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**Inaugural Address of Professor Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri  
Deputy General Secretary in Public Witness and Diakonia,  
World Council of Churches  
International Seminar commemorating the 100th Birth  
Anniversary of His Eminence Dr Paulose Mar Gregorios**

His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Mathews III the Catholicos of the East and the Malankara Metropolitan, Your Eminences, and dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I bring you greetings on behalf of the World Council of Churches and the global Ecumenical movement, from Geneva, Switzerland. It is my privilege that I can reflect and share my thoughts on the ecumenical contributions of the inspiring and phenomenal life of His Eminence Paulose Mar Gregorios, of blessed memory, at this august event that marks his birth centenary.

The leadership of WCC is deeply honoured to be asked to give this opening address.

His Eminence Paulose Mar Gregorios has contributed immensely to the work of the WCC and has positively impacted and strengthened the Ecumenical movement. He consistently uplifted the voice of people in the margins of society, through his life, actions and his teachings. It is a daunting task to reflect on the depth and width of the contributions of this deeply spiritual, and outstanding scholar, theologian, philosopher, and leader. The reflections and brief narratives I will give now are just examples and in no way exhaustive or representative of his immense contributions. It is simply a deeply grateful and thoughtful reflection of this servant of God.

A constant learner and teacher, Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios, sought to bring together in a holistic vision, several disciplines such as philosophy, economics, political science, medicine,

education, physics, and theology. In that process, he became a great mediator and bridge-builder, bringing together, cultures, peoples, faiths and philosophies.

His Eminence Paulose Mar Gregorios, then known as Fr. Paul Verghese who became widely known in the international ecumenical scene, in 1961, as a 39-year-old recently ordained Indian orthodox priest, and a doctoral student from Oxford. He was one of the three main Bible Study leaders, at the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches held at New Delhi in 1961. His contributions made a great impression on the Assembly, which made the Orthodox delegates, many of whose churches had just joined the WCC, exceptionally elated and proud.

Fr Paul Verghese was invited to join the staff of the World Council of Churches in Geneva by its first General Secretary Dr. Visser't Hooft. He joined WCC as its Associate General Secretary and as Director of the Division of Ecumenical Action where he served from 1962 to 1967. Following that, he returned to India as the Principal of the Orthodox Theological Seminary in Kottayam. The time he spent at the WCC helped cement many ecumenical relationships and led to many contributions to the global ecumenical movement.

I now turn to examples of His Eminence Paulose Mar Gregorios gift as a bridge builder.

### **Bridging and mediating the denominational divide**

His Eminence Paulose Mar Gregorios reiterated that Ecumenism for Christians is not an option- but an obligation, to live the unity, confirming the Christian understanding that the church is one body with Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-13).

During the five years at the WCC, he was able to extensively visit the Protestant and Orthodox churches of the World, and to serve as an Observer at the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church and to get an inside knowledge of the Christian churches of the world. While taking up major teaching and ecumenical responsibilities in his own church, he served also as a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC from 1968 to 1975, meeting and working with many outstanding theological minds. His Eminence also served for 12 years, from 1963 to 1975, as a founding member of the Joint Working Group between the Vatican and the WCC. As a pioneering Orthodox staff member at the WCC, he also served alongside and developed a close working relationship with the late Dr Nikos Nissiotos, (director of the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, from 1958 to 1974) and a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. They worked as one of the Joint Convenors of the history-making informal conversations between theologians of the Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox churches, which had broken communion with each other more than 13 centuries

ago. In 1975 Fr Paul Verghese was consecrated as His Eminence Paulose Mar Gregorios. In the same year he was elected to the Executive Committee of the WCC. In 1983 at WCC Assembly in Vancouver, Canada, he was elected Asia President of the World Council of Churches, a position he held until the 1991 WCC Assembly in Canberra.

