

**A JARRING NOTE
MADE MORE JARRING**

An Expose of the Orthodox Syrian
Statements on Pope John Paul II

Rev. Dr. C. A. Abraham

With the Compliments of
F. C. A. A.

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Statements on Pope John Paul II

"THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE."

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A JARRING NOTE MADE MORE JARRING

—An expose of the Orthodox Syrian statements
on Pope John Paul II—

Introduction:

The Orthodox Syrian church in Kerala, under the Catholicos of Kottayam, had the dubious distinction of striking the only jarring note during the historic visit of Pope John Paul II to India. * Certain parts of the two public statements, made under their auspices relating to the Pope and the Catholic Church make painful reading. The first of these, which is good in parts, was the Address of Welcome presented to the Pope during his visit to Kerala, by the Catholicos, Mar Thoma Mathews I. THE HINDU and THE INDIAN EXPRESS, prominent English dailies in India, had commented that this Welcome Address had struck a "jarring" note. They had also pointed out that there was an attempt in the Address to equate the Catholicos's own church with the Catholic Church. Malayala Manorama, the Malayalam daily, largely responsible for the consolidation of the Catholicos party in the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church, had shown commendable wisdom in suppressing the offensive passages in the speech of their Catholicos. Certain Orthodox publications, such as The Church Weekly and Orthodox Voice, too, were critical of the jarring note in this speech. Their view was widely shared by many in the Orthodox Syrian church as well as outside it.

The second public statement from the Orthodox Syrian side appeared in the March issue of The Star of the East, "an ecumenical quarterly published under the editorial responsibility of Metropolitan

* The Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church in Kerala is divided into two groups under two Catholicos, one of them appointed by the Patriarch. Their combined strength, 1200 parishes and 1.5 million people approximately.

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Dr. Paulose Gregorios of Delhi." The editor of the Star of the East, evidently piqued by the hostile reactions to the Catholicos's speech, wrote an apologia under the title, "The Jarring Note". In this, however, he has not only defended the jarring note but also mounted an unfair attack on the Catholic Church and its head, Pope John Paul II. This rather crepitan exercise has made the first jarring note more jarring.

The Orthodox Welcome Address to the Pope is widely believed to have been the handiwork of Metropolitan Dr. Paulose Gregorios. The editorial, too, in the Star of the East must be his own. Both carry the signature tune of Dr. Paulose Gregorios, but they cannot be dismissed merely as an individual's idiom of ecumenism.

The jarring note in the speech of the Catholicos pertains chiefly to expressions such as these: "If only all could stop sheep-stealing and proselytism.....We are told that the Second Vatican Council had discouraged Roman Catholic proselytism among the Orthodox.....But these prelates continue using questionable methods to draw our people away to your Church".

The efforts to equate the Kottayam-based Orthodox section in the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church with the Catholic Church are reflected in passages such as these: ".....today the successor of St. Thomas is privileged to welcome the successor of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul. " "There is so much need and suffering in the world. Millions go hungry.....We could work together to serve these... We should work together to make the earth free from nuclear war. ... Space must be used for peaceful purposes. ... We can work together in this field... "* (The Welcome Address also reflects an effort to project the Orthodox section as an independent church). The Star of the East editorial has not only tried to justify the uncalled for accusations in the Catholicos's Welcome Address, but also added some new allegations, including a personal jibe on Pope John Paul II. These demand an answer; I shall deal with them item by item.

* No better comment can be made on the pretensions of smaller churches than the one implied in G.K. Chesterton's parable. An elephant, meeting a rabbit on his way, looked at him and exclaimed, "you are so small!". The rabbit, raising himself on his hind legs, said, "You see, I have not been too well these days!".

I

Sheep-stealing:

Dr. Paulose Gregorios justifies the jarring note in the Welcome Address as a legitimate reaction to the sheep-stealing and proselytism by Catholics and the questionable methods used by them to draw members of the Orthodox Syrian church, with the approval and blessing of the Pope.

(a) The first thing I want to say in answer to this charge is that the Orthodox Syrian church, too, is in this business of sheep-stealing! There are several instances of this personally known to me in Kerala, including a recent one in South Kerala, but here I shall limit myself to two instances outside Kerala, one in Trichinopoly and the other in South Canara, where some Latin rite Catholics were received into the Orthodox church. Is the question, then, my lord, merely one of numbers? Is the Orthodox Syrian Metropolitan worried to death about the fact that while there is a steady flow out of his own church (into the Catholic Church as well as the Pentecostal groups), there is only a trickle coming into it? No, Sir, you have absolutely no moral right to complain about other churches in this matter.

