

# Concept of Monasticism in the Malankara Syrian Liturgy

## Based on the Rite of Profession in Bethany

### Introduction

Archbishop Geevarghese Mar Ivanios (+1953) is fondly remembered as the founder of Monastic life or *Sannyasa* in the Malankara Church. The Christian way of life which he founded in the Malankara Church is named Bethany, after Bethany in the Bible, the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The Bethany *Sannyasa* he founded in the Malankara Church is in perfect harmony with the traditions of the Oriental/Occidental Syriac monastic traditions and with the spiritual tradition of India and it enriched and rejuvenated the church-life, especially in Kerala which has been thirsting for a spiritual renewal. Therefore, it is important to understand this monastic life which is a “spiritual treasure” that God has given to the Syro-Malankara Church of Antiochean Tradition.

In his historic attempt to revitalize the ancient division of the Malankara Church, the founding of *Sannyasa* is a landmark. It becomes an antidote to the factionalism and spiritual aridity in the Malankara Church. It was Mar Ivanios’s theological vision and spiritual conviction that we found in the trajectory of the development of his monastic ideal, through the foundation of Bethany.

The decision of Mar Ivanios to begin a monastic life in Malankara is for those who aspire union with God, following the foot step of Christ. Mar Ivanios says: The goal of *sanyasa* is nothing but, “possession of God”; According to him; “there is nothing nobler than to possess God in this world.<sup>1</sup> Mar Ivanios does not limit his monastic ideal in attaining man’s individual goal of communion with God but he was also convinced, about the evangelical dimension of *Sannyasa* in the spreading of the Gospel.

Thus, through the Bethanian monastic movement Mar Ivanios aimed at two things; firstly, to attain union with God and secondly to work zealously for the evangelization. The Bethany monastic movement which he founded is comprised of the Order of the Imitation of Christ (Bethany Fathers) founded in 1919 and the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ (Bethany Sisters) founded in 1925.

Since the inception of monastic life in the Malankara Church there has been the practice of receiving members to the community and there started a mode of living together as a fraternal community in deep prayer, and doing some external works of both personal and communitarian nature. During that long span of time, one could not find any specific service of initiation for receiving members to monastic life. It is in *Girideepam*, the first written document of Bethany on monastic life, that we come across the ceremony of monastic profession, celebrated for the first time in its history.

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<sup>1</sup> Mar Ivanios, Sr. Rehmas (trans.) *Girideepam*, (*The Mountain Torch*) Trivandrum, 2005, p. 60. Hereafter cited as *Girideepam*

In *Girideepam*, we read: On that day of Pentecost, having completed the Morning prayers, the Holy *Qurbano* and the special Service of Pentecost, Father Geevarghese (Mar Ivanios) delivered an instruction regarding the core of monastic dedication: “We are compelled to follow the sacrificial life of our Lord through our religious profession. We earnestly desire to learn more and more and to identify ourselves with his (Christ’s) sacrifice”.<sup>2</sup> Thus the first members dedicated their whole life in absolute faith renouncing what they have and what they will have in future. This total dedication is termed *Sanyasaprathishta*, a total giving of the self as an offering or sacrifice. This sacrifice is like a holocaust in which one who offers is no more left. The Service of monastic profession for the first time in Bethany was thus conducted at Bethany Ashram, Perunadu on March 9<sup>th</sup> 1920.<sup>3</sup>

Though there originated a service of dedication in an enigmatic form in Bethany since 1920, it was only in 1925 that a Liturgical Rite for monastic profession was compiled by Mar Ivanios collating different monastic rituals and liturgical rites that were prevailed in the early Syriac speaking Churches.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Rite of Religious Profession in Bethany**

As we have introduced the emergence of Bethany in the Malankara Church, we are now trying to understand the Rite of Religious Profession in Bethany. Hence, in the following part we give a brief note on the Syrian understanding of religious profession, the liturgical texts used for religious profession in the Order of the Imitation of Christ (OIC) and in the Congregation of the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ (SIC).

### **Religious Profession: A Syrian Understanding**

The term profession in Greek *homologia* and in Hebrew *berît*, used since the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century to designate virginal commitment of a person, has acquired different technical meanings such as consecration, promise, and dedication.<sup>5</sup> In the present religious context, profession indicates the public solemn pledge of the vows of obedience, chastity and poverty before the Church and in the presence of a legitimate religious superior by which one attains membership in a specific religious community with rights and obligations.<sup>6</sup> Hence religious profession is an act of divine consecration by which candidates to the religious life declare their intention in the midst of a worshipping community to put on the charism of singleness (*ih̄idōyūtō*), to draw near to God in absolute trust with a view to recount all through their life

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<sup>2</sup> *Girideepam*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>3</sup> *Girideepam*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>4</sup> Kaduvinal, *Monastic Virgin Profession*, Roma, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> In the early period since Clement of Alexandria and in the Syrian tradition since Aphrahat, the term *homologia* and *berît* were used respectively. *Homologia* the Greek word signifies the external manifestation of an internal consent and *berît* means a pact in terms of a covenant made between God and man. Later, the terms *consecratio*, *professio* and *propositum* became the vocabulary to denote the consecration of the virgins. Cf. GRIBOMONT, “Professione”, in *Dizionario degli Istituti Perfezione*, 7(1983) pp. 884-894.

