

Petrine Primacy – Ecumenical Perspectives

Rev. Dr. Adai Jacob Corepiscopa

Part I: Petrine Primacy as an Undeniable Truth as per NT and the Traditions of the Primitive Church

When we think of the whole inhabited world (oikumene) as a global village in this cyber age, Christians form a formidable part of its inhabitation. But unfortunately the Christians in the world lost their feeling of oneness though they all believe in one God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The church existing in this world is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality. In our creed we confess our faith in one holy catholic and apostolic church. The church as body of Christ cannot be divided, but remain united under its head Jesus Christ. The Universal Church as a visible reality it needs a visible head to realize its unity and oneness. The church is continuation of incarnation and therefore the role of Jesus Christ and his apostles especially the leader of the apostles Peter cannot be ignored and suppressed when we think of unity. If the Christian churches in this world dream of a unity of all Christians in this world, the role of Peter as the head of the primitive church and afterwards the role of the successors of Peter to represent Peter cannot be denied. Ecumenism in its wider global sense is inevitably related to Petrine primacy. With such a primacy I never mean the exercise of temporal authority. From Petrine Primacy I mean the responsibility to represent Jesus Christ and follow the model of leaderships that Jesus taught which is expressed and practiced in love self-sacrifices and service.

1. Primacy of Simon Peter among the Disciples of Jesus

Among the disciples of Jesus, Peter holds a special position. This special position occupied by Peter is clearly stated in the Gospels when they deal with the earthly ministry of Jesus.

a. Simon Peter as first among the disciples.

When the synoptic Gospels give the list of the twelve apostles,¹ the name of Peter is listed first always. This practice of listing Peter in the first place continued in the Primitive Church

¹ Mt 10: 2-4, Mk 3:16-19, Lk 6:14-16

also (Acts 1:13). In the case of the calling of the disciples Simon Peter was the first one to be called by Jesus.²The first position of Peter is explicitly expressed in the Gospel of St. Mathew (10:2). A clear trace of primacy of Simon Peter is visible in the attribute “first” given to him.³ St. Mark and St. Luke use a short form to mention the twelve apostles – Peter and the companions. This shows that the twelve apostles accompanied Jesus under the leadership of Peter.

b. Confession of faith and giving of the new name “Kepha”.

The primacy attributed to Peter is not simply an inference based on abstract texts of the NT. The primacy was given to Peter by Jesus, when Simon made the decisive church building confession of faith: “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). The Christian church exists in this world on the basis of this faith confessed by Simon. Just after the confession of faith Jesus gave Simon a new name- Kepha and it means stone or rock. In NT this new Aramaic name given to Peter is preserved and used as it is. In Greek NT the name Kepha is not translated but transcribed adding an “S” and thus the form “Kephas” is used. Apostle Paul always used the Aramaic form Kepha except in Gal 2:7. By giving a new Aramaic name Jesus was projecting the primacy of Peter among the disciples.

The answer of Jesus to Simon’s proclamation of faith is also decisive: You are Kepha and on this rock I will build my church (Matthew 16:18). The church is thus built on the Rock, who is Simon Kepha and on the foundation of faith professed by Peter. In the interpretations of this text by the early Fathers of the Church the prime position of Peter is emphasized.⁴

c. Peter as representative and spokesman of the disciples

In Synoptic Gospels Peter appears as the representative and spokesman of the disciples⁵. Prominence of Peter among the disciples is evidently reported in the Synoptic Gospels. As we know Peter, James and John belonged to the close circle of disciples and among them Peter

² Mt 4:18-19, Mk 1:16-17, Lk 5:1-11

³ Ratzinger, called to communion 54

⁴ Cyprian : “It is on one man that He builds the church” (de unitate ecelesiac 4)

St. Aphraat : “ Simon, the prime of the disciples... the lord look him made him the foundation and called him the rock the foundation of the church (demonstrations 7:15

St. Ephrem: “Blessed art thou, thou whom the Son of God choose and appointed had of his desciples, and to who he gave the power and authority to bind and to loose.