His Ecumenical journey was built on a firm foundation of dedicated and disciplined life both as a lay person and as a clergy, living and serving the Lord and people in different denominations in various contexts. Even as a young adult aged 15, having to break his education after school due to the financial constraints of his family, he worked as a free-lance journalist for a Catholic periodical in his hometown. In his early 20's after working for the Postal Service, he moved to Ethiopia as a teacher. After 13 years of working, he raised enough resources to fund his education - BA, Bachelors and Master's in Divinity at Goshen College and from Princeton Theological Seminary. During that period (1950-1954), as an orthodox layperson, he served as Assistant pastor in two African American Baptist churches in Indiana and New Jersey. This was during the era of segregation, where he became one with African American communities in their struggles. In 1954 Paul Verghese returned to India and started working as a lecturer in Christian faith and theology at the Union Christian College, Alwaye and the Fellowship House. Soon he was elected General Secretary of the Orthodox Student Conference of India. From 1956 to 1959 he served as the special advisor to Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. Following that, he left the life of power and privilege to pursue further studies. His ecumenical journey and his life connecting people was an emblematic bridge, bearing, connecting, and relating. Always true to his faith.

### **Bridging and mediating the divide between Faith and Science**

Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios was the Chair of the WCC's famous World Conference on *Faith, Science, and the Future*, held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1979, with 500 scientists and the same number of social scientists and theologians. He also chaired the Preparatory Committee for the gathering for a five-year period. In the process, he prepared the book *The Human Presence*, giving an Orthodox Christian approach to the challenging topic. He effectively worked with many world thinkers on the issues relating to modern science as our chief way of knowing, and to modern technology as our principal tool for transforming society and environment. His effective chairing of the whole process and the Conference revealed Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios' ability to facilitate the high-level discussions and draw out implications from his widespread learning to be able to make an impact on the best secular and scientific minds of the world.

He identified the root problem is the disconnection and separation of our science-technology from the sacramental understanding of material reality as the bearer of God. For the sake of a quick development of science-technology, humankind has increasingly taken an exclusively triumphalistic, unsacramental, one-sided anthropological stance, increasingly straying away from the path of the good and losing the very capacity for a sacramental understanding of reality. He advised the re-conditioning of the human consciousness through intensive corporate disciplines (*that guide us into functioning as the early church, to live together with the richness of Confession and the depth of Worship, the necessity of Guidance and the joy of Celebration*), to overcome the alienation precipitated by a technological culture. He taught that the sacrament is the mode of man's participation in the divine through the created reality, without which humanity would perish.

### **Bridging and mediating the Spiritual and Secular**

Mar Gregorios qualifies his own Christian vision of the world as "sacramental humanism." His understanding of reality was firmly rooted in the incarnation of God in Christ and the transformation of humanity to be in the likeness of God. From this firm foundation, he could easily and seamlessly move across the borders of various disciplines, faiths and philosophies and gather insights from current research in both physical and social sciences as well as from ideological debates. His wisdom, versatile mind, his forthright and respectful approach to people from all walks of life, bought him recognition and honour from the secular, religious and academic worlds. His advice, guidance and counsel were valued by people from across the ideological and religious spectrum. He has chairs created in his name in secular universities and was even the president of the Indian Philosophical Congress. He was well grounded in both Western and Eastern philosophical systems. His knowledge of European philosophy from its beginnings in the classical Greek tradition and more particularly in the Neoplatonic and Greek patristic streams to twentieth-century philosophers made him critical of contemporary Western philosophy's turning away from the transcendent. He identified the 'Subjective' and the 'Objective' as two Poles of Knowledge. He reasoned that the western influenced secular thinking has gone far on the analytical path, practically neglecting the holistic and the intuitive-synthetic and have become weak in their capacity to have holistic visions, losing sight of the transcendent in which this world is grounded. Mar Gregorios called for "a new enlightenment" and turned to Indian/Asian philosophical resources, as providing sane philosophical grounding for an alternative that links the material and the transcendent in a holistic and all-connecting awareness. He was deeply rooted in early Christian thinking and practice, and argued that ethics could never be divorced from theology. He addressed the socio economic and political realities of his time, in a frank and

forthright manner, dynamically, publicly, and respectfully engaged and connected with leading thought leaders, both in the secular domain and in the context of other faiths. During his life, the way he interacted with the society and his own context in India, revealed this mediation and bridgebuilding nature.

