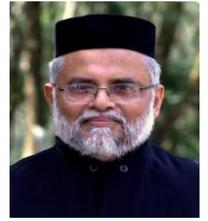


SAINT PETER IN WEST SYRIAC LITURGICAL TRADITION by

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The idea of the Primacy of the Pope set forth in the decrees of the first Vatican Council of 1870 is perhaps the most crucial subject discussed in the dialogues between the Catholics and the eastern and the Oriental Orthodox Christians. [E.g.XIth session of the Plenary of the International mixed Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, Patmos, Greece, 16-23 October 2009 & XIIth Session in Vienna, 20 to 27 September 2010]¹

Since its promulgation, the Catholic theologians have defended it, quoting evidences from the biblical, patristic, canonical and liturgical sources, often reading into the texts a developed concept of primacy. The Syrian Catholic Bishop H.E.Cyril Behnam Benni [Arch bishop of Mosul 1861-92; Syrian catholic Patriarch 1892-97] an ardent defender of the Petrine primacy at the first Vatican Council of 1870, had made an impressive collection of Syriac sources, in order to support his arguments ². For the past 140 years, Mgr.Benni's work was never been the subject of a critical evaluation.

The West Syriac liturgical tradition acknowledges St Peter as the first among the apostles. Thus he is called 'the chief of the apostles' (*risho d-slihe*). The so-called Petrine texts (Math. 16:18-19; Luke 22:32; John 21:15-17) are often quoted in the prayers and hymns along with other New Testament allusions to St Peter. Thus the key words in the Catholic teaching on 'Petrine Primacy' such as 'keys', 'faith of Peter' and 'rock' occur in the Syriac liturgical texts.

Syriac tradition speaks of 'the place of honour' that St Peter occupied among the apostles. But he was never seen as 'superior' to his fellow apostles. The texts that speak of 'the place of honour' that St Peter occupied shall be understood in relation to numerous other passages that highlight the ministry of the apostles and various ministers. Sometimes the encomium or eulogy of Peter is part of the poetical style of the prayers and other liturgical texts, which compare and contrast biblical figures precisely to meditate on the mystery of salvation and to praise God.

In the Weekly Breviary *Shehimo* or the *Book of Common Prayer* the Evening (*Ramso*) and Morning (*Sapro*) have certain themes that recur: e.g. Mother of God, Saints, and Penitence, departed. Occasional references to St Peter appear under the section 'Saints', along with other apostles, especially with St Paul or St John the Baptist. A prayer of Monday evening provides the example: "Simon the head of the apostles, and Paul the elect and John who baptized your Lord, be intercessors on behalf of the flock which you fed by the waters of faith, and lead it to pasture"³.

The main themes of the texts are not often St Peter and never his primacy. Let us quote a text from *Monday Night Second Qaumo*: "We remember Moses the fountainhead of prophecy and Simon, head of the apostles, and Paul the master-builder, who wrote to us in a letter to the Romans, that we should take part in the remembrance of the just, who

loved God with all their heart; by their prayer and their petition may mercy be shown to us, halleluiah, may their prayer assist us.

Moses is the head of the Old, Simon of the New; both resemble one another and God dwelt in them. Moses brought down the tables of the Law, Simon received the keys of the kingdom; Moses built the earthly tabernacle, Simon built the Church, for the Old and the New, glory to you, O Lord, halleluiah, may their prayer assist us”⁴. [The next two stanzas speak of the martyrs, St Stephen, George, Sergius, Kuriakose, Julitta, Shmouni and the forty martyrs]

The theme of Monday Night Second Qaumo is the saints. It is in that context that St Peter is remembered. Here the imagery of building the Church has been associated to St Paul as well as St Peter. In fact these two apostles appear together in a number of liturgical texts. Thus the fourth diptych speaks of “the exalted chiefs of the apostles St Peter and St Paul”. It shall be noted that the main goal of this diptych is not to teach the doctrine of the ‘primacy’ of these two apostles, but to commemorate the Mother of God, the prophets and the apostles, the preachers and Evangelists, the martyrs and confessors. Along with them St John the Baptist, St Stephen and St Peter and St Paul are commemorated. In the inaudible prayer that accompanies the fourth diptych, there is no reference to Peter and Paul. The prayer simply speaks of the ‘apostles’. In fact in the Syrian Orthodox anaphoras, the inaudible prayer that accompanies the fourth diptych does not mention St Peter by name. The Anaphora of Julius of Rome is an exception. The inaudible prayer reads: “Remember O Lord, all the bishops, orthodox doctors of Your Holy Church who have already departed.... From Peter, the chief of the apostles until today”⁵. This is an isolated example and cannot support the any argument related to the primacy of Peter. In the Anaphora of Abraham Nahshirtono (‘the Hunter’), the same prayer reads: “Remember O Lord, all those who have ruled over Your Holy Church from Mar Jacob until today”⁶.

The Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles (St Luke) speaks of “John the Baptist and Stephen the head of the deacons”. (also the anaphoras of St John Chrysostom and the *Mkanashto*) The fourth diptych provides the key to understand the question of Peter’s position. The Blessed apostle Peter is commemorated as one of the leading figures among the saints, but not as their head. The ‘General prayer’ of the preparation rites (which commemorates “all those who, since the world began, have been well pleasing to Thee from our father Adam even unto this day”) does not speak of Peter.

A text in the liturgy of the marriage speaks Christ entrusting the care of the Church to St Peter along with St John: “When the heavenly Bridegroom betrothed the faithful Holy Church, he called Simon and John and entrusted her to both of them (*aga’el w-yahboh lathraihun*). He made Simon the steward of the House (*rab baitho*) and John the preacher (of the Gospel). He called them and commanded them: you shall guard diligently the (church) that I have purchased with my precious blood”⁷. When the Malayalam translation was rendered into verses, the original sense was completely lost, which is often quoted by those who defend the doctrine of Petrine primacy.

St Peter in the Liturgical year

It is interesting to note that in the Syrian Orthodox liturgical year there is no feast of St Peter. The ‘chief of the apostle’ is commemorated along with St Paul on June 29. There are a good number of ancient Syriac calendars that have come down to us. None of them contains a feast of St Peter. There is even a feast of St Andrew, brother of St Peter (Nov. 30). There are feasts of St Thomas (July 3; Sept 10); John the Evangelist (Sept. 26; Oct 5;

Dec. 15; May 8); Philip (Nov. 14), Simon the Zealot (May 10), Mathew (Nov 16), Judas (Jan 27). The New Testament figures such as Philemon (Nov 22), Timothy (Jan 21), Onesimos (Feb 15), Jason (April 28) are commemorated as apostles.. Even the Old Testament minor prophets are commemorated: Nahum (Dec.1); Habakkuk (Dec 2); Zephaniah (Dec.3).

In the earliest arrangement of the liturgical calendars, the most important feasts are placed closer to the feasts of Nativity and Epiphany. Thus the glorification of Theotokos (Dec. 26), the beheading of John the Baptist (Jan. 7) and the martyrdom of St Stephen (Jan 8), the oldest among the feasts of the saints are widely celebrated. According to a number of ancient sources, the feast of Jacob, brother of our Lord was celebrated on 28th December. The position of the feast of St Peter and St Paul outside this cycle is not without significance.

125 Homilies of Severus of Antioch (d. 536) have come down to us. Apparently a feast of St Peter did not exist in his days. Severus had preached homilies on John the Baptist (Hom. 32; 61) and on the memory of St Thomas (Hom. 28 preached on July 3, 513) . We have three homilies on 'Golden Friday (Hom. 74; 92) Homily 74 is based on Acts 3:1-2. But no special honour has been attributed to St Peter. Homily 124 is on Math. 16:13 ('Who do men say that the Son of man is?'). No primacy is attributed to St Peter and to the see of Antioch. In homily 124, the main emphasis is on the orthodox faith and in it, Severus says: " If some one confesses Christ in the say was as Peter had confessed, he removes the 'veil of flesh' (spread) on his heart, and associates with the revelation of the Father in heaven"⁸. Homily 81 (on Mathew 17:23: on paying didrachma) makes no special comments on the role of Peter in paying the didrachma ⁹.

St Peter as one among the twelve apostles

In the New Testament, the titles 'rock', 'head', 'shepherd' and 'bridegroom' are used for Christ and some of them are associated with the ministry of the apostles and later with that of the bishops. The metaphors 'son' and 'anointed' are used for the believers. The title "only begotten" (*Ihydoyo*) is used for the monks.

