III

SPIRITUALITY AND CULTURE

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Introduction

Man’s quest for God has given birth to different religious expressions and life styles, in various religions. Each religion has its own vision with regard to the spiritual passage to reach God. The customs and practices vary from religion to religion. Among the world religions the life style of Christianity is appealing to a large number of people in the world. From ancient time onwards Eastern Christianity was well known for its austere way of life. The ascetical practises that were prevalent among the early Christians in the East surprise us today. The spiritual life of the Fathers of the Church and the Mystics in the East, the ascetic outlook of the Sages, may seem to be strange and rigid. However, their vision of life remains sublime and gives us enlightenment. The present study throws light into the rich spiritual heritage of the St Thomas Christians from Early centuries.

1. The Spiritual Heritage of St Thomas Christians

“The Syro-Malabar Church believes that the Christ-Experience of the Apostle Thomas forms part of its original patrimony and hence of its spirituality”1. Although St Thomas is sometimes pictured popularly as ‘doubting Thomas’, he is the one who has made the most explicit Christological profession of faith, if we are to search in all the four Gospels. The confession of faith “My Lord and my God” remains the climax of the Gospel of John. The risen Lord touches the heart of Thomas telling “do not be faithless but believing” and then the Apostle has no more the need of any tangible experience but answers in deep faith2. This spirituality of Thomas is the very life—breath of the St Thomas Christians. It is nothing other than the spirituality of Jesus Himself, that is, to keep the commandment of the Father, abide in His love, and to do all that is pleasing to Him. This heredity is lived on in the tradition of the St Thomas Christians3.
1.1. The Passionate Attachment of the Christians to their Father in Faith

Although historical documents are not available in the first centuries regarding the visit of Thomas to India, it is quite evident from the passionate attachment, the St Thomas Christians had, towards their Father in faith. The common and frequent long pilgrimages that were made to his tomb at Mylapore, the names of innumerable members of the Church, the Church communities existing in various places for which he instituted churches, bear witness to that. The spiritual heritage that formed part and parcel of the Christian way of life which was designated by the term ‘Law of Thomas’ was shocking even for the Westerners in the 16th century. This term was employed by the Thomas Christians to prove their stand against Latinization forced upon them by the foreign missionaries. It comprised the whole of their Christian patrimony, of faith, liturgy, Church discipline, customs usages and laws. It referred to their specific mode of ‘living as a Church community’ with a spirituality and an identity of its own, distinct from the ‘Law of Peter’ followed by the Latin missionaries. It stood for the whole ethos of their Church life and the St Thomas Christians were very keen on keeping up their right to autonomy as a particular Church having its own proper rite.⁴

“The unbroken presence and belief of the St Thomas Christians through two millennia gives witness to the missionary work of their great Apostle. These Christians, with their East Syrian Liturgical tradition, ensured that the message of the Gospel was kept alive and that the memory of the Apostle Thomas would live on to inspire successive generations.”⁵ They kept up their fidelity to Christ and to his beloved Apostle, Thomas and through trials and tribulations of all kinds they remained firm giving witness to God’s love.⁶ St Epharem bears witness to the fact that in the first centuries those who visited and interceded at the tomb of St Thomas were granted innumerable gifts and blessings.⁷ “Thus Mar Thomma Margam is the particular Christian life style, introduced in India by Mar Thomma, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. Centuries back, in the beginning of Christian era itself, this special Christian life-style gminated in our own motherland India through St Thomas (Mar Thomma) who lived with, touched and experienced the Son of God, Jesus”.⁸ It means their faith, liturgical tradition, ecclesiastical system, discipline, ascetical practices administration, spirituality, theological tradition etc.⁹

1.2. Law of Thomas – A Life Style Rooted in the Soil

The Thomas Christians who form the most ancient Christian community of India and of the East as such possessed its own customs, practises and traditions deeply rooted in the life of the people. “Their family and social customs and traditions at birth, schooling, marriage, death and so on were not in need of change by their Christian faith”.⁹ They enjoyed a social status that was quite high in the society and their courteous behaviour contributed a great deal to preserve the peace and unity for which they were distinguished above all other inhabitants of the place. The Thomas Christians enjoyed seventy two privileges granted by the local kings which show their high social status.¹⁰ In spite of the surroundings alien to Christianity and the pressure of the cast-ridden society, they kept their Apostolic faith intact and pure, although they were not properly instructed and were thereby sometimes misled into superstitious practices and errors.¹¹ The unique mode of worship, with its disciplinary and social dimensions related to it, is called the ‘Law of Thomas’ which forms part and parcel of their spiritual heritage and makes it a distinct Oriental Church.¹² The ‘Law of Thomas’ was more a Christian life style inherited from the Apostle, rather than a system of faith, which was deeply oriental, well adapted to the socio-cultural life of their native land, Malabar.¹³ It formed the sum total of the ancient traditions of the Thomas Christians, and the sum total of their Christian...
heritage\textsuperscript{17}. Their spirituality was more a vital or existential one constructed from life, rather lived than reflected upon, in contrast to the reflexive spirituality that can be described from the works of the spiritual masters in the West\textsuperscript{18}.

1.3. Devotion to the Bible and Liturgical Prayer

One of the outstanding characteristics of the particular spiritual heritage of the St Thomas Christians is their frequent and customary reference to the Scriptures, in liturgical prayers and theological reflections, if we are to compare these practices with the other two Traditions of the Catholic Church. The East Syriac ecclesial Tradition inherited the Jewish Bible which eventually became the normative Scripture for the early Christians. On a cultural linguistic basis, in prayer - forms and symbolisms as well, it remained faithful to the sacred Scriptures. The writings of the Fathers like Ephraem and Aphrat show the intimate link with the Bible. Their writings are saturated with citations, images and allusions to the OT, and they find fulfilled in the mysteries of Christ\textsuperscript{19}. Writers like Ephraem can visualize Scripture as the incarnation of God in human language\textsuperscript{20}.

Among the Thomas Christians, the Bible used was the Syriac Pshitta. The Gospel is read out at liturgical services while the faithful stand as a sign of attention and reverence. However, following the age-old Indian custom of squatting during prayer and meditation, the Thomas Christians used to squat during the gospel reading. It was at a later period around AD 349-50 according to the instruction of Theophilus, the Indian, as to conform to the general liturgical practice along with other such customs, that standing as a sign of attention and reverence was introduced\textsuperscript{21}.

Reverence to the book of the Bible was immense among Thomas Christians. The book of the Gospels for the liturgical use was kept always on the altar in the sanctuary, adorned with gold, silver and precious stones. It was never taken out for private use but only used for carrying in procession by the clergy. Meanwhile the faithful would kiss it. The deacons were expected to learn the Psalter by heart and the theological formation was based on the Bible and the biblical commentary of Isodad of Mary, the 9\textsuperscript{th} century East Syrian patristic biblical synthesis. The candidates for Priesthood were required to copy out the Bible. Even though only a few priests had mastery over the Syriac language, most of them had an average knowledge to celebrate the liturgy. The Bible was taught mainly through liturgical homilies, catechesis, symbols, etc\textsuperscript{22}.

The divine liturgy of the St Thomas Christians was the liturgy of the Chaldean Church which formed the vital part of the ‘Law of Thomas’. The entire sacramental life also was the constituent element of the ‘Law of Thomas’. They followed the East Syrian or Chaldean liturgy with the necessary adaptation and modification and they recited the divine office of the same Tradition\textsuperscript{23}. “For their liturgical life, while following basically the rites, prayers, and ceremonies prescribed by the liturgical books of their Chaldean prelates they also knew how to strike a style of their own at least in certain details”\textsuperscript{24}. The original East Syrian Liturgy owed its origin to Apostles Addai and Mari\textsuperscript{25}.

1.4. High Esteem for the Syriac Language

The Thomas Christians of old highly esteemed the Syriac language\textsuperscript{26}. They were emotionally attached to it since it is substantially the same as the Aramaic language that was spoken by the Lord and the Apostles\textsuperscript{27}. “On the 1\textsuperscript{st} of January, the \textit{Mar Thomma Nazranees} celebrate the name of ISO. The name stands for the person. \textit{Iso} is the Aramaic pronunciation of our Lord’s name and it means “ Redeemer”\textsuperscript{28}. They preferred to use the word \textit{Isomisiha} to refer to Jesus Christ. “As the divine mystery was basically semitic, cast in a biblical idiom...
of thought we have to search the Scripture itself to find the real significance and meaning of these words. A profound sense of the presence of God which permeates the Divine Liturgy, is the underlying reason why these attributes are given to it.  

1.5. The Highly Symbolic Sign of the Cross

*Mar Thoma Nazarenes*, according to their ancient custom, used to draw the sign of the cross on themselves in a particular way. They hold the first three finger tips of the right hand joined together which symbolizes the oneness of God and the distinct three divine persons, and the other two fingers folding inward as to touch the palm of the hand confessing Christ Incarnate as having united in Him the two natures. They touch the forehead, the chest and the right shoulder and then the left shoulder signing in the form of the cross.

2. Asceticism centred around the Liturgy

Asceticism is considered to be one of the fundamental conditions for Christian discipleship as a means of following Christ closely. The practice of vigil, fasting, prayer, reading and meditation of holy books, obedience and humility are the important means of practising purity. “Consequently, Christian engagement implied a life of sanctity. One of the conditions of this way of life was to be in a state of struggle, a spiritual warfare against the devil and all his forces, including the first manifest enemy, the world. In the domain of spiritual and ascetic life all the natural inclinations and temptations of concupiscence were to be always resisted.”

Baptism was the sign of entering the New Pact and it demanded a person’s constant struggle against concupiscence, in addition to the abandonment of everything in the world and attachment only to Christ. This ideal of life was to be realized perfectly in the preference given to celibacy or virginity. In the spirit of a life of sacrifice and mortification the members could live a life of daily martyrdom. That means to avoid sin and to protect oneself in the war against the devil by means of prayer, spiritual readings and renunciation in all forms. In the purpose of total renunciation and radical following of Christ the neophytes and especially the baptized had to practise not only continence and chastity but also poverty, fasting, prayer and brotherhood.

2.1. The Ascetic Life Style

The East Syrian Tradition dates back its origin to the Apostolic period of preaching. The ascetic spirituality of the Syro-oriental Christians was in direct continuity with Christ and the Apostles. The spirit of asceticism was quite strong in early Syrian Christianity especially in the norms of poverty, abstinence, fasting, vigilance and celibacy. The tradition of a specific ascetic form of life was prevalent in the ecclesial life of the Early Christians already in the first centuries. The oldest form of this way of life, in the life style of monks, nuns having an ecclesial apostolate, known as Bnay – Bnat Qyama, was a high degree of spirituality and asceticism practised in this form of Christian life.

