

Catholics in History and Tradition

(G. Chediath)

In the ancient Roman Empire the bishops of the most important cities were known as *Patriarchs*. Thus the bishops of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Jerusalem were called Patriarchs. The chief bishops outside the Roman Empire were known as *Catholicos*. Thus the chief bishops of Persia, Armenia and Georgia were known as Catholicos. Although the position of the Catholicos was below that of the Patriarch in later times, both were used almost as synonyms.

The Persian Catholicate

In the Persian East Syrian Church the Catholicos resided at Seleucia –Ctesiphon, the capital of the Persian Empire. There the title was in use since 410. Later the title Patriarch was added to it. Thus they used the combined title *Catholicos –Patriarch*. The Catholicos has all the authority over his faithful which the Patriarch has over his faithful. The so called Nicene-Arabic Canons speak about the authority of the Catholicos: The Catholicos is the Supreme authority in the Catholicate. All those who are subject to him should obey him. He has authority over all the Metropolitans and bishops in Persia. None has the authority to judge him. He is the shepherd who teaches authoritatively. He is to take the ultimate decisions on matters of faith and liturgy. He institutes feast days and removes them at his will. All should mention the Catholicos in the liturgy. His decision will be final. He has authority to convene Synods, to confirm the bishops elected by the Metropolitans, to establish dioceses, to alter the borders and to transfer the bishops. He has authority over monasteries. He is the custodian of faith. Thus he has all the authorities in his Catholicate just like the Patriarch has in his Patriarchate. (A. Urumpackal, *the*

Juridical Status of the Catholicos of Malabar, 23-26). There are at present three persons in the line of the ancient Catholicate in the Persian Church: the Catholic Catholicos-Patriarch in Baghdad (Iraq), the Catholicos-Patriarch of the ancient Church of the East (the so called Nestorian Church) in Baghdad, and the Catholicos –Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East (another section of the so called Nestorian Church) in Chicago, USA. All the three groups together may come about one million faithful.

The Syrian Orthodox Maphrianate

In 628/9 the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Patriarch of Antioch appointed a certain Marutha as *the Great Metropolitan* or *Maphrian* in Persia for the non-Chalcedonians there. His residence was at Tagrit, Iraq. During the subsequent centuries he changed his residence several times. He was in general known as Maphrian. *Maphrian* is a Syriac word. It means one who gives fecundity, one who gives birth, and the one who has authority to install Metropolitans and bishops and the one who is able to produce several spiritual fruits. He was known by several names, such as the *Metropolitan of Bet-Parsaye*, the *Metropolitan of Tagrit*, the *Chief Bishop of the Orient* and the *Maphrian of Mosul*. After 1523 the Maphrians began to add *Basil* (*Baselios*) to their names. In a document of 1762 we find the reference *the Catholicos of the East* for the first time. We see that Bar Ebraya, the Maphrian (1264-1286) added the title Catholicos to his name. Among the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Maphrians, it was he who used it for the first time. When he took the title, the Seleucian Catholicos –Patriarch of the Church of the East (Persia) protested. The reason Bar Ebraya gives was that it was their title for centuries and that it was not so far used by the Jacobites.

Catholicos and Maphrian - two distinct Titles

The Catholicos –Patriarch of the Seleucian Church (Church of the East) and the Jacobite Maphrian were not the one and the same. The Catholicos and the Catholicate in the Church of the East originated in the ancient Persian Church. Seleucia was the ecclesiastical centre of their Church. But the Maphrian was a subordinate of the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch and was appointed by him and had his beginning in 628/9 .He had his residence at Tagrit and other places. The Maphrianate was dependent on the Jacobite Patriarch. But the Seleucian Patriarch was not dependent on any other Patriarch for his authority. He had his autonomy. But the Maphrianate was part of the Jacobite Church. Nevertheless the Maphrian had some autonomy in his Maphrianate. The Maphrianate remained without further growth, while the Catholicate of the Persian Church grew and developed. Hence it is not correct to present the Maphrian as the successor of the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East. In 1860/63 in Synod of 17 Jacobite bishops at Deir-as-Safaran, the Jacobite Patriarch Jacob II (+1871) terminated the Maphrianate. (A. Urumpackal, *the Juridical Status*, 33).