⁵ Mk 8:29; Mt 18:21; Lk 12:41; Mk 10:28; Mt 17:24

comes first (Luke 5:10; Matthew 17:1). When Jesus walked on the water in sea of Galilee Peter wanted to reach Jesus by walking on the water (Matthew 14:28). During important representing all the disciples the questions of Jesus to them were answered by Peter. Jesus knew that his last supper is going to be a crucial incident in the life Jesus and also in the life of Christian church for ever. Jesus entrusts Peter and the beloved disciple John to make preparations for the last supper (Mark 14:13; Luke 22:8). In Gethsemane Jesus prayed in agony and his sweat became like great drops of blood (Lk22:44) and just after that he turns to the disciples calling Peter (Mk 14:37; Mt 26:40).

d. Peter as Holder of the Keys of the kingdom of heaven.

Through his public ministry Jesus wanted to establish the kingdom of God. It can be realized only through repentance and true faith in Jesus (Mk 1:15) Peter followed Jesus and proclaimed true faith in Jesus. Therefore Jesus built his church on the rock that is Peter who confessed the faith. Here we see the starting point of establishing the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus moved a step further and entrusted with Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. To entrust with the keys of the kingdom of heaven means that the duty to administer the same is handed over to Peter by Jesus.⁶ Jesus makes Peter his vicar with the unique function of carrying and ministering the household of God, the church⁷.

e. Peter as leader is the one who strengthens the disciples and the believers.

In NT Peter is never pictured as a superman with extraordinary ability, power and authority. He is depicted in NT with all his human weaknesses as a simple fisher man, but he is chosen by Jesus to be the leader of the disciples and to be the primate of the church he established. During the most difficult time of the trial of Jesus like a criminal the fidelity of the disciples were put in trial. Jesus said to Peter that the Satan demanded the fall of Peter but Jesus prayed for him so that his faith may not fail (Luke 22:31-32) Peter expressed his readiness to go to prison with Jesus and also to die with him. Though Jesus foresaw Peter's denial and momentary loosing of fidelity He entrusts with Peter the difficult and great duty of strengthening

⁶ Mathew Vellanickal, *Church: Communion of Individual Churches* (St. Pauls, Bombay 2009),278.

⁷ Ibid 278.

the faith of the disciples and the believers⁸. Peter's role of strengthening the faith of the believers points to the future. To strengthen the faith of the brethren means to give leadership to the church in safeguarding and strengthening the faith of the church.

2. Primacy given to Peter by the resurrected Christ

Peter exercised primacy not only during the earthly life of Jesus, but also after his death and resurrection. The resurrected Christ himself appointed Peter as the chief shepherd of the people of God. To become the first witness to the resurrected Christ is a special privilege allotted to Peter. After resurrection Peter turns out to be the best fisherman to fish human beings.

a. Appointing Peter as the chief shepherd of the new people of God (John 21:15-18)

Before ascension the resurrected Christ entrusted Peter the most important duty of feeding the lambs and sheep of God. The threefold affirmative entrusting the duty of feeding the whole sheep means that Peter is appointed as the chief shepherd. The resurrected Christ wanted to keep the unity of the sheep under one shepherd after his earthly ministry. This chief shepherd is but indebted to follow the path of Jesus and must be ready to die for the sheep. (John 10:11, 21:19). The role of the Shepherd is not to rule over the sheep, but to feed, guide and to die for the sheep. The only role model for the chief shepherd is none other than the role of Jesus Christ himself.

b. Peter as the first witness to the resurrection.

The most important qualification that an apostle of Christ possessed was to be a witness of the risen Christ and to have direct experience of the presence of the risen Christ (Acts 1:22). St. Paul reports the tradition of the confession of faith of the primitive church in 1 Cori 15:3-8. According to it the risen Christ appeared to Peter at first and then to the twelve apostles. The true Gospel to be proclaimed to the whole world contains all the experiences from the earthly Jesus and from the risen Christ. Peter was the first one to be called as a disciple to experience the earthly Jesus again the first one to get the appearance of the risen Christ and to experience the risen Christ (1 Cori 15:5) The Gospels also emphatically affirm and project the appearance of

⁸ Ibid 279.

the risen Christ to Peter.⁹ The primacy given to Peter during earthly life of Jesus continued after the death and resurrection and it is clearly expressed in the narrations of the appearances of the risen Lord (Luke 24:34).