Besides the secular clergy there were monks and nuns and according to the writers of old they lived in great poverty and chastity. The Syro-Oriental Church developed her own distinctive tradition of ascetic and consecrated life. The Church as a whole led an austere life. Among the Thomas Christians even in some families there were small cells that were used from time to time to retire for prayer and solitude. Chastity was held in very high esteem even by non Christians in the surroundings.

The Syro-Oriental writers in general stress the necessity of self-emptying in order to attain the exalted stages in spiritual life. The life of penance of the St Thomas Christians mainly consisted in rigorous fasting. “The motivating force behind the ascetical ideal, based on baptism, are mainly three: the model of Christ as the Bridegroom to whom individual Christians are betrothed at Baptism; the model of Baptism as a return to Paradise and the model of the baptismal life as the marriageless life of the angels.” Ascetical fasting is an act undertaken...
for a religious purpose and it consists in abstaining from food as an act of self denial for the purification of the soul and eventually to enter into communion with God. It remains the most common and the most important form of asceticism in spiritual life originating from the Bible and advocated by the Fathers of the Church like Ephraem⁴⁰.

### 2.2. Rigorous Life of Fasting

The Syrian Fathers are not so much concerned about the historical exegesis of Scripture as the spiritual exegesis that proceeds from faith. According to Aphrahat the main learning and reading the Scripture is to put them into practice and to fulfill the commandment of self-renunciation and love of God⁴¹. One of the best expressions of self-renunciation is fasting. Ephrem has written 12 poems illustrating the necessity of fasting, the manner in which one should fast, the benefits one derives from it etc.⁴². According to him penance should be the attitude of the Christian and tears of repentance or penitence are external signs of internal remorse that is powerful enough to open the doors of God’s mercy. Fasting heals our wounds and makes us powerful to resist the power of Satan⁴³. The Chaldean liturgy and Divine Office is rich with the doctrine on fasting on the basis of the teaching of Bible and the Fathers. In and through the Liturgy, instructions are given on the necessity and usefulness of fast and the relationship fasting has with the Paschal Mystery of Christ. It is through fasting one grows in the theological virtues faith, hope and charity. The liturgical texts clearly illustrate the spiritual benefits attained through fasting which includes subduing one’s concupiscence, strengthening sobriety and acquiring sanctity. Good thoughts diminish the urge of gluttony and carnal pleasures, and a life rooted in asceticism enables to walk in the right path of the Lord⁴⁴. The ascetical character of early Syriac Christianity springs from the covenant—consciousness that the primitive Syrian Christianity had, in which Christian faith is perceived as a new covenant with God. It forms the basis of all theology, ethics and organization⁴⁵.

The St Thomas Christians had a rigorous practice of asceticism especially in the practice of fasting that was an integral part of their spirituality. The outstanding characteristic of fasting was that it was centred on the liturgy⁴⁶. The discipline was observed rigourously in close relationship to its liturgical dimension⁴⁷. There was no fasting on Sundays and feast days even in the period of Lent⁴⁸. “The liturgical prayer in itself is an effort for sanctification: to come to the Church, to participate in the prayers actively, to acquire moral and spiritual dispositions for a good life etc. The liturgical prayer is also an invitation to a deeper understanding and to a more serious commitment to the evangelical teachings and morals. Conversion through penance is the entrance to evangelical life. Therefore, the Church prescribes penance which is mainly practised by fasting”⁴⁹.

### 2.3. Excellence of Life

The Thomas Christians excelled all other Christians in the matter of austerity especially in the matter of Fasting. Fasting was never counted as an act of private devotion or an obligation imposed by the ecclesiastical law but as part and parcel of one’s devotion to God⁵⁰. Over half of the year was set aside for fasting⁵¹. The Church advocates mainly eight fasts in the course of the liturgical year. However, in a year of 365 days, 290 days were fasting days, and in practice, as to exclude overlapping, 225 days were observed as days of fasting⁵². They include the Great Fast of 50 days during the Lenten season, the twenty five day’s Fast of Advent, the fifty day’s Fast of the Apostles, the Fast of the migration of Our Lady, the Fast before the Nativity of Mary, the Fast of 12 Fridays after Christmas, the Fast before the feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the fast of Elias and the Cross, the Fast of the Ninivites, the usual Fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, the Fast of the virgins, the Fast of Transfiguration, the vigil Fasts before the feasts of the nativity of our Lord, Pentecost, Ascension, and the feast of the Patron of the Church.

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The Ecclesial Heritage of the St Thomas Christians

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Mar Thoma Margam

According to the East Syrian discipline the liturgical day begins with sunset and ends with the sunset on the following day which was the usual ancient custom of the Christians of Mesopotomea and Chaldea. The mode of fasting included a double obligation: natural fasting and abstinence from certain food articles. The canonical discipline and strict observance of Fasts implied both complete abstinence from food and drink till the end of the liturgical service and also from certain delicious food articles like meat, fish, egg, wine, milk and milk products. The fasting ended probably in the evening with the liturgical services. “In the 16th century when the Portugese forced them to begin Lent on Ash Wednesday only, and to eat fish and drink wine during Lent they ran away from the Portugese settlements” 53.

According to the foreign missionaries what is outstanding is that they observed all Fasts with the same strictness both in duration and the rigour of abstinence. 54 Besides the Church organizes days of penance that is called rogations, two or three times a year, to pray and do penance day and night, in order to renew oneself and to meet God 55.

However, to consider fast as an absolute reality would be wrong. The Church teaches that it is only a means and therefore, fasting is made moderate with times of rest and relaxation on Sundays of great Lent and feast days of local saints on which the faithful make a pilgrimage to their monasteries. 56

3. The Ascetical Practises during the Liturgical Seasons of the Year

Along with Fasts, the celebration of the Liturgy, the chanting of the divine office by the whole parish community, the reception of sacraments as well, were part and parcel of liturgical worship. Liturgy is the reproduction andactualization of the mystery of Christ in time. During the liturgical seasons, “(t)he Church, therefore, uses the pedagogical technique of communicating it little by little, over a year’s time, according to a wisely contrived cycle so that ultimately we contemplate the whole of God’s plan for our salvation which was realized in His Son” 57. The liturgical calendar of the Thomas Christians was divided in such a way that it not only presented the whole mystery of Christ in an year span but also prepared the people both physically and psychologically for assimilating the mystery, by a life of penance and spiritual preparation 58.

In the period of Annunciation, although the Church does not positively suggest a life of penance, the Thomas Christians led a life of fasting and prayer. 59 This period is considered very important as far as salvation history and liturgical calendar are concerned. It is the period of preparation for the coming of the Messiah. As the people of old prepared themselves for the Lord the faithful should prepare themselves to receive Him. A better grasp and participation of the mystery of Christ and one’s own salvation is made possible only by a subjective participation of man through a life of penance. Therefore, this period is spent in fasting and prayer. The Thomas Christians kept the fast in the period of Annunciation with the same strictness and rigour of abstinence as the Great Fast 60.

The Fast of the Ninivites which is known as Moonnu noimbu is celebrated with special observances. The whole Psalmody of David was recited with antiphons and hymns and a lengthy reading from the writings of Ephraem about the penance of the Ninivites were read during the day as well. Then the priest in sacred vestments would sing the liturgical prayers, expressing great compunction of the heart to which the faithful would answer ‘Amen’ in prostration. The ceremony lasts till sunset and the Fast would end with the Celebration of the Liturgy, after which there was a common meal prepared for the occasion. While keeping the Fast in the same manner in succeeding days, the last day, the faithful take part in the Sacred Mysteries and the following day will be celebrated as a day of Feast. It is an attempt to commemorate the repentance of the Ninivites and to imitate them. The Fast is observed by all, irrespective of man or woman, grown - ups or children, setting aside all other occupations with the fear of being punished from...
above, if one does not observe it deliberately. On these days the faithful would by all means never leave the premises of the Church and spent time in continuous prayer and meditation which is known as Bhajana⁶¹.

Similarly the Fast before the nativity of Mary, known as Ettunoimbu is purely a local custom of worship both in origin and observance. This is a practice mainly of women especially of the virgins in the manner of the fast of the virgins in the Chaldean Church. It originated in the ⁹th century for fear of the invasion of the Muslims’ attack on the city of Cranganore, so that virgins would be protected from them. The way of observing the Fast was like that of the Ninivites. The faithful used to pray continuously in the Church taking part in the Qurbana and remaining in the Church in private prayer and meditation till the afternoon. Those who remain at home prepare and bring meals for them so that those who fast could eat it or take home when the Fast is over.

The season of the Great Fast of fifty days known as Ampathu Noimbu begins with prayers of the Divine Liturgy and Divine Office that invite the faithful to repentance, prayer, fasting and charity towards the poor. The basis of the Fast is the forty day fast of Jesus⁶². During the Holy week, from Maundy Thursday to Easter, they abstain from food. During the night of Friday they have prayers and holy sermons commemorating the divine mysteries. Throughout the Lenten season people assemble in the Church three times a day, in the morning, evening and at midnight. Nobody abstains from prayers in the morning and evening. The Archbishop and Archdeacons visit the Churches during Lenten Season and hear confession and distribute communion⁶³.

The call to repentance is plenty in the prayers of the season. “It is only from a deep awareness of being sinners, of being separated from God, the source of life, and being redeemed, that believers will be able to raise authentic and sincere praise and thanksgiving to God the Redeemer. This Salvific Experience is the attitude of Reconciliation”⁶⁴. Throughout the season the Church appeals to the faithful to purify their conscience and abstain from all malice. It is not only for preparing for the celebration of Easter, but also for making their bodies the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, fasting being the means for the same⁶⁵. The holy Week is fully set apart for intense spiritual renewal and preparation for the Pasch. On these days the Fast is rigorous and time is spent in reading the Scriptures, meditating over all the events which preceded the death and resurrection of Jesus. Time is spent in prayers and vigil, and in listening to the proclamation of the divine mystery⁶⁶. St Thomas Christians used to spent the time of Passion week practically in the Church keeping vigil at night. They used to give alms, spent their time in silence and abstained from even cleansing the house and its premises, as a sign of participating in the death of the Lord⁶⁷. The liturgical celebrations of the Holy Week are a spiritual enactment of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord. The holy tradition is that the faithful keep vigil and pray at the tomb of the Lord (in the church) throughout the night of the Passion Friday while learned priests deliver long sermons over the mysteries of Christ⁶⁸. Thomas Christians keep up the special memory of the beloved departed throughout the season of the Great Fast, by visiting the tombs of the beloved departed, and interceding for them⁶⁹. In the prayers recited during the liturgy one sees a number of OT citations and allusions and the theology of penance of the Fathers like Ephraem and Ebed Jesu⁷⁰.