<sup>6</sup> GRIBOMONT, “Professione”, 884.

the wonders of the Triune God.<sup>7</sup> This is a voluntary commitment of love for a whole-hearted following of Christ the *ih̄idōyō* which effects a consecration – a setting apart for God and a putting on of the *Īh̄idōyō* - the Only Begotten Son of God. It is further a communion with God and with others, and is oriented for mission. In the West Syrian tradition, dedication is made primarily through consecratory rites of initiation specifically manifested through the tonsuring and the clothing of the candidate.

### 2.3.3. The Liturgical Texts of Monastic Profession in Bethany

The principal sources that we rely upon in the writing of this article are the two liturgical texts in Malayalam namely, *Sanyasinikalude Vritha Vagdanam* published in 1980 by the Liturgical Commission of the Malankara Church and *Sanyasa Vrithanushtana Susrushakramam* published by the Bethany Ashram Generalate Kottayam in 2016. The term *Vritha* derived from Sanskrit means vow, and *Vagdana* means to proclaim or to promise; hence, the liturgical texts *Sanyasinikalude Vritha Vagdanam* mean Profession of Vows: The Service for Nuns and *Sanyasa Vrithanushtana Susrushakramam* means Profession of Vows: The Service for Monks. The liturgical texts published in 1980 and in 2016 are based on Mar Ivanios's Syriac-Malayalam anthology of 1925 and its hand-written copy by Mother Cybar, the eighth member of the Bethany congregation of the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Compared to the manuscript copy, the re-edited liturgical texts are in a splendid form. Omission of two *proemions* and two *sedrōe* of the Syriac manuscript is solved by the inclusion of two other *sedrōe* in the liturgical text.<sup>9</sup> The Liturgy of the Word is given partially in the manuscript (five readings; two from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament) but it is specified clearly as seven (four readings from the Old Testament and three readings from the New Testament) in the liturgical text.<sup>10</sup> A considerable portion of the exhortation which contains statements against those Fathers, who had fallen in the heresies and were anathematized, also is not included in the present liturgical text.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Vritha Vagdanam : Sanyasinikade Vritha Vagdanam* (Malayalam) Thiruvalla, 1980, 46. Hereafter cited as *Vritha Vagdanam*.

<sup>8</sup> The rite of profession formulated by Mar Ivanios in Syriac-Malayalam is copied by Mother Cybar. The copyist did not indicate on the copy the year in which it is copied but according to Sr. Rehmas, one of the pioneers, it is copied in 1925.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Vritha Vagdanam*, 18, The *proemion* and the *sedrō* given in the liturgical text are an addition which are not seen in the Syriac manuscript. The *proemion* and the *sedrō* given in the liturgical text are different from that are given in the Syriac manuscript. See *Vritha Vagdanam* pp. 29-31; *Bethany Manuscripts.*, 1, Trivandrum 1925, pp. 69-73. Hereafter cited as *Beth. Ms.* The *etrō* given in the liturgical text also is different from that of the Syriac Manuscript.

<sup>10</sup> *Vritha Vagdanam*, 32-33.

The English translations of the liturgical text *Sanyasinikalude Vritha Vagdanam* was done by S. Thaikoottathil in 2001 and it is entitled, *Profession of Vows: The Service in the Malankara Church*. Another translation of the same text was prepared in 2016 by the Department of the Sacred Liturgy, St. Mary Queen of Peace Syro-Malankara Catholic Eparchy in USA & Canada and it is entitled, *The Order of the Profession of Religious Sisters*. The translations, though identical to the Syriac–Malayalam version, needs to be revised again together with our recently acquired manuscripts, *the Ritual of the Clothing of the Monks (Takso D'tulboshho D'dairoye)* found in 1001 AD at the monastery of Mar Schaino in the West of Euphrates region.<sup>11</sup> and the Ritual of the Tonsure of Nuns (*Takso D'suporo D'dairoyutho*) the Charfet publication of 1952. The present liturgical texts, are to be considered as a rich heritage of the Malankara Church.

### **Scriptural Roots of the Liturgical Texts**

Sacred Scripture is the most important source of the liturgical texts used in Bethany. The readings, paraphrases and quotations ingrained in the liturgical text witness to ascetic life and the monastic spirituality of the West Syrian tradition as “productive of Scripture.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the religious significance in the context of biblical language and biblical figures like Abraham, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Samuel underlines the ascetic nature of monastic life and expresses the covenantal foundation of the monastic commitment.<sup>13</sup> The biblical themes such as consecration, virginity, covenant, repentance, cross, new life, kingdom of God, renunciation, discipleship, evangelical counsels are all inserted in the Service.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the entire religious experience of the Church is rooted in and articulated by biblical symbolism.

