

The Ecclesiology of Mathew the poor (1916-2006) renewing Coptic Theology

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Mathew the poor (Matta al-Meskeen) was born in 1919 in the city of Banha, which is located few miles further from Cairo and later on, in 1948, he became a monk in the convent of Abba Samuel, in Upper Egypt. He led an ascetic life in various monastic centers of Egypt, ending up finally in the monastery of saint Macarios, where afterwards, he became Abbot. Finally, he passed away in June 2006. He was rather, one of the Copt writers who had the most writing's since the schism of the churches (specifically, since the Chalcedon Synod 451 A.D.) Mathew was promoted to introducer of the renewing Theological movement of Coptic Theological concept of the 20th century¹. Around this frame Mathew the poor introduced the meaning of Ecclesiology to Coptic Theology with his extraordinary Ecclesiological works. «Eternal Church» Pentecost' Real unity wii inspire the world» «Christian unity under the meaning of the Church and the truth of Christ» etc.

I) The church as body of Christ

For Mathew the appearance of the church in the world is connected to the fact of divine incarnation². The church was revealed the moment, the Son and Word of

¹ For more information about the above personality and his activity, see D. Athanasiou "The reformers of Coptic Theology of the 20th century", Synaxi 136 (2015), pp. 58-63.

² Matta al-Meskeen, Al-Rû- al-Qudus al-rabb el-mohy (1), Maṭb'ait Dayr al-qiddis Anba Maqar, Wādi l-Naṭrûn, 2012, p. 173. See also Matta al-Meskeen, Al-Tajassud al-ilāhy fī t'ālim kirilus al-kabir, Maṭb'ait Dayr al-qiddis Anba Maqar, Wādi l-Naṭrûn, 1978, p. 44.

God was incarnated³. Because essentially the Union between God and man, consists of the base, the meaning and the reality of the church (the meeting between God and man)⁴. The appearance of God in human flesh consists the first revelation about the nature of the church and the existence of it, being fulfilled in a practical way on earth⁵. Under this concept, and according to the ecclesiological position of Mathew, the church is identified to the body of the Lord, that is with human nature and consequently to all humanity⁶. The church and body of Christ consists the one and the same reality⁷. Around this frame, Mathew mentions that the mystical body of Christ as church, is an inseparable and undivided body with the historical body of the Lord, which is in heaven at the right hand of God the Father⁸. Similarly, the body we receive the sacrament of Eucharist is not distinguished and separated from the historical body of the Lord and the church. As a result for Mathew there is no distinction concerning 3 different bodies (the historical body of Jesus Christ, the church as gathering of believers, during the sacrament of Eucharist) as patriarch Shenouda (1923-2012) later supported initiating the so called theory of three bodies, contradicted it saying that the three is one itself⁹.

The Apostle Paul explain how come to be the body of the church as a gathering of believers, the same thing with the real historical human body of the Lord through the perspective of baptism and new creation:

«For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ» (Galatians: 3: 26-27), «For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit» (1 Corinthians: 12:13), «Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Matta al-Meskeen*, Al-Rū- al-Qudus al-rabb el-mohy, p. 174.

⁶ *Matta al-Meskeen*, Al-ʿAriss, Maṭbʿait Dayr al-qiddis Anba Maqar, Wādi l-Naṭrūn, 1994, pp. 5-6. According to Mathew, the Church no doubt consists the real historical body of the Lord and consequently his human nature. At the same time is identified with all humanity's nature, that is with all mankind. Such nature, the Word God clothed during his incarnation and moreover, the church consists the new creation, the renewing human nature, the «new man» the last Adam Jesus Christ. Bλ. *Matta al-Meskeen*, Tafsīr rissalit ifissos, Maṭbʿait Dayr al-qiddis Anba Maqar, Wādi l-Naṭrūn, 1994, pp. 26-30.

⁷ *Matta al-Meskeen*, Al-kanīsa al-khalida, Maṭbʿait Dayr al-qiddis Anba Maqar, Wādi l-Naṭrūn, 2002, p. 120.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Shenouda*, Bida'a -adithā, al-Qāhirah: Maṭbaʿat al-Anba Rwis, 2007, pp. 108-109.

