

HEART TO HEART

..... in conversation with KMG

(Rev. Fr. Dr. K M George, Principal, Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam, is a world-renowned theologian. KMG, as he is popularly known, is a multifaceted personality. He is a poet, philosopher, artist, teacher, orator, priest, administrator as well as a theologian; all rolled in one. He is a well known ecumenist and has been working with several international organizations including the World Council of Churches (WCC) at various capacities. Recently Achen has been elected to the Central Committee of the WCC.

While on a visit to Bangalore recently, KMG has found time to interact with our Editorial Board members, Mathew Panayil and John Attupuram. And, following are the excerpts from an exclusive interview he gave to San Thome Parish Diary)

John: *Achen, you have been a distinguished teacher of theology for almost three decades now... What are some of your key experiences as a teacher at our theological seminary?*

KMG: As soon as I completed my doctoral work in Paris in 1977 I was asked to teach in the Seminary. I do not consider myself a good teacher but I find great joy in teaching— the joy in contributing though modestly to the training of our Achens. But there is a decline in the interest of lay people in pursuing theological studies. Some decades ago when we did not have modern facilities for the systematic training of our clergy we had outstanding lay leaders in the Church with good theological background. We need to recapture that tradition and attract more lay people to the systematic study of Theology. 'Divya Bhodhanam' is originally intended to foster that though it is not adequate by itself.

John: *Apart from being a scholarly teacher of theology, your personality has other shades like; you are an artist, a poet, a philosopher, an administrator and an orator of high repute... if you like to be called by any one of these terms, what would you like to be called?*

KMG: I do not claim any such title. Nor do I make neat distinctions between them. My modest conviction is that a good theologian is necessarily an artist, a poet and a teacher. In our eastern Orthodox understanding theology is not an academic verbal-rational concept. It is essentially, worship of God and loving service to humanity and all God's creations. Some of our best theology is expressed in poetry and painting, in art and architecture, in acts of compassion and healing. These are beautiful acts reflecting God's infinite beauty. There is a pedagogy of beauty. One who creates beauty is naturally a teacher, a communicator.

Some years ago I used to keep my dust-covered small car in the Seminary. The windscreen became the 'drawing board' for some of the seminary students. Initially I got upset, but then I thought why couldn't we use this energy in a positive way. So I proposed a big "expression board" on which students could freely express their creativity. The result was astounding - out flowed poems, drawings, paintings, humour, prayers, meditations and wisdom. Now we have a marvelous collection of the creative gifts of students over the years.

John: *Many lay people, especially the newer generations of the Diaspora are not well educated of the meaning and significance of our prayers. The same is true with them with regard to*

various symbols, icons and gestures used in our liturgy. Do you think it is a good idea explaining these during the Holy Qurbana itself, at least, once in a while?

KMG: Practically there will only be very few among the laity who are really interested in going deeper into the meaning of the various symbols and icons. Probably this disinterest is due to the defect in our teaching system in the church. To articulate the relevance of the symbols etc, our Achens need to be very good communicators. Otherwise it may not be appealing and we will not achieve the desired result. But what we can do at the moment is to enlighten our young people on the significance of the various symbols and rituals of the Church through forums like MGOCSM, Youth Movement etc. Whenever I am invited to MGOCSM meetings I try to explain to the youth the meaning and relevance of some of these symbols and liturgical gestures.

***John:** We are perhaps talking about the efforts put in by people like Mr. C. K. Varghese through the book 'The Living Sacrifice' in explaining the prayers and other symbols used in the Holy Qurbana.*

KMG: I have seen the book of Mr. Varghese and personally appreciate his efforts. It is the example of an enlightened lay person trying to shed some light on the prayers and Qurbana. Unfortunately there are not many such efforts happening.