The Word of God manifests religious life's origin from the Sacred Scriptures and importance of the Word of God in the life of the consecrated. In the Service of Receiving of

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<sup>11</sup> O. Heiming, who translated the Syriac manuscript which belongs to the National Library of Paris (BN., Ms., le Syr. 154. fol. 186 of 1951) suggests that the Ritual of the Clothing of Monks was written in 1001 AD at the monastery of Mar Schaino in the west of the Euphrates region. For more details of the manuscript; See Zotenberg, *Catalogues des manuscrits Syriaques*, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris 1874. 111; Heiming, “Der Ordo des Heiligen Mönchs Schema” in der Syrischen Kirche“ Vom *Chrislichen Mysterium, Gesammelte Arbeiten zum Gedächtnis von O Casel*, Düsseldorf, 1951, pp.152-172; Heiming, “Der Nationalsyrische Ritus Tonsurae” im Syrer Kloster der Ägyptischen Skete“, *Miscellanea Giovanni Galbiati III*, Milano, 1951, pp.123-174. This is in microfilm at the PIO, Roma.

<sup>12</sup>SCHNEIDERS, “Scripture and Sprituality” in McGinn & Meyendorff eds., *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Vol.2, New York, 1989, 2-15.

<sup>13</sup> *Vritha Vagdanam*, 22-34.

<sup>14</sup> Beth., Ms.,1, 4-113; *Vritha Vagdanam*, 1-52; *Profession of Vows*, Thaikoottathil (Eng.trans.) Trivandrum, 2001, pp.1-20.

the Candidate to profession there is a Bible lesson comprised of four readings from Mathew's Gospel (Mt 7:13-14; Mt 7:24-27; Mt 6:19-21; Mt 5:48).<sup>15</sup> In the Service of Religious Profession, there are seven readings; (Gen 12:1-10; Num 6:1-9; Deut 30:15-19; Is 19:1-25; I Pet 1:13-21; Col 3:5-17; Mt 25:1-13).<sup>16</sup> Three Psalms (Ps 51; 63; 135), *Magnificat* (Lk 1:45-55) Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5: 3-12) are also integrated into the Service.<sup>17</sup>

In the Syrian understanding, patristic writings are included in the category of Sacred Scripture. Thus writings of the Fathers such as hymns (*Bo'ūtō of Mar Jacob*) and portions of their homilies (Moses Bar Kepho) also constitute the content of the rite.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Structural Parts of the Rite of Profession**

The structural parts of the Rite of Profession consist of the following elements:

1. Doxology and Opening Prayer
2. The Service of Incense
3. The Bible Lessons (Old Testament : 4 Readings, New Testament: Epistles 2 and the Gospel )
4. The Exhortation of the *Rish Dairo*
5. The Mystery Initiations (Sealing, The Tonsure, Stripping, Profession of Vows, Clothing, Incorporation into the Community),
6. Concluding Hymns and Prayers

### **The Rite Envisages Religious Profession as Religious Consecration**

Religious consecration is a complete dedication of a person, which binds one strongly to Jesus. A personal affection makes this self-dedication meaningful and the consecrated person become God's absolutely and un-dividedly. This leads to a deep experience so as to say "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal.2:20).<sup>19</sup> To be consecrated also means to set apart for a specific purpose. It is through the vows of obedience, chastity and poverty that one set apart for God and dedicates to this life. This consecration though seem to be made by the religious is primarily the result of the divine action of the Spirit in the person of religious. It is the Holy Spirit, who empowers the consecrated to follow Christ more closely under his divine action. When one consecrates

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<sup>15</sup> *Vritha Vagdanam*, pp.18-19.

<sup>16</sup> *Vritha Vagdanam*, p.32.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Beth., Ms.,1, 33; *Vritha Vagdanam*, pp. 24-28.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Beth Ms.1, 20-21; *Vritha Vagdanam*, p.35.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *The Holy Rule of the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ*, Kottayam, 2018, art. 98. Here after cited as The Holy Rule.

positively to God, one consecrates one's whole person to God. The divine action of the Holy Spirit is denoted in the liturgy of profession by using the liturgical terms of consecration such as, *qadesh*, to sanctify, *barek*, to bless, *shra*, to reside *aggen* to tabernacle upon, used in the liturgical prayers refer to the action of the Holy Spirit in effecting consecration of the monk/nun.<sup>20</sup>

The vows manifest one's consecration and illumine in public one's commitment founded on baptism. This dedication is for the honour of God, the building of the Church and the salvation of the world, as they strive for the perfection of charity in the service of the Kingdom of God.<sup>21</sup>

The vow of Obedience is the most vital virtue that unites one with the person of Jesus. Obedience places one's life entirely in God's hands so that he/she may use it according to God's design.<sup>22</sup> Religious obedience presupposes a disposition of attention and docility to the voice of God and it enables the religious to participate in the life of Christ who is obedient unto death, even death on the cross (Phil.2:8.) and who through obedience merited his resurrection and our redemption. By the vow of obedience the consecrated overcome the ambition for power and autonomy; to be someone, to dominate and to give free rein to one's own selfish desires. Obedience demands from the religious, an effort to overcome selfishness and self interests and loyal acceptance of those plans and projects and the Constitution of the community and the commands of the lawful superiors. It is through obedience that the consecrated builds communion in the community, in the Church and in the world.

