

Question of Ancestral Traditions

A Crisis in the Syro-Malabar Church

Francis Kanichikattil

[In this article Dr. Kanichikattil discusses how to solve the problem namely 'Question of Ancestral Traditions' (Heritage) in the Syro-Malabar Church, which, he thinks, should include not only Syriac but early Apostolic and later Colonial Traditions]

Introduction:

“Return to Ancestral Traditions” was the call of Vat.II to all Individual Churches. “if they have (unduly) fallen away due to circumstances of times or persons, they are to strive to return to their *ancestral traditions*”.¹ Return to the vision and foresight of the ancestors is the most sublime duty and right of the young generation since that vision and foresight of the forefathers would undoubtedly strengthen their steps in achieving the goals initiated by them.

The Syro-Malabar Church, an individual Church with Major Archiepiscopal status, was known in history as ‘Malabar Church’ due to its geographical position in the south-west coast of India. The Christians were known by the name ‘Thomas Christians’ or simply *Nazranikal* (followers of the one from Nazareth) resembling the other names such as *Naboothiris*, *Nairs* in the Kerala society. We do not go into the details of the historical evidences regarding the foundation of the Christian Church in Kerala; rather we take into account the consensus that Thomas the Apostle founded the Church in India in the first century itself. The prefix ‘Syro’ (Syriac) was added to Malabar Church officially towards the end of 19th century in order to distinguish the Malabar Church which used Syriac as the liturgical language from the Latin Church in India.

¹ Vat. II, Decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches, no.6.

Malabar Church down through the Centuries:

The history of the Thomas Christians or Malabar Church may broadly be divided into four epochs. It is the firm belief of the Thomas Christians that St. Thomas founded Seven Churches in south India, rather **seven** Christian communities in Faith that became the nucleus of the Christian presence in India. Sources like *Jornada of Dom Alexis De Menezes* confirms that one of these Seven communities lived in the Coramandel Coast, namely at Mylapur where apostle Thomas had his martyrdom in A.D.72. Due to some persecutions in the later period these people had to flee somewhere in Tamil Nadu and others to Kerala to join with other Christian communities baptized by St. Thomas.² The Thomas Christians both Catholics and other denominations are proud to be called that they are the descendents of the **Apostle** Thomas. It was the early Christian tradition that wherever the apostles went and preached the ‘good news’ there they founded the Church and celebrated the Eucharist (breaking of the Bread) with them, certainly accepting many symbols and elements from the local culture of the people. Hence there is no doubt at all that there existed an indigenous form of Christian liturgy in the Malabar Coast in the first century itself, the author of which is none other than St. Thomas, the Apostle of India.

The second epoch in the history of the Thomas Christians starts with the migration of a mercantile group of Persian Christians from Mesopotamia to Malabar Coast during 4th century. Historians suggest various reasons for the migration of large group of Persian Christians to the Malabar Coast. The Persian Church was severely persecuted by Saphor II (309-379) A.D and it is a historical fact. The Church of ‘Thomas Christians’ was a strong Christian community in India at that time. Quite possibly Christians from

² Malekandathil P (Ed.); *Jornada of Dom Alexis De Menezes* (trans.) L.R.C. Publications, Kochi. 2003 pp. 14-15

Persia might have come to India for their survival and livelihood. Some other authors say that Persian Christians were best trade men and their skill in trade led them to Malabar Coast to make trade relations with India. However the Malabar tradition seems to be very strong of the migration of 72 families with a bishop and number of priests in 345 A.D. under the leadership of an able Persian merchant by name Thomas of *Kynai*³. These Christian trade men soon won the favour of the King of *Kodungalloor*⁴ that was an important seaport in South India during the early centuries. Seeing their skill in trade the King Cheraman Perumal of Malabar gave them many 72 privileges, written on copper plates. Unfortunately those copper plates were lost in the later period. There is a consensus today in the Syro-Malabar Church that these Persian Christians brought the Syriac Liturgy and Syriac Rite to Kerala from Mesopotamia in the 4th century. Further the *Knanite* community (diocese of Kottayam) in Kerala today very strongly own that their forefathers brought the Syriac Rite and Syriac liturgy to Malabar Christians centuries ago and they are proud to be called as descendents of Thomas of *Kynai*⁵

Unfortunately this created a negative result in the Malabar Church. Thomas Christians never attempted for a liturgy or theology as their own, adapting signs and symbols from their life context. They were very much satisfied by the developed Persian Liturgical rites and other prayers conducted in Syriac language which was unknown to them. Indeed it was a great disaster as far the early Thomas Christian community was concerned.

Towards the close of the 15th century, the Portuguese navigator Vasco De Gamma along with his companions reached the Malabar Coast. To start new colonies in the Eastern land and improve their

³ All Church historians today accept this event in the Malabar History.

