in pastoral field? Mutual acceptance and respect are necessary for such co-operation. If a believer is unable to get the service of a priest from his own church, then he must be free to get the service of a priest from the other church if available. We should not try to swallow each other. In the case of inter-marriage the churches have not yet accepted a realistic way of approach. The Catholic Church insists on to change the church. According to Indian tradition the bride has to join the family of bridegroom. If the bride is a Catholic and the bridegroom is non-Catholic how can we insist that the bride groom must become a Catholic before the marriage? There are some practical problems still to be solved.

c. Co-operation in social and political fields.

As the Christians are a minority in India co-operation in social and political fields is necessary to render an effective service to the society and to the nation. In India religious fundamentalism is growing day by day and only if the Christians stand together we can face problems arising from the society in which we live. We also have to find out and open up

new areas of social work. Working with or working against a political party is not at all advisable for the Church. The Church must be able to impart mainly the Christian spirit in the society and in politics.

d. Time for positive ecumenism

In India the churches come together only when they are threatened. In Kerala, for example, the churches co-operated when the government tried to take over their educational institutions. The ecumenical body in Nilackal also emerged out of a threat. We can call this type of ecumenism as negative ecumenism. Now it is time to think of Introducing positive ecumenism. From positive ecumenism I mean that our ecumenism must emerge out of the positive desire to work together and to co-operate with each other.

Conclusion

This paper is not a perfect treatise on the ecclesiology of the Syrian Orthodox Church. Here I have made an attempt to highlight the special features of the Syrian Orthodox Ecclesiology. Some of these special features are common to all the Orthodox Churches. I think that the knowledge about the different ecclesiological stand points is the first and important step towards ecumenism and “Ecclesial Communion”.

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