The virtue of Chastity is a "surpassing gift of grace" through which the religious bind themselves in love with the person of Jesus Christ. Through this vow the religious give witness to all Christ's faithful of that wondrous marriage between the Church and Christ her only spouse, a union that has been established by God and will be fully manifested in the world to come (*PC*, no.12). Hence, it is the sign that signifies the mystery of the Church in her eschatological dimensions. The fundamental motive of virginity must be the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt.19:12). The vow of chastity is not merely a promise to forgo certain human sexual experience but it is the complete consecration to God one's entire power of love. Not being tied down to one person, one is able to give himself/herself to all. It is therefore, an

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<sup>20</sup> *Sanyasa Vrithanushtana Susrushakramam* (OIC), Kottayam, 2016, pp. 34-36; Hereafter Cited as *Vrithanushtana Susrusha*.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Vritha Vagdanam*, p. 43; *Vrithanushtana Susrusha*, p. 43.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *The Holy Rule*, art. 103.

outstanding symbol of heavenly riches and also a most suitable way for the religious to dedicate themselves joyfully in God's service and in works of the apostolate.<sup>23</sup>

By the vow of Poverty, the consecrated shares the life of Jesus who though rich became poor to make us rich (cf. 2 Cor.8-9). By this virtue the religious enter into the freedom of the children of God. It urges one to seek Christ as their wealth and their sole possession and to overcome the tendency of possessing things instead of possessing God. It enables the religious to put all their trust in God and entrust themselves to His loving providence. The special feature of poverty is that it makes everything we have, our time, conveniences, talents etc. generously available to others. Through this sharing they are enabled to stand in the midst of people as the poor of God and with humble hearts.<sup>24</sup>

Mar Ivanios, too upheld the consecratory dimension of religious life. According to him, Religious life is not merely a pious or devote life. It is *Sanyasa* /total dedication; an unconditional sacrifice of the religious to God. Through this sacrifice, one surrenders his/her entire being totally and absolutely to God as an oblation. Hence, we would say that the liturgy of profession in Bethany is primarily a consecratory rite in which the consecration is made through the profession of vows under the action of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Theological Aspects of Monastic Life as Reflected in the Rite of Profession**

According to the liturgical texts of profession, religious life is a closer following of Christ, Teacher and Exemplar of Holiness, under the influence of the Holy Spirit. In his book *A Guide to Malankara Sanyasa Jeevitha Sahai* Mar Ivanios emphasizes the characteristics of the following of Christ as "imitation of Christ". According to him, "The *Sannyasi* lives imitating and obeying Jesus, the Messiah." Those who follow the Lord, when they live in ardent devotion to him and in constant union with him, their souls will dwell in and being imbued with pure love and gratitude towards him, they will be inspired to lead a life like that of the Lord".<sup>25</sup> The one who is consecrated through the vows is undertaking a life of imitation of Christ. The nature of the imitation lies in imitating the simple life of Jesus Christ, who in

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<sup>23</sup> *The Holy Rule*, art. 121.

<sup>24</sup> *The Holy Rule*, art. 139.

<sup>25</sup> Mar Ivanios, (Eng.trans), *A Guide to the Malankara Sanyasa*, Thaikootathil Trivandrum, 2016, p.26. Hereafter cited as *A guide to Sanyasa*.

union with God the Father in prayer, went about doing good to all, in complete renunciation and simplicity.<sup>26</sup>

The imitation of Christ also speaks of a new and deeper insertion into the paschal mystery of Christ, an insertion begun radically at baptism. The Christian is baptized into Christ, entering more profoundly into Christ's dying and rising. Religious consecration has long been viewed in the Church as a sort of second baptism, an entering into a more radical identification with Him. The readings of biblical lessons (Mt. 16:24; 1 Pt.1:13-21; Colo. 3:5-17), the initiatory rites of stripping and putting on of the monastic habits, the donning of the Cross, and the profession of the evangelical obedience, chastity and obedience, given in the liturgical texts of profession confirmed the sacrificial view of religious life.<sup>27</sup> In *Girideepam* Mar Ivanios says: "One who longs to remain close to God should imitate Jesus himself. The most evident example of self-sacrifice seen on Calvary should be reflected in him. He needs to renounce not only his family, his own country, nay even this world itself. Over and above that, he has to renounce himself".<sup>28</sup> Renunciation always helps the person's total donation in order to attain perfect charity which enables the religious to participate in the salvific mission of Christ.

