



Provincial Circular

SALESIAN PROVINCE OF CHENNAI (INM)



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St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315 – 386 AD)

In the course of the meditation on the prominent Fathers of the Church, we take up St. Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem for this month.

His Life:

St. Cyril was born at or near Jerusalem in 315 A.D. He received an excellent literary education which formed the basis of his ecclesiastical culture, centred on the study of the Bible. He was ordained a priest and later a bishop by Acacius, the influential Metropolitan of Caesarea in Palestine, a philo-Arian who must have been under the impression that in Cyril he had an ally of Arianism. As a result, Cyril was suspected of having obtained his episcopal appointment by making concessions to Arianism. However, the Arians knew that he was not one among them. When the heretics gained control of the eastern Roman empire, they had Cyril exiled thrice within the course of approximately 20 years. It was only after the emperor's death, Cyril could definitively resume possession of his See and restore unity and peace to his faithful.

St. Cyril was a bishop for forty years but he was often under the suspicion of following Arianism. Some sources of that time cast doubt on his orthodoxy, whereas other equally ancient sources come out strongly in his favour. The most authoritative of them is the Synodal Letter of 382 that followed the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381), in which Cyril had played an important part. The letter portrays that in spite of the political and moral turmoil in Jerusalem, the bishop remained orthodox and faithful to the Apostolic Tradition.

His Theological Contribution:

St. Cyril's significance for patrology rests on his *Catecheses* (catechetical instructions) that he gave as the Bishop of Jerusalem during the period of Lent and Easter for the baptismal candidates or the newly baptised and the instructions were taken down. They became famous not only because they show great theological, spiritual and stylistic quality but also because they offer extraordinary insight into the liturgical praxis and doctrinal instruction of the fourth century. Prefaced by a 'pro-catechesis', there are twenty-three sermons, eighteen of which were given during Lent, and five, expounding the rites of initiation themselves (baptism, anointing and the eucharist), the so-called 'mystagogical catecheses', given during Easter week itself (and thus after those who heard them had been initiated into the Christian life).

Introduced by a Pro-catechesis of welcome, the first 18 of these are addressed to catechumens or candidates for illumination (the candidates for Baptism); the first four were delivered in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. Each of the first five ones respectively treat the prerequisites for Baptism, conversion from pagan morals, the Sacrament of Baptism, the 10 dogmatic truths contained in the Creed or Symbol of the faith. The next catecheses (5-18) formulate the Jerusalem Creed (in the ancient period each Church of a major city had its own creed) with the anti-Arian tone. The last part (19-23) consists of a commentary on the rites of Baptism and the last three focus on the Chrism, the Body and Blood of Christ and the Eucharistic Liturgy. They include also an explanation of the Lord's prayer.

The Pro-catechesis reflects the typical situation of the growing Church at large as the fourth century advanced, when many flocked to the Church, no longer directedly because of the religious zeal of the earliest centuries but for ulterior, political, societal, or professional reason. Therefore, the Pro-catechesis admonishes the catechumen entering into the actual preparation for baptism to have proper motivation and internal and external disposition. The one who comes to baptism like the guest without wedding garments (cf. Mt. 22:11-14) will not receive the sacrament effectively. Thus St. Cyril insisted on the inner preparation to receive the great grace of baptism. He urges the catechumens: "You have been caught in the nets of the Church (cf. Mt 13: 47). Be taken alive, therefore; do not escape for it is Jesus who is fishing for you, not in order to kill you but to resurrect you after death. Indeed, you must die and rise again (cf. Rom 6: 11, 14) Die to your sins and live to righteousness from this very day".

The basis of his instruction on the Christian faith also served to play a polemic role against pagans, Judaeo Christians and Manicheans. The argument was based on the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises, in a language rich in imagery. From the doctrinal viewpoint, Cyril commented on the Jerusalem Creed with recourse to the typology of the Scriptures in a "symphonic" relationship between the two Testaments, arriving at Christ as the centre of the universe.

As for the moral catechesis, it is anchored in deep unity to the doctrinal catechesis: the dogma progressively descends in souls who are thus urged to transform their pagan behaviour on the basis of new life in Christ, a gift of Baptism. The "mystagogical catechesis", lastly, marked the summit of the instruction that Cyril imparted, no longer to catechumens but to the newly baptized or neophytes during Easter week. He led them to discover the mysteries still hidden in the baptismal rites of the Easter Vigil. Enlightened by the light of a deeper faith by virtue of Baptism, the neophytes were at last able to understand these mysteries better, having celebrated their rites.

The holy bishop of Jerusalem explains the mystery of baptism: "You descended three times into the water, and ascended again, suggesting by a symbol the three days burial of Christ, imitating Our Saviour who spent three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (cf. Mt 12: 40). Celebrating the first immersion in water you recall the first day passed by Christ in the sepulchre; with the first immersion you confessed the first night passed in the sepulchre: for as he who is in the night no longer

sees, but he who is in the day remains in the light, so in the descent, as in the night, you saw nothing, but in ascending again you were as in the day. And at the self-same moment you were both dying and being born; and that water of salvation was at once your grave and your mother.... For you... the time to die goes hand in hand with the time to be born: one and the same time effected both of these events". This mystery to be understood is God's plan, which is brought about through Christ's saving actions in the Church.

Finally, the catechesis of St. Cyril contains the mystical dimension which brings about the synthesis of doctrinal and moral dimensions of the catechetical instructions.

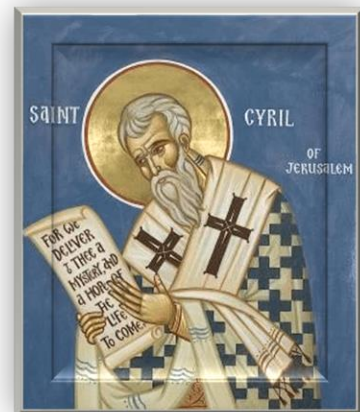
Points for Our Reflection:

- Our charism began with the simple catechetical instructions, how much do I involve myself in catechising the beneficiaries, especially the young ones, of the mission in my community?
- "Die to your sins and live to righteousness from this very day" – this is the essence of reliving our baptismal consecration of new life. How effective is the consecration prayer after my daily meditation?
- Do I have a mystical dimension in my Salesian life? If I possess it, how do I integrate it in my apostolic mission?

Yours affectionately,



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INM Provincial



Date: 15.10.2024
Place: Chennai - 10