Among these titles, 'rock' is often discussed in relation to the 'Petrine primacy'. In the liturgical texts, the imagery of rock is used with different meanings. The liturgical texts unequivocally say that the Church is founded upon Christ, the Rock (cfr. 1Cor. 10:4). In the Sedro of the *Kudosh 'edtho* (Consecration of the Church), we find: " Praise to You and thanksgiving to You, Jesus Christ, the unshakable rock of truth on which the holy Church is established, rock of Moses which gave forth twelve streams to quench the thirst of Israel"¹⁰. The same idea is found in the inaudible prayer that accompanies the lifting up of the veil in the anaphora: "Thou art the rock of flint, sent forth twelve streams of water for the twelve tribes of Israel". Elsewhere, the imagery of rock is used to refer to the faith: "Your Holy Church, which is firmly established on the rock of faith"¹¹. The Church says: " On that rock (i.e. faith) at the house of Simon, the head of the apostles, I am built and I am not afraid, the Church answered and said.." ¹². The rock which brought forth the streams is the image of Mary: " The rock which brought forth streams in the desert was clearly a figure (*tupso*) of you, holy virgin, from whom came forth in the creation the Son of God, who is the true rock, as Paul said"¹³.

The title rock is used for St Peter as well: " On Simon, the rock, our Lord built the Church and on seventy two pillars he set it up; it is more high and lofty than the mountain of Cardu; the architect, who built it, has his dwelling on high halleluiah, blessed is he who built the Church and set up the altar in it"¹⁴. This passage is part of the section on the saints. The text is a meditation on the mystery of the Church and the place of the saints in it. Thus in the previous stanza we find: "At your door, O Church, watchers stand by night and by day, and guard you from the evil one; Simon, the foundation, and Paul, the

architect, and John, who was the friend of the bridegroom, halleluiah, and David, the harp of the Holy Spirit”¹⁵.

These texts do not signify any primacy of Peter, for elsewhere the same ideas are used in a general sense: “Peace be with the prophets, apostles and martyrs, builders of faith and pillars of the holy Church, who endured all torments for the sake of our Lord...”¹⁶.

A text paraphrased from the biblical accounts speaks of Peter’s privileged position in the Church: “Simon Peter was catching fish in the sea, when his Lord called him and thus said to him: Come, Simon, and I will give you a catch of the Spirit and you shall draw men, from death to life; and on you, Simon, I will build the holy Church, and the bars of Sheol shall not be able to prevail against it”¹⁷. This is an isolated example and shall be understood in relation to other texts on Peter and the apostles.

In several passages, Simon Peter is presented as one of the apostles, without attributing any special significance to his place among the twelve. Thus in a prayer of the Holy Week we find a lamentation on Judas: “O dishonest (Judas), why have you disregarded the gift that the Master has given you, as He gave it to Simon or John?”¹⁸ Again in a passage addressed to Judas: “I have elected you like Simon and loved like Thomas and honoured like John”¹⁹.

Judas had the same dignity as Peter and John: “O dishonest (Judas), why have you disregarded the gift that the Master has given you, as He gave it to Simon and John?”²⁰ Simon is presented along with other apostles: “O Simon, if I do not wash your feet, you will have no throne among your companions”²¹. Again: “Simon wept along with John. Mathew and Bartholomew cried out. With pain they mourned for their teacher who was about to die, and for the companion who mingled with the wicked”²². Simon Peter and Judas were compared and contrasted and even put at the same level: “One slaps on His cheek, and another spits on His face. One kisses (Him) and betrays. Another says that he does not know Him”²³.

On one occasion, the faith of the thief is said to be greater than that of Peter and John: “How great is the faith of the thief, who asked forgiveness to His Lord suspended on the tree, with nails on His hands and feet. He told Him: Forgive me my iniquity! Simon who saw Him renounced Him and John stood afar, but the thief cried out, saying: ‘Remember me O Lord, when You come!’”²⁴. Thus any reference to Peter shall be understood in the context of the idea of the ‘cloud of witnesses’ who are regularly evoked in the liturgical texts. In a Sedro of the *Kudosh ‘edtho* we find: “The Lord of the world is her (= Church’s) Bridegroom. John is the Bridegroom’s friend, the apostles and the martyrs are the wedding guests”²⁵.

