

# Mar Ivanios and Bethany Movement

- Sr. Gifty, SIC -

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## Introduction

God, who revealed himself to human beings through various means, sent his own Son in the fullness of time and now He continues His mission through various chosen people. (Heb 1:1) He blesses mankind through them. God, when He called Abraham, said that he would be a blessing. The call of everyone, chosen by God, is to be a blessing. Archbishop Mar Ivanios was such a man chosen by God.

His contribution to the ecclesial communion and reunion has paved the way for a new horizon in the Church. Mar Ivanios was instrumental in the renaissance of the Malankara Church.<sup>1</sup> The theological position of Malankara Catholic Church as an individual Church in the Catholic communion was built upon the common fountain of revelation given forth by its founder Mar Ivanios, and that was based on the foundation of Scriptures and Apostolic Tradition. The splendor of his saintly life and the depth of his ecclesial as well as ecclesiastical life become more and more inspiring and striking to the people at large everywhere. His tireless strive for the truth made him think about the true Church, and his firm decision to stand with the truth made him the founder of the Reunion movement even amidst great pressures both from his own fellow beings and also from outside.

He founded Bethany movement, the *Sanyasa* movement for the first time in the Malankara Orthodox Church, for leading a radical life amidst of all these adversaries.<sup>2</sup> Bethany, as a unique movement that paved a way to the social, missionary and religious changes in the



Malankara community, received its influences from Mar Ivanios. Due to the intellectual and mystical experience and transformation that Mar Ivanios underwent in the course of time, he could lay a strong foundation for the reunion movement of the Malankara Church with the Catholic Church. He gave a strong theological and spiritual foundation to the religious and ecclesial movements he initiated with his strong ecclesial patrimony of oriental spirituality of asceticism and oriental ecclesial life of Orthodox faith. His ability to discern the thoughts, desires, and needs of his contemporaries and of the society led him to take any risk as a true prophet. He had a special gift to touch their hearts and thought and to influence them.<sup>3</sup> Story of Bethany and life of Mar Ivanios, we can say, are the same. His autobiography *The Girideepam* is the history of Bethany Movement only. When we go through the history of Mar Ivanios, we also go through the history of Bethany, history of Malankara Church, the history of sacrifices of the fathers of Malankara Catholic Church, the history of God's providence which the Church and Bethany movement was led with and the history of the transformation of a man who was made an instrument to do the will of his master.<sup>4</sup> So, Bethany from the life of Mar Ivanios cannot be separated. The Bethany movement is celebrating its centenary, and on this occasion, it is very relevant to know about the origin and growth of Bethany Movement and its contributions to the Church.

### 1. The Early Life of Mar Ivanios

Mar Ivanios' family, which was deeply involved in ecclesial life and deeply committed to social causes, played a great role in the formation of his personality. The seeds sown in his heart by many of his family members bore fruits in his life especially when he took crucial decisions: founding *Sanyasa* in Malankara and reuniting with the universal Church. The socio-religious life situation in Travancore had its impact on shaping his theological vision. The rare and best educational opportunity he received also made him very open-minded and helped him to assess the situations critically and to take up the challenges courageously.<sup>5</sup> "You have a smart son", the comment by Malankara Metropolitan, Pulikkotttil Mar Dionysius to his father at his very young age shows his courage and great appreciation by others.<sup>6</sup>





## 1.1 Family Background

Mar Ivanios was born in a noble family of *Mallitti Panicker* at Mavelikkara on September 21, 1882. His family that is *Panikkaruveetil* was a royal family<sup>7</sup>. His family members, mainly his father, mother, his priest uncle Zacharias<sup>8</sup> played a great role in instilling in him different aspects of Christian life. The martial art school, run by his father, opened him a chance to mingle with the people of other caste and denominations, and paved the path for him to create a positive attitude and respect towards them. His mother had a great love and respect for the Catholic Church, and it became a great influence in the life of Mar Ivanios to embrace Catholic faith later.