(b) Let us examine the question of proselytism from a broader angle. The movement of individuals and groups from one church to another has always put a strain on the relations between churches. From the time divisions started within the Church, there have been cases of individuals and groups changing over from one church to another. The churches that lose their members are always tempted to impugn the objective rightness of the motives and even the subjective honesty of the converts. This is exactly what Dr. Paulose Gregorios is doing when he accuses Catholics of using doubtful means to wean away the Orthodox.

(c) No one will justify the conversion of non-Christians or the change from one church to another of Christians for wrong reasons or through unfair means. The fundamental question is whether an individual has the right to exercise his God-given liberty to re-think his religious faith or church affiliation. If one is convinced that the universal Church subsists in the Catholic

Church, however much Christian reality there may be outside her, and that for Christian unity communion with the See of Rome is essential ecclesially, should he not trustfully obey his conscience? If you accept the principle that you should live and die in the particular religion or ecclesial group in which you happen to be born, we would all have been Jews or heathens!

(d) In point of fact, there are many who, for wrong reasons and motives, continue to live in the churches and groups into which they happen to be born! They do not move because they are afraid of losing the positions of power and prestige they enjoy, or worried about insecurity, or social needs, or the hatred of the tribe and several other worldly restraints. For each person leaving the Orthodox church in Kerala for "wrong reasons" there will be at least ten remaining with them for equally wrong reasons or because of mixed worldly motives! It might be a good thing to remain where you are, but it is a far better thing to move on to where you ought to be.

(e) Now, with an apology, a personal focus. After all, Dr. Paulose Gregorios, whose family and parish had affiliation with the Patriarch's party, felt it was right for him to change over to the party under the Catholicos of Kottayam. I am sure he had valid reasons and the right motivation for such a change. How can this right to change be denied to others? To raise an accusing finger against those who leave the Orthodox church and join the Catholic Church and to declare that they are "bought" by the Catholics through questionable means or that they have been "stolen" by the Catholics, is unjust, unfair and unchristian. It is an insult to their own people. Are the Orthodox lay people private properties of the bishops, without authentic personalities of their own? Are they no more than dumb sheep put up for sale in the market?

(f) There may be people who become Christian or Catholic through unclear or mixed motives. God will judge those who do even right things for wrong reasons, but an individual's conscience is never transparent to another human being and therefore cannot be judged by him. Who am I or Metropolitan Paulose Gregorios to sit in judgement over the motives and conscience of all other people? A president of the World Council of Churches is not, after all, "the President of the Immortals"!

II

Some sources of Orthodox confusion:

A more profitable exercise for the Orthodox Syrian leaders (including Dr. Paulose Gregorios) would be to ask themselves why there is a steady exodus from their own church. I shall just touch on a few prominent areas where the thinking members of the Orthodox Syrian church might feel that their church's position is untenable or at least highly embarrassing.

(a) Take, for instance, the present attitude of the Orthodox Syrian church to the primacy of Peter.* I do not intend going into the New Testament interpretations of Cullman and others, nor do I wish to enter the areas of Church history and the witness of the Fathers. What I wish to affirm here is simply that Dr. Paulose Gregorios and his church just cannot deny Petrine primacy without repudiating their own liturgical heritage, sacramentals, common prayer, Penkitho and canons of the Syrian tradition. Unless the Orthodox Syrian church undertakes a Reform (parallel to that of the Mar Thoma church), getting rid of the numerous prayers and affirmations undergirding the primacy of Peter, their prayer books will contradict their stance and will continue to embarrass every thinking member of their church.

(b) The awkwardness of the Orthodox Syrian position has been accentuated by their recent claim that their Catholicos is sitting on the throne of St. Thomas. In support of this position and as a ploy to repudiate the Patriarch's authority (who claims to be the successor of St. Peter in Antioch), the Orthodox Syrian church has started talking about the equality of all Apostles and the equality of the throne of Thomas to that of Peter. In 1982 the Orthodox Syrian church celebrated in a big way the 70th anniversary of transferring the throne of the Catholicos of the East from the Middle East to Kerala. Fr. P. Duprey had come from Rome

* This does not necessarily imply the degree of Juridical authority now claimed for the Pope.

as the Papal representative for these celebrations. Many members of the Orthodox church had then asked why a throne that had become defunct for over a century in the Middle East had to be set up in Kerala by an ex-Patriarch (that, too, in dubious circumstances), if the throne of St. Thomas was already here. Obviously the throne of St. Thomas was a late afterthought! These questions still continue to worry many of their people. Their confusion is made worse by the occasional asides of certain Catholicos party leaders claiming that theirs is an autocephalous church. Who gave them the authority for this, anyway? There is nothing to show that the founding fathers of the Catholicos party (Sri K.C. Mammen Mappilai, Mar Dionysius Vattasseril et al) had dreamed of anything more than a church following West Syrian traditions, with affiliation to the Patriarch of Antioch, but with full autonomy in all internal affairs.