It is interesting to note that the ‘priority’ of women as the first witnesses of the resurrection in contrast to St Peter is underscored: “He sent word to His apostles, that He had risen, by the women; it was not from Simon that the women received the tidings, but they who gave them to Simon; from women was the beginning of his course, His birth, His resurrection and the news of His resurrection”²⁶. It is certain that the goal of the text is to emphasize the reality of the resurrection. Similarly, the texts on St Peter are aimed at narrating the experiences of the apostles or to point out their place in the Church as the prime witnesses to the mystery of Christ. This explains the usual references to St Peter along with St Paul or other apostles.

The West Syriac weekly breviary always commemorates the apostles along with the saints of the Old and the New dispensations. In the evening of Tuesday we find (section on the saints): “At all time we remember the prophets and apostles with the blessed martyrs; may their prayers be a strong hold to us. Prophets, apostles and holy fathers, may your prayers be to us a high wall and a house of refuge”²⁷.

The saints are the foundations of the Church: “ Blessed is he, who built the holy Church on the palm of his hands, and placed as its foundations the prophets, apostles and holy martyrs and assembled and filled her with all peoples; and behold, they offer praise in her by night and day. Blessed is he, who magnified you, prophets, apostles and holy martyrs, and placed your bones like lights within the holy Church, and honoured and magnified your memory here and above in heaven; may your prayers assist us”²⁸.

There are isolated examples in which Peter is singled out: “ In the company of Peter, we shall see you, our father, Mar (X), when you will say to him with open face; these you gave me, Lord, acknowledge them before your Father, even as they have acknowledge you”²⁹. Peter is an example of repentance and is alluded to along with the thief, publican and the sinful woman: “Open to us, Lord, the door of your mercy, as you did to the thief, and accept our repentance, as you did that of the publican and the sinful woman, and as you pardoned Simon after he had denied you, pardon our offences and sins....”³⁰.

The repentance of Peter is described vividly: “Simon was sitting at the outer door and was weeping at the outer door and was weeping: Open Your door, O my master, for I am your disciple. Heaven and earth shall weep for me, for I have made the keys of the kingdom to be lost”³¹. Unlike the Latin tradition, the Syriac fathers do not say that ‘the keys’ are the sole privilege of St Peter. According to Moses Bar Kepha, every bishop holds the keys. Thus in his commentary on Holy Myron Bar Kepha writes: “Again (the Myron) is given with the permission of the bishops, because he holds the keys of Peter and opens the treasury to whom he pleases”³². For Bar Kepha, ‘the keys’ is a poetical expression implying no primacy whatsoever. Thus in the same work he writes: “(Myron) holds the keys of the kingdom of heaven”³³.

The theme of the first Qaumo of Monday of the Holy Week is “the Parable of the Vineyard” The prayers of this qaumo are the exposition of the parable and they represent an important source for ecclesiology. There is no reference to St Peter. He is not referred to as the guardian or the keeper of the vineyard. The Sedro of this qaumo presents the Church as the vine planted in the place of Israel. After having narrated the planting of Israel, the spiritual vineyard and its destruction, the Sedro continues: “And You have planted in its place the glorious Vine, the Holy Church, chosen from among the gentiles. And You have made a fence of the Gospel Law around it, and adorned it with the angelic priesthood. You have established it with the high tower of the cross, and entrusted it to the labourers: the apostles, evangelists, shepherds, doctors and chosen priests, that through them she might offer spiritual fruits worthy of Your divinity. You have established Christ, the stone, rejected by the sons – that is by the Jewish leaders – the corner stone, which joins and unites the heavenly with the earthly beings, the people with the gentiles, which shakes and breaks into pieces, and shatters all who stumble against it”³⁴.

Conclusion

In the prayers, St Peter is never qualified as the ‘the Shepherd of Christ’s flock’, nor Church is called ‘Peter’s flock’. He is never qualified as the ‘vicar of Christ’ or as the representative of Christ to whom other disciples are subjected to. The liturgical references to St Peter are

far from being all of equal value, and it is not always possible to deduce from them a consistent ecclesiology. However, they ignore altogether Peter's primacy or of his successors. Scriptural references to Peter have been used to illustrate the place of the apostles and the saints in the Church, and to speak of the reality of resurrection, firm faith, human weakness, fall and repentance. The references to St Peter are to be understood as part of the narratives on the apostles' experience of the mystery of Christ and their reaction to it.