The religious life is envisaged as loving and honoring God and is for furthering the mission of the Church. In the Liturgical text we read: The only intention in *Sanyasa* is to love and glorify the Savior.<sup>29</sup> "You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with your entire mind". This is the first and the greatest commandment and the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mt.22:37-39). Love of God is supreme and total, yet simultaneously linked with the love which is expressed in prayer for and service of others.

Fraternal life of communion is demanded from the religious. The celebrant exhorts the candidate saying: "You shall be humble, meek and patient. Besides this, you must be adorned with obedience and love which are the perfection of all commandments. To be qualified for the discipleship of Jesus Christ, you shall have many other virtues which are like

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<sup>26</sup>The *Holy Rule*, art.7.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Vrithanushtana Sushrusha*, pp. 40-46, *Vritha Vagdanam*, pp. 32-52.

<sup>28</sup> *Giripeedam*, p. 61.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Vritha Vagdanam*, p.9.



the perfumes of love”.<sup>30</sup> The communal dimension of consecrated life is highlighted in the rite by depicting the symbolic imageries of common life in communities. Monastic community is denoted in the rite as “Sheepfold”, “Paradise”, and “Bridal Chamber”. These imageries point out the primordial and the eschatological state of bliss at the end of time, which is to be anticipated in the community life of the religious. To live this blissful state the rite admonishes the religious that they may be “filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit”, by ‘staying incessantly with the Lord in the holy Tent of Meeting’, by following the “life-giving ordinances, the Holy Rule which administers one’s religious life”, by bearings “fruits of virtues and goodness”, by “doings works of justice”, and “by protecting themselves from diabolic jealousy, enmity, deceitfulness, slander, luxury and avarice”.<sup>31</sup>

Life together with Christ is nourished by the celebration of daily divine praises, observance of silence and perception, celebration of the divine liturgy reading of the Scriptures, contemplation of divine realities, conversion of heart, frequent practices of spiritual exercises, practice of spiritual direction and performance of charitable acts and leading an ascetic life of simplicity, penance and mortifications. The gift of the eschatological life is promised to the consecrated ones who cling to the Lord in perfect love enduring all tribulations and temptations.<sup>32</sup>

## **The Salient Features of Monasticism as Reflected in the Rite of Profession**

The liturgical Rite provides us with certain unique features which are central to the concepts of monasticism. Let us briefly discuss some of those fundamental aspects for understanding better the concept of monasticism in the Malankara Church.

### **Monasticism- A Marriage Covenant**

Virginal life and initiation to it are considered a covenant (*qyōmō*) in the Syriac tradition. Aphrahat uses the term *qyōmō* 77 times in his VI<sup>th</sup> Demonstration on the

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<sup>30</sup> *The Order of the Profession of Religious Sisters (Eng.trans)* New York, 2016, p. 41. Hereafter cited as The Order of Profession.

<sup>31</sup> *The Order of the Profession*, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Vritha Vagdanam*, 38.

Covenanters to depict the irrevocable relation that God establishes with his chosen people Israel, with the Church and with individuals in the history of salvation.<sup>33</sup> Vööbus perceives that God's covenant with the individual is made at baptism and effects in the baptized an all pervading covenant consciousness of Christian life. It urges the person to commit totally to Christ the True Covenant in person repudiating the physical natural conditions of the world such as marriage, possession, and personal autonomy for the sake of union with him.<sup>34</sup> The Syriac speaking churches views monastic profession as a covenant made to God by the baptized not in the nature of the Old Testament Covenant but it is depicted as a Marriage Covenant; a Nuptial Mystery.<sup>35</sup> In the liturgy of profession the celebrant prays: O heavenly bridegroom, you who have saved me by the by your precious blood, let me worthy to behold you at that time in your kingdom".<sup>36</sup> The *Proëmiōn* of the marriage liturgy says: "O Lord Messiah heavenly bridegroom, you have chosen the daughter of the Gentiles as your Church and cleansed her from all defilement and transgression by your innocent and holy blood."<sup>37</sup> The prayers in the monastic consecration and marriage liturgy differ in their form but same in their content. Both of them indicate Christ as the heavenly bridegroom of the Church and of the individual Christian. On the occasion of the virginal commitment of a Syrian covenanter Ephrem sings: "My brothers, we are invited to the marriage of this sister who is betrothed not to a mortal bridegroom but to the Son who gives life to all."<sup>38</sup>

Jacob of Serugh's homily on the Ten Virgins speaks of Christ's betrothal to the virgins or the virgin's betrothal to Christ. S. Brock says: Every individual member of the Church as well as the collective Church could be regarded as the bride of Christ, for Christ has brought the Church and the individual soul as his bride through the payment of his own precious blood as the bridal price."<sup>39</sup> The covenantal dimension of monastic life implies one's unending fidelity and steadfast love and irrevocable relation with Christ.