(c) A third area of confusion in Orthodox Syrian minds is the attitude of their church to the Council of Chalcedon. They had taken up the anti-Chalcedonian stance when they had accepted the (Jacobite) Patriarch of Antioch as the supreme head of their church. Today the Patriarch has revised his attitude to Chalcedon and its decrees and made a historic joint statement with the Pope. Chalcedon is no more the stumbling block that it was. * The Orthodox Syrian church is now left in the lurch and they do not know how to react to this development, except to cling on to the anti-Chalcedonian position. What worries many members of the Orthodox Syrian church is that while their church had accepted every detail of the liturgical, historical, canonical and theological position of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and still try to cling on to those, the Patriarch himself is moving away from some of those positions. The Orthodox Syrian church, while it has moved away from the Patriarch, clings on to all the theological and historical positions received through the Patriarch!

(d) The status of the Patriarch has become another area of confusion for the Orthodox Syrians. While the Constitution of the Orthodox Syrian church in Kerala depicts the Patriarch of

* Dr. Paulose Mar Gregorios's church is barred from formal communion with the Great Eastern (Orthodox) Churches because of its anti-Chalcedonian position, thanks to their once-lauded now-repudiated Patriarchal affiliation.

Antioch as the supreme head of their church, they do not recognize the present Patriarch (Ignatius Zaka I) as the duly constituted Patriarch of Antioch. All the Oriental churches, the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Catholic and Protestant churches recognize Ignatius Zaka I as the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, but Dr. Paulose Gregorios and his church refuse to recognize him!

(e) Peace is another area of confusion in Orthodox Syrian minds and the major credit for this, perhaps, goes to Dr. Paulose Gregorios, reportedly a leading light of the Moscow-inspired World Peace Forums. While he and certain other Orthodox leaders in Kerala are constantly devising plans to solve the problems of nuclear and space wars, they do everything possible on earth to prevent a peaceful settlement of their disputes with their brethren of the Patriarch's party in Kerala! In fact the Orthodox are now trying to grab even the parish churches built up by the sweat and toil of generations of people devoted to the Patriarch and where they continue to enjoy an overwhelming majority. They have initiated a new round of litigations for this. To some of the Orthodox Syrian leaders "peace" seems to have become an instrument of war, in the Orwellian sense!

I do not wish to add to this brief list of areas of confusion in the Orthodox Syrian church in Kerala today. All I want to suggest is that there may be compelling reasons prompting the members of the Orthodox Syrian church to re-think their church affiliation. If, in the process of their agonizing re-appraisal, they turn towards the Catholic Church, why blame them or the Catholic Church? The search for unity and meaning is everyman's concern. To heap abuses on the Catholic church or the Pope is only a pitiful effort to block such searches; it is bound to be a self-defeating exercise.

III

Uniatism in India:

(a) Dr. Paulose Gregorios has given his own interpretation of the history of the St. Thomas Christians in India. His view is that the children of St. Thomas were "one flock until the 16th century when the uniat Roman Catholic Church was imposed in India". It is true that the St. Thomas Christians were

undivided until the 16th century. It is also true that this undivided Church had used the East Syrian liturgy and had links with the church of Babylon and was in communion with Rome. The Portuguese, known to be under the Pope, were welcomed by the St. Thomas Christians and the parting of ways came only when the former pursued their Latinising efforts and began to interfere in the internal administration of the local Church. At the historic Coonen Cross the oath taken by the Syrians was not against the Pope as such, but against the "Paulists" (that is, the Latin Jesuits of St. Paul's Seminary.)

Subsequently the Carmelite missionaries had attempted the re-integration of St. Thomas Christians. If the Syrians had been allowed to use their own liturgy and to be ruled by their own Bishops, the St. Thomas Christians in India might have yet been one. Many Syrian Prelates had attempted to achieve these aims, but in vain. Mar Ivanios, over half a century ago, was able to achieve what many leaders of his church had earlier failed to achieve. There is clear evidence to show that he had started negotiation with Rome with the concurrence of and on behalf of his brother bishops and that they later resiled. The positive value of Mar Ivanios's vision can be fully appreciated only against its historical setting.