3. Primacy of Peter in the Primitive Church

a. One of the Pillars

In the epistle to the Galatians, Peter, James and John are considered to be the pillars of the early church (Galatians 2:9). The whole NT witness to the special place of Peter among the apostles and in the early Church¹⁰. In the account of the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is kept as the focal point in explaining the history of the primitive church. It asserts the primacy of St. Peter in the primitive church. After the death and resurrection of Lord Jesus Christ, Peter was accepted as the leader of the church in Jerusalem. It was Peter who addressed the crowd on the day of Pentecost which lead to the conversion of the thousands to Christianity. Though Peter is primarily the apostle to the Jews (Gal 2:8), it is Peter who inaugurates the conversion of the Gentiles by converting and baptizing Cornelius and his family. The epistles of St. Paul give evidence to prove the primacy of Peter in the church. Paul as apostle to the Gentiles got the necessary permission to carry out his mission from Peter (Galatians. 1:18) and Paul used to give a report about his missionary activities to Peter (Galatians 2:2). Peter was honored in the primitive church as the main witness to the resurrected Christ, as the head of the apostles, as protector of the true faith and traditions and as the one who is responsible to keep the discipline in the church and above all as the main shepherd of the newly formed sheep of god.

According to Oscar Cullman, Raymond E. Brown, A. Findly and J.K. Blank, the special role allotted to Peter in NT cannot be denied¹¹. They have made scientific studies on this matter and tried to give an objective picture of Peter. The scholars unanimously agree that Peter had a special role in the early church. The special role of Peter is entrusted by the resurrected Lord

⁹ Lk 24:34; John21:7-11, 15-17

¹⁰ Cf Matthew 4:18-20; 8:14; 10:2; 14:28-32; 15:15; 16:18-19; Luke 22:31-32; John 21:15-18; Acts 1-12; 15:7; Galatians 1:8;2:9.

¹¹ Adai Jacob, "A doctrinal study on the relation between Episcopacy and Petrine Ministry"(unpublished article)

himself. According to Cullman the leading position of Peter among the apostles and in the early church is evident in Synoptic Gospels, in 4th Gospel, in acts and in the letters of Paul¹².

According to Thomas Athanasius, the primacy of Peter has three levels of function in the church¹³. Firstly, Peter is the foundation of the church since he has been given the title Kepha (John 1:42; Matthew 16:18). Secondly, Peter has been given participation in the mission (Luke 5:10). Thirdly, Peter exercises pastoral functions as the leader of the universal church (John 21:15-17).

b. Keeping of Discipline in the Church

The history of the early church as described in the Acts of the Apostles is supportive of a Petrine ministry at the service of the unity of the whole Church. After Easter, Peter is presented as the leading figure among the disciples and supposed to be accountable for maintaining the discipline in the early church. When Luke describes the history of the primitive church in Acts of Apostles he puts Peter at the top. The important speech on the day of the Pentecost that led to the conversion of thousands was made by Peter. It can be seen that Peter was accountable for maintaining the discipline in the early church. The incident of punishing Ananias and Saphira who broke the discipline as described in the scripture is an example for it. The special mention of the Hellenists in the Book of Acts and their special views proves that even in the Primitive Church itself there were different tendencies. Peter and the rest of the apostles as a whole appear to have taken a mediating position between the Judaizers and the Hellenists¹⁴. All these points to the fact that Peter had a crucial role in keeping the discipline in the early church.

c. Leadership in Missionary Activities

The evangelization among the Jews was entrusted primarily to Peter (Galatians 2:8), but at the same time he is presented as the initiator of the Gentile mission. Cornelius and his family who were the first gentile converts were baptized by Peter. Paul as apostle to the Gentiles got the

¹² Adai Jacob, "A doctrinal study on the relation between Episcopacy and Petrine Ministry" (Paper Presented in the Catholic-Syrian Orthodox Theological Dialogue)

¹³ Thomas Athanasios, Ithu Viswasathinte Karyam(Malayalam), (Udayagiri: MSOT Seminary Publications, 1994),23.