“The repeated insistence on fasting, prayer, and almsgiving is ample evidence of the concern of the Divine Liturgy to keep up the excellent spiritual traditions of the oriental church based on the inspired words of God in the Old Testament, nourished and developed by the oriental fathers. The spirituality resulting from this asceticism appeared to be an ideal one, since it was the fruit of a biblical and patristic synthesis; moreover it maintained the vertical and horizontal relations of man in balance”⁷¹.
Fasting and prayer make man a worthy abode of the Holy Trinity and draws him closer to God and works of charity, almsgiving and righteous living strengthen his bonds with others to lead a happy social life.

Following the Great Feast of Easter, the seven weeks of the season of Resurrection is a period of joy and exultation over the life in the Risen Lord and His victory over death and satanic power. Christ’s resurrection is the foundation of the Church’s faith and the Church reminds the members that baptism is participation in the death and resurrection of the risen Lord. The Church remembers all the saints on the Friday after Easter, all those who have participated in the glory of the Son. Every Christian lives in a world redeemed by Christ in the hope and joy of the Lord.

The season of the Apostles is a reminder of the works of the Spirit on the Apostles that forms the foundation of Church. It is He who illumines and perfects the work of the Apostles, gives them courage to fight against evil and to practice Christian virtues. The “Kneeling Rite” which is performed on the day of Pentecost as a public rite of reconciliation and the Fasting that is observed throughout the Season of the Apostles in order to identify themselves with the afflictions and difficulties in sharing the Christ experience also form an integral part of the ascetical practices of the Mar Thomma Nazranees.

The season of Summer is the commemoration of the development and prosperity of the Church owing to the work of the Apostles which produced abundant fruits of martyrdom. The Church reminds the faithful to meditate over the martyrs and its fruit is repentance. The spirituality of martyrdom is an essential aspect of the Spirituality of the Church because it is the highest way of imitating Christ. The faithful feel proud of being the sons of these great Fathers in faith, the Martyrs, and it invites the Christians to live in patience and to die daily as heroes in constant poverty like Christ, helping the poor and dying to the world.

The season of Elia and the Cross symbolizes the end of the world and the last judgment and the prayers which overtone eschatological life. The feast of the Cross (on September 14) is the central event of the season and the Liturgy celebrates the glorious victory and power of the Cross with its eschatological significance which symbolizes the second coming of Christ. According to Syrian mystical theology, “the cross is the gate to the path of mystic; the gnosis of the cross is given through the suffering of the cross, through this gate the entrance into the heavenly mysteries is achieved.” The Church extols and sings praise to the Holy Cross. She tries to create an eschatological sense in the minds of the faithful, inviting them to participate in the heavenly liturgy. They are expected to pray for the remission of their sins and renewal of life for the things to come. The theology of the Cross expounds the meaning of suffering in its Christian sense. Suffering has a positive and saving dimension because of the living and eschatological Cross of Christ. The divine Liturgy gives man hope and consolation showing that the Cross leads to victory and salvation. The same spirit is continued in the season of Moses that follows immediately. The season of the Dedication of the Church reminds the faithful of the final dedication of the Church by Christ to the Father in Parousia. The Church is extolled as a heavenly establishment, as God’s tent of the new covenant in the place of old.

Thus the spiritual customs of the Thomas Christians has a long history, practice and approval both on the part of the authority and of the people having a definite aim. “.... (T)his institution and observance of the Malabar Church was aimed at gaining spiritual fervour and renewal of faith through the public worship of God with which they ended the fast.”

4. Ascetical Practices and Renewal of Life

Ascetical practises as such are not an end in themselves, but a call to repentance and inner renewal. It is a quest for a life with God and its
effectiveness is in the cooperation of man with God⁸⁹. The salient feature of Syrian liturgy is that there is a close relationship between ascetical practices and liturgical seasons. The four major fasts 25 days before Christmas, the 50 days fast in preparation for the death and resurrection of the Lord, the 50 days fasts in view of the feast of the Apostles and the feast of Elias are arranged as a preparation for and realization of important events. The penitential life of man is well set into the liturgical season that the advancement of salvation history induces in the believer a life of conversion which enables him to commit himself to the Church. All other fasts are also performed in accordance with the liturgy to make it all the more fruitful⁹¹.

For example, the period of the Great Fast Anpathu Noimbu is exclusively devoted to prayer, penance and repentance over one’s sinful life as a preparation for the death and resurrection of Christ. Therefore the liturgy of the season continually reminds the people of repentance, fast and prayer in order to purify their souls and an invitation for a better participation of the great mysteries that are commemorated and enacted. For the Thomas Christians these days were days of severe fasting, mortification, abstinence and long liturgical prayers. What is outstanding is the liturgical and communitarian aspect of these practices. Each day of the Lenten fast concluded with liturgical service that comprised readings from the Bible, sermons and communion. People assemble in the Church thrice a day for reciting the divine office in which the whole community participates.

Similarly the fifty days fast of the Apostles and the period of the Apostles is to realize the two ends intended by the season namely, that the Church may establish herself in the faithful and the faithful may be rooted deep in the life of the Church through faith and the power of the Spirit. Fast is an effective means to realize this aim. The Fast of Elias and the Cross symbolizes the eschatological expectation, reminds and prepares the people for the second coming of Christ in glory. Since the fast is in relation to the feast of the Cross it is known as the fast of Elias and the Cross. It starts on the first Sunday of Elias and lasts for seven weeks. The liturgy of the period attempts to create a sense of readiness and hope to receive the Lord and participate in the heavenly liturgy. Thus the Thomas Christians establish a meaningful relationship between life of penance and liturgy⁹².

The St Thomas Christians under the influence of Chaldean theology resembled much of the Chaldean asceticism, fasting being the main form of penance. The native culture of the Hindus which had a well set form of austerity has definitely influenced the Thomas Christians’ way of life. The ascetical practices like continued prayer in the Church, abstinence from conjugal relationship for certain days are to a certain extent borrowed from them. The fasts were not considered an obligation but voluntary springing out of the feeling of necessity and that is the reason for keeping the fast intact with all its strictness. The liturgical season invited the Christians to a life of prayer and penance through which they continuously renewed their life.

Conclusion

The Spiritual heritage and ascetic practises of Thomas Christians illustrate an excellent way of Christian living in Kerala in the midst of other predominant and widespread religions of the time. Indeed the strong attachment of the Thomas Christians to St Thomas is a reflection of the passionate attachment of their father in faith to Christ. The beauty of the life style consists in the way of worship which is purely Christian but assimilating many elements from Hindu Culture. The Hindu scriptures and spiritual exercises have contributed much to the spirit of this unique form of Christian living. Since they lived a life of asceticism, the life style was of great excellence and therefore, the Christian heritage really impressed the people of other religions as well. It can be considered to be an ideal form of missionary adaptation by which Christianity was presented in an appealing way to the Non-Christian brethren around. Moreover, what was outstanding was the spirit of prayer and penance that
was exercised not by way of obligation, but given voluntarily and generously which marvelled even the missionaries who landed in India at a later stage. It is sad to see that this precious patrimony is practically forgotten by the present generation. The Thomas Christians are not proud enough of this rich heritage. Only a deep awareness of this richness and a readiness to draw inspiration from the life of our forefathers will enable the Thomas Christians to solve the present crises which is badly affecting the life of the Church today.

ENDNOTES

1 George Nedungattu S.J., “Spirituality of the Syro – Malabar Church” in East Syrian Spirituality, Augustine Thottakara (ed). (Centre for Indian and Inter-religious studies, 1990), 154.
8 Varghese Pathikulangara, Mar Thomma Margam, (Denha Services, Vidyanagar,Manganam, Kottayam, 2004), 19.
10 James Aeryhayil, The Spiritual Heritage of St. Thomas Christians, (Dharmaram publications, Bangalore, 2001), 5
12 See for details N.A. Thomas, One Territory – One Bishop? Or Shall the Syrian Rites Die?, (Denha Services, Manganam, 2011), 52 - 56
17 Andrews Thazhath, The Law of Thomas, 10 – 11
20 Fr. Pauly Maniyattu, Fundamentals of Oriental Theology, Class notes p. 3
23 James Aeryhayil, The Spiritual Heritage of St. Thomas Christians, 31-34.
28 Varghese Pathikulangara, Mar Thomma Margam, 77.
30 Varghese Pathikulangara, Mar Thomma Margam, 30.
31 Dr. Thomas Olickal, The Three Stages of Spiritual Realization according to Joseph Huzzaya, 101-103.
32 Joseph Habbi, “East Syrian Women Saints and their Contribution to Spiritual Theology” in East Syriac Spirituality, Augustine Thottakara (ed). (Centre for Indian and Inter-religious studies, 1990), 102 - 103
36 See for details Thomas Olickal, The Three Stages of Spiritual Realization according to Joseph Huzzaya, (Hirs Publication Changanaserry, 2000), 52-59

Thomas Olickal, The Three Stages of Spiritual Realization according to Joseph Huzzaya, 50.


James Aethayil, The Spiritual Heritage of St. Thomas Christians, 141-144.


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Patros Yousif, “An Introduction to the East Syrian Spirituality”, in East Syrian Spirituality, edited by Augustine Thottakara (Centre for Indian and Inter – religious Studies, Rome 1990), 50


Varghese Pathikulangara, Mar Thomma Margam, 91.

Varghese Pathikulangara, Mar Thomma Margam, 85.


Varghese Pathikulangara, Mar Thomma Margam, 101-102.

James Aethayil cmi, The Spiritual Heritage of St. Thomas Christians, 188.


James Aethayil, The Spiritual Heritage of St. Thomas Christians 192-193

James Aethayil, The Spiritual Heritage of St. Thomas Christians 196-198
2
The Spiritual Life of the St Thomas Christians

Dr Joseph Chalasserry

Introduction

Before the 17th century, the St Thomas Christians of India were particularly rich in their spiritual vision of the life of man. That glorious spiritual heritage is partially buried in the historical past, but now there is a praiseworthy attempt to give life and flesh to the skeleton of their precious heritage. In this article we are trying to have a glimpse over the spiritual life of St Thomas Christians, while forgetting its diminution in the midst of historical events. All the descriptions in the perfect tense show the spiritual traditions of the St Thomas Christians before the sixteenth century and that in the present tense show the spiritual traditions which are even practised today.