God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all»
(Ephesians: 4: 3-6)¹⁰.

Identifying the flesh, that is to say the human nature of the Lord with the church itself, become obvious at various points of the ecclesiological works of Matthew, who underlines that Christ suffered, was crucified, buried and resurrected with our body which is the church¹¹. The body of this church according to Matthew, is invisible and is not possible to be visible to human eyes, because the church as the body of Christ is impossible to be formed in an image, but can be seen through the gathering of believers, who are united with the spirit, the faith and the baptism at the same time worship and confess Jesus Christ as the incarnated Son and Word of God, Saviour and Redeemer of the world¹². The body of Christ consist an invisible divine reality, where every church even the smallest in number of believers, no matter the place and time, consists the complete undetected body of Christ¹³.

The unity of faith and love is what counts for Mathew as basic ingredient , for the church to be complete. Otherwise if some Christian Community doesn't live with Faith and love, then it doesn't prove to be the real body of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, for him the church is not limited within place and time, but earth and heaven¹⁴.

So, by identifying Christ to the church, which is repeatedly mentioned by Mathew, he wanted to come into conflict with the spirit of double nature, which he had distinguished, and thus disconnected Jesus Christ from the church, as two unequal things and diametrically opposite between them¹⁵. Mathew is noting that the Apostle Paul himself, mentions clearly that we as members of the body of the church, we are «out of his flesh and his bones» (Ephesians: 5: 30)¹⁶ that

¹⁰ *Matta el-Meskeen*, Al-qiddis būlos al-rasūl, Maṭb'ait Dayr al-qiddis Anba Maqar, Wādī l-Naṭrūn, 1992, pp. 454-455.

¹¹ *Matta el-Meskeen*, Al-qiddis būlos al-rasūl, p. 451.

¹² *Matta al-Meskeen*, Tafsīr rissalit ifissos, p. 27.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Matta al-Meskeen*, Al-kanīsa al-khalida, p. 133. Mathew is distinguishing the committed Church from the victorious Church. The first one, is being protected and aided in every difficult situation that is facing (even in the case of martyrdom) by the community of the saints, the victorious church. Both categories are as members of the body of the church, is one church with the destination for the Kingdom of God: «But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all» (Galatians: 4, 26). See *Matta el-Meskeen*, Al-qiddis būlos al-rasūl, p. 455.

¹⁵ G. Habib, "Al-Radd 'alā kitāb Bida' a-adithā" (1), in: <http://www.coptology.com/?p=925#more-925> (10-1-2020), p. 54.

¹⁶ Mathew connects the reference of Paul in the Epistles, with the sacrament of the divine Eucharist. Eating his body in the Sacrament, we become members of his body. See *Matta al-Meskeen*, Al-'Ariss, p. 5.

is of Jesus Christ¹⁷. Moreover, he himself, as Habib's disciple mentions, underlines that what is missing from Coptic Theological Tradition, is the shape «*head-body*» which is what we meet in many ways in Paul's Theology: The organic connection between Jesus Christ - head and Church- body¹⁸, which means that we can't decompose the head from the body, that is Jesus Christ out of the church¹⁹. Any such kind of attempt, according to Mathew decomposes the Union of man with God and as a result has destructive consequences for the salvation of humanity²⁰.

The absolute identification church and Christ, is problematic Theologically. According to Apostle Paul church, up to the degree that is the body of Christ, with his fullness and his presence completes everything (*Ephesians: 1:23*).

The Greek Theologian Thanasis Papathanasiou rightly observes, that it is the church an addition to Christ meaning that Christ is not sufficient without the church his body, and similarly the church is not sufficient without Christ who is the head²¹! Under this perspective he himself, refers to Saint John Chrisostomos, who having commented the above reasons of the Apostle Paul, underlines that since the body consists of all it's parts, Christ needs each member «*So if we aren't many, «someone hand someone else a leg and another one something else, the body can't be complete*»». That means, although the incarnation was complete, at the same time there is an unsettlement and the body of Christ will only be completed in the last times (*1 Corinthians: 15: 27-28*)²². So we conclude that the church is the supplement of Jesus Christ. Between both of them can't be absolute identification. But completing each other, they are acting with distinction. In a mysterious way the church is the crew and at the same time the additive of Jesus Christ. With this meaning the church is not a composing substance but a fact that is being developed.