Vatican II

(b) "We were told", says Dr. Paulose Gregorios that Vatican II had taken a stand against receiving the Orthodox into the Catholic Church. Vatican II certainly shows a clear appreciation of the patrimony of the Eastern Churches, but it also declares that "the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church subsists in the Catholic Church. Nevertheless many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards Catholic unity.....the spirit stirs up desires and actions in all of Christ's disciples in order that all may be united as Christ ordained, in one flock under one shepherd." (Decree on The Church).

The Decree on Ecumenism contains these statements:

".....the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them (the separated Churches) as means of salvation which derive their

efficacy from the very fulness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church'.

'Nevertheless our separated brethren, whether considered as individuals or as communities and Churches, are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished..... that unity which the Holy Scriptures and the ancient Tradition of the Church proclaims.

(Decree on Ecumenism. Ch. 1. 3)

It is true that in the ecumenical quest for oneness, the accent is on the re-integration of churches, but there cannot be any regulation forbidding the people of God to act according to their conviction and conscience in their church affiliation. Vatican II has said nothing meant to prevent anyone who in good conscience seeks the privilege of communion in the Catholic Church.

The following quotation contains the Conciliar view:

"However it is evident that the work of preparing and reconciling those individuals who wish for full Catholic communion is of its nature distinct from ecumenical action. But there is no opposition between the two, since both proceed from the marvellous ways of God."

(Decree on Ecumenism, Ch. 1. 4)

IV

The Ethiopian Connection:

The major part of the Star of the East editorial is devoted to allegations of Catholic misdeeds in Ethiopia. Some allegations are relayed, with approval, through quotations from an Ethiopian church news paper. The main points raised by Dr. Paulose Gregorios about the present are:

"The present Pope encourages sheep-stealing in Ethiopia (as he has done in India); the appointment of a Cardinal in the small Catholic Church there proves this. The cardinalate was "an honour to the despicable activity of proselytism."

"The Roman Catholic Church is "passionately opposed" to the present revolutionary regime in Ethiopia, but at the same time they are giving massive aid to the famine-stricken people of Ethiopia and their motive, of course, must be proselytism."

Dr. Paulose Gregorios has first-hand knowledge of Ethiopia because he was formerly a devoted secretary of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selasse, although now he is "passionately" supportive of the new revolutionary government. One can understand his dislike for the Ethiopian Catholics and their Cardinal, but why does he and those of his thinking oppose famine relief in Ethiopia?

Let us look at another revealing report on Ethiopia from a well-known writer, Prof. Paul Johnson:* "Most pathetic case of all, perhaps, is *Ethiopia*, the only African country to retain its Christianity from Antiquity, the last monarchy to fall victim to colonialism, the first to have its independence restored: A strange, colourful, primitive and vulnerable survival from the pre-modern world. There was considerable freedom, and some progress, under the old Emperor Haile Selasse, who survived until 1974, when the Soviets caused him to be smothered to death, and installed a puppet Marxist regime in his place. The worst that could be said of the old Emperor's censorship is that he cut the death-scene of King Duncan from performances of *Macbeth*; after his fall, Shakespeare was not performed at all. *Now ten years later, Ethiopia is stricken by civil and external wars and is enduring the worst famine in its history, created at least in part by the deliberate decisions of its Marxist rulers—thus following the tradition of Lenin and Stalin, who used the famine-weapon to destroy their internal enemies. Soviet air-craft are employed to bomb the refugees from the famine-stricken areas.*"

Prof. Paul Johnson's comments will probably help us to understand the real reason why Dr. Paulose Gregorios, an ardent supporter of the Ethiopian Marxist regime, is opposed to famine-relief in Ethiopia.

* Oxford scholar, social historian, editor for 15 years of the prestigious British weekly, *The New Statesman*, in an article in *TRUTH*, an inter-disciplinary Journal of Christian Thought, U.S.A., vol. I.

V

(a) **Tempting the Catholicos:**

The Star of the East explains that the jarring note in the Welcome Address to the Pope was partly due to a "painful episode in which three Roman Catholic bishops had tried to persuade the Catholicos to join the Roman Catholic Church." There is little that is objectionable in the Orthodox minutes of this meeting given in the Star of the East; the comments tagged to it, however, seem vicious.