¹⁴ Oscar Cullman, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, translated by Floyd V. Filson (New York: Living Age Books,1958),36.

necessary permission to carry out his mission from Peter (Galatians. 1:18) and Paul used to give a report about his missionary activities to Peter (Galatians 2:2). The Pauline writings are also not exceptions to this privileged position of Peter. Paul's various journeys to visit Peter also indicate the special position Peter had among the Pillars, the college of leading men in the Jerusalem Community. Antioch was considered to be the center of missionary activities in the early church and it is believed that Peter was in Antioch for a long time. This points to the fact that Peter was giving guidance and leadership to the missionary activities. There are texts, which show Peter's special function even in the Pauline communities. When speaking of his function in his own communities. Paul refers to Kephas as the first one who is recognized by the believers as having authority. Paul speaks about his right comparing himself to the other privileged persons in the Church among whom there is Kephas. When speaking of the apparitions of the risen Lord as a tradition handed over to him and as a privilege of apostleship he presents Kephas as the first one to have that privilege. This recognition of Peter in the Pauline Churches seems to indicate the special role of Peter among the Jerusalem community, among the apostles and in primitive Church, in which Jerusalem is the point of departure and origin for all the Christian communities. The importance given to Peter in the Pauline communities is also pointing to the vital role played by him in the missionary activities in those churches. According to Cullman the power of the keys concerns the missionary leadership and definitely presupposes the church leadership¹⁵.

d. Peter in Antioch

Although Christian Church had its beginnings in Jerusalem, the severe persecutions (Acts 11:10) lead to the shift of the center from Jerusalem to Antioch, a cosmopolitan city of that time. Antioch was not just a refuge for the Christians, rather also a center of missionary activities. St. Paul made his missionary journeys from Antioch and it was the center of all his operation. The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 lead to massive migration of Christians to Antioch, increasing the prominence of the city¹⁶. The historical fact that the title 'Christians' were given to the

¹⁵ Oscar Cullman, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, translated by Floyd V. Filson (New York: Living Age Books, 1958), 223.

¹⁶ Adai Jacob, "*The Patriarch of Antioch and the Throne of St. Peter*", Excelsior (Udayagiri: MSOT Seminary Publications, 1990), 30.

followers of Christ in Antioch reveals the importance and the presence of many Christians in the city.

It is widely accepted that Peter came to Antioch and worked for several years in Antioch (Acts 12:17; Gal 5:11). The Fathers of the church give report about the same. (E.g. Eusebius, Johannes, Chrysostom's, Heronimus). According to Eusebius Peter is the founder of the Church in Antioch and also became the first Bishop of Antioch¹⁷. If Peter is the first Bishop in Antioch, then Bishop or Patriarch of Antioch after Peter are his successors. The Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch has above all a legitimate claim over the Throne of Antioch in the succession of Peter. The importance of Rome regarding primacy is vested mainly in the fact that Peter suffered Martyrdom in Rome. As it is understood that Antioch was the center of Christianity in the early church for a long time, it is to be assumed that Peter who was in Antioch was the one who was monitoring the whole church and its activities.

Part II - Ecumenical Perspective of Petrine Primacy

If we now consider ecumenism as dealing with the unity and cooperation among the churches in this world, the Petrine primacy and ministry, if it is biblically analyzed, can play a vital role in ecumenism. We have just seen the primacy attributed to Peter during the earthly ministry of Jesus, after the resurrection and during the formation of the primitive church. In the light of the NT we can affirmatively say that Peter was the primate and the symbol of unity of the first century church. Our ecumenical perspectives today have to consider and adopt the model of the role played by Peter in the primitive church.