1. Some Antecedents of the Spiritual Life of the St Thomas Christians

1.1. The Theological Antecedent

St Thomas Christians of India received their Christian faith from the Apostle Thomas. As Cardinal Tisserant wrote: At the very beginning of the Christian era, the evangelical message was brought to India by one of the men who had heard directly the teaching of Jesus, the one who touched with his fingers the glorious wounds of Christ.” The Spiritual life of St Thomas Christians springs from the apostolic Christ experience of St Thomas. From him they received the heroic love towards God and towards their neighbours. The name St Thomas Christians (Marthomakristyanikal) takes its origin from the Apostle Thomas. In honour of the Apostle Thomas, the St Thomas Christians have three great feasts, i.e., on July 3rd, the octave of Easter and on 18th December. On the 3rd of July, known as Dukhrana (commemoration), until recently certain families celebrated it as kind of Chatham (death anniversary) in memory of their father in faith. The octave of Easter, known as Puthunjayar (New Sunday), is solemnly celebrated in honour of St Thomas, who confessed with conviction "My Lord and My God" (Jn 20: 28). The commemoration of the miracle of the cross of St Thomas occurs on 18th December. On the occasions of these feasts days the pilgrims visit Mylapore, where the tomb of St Thomas remains, and Malayattoor, where St Thomas is believed to have prayed and his foot-prints were stamped on the rock.
1.2. The Liturgical Antecedent

With the Chaldean Church St Thomas Christians share the East Syrian liturgical tradition from the time of the establishment of their liturgy, (perhaps from the 4th or 5th century). Because of the great love and esteem for the Syriac language, the St Thomas Christians had accepted this liturgical tradition whole-heartedly. The letter of three lay leaders of St Thomas Christians to Pope Gregory XIII in 1578 says: "Our prayers are in the Syriac or the Chaldean language which was handed down to us by our lord St Thomas". They did not consider the East Syrian liturgy as a foreign one, but they accepted it as their own and held fast to it with great respect and veneration. Through this liturgical tradition they developed an oriental form of worship of their Catholic and Apostolic faith with the disciplinary and social dimensions of India, known as the Law of Thomas, making them a distinct Oriental Church. This Law of Thomas designates the liturgical, ecclesial, ascetical and socio-cultural life style of St Thomas Christians. It was the warp and woof of their spiritual life before the synod of Diamper.

1.3. The Cultural Antecedent

The St Thomas Christians were born in the land of India, a land famous for yoga (spiritual effort for integration with God), dhyana (meditation), asceticism and Rshies (Sages) who attained the higher world through the performance of yajna (sacrifice). Before the growth of Christianity in India there was already Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism in this soil. Among them, Hinduism, the major religion of India, had a great influence on the cultural development of India. Therefore, Indian Spirituality and culture are sometimes known as Hindu Spirituality and culture. Interiority, the importance of the heart, the sense of the sacred, the love of nature, the obsession for liberation, the emphasis on self-renunciation, the importance of a Guru (teacher), etc. are some of the special characteristics of this Spirituality. The life based on dharma (duty) is the supreme teaching of Indian culture and society as a whole. We can say that this spirituality is more experiential than experimental, more subjective than objective, more immanent than transcendent. The concept of ahimsa is another great contribution of India to the world for the respect of all kinds of life. These spiritual and cultural elements of the homeland of St Thomas Christians had a great role in the formation of their spiritual life. The integrated Indian culture with the Christian faith is the uniqueness of St Thomas Christian's spirituality in the history of Christian spirituality.

2. Some Characteristics of St Thomas Christian's Spirituality

2.1. Liturgical and Biblical Spirituality

2.1.1. Eucharist Centred

The "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" no. 10 teaches that, 'the liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed and it is also the fount from which all her power flows'. 'From the liturgy and especially from the Eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain, and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed, are achieved with maximum effectiveness'. This teaching of the Council Fathers is found alive already in the tradition of St Thomas Christians. They have great respect towards the Most Holy Eucharist. Their life is centred on the Eucharistic celebration. Attendance at the Eucharistic celebration on Sundays and feast days belongs to their life norms. The long but beautiful ceremonies of the liturgy of the Word, the occasional bible conventions and classes and the daily bible reading at home help them to integrate their life with true biblical spirit.
Though their liturgy is long, they take keen interest to participate in the Eucharistic liturgy due to their conviction on the centrality of the Eucharist in their whole life. For them the Eucharist is the "medicine of life" (sam hayye) and the "treasury of healing". So they gather in the name of Jesus Christ and rejoice, glorify, commemorate and celebrate the great awesome, holy, vivifying and divine mystery of the passion, death, burial and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In the liturgy, all the mysteries of our faith are explained simply but with a profound theological understanding for the acceptance of the people of God. Through the repetitive style of the liturgy people can experience these mysteries in a wonderful manner. About this repetitive style of the East Syrian liturgy J. Aerthayil states:

The repetitive style of the Eastern liturgies is remarkably verified in the Divine Liturgy's innumerable multiplication of the acts of worship, praise, etc. Appearing as monotonous at the first glance, it points to the experiential dimension of the Divine Liturgy. This is the fruit of the experience of the mystery of Christ as well as an aid to it. This is in line with well-known Oriental methods of prayer such as Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer. Thus repeating the praise of God orally and experiencing it internally, the whole man participating in Divine Liturgy, praises and glorifies the adorable Trinity.

All those who participated in the liturgy received communion in both species. The actual participation of the Qurbana (Offering, Eucharistic Celebration) aims to bring all the life experience of the faithful and to offer them with the offering of Jesus to God the Father. It helps them to experience the real presence of Jesus, as the deep love of God, the Father, towards them, not only during the celebration of the Qurbana but also in their life after the Qurbana. Thus, they are able to sing for ever the hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the sublime Godhead, Lord of all, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

2.1.2. Participation in the “Yama Prarthana”

St. Thomas Christians were not satisfied only with the participation in the Qurbana, often celebrated on Sundays and feast days and on other special occasions. They took interest to participate together with the priests in the Yama Prarthana (The Liturgy of the Hours). The priests and the people recited the liturgical prayers of the Church in the morning and evening, in the churches. It is clear from the eyewitness Melchior Nunes Barreto, after a visit to the St Thomas Christians in 1563, who wrote to his brethren in Europe.

I cannot tell you, my dear brethren, how much I am consoled in the Lord when I see and speak with these Christians who from the time, when St. Thomas had been in these parts, as it is believed, have kept faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ in spite of the fact that they had been deprived of instruction, sacraments and other means which are preserved among us by the divine goodness, and even though they have been living among an infinite number of infidels, not only molested by the gentiles but even persecuted by the Moors and Jews, who are living among them. In spite of all this they have always preserved the veneration, obedience and faith of the Holy Cross and the memory of the mysteries of the Catholic faith. And on all days before sunset they assemble in the Church to recite the psalms and lessons in Chaldean, and in the morning they do the same, the cassanars... reciting their matins at the altar and the people answering their aleyas and other words with such impetus of the spirit that, although I do not understand the words they provoke in me devotion.

They began the liturgy of the hours with the special ceremony of giving peace (Kasthuri) to each other, as a symbol of their perfect love towards the neighbour and their true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
2.2. Ecclesial and Sacramental Spirituality

In the history of St Thomas Christians we cannot see different schools of spirituality, as in the Western Church, and no particular spiritual writing, as far as I know, or a spiritual person propagating a particular way of spiritual life. For them, the spiritual life is always centred on the life of the Church. They have the strong conviction that they are incorporated in to the mystical body of Christ through the rites of Christian Initiation. The Church nourishes them through the sacraments in their spiritual growth. All the sacramental rites help them to participate in Christ's life, either in personal relation to him or in a communitarian way within the Church. Each person tries to assimilate and keep the spirit of their Church in their own life situation through the sacramental rites of the Church.

The Law of Thomas expresses the ecclesial spirit of the Thomas Christians. Those who study the history of St Thomas Christians will appreciate their struggle for safeguarding their ecclesial identity manifested through the Law of Thomas. Mar Joseph Cariattil, Paremmakkal Thomakathanar, Fr Placid Podipara etc., are some of the outstanding examples for those who reflected the ecclesial identity of St Thomas Christians through their lives. By living this ecclesial spirituality, Fr Chavara Kuriakose Elias and Sister Alphonsa were beatified by Pope John Paul II during his apostolic visit at Kottayam. Sister Alphonsa was canonized as the first Saint of the St Thomas Christians at Rome by Pope Benedict XVI. The process of beatification of Bishop Thomas Kurialacherry, Archbishop Mathew Kavukattu, Kunjachan (Fr. Augustine Thevarpampil), Sr Evuprasia, Sr Mariyam Thresia and Fr Mathew Kadalikkattil are on going. All these lives give witnesses to a living ecclesial spirituality of St Thomas Christians.

The faithful of St Thomas Christians not only participate in the sacramental life of the Church but they are involved in all the affairs of the Church. In ancient time the participation of the laity in the Church was fully and satisfactorily undertaken by the Palliyogam, which still exists as the Parish Council, but without the proper glamour as it had before. The real nature of the Palliyogam shows a significant expression of ecclesial communion and co-responsibility of St Thomas Christians. Nowadays every parish has different associations for the activities of the different groups of the laities with the church. For example, the Mission League for the Children, the Yuvadeepthi or CYM (Catholic Youth Movement) for the youths, Mathrujyothis for the mothers and Pithrvedi for the fathers. Each organization has the particular spiritual formation programme as well as charitable activities in the parishes and in the dioceses. Thus the people can act and grow together with the Church at every stage of their life. The people consider the church of their parish as their common family and the parish priest as the head of that family. They have great respect towards their bishops, priests and other dedicated members of the Church. The priest is always welcome in their family and they receive him in the place of Christ himself. When they see the priest, they greet him with folded hands saying: Isomishaku Stuthiyarickatte (Praise be to Jesus Christ). Even their personal prayers and fasting are meant to prepare themselves for the acceptance and the better participation of the real spirit of the Church. Thus, the spiritual life of Thomas Christians is always in and through the Church.

2.3. A Spirituality Practised in the Family

The St. Thomas Christians are famous for their good religious traditions in their families. They receive most of these traditions from the society in which they live.

2.3.1. Family Prayer

The habit of family prayer in the evening belongs to the normal programme of the St Thomas Christians. The spirit of family prayer of St Thomas Christians originates from their sharing with the Hindu tradition in Kerala. The traditional Hindu family every day recites "Nama Japam" (reciting the name of their
God, such as "Rama Rama"), at the evening before the lit lamp. As the Hindus, the daily prayer at home is the sacred patrimony of St Thomas Christians that they hand over from generation to generation. About the manner of the St Thomas Christians family prayer A. P. Urumpackal notes:

"In the evenings all members of the family gather together in front of a sacred picture. They light a candle and say the prayers. The prayers are concluded with the reading of the Gospel. Then all children salute the parents first and then each other with folded hands saying: 'praise be to Jesus Christ'.

This family prayer and giving the peace (Kasthuri) express and reinforce the family unity as well as respect towards the elders.

