

**THE PRESENCE OF THE ORDER OF THE IMITATION OF CHRIST  
(BETHANY ASHRAM) IN THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH**

**Church, by its very nature,** is missionary in accordance with the command of the Lord (Mt.28:19) and evangelization through proclamation of the Word of God is her task in this world. Christ-event is the basis of her mission which the early Christian communities in the apostolic era re-lived and re-presented in the world to its perfection during their lifetime. The zealous nature of the early communities to live the gospel to its perfection paved the way for the post-apostolic Christian spiritual leaders, and they regarded Christian life seriously and fervently. They responded to the invitation of Jesus “to be perfect as your Father in heaven, is perfect” (Mt.5:48) faithfully by leading an austere life and thereby truly having the “desert experience” or the “*upvaasa*” (be/being with) experience. They lived the evangelical virtues in their most holy and sublime form. With this austere and holy life they, as their vocation and commissioning demanded, exercised the stewardship of the Gospel and formed religious communities so that the Church and society would be sanctified and uplifted in the pattern of the Gospel and that the holy name of God be glorified.

**Malankara Catholic Church** is meritoriously blessed with such religious communities or congregations whose unique *charisms* plentifully imparted and contributed to the life of the Church. And if the Catholic Church, being the communion of Churches, reflects the nature of unity in diversity and diversity in unity, the different religious congregations in the Church beautify that diversity and unity by being her (the Church’s) spiritual fountainhead and strength. Here I, being a Bethanian, just, very briefly, take a glance at Bethany Ashram (Bethany = house of consolation; *Ashram* = monastery) and its remarkable presence with its contributions to the spiritual renewal, nourishment and growth of the Universal Church. After all, this is not a theological study but it may be an incentive for the people of God to make, *in a new constructive-hermeneutical manner*, further studies and discussions on the gracious presence and relevance of Bethany Ashram in the life of the Church and the society at large.

**Prompted by divine inspiration** to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout India through the spiritual renewal of the Malankara Church, Fr. P.T. Geevarghese

Panickaruveettil - later Archbishop Mar Ivanios, the Servant of God - founded this religious Community at Mundenmala-Ranni, Kerala, India on August 15, 1919.

**Being a great visionary** of the future of the Church and society, Mar Ivanios believed that the true purpose of Christian religious life is to imitate our Lord Jesus Christ, by perfect renunciation and detachment and thus bear testimony to the heavenly life. The Charism of *the Order of the Imitation of Christ* (OIC) is to follow Jesus Christ in His life of prayer and action (*Holy Rule of the OIC*, Ch.1, no.04), realized in Oriental monastic tradition and Indian *sanyasa* (monastic life) and aimed at the evangelization of India through the spiritual renewal of the Malankara Church. Thus Mar Ivanios practised and propagated the importance of enculturation for many years before it became trendy and fashionable in the post Vatican II era. The spiritual values and practices he imbibed from the *Sabarmati* Ashram of Mahatma Gandhi and the *Shanthiniketan* (House of Peace) of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore truly inspired his aspiration of living and propagating the values of the Gospel in an indigenous, monastic and austere manner.

**When the spiritual life** of the Malankara Church began to show anti-witnessing and morally degrading the values of the Gospel beleaguered by court cases and conflicts, Mar Ivanios prayed "Jesus Christ, O God, bring peace and tranquility to your Holy Church, protect it lovingly, so that there may not arise in it quarrels and lawsuits." (*Girideepam*, 41). The prayer led him to take the noble and firm decision for a full Catholic communion where we see the fullness of the nature of the Universal and True Church. Thus Mar Ivanios' dream of attaining peace in the life of the Church came true on September 30, 1930 when he, along with Bishop Jacob Mar Theophilos OIC - the first *Navasishya Guru* (Novice Master) of Bethany Ashram and some of its members, professed the true Catholic faith in the name of the Holy Trinity before Bishop Mar Benzigar, the then bishop of Kollam, Kerala. Bethany Ashram, which was started in the Orthodox Syrian Church, thus turned into the cradle of the Malankara Reunion Movement and regained the Catholic communion which the Malankara Church enjoyed from AD52 with St. Thomas the Apostle till January 3, 1653 with the *Coonan Cross Oath* (a proudly-made public oath by members of the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala, India that they would not submit to Portuguese dominance with imposed latinization whether in ecclesiastical or secular life).

**Since Bethany Ashram gave importance** to the spiritual dimension and aimed at the renewal of the Malankara Church, primarily it had to concentrate on the then existing Malankara community itself in Kerala. Progressively, as the faithful started moving to other cities of India and abroad, Bethany Ashram expanded her “mission work” outside Kerala in terms of giving pastoral care and providing spiritual nourishment to the Malankara flock in 1953 and under the great leadership of Rev. Fr. Gabriel Thaikadavil OIC - the then Rector of happy memory of Bethany Scholasticate - Bethany Ashram Pune became the cradle of the *pastoral-care-mission works* for the Malankara flock outside Kerala.