### **Monastic Life –An Angelic Life**

The prayers of the liturgy of profession often bring to mind the idea that the monastic life is the 'angelic way of life' (*dūbōro mālākōyo*, *angelikos bios*).<sup>40</sup> In the Syrian understanding, angels (*mal'ake*) are those spiritual beings who are with God. Derived from the Semitic term l'k' meaning to send, and *la' aka* the person sent with a commission, they

<sup>33</sup> *Aphraates, Demonstrationes* VI, in J. Parisot, Ed. & Trans., *Patrologica Syriaca* 1-2, Paris 1894, 3-6; Nedungatt, "The Covenanters of the Early Syriac Speaking Churches" *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* (OCP) 39 (1973). 191-215.

<sup>34</sup> Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, Vol. I, in *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (CSCO) 184/197/ Louvain, 1958, p.12.

<sup>35</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns Armenian* 46:1-2; Murray, "A Marriage for All Eternity": The Consecration of a Syrian Bride of Christ", in *Eastern Churches Review* 11:1, 2, (1989) p. 65-66.

<sup>36</sup> *Profession of Vows*, p.11.

<sup>37</sup> *Aradhanakramam* (Mal), Thiruvalla, 1988, p.44.

<sup>38</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns Armenian* 46:1-2; Murray, "A Marriage for All Eternity", p. 65.

<sup>39</sup> Brock, (Eng. Trans. *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, New York, 1990, p.27.

<sup>40</sup> In the Syriac tradition, the monastic life is considered as the blessed way of life by one can depict the life of angels can have the foretaste of our future heavenly existence. Taking into account this reason the monastic life is known in the syriac churches as 'the angelic way of life' (*dūbōro mālākōyo*) Cf. Payne Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, Oxford, 1979, p.85.

are the messengers (*mal'ake*) of God as well as the wakeful ones (*'ire*) who worship God without ceasing.<sup>41</sup> Even though the term does not make intrinsic reference to their nature, they are considered pure beings. Neither anger nor envy or pride is ever seen in them. They do not have any desire for earthly vanities, honour, glory or anything of that kind. Their delight is in self-control, their glory is to be unknown and their wealth is to possess nothing. Their engagement is only with God, and their work consists only in attention to the things of God. The angels are renowned for their marriage-less state and therefore are witnesses of the resurrected life (cf. Mt 20:30, Mk 12:25, Lk 20:35-36). Severus of Antioch alluding to the monastics as resembling the resurrected life of the angels says:

These people (monastics) in this world are already similar to the angels because they have received the impassibility (*lā hāšūšūṭā*) and the joy (*tūbtānūṭā*) of the resurrection and rejoice in anticipation the good that we all await.<sup>42</sup>

The angelic nature of monastic life implies closeness to and communion with God, wakefulness in His service, freedom from passions and worldly cares and purity of life. Although the angels and the virgins both belong to the created order of God, there exists an essential gap between them.<sup>43</sup> But this gap according to the Syrian Fathers is crossed by baptism. Hence, born of water and the Spirit, the baptized are considered equal to the angels. Through virginity, the virgin is destined to be one with the angels. Like the angels the virgin can also preserve her innermost virginity and chastity of the soul, and thus can betroth herself to Christ, the heavenly bridegroom.<sup>44</sup> So, the virgin is called forth to manifest angelic qualities. Integrating in her corporeal being the incorporeal nature of the angels, the religious are challenged to witness to an angelic life on earth.

### **The Idea of Suffering (Mortification)**

The idea of suffering is central to the concept of Syrian asceticism. It is given emphasis in the liturgical rite and the ascetical teachings of Mar Ivanios. According to the liturgy of profession the hall mark of the *sanyasi-sannyasins* is suffering (*ulsôno*). Suffering is a special characteristic of *Sannyasa*. No one can become the disciple of Christ without suffering. Jesus says: "If anyone want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me" (Mt.16:24 ). The Celebrant addresses the candidates about the tribulations in their life says: My Son/daughter, if you come to serve the Lord, you must prepare yourself and be strong in your heart to face all types of temptations. When you

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<sup>41</sup> PAYNE SMITH, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 275; BROCK, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, Kottayam, 1989, p. 57; WAGNER, *The Mission of the Holy Angels*, Roma, 1984, p. 2

<sup>42</sup> SEVERIOS OF ANTIOCH, "Les Homelie Cathedrales" Hom. LXIX in *Patrologia Orientalis*, (P O) vol. 8, Paris, 1911, p. 257.

<sup>43</sup> Here we do not forget that even though angels and men are both God's creation, there exists a huge polarity between them. The angels are of pure nature, and are purely spiritual beings, whereas man is created from the dust and is corporeal. Cf. BOTHA, "Fire Mingled with Spirit", *The Harp*, vol. 8-9, Kottayam, 1995-96, p. 98-99.

<sup>44</sup> BOTHA, "Fire Mingled with Spirit", 100-101.

are faced with tests and trials do not be alarmed; but cling to the Lord. Do not move away from Him. At the end you will be great before the Lord. Follow His Path. He will raise you as the heir of heaven”<sup>45</sup> Through suffering the religious become true disciples of Christ. Mar Ivanios employs the idea of cross in a special way in giving teleology of monasticism.

