

# Why the Catholicate is so precious to us

## H.H. BASELIUS MARTHOMA MATHEWS I CATHOLICOS OF THE EAST

Your Holiness Patriarch Ilya, Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Your Graces, Honourable Ministers, and our beloved people.

Our heart is truly filled with joy and gratitude on this occasion. Not only because God Almighty has been gracious to us, and has fostered this Catholicate here in India for the last seventy years. For that our gratitude to God knows no bounds.

But even more, our joy is fulfilled because you from our sister churches from all over the world have arrived here to share our joy. Ever since St. Thomas established this church here in the first century, the circumstances of history and geography have conspired to isolate us from other Christian Churches. Why did our sister church in China disappear? Mainly because of a similar isolation from the sister churches of the world.

The last seventy years mark not only the history of our re-established Catholicate but also a period of more helpful and more frequent contacts with sister churches all over the world. We remember especially the visit of one of our distinguished predecessors to the Faith and Order Conference in Edinburgh in 1935. We became founder members of the World Council of Churches, in 1948, and our bishops, priests and lay people have represented us in all important World Council meetings and other ecumenical gatherings. It is a matter of no small pride to us that the first Woman President of the World Council of Churches was our beloved daughter Miss Sarah Chacko, who later served the W.C.C. as its first Secretary for the Department of Cooperation between Men and Women and died in harness. Later our Fr. Paul Varghese served the W.C.C. as Associate General Secretary. Others like Dr. K. C. Joseph and Mr. C. I. Itty served on the staff in Geneva. The World Council of Churches became in many ways the forum through which our frequent and friendly contacts with the non-Roman churches were built up and maintained. We are therefore particularly grateful that one of the Presidents of the World Council is present with us on this occasion - its Orthodox President H.H. Patriarch Ilya Catholicos Patriarch of all Georgia.

With the opening of the Second Vatican Council and from the time of pope John XXIII of blessed memory, our relations with the Roman Catholic Church also were put on a new basis of ecumenical co-operation. Our delegates were present at the Vatican Council as delegated observers. Our immediate predecessor had the privilege of greeting and embracing Pope Paul VI in Bombay. His Eminence Cardinal Willebrands, Fr. Pierre Duprey, Archbishop Jerome Hamer, Fr. John Long and others visited us, and opened and maintained a new set of genuinely sisterly relationships between our churches. It gives us particular pleasure that Pope John Paul II has delegated Fr. Pierre Duprey to represent His Holiness on this joyous occasion.

His Holiness Patriarch Athenagoras of blessed memory, that angelic ecumenical pastor, whom we never had the privilege of meeting, also maintained very close relations with our church and we are very happy to welcome the delegate of Patriarch Dmitrios his successor, in the person of Metropolitan Emilianos of Silibria.

All our distinguished international and Indian guests have already been welcomed. We wish only to add our personal welcome and gratitude to all of you.

In requesting to inaugurate the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the re-establishment in India of the Catholicate of the East, we wish to make one or two points clear.

First, ours is an autocephalous Orthodox Church of apostolic origin, and we want to develop our life in sisterly ecumenical co-operation with all our sister churches in the world. We are fully committed to the ecumenical movement - a prayerful dedication to make manifest our unity in Christ as His One Body. We are anxious to engage in active dialogue with our sister churches in

India as well as abroad. We have officially communicated our desire to begin dialogue with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India. We are still awaiting an official response. We have also communicated our desire to begin dialogue with the federation of the three evangelical churches: the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the Church of South India and the Church of North India. We have now been in dialogue for some years with the Lutheran churches in India, and we are pursuing it. We hope the other two dialogues can also begin soon.

Secondly, I want to say a brief word about our relations with the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Middle East. Our experience in the past twelve years has been bitter. We have faced both Portuguese and British intrigue and treachery in the past—instances in which our ecumenical hospitality has been sinfully misused to disrupt our Church from within. What the late Syrian Orthodox Patriarch did to our Church was something worse. We pray that God may forgive him. We allowed him inside our Church in 1958 in good faith. Since 1970 he consistently betrayed that good faith and interfered in our internal affairs. His successor, the present Patriarch, came here recently, without even the courtesy of informing us, and began entering our churches and misleading our people.

He did not take one step towards a settlement of our disputes beyond certain very offensive paternalistic declarations of self-righteous willingness to forgive those whom his predecessor had hurt. We had cabled him before his departure from Syria to delay his visit in order that we could prepare the stage for a settlement of our disputes. To this date he has not had the courtesy to respond to our telegram.

We want to make this clear. We are anxious for a settlement. We are prepared to ask our deputies to sit down and discuss such a settlement with duly authorised people. We shall, of course, not compromise the autocephaly and independence of our Church. Nor can we allow any other church to interfere in the affairs of our church. Those are our two cherished values. We have sometimes compromised these values in the past for the sake of peace. We cannot do so in the future. We have learned our lesson.

We have a long history of association with our sister church of Antioch. We are grateful for their help on occasions in the past when exclusive heritage of the Orthodox Christians. St. Thomas belongs to the whole of India. In fact Jawaharlal Nehru once said when he was participating in the 1900 years' celebrations of St. Thomas, that St. Thomas belongs the whole Indian heritage. We are not making an exclusive claim of St. Thomas.

But there is a special point for this community. While for other Christians, it may be a part of history, while for some others it may be a part of heritage, for orthodox Syrian Christians, it is a part of their emotion, something which we have imbibed from the milk of mothers something which we want to transfer to our children and to our childrens' children as treasure to be preserved with awe and pride. This is the special feature about St. Thomas as far as we. Christians are concerned. I have always wondered why St. Thomas chose to come to this ancient Land of ours, which is the cradle for the four religions of the world, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism and I have the answer for that.

In this ancient holy land of ours, Christianity out of necessity has to come from the authentic hands of the apostle of Christ himself. Imagine what would have been the inadequacy of Christianity, if our ancestors have been converted by the missionaries who came with the Portuguese, the French or the Dutch. It was one of the justifications of the historical necessity and inevitable part of history that in this land, the authenticity of Christianity should be established by the disciple of Christ himself. When we speak about the authenticity of Christianity, we should also remember another thing and that is to preserve the faith of our fathers.

(Inaugural Address delivered by His Holiness Baselius Marthoma Mathews I Catholicos at the Saphthathi Meeting, Ernakulam)