⁴ Ref. *Jornado of Dom Alexis* p.17

⁵ Vellian J; *Knanite Community: History and Culture* (Syrian Church Series Vol.XVII, 2001) p.36. Also refer the encounter with Bp. Kunnassery in the Magazine '*Apna Desh*' Book 53, Sept.7 :2003 and Book 54, Sept.5: 2004. p.9

trade motivated the Portuguese to hold any hardship to reach far distant land like India. The Thomas Christians warmly welcomed the Western Christians as their own brothers. But later when they started to *purify* the existing Syriac Rite, they retaliated against them strongly because they were at home with the Syriac Rite and Syriac Liturgy by this time. Even though this process is named 'latinisation' in the Malabar history, the contribution of the Western Christians to the Malabar Church was praiseworthy both in the secular and ecclesiastical as well. They created a missionary zeal among the Thomas Christians. Starting of Christian schools, better seminary formation for the clergy, publication of Christian literature and propagation of popular devotions such as Rosary, Way of the Cross, devotion to the Holy Eucharist, devotion to Mother Mary are some of their best Contributions to the Thomas Christians. In fact these popular devotions have greatly contributed for the growth of Christian life in the Malabar Coast. Still these devotions have an important place in the spiritual life of the Thomas Christians.

The fourth epoch in the history of the Malabar Church begins with the erection of two Apostolic Vicariates namely Thrissur and Kottayam exclusively for the Thomas Christians by Rome in 1887. Later in 1896 the Holy See suppressed the former Vicariates and reconstituted three Vicariates, namely Trichur, Ernakulam and Changanacherry, appointing three indigenous Bishops. The appointment of three Indians as Bishops of the Thomas Christians was an important step in the growth of the Malabar Church. In 1923 the Holy See constituted the Syro-Malabar Hierarchy making Ernakulam the Archbishopric See. The Archbishop then had control over all matters concerned with his Church. Malabar Church made tremendous progress in all fields such as education, hospitals, mission work, publications, starting the liturgical reform etc. by the appointment of native bishops. But things became very complicated in 1956 when another ecclesiastical province with Changanacherry as the Archbishopric was erected as in the Latin

model. It was the most disastrous event because in all liturgical matters the Archiepiscopal Sees went in opposite direction in the later period. The Syro-Malabar Church was raised to the Major Archiepiscopal status in 1993 and still the Church is in the path of progress.

Why A Crisis in the Syro-Malabar Church?

It is quite certain that the above mentioned two Christian groups who were primarily trade men and later took the mandates of official Church, had great role in making the destinies of the Malabar Church. But first and foremost Malabar Church is an Apostolic Church, founded by Apostle Thomas in Malabar and it must grow as an indigenous Church well rooted in the socio-religious milieu of India. The crisis in the Malabar Church directly points to the Church's Ancestral Tradition (Heritage), which eventually seems to have been reflected in the 'Liturgy' of the Church. Second Vatican Council called for a reform in the Church, especially a reform in the liturgical life in view of a renewal in the Christian life of the faithful. As far the Malabar Church was concerned, from a long period the Church was following the liturgy of the Persian Church in Syriac language. During sixteenth century and later the liturgy was thoroughly latinised. But the spiritual and theological formation of the faithful continued to be in Western style. It created a difficult situation.

During the renewal process in 1980s and later a minority group of bishops strongly supported a total restoration of the Persian (East Syrian) liturgy for the use of the Malabar Church⁶ For them return to 'ancestral heritage' was confined only to pre-sixteenth century East Syrian (Persian) tradition and liturgy. They were never concerned with the situation of the Malabar Church in the first four

⁶ See the document "Final Judgement of the Congregation for the oriental Churches Concerning the Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana" in *Roman Documents on the Syro-Malabar Liturgy* OIRSI Publications, Kottayam 1995 p.96.

centuries before the Persian immigration and the period of Latin rule after the Synod of Diamper and the present context of the Malabar Church. But majority of the Dioceses never desired for a total restoration of the Persian liturgy. In the light of the Vatican council document on liturgy, they wished for a renewal in the liturgy taking into consideration the principle of restoration, reform and adaptation promoted by the council. Also they stood for the new experiments and new Eucharistic prayers in the Liturgy as in the Latin model. These two views truly created a tension, which eventually developed into a Crisis in the Malabar Church.

Bishops' Response to the Roman Policy of Total Restoration:

It is very clear from the evidence of the number of letters sent by Malabar Bishops to Rome in 1930s, that they never favoured the Roman policy of total restoration of the Chaldean (East Syrian) liturgy for the use of the Malabar Church. Bishop George Alapatt of Trichur (Bishop since 1944) wrote a long letter to Eugene Cardinal Tisserant⁷ in 1938, entitled "No Return to Chaldeism". In the letter he mentioned the after effects of a total restoration of the Chaldean liturgy in the Malabar Church. He wrote "Both people and clergy have come to love our *modified* Chaldean Rite to such an extent that the pure Chaldean Rite is looked upon as a strange and foreign Rite. A reversion to the pure Chaldean Rite would seriously affect some of the popular and cherished devotions in Malabar"⁸

Another letter with the title "Chaldean Missal and Breviary not to be Restored" signed by all the Malabar bishops under the leadership of Archbishop Augustine Kandathil on 6th Dec.1938, reads "...if it be your mind that we should change our existing Missal and Breviary which have been in use for centuries, thus bringing about momentous changes in our Syro-Malabar Rite, it