¹⁷ G. Habib, "Al-Radd 'alā kitbāb Bida'a -adithā" (2), in: <http://www.coptology.com/?p=1268#more-1268> (10-1-2020), p. 68.

¹⁸ For Mathew the fact that the church is the body of Jesus Christ and the Lord himself is the head, is not an allegory but a reality. See Matta al-Meskeen, *Al-kanisa al-khalida*, p. 132.

¹⁹ G. Habib, "Al-Radd 'alā kitbāb Bida'a -adithā" (2), p. 73.

²⁰ Matta al-Meskeen, *Tafsir rissalit ifissos*, pp. 26-43.

²¹ A. Papathanasiou, *The Church becomes when it opens up. Mission as hope and as nightmare*, Ev Πλω Press, Athens 2008, p. 77.

²² A. Papathanasiou, *The Church becomes when it opens up*, p. 78.

II) The church as the bride of Jesus Christ

For Mathew, the relationship between Jesus and the church is parallel with a relationship of a husband and wife, of a bride and a bridegroom: « *That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish* » (Ephesians: 5: 26-27)²³. The name «bridegroom» according to Mathew, has been given from the Lord himself to himself in order to describe his relationship with the church²⁴. This kind of relationship bride and bridegroom, husband and wife, as mentioned by Mathew, about the relationship between the church and Jesus Christ, consists a true love story which has its root in the times of the old Testament, where God Jehovah is presented as a man who claims and punishes his beloved one, that is his people Israel, because she worships other Deities and shows no interest to him (Oshie: 2-14-20)²⁵. This fact according to Mathew is being described with elegance at many points of the old Testament: as well:

*«Thus saith the lord, Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have ye sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away» (Isaiah: 50:1)*²⁶.

Copt priest mentions, the relationship between Christ and Church is moving around a frame of love that can go as far as the last times, where the church will be transformed into new Jerusalem:

*« And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the Lamb's wife. And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; » (Revelation: 21: 9-11)*²⁷.

For Mathew what is of great importance, is that out of this relationship Christ with church, as bride and bridegroom gives birth to a new relationship between God and man, which doesn't remain an imposing worship, but goes beyond

²³ Matta al-Meskeen, Al-'Ariss, p. 4.

²⁴ Matta al-Meskeen, Al-'Ariss, p. 3.

²⁵ Matta al-Meskeen, Al-'Ariss, pp. 6-7.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Matta al-Meskeen, Al-'Ariss, p. 11.

it living a relationship of the highest form of love, since from now on, man as a member of the church, of the bride, is having a love affair with her bridegroom Jesus Christ²⁸. For Mathew through this bridegroom church relationship, life receives an other dimension of worship and love, not only from human side but from the Lord himself as well²⁹. This kind of relationship between God and man is expressed in various ways from the lovers of the Lord

[«Yea, in the way of thy judgments, o lord, have we waited for thee; the desire of our soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of thee. With my soul have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek thee early: for when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness» (Isaiah: 26: 8-9)], as well as from the Lord himself [«For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life» (John: 3, 16)]³⁰.

III) The unity of the church and the transcendence of the division

The unity of the church and the transcendence of the division making known the common point of all professing Christians, which is Jesus Christ as a person. At this point, it is interesting to analyze the view of Mathew the poor.

Mathew supports, that the theological terms formed by all the profession's Christians, don't really have any disadvantages³¹. These were created through the interpretation and the understanding of people, who were trying to understand and explain with the reason and the thinking of Adam instead of the thinking and reason of Christ³². Causing Division by trying to understand Christ doesn't fit in his person or the nature of the church, which consists the communion of persons and unity³³. This is due to the division that was caused from the human nature

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰ Matta al-Meskeen, Al-'Ariss, pp. 11-12.

³¹ Matta al-Meskeen, Al-Wa-da al-Masihyya fī dw'a ma'anat al-Kinisa w-aqiqet al-Masi-, Ma-b'aitDayral-qiddisAnbaMaqar, Wādi l-Naṭrūn, p. 20.