## 1.2 Education and Social Background

After his *Kalari* education, he joined CMS English medium school, Mavelikkara. He discontinued the studies there, and then joined Government English medium school at Mavelikkara. His social background had a great impact on developing his visions, especially its different elements such as inculturation, education and social commitment, co-operation, etc. Though the coexistence of Hindus and Christians was peaceful, the caste system prevailed in the society disturbed him a lot. The condition of women was very miserable, and they were not expected to enjoy freedom. Ivanios was very sensitive to such social discrimination, and he worked later for the emancipation of the poor and the womenfolk. He also benefitted from the religious tolerance existed in society. His right knowledge of missionary proclamation, supported by the religious tolerance, helped him to carry out a genuine approach towards other religions.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Ecclesial life of Mar Ivanios

“The child grew and became strong in spirit” (Lk 1:80a). The divine plan that selected Mar Ivanios for His great works, even before his birth, providentially prepared him through his family and relatives. He had been very much interested in prayer and church-related matters since his younger age itself. He had a raging thirst for the service of God's altar. It was a great joy for his mother and his uncle, but his father who wished to see his son as a military officer and a

warrior was not really happy. Mar Ivanios dedicated his life to the uplift of the community, and was ready to pay anything for his wish as he realized it was the plan of God.

## 2.1 Entry to the Seminary and Higher Education

In January 1898, staying at *Pazhaya Seminary*, he entered school studies at the MD Seminary, Kottayam, at the age of 15. That was an occasion for him to enter into contact with many prominent people in the Church. Considering his profound interests in spiritual matters, *Vattasseril Malpan* gave him the post of sacristan of the chapel of *Pazhaya Seminary*. After completing his high school studies, he was sent to CMS College to pursue his higher studies in FA (Fellow of Arts). He was very eager to dedicate himself for the good of his Church. He found time to read and understand Church history. The historical scenes formed in him helped him to grow more in genuine respect towards his Church and apostolic faith. Gibbons describes his activities during his studies at CMS College as, “He utilized every free moment in the Old Seminary to organize a missionary circle amongst the deacons resided there...He took up with his companions the study of apologetics and Christian doctrines. He prepared with them sermons, instructions, discourses on liturgy, and commentaries on scriptural passages.”<sup>10</sup> During those days he got the opportunity to meet only the Protestant missionaries and that helped him to imbibe the spirit of evangelization and mission, which his church lacked.

## 2.2 P. T Geevarghese to *Koodashasemmassan* and *MA Achen*

After the completion of his FA, he pursued his BA and MA at Madras Christian College. He made use of that occasion to deepen his knowledge in the history of his Church. The choice of his topic for the MA dissertation was “Were the Syrian Christians Nestorians?” That proved his deep interest in the history of his church. He was very keen to share his knowledge of the Church and its doctrines with his Syrian classmates in order to root them in the right faith.<sup>11</sup>

As he was growing high in knowledge and wisdom, his commitment to the Church was also growing. On January 9, 1900, he was ordained a deacon. Being very zealous of serving the church, he visited many parishes and delivered sermons on Holy Sacraments, and the people started calling him *Koodashasemmassan*, which





means Deacon of the Sacrament. He was ordained on September 15, 1908. He was the first one to obtain an MA degree at that time, from the Orthodox community. So, he was also called *MA Achen*.

### **3. Birth of Bethany**

Origin of religious congregations like Bethany could be clearly understood only when we could understand the background of the church at that time. MA Achen was appointed the principal of M D Seminary High School, and he started to be involved in church matters. In the context of disputes and problems, the Church had lost its spirit and mission, and it was concentrating only on the physical matters. Lack of priests and their indifference, unqualified clergy, financial problems, factional fights, etc., were prevailing in the Church. All those factors acted as a means for Mar Ivanios to find out new ways to uplift his Church. Founding of the Religious Congregation was one of the methods he selected for the renewal of the Church.

#### **3.1 Ecclesial Background**

Patriarch Abdulla of Antioch visited Malankara in 1909, and he declared that the Patriarch had all the spiritual and temporal powers among the Jacobites of Malankara. But, *Vattasseril Mar Dionysius* and a group of Jacobites opposed it. So, Patriarch excommunicated Mar Dionysius, and appointed *Paulose Mar Koorilos* as the Malankara Metropolitan. That paved, again, the way to division. Some of them supported the Patriarch and Paulose Mar Koorilos, and they are, later, known as Patriarch Party (*Bava Kakshi*). And those who supported Bishop Dionysius are known as Metropolitan Party or *Methran Kakshi*. They are later known as the Orthodox Church.