Establishment of the Catholicate in India

In 1912 the Senior Patriarch Abd-al-Msiha (+1915) instituted the Catholicate in the Puthenkur community of the Malankara Church in India. Fr.P.T. Geevarghese (later Archbishop Mar Ivanios) played a leading role in its establishment. After establishing the Catholicate here, Mar Abd-al-Msiha published a Circular, announcing that he installed a Maphrian (Catholicos). In his Circular, the terms Maphrian and Catholicos were used as synonyms. There was no mention of the Maphrianate of the Jacobites in Tagrit, nor of the Catholicate of the

Chaldeans at Seleucia. There was no mention of it as a re-establishment of the one at Tagrit. When the first Catholicos of the Malankara Orthodox Church died in 1913, the Orthodox did/could not appoint another one till 1925, because of the factionalism and civil litigation with the Patriarchal faction. This civil litigation is known as the *Vattippanakkes*. In 1925 when there was a temporary victory for the Orthodox faction in the civil litigation, the Second Catholicos was installed. He died in 1928. By 1928 the final verdict of the litigation was in favor of the Orthodox faction. So Vattasseril Mar Dionysius and Mar Ivanios of Bethany (later Archbishop Mar Ivanios) installed the third Catholicos at Mar Elijah Chapel at Kottayam in 1928. Already in 1926 the Synod of the Malankara Orthodox Church deputed Mar Ivanios to have ecumenical negotiations with the Roman Catholic Church. The Second Catholicos ardently desired the full communion and the third Catholicos (then a bishop) was also one among the members of the Synod who deputed Mar Ivanios for the negotiations. Vattasseril Mar Dionysius in his heart was a Jacobite, but he was also ready to follow the other bishops of the group.

Mar Ivanios' Ecumenical Negotiations

From the beginning of his ecumenical negotiations with Rome, Mar Ivanios was requesting Rome to recognize the position of the Catholicos and the Synod. It was totally rejected. The ecclesiology prevalent in those days in the Roman circle was pre-Vatican. So the Catholicos did not enter into full communion. All the same, Mar Ivanios with his suffragan, Mar Theophilus entered into canonical communion with the Roman Catholic Church in 1930. Mar Ivanios believed that the Malankara Apostolic Church is an autonomous Church. After 1930 also there were attempts from several quarters for the establishment of the Catholicate in the Malankara Catholic Church.

The Malankara Catholic Catholicate

On 10th February, 2005, at 4 p.m. the Apostolic Nuncio His Excellency, Lopez Quintana pronounced at the St. Mary's Cathedral Pattom in the presence of a large gathering of bishops, priests, religious and laity of the Malankara Catholic Church that the Malankara Catholic Church is canonically raised to the status of a *Major Archiepiscopal Church*. He added that it is equivalent to a *Catholicate*. The announcement was received with great enthusiasm. The long cherished desire of the Malankara Catholic faithful became a reality. Then the Apostolic Nuncio gave the *insignia* of the Catholicos and Bishop Isaac Mar Cleemis thanked in the name of the Malankara Church, the Holy Father John Paul II and the Apostolic Nuncio for this unique status in the Catholic Church. He also greeted the new Catholicos in the name of the whole Malankara Church. Then the new Catholicos addressed the audience. Then there was the litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the saints. Finally both the Apostolic Nuncio and the new Catholicos blessed the faithful. As a sign of their allegiance to the Catholicos, all kissed his Sliba, together with the Sliba of the Apostolic Nuncio. Later they all went to the tomb of Archbishop Mar Ivanios and Archbishop Mar Gregorios and commemorated their memory. I have never seen such a joy on the face of all those who were present. The long cherished desire is realized after 75 years, at the dawn of the Platinum Jubilee of the Reunion Movement.

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1. Alex Urumpackal, *the Juridical Status of the Catholicos of Malabar*, Rome 1977.
 2. G. Chediath, *Paurastya Catholicos*, Kottayam, 1999, 2nd Edition. (Malayalam).
 3. G. Chediath, *the Catholicos of the East*, Trivandrum, 2005.
 4. G. Chediath, *the Malankara Catholic Church*, Kottayam, 2003.