The idea of life of cross is well articulated in the rite of profession in the West Syriac liturgical praxis. There are three important moments in the service of profession which convey the importance of cross in the life of the religious. The first moment is the signing of the document of vows with the sign of the cross. The second is the is the donning of the cross which consists of putting on a wooden cross upon the neck of the newly professed and the third moment is the bestowing of the wooden cross to the newly professed one along with a lighted candle towards the end of the service.<sup>46</sup>

All these moments are arranged in a way to remind the candidate about the significance of the cross in his/her life. Through the carrying of the cross, the religious bears the mark of Jesus in his/her body (Gal.6:18).

The Cross is also referred to as in the liturgy as the weapon of the Son of God which guards, directs, strengthens, and protects the consecrated ones. It is an unconquerable weapon for the virgins to fight against the forces of darkness. The cross is presented not only as a material object but also as a symbol, which represents Christ himself and his great love towards the religious.

## **Monastic Life in Service of the Church**

The solemn liturgy in which the religious is consecrated to God through the ministry of the Church unites the virgin in a profound way with the Mystical Body of Christ. Therefore, in this section, we consider briefly how through profession, the consecrated life witnesses to the Church.

### **Monastic Communion: Witness to Ecclesial Communion**

Communion means fellowship, sharing, and participation. In the liturgical text the word “communion” as such does not occur. But through Psalm 132 and

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<sup>45</sup> *The Order of the Profession*, p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> *Vritha Vagdanam*, pp, 43, 47, 50, 51; *Vrithanushtana Sushrusha*, p. 43, 46, 47, *The Order of the Profession*, p.44, 45, 49.

through St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians 3: 5-17 the liturgy acclaims the goodness of unity and communion, and it reminds the consecrated of the need of witnessing the same in their lives.<sup>47</sup> By employing different concepts for community such as "house of God", "sheepfold", "king's palace" "angelic life", "paradise", "bridal chamber", the liturgy brings out the true nature of religious life in the Church.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, it reminds the consecrated that their spirit of communion has its source not in the natural bond of blood relation but in their communion with the Triune God.<sup>49</sup>

The ecclesial character of the community is further vindicated in the Service. At the beginning of the exhortation to the candidate, the celebrant reminds the religious that she makes her profession in the presence of the community of her sisters and promises to live her whole life as a member of it. The significance of this community is great, hence, in the Service, it is mentioned as a community united with Christ, with the holy altar (earthly Church), and with the company of all the holy angels and saints (heavenly Church).<sup>50</sup> It is in the name of the Church that the superior of the Congregation in the presence of the ecclesial hierarchy accepts the dedication of the virgin while she makes the profession of vows.<sup>51</sup>

By the profession of vows, the Christian virgins are potentially freed from what might be an obstacle to the fervour of charity; therefore they become architects and experts of communion in the Church and in the world (cf. *GS*, no.19, 22). As experts of communion, they are bound to witness the intrinsic nature of the Church rooted in the Trinitarian mystery, a sign of union with God and of unity of the whole human race, and to dedicate themselves for her service.<sup>52</sup> This means that each consecrated Christian virgin and the community as such becomes a replica of the Church.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Vritha Vagdanam*, 27-33.

<sup>48</sup> *Vritha Vagdanam*, 6; 13; 17; 51, 52.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. LAMPE, "Communion", in *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, New York, 1962, p. 664-66.

<sup>50</sup> *Vritha Vagdanam*, 37-38; *Profession of Vows*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> *Vritha Vagdanam*, 42.

<sup>52</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, no.1; *IL*, no.57; COLE & CONNER, *Christian Totality*, Theology of the Consecrated Life, Mumbai, 1997, p. 283.

## Monastic Consecration is for Mission

Mission is not only an inseparable part of consecration but it is the dynamic totality of it. Through the profession of vows religious take on themselves the obligation to be witnesses of the Gospel. By their divine calling, the consecrated are sent into the world with plans for realizing the Kingdom of God. The Old and New Testaments provide us with examples. In the sending of Moses (Ex 3:10), Jeremiah (Jr 1:6) and Isaiah (Is 6.8) we observe the beautiful co-mingling of the triple aspects of vocation, consecration and mission which in a most sublime way are fulfilled in Christ (Lk 4; 18-19; Jn 17: 18-19).