1. Trinitarian Model

The church as communion is to be understood in relationship with the Trinitarian Communion. We are at the heart of the mystery of the Church in the final salutation of Paul in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians : 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you'. The fellowship with the Father and the son in the Holy Spirit is the life towards which the whole economy of salvation tends. The Church is

¹⁷ Adai Jacob, "*The Question of Primacy in the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch,*" (Paper Presented in the Catholic-Syrian Orthodox Theological Dialogue),2.

the Sacrament of this fellowship. Within this Ecclesiology of Communion it is easier to see the theological significance of the Petrine ministry.

The structure and life of the Church reflects the mystery of the inner life of the Triune God, a life which is a community of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and at the same time uniquely and mysteriously one. 'Just as in the communion of persons within the Trinity there is a certain hierarchy, so also in the Communion of Churches there is a hierarchy'¹⁸. There is a first church and a first bishop. The fact that the Father is first within the Trinity does not mean that the Son and the Spirit are less or in any way subordinate to him. As the Father is in a special way the source and the symbol of the unity within the trinity, the succession of Petrine ministry is holding a special primacy within *the perichoresis* or communion of Churches and college of bishops. It is not a primacy of domination by one and subordination of others, but is rather a primacy of service in communion.

2. Reaffirming the Unity of the Church

Petrine Ministry is intended to preserve the unity of the Universal Church. Just as the three persons of the Trinity do not imply a division in the divine essence, but each of them possesses it fully and has His life in it, so also the essence of the Church the Body of Christ, is not divided by the plurality of Churches. Just as God is one and yet three without being divided, so too the Church is one and yet many again without division, because each Church represents and contains the full reality of the one Universal Church. It is in the context of this Ecclesiology of Communion that we see the significance of the Petrine ministry as a ministry of unity. In local level every bishop is a symbol of the unity of the church. In the universal level the Petrine primacy can be an aspect promoting unity among the churches. Abraham, the father of faith, is by his faith, the rock that holds back the chaos, the onrushing primordial flood of destruction, and thus sustains creation. Simon the first to confess Jesus as Christ and first witness of resurrection, now becomes by virtue of his Abrahamic faith, which is renewed in Christ, the rock that stands against the impure tide of unbelief and its destruction of man.¹⁹ Similarly the successor of Peter is intended to hold back the church together against the challenges that arises against its beliefs and existence.

¹⁸ Matthew Vellanickal, *Church: Communion of Individual Churches* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2009),281.

¹⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, translated by Adrian Walker (San Francisco, 1996)49-50.

According to the Eucharistic Ecclesiology each local church is an expression of the universal church possessing all its fullness.. This fullness is realized when there is a Eucharistic celebration under the leadership of a bishop. Wherever the Eucharist is celebrated, there the fullness of the church is realised. Each bishop as the head of the local church shares the promises given to Peter. Here local churches exist in communion with the apostolic throne of Peter and it is a communion with apostolic succession of St. Peter. The local church exists in relation to the universal where the successor of Peter is a symbol of unity²⁰.

The churches that accept the Petrine succession and Petrine authority in the church are the Catholic and Syrian Orthodox Church, accepting Popes and the Patriarchs as the successors of St. Peter and as a symbol of unity. Maintaining this line we can have a reinterpretation in the line of Cyprian. According to him succession of Peter cannot be limited to the bishop of Rome or of Antioch. Every local church is the church in its fullness. So the bishop of the local church shares the promise given to Peter. Peter is the model of every bishop. So Cyprian says each bishop is Peter and each bishop is the foundation of the church. This early Christian ecclesiology could help us for a more ecumenical interpretation of the Petrine office without discarding the primacy of bishop of Rome or Antioch.²¹

The successor of Peter as the head of the universal church can be seen as a symbol of unity. The patriarch of Antioch as successor of Peter is the symbol of unity of the Syrian Orthodox Church. As the holder of the Petrine office the patriarch of Antioch has two types of representative character, a.) He represents Peter and just as Peter was the head and shepherd of the primitive church, the Patriarch of Antioch keeping the same position safeguards the unity of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church b.) The Patriarch as the high priest represents the whole body of the people of God. The acclamation of the people, just after the consecration of Patriarch saying *axios* is a clear indication of the approval of the people as their representative. Unity of the Universal Syrian Orthodox Church is realized through the Patriarch of Antioch acting as the one chief shepherd of the whole church. Similarly in an ecumenical context the

²⁰ James C.S., "Petrine Ministry in relation to Antioch and Rome," (Paper Presented in the Catholic-Syrian Orthodox Theological Dialogue), 6.