### A holistic life: Breaking down duality, and the compartments of our thought and life

Mar Gregorios points us to the Asian-African heritage that shaped Christianity in the first millennium. Be it Egypt and Cappadocia, he reminded us all major fathers and mothers of the church in the East came from parts of Africa and Asia, and they had very different cultural and spiritual sensitivities from the Roman and European West. He emphasised the St Gregory of Nyssa's thoughts and alternate structure to shape a Christian ideology that is timeless and helpful for us to face the future. A perspective that humanity is potentially capable of all good as we are created in the "image of God".

*"...understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord."* Jeremiah 9:24.

The adoption of such an alternate structure of Christian thought has many implications that are most significant for the human pursuit of humanity's God-given destiny.

This is quite different from the dualism of the two cities, one of the earth and the other of God, that which was propounded by St Augustine, which had a huge influence on Western Christianity.

From the perspective that humanity is potentially capable of all good, he also pointed us back to the roots of the Hebrew bible and the early Christian communities and taught us to break down the compartments created by false interpretations. He taught us that we are expected to serve both God and humanity, seamlessly. We cannot claim to serve God and be blind to the needs of people and creation. He studied the Hebrew word used for 'service', which is 'Avodah' and the Greek equivalent is 'Diakonia'. He also emphasised that the Hebrew word is holistic with connotations ranging from worship, work, and service. Therefore, he argued, the biblical concept of serving God and humanity cannot be compartmentalised.

He also taught us that justice and righteousness are core characteristics of the Kingdom/reign of God, experienced in all fullness expressed alongside steadfast love, peace, and joy-truths that cannot be placed in silos.

*“For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Romans 14:17*

He constantly reminded us that the biblical meaning of justice is rich and multidimensional, as compared to the often-limited secular understanding of justice, establishing a template for a society that is deeply concerned about the welfare of each individual, with mutual moral responsibilities between people, and a framework of obligations created by laws and commandments. This understanding of justice arises from the biblical insistence on the difference between possession and ownership. Ultimately, all things are owned by God, the Creator of the world. What we possess, we do not own – we merely hold it in trust for God. We are exhorted to strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and God will meet all the needs of the followers as well. (Matthew 6:33). God promises to guide people and communities continually, to be sustained, strengthened, and be nourished (Isaiah 58:11).

### **Concluding remarks.**

I would like to conclude with four aspects of the life of His Eminence Paulose Mar Gregorios that have deeply moved me.

1. **Humility.** He had no false pretensions or false modesty and was always truthful. Even being an academic giant, he was a keen listener, with a childlike enthusiasm to learn with constant openness to different perspectives. He interacted and engaged with the greatest and the smallest with equanimity and respect.
2. **Rooted in the Bible.** Even as a prolific and deep thinker who read widely, dialogued earnestly, and wrote extensively, and authored more than 47 books, he was rooted in the Bible. He deeply reflected on the layers of meanings and its complexities and engaged from one-to-one personal interactions to audiences of thousands of people. Most significantly, he lived by the values anchored in our Holy Scripture.
3. **Intolerance to injustice.** He did not tolerate domination, exploitation, and subjugation by the power wielding nations, often manifested as colonialism, neo-colonialism and racism. He spoke up boldly and spoke plainly against injustices, especially from the context of the marginalised, be it in Asia, Africa or Australia. He took his stand, even at the expense of upsetting the powerful. For him, it was a question of human dignity and not economic development at any cost.
4. **A great seer with a vision of the future.** He was way ahead of his time, questioning the doctrine that humanity has a mandate from God to dominate the earth, that has helped promote industry and advance science and technology, but has extensively damaged creation and the biosphere. His teaching help us to chart the

future, where humanity is not the measure of all things, but rather, bears a major responsibility for the welfare and sustenance of the whole creation.

May his memory be ever blessed! May his life continue to inspire us to journey with God, to a better future!

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of numerous scholars and theologians, who have helped study, compile, and promote the phenomenal body of work that His Eminence Dr Paulose Mar Gregorios has left us. The Ecumenical community has greatly benefitted from your work. In this regard, my special thanks to Fr. Dr K M George, the Director of Sopana Orthodox Academy, a past member of the Central Committee of WCC and a colleague who worked at WCC, for his dedication and faithfulness to the work and legacy of His Eminence Dr Paulose Mar Gregorios.

**Honouring the Blessed Memory of His Eminence, I humbly declare the International Seminar commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of His Eminence Dr Paulose Mar Gregorios- OPEN!**