Christ's mission as mentioned in the liturgical prayers is revealing God the Father who is rich in mercy and leads humanity towards Him.<sup>53</sup> The Son has made the Father known in the fullest possible way (cf. Jn 1:18; Mt 11:27). He has revealed to humankind *who He is*.<sup>54</sup>

Christ's mission implicitly pointed out in the liturgical prayers involves a double dimension: an existential witnessing of the living God and a dynamic witnessing of His love through salvific actions (cf. Jn 14:10-11).<sup>55</sup> Witnessing to God is the same as witnessing to the kingdom. The Kingdom of God is neither a concept nor a doctrine, but as stated in *Redemptoris Missio*, it is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, 'the image of the invisible God.'<sup>56</sup> He made manifest this Kingdom in His very person by serving and giving His life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45). The secrets and the demands of attaining this Kingdom are explicitly put down in the Liturgy of Profession through the Bible lessons:- Mt 7:13-14; Mt 7 24-27; Mt 6: 19-21.<sup>57</sup>

Jesus's concrete mode of existence witnesses to His very being as God's missionary. Jesus' coming or proceeding from the Father, His remaining with the Father (Jn 10:38; Jn 16:32) and His eventual return to the Father (Jn 16:5; Jn 7:33), reveal Christ's being with His Father. Jesus is obedient, poor and virgin. Through His

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<sup>53</sup> *Vritha Vagdanam*, 4-5.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical Letter, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 83 (1991), Roma, no. 12

<sup>55</sup> *Vritha Vagdanam*, 24.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *LG*, no.5; JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 18.

<sup>57</sup> *Vritha Vagdanam*, p.18.

obedience He made Himself the Word of His Father. Through the stripping of His divine glory, Jesus witnessed how non-possessive He is. By making all human persons the sons of God Christ witnessed how chaste He is. It was and it is in Christ's mode of existence that Christ revealed that He is the "missionary" (*šlīhō*) of the Father.<sup>58</sup>

In the Syrian Church, there is always a basic link between consecration and mission. According to P. Yousif, the basis of any mission or ministry is the respective consecration, and for each service there is a corresponding liturgical dedication of the person. He continues: "The idea of delegating a person to an ecclesial ministry or function without consecration or mission is not found in the Church."<sup>59</sup> From this perspective we see that monastic consecration integrally forms a part of one's commitment to the divine and the ecclesial ministry.

The religious called and consecrated by God, primarily through baptism and then to its fullness through the Liturgy of Profession is a missionary, that is, a herald or an envoy of God with a new and special title, proclaiming and witnessing the kingdom and participating in the salvific works of God in the Church and in the world. To quote John Paul II: "It can be said that consecrated persons are in mission by virtue of their consecration, to which they bear witness in accordance with the ideal of their institute"<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article we have made an attempt to study the Rite of Profession in Bethany. From this study we derived the following conclusions.

1. The first rite of monastic profession in Bethany was conducted on 9 March 1919 at Bethany Ashram Perunad in Kerala. Though the primer monastic initiation was an informal service, it conveyed a deep understanding about the basic nature of monastic life as a sacrifice, a total offering of the monk/nun through the pronouncement of vows.

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<sup>58</sup> FARRUGIA, *Monasticism as a Bridge between East and West*, Malta, 1994, pp. 6-7.

<sup>59</sup> YOUSIF, "East Syrian Spirituality", in A. Thottakkara Ed., *East Syrian Spirituality*, Rome, 1989, p.40.

<sup>60</sup> JOHN PAUL II, "Vita Consecrata", Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, (25 March 1996), no. 72.

2. It was in 1925, that the liturgical texts of the rite of profession was compiled by Mar Ivanios and was copied by Mother Cybar. The text is a compilation of prayers and rituals and to name the two rituals, Ritual of the Clothing of the Monks and the Ritual of the Tonsure of Nuns form its major part.

3. The liturgical texts of profession of profession that are used in Bethany are the edited texts and are written in Malayalam, the language used in Kerala.

4. The liturgical texts used in Bethany are identical texts with some minor changes. For example the Gospel reading in the Rite of Profession for the Nuns is from Mathew 25: 1-13 but the Gospel Reading in the Rite of Profession of the Monks is from Luke 14:25-35.

5. The liturgical texts convey the idea that the service of profession is not merely a clothing ceremony or a rite of professing vows. It is a liturgical celebration in which the candidate who 'wishes to draw near to God' is drawn by God and it consecrated by his Spirit and is send to do his mission. It is through a deliberate pronouncement of vows that the religious is made a consecrated person.

6. The theological reflection of the rite of profession enables us to confirm the view that monastic life is a total following of Christ, the poor, chaste, obedient Son of God and this life of imitation is lived out through the practice of the evangelical counsels of obedience, chastity and poverty. The following of Christ is further witnessed through a life of communion in a religious community which manifests the ecclesial community and the religious who follows Christ is at the service of the Kingdom of God.

7. The study of the liturgical rite of profession also provides us with an understanding about the characteristic features of monastic life. They are (i) Monastic life as a Marriage Covenant, (ii) Monastic life – An Angelic Life and (iii) the Idea of Suffering in Monastic Life. These tents are unique to the concept of monasticism in the Malankara Church.

To sum up, we would say that the concept of monasticism as it is referred to in the Rite of Profession in Bethany has multifaceted dimensions which enable us to appreciate and value this life very dearly despite of various challenges it faces in the present cultural context.

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