After the excommunication of Vattasseril Mar Dionysius, the Metropolitan Party contacted another Patriarch in Antioch, named Abded M'shiha. He came to Kerala in 1912, annulled the excommunication of Vattasseril Mar Dionysius, and established a Catholicate here; and Paulose Mar Koorilos became the first Catholicos. The church gradually lost its efficiency in spiritual and temporal administration and gradually immersed into worldly affairs.<sup>12</sup> Mar Ivanios says, "I have found plentifully the jealousy and antagonism among the top leaders of the Church. Peace and

happiness have not been seen even in a single parish. To say concisely, the body of the Church was ripped and rotten.”<sup>13</sup> The Church was full of disputes, hatred, and blood-shedding. There was a lack of fear of God and the love of God. That was the context in which Mar Ivanios was serving as the principal of MD Seminary High School. He had a great desire to reform the church in any way.

At that time he attended a students' conference in 1912 and that was the turning point in his life. Dr. Howells, the then principal of Serampore College requested him to join as a professor in that College. Even though the presence of Mar Ivanios was needed there in Malankara at that time, it was an opportunity for him to fulfill his dream of the development of Seminary. MD seminary was in a big financial crisis and debt. So, the financial offer from Serampore College as a salary became an immediate solution to solve the financial crisis of MD Seminary. But, on the other side, he had to pay a big price for receiving that offer. He had to leave Kottayam, MD Seminary, and the plans had already been started for the development of the Seminary. In *Girideepam*, this struggle is expressed very clearly.

Hence I do not know whether to go or not to go to Serampore. I am much disturbed as this question is constantly troubling my mind... The Serampore journey occupied a prime place in my prayers, and as the days passed, the college seems more attractive to me. And I concluded that it was part of God's plan. But I could not do anything about it. Since I had submitted myself to the authority of a great leader of the Malankara Church, my decision would not be valid. I had seen and experienced on many occasions the filial love, which the metropolitan had for the MD Seminary and the passion he entertained for its growth and development.<sup>14</sup>

At last, he got permission from the Metropolitan and went to Serampore. The stay at Serampore helped him to see his Church from a distance with a different frame of mind. This period was a very crucial period in the life of Mar Ivanios.

### 3.2 The Need for a Religious Community

The conflicts in the church led Mar Ivanios to think about a reformation in the Church. His thoughts had really a gradual progression in developing that idea. Firstly, he thought that priests





with education could change the Church and society; Good education with a virtuous living would change the present scenario. So, he thought about having a theology college in MD Seminary. He had already started to educate some of the seminarians in Serampore College. Through them, to renew the Church was his plan. But again his thoughts deviated, and he thought that was alone would not solve all the problems. He says, “But, would those aims be fulfilled under the present circumstances? Even if they are realized, would they last long? ...Isn't it necessary that we make of the priest students, who are with us for better useful ways more pleasing to God and for more useful things conducive to the prosperity of the community than to employ them in schools?”<sup>15</sup>

Then his thoughts and decisions shifted to the need of initiating a missionary society. He said that the Malankara Christian Community which had received its faith in its early centuries was still working and living there only. They hadn't done anything to give that light to others who did not know Christ. Again he changed his opinion because there was a possibility of losing its vitality in the course of time. When selfishness and a craving for public recognition usurped the hearts of its members, the decline of the society was guaranteed. So, there should be people prepared to take the firm oath for common life in an ideal society. It is only through founding an institution by chosen people, who have chosen to the service of God as their life principle and who are nourished by an ardent devotion to God, could bring about the development of the Syrian community. Only those who stand above could save those who are in the pit.<sup>16</sup> At last, he reached a conclusion to start a religious congregation to live a radical life and thus to have a renewal from within the church.

