



THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH

AN OVERVIEW

The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church is one of the 23 Eastern (Oriental) Catholic Churches in full communion with Rome. It is the largest Eastern Catholic Church and also the largest of the Saint Thomas Christian (*Nazrani*) denominations with 5.2 million believers (according to the latest statistics as is found in the *Syro-Malabar Church Year Book 2020*, p. 51). It is a *sui juris* Church governed by the Synod of Bishops headed by the Major Archbishop. The Syro-Malabar Church, with its deep-rooted spirituality, Christian life, parish activities, youth ministry, ecclesiastical, charitable, health and educational institutions, publications and involvement in social activities and high rate of vocations to priesthood and religious life is the most active, living, vibrant and the rapidly growing Catholic community in the world.

The St. Thomas Christians (*Nazranis*)

The Syro-Malabar Church is an Apostolic Church which traces its origin to the St. Thomas, the Apostle, who landed at Kodungalloor (Muziris) in 52 AD and founded seven Christian communities in

Kerala, at Palayur, Kodungalloor, Kokkamangalam, Paravur, Kollam, Niranam and Nilakkal. St. Thomas was martyred in 72 AD at Mylapore, in Chennai/Madras. The early Christian community in India was known as St. Thomas Christians. They were also called *Nazranis*, meaning those who follow the path of Jesus of Nazareth.

The East Syrian (Chaldean) Connection

From early centuries, the Church of St. Thomas Christians came into contact with the East Syrian Church (Church of the East), which also traces its origin to Apostle Thomas. From the 4th century until the end of the 16th century St. Thomas Christians were governed by bishops who were appointed and sent by the Patriarch of the East Syrian Church. The Thomas Christians developed a unique system of ecclesiastical administration with the bishops from Persia in charge of liturgical and spiritual matters and the local Archdeacon of All India (A priest) heading the Christian community and handling the administration of the Church through *Palliyogam* (early form of Synod). Thus the Thomas Christians shared the

liturgical, theological, spiritual and other ecclesiastical traditions with the East Syrian Church; in socio-cultural organization, rites and ceremonies and customs and practices, however, they were distinctively Indian.

The Arrival of Portuguese and the Influence of the Latin Church

The arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century marks a new era in the life of the Thomas Christians. With the introduction of *Padroado* rule (the Portuguese ecclesiastical jurisdiction in India) East Syrian Bishops stopped coming. Archdeacon lost his position and Latin Prelates exercised full authority over ecclesiastical administration for almost three centuries. This paved way for the latinization of liturgy and ecclesiastical administration. Following the Coonan Cross oath of 1653 Propaganda jurisdiction directly under Rome too started functioning in Kerala in 1661 which resulted in the division of the Thomas Christians into two groups, of which the group which resisted Latin rule formed a separate community under the Archdeacon which later accepted the West Syrian theological and liturgical tradition of the West Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and came to be known as the Jacobite Church. They were further divided into several independent Churches. The group that remained faithful to Rome came to be known as Syro-Malabar Church, a name which became a common epithet only in the nineteenth century which literally means Syrian Christians of the Malabar Coast (Kerala).

The Syro-Malabar Church

In 1886 the Portuguese *Padroado* jurisdiction over the whole Malabar (Kerala) was suppressed and in 1887 Pope Leo XIII re-organized the Syro-Malabar Catholics into two independent Vicariates of Kottayam and Trichur. Finally, the Syro-Malabar Church obtained bishops of their own rites and nationality in 1896, when they were further reorganized into three vicariates of Trichur, Changanacherry and Ernakulam by Pope Leo XIII through his Brief *Quae rei Sacrae*. Later,

the Syro-Malabar Hierarchy was established on 21 December 1923 with the Apostolic Constitution *Romani Pontifices* of Pope Pius XI (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 16 [1924], pp. 257-262), with Ernakulam as the Metropolitan See and Trichur, Changanacherry and Kottayam (established in 1911 for the Southists) as suffragans. In 1956 Changanacherry was raised to the status of a Metropolitan See.

The restoration of the hierarchy initiated a process of liturgical reform that sought to restore the oriental identity of the Latinized Syro-Malabar rite, which was approved by Pius XII in 1957 and introduced in 1962. In subsequent years several new dioceses were established both within and outside Kerala. From 1962, the Church began to set up mission territories in Northern India, which later became dioceses. The subsequent years witnessed a steady growth of this Church both in India and outside.

The Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Church

On 16 December 1992 Pope John Paul II with the Apostolic Constitution *Quae maiori* (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 85[1993], pp. 398-399) raised the Syro-Malabar Church to the status of Major Archiepiscopal *sui iuris* Church with the title of Ernakulam-Angamaly. Mar Antony Padiyara, the then Metropolitan of Ernakulam was appointed its first Major Archbishop and Mar Abraham Kattumana as the Pontifical Delegate who discharged the duties of the Major Archbishop. Archbishop Kattumana died unexpectedly during his visit to Rome in April 1995 and Mar Padiyara was given the powers of the Major Archbishop; however, assisted by Mar James Pazhayattil of the diocese of Irinjalakuda. In November 1996 Cardinal Padiyara resigned from his office as Major Archbishop. In his place Archbishop Varkey Vithayathil, C.Ss.R. was appointed as the Apostolic Administrator. In December 1998 he was appointed Major Archbishop by the Pope. In February 2001 Archbishop Varkey Vithayathil was created a cardinal by

Pope John Paul II. In 2004, the Holy See granted full administrative powers to the Syro-Malabar Church, including the power to elect bishops.

Major Archbishop Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil passed away on April 1, 2011. On 24 May 2011 Mar George Alencherry was elected Major Archbishop. Pope Benedict XVI confirmed the election on 25 May 2011. He is the first head of the Syro-Malabar Church to be elected by its Synod. On February 18, 2012 Major Archbishop George Alencherry was made cardinal and a member of the Roman Consistory. On 10 October 2017 with the erection of the eparchies of Shamshabad and Hosur and the extension of territories of Thuckalay and Ramanathapuram, the Syro-Malabar Church was given jurisdiction for pastoral care and evangelization all over India.

The Syro-Malabar Church Today

Of the 23 individual Churches which constitutes the Catholic communion the Syro-Malabar Church is the largest Eastern Church in Catholic communion. The other two Catholic Churches in India are the Latin Church and the Syro-Malankara Church.

In the Syro-Malabar Church at present there are 35 archdioceses and dioceses. The five archdioceses are Ernakulam-Angamaly, Changanacherry, Trichur, Tellicherry and Kottayam and 13 eparchies within the canonical territory of the Major Archi-episcopal Church are Bhadravathi, Belthangady, Irinjalakuda, Kanjirapally, Kothamangalam, Idukki, Mananthavady, Mandya, Palai, Palghat, Ramanathaapuram, Thamarassery, and Thuckalay and 13 eparchies outside, of which Adilabad, Bijnor, Chanda, Gorakhpur, Jagdalpur, Rajkot, Sagar, Satna, and Ujjain in India are with exclusive jurisdiction and Kalyan, Faridabad, Shamshabad and Hosur in India and the St. Thomas Eparchy of Chicago in the United States of America, Eparchy of St. Thomas the Apostle of Melbourne, St. Thomas the Apostle Eparchy

of Great Britain and the St. Thomas the Apostle eparchy of Mississauga in Canada also enjoy personal jurisdiction. In Europe and New Zealand Syro Malabar Church has apostolic visitators. There are altogether 46,33,242 Syro-Malabarians within the 35 Syro-Malabar Eparchies and 5,74,373 members live as migrants outside Syro-Malabar Eparchies. Thus there are altogether 52,07,615 Syro-Malabar faithful around the globe. There are 65 Bishops including 19 emiriti (besides 25 bishops serving in the Latin dioceses and 4 archbishops in Vatican diplomatic service), 4558 diocesan priests, 5484 men religious and 32,465 women religious and 1230 major seminarians (in 17 Major seminaries). Many bishops, priests, religious and laity of the Syro-Malabar Church are present all over the world and share in the missionary and pastoral life of the sister Churches. The Syro-Malabar Church is very actively involved in educational, social and health-related fields. The Syro-Malabar Church runs 5009 educational, 282 ecclesiastical and 3115 health and charitable institutions. The corporate contribution of the Syro-Malabar Church to nation-building is inestimable. This Church which has today 4 Saints, 2 Blessed, 4 Venerables and 14 Servants of God is heading all other Churches in living the Christian faith, eastern tradition and missionary zeal.



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