²¹ Thomas Athanasius, *Function and Role of Bishop in the Regional and Local Level*, (Paper Presented in the Catholic-Syrian Orthodox Theological Dialogue), 5.

recognition of the Petrine primacy can pave way for much cooperation among the churches leading to a unity.

3. Expression of Catholicity

We know that in ecclesiology catholicity is basically a qualitative terminology and at the same time quantitative. It is to be understood that every local church under a bishop is expression of the Universal Church. If the Peter is ‘risha daslihe’ (a head of apostles) then the Patriarch as successor of Peter is ‘risha depiscopos’ (the head of the Bishops) In the context of Eucharistic ecclesiology when the patriarch celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the one holy catholic and apostolic church is manifested in a special and concrete way. There we find above all the manifestation of the union of catholicity and universality and the Patriarch appears as the visible symbol of catholicity. Hence it is to be concluded the Petrine primacy is always an expression of the catholicity of the Christian Church.

The Petrine ministry is given to the Church in view of maintaining the unity and integrity of the apostolic faith, which concretely exists in the different Ecclesial Traditions. Hence Petrine ministry, as the ministry of unity, is also collegially shared by the Heads of the Individual Churches who exercise the ministry of unity in their respective Individual Churches. On the Individual Ecclesial level, it is exercised by the head of the particular church who in the Eucharistic perspective, presides over the Eucharist, in which all the Particular Churches and all the Bishops of that Individual Church participate

4. Orthodox Perspective - Primacy and Conciliarity

The conciliar way of exercising the authority and taking decisions in the Church is seen from the early church itself. The election of Matthias and of the seven deacons and the Council of Jerusalem are all examples of conciliarity in the Church²². The decisions were taken in agreement with the whole church. The election of Matthias was effected by the congregation of a hundred and twenty people under the leadership of Peter. The institution of the seven deacons was established with the approval of the whole assembly. The apostles settled the controversy about the gentile Christians together with the elders and the whole Church, gathered in the Council of Jerusalem. The primacy of Peter in the Church is necessarily associated with

²² Acts 1: 15-26, Acts 6:1-6, Acts 15:5-30.

conciliarity. If Peter is the Rock on which Christ has built the Church (Matthew 16:18), the apostles are foundations to the Church (Eph 2:20). If Jesus has prayed for Peter in view of his role of strengthening his brethren (Luke 22:32), he has also prayed for all his apostles and for the whole Church in view of their unity and solidarity. If Peter has received in a special way the keys of the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:19), all the apostles have received it in a collegial way (Matthew 18:18, John 20:23). If Peter is the first one who had the privilege of experiencing the Risen Lord and being his official witness(1 Corinthians 15:5-15), all the apostles are official witnesses of the risen Christ(Acts 24:48; Acts 1:8).

Tavard says that it is the oneness of the church that is insisted in the conciliarity. It consists in the existence of the one universal gathering of believers and in the teaching of one doctrine. It implies the sacramental union of the whole people of God in the body of Christ and thereby the mutual communion with one another under their bishops.²³

The Syrian Orthodox Church emphasis the conciliar nature of the church. The council of bishops or the Episcopal Synod is the Supreme Spiritual authority in the church. It is the highest spiritual authority and the protector of true faith and tradition in the church. The Patriarch of Antioch has got primacy to a certain extent as successor of Peter and as the President of Synod of the Universal church. As the president of the Synod the Patriarch who is holding the office of Peter has the duty to see that true faith and traditions are kept, practiced and propagated in the church. Just as Peter is the house keeper so also the Patriarch is the keeper of the house of God the church, who has responsibility to keep the same clean free from all types malignity of heresy. Primacy does not mean that the Patriarch can take unilateral decision regarding important matters of the church. The Patriarch is not over the Synod but subject to the decisions of the Synod. For example if there are complaints against the Patriarch the synod has the authority to discuss the complaints and to take action. In Syrian Orthodox Church primacy and conciliarity go hand in hand and they are not contradictory to each other. While the successor of Peter exercises the primacy on the level of the Universal Church, it is collegially shared by the bishops who exercise this ministry of unity on the local level.