**The presence of the Bethany Fathers** was a blessing for the people, irrespective of cast and creed, to meet their needs not only spiritually or sacramentally but also materially. The Fathers were very supportive of our people to pursue better education and seek out jobs in different cities in India and abroad. Recognizing the zealous activities of its members and the contribution to the Church and the society at large, the Holy See elevated Bethany Ashram to a Pontifical Religious Order (*Juris Pontifici*) in the Universal Church on April 14, 1966. In fact, it was Very Rev. Fr. Jacob Perumbral OIC, the then Superior General (with the support of the General Chapter and the General Council), became instrumental in making Bethany Congregation with Pontifical Status. We bow down before this great and humble Bethanian-soul who is “*back home*” (9/6/2014) and *Resting in Peace*.

**The second half of the twentieth century** and the dawn of the new millennium saw the presence of Bethanians all over *Bahya* Kerala (Extra Territorial Regions in India) and *Bahya* India (outside India) especially in different parts of North America, Europe and the Arab Countries. A very new and dynamic step has been taken again by Bethany Ashram in May, 2009 by sending three of her young priests to the Mission Diocese of Emdibir, Ethiopia, East Africa that it might open new doors for evangelization as our Lord has commanded (cf., Mt.28:19).

**While Bethany Ashram was involved** in evangelical and ecumenical works, she also engaged in quality education, Vocational training (differently-abled centers), HRD Centers, Communications – Printing press & publications, Pastoral & Animation Centers, parish works, retreat preaching especially through Bethany *Suvisesha-*

*Sangham* (teams for preaching), teaching, holistic health and counseling, Medical care: Nature Cure Centers – Cancer Care Centers - Pain and Palliative Care, homes for the orphans and destitute, art works, etc.

**The General House** (Bethany Ashram Generalate) of the Order of the Imitation of Christ is in Kottayam, Kerala where the General Governing Body (Superior General and his Councilors) reside. The present Superior General is Very Rev. Fr. Jose Mariadas Padipurackal OIC. As part of the growth and development and widening the horizon of evangelization, two provinces have been erected in the Order. They are Bethany Navajeevan Province with its provincial house in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, and Bethany Navajyothi Province with its provincial house in Aluva, Kerala. At present, Bethany has 55 Houses, 3 *Dayaras* (formed house with a minimum of six perpetual-professed members) and 52 Zoor *Dayaras* & Mission Houses. The institutions are attached with the Ashrams. She is blessed with 265 members: Bishops 2 (Bp. Jacob Mar Barnabas OIC and Bp. Thomas Mar Anthonios OIC), Priests 154, Lay Religious Brothers 08 and 101 students, doing their studies in different formation houses. Students of Theology do their studies in the Oriental Institute in Bethany Vedavijnana Peeth (BVP) at Pune, India.

**The dedicated lives of the older generation of the Ashram**, both the living and the deceased (*Archbishop Mar Ivanios OIC - the founder - Servant of God, Bishop Mar Theophilos OIC, Archbishop Mar Gregorios OIC, Moran Mor Cyril Baselios OIC- the first Major Archbishop Catholicos, 32 Priests and six Religious Brothers*), always ardently give inspiration and light to every Bethanian in living his vocation.

**In fact, the dream of canonically erected Bethany Ashrams** outside India came true with the erection of two Ashrams at Emdibir (Sep. 20, 2009) and Goru (Feb. 09, 2013) in Ethiopia, East Africa. It is highly remarkable that in the history of the Catholic Church, Bethany is the first Oriental Religious Congregation to send its members to another Oriental Catholic Church for missionary activities and the establishment of communities. The dream is yet to be bloomed in other parts of the world and let us hope that it is not that far away from our sight, so that the Universal Church may ardently experience spiritual nourishment from the very presence of Bethany Ashram and thereby the Malankara Major Archiepiscopal

Church (of which the Major Archbishop-Catholicos is the Head & Father) which is one of the *sui juris* Churches in the Catholic Communion.

Bethany Ashram celebrates its Founder's Day on July 15, Mar Theophilos Day on June 27 and Patrons' Day (Bethany Saints: Martha, Mary & Lazarus) on July 29. Other guardian-Patron Saints of the Congregation are St. John the Apostle, St. Basil & St. Little Therese.

**RELIGIOUS LIFE**, in response to the call of God, is a way of life that a few people choose for becoming as holy as possible and for being of the greatest possible service to humankind. History tells us that the pilgrim Church of Jesus Christ has been fervently influenced by religious communities. They all contributed and still contribute profoundly to the spiritual growth and enrichment of the Church and the development of the human society. The monastic and other religious communities founded in the Malankara Church, along with the supportive role of the other religious communities of both men and women of other *sui juris* Churches, selflessly fulfill the vocation, vision and mission of the Malankara Catholic Church. They all, while promoting the holiness of their members, contribute to the sustenance of the spiritual awakening of the Church, by actively engaging in social and spiritual work in parishes, mission stations, schools, hospitals, orphanages and other charitable spheres. They are playing an important role in forming the religious disciplines in the Church and the world at large. This means that the religious communities become causes of sanctification not only of their own people but of the whole of humankind in the salvific plan of God. They impart what they have accumulated in their life to the upcoming generations who become more knowledgeable people in God's wisdom. They are all visible signs of the beauty of the diverse nature of the **ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC and APOSTOLIC CHURCH** which leads humankind towards the full realization of the Kingdom of God. Here Bethany Ashram, as that of any other Religious Order, exercises a big and vital role in the life of the Church but with its unique **CHARISM** of imitating Jesus Christ in his prayer and active life in an indigenous way.

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