#### **4. Establishment of Bethany and Reunion Movement**

Havig decided to become a religious and start a religious congregation, he prepared himself for that task trusting completely in God, and he visited many *ashrams* and convents in order to get the pulse of their living style and visions. India is known to be very rich in the tradition of religious lives, and she has a great patrimony of being the mother of different religions and cultures. He visited some of these monasteries without looking for any caste or culture discrimination. Also, the problems that were prevailing in the

Malankara Church led to a way of reunion with the Catholic Church and Mar Ivanios was an instrument in the hands of God in that too. Bethany movement became an inevitable part of the reunion movement because of that.

#### 4.1 Order of the Imitation of Christ (OIC)

“The shade of trees with a lot of branches and leaves attracts wayfarers tired and scorched by the heat of the sun. The wayfarer plucks the fruits from a fruit-bearing tree.”<sup>17</sup> That was the concept of *Sanyasa* according to Mar Ivanios. It appeared to us most proper to possess God than to serve Him. He visited a lot of religious institutes of both Catholics and Protestants in North India. He started to read a lot of books to know about religious life. Apart from all those, he visited *Santhi Niketan* of Rabindranath Tagore and *Sabarmati Ashram* of Mahatma Gandhi to get the underpinnings of religious life. Also, he informed his wish to Mar Dionysius. He gladly encouraged Fr. P. T. Geevarghese for that endeavor, and many from Malankara Church also wrote him as they would support that endeavor. Under the leadership of Mar Ivanios, the small community in Serampore started to live a monastic life there, observing Daily offices, Examination of Conscience, Mediation, Silence, etc. After a few months, Mr. E. J. John offered 100 Acres of his land freely for the building of the monastery at Perunadu, Mundanmala. When the buildings were ready, he resigned from his job at Serampore and started the Ashram with 10 members. After a six-month preparation, the first three members namely, Fr. P. T. Gheevarghese (Mar Ivanios), Deacon Jacob (Mar Theophilos) and Fr. Alexios (Mar Thevodosios) made their solemn profession of religious vows on the Feast of Pentecost in 1920.<sup>18</sup> Later, they bought another 300 Acres of land around the Ashram, and he, then, made its rules, and selected the name Bethany, officially Order of Imitation of Christ. Also, he selected the saffron cloth for their habit to better suit the Indian religious culture. They started the monastery at Mundanmala on August 15, 1919.

#### 4.2 Sisters of the Imitation of Christ (SIC)

Mar Ivanios always thought about the role of women in society and in the Church. He says, “The prosperity of any community depends upon the characteristic culture of its women. It would be more





beneficial and advantageous if its administrators and instructors were women in our community.”<sup>19</sup> So, he began to take girls from here to Calcutta for higher education and also they were formed under Sisters of Epiphany<sup>20</sup> in Barisol.

Like men who have dedicated their whole life for the service of God, there were also women from early days in Christian Churches who took the vow of chastity and served God living a community life in convents. These women spent their lives doing good deeds of charity both in Eastern and Western Churches. Considering this we thought that there was a need for establishing convents for women in Malankara Church also. For, it is a fact that where religious men could not get access or cooperation in the work of evangelization, religious women could easily get both. Besides the presence of God, both in the family as well as in Church depends to a great extent to the attitude of women, who dedicated themselves to God.<sup>21</sup>

So, Mar Ivanios started a congregation for women in Thirumoolapuram, Kerala, on September 21, 1925. He started his vision of empowering women through the women religious.

#### 4.3 Attempts by Malankara Synod and Reunion

The Malankara Synod decided to ordain Fr. Geevarghese as the bishop of Bethany. He was ordained by Catholicos on May 1, 1925. Efforts for Reunion were under the Malankara synod initially. They appointed Mar Ivanios to discuss and continue further matters. Mar Ivanios submitted the first memorandum to the Apostolic See with the approval of the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church in November 1926. There were two conditions proposed in it:

1. To safeguard their ancient liturgy and religious practices; and
2. To receive them giving jurisdiction to the bishops over all the Syrian Jacobites who got reunited.