2.3.2. The Celebration of Pesaha in the Family

In the evening of Holy Thursday there is a very appealing celebration of Pesaha, in connection with the Last Supper of Our Lord, in the traditional families of St. Thomas Christians. After the celebration in the church the members of the family gather together under the leadership of the head of the family and break the Indriyappam (special bread with rice, made only for this occasion) and drink Pal (special drink with rice-powder, cocos sauce, jaggery, bananas etc.). On Good Friday, as a sign of remorse, the St Thomas Christians would not sweep clean even the floor and the courtyard of the house. On that day they take some bitter drinks or bitter leaves as participation in Christ's suffering on the Cross (Cf. Mt. 27: 45 - 50).

2.3.3. Ceremony Concerning the Birth of a Child

The newborn child is fed with a paste of honey and powdered gold as a symbol of good fortune and good life. Though it is a Hindu custom and belief, the St Thomas Christians Christianized it through reciting Maran Iso Mishiha (Our Lord Jesus Christ) while the child is fed. They wish that the child should hear first the name of Jesus. At the time of baptism, infants are given the name of grandparents, the first born male bears the paternal grandfather's name and the first born female bear the paternal grandmother's name and the second born children bare the names of maternal grandparents respectively. These baptismal names are always biblical or names of saints.

2.3.4. Vidyarambham (The Beginning of Education)

Vidyarambham or the initiation of the child into the letters of the alphabet is one of the important occasions of great religious significance for the religious-minded Hindus. At the age of five the child is initiated into the letters of the alphabet by the father or the 'Asan' (teacher). At the beginning of this ceremony, for Hindus, the names of Hindu gods - Hari Sri Ganapataye Nama - are written on the tongue of the child with a gold-piece. St Thomas Christians followed this practice (among them it is known as Arijiliruthu), but instead of "Hari Sri...", they recited Thamburan thunaka, Guruve saranam or Sarveswaraya nama (Let God help, I depend on my teacher; Hail, O God of all). Nowadays in some parishes of St Thomas Christians the parish priest initiates the children, with special prayers, into the letters of the alphabet.

2.3.5. Marriage Ceremonies

Normally the parents seek the partner for their children among the St Thomas Christians. In their families parents are given great importance in taking the decisions even for the marriage of the children. The experience and counseling of parents help the children in choosing the life-long partner. Before going to the church the bride and the bridegroom receive blessings from their parents and other elder members of the family. During the marriage ceremony in the church the bridegroom ties the Tali or Minnu (a small golden ornament), which is blessed by the priest, round the neck of the bride.
Though the tying of Tali is a Hindu custom, the St Thomas Christians had Christianized it as a marriage symbol by making a cross of 21 small gold balls in one side of the Tali. Besides this Tali the bridegroom presents a special sari (dress of women in India), known as Manthrakodi, which also is blessed by the priest during the marriage ceremony in the church. The couple keeps these Tali and Manthrakodi as very precious things in their whole life. Married women never take off the Tali from their necks. These symbols help them to remember their marriage promises throughout their life. After the marriage, when the couple reaches home the bridegroom's mother receives them holding a peculiar lighted lamp (Kolailakku) and she makes a cross on the forehead of them and blesses them at the door of the house. The next day wearing this Manthrakodi the bride with the bridegroom go to the church to thank God for everything.

The strong family relationship among the St Thomas Christians is based on the Trinitarian life. The relation between the husband and the wife is considered as a symbol of the relation between Christ and the Church. Therefore divorce is generally unheard among the St Thomas Christians, even remarriage after the death of a young partner is also very rare among them. The remaining partner lead an ascetical and celibate life and prays for the departed person throughout the rest of the life.

2.3.6. The Ceremonies in Connection with Death

Some of the Hindu customs in connection with death, burial and commemoration of the dead were also adapted by the St Thomas Christians. When death is imminent, the names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph (lyso Mariyam Ousephe) are whispered into the ears of the dying person, who might depart from this earthly family to the heavenly one. After death, the body is washed in warm water and adorned with flowers etc. Then the body is placed in a prominent place of the house, the head turning towards the East. No food is prepared or served in the house until the dead body is buried. Children will be fed in a neighbouring house. Very often the burial takes place the day after the death. The members of the family with the relatives and neighbours pray for the dead person even in the night also. The burial ceremony begins in the family under the leadership of the parish priest. After the prayers in the family, when they carry the dead body to the church, there is a farewell song, in which the dead person says farewell to the family and all others that he is going to the eternal family to enjoy the real happiness, that they need not mourn for him and he wishes that, they can meet again in that heavenly family.

After the death and burial of a person, there are some fixed dates, such as 7th, 9th, 11th, 41th, etc. of prayer for the departed one. The anniversary of death, which is called Chatham, is commemorated as a feast in the family to which all the close relations are invited, and the priest officiates with special prayers and blessings. On these occasions the St Thomas Christians not only pray for the dead person but also give alms and food to the poor in the name of the departed person. After the death of the father or the mother, the children, especially the elder ones, practise penance like abstaining from food materials like meat, fish, milk etc. for a certain duration.

2.3.7. The Practice of Nercha (food offerings) in the Family

1. Muthiyuoonu. It is a remembrance of the members of the Holy Family, by giving food to a poor man and a woman and a child who are invited to the family.

2. Twelve Apostles' Nercha (Giving of food to twelve poor boys). It is the remembrance of the twelve Apostles of Jesus and therefore on this occasion often the priest also is invited in the place of Jesus.

All the above mentioned religious traditions are still practised in some families of the St Thomas Christians. All these factors add colour to practising and experiencing spiritual life of the St Thomas Christians.

Dr Joseph Chalasserry
Conclusion

The spirituality of St Thomas Christians emerging from the mingling of the Catholic faith, the Oriental form of worship and the Indian culture appears to be an ideal one. It is the fruit of the biblical and patristic synthesis of the catholic faith which came through the Apostle Thomas and the East Syrian Fathers. It maintains the vertical and horizontal relations of man in balance, in the sense that, through fasting and prayer man purifies his heart, makes his relationship with God very close and intimate. Through the works of mercy, almsgiving and righteousness he regulates and strengthens his relations with his fellowmen. Thus the spirituality of St Thomas Christians becomes experiential through the fruits of their life, which is completely penetrated with charity and the love of God. They experience, in the Church and in the family, a life in which the presence of God is concretely manifested.

They are inspired to lead a life centred on the love of God and on the love of neighbour. In the interior self they experience the true presence of God. This personal experience of God leads them to the celebration of that experience in the divine liturgy. Thus, the celebration of the Eucharist becomes the celebration of their own life. The liturgy provides them the social and religious matrices on which all the strands of their life may be woven into an organic whole. The commingling of the interiority from the Indian culture with the true faith in God is one of the unique contributions of the St Thomas Christians to the history of Christian spirituality.

ENDNOTES


2 The Clergy Monthly, Ranchi (India), Vol. 14 (1952 November, special issue published in honour of St. Thomas the Apostle of India, on the occasion of nineteenth centenary celebrations) 361.

3 See P. J. Podipara, The Thomas Christians, 94. Liturgical prayers, memorial common meals, almsgiving, etc. were parts of this celebration.

4 See P. Petrus Le Brun, Liturgia Chaldaeo-Malabarica et Chaldeo. Nestoriana comparatae, Paris 1716, 1843; S. Giamil, Genuinae Relationes inter Sedem Apostolicam et Assyriorum Orientalium seu Chaldeorum Ecclesiam, Romae 1902, 564. According to P. J. Podipara before the arrival of Thomas Cana, in the year 345, there might be the East Syrian Liturgy among the St. Thomas Christians and he saw this liturgy only as a developed form of the rite established by the Apostle Thomas in Syriac language. See Placid (P. J. Podipara), Our Rite (in Malayalam), Mannanam 1944. 13-20.


6 S. Giamil, Genuinae Relationes... Doc. XX, quoted by P.J. Podipara Reflections on Liturgy, Kottayam 1983, 70.

7 For a detailed study of the Law of Thomas, see A. Thazhath, The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church, Kottayam 1987; 1-63.


10 The modern Indian culture is a complex of numerous cultures, such as the Dravidian, the Aryan, the Persian, the Hindu, the Muslim, the Christian, the Semite, the English and so on. See K. J. Mathew, “The Role of the Kerala Church in Indian Culture”, OCJ 186 (1970), 120.

12 It is often translated as non-violence, but it is more than non-violence. Ahimsa was the way of life of Jainism. All life is one, therefore when one is hurt it affects others also. This is the principle behind the concept of ahimsa.

13 Though the percentage of Christianity in India is very small (ca. 2%), in India, especially in Kerala, where a majority of the St. Thomas Christians are living, the principles of Christianity have been diffused into all zones of society so that national and social life here are more Christian than in most Christian countries abroad. The abolishment of caste-system, equality of all men, providing education to all, the protection of the weak, decency and modesty in dress (especially of women), the moulding of Indian family life through the principles of monogamy, wed-lock loyalty and patrimonial heritage (makkathayam), etc. are some of the examples of the Christian influence in India. See K. J. Mathew, “The Role of the Kerala Church in Indian Culture”, 120-121. I wish to remark about another notable influence of Christianity in India that Good Friday is a national holiday in India while it is a working day in the Christian countries like Italy.


17 Ephrem, Hymns on Unleavened Bread, 14: 15, in CSCO 248 (Syri.108), 24.

18 Ephrem, Homily on Our Lord § 13, in NPNF, Vol XIII, 310.

19 The Syro-Malabar Qurbana, The Order of Raza, Published by SMBC, Trivandrum 1989, 44.

20 For the Eucharistic celebration they had used three anaphoras of the East Syrian Church, that of Addai and Mari, the anaphora of Theodore and the anaphora of Nestorius. The last two were suppressed by the Synod of Diamper and were not encouraged by the Latin Missionaries simply because they contained names which they did not like. See A. M. Mundadan, Traditions of St. Thomas Christians, 163, fn. 196.


22 Cf. The Syro-Malabar Qurbana, 59.

23 According to A. M. Mundadan, most probably the following was the ordinary practice: on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings and also on feast days, all the people gathered in the church to join the priests in the recital of the divine office (the Liturgy of the Hours); on other days a few attended. A M. Mundadan, Traditions of St. Thomas Christians, 161. See also T. Puthiyakunnel, Syro-Malabar Clergy and their General Obligation, Ernakulam 1964, 133 –140. After the Synod of Diamper, this ancient prayer-life was slowly changed into many pious practices such as rosary, novenas, devotion to the saints etc., which were imported into the Church of St. Thomas Christians by the Western missionaries. Such changes were not always very helpful for the genuine progress of the spiritual life of St. Thomas Christians. Nowadays there is a praiseworthy attempt to re-introduce the participation of the people in the liturgical hours of the Church.


26 The "perfect love and true faith" seem to be the necessary demands for the administration of the Mysteries of Christ. Therefore at the beginning of the anaphora of Addai and Mari the celebrant prays: ... We implore you to strengthen us so that we may with perfect love and true faith administer the gifts you have given us." After this prayer people give peace to one another in the love of Christ. See The Syro-Malabar Qurbana, 35.