³² *Ibidem.*

³³ *Ibidem.*

with sin, which in turn spread hatred, doubt, and arrogance³⁴. Consequently, for Mathew the poor, the division of the church is not due to the nature of the church, but it's because of the nature of understanding, the conception and the vision for the truth of Christ and the church³⁵. Division for understanding the nature of Christ came up, when it was attempted to approach the divine, of the Deity, in a human way³⁶. This approachment was not theological. Each division in the church this is what really indicates³⁷. Man tried to cure the ecclesiological matters with human concept, but with no ecclesiological way, with no communion with others, individually³⁸. For Mathew, concerning the new man, who has regenerated and has been inspired by the thinking of Christ, Christ will remain one unseperable and undivided³⁹. Such a man accepts a church in the world, that unites all mankind⁴⁰. It's about Orthodoxy without division and dogmatism⁴¹. Something like that happens only to a regenerated man, who has accepted the nature of Christ very deep inside⁴².

Mathew the poor observes, that Christ is asking from Christians the unity not in the letter, but in the spirit⁴³, the unity not in thinking and view, but in love⁴⁴. This is why all the attempts of the Christian world for unity ought to be within this spirit and not the letter⁴⁵. Besides the spirit strengthens and completes the letter⁴⁶. The dogma is a matter of speech and doesn't concern the substance which is Christ himself⁴⁷.

For Mathew, in order to become reality the unity of the Christian denominations, it's important three basic steps to be achieved:

- a) The Churches should simultaneously reciprocate in lifting all excommunications from one another⁴⁸. Such excommunications are against the will of the

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ *Matta al-Meskeen*, Al-Wa-da al-Masihyya p. 21.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *Matta al-Maksen*, Al-Wa-da al-aqiqiyya sataqūn il-ām lil-'alam, Ma-b'ait Dayr al-qiddis Anba Maqar, Wādī l-Naṭrūn, p. 6.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Matta al-Maksen*, Al-Wa-da al-aqiqiyya sataqūn il-ām lil-'alam, p. 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Matthew the Poor*, True unity will inspire the world, Wadi El-Natrun: Monastery of st. Macarius, 2011, p. 8.

Holy Spirit⁴⁹. This has happened through the ignorance that each church has had for the spirit and conscience of the other, and also because of their adherence to the letter and not to the spirit of the law⁵⁰. This mutual excommunications are the basic handicaps of all attempts at unity in the meetings and sessions that have been held up to the present date⁵¹.

- β) There has to be a mutual and simultaneous recognition of doctrine between the Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian churches on the basis of essence and not of contents⁵². That is to say by reason of the tenets of salvation and eternal life which both of them propound as being through Jesus Christ who is the single active principle in both of them despite difference in doctrinal wording⁵³.
- γ) Discussion of doctrinal contents has to be entered into and vagueness removed by explanation, not by deletion or insertion, regarding doctrinal points that have been handed down to each church by means of tradition⁵⁴. Such a discussion Would provide a formula of reconciliation which would be in harmony with the unity of fellowship and the Spirit without any violation whatsoever to the history of doctrine and the concomitant circumstances surrounding its writings, and councils⁵⁵. That is to say that, between the Orthodox who are now in conference with one another, there should take place a mutual and simultaneous recognition of the soundness of doctrine at each extreme, as well as an acceptance of the fellowship in Christ, or rather freely accepting Christ himself in our fellowship⁵⁶. It should also happen that we receive Holy Communion from one cup- not on the basis of the recorded letter of the law- but rather on the basis of the living Christ dwelling in the heart of each church, and on the basis of the Holy Spirit, the active principle and effective agent in each which leads to salvation⁵⁷. After that we can then begin discussion of formulas and articles without violating the legacy of any of the churches of their spiritual traditions, theological concepts, or anything derived from their writings and councils⁵⁸.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² *Matthew the Poor*, True unity will inspire the world, p. 9.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

Mathew is convinced that the unity of the world and humanity reflects the unity of God, the unity of the divine essence included in the three persons of the Holy Trinity⁵⁹. Christ came into the world, in order to unite it. To unite heaven with earth, people, soul with flesh⁶⁰. The Christian is looking for the unity, because he is looking for God himself⁶¹.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁶¹ *Matthew the Poor*, True unity will inspire the world, p. 6.