The editorial in the Star of the East gives a highly dramatised and deliberately distorted version of the meeting of three Catholic Bishops with Orthodox church leaders in Kottayam. The initiative for this get-together was taken by Fr. Nirappel who was the convener of the St. Thomas Ecumenical church set up at Nilackal. (The editor's comment on Nilackal shows his prejudice. He says Fr. Nirappel had "discovered" the stone cross at Nilackal and adds that this had led to "communal riots" in Kerala. It is true that certain R.S.S. leaders had made some provocative statements about Nilackal, but there were no communal riots at all. The positive side of Nilackal is that for the first time in history the Bishops of all Episcopal churches came together to dedicate a church, which is jointly owned by all the churches in Kerala, including the Orthodox Syrian church). Fr. Nirappel had clearly stated that the initiative for the meeting of Bishops was entirely his own, inspired by his Nilackal ecumenical experience. But the Star of the East insists that he was doing it with the knowledge of the Vatican and the Pope! The finale is the revelation of the Star of the East that a tempting offer was made to the Catholicos directly, through the words of Bishop Kuriakose Kunnassery (of the Knanaya Catholic Diocese) who said, ".....We in the Syro-Malabar church have no objection to dissolve our rite and join the Orthodox church. Then, if the Lord wills, all of us St. Thomas Syrian Christians will have one head and one Church in India". This, obviously, is a highly personalized vision. Even if the Catholic Bishop had made such a proposal, what is there in it to cause pain to anyone? *

* The Catholic Bishops had gone to the meeting at the invitation of the Catholicos. According to Dr. Paulose Gregorios this invitation was secured by Fr. Nirappel by taking for a ride both the Catholicos and the Catholicos-Elect. The moral is that when Dr. Gregorios is away, these venerable prelates are exposed to Roman Catholic machinations!

It is rather strange that such a candid expression of hope, made openly in the presence of seven Orthodox Bishops and three Orthodox theologians, should be interpreted as an attempt to make the Catholicos a Roman Catholic. Moreover, the Catholic side had proposed that the matter might be discussed by the general assembly of the Orthodox Syrian church. After all, the Catholicos's Address to the Pope speaks of the "deep yearning for the unity" that was lost. The Star of the East also states that "the Catholicos was always of the opinion that all Christians who belonged to the St. Thomas tradition should rediscover their lost unity." If, then, an idea is broached that in recovering that unity, the Orthodox Syrian church could play a pivotal role and that all St. Thomas Christians in India could, if the Lord wills, be united under one head, what is wrong with that? Truly, the Catholic Bishop's offer was very close to self-emptying. Is this not in harmony with the spirit of ecumenism? It is now known that the Catholicos himself had no misgivings about this meeting; nor was he pained by anything said on the occasion. Why should such an open consultation cause pain to Dr. Paulose Gregorios or someone else? They will have, no doubt, their own private perspectives and personal prejudices prompting them to adopt such a peevish stance. It is also possible that someone else calls the tune by remote control and the Orthodox Syrian piper obligingly produces a jarring note!

(b) "Pope of Kottayam":

Dr. Paulose Gregorios surpasses himself with his interpretation of the Pope's parting words to the Catholicos. As he was taking leave of the Catholicos, the Pope turned to him and is reported to have said, "I am the Pope of Rome, you are the Pope of Kottayam." This was no Parthian shot, but a good-humoured compliment. At least most people understood it that way. If, however, one tried to find any mischievous intent in it, it could perhaps be seen as a wry comment on the Catholicos's effort to equate his own small church with the Catholic Church. The equation between the Orthodox Syrian church and the Catholic Church (the Pope might seem to imply) is as the small town of Kottayam is to the "eternal" city of Rome! Metropolitan Gregorios, however, chooses to discover a sinister design in the Pope's words. According to him, the Pope was enticing the Catholicos by offering to elevate him to a position in India equal in dignity to that of the Pope. What a propensity

for misinterpretation! It is odd that the Pope should make such an epoch-making offer so casually! Further, if the Pope had any intention of "tempting" the Catholicos, he would surely have yielded to the pressing request of the Catholicos that the Pope should meet him at the Catholicos's residence. Dr. Paulose Gregorios, too, had tried in vain to make such a visit possible.

On the basis of his own twisted interpretation, the editor of the Star of the East gleefully asks, "Is Pope John Paul II, then, a shepherd-stealer?" The disingenuous interpretation of the Pope's words by the Editor and the obnoxious question attached to it, surely show a sixth sense which (as Coleridge said about a brash and brazen critic) is very far from common sense! It is both painful and astonishing that brilliance and narrowness can sit in uneasy conjunction in high ecumenical places.

Note:- Frankly, I am not happy with the polemical note in this article, but I felt that that was necessary to set the record straight. This, however, is a first reaction. I am willing to enter into an extended ecumenical debate on the issues raised in this.)

Rev. Dr. C.A. Abraham.