Peter is rarely singled out, but never placed above the apostolic college. His title *riso daslihe* (chief of the apostles) is to be understood not in terms of primacy whatsoever, but rather as the chief among the apostles. It implies a 'place of honour' which is not defined by the New Testament or by the early Christian fathers. Apparently, early Eastern Christian liturgical tradition did not attribute a privileged position to St Peter, similar to that of Theotokos, St John the Baptist and even St Stephen. Thus no separate feast of St Peter is attested in the Eastern liturgical calendars. In the Byzantine tradition, the icons of Theotokos and John the Baptist ('the friend of the bridegroom') occupy a special place on the iconostasis, a place never attributed to St Peter. Likewise the Syrian Orthodox Pre-anaphora ('Public celebration') begins with the acclamation: "Mary who brought Thee forth, and John who baptized Thee shall be suppliants unto Thee in our behalf. Have mercy upon us". Even in the fourth diptych, the saints are enumerated in the following order, "Mother of God, prophets, apostles, preachers, Evangelists, martyrs, confessors, John the Baptist, St Stephen and the "exalted chiefs of the apostles St Peter and St Paul". Thus the anaphora, the prayer par excellence of the Church completely ignores the doctrine of Petrine primacy.

(Footnotes)

1 F.Bouwen, "Patmos 2009. XIe session plénière de la Commission mixte internationale pour le dialogue théologique entre l'Église catholique et l'Église orthodoxe", *Proche Orient Chrétien* 60 (2010), 78-99 ;ID., « XIIe Session..... », *POC* 60 (2010), 335- 351.

2 Cyril Benham Benni, *Syriac Church of Antioch, concerning the Primacy and Prerogatives of Peter and of His Successors the Roman Pontiffs*, London, 1871 (This work was not available to me).

3 *Awsar Slawot'o –The Book of Common Prayer*, (SEERI, Kottayam, 2006), 193 (=BCP)

4 BCP p. 239-241.

5 Pampakuda, 1986, p. 199.

6 Ibid. p. 256.

7 Translated from the Syriac text, Pampakuda (1982), p. 76.

8 Hom. 124, in *Patrologia Orientalis* 29, pp. 208-231; here, p. 219.

9 Hom. 81, in *PO* . 20, pp. 344-370.

10 Sedro, Evening, *Kud osh 'edtho, Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit*, Vol. II, (Vagamon, 1982), p.3.

11 Anaphora of St James, Prayer after the Epiclesis.

12 Saturday Morning, BCP, p. 929.

13 Ibid..

14 Friday Morning, BCP p. 819.

15 Friday, Morning, BCP, p. 819.

16 Thursday Evening, BCP, p. 593.

17 Thursday Lilyo, Second Qaumo, BCP, p. 643.

18 Holy Week, Thursday Night, Second Qaumo, Bo 'utho of Mar Jacob, Syriac Text, in *Ktobo d-sabtho rabtho d-hasho porukoyo* (Pampakuda, 1958), p. 168.

19 Ibid.

- 20 Holy Week, Thursday Night, Second Qaumo, Bo 'utho of Mar Jacob, Syr. P.168- 169.
- 21 Holy Week, Tuesday Night , Second Qaumo, Syriac. p. 70.
- 22 Holy Week, Thursday Night, Second Qaumo, Mad rosho: Qum Paulose, Syriac, p.173.
- 23 Sedro, Good Friday, Night, Fourth Qaumo. Tr. B.Varghese, *Promioun-Sedro of the Holy Week*, (Kottayam,2011), p.139.
- 24 *Service of the adoration of the cross* , in Fr.B.Varghese (tr), *Order of the Prayers of Good Friday*, (Kottayam, 2001), p. 91.
- 25 Crown of the Year Vol .II, p. 3.
- 26 Sunday night, Second Qaumo, BCP, p. 95.
- 27 BCP. p. 335.
- 28 Ibid. p. 343.
- 29 Tuesday Morning, BCP , p. 425.
- 30 Thursday Evening, BCP, p. 595-97.
- 31 Monday Night, Third Qaumo, BCP, p. 245.
- 32 Bar Kepha, *Commentary on the Consecration of Holy Myron* , ch. 38 (ed.W.Strothmann, p. 102).
- 33 Ibid. ch. 49. p. 122.
- 34 *Promioun-Sedro of the Holy Week*, p. 14-15.