***John:** You have great reverence for Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios Thirumeni of blessed memory. We understand that Thirumeni considered you as his beloved sishya. Also, we have heard that you, currently, are working on a project related to Thirumen's writings. Do you like to give your comments on it?*

KMG: Yes, I am presently working on a project to publish an anthology of the selected writings of Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios with introduction and notes. In the Seminary we are already in the process of publishing his complete works. The late Thirumeni was truly a versatile person and I was drawn to his amazing personality. When I was a Chemistry student in college I wanted to pursue science studies but at the end of my college life I began to get interested in theological and philosophical books, initially not with the intention to become a priest. Then I joined the Seminary and Thirumeni opened an amazing universe before me. Thirumeni used to test some of his new ideas and insights on my young mind before he articulated them publicly and it was a great learning experience for me. I could also discover another rather unknown aspect of Thirumeni's personality – generally Thirumeni had an ill-reputation for being very short tempered and unapproachable. On the contrary, he was a very humble person at heart, and he found great joy in being with small children with whom he could spend hours playing, forgetting his other pressing responsibilities. He also would give enormous time and care to genuine seekers of knowledge in all fields. He was quite comfortable and humble in the presence of saintly people, even those at the edge of sanity, whatever be their religion. He had difficulty to deal with self-assuming, western educated, shallow "intellectuals".

***John:** What has been some of your major experiences with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the contributions of our Church to the WCC?*

KMG: Our Malankara Orthodox Church is one of the founding members of the WCC in 1948; this is very unusual since some of the big Orthodox Churches joined the WCC only in 1961. Our Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church were among the founding members. Our Church was represented in the past by such stalwarts like Philipose Mar Theophilos, Paúlos

Mar Gregorios, Geevarghese Mar Osthathios and renowned theologian Fr. V. C. Samuel. Many foreign church leaders think that our Church is big and resourceful because of their contributions. The contribution of Paulos Mar Gregorios Thirumeni to WCC is incomparable and sometimes controversial since he was ruthlessly critical of the West. I had been introduced to the WCC and the Ecumenical Movement by Thirumeni and since been assigned with important responsibilities.

John: Could you throw some light on the some of the current challenges facing WCC?

KMG: WCC is over 50 years old; and an international organization like WCC, in my opinion, is showing signs of aging. The WCC as an organization is existing because the rich Churches are still supporting it financially but WCC is slowly losing its relevance due to the changed socio-political environment of the world. The WCC had a special role during the Cold War period when the Eastern Communist Block was closed to the West and Christianity was persecuted in the Eastern block. In such an environment, WCC used to bridge the gap between the Eastern Communist block and the rest of the world during the Cold War period. Also WCC played a key role in fighting against apartheid and in various liberation movements. It also helped forge the present fellowship of various Orthodox Churches. A factor for the disinterest in WCC is that the nature of unity we seek has undergone some radical changes world over. There is no longer any major interest in the classical Faith and Order agenda of the unity of churches. Ecumenism and its "privileged instrument" WCC are now searching for new and effective avenues for Christian unity and service to the world.

John: Do you consider the relations that we have built-up in WCC would help in solving the issues that we have with the Jacobite sect.

KMG: The WCC cannot directly intervene since it is an internal matter of member Churches. Informally Gregorios Thirumeni had sought the services of WCC in different ways. In a very modest way I myself have sought the help of two successive General Secretaries of the WCC to mediate between the two Church centres in Damascus and Kottayam. They tried their best .Unfortunately no effort was fruitful.

John: As the last question for you now, what do you consider as the greatest challenge facing Malankara Orthodox Church now?

KMG: **We are not aware of the challenges - that is the greatest challenge! Most of our energies are being diverted to the internal strife and litigations so that we do not have the time or vision to reflect on the greater challenges facing the Church. One of our immediate challenges is to strive to create a deeper Indian identity for the Church through genuine missionary work and intense pastoral care for our people, especially outside Kerala.**

John: On behalf of the Editorial Board of the San Thome PD, I thank you for giving us the opportunity for this interview.

Again, on behalf of the Vicar, the Managing Committee and the parish members of St. Thomas Orthodox Church, Bangalore East we congratulate and wish you the very best on your being elected to the Central Committee of the WCC.

KMG: I too thank you all for this opportunity to interact with you all and for your good wishes. ■