²³ Tavard, The Church Community of Salvation, An Ecumenical Ecclesiology, 107.

5. Exercise of primacy in love, service and self sacrifice

AS we have already seen in the Trinitarian model the Father is considered as first in the trinity, but it does not mean that the Son and the Spirit are less or in any way subordinate to Him²⁴. He is in a special way the source and symbol of the unity of that mysterious divine life. Similarly in the communion of the churches there can be one particular church and the head of that church to hold a primacy. This primacy never means dominating others, rather a primacy that is exercised in love, service and self sacrifice. The primacy is intended to provide the universal church a sense of unity and also to face the chaos that arise in the course of collaborating with each other. It intends to develop a cooperative attitude between the members of the various churches, who are part of the single body of Christ. Just as the father is the source and symbol of the unity, the primacy should also stand for the unity among the churches, which demands a greater sense of love, service and self sacrifice.

6. Petrine Primacy in the context of wider Ecumenism: A new challenge

From wider ecumenism I mean the unity of all the Christian churches in the world – a dream to be realized in near future. In His High priestly prayer Jesus prayed for the unity of the whole church and it is essential to safeguard and protect the Christian faith in this world. (John 17:21). St. Paul emphatically advises the church to keep the unity of the church based on the one Body, one spirit, one hope, one lord, one faith, one baptism and one God the Father (Eph 4:3-7). Unity and mutual love are the essential qualities that the church and its members have to possess and that is actually the final will of our Lord Jesus Christ. By the grace of God in this 21st century the age old theological disputes and quarrels that led to the division of the Christian church into several denominations, have lost their relevance. But when we examine the history of the church we cannot deny the fact that disunity led to mutual persecution decline of the church and later to the decline of the Christian faith. Now in different parts of the world the Christians are persecuted and in many ancient Christian centers the very existence of the church is in danger. The Christian church is entrusted to impart the message of salvation brought by Jesus aiming at establishing the universal brotherhood of the human race, through mutual love and unity under all embracing and loving God the Father. The message of Jesus should not be crushed through the disunity and mutual hatred and disputes between the churches. Just as Jesus inaugurated his

²⁴ Matthew Vellanickal, *Church: Communion of Individual Churches* (Mumbai: St.Pauls,2009),281.

mission with the words – “The time is fulfilled” so also now the time is fulfilled for all the churches in the world to establish unity in diversity in the model of the unity of the church that we see in the New Testament. Though the church during the NT times existed as different local churches with different traditions, it maintained its unity under one visible primate – Peter. As I have already mentioned earlier during the earthly ministry of Jesus, Peter was the first among the disciples, after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ Peter was appointed by the resurrected Christ as chief shepherd or primate of whole flock of God, and according to Acts of the Apostles Peter was the primate of the primitive church in order to reaffirm and experience the Unity of church and all the individual Christians in this world. We have to pray and expect for a new Pentecost in which the Holy Spirit may be poured a new upon all the churches and on all people God and the successor of Peter may be able to safeguard the unity and lead the whole flock of God to the Kingdom of God following the model of our Lord Jesus Christ, depicted in the New Testament. It is a new challenge for all churches and for all individual Christians and it is high time that all the ecumenical movements and activities may adopt this model of unity found in the NT.

Conclusion

In the light of the scripture, it is quite evident that Peter possessed primacy among the Apostles and in the early church. The primacy was an aspect which kept the church together and also which enabled effective administration. Today in the midst of several Christian denominations, the Petrine primacy can function as a cohesive force leading to much cooperation between these different denominations. But it is to be emphasized that this primacy is never intended to be a super power or a biased one, rather it advocates for mutual love, respect and equality. In such a scenario the Christian Church can excel much more as a collective unit in the present world of disintegration, competition and suppression.

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