

# The Orthodox Church: Short History

## Division and union of the Orthodox Church

Most of our children are faced with a very difficult question in their schools and in public places: Are you a *Catholic* or *Protestant*? Many do not know how to answer. The following paragraphs will help them to have a bird's eye-view about world Christianity. Thirty three per cent of the world population makes Christians. Basically they belong to three families, viz. Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. Historically, they belonged to one Church till the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D.

This Church called itself the *Orthodox Church*, which meant *the Church of right worship and faith*. The ancient Church used the title *Orthodox* against the heretics like *Gnostics*, *Montanists*, *Arians* and *Nestorians* to qualify itself as the Church having the undefiled faith and their opponents as the heretics. This Church had five main centers at Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, Jerusalem and Rome. Each centre was headed by a bishop, who was called either *Patriarch* (Antioch, Constantinople and Jerusalem) or *Pope* (Alexandria and Rome).

The Council of Chalcedon divided the ancient Church in to two kinds of Christians. The council's main agenda was to discuss about the Person of Jesus Christ, i.e. to say how the divinity and humanity are united in Jesus Christ. The council adopted a doctrinal thesis, which was accepted by a group and rejected by another group. Those who rejected the council decisions were called the *Non-Chalcedonians* and even today the Churches of Egypt, Syria, Ethiopia, Erithrea, Armenia and India are known by this name; they have one more name and that is the *Oriental Orthodox Christians*. On the other side the Christians of the major portion of the Roman Empire accepted the Council of 451 and they were known as the *Chalcedonians*. During the Middle Ages there were frictions within the Chalcedonian group and ultimately it lead to a division of the Chalcedonians in 1054; the *Church of Rome* (Roman Catholic) stood against the *Eastern Christianity* (Churches of the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire).

With the Reformation Movement of the 16<sup>th</sup> century led by Martin Luther a lot of Christians of western Europe protested against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and they came out of the Roman patronage. Their Churches were called by the name the *Protestants*. Lutheran Church, Reformed Church, Anglican Church, Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church are major Protestant Churches of the World. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a lot of *Pentecostal Churches* and *Sectarian Churches* came into existence. They also are counted as Protestants, even though they don't have a sound theological basis as the major Protestant Churches mentioned above. In India we may find representatives of almost all protestant groups. Some of them stay in alliances like the Church of South India (CSI) and the Church of North India (CNI). Even

though the Mar Thoma Church is not a member of these alliances it has communion with them as a Protestant Church.

With the advent of the *Colonial Age* the churches of the western colonial rulers spread in many countries of the world. Thus we have 970 million Catholics and about 470 million Protestants in the world today. About 275 million Christians of the world belong to the Pentecostal and Sectarian Churches. The Oriental Orthodox family comprises the Churches of Egypt (Coptic Orthodox Church), of Ethiopia, Syria, Armenia and India. In the Eastern Orthodox family there are Churches in Russia, Greece, Rumania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Check Republic etc. Together the Orthodox believers make 220 million people of the world.

### Coming together of the Churches

20<sup>th</sup> century was a century of *ecumenism*. Since the conference of missionaries at Edinburg in 1910 the Churches are striving for a united life. Union does not mean the adoption of a uniformity in Christian traditions, but it aims at achieving a uniformity in basic faith matters. A world body called the *World Council of Churches* was started in 1948 and it convenes meetings of different Churches.

Thus came the two families of the Orthodox Church, viz. *Oriental Orthodox Churches* and *Eastern Orthodox Churches*, together for deliberations in faith matters after 1500 years of parted life (since 451 A.D.). Their first agenda was to make a historical and critical study of the Council of Chalcedon, which divided them. A series of meetings were conducted under the leadership of H.G.Dr.Paulos Mar Gregorios of the Indian Orthodox Church (Non-Chalcedonian) and Prof. Nikos Nissiotis of the Greek Orthodox Church (Chalcedonian). At first there were four *unofficial consultations* at Aarhus (1964), Bristol (1967), Geneva (1970) and Addis Ababa (1970). Even though these were called *unofficial* these meetings were of high academic quality. Internationally reputed theologians presented papers there followed by serious and open discussions. The presence of Fr.Dr.V.C.Samuel, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the subject (*The Council of Chalcedon Re-examined*), was very helpful for the Oriental Orthodox side.

Through these consultations they came to know a reality: even though the two families have their own history and cultural background there are some common characteristics which bind them together. They believe that they inherit these characteristics from the Early Church, which was *Orthodox*, that means the people who had the right kind of faith (the Greek word *ortho* means *undefiled* and *doxa* means *worship*). The *unofficial* dialogues were followed by four *official* dialogues at Chambessy (1985), Cairo (1989) and Geneva (1990, 1993). These produced an *Agreed Statement* on the Person of Jesus Christ, which was the topic of division in 451. This statement was discussed and approved by the Synods of almost all Orthodox Churches. What is to happen is a universal Synod of all the Orthodox Churches (Pan Orthodox Council), in which decisions could be taken to

re-establish *communion* (receiving and giving of the Body and Blood of Christ) between the two families of the Orthodox Church.

However, the coming together of the two families was a sensational news in the ecumenical field. The agreement between them affects the union of the Oriental Orthodox Church with a larger community of Christianity, because the so-called *Chalcedonian Church* of 451 is having three groups now: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and the Protestant. So every agreement between the Oriental Orthodox and the Eastern Orthodox Churches regarding the Person of Christ paves the way for such an agreement of the Oriental Orthodox Church with the Roman Catholic and the Protestant Churches.