27 For the sacramental theology of East Syrian Church see W. De Vries, Sakramententheologie bei den Nestorianern, OCA 133, Roma 1947.

28 The Coonan Cross Oath of 1653 is a hallmark of the ecclesial spirit of the St. Thomas Christians. To know the spirituality behind this struggle for identity, see G. Nedungatt, “The Spirituality of the Syro-Malabar Church”, in A. Thottakara, East Syrian Spirituality, 167-172.

29 See Paremmakkal, Varthamanappusthakam, Introduction by Podipara, OCA 190, Rome 1971, 17-19. To know about the life and activities of Mar Joseph

Paremmakkal wrote  Varthamanappusthakam, which contains the narrations of the events connected with the history of St. Thomas Christians from 1773 to 1786. The whole account is inspired by the history of the St. Thomas Christians, especially by the reminiscences of their ancient ecclesiastical constitution, rights and privileges. See Paremmakkal, Varthamanappusthakam, Introduction by Podipara, 1, 19-21.

51. According to P. Bilaniuk, Fr. Placid Podipara “is the most distinguished scholar and spiritual father of the St. Thomas Christians in India”. He continues: "It would not be an exaggeration to call him the 'uncrowned patriarch' of the Catholic Syro-Malabar Church, for his contribution to the cause of the Eastern Christian Tradition in general and to the Eastern Christian Tradition of India in particular is truly incomparable”. P. Bilaniuk, Theology and Economy of the Holy Spirit: An Eastern Approach, CIIRS, Rome 1980, vii.

32 The great respect of the St. Thomas Christians towards their clergy and their attachment to the local church were wonder to the Portuguese. See A. M. Mundadan, Traditions of St. Thomas Christians, 158.

33 Here I recollect some of them from my own experience from the family. Some of these traditions described here may differ slightly from place to place with regard to details, and in certain matters may be, to some extent, different from those described here. For a general view on the culture and traditions of the St. Thomas Christians see J. Kolengadan, “Culture and Traditions of Thomas Christians”, in G. Menachery, ed., The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia of India, vol. II, 127-131.


35 See P. J. Podipara, The Thomas Christians, 94.


37 From the personal experience of Placid J. Podipara, J. Aerthayil recorded these words in his doctoral thesis. J. Aerthayil, The Spiritual Heritage of the St. Thomas Christians, 45-46.

38 P. J. Podipara, The Thomas Christians, 90.


41 See P. J. Podipara, The Thomas Christians, 91-93.
Monasticism in the East Syriac Tradition

Fr Naiju Jose Kalambukattu CMI

1. Introduction

The ecclesial dimension of monasticism has always remained very lively in the Eastern Churches and true monasticism was considered the ideal of Christian life. It had its origin and early development in the East. It emerged, grew and developed in the Christian centers of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Persia and Asia Minor. Egypt was called the cradle of Christian monasticism. Celibacy was considered the source of Eastern as well as Western monasticism. The Eastern Churches point out celibacy as the central virtue of monastic life. Western Monasticism is the later flowering of its Eastern counterpart. Now it continues to be a rich and unique heritage of the Universal Church. Different religious orders in the Church are expressions of the ecclesial life based on the Gospel.

In the Christian tradition, monasticism began as a counter-cultural movement against worldliness. St. Paul challenges, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:1-2). Although it is a call to all Christians, the monastic communities seem to have taken it seriously. Thus Monastic movement began with the individuals and groups who decided to follow Jesus in a radical way.

Life of total renunciation is not just special to Christianity alone but it is seen in almost all established religions and cultures. This is an expression of the unquenchable thirst for God. In the Indian tradition, monasticism (Ashram Life) has a long history and a sannyasi is considered as a holy man. Monasticism was advocated not only to fight the consumerist tendencies in India, but also to provide the monks a suitable environment to spread the Christian message. Exploring the role of Eastern Monasticism in the renewal of the Church, this article invites the entire Church especially the Indian Church for a ‘change
of heart’ to make herself credible and effective in the present context.

2. The Church: Its Pristine Beauty

The first seven Chapters of the Acts of the Apostles draw the picture of the first Christian community which was under the leadership of the apostles. The Apostles were the eye-witnesses to the death and resurrection of the Lord and hence their authority was unquestionable. Acts of the Apostles presents the original vision of the Church; “the Apostolic life” which was considered the model of the Christian way of life.7 “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The life of the early Church consisted in witnessing the Gospel message. Their life was centered on prayer and breaking the bread and it was a life of communion, each one having importance. It was a community of fraternal love, responsibility and fellowship. “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (Acts 4:32). They were aware of their call and mission. Thus the first Christians, filled with the Holy Spirit, sought to live in holiness. It was the resurrection of the Lord that united and strengthened the community.

The leadership in the first Christian community was primarily a leadership in bearing witness to what Jesus had said and done; for the leadership envisaged by Jesus was through life example (Mt 20:20-28, Mk 10:35-45, Lk 22:24-27, Jn 13:12-17). The Acts of the Apostles portrays Peter as both leader and spokesperson (Acts 1:15, 7:59-60, 9:1, 3:14, 5:31) but Peter was not above the community. It was the twelve as a group that decided to appoint deacons with the approval of the community (Acts 6:1-7).

The apostles, elders and overseers appointed to their ministry were stewards of the mysteries of Christ. They were interested only in establishing the Lordship of Christ and not in any power or authority. Stewards are not masters. The self-effacing image of Jesus is the model he prescribed for his followers. The authority given by Jesus is for the service of the people of God. The authority was in proportion to the authenticity of one’s inner experience of Christ. This was true with regard to the leaders of the early Church.

3. Monasticism: Context of Emergence

The Christian monasticism emerged from the spirituality of the first Christian community. Hence the first Christian community is called the forerunner of Christian monasticism.8 The lives of the apostles and their communities were based on the Gospel. In the early Church, martyrdom was considered the perfect way of imitating Christ; for the martyrs participated in the life, passion and death of Christ. But when the period of persecution was over, the zeal and fervor of the spiritual life was also weakened. But there was a growing respect towards the martyrdom without blood.9 The monk was considered as a martyr because his or her life was seen as an ongoing martyrdom.10 Hence many ascetics withdrew to the forests and deserts to imitate Christ in an intense manner.

The original vision and life style of the Church as seen in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-46, 4:32-36) were changed into an organizational set up during the Middle Ages. “The persecuted Church had become the official religion of the Roman Empire from the time of the Emperor Constantine. Consequently it borrowed a corresponding juridical set up of privileges, power, titles and above all an administrative system, all after the imperial pattern.”11 The Church assumed the categories of a state-religion after the persecution and Christianity became a status symbol and author of culture. Christians dominated in the cities and people of other faiths and religions were considered to be the unenlightened ones, the “pagans”12 or “heathen”.13 The Church became a political reality. By the “Gregorian Reform”14 the Church became a Papal Monarchy. The climax of
Papal power is seen with Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) and Boniface VIII (1294-1303). The stewards who were to be faithful to the Lord (I Cor 4:1f) became unfaithful and acted as the masters forgetting what the Lord had instructed, “It shall not be so among you” (Mt 20:26). Authority protected the authority. The Church became an institution with its hierarchical structure.

At the later part of the 3rd century, monasticism emerged as a protest against the Church which had become too worldly, rich and powerful. “As Christianity spread, and the Church became more secularized, this realization of the costliness of grace gradually faded… Monasticism became a living protest against the secularization of Christianity and the cheapening of grace…” Kavunkal comments, “When Christianity became the state religion the life of the Christian began to conform more and more to the norms of Society than to the Christian ideal. As a reaction to the growing this-worldliness of the Church there arose the monastic movement.” When the Church was losing its spirituality and was involved in the world, the ascetics retired to the lonely places away from the hustle and bustle of city life. It was to reform the Church and lead it to the original life based on the Gospel values. When the Christians followed the way of the world, the ascetics tried to preserve and live the Christian values. Thus the root of Christian monasticism is in the efforts of the ordinary Christians who tried to imitate Christ and follow the Gospel values.

The Monastic life which started through the Christian ascetics during the later part of the 3rd century spread in the important Christian centers especially Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Persia and Asia Minor. Slowly community life (cenobitical life) emerged from the single solitary life (anchorites). St. Pachomius is considered the founder of the cenobetical life. St. Basil is known as the legislator of Eastern Monasticism. He organized the monastic life and made it intelligible to the people and place in Asia Minor.

4. Eastern Monasticism:
Theological Foundation

The Eastern world has never been alien to monastic values. The great saints and sages of Asia open their spiritual treasures through prayer, contemplation, ascetic ways of life, etc. The Second Vatican Council which was convened for the renewal and reconciliation of the Churches has taken note of this reality and reminds the whole Christian world of the unique importance of the monastic heritage of the Christian East:

Moreover, in the East are to be found the riches of those spiritual traditions to which monasticism gives special expression. From the glorious days of the Holy Fathers, there flourished in the East that monastic spirituality which later flowed over into the Western world, and there provided a source from which the Latin monastic life took its rise and has drawn fresh vigour ever since. Therefore Catholics are strongly urged to avail themselves more often of these spiritual riches of the Eastern Fathers, riches which lift up the whole man to the contemplation of the divine mysteries.

The invitation of the Second Vatican Council is indeed a clear message to the whole Church especially to the Eastern Christianity in India to delve deep into the riches of the spiritual traditions of monasticism. Pope John Paul II states in Orientale Lumen:

With regard to monasticism, in consideration of its importance in Eastern Christianity, we would like it to flourish once more in the Eastern Catholic Churches, and that support be given to all those who feel called to work for its revitalization. In fact, in the East an intrinsic link exists between liturgical prayer, spiritual tradition and monastic life. For this reason precisely, a well trained and motivated renewal of monastic life could mean true ecclesial fruitfulness for them as well.
Pope John Paul II has clearly expressed in his apostolic letter Orientale Lumen that “Monasticism has always been the very soul of the Eastern Churches.” The first Christian monks were born in the East and the monastic life was an integral part of the East. It was passed on to the West by the great Fathers of the undivided Church. The Eastern Churches have to preserve and foster their venerable heritage whole and entire of which monasticism forms a vital part.

Monasticism is not an “establishment.” It is to be understood as a living movement in the Church. But it is not as the Western concept of “religious Orders”. “Monasticism is essentially a movement, away from lasting engagement in this world, toward the Lord’s return. Therefore, monasticism, since its very beginning, has always been an anti-establishment medicine preventing her from getting to entangled in worldly things, enabling her to stay free for ‘the things of the Father.’” The worldly values like power, positions, possessions and prestige are not monastic or evangelical values. The power of monasticism lies in the Gospel and the living Holy tradition that are beyond the material values.