There was a favorable decision from Rome for the reunion in July 1930. The matter was informed to Mar Ivanios on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1930. But many changes were happening in the Malankara community after submitting the petition for the reunion in 1926. The amount which was deposited in the bank for the Puthenloor community (*Vattippanam*) was given to the Metropolitan party. So the synod and

its members withdrew from the decision of reunion. But Mar Ivanios stood firm in his decision. The preparations for the reunion went on centering on Bethany *Ashram* and *Madom*. Mar Ivanios, Mar Theophilos and 20 other professed left the Bethany Hills, Mundanmala.

On 20<sup>th</sup> September 1930, Mar Ivanios, Mar Theophilos, Fr. John OIC, Deacon Alexander, and Kililethu Chacko made their profession of faith before Rt. Rev. Dr. Benzigar the bishop of Quilon, as representatives. On the next day, all the sisters who were then at Thirumoolapuram reunited with the Catholic Church.<sup>22</sup>

## 5. Activities of Bethany

Activities of Bethany were the reflection of Mar Ivanios on theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, vision about the role of women and pastoral vision. All these ministries were the foundation for the Malankara Catholic Church at that period. Bethany had a key role in the formation of all the Malankara Church today. “Winning God is nobler than serving him” was his motto in all aspects of life.<sup>23</sup>

### 5.1 Ecclesial Vision and Mission in the Church

Bethany movement, like the founder, imbibed the spirit of the early Christian community and obeyed the command of Jesus Christ to preach the gospel to every creature. The Malankara Catholic Church is the fruition of the ecclesial vision of Mar Ivanios.<sup>24</sup> He envisioned a Church of great missionary zeal. His vision of Church focused mainly on 'one Shepherd and one flock' aspect found in the gospel of John. He believed that the Church without communion was a contradiction in itself. So he insisted reunion with the Catholic Church. He also tirelessly worked for the renewal of the Church from within Bethany movement, had its main charism as a reunion and also had great care for the formation of religious and priest for the Church. The brilliance of the vision of Mar Ivanios is well brought out as we fall back in time and see that he was a proponent of this vision much before the Second Vatican Council.<sup>25</sup> Bethany through its publications, founding of churches, pastoral care in the Church, etc., receiving the spirit of mission from Mar Ivanios, is now working in different parts of the world such as Africa and Ethiopia.





## 5.2 Liturgical Vision and Arrangement of Liturgy

Mar Ivanios who was born and brought up in the rich liturgical tradition of Malankara Church was greatly influenced by it. He understood liturgy as the center of Christian life and the unfolding of salvation history. He taught that liturgy was a communitarian celebration and it should be the source of whole spirituality and theology of the church. He insisted on the mystical and symbolic aspect of Malankara liturgy. He experienced sacramental life as a union with God. Even from the beginning, Bethany Ashram became the centre of prayer, meditation and social service of the Orthodox Church. The faithful gathered in large numbers to take part in prayers were held in the chapel of the *Ashram*, especially during the Holy weeks.<sup>26</sup>

## 5.3 Vision about Role of Women and Education

Already, we saw the vision about the role of women when we discussed the founding of religious congregation for women. Mar Ivanios said, “it is a fact that where religious men could not get access or co-operation, women will get”. And he believed that a woman could influence both the Church and society very powerfully. So he started educating women. He established the first school for girls in Thirumoolapuram, Balikamadom. In Bethany, especially sisters continue this mission, and, along with the education, they are caring for the integral development of each one. They visit families and they listen to the women there.

## 5.4 Mission Aspect of Bethany Movement

One of Bethany's major contributions was its Gentile Mission. This mission turned out wonderful results at several places in central Travancore, like Thirumoolapuram, Vennikkulam, Thumpaman, Vadassrikkara, and Ranni. The greatest achievement of this mission was that it helped to root out differences of class and caste from the minds of Christians.<sup>27</sup>

## 6. Bethany Today

Malankara hierarchy was established on June 11, 1932, through the decree *Christo Pastorum Principi* by Pope Pius XI. Later on February 10, 2005, it is raised to the status of Major Archiepiscopal

Church. Mar Ivanios, after completing his task in this world went for eternal reward on July 15, 1953. Bethany, which God had planted through Mar Ivanio, has now grown up and now at the age of 100. It serves the Church a lot with prayer and action as its mission. OIC has two provinces and many mission centres in countries like Ethiopia and Africa. Bethany Sisters have 5 provinces and around 800 sisters now. It is going ahead with the mission of spreading of the kingdom of God.

