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St. Ephrem the Syrian (306 – 373 A.D.)

Our reflection on the Syriac Fathers of the Church continues this month with St. Ephrem the Syrian. Ephraem, with the epithet “of Nisibis” or “the Syrian,” is indisputably the most productive, the most significant, and by far the most cited author of Syriac Christian literature overall. For the Syrian Christians in India, Ephrem is not just a historical figure but also a metaphor for their faith, a “touchstone” in their collective memory.

His Life:

Ephrem was born at Nisibis near Syria’s border with present-day Turkey. It was part of the Roman Empire. Nisibis was a diverse city of Syrians, Arameans, Arabs, Greeks, Jews, Parthians, Romans, and Iranians. Among the religious beliefs were Judaism, Christianity, and polytheism. Aramaic was commonly spoken, and to a lesser extent, Greek and Latin. Thus Ephrem was brought up in a multicultural and multilingual context. When he was a boy, Emperor Constantine the Great issued the ‘Edict of Milan’, legalizing Christianity throughout the empire. He was educated and grew up beside James, Bishop of Nisibis (303-338), and with him founded the theological school in his city. He was ordained a deacon and was intensely active in local Christian community life until 363, the year when Nisibis fell into Persian hands. Ephrem then emigrated to Edessa, where he continued his activity as a preacher. The city of Edessa has a firm connection with the Syriac Christians in India. Ephrem died in this city in 373 due to a plague. He remained a deacon till the end of his life. He played an important role in the founding of the ‘school of Persians’. He was a deacon, a servant, in his liturgical ministry, and more radically, in his love for Christ, whose praises he sang in an unparalleled way and introduced with rare skill the knowledge of divine Revelation.

His Theological Contribution:

St. Ephrem has left us an important theological inheritance. His substantial opus can be divided into four categories: works written in ordinary prose (his polemic works or biblical commentaries); works written in poetic prose; homilies in verse; and lastly, hymns, undoubtedly Ephrem’s most abundant production. He is a rich and interesting author in many ways, but especially from the theological point of view. It is the fact that theology and poetry converge in his work which makes it so special. If we desire to approach his doctrine, we must insist on this from the outset: namely, on the fact that he produces theology in poetical form. Poetry enabled him to deepen his theological reflection. At the same time, his theology became liturgy, became music; indeed, he was a great composer. Theology, reflection on the faith, poetry, song and praise of God go together; and it is precisely in this liturgical character that the divine truth emerges clearly in Ephrem’s theology. In our breviary we use many of his hymns for our lauds and vespers. In his theological activity, he employed the way of paradoxes and symbols. He made ample use of contrasting images because they served to emphasize the mystery of God. For example, in his hymns *On the Nativity of Christ*, he explains the mystery with the paradoxes: “The belly of your Mother changed the order of things, O you who order all! Rich he went in, he came out poor: the High One went into her [Mary], he came out lowly. Brightness went into her and clothed himself,

and came forth a despised form.” In another instance he says, “He that gives food to all went in, and knew hunger. He who gives drink to all went in, and knew thirst. Naked and bare came forth from her the Clother of all things.” He elucidates the mystery of salvation with these words in a hymn: “The trees of the Garden of Eden were given as food to the first Adam. For us, the gardener of the Garden in person made himself food for our souls. Indeed, we had all left Paradise together with Adam, who left it behind him.” In his soteriology he compares paradise with Noah’s Ark and Mount Sinai and describes redemption as “the way from wood to wood” (from the tree of paradise to the Cross of Christ). His metaphorical language was very attractive and helped the simple faithful to grasp easily the divine mysteries. Certainly, the allegorical language was present also among the Greek and Latin Fathers, its fullness, poetic quality, and theologically central role in Ephrem, however, transcends them by far.

Apart from his erudition in poetic genre, he was also known for his apologetic works through his homilies and letters against Marcion, Mani, and Bardesanes. The influence and importance of Ephraem extend far beyond the Syriac linguistic realm. Although he himself wrote exclusively in Syriac, already during his lifetime he was cited by both the Greek and the Latin churches—quite unique in this context. Jerome included him in *De viris illustribus* and reports that the works of the deacon of the Church of Edessa were recited in church after the scripture reading.

The theological contribution of Ephrem had a great impact also in the western Church which is underscored by the conferral of the honorary title ‘doctor of the Church’ by Pope Benedict XV on 5 October 1920, thereby ranking him among the greatest Fathers of the Church.

Points for our Reflection:

- St. Ephrem lived in a multicultural and multireligious context and yet he kept his faith and Christian identity intact. Living and serving the Lord in such environment do I hold my Salesian Charismatic identity clear?
- Poetry in theology is an emotional expression of faith. Do I pray the Lauds and Vespers as my own emotional expression of faith?
- Have I ever had an emotional encounter with the Lord?

Yours affectionately,



Fr. Don Bosco SDB

INM Provincial

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