Monasticism stands in the heart of the Mystery of the Church. “Monasticism itself is first of all a Mystery i.e., ‘a divine reality of salvation expressed in human forms,’ in both its incarnational and eschatological dimensions.” Easterners understood it as the best way to express the fidelity to Christ. “Monasticism was essentially, and still is, a covenant with Christ. The monks were, therefore, called bnay qyama, the sons of the covenant, and virgins bnath qyama, the daughters of the covenant.” Syriac Orient is the cradle of ‘Syriac Proto-Monasticism’ which is expressed in the life of bnay qyama, sons of the covenant. Their focus was on the radical following of Christ. Such a life existed in Syria and Mesopotamia prior to the emergence of the classical monastic life in Egypt. Therefore it is called ‘Proto-Monasticism.’ Aphrahat (+345), the Persian sage explains about the ascetical life pattern of the sons of the covenant in the sixth demonstration which is considered the earliest and most reliable exposition. They vowed to dedicate themselves to lead a life without marriage in the model of Christ for imitating him very effectively. From the very inception of Eastern Monasticism, the two important characteristics are its close relation to the Gospels and its ecclesial nature.

4.1. Faithfulness to the Gospel

Monasticism wants the return to the evangelical simplicity of life totally geared towards the essentials of the Gospel. Patros Yousif calls monasticism an expression of the evangelical life of the Church. Monks take the Gospel seriously as the paramount vision of their lives and live this out in daily practice and observances. “A monk, in fact, is a man of the Gospel, a man who thirsts after salvation in the risen Lord.” The monastic theology, spirituality and charism flow straight from the Gospel, the core of all Christian life. Taken seriously in its full and life giving power, the Gospels are being kept alive by unwavering faithfulness. By living the Gospel values to the fullest, monks prove that it can be lived and that the Gospel is worth living and even dying for.

The ‘Book of Steps’ (Book of Grades) which had greatly influenced the Eastern monasticism also advocates Gospel values for Christian perfection, for the author (unknown) was intimately related to monasticism. In short, monks displayed a constructive enthusiasm for the Gospel teachings and an orthodox lay person attached great importance to this model of obedience to the Gospel teachings, an icon of love for God and one’s neighbour.

4.2. Ecclesial Nature

Monasticism is for the growth and good of the Church. Therefore, the monks and monasteries are to stand for the cause and growth of the Church, remaining ever faithful to the basic spirit of the Church. The monks proclaim the faith of the Church and express that faith through the liturgy, for the fidelity to the faith of the Church means fidelity to the liturgy and liturgical spirituality of the Church. Hence the Monastic spirituality is very much ecclesial and
liturgical in nature. The most important contribution of the monks is liturgical, for they enriched the liturgy of the Church singing the Psalms and celebrating the Divine Praises.

5. Eastern Monasticism: Riches and Relevance

Eastern Monasticism is the cradle of all consecrated life in the East and West. Boniface expresses the true value and relevance of monasticism:

Eastern Monasticism has survived victoriously the heaviest attacks and crises of all kinds: the choking oppression by Islam, the brutal exterminations by communism, the allurements of bourgeois secularism, as well as the challenges of changing cultural contexts, and more, without ever losing its soul (i.e., its living continuity with the Gospel), leading every inculturation and surviving every crisis by faithfully giving its priority to the ‘one thing necessary’.

Monastic community embodies the values of the Kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is a call to be in relationship of authentic love with God and fellow humans. According to St. Paul it is a state of life identified with righteousness, peace and joy (Rom 14:17). Monastic community is an effective witness of the ‘Church as a sign of the Kingdom of God.’ Monasticism represents the fullness of the Church, anticipating the Kingdom of God. Monasticism is, in fact, a “sign”, a “paradigm”, an anticipation and foretaste of the Kingdom of God; a “trans-figuration”. Being tempted to conform themselves to the standards of this world, different individual Churches, both in the East and in the West, tried to shut their eyes against the necessary tension between “already and not yet.” During such crises the monastic communities came forward as a “sign” proclaiming the kingdom of God – as a paradigm of the Parousia. Monasticism as a counter culture disseminates the values of the Gospel. A monk is a “symbol of salvation” in this world. Hence monasticism is to be protected and promoted in the Church.

6. Monasticism: Recovery and Renewal of the Church

The paradigm function of monasticism is meant originally for the whole Church at large, for it is the expression and guarantor of her primary contemplative character. Monasticism by its very existence in the Church reminds her of the original beauty and call for the most effective form of life-witness. Boniface speaks about the importance of monasticism in the renewal of the Church:

The uninterrupted flow of life-giving holy wisdom, issuing from the Gospel through the Apostolic Community and irrigating the whole of Holy Tradition until now forms the mainstay and constant reference for healthy monasticism and for its recovery after crises, so that it can be used by the Holy Spirit for the constant strength and orthodoxy of the Church at large. Therefore monasticism should be fostered perhaps more than other institutions in the Church, because it is not peripheral or ephemeral but stands right at the heart of the Church and her constant need of revival.

Being the carrier and guarantor of the living heritage of true Christian life, throughout all the ages, especially in the Eastern Churches, monasticism is an important contribution to the Church. For this reason, the Eastern Churches have often been called “Monastic Churches,” deeply nourished, and supported by it.

7. Eastern and Western Religious Life: Differences

In the Eastern Church, there are no “different kinds” of religious life. They have only a monastic state but in the West it is divided into Orders, Congregations and Secular Institutes. The monastery is the home of one or many monks and it had its own autonomy (Monasterium Sui Juris).
In the West, the Abbot is the result of the consensus of a number of monks who already exist, so that the monks “make” the Abbot. But in the East, the Abbot with his charismatic grace gather candidates around him and makes the monks by sharing with them his own fertile fatherhood that comes from his model, Christ, so that the group grows both in holiness and numbers as a true “family of Jesus”.

In the West the “orders” were found to attend to horizontal needs so that Western orders stick to the “charism of their founders.” In the East they are just “monks” whose identity and status flow from their faithfulness to the core of Christianity in the Bible and Tradition.

All consecrated life in the East and West stem from the urge for evangelical perfection. The Western institutes are rightly urged to return to the “charism of the founder”, but in the Eastern monasticism it has always been understood that the “Founder” and immediate inspiration is Christ Himself.

8. Monasticism and Ecclesial Renewal

The history of the Church both in the East and the West sheds light on the important role of monasticism in building up and renewal of an individual Church. The monastic life has a crucial role in the growth of the Church. In all the ancient monasteries, liturgy had the prime importance. The monks supported the Church through the singing of the Psalms and celebrating the Divine Praises. One of the main contributions of early monasticism to the Churches was their eagerness to worship; monks were the main authors of Christian prayer and worship, which became the official prayer of the Church, the Liturgy of the Hours.

For the monks, worship was not only the re-enactment of the Mysteries in the Eucharist, Sacraments, Divine Praises, and Liturgical Year, but was equally the expression and food of their personal prayer lives. Their prayerfulness pervaded liturgical prayer, to the great benefit of clergy and faithful alike. The early monks put the best of their spirituality into their worship, especially into the Divine Praises. It should be the main source of spirituality and true monastic formation of the modern monks and religious.

Liturgy expresses the identity of the Church. There is a deep rooted relation between liturgy and the Church. One is not without the other. Liturgical renewal can be done only in the context of the proper liturgical traditions of the Church. Since the nature of liturgy radically affects the nature of the Church, liturgical renewal will have a direct impact on the nature of the Church. That means liturgical renewal is not a simple renewal of a text but the renewal of the Church. The Church knows herself and forms herself in the liturgy. Therefore, what is to be done in the liturgical renewal is the restoration and renewal of the proper traditions of the Church. The venerable patrimonies of the Church should be cherished and fostered.

The monastery is a living icon of the Church. The Eastern monasticism has helped to preserve and promote the heritages of the Church by living the Gospel values to its fullness and by being faithful to the Church. Since reading and reflection of the Word of God are very essential to knowing God, the scriptural readings are given due importance in the Eastern liturgy. When the monks lead a life based on the Gospels they strengthen the ecclesial and liturgical life of the Church itself. Thus Eastern monasticism is marked by an intense life of liturgical spirituality.

The monastic communities were attentive to relish and present the unfathomable riches of the heritage received from the traditions of their respective Churches. “In fact, in the East an intrinsic link exists between liturgical prayer, spiritual tradition and monastic life. For this reason precisely, a well trained and motivated renewal of monastic life could mean true ecclesial fruitfulness for them as well.”
This is the charism of the monastic life.

The monastic communities recognize the identity of the individual Church to which they belong, in her liturgy, theology, spirituality and discipline and live and bear witness to it in all possible ways. Moreover, they have to help their mother Church to rediscover her identity and build upon it with creative intuition. Hence, they lead an authentic liturgical life according to the genius of their individual Church. Monasteries being the common property of the Church, the monks take measures to provide ample facilities for the people to experience the monastic life and engage in serious research of the sources and bring them to the reach of the ordinary faithful in the Church.

Monastic communities are neither a threat nor a challenge to the other religious congregations or orders, rather, they give strength and support to them. The ashrams exist to deepen the faith of the people including the religious. Hence, the faithful are encouraged to participate in the liturgical celebrations in the monasteries and experience the faith-life.

9. Monasticism in Syro-Malabar Church in India

“As the legitimate heirs of an apostolic tradition, the Syro-Malabar Church which is as old as Christianity itself, has got a unique role to play in the Universal Church and the world at large. An adequate awareness and appreciation of our identity and prospective unique role are essential for enabling ourselves to face challenges and fulfilling our mission meaningfully.” The attempts to start monasteries are signs of positive development in evangelization and renewal in the Church. The Syro-Malabar Church has taken modest attempts in establishing monasteries. The Bet-Toma at Palamattom in the archdiocese of Changanasery, Kerala in India and the Mar Thoma Sliha Monastery at Nallathanny in the eparchy of Kanjirapally, Kerala in India are pioneering attempts to begin monastic life in the present day Syro-Malabar Church. It does not mean that monasticism is quite new to the Syro-Malabar Church. Though the details are not available, there existed Christian monasticism in this Church centred around Angamaly, Mylakkombu and Edappally before the sixteenth century. The desire for radical life and the influence of Persian monks might have paved the way for monastic life in the Pre-Diamper period.

The fidelity to the ecclesia centered life is the characteristic of these movements. They take the interests of the Church to the heart. Once Prof. Xavier Koodapuzha, the architect and founding superior of the Mar Thoma Sliha Monastery, Nallathanny shared about the life style of the monastery as “The charism of the Church is the charism of the monastery.” At the heart of the monastic discipline are the sanctification of time and the renewal by unceasing prayer. With the elements of simplicity and renunciation, these monasteries are effective pointers of a counter-culture in the midst of today’s consumerist culture.