⁷ French Cardinal, he was the Secretary of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches in 1936-59

⁸ref. *Ernakulam Missam* (Diocesan Bulletin of Arch-diocese of Ernakulam-Angamaly) Vol.xlv.no. 8, 1975, p.326.

would be a *regretful* surprise to us and to the flock entrusted to our care”⁹

Rome continued the same policy of total restoration in 1950s. In a letter to Archbishop Augustine Kandathil of Ernakulam in the year 1954 Cardinal Tisserant¹⁰ wrote, “Your ancient Rite, which in its origin and development is connected with Edessa and Mesopotamia, is preserved among you in a mutilated and highly Westernised form. In its present form it cannot help inculcate the liturgical spirit as much esteemed by Holy Mother Church” From the letter of the Cardinal it is very clear that the Chaldean Rite and Liturgy developed in Edessa-Mesopotamia and the liturgy in the Malabar Church must be restored to pure Chaldean form. The bishops, in the light of their long pastoral experience in Kerala certainly never wished for a pure Chaldean Liturgy for the use of the Malabar Church. On 6th June 1955 Archbishop with a title “Chaldean Liturgy Not to be Restored” wrote a long letter to Cardinal Tisserant. In the letter Archbishop proposed suggestions for a renewal of the liturgy in his Church. His words seem to be very courageous. He wrote “The Latin Liturgy has not failed to make convenient adaptations and modifications throughout the centuries. We want a reformation in our liturgy that will help it *living, dynamic, and progressive*¹¹”. From 1980s we notice a change in the policy of bishops. A minority group¹² of bishops strongly supported the Roman policy of total restoration, which eventually created a division within the Church. The wave of unity that spreads now slowly cures the wounds created by agitations, retaliations, false propaganda and circulation of anonymous letters within the Church.

Future Prospects:

⁹ *Ernakulam Missam*, Vol.xliii, no.4, p.128

¹⁰ Mannooramparambil T; *The Historical Background of the Syro-Malabar Liturgy* (Mal.) OIRSI publications 1986, p.303.

¹¹ *Ernakulam Missam*; Vol. Xliii. No.6, 1973, p. 69.

¹² See foot-note 6.

Syro-Malabar Church is an apostolic church founded by Apostle Church in the first century. The Church must be an indigenous in all possible ways, especially in the liturgical celebrations. The Indian *sadhanas* such as *mediation, namajapa, Kirthana, Pranidhana, bhajans, arathi, Deepanjaly, repeating Ishta manthra, silenc, etc* must have an important place in the liturgy of the Church. As the other apostles, St. Thomas might have celebrated the 'Breaking of the Bread' with the Indians accepting many symbols and elements from the life situation of the people. The above-mentioned *sadhanas* may be taken as the ancestral heritage, which the Church accepted from the local pattern of the worship of the people. New anaphoras must be formulated considering the need of the faithful. The Indian anaphoras composed by Dharmaram college Bangalore (1969) and the Liturgical centre in the Archdiocese of Ernakulam (1973) may be taken as models for the creation of new anaphoras. As far the Sources are concerned, the Anaphora of Addai and Mari was born in the theological centre of Edessa in the early century. New Anaphoras must be born in the theological centres of India as in the Edesean model. As far as possible Indian ragas must be taken in the composing new liturgical hymns. The liturgical text must contain symbols, language, philosophy and literature taken from living conditions of the people.

From 4th century (the arrival of *Kynai* Thomas at Kodungallur) till the second half of 20th century (II Vatican Council) the Malabar Church used Syriac as its liturgical language. Syriac was unknown to the faithful in Malabar. Nobody was bothered on what the priest was reciting in the Liturgy. Still those liturgical texts can be taken as an *Early Tradition* for further research, adaptation and inculturation. As Cardinal Parecattil puts

it, the Caldean Liturgy may be taken as a *canvas* for drawing ‘beautiful pictures’ from the *life context of the people*¹³.

The contribution of the Western Church to the Malabar Church especially in the field of liturgy can be taken in the realm of popular devotions. From the 16th century the Church developed a spirituality based on popular devotion, which was a contribution of the western missionaries. Popular devotions such as rosary, way of the cross, first Friday devotion, forty hour adoration, Marian devotion on Saturday, novenas to the saints and remembering the departed in November are some of the most popular devotions that have contributed much for the spiritual growth of the St. Thomas Christians and are still being continued.

Syro-Malabar Church is an individual Church with all the rights and freedom in liturgy. Inspired by the power of the Spirit the Church must take firm steps taking into consideration the past history of the community. Confining the ancestral heritage of the Church only to the pre-sixteenth century Persian (East Syrian) Period would not be a permanent solution to the Crisis in the Church.

¹³Mundadan Gracious; “Cardinal Parecattil Avant-Garde of Liturgical Reform” in *Cardinal Parecattil The Man His Vision and His Contribution*; Mundadan M.(Ed.) STAR Publication, Alwaye 1988.