Even today, Bethany has its duties and challenges which have yet to be fulfilled. The ecclesiological, social, monastic and missiological aspects are now spreading outside the Malankara Catholic Church breaking the boundaries of languages and cultures. Bethany as a gateway to the communion with Catholic Church, Bethany as a unique monastic community which practices contemplation in action in the eastern monastic horizon is now redefining these charisms according to the needs of the times. Also, Bethany should act as a challenge to the whole world as the instrument of God for communion.

### **Conclusion**

God elects each one as the answer for the cry of His people. Many examples are there in the Holy Scripture. In the life of Mar Ivanios, we can see a clear mission given by God which was the spiritual renewal of the Church through Bethany. He had heard the will of God in each stage of his life and fulfilled the will of God. Now while analyzing the history of 100 years, this is a moment for self-evaluation and also a chance for revitalization for Bethany to go ahead with the mission and vision of Mar Ivanios and to prepare this world for the second coming of Jesus.

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**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Rehmas, *The Complete Works of Archbishop Mar Ivanios*, 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Valiyavilayil, *The Theological Visions of Mar Ivanios*, 9.
- <sup>3</sup> Rehmas, *The Complete Works of Archbishop Mar Ivanios*, 7.
- <sup>4</sup> Ivanios, *Girideepam*, 6.
- <sup>5</sup> Abraham, "The Concept of Sanyasa and Mission," 10.
- <sup>6</sup> Abraham, *In His Master's Footsteps*, 4.



- <sup>7</sup> Panicker family had good contact with kings and royal personalities as his family men were bodyguards of kings of Travancore. As a child of this family, young Geevarghese got chances to visit the royal court and meet with noble people. This also influenced him very much. From his early years of life, he was courageous as he belonged to the family of bodyguards of kings and well trained in martial arts which were customary for the youth of his family tradition.
- <sup>8</sup> Fr. Zacharias, who was a celibate priest also, helped him to form his mind for the liberation and uplift of outcaste and marginalized ones.
- <sup>9</sup> Abraham, "The Concept of Sanyasa and Mission," 12.
- <sup>10</sup> Gibbons, *Archbishop Mar Ivanios*, 32.
- <sup>11</sup> Inchakkalody, *Archbishop Mar Ivanios*, 42.
- <sup>12</sup> Thykkootathil, *God Who Saves* 84-87.
- <sup>13</sup> Ivanios, *Girideepam*, 47.
- <sup>14</sup> Ivanios, *Girideepam*, 48-49.
- <sup>15</sup> Ivanios, *Girideepam*, 66.
- <sup>16</sup> Ivanios, *Girideepam*, 67-69.
- <sup>17</sup> Ivanios, *Girideepam*, 69.
- <sup>18</sup> Samuel, "An Appraisal of Mar Ivanios: The Man of God", 144.
- <sup>19</sup> Ivanios, *Girideepam*, 72.
- <sup>20</sup> Mother Edith, the superior of the community of Sisters of Epiphany in Barisol played a great role in the formation of Malankara girls. Also Sr. Helen joined her.
- <sup>21</sup> Ivanios, *Girideepam*, 72-74.
- <sup>22</sup> Injakkalody, *Arch bishop Mar Ivanios*, 459-473.
- <sup>23</sup> Samuel, "An Appraisal of Mar Ivanios: The Man of God", 140.
- <sup>24</sup> Valiyavilayil, *The Theological Vision of Mar Ivanios*, 100.
- <sup>25</sup> Valiyavilayil, *The Theological Vision of Mar Ivanios*, 101.
- <sup>26</sup> Samuel, "An Appraisal of Mar Ivanios: The Man of God", 145.
- <sup>27</sup> Samuel, "An Appraisal of Mar Ivanios: The Man of God", 146.