9.1. A Brief History of the First Monastic Community

Having explored the intimate relation between Church and Liturgy and realizing the role of a monastic community in the ecclesial renewal, Pathikulangara proposed such a community in the Syro-Malabar Church for the renewal, growth and experiential celebration of its liturgy and to rediscover and preserve the identity of this apostolic Church. He also presented the idea before the general public in 1982 through an editorial on “Monasticism” in Christian Orient, a journal of Eastern Churches for creative theological thinking.

Having contemplated for several years on the need for a monastic movement in the Syro-Malabar Church, Mar Joseph Powathil, then eparchial Bishop of Kanjirapally, Fr. Xavier Koodapuzha, Professor at Paurastya Vidyapitham, Kottayam, Fr. Quriaqos Elijah Vadaketh CMI, member of the CMI novitiate house at Kapadu and Fr. Varghese Pathikulangara CMI, Professor at Dharmaram College, Bangalore, discussed the feasibility of such a spiritual movement.
in 1983 and decided to commit themselves to make it a reality. On April 28-30, 1985, they met at Nallathanny, near Murinjapuzha in the eparchy of Kanjirappally in Kerala and prayerfully deliberated and decided to start two autonomous monastic communities of the one Family, Mar Toma Sangham; one for men, and the other for women. They decided to start the community for the women at Nallathanny and Mar Joseph Powathil, eparchial Bishop of Kanjirapally gave the ecclesial sanction. The first community consisted of five candidates. Later, they moved to the MOC Campus at Manganam, Kottayam as Mar Joseph Powathil was transferred to Changanasery as the Metropolitan Archbishop. On July 3, 1989, this community was erected as a pious union with the name “Sisters of Saint Thomas” (SST) by His Grace Mar Joseph Powathil. On December 18, 1989, the community moved to its own house Bet-Toma in the MOC campus, Kottayam. The first ashram of this community was established at Palamattom, in the territory of the Assumption Parish of Kurumpanadom belonging to the Metropolitan Eparchy of Changanasery and was blessed by His Grace Pedro Lopez Quintana, the Apostolic Nuncio on 11 February 2005.

9.2. Life-Style of the First Monastic Community

’Sisters of Saint Thomas’ (SST) is a community based on the values of ‘Costly Discipleship’ which was the monastic style in the early Syriac Churches. It is a community dedicated to the study, celebration and proclamation of the original apostolic and ecclesial life of the Syro-Malabar Church, a community which considers the Mar Toma Margam (Way of Thomas) as its rule of life. They try to understand the Syro-Malabar liturgical and ecclesial spirituality and live it wholeheartedly. They spend sufficient time to meditate on the biblical, liturgical, patristic and ecclesial sources to assimilate and translate them into daily life. They also make serious search into these sources and display them before the members of the Church for their consideration, using all possible means of communication.

The Holy Qurbana being a comprehensive celebration of the salvific action accomplished by Lord Jesus, they celebrate it as solemnly as possible and try to experience it in their life. The Divine Praises or Liturgy of the Hours being an extension of the Holy Qurbana to the various hours of the day, they gather seven times a day to praise the Lord in tune with the biblical tradition and the liturgical genius of the Syro-Malabar Church.

10. Conclusion

The quintessence of monastic life is the paradigm of the perfect Church community seen in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 2 and 4. In the East, monasticism was not conceived as a separate condition meant for a particular group of people but was an ecclesial expression of all the baptized. Monasticism was a spontaneous expression of the Church. For the Syriac Churches it was a way of life. Monasticism played a significant role in formulating and sustaining the unique liturgy, spirituality and tradition of the Church. The principle of returning to the Gospel was the inspiration and model of action of the monastic movement. Thus monasticism kept alive the awareness of the Gospel by taking it seriously, by living it entirely and by celebrating it joyfully in a life style totally permeated by love for God and for neighbour. This contains the inexhaustible spiritual wealth and lasting actuality of monasticism. In the Indian context marked by economic poverty, corruption, oppression, exploitation and terrorism, the Church has to re-live its pristine beauty, remaining ever faithful to the Word. Monasticism is one of the ways to re-live it and make the Church credible and her ministry laudable to address herself to the pressing problems India faces today.

ENDNOTES
2 Jean Gribomont, “Monasticism and Asceticism,” in


26 Xavier Koodapuzha, “The Impact of the Vatican Council II on the Syro-Malabar Church and the Present Challenges in Implementing the Councilor teaching,” 76.


28 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 59.

29 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 61.

30 Kuriakose Eliah, Kizhakkinte Sakshyam, 22.


34 Thomas Kollamparambil, “Syriac Spiritual, Ascetical and Mystical Legacy,” 43.


36 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 81.


39 The ‘Book of Steps’ was originally written in Syriac with the title Ktawa d-masqatha either at the end of

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41 Kuriakose Elia, Kizhakkinte Sakshyam, 58.

42 Kuriakose Elia, Kizhakkinte Sakshyam, 71.

43 Kuriakose Elia, Kizhakkinte Sakshyam, 41-42.

44 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 15.

45 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 15.


41 Kuriakose Elia, Kizhakkinte Sakshyam, 58.

42 Kuriakose Elia, Kizhakkinte Sakshyam, 71.

43 Kuriakose Elia, Kizhakkinte Sakshyam, 41-42.

44 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 15.

45 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 15.


48 Davis Varayilan, Spirit and the Pilgrim Church, 171-172.

49 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 80.


54 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 80.

55 Kuriakose Elia, Kizhakkinte Sakshyam, 60.

56 Kuriakose Elia, Kizhakkinte Sakshyam, 62.

57 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 62.

58 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 63.

59 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 91.

60 Varghese Pathikulangara, Qvamta w-hayye w-hudata Resurrection Life and Renewal: A Theological Study of the Liturgical Celebration of the Great Saturday and the Sunday of Resurrection in the Chaldeo-Indian Church, Bangalore- Kottayam: Dharmaram Publications and OIRSI, 1982, 293.

61 Kuriakose Elia, Kizhakkinte Sakshyam, 42.

62 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 129.

63 Archimandrite Boniface, Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church, 131.

64 Joseph Kallarangatt, “Church as the Meeting Place of Liturgy and Theology,” Christian Orient 15, 1 (March 1994), 41.

65 Joseph Kallarangatt, “Church as the Meeting Place of Liturgy and Theology,” 43.


67 Oriental Lumen 27.

68 Varghese Pathikulangara, Jeevitha Spandanangal, 15.

69 Varghese Pathikulangara, Jeevitha Spandanangal, 15-16.

70 Xavier Koodapuzha, “The Impact of the Vatican Council II on the Syro-Malabar Church and the Present Challenges in Implementing the Councilor teaching,” 77.

71 Varghese Pathikulangara, Jeevitha Spandanangal, 14.


73 It was one of the concluding proposals of his doctoral dissertation. Cfr. Varghese Pathikulangara, Resurrection Life and Renewal, 293.


75 Lumen Gentium, 44.

76 The individuality of this Church as expressed in its autonomy, East Syriac Liturgy and the Christianized Hindu customs were the Mar Toma Margam (Way of Thomas) for the Thomas Christians. The ‘Way of Thomas’ was the sum total of their Christian heritage and ancient traditions.


78 The present schedule of Liturgy of the Hours in the Ashram is: Ramsa, the Evening Liturgy at 6.30 pm, Lelya, the Night Liturgy at 9.00 pm, Qala d-Sahra, the Vigil Liturgy at 4.15 am, Supra, the Morning Liturgy at 5.45 am, Quta ‘a, the Third Hour Liturgy at 9.00 am, Endana, the Noon Liturgy at 12.00 noon and the Ninth Hour Liturgy at 3.00 pm.


81. This article of Naiju Jose Kalambukattu CMI first
Introduction

Words like asceticism and mortification suffer a worst fate today than many of the frequently used words of common use in the past. Modern man feels a kind of negative and indifferent attitude towards the practices of asceticism. Ascetics are generally considered as strict, stern and austere people who are unable to appreciate the delights of the world and created beings. On the other hand, the fact remains that whether we are believers or not, even if we do not use the term asceticism, we are supposed to impose acts of self denial and self restraint upon us. Otherwise, a person would become the constant plaything of his whims, of all the latent tendencies in him and we can see where that would lead him. In our social life we practise natural asceticism like giving up food and drink, avoid smoking and exercise self restraint physically and mentally for all sorts of reasons and for acquiring something of better value. Everybody, in fact, naturally leads an ascetical life.1 One of the reasons behind this negative attitude to asceticism is the misunderstanding caused by presenting and propagating some of the extreme, exaggerated and inhuman practices prevailed in the early monastic circles.

But Christian asceticism has a very positive meaning and outlook, especially when we consider it in the theological context of the paschal experience of Jesus. In an all-encompassing consumer culture in which we live, genuine Christian asceticism could provide the right spiritual direction and orientation through its disciplines and practices adapted to needs of the time. Therefore, fostering a renewed appreciation and practice of Christian asceticism is our mission in the Church today

1. Asceticism: A Universal Religious Phenomenon

The term asceticism has its origin from the Greek root ‘Askesis’ that means exercise, training
and practice particularly applied to athletes. In the religious background it refers to a lifestyle characterized by abstinence and withdrawal from various sort of worldly pleasures, physical or psychological desires in order to attain a spiritual ideal or higher and ultimate religious goals. Asceticism as a value and a means to strengthen an individual’s will and his deeper spiritual powers has been a part of many religions and philosophies throughout history.

In the Hellenistic background asceticism became an important discipline, especially among Stoics to achieve control over the promptings of emotions or passions by intellect, in order to achieve imperturbability. Plato believed that bodily desires are to be suppressed so that the soul can be free for the search of knowledge. This view was further propagated by Plotinus, one of the founders of Neo-Platonism, that influenced many Christian Fathers. Pythagoreans and Orphics practiced strict asceticism in the form of fasting and refraining from sexual intercourse as a means to attain union with the Absolute.

Hinduism uses the Term ‘Tapas’ which means heat, austerity, burning of desires to denote asceticism. In India ascetic practices were widely prevalent from earliest times. Hindu ascetics or Yogi who are believed to be Holy, are known for their extreme forms of practices of self-denial and abstinence. The motivation behind Tapas was the realization of the transitory nature of earthly life and the desire to anchor one’s hope in the other worldliness. Asceticism was considered as means of liberation from Samsara, the never ending cycle of rebirth, and to reach Moksha, the union with the Absolute Brahman. The mortification of the body and the self-inflicted pains associated with it, has been habitually carried out to lengths beyond anything familiar to other peoples.

Asceticism in its intense form could be found also in Jainism, a branch broken from Brahminic Hinduism. In order to achieve the highest goal in life, that is Moksha, the human soul has to be without attachment and self indulgence. Practice of asceticism is the means to achieve this ultimate goal in life. Samyamana or self restraint is the basis of Jain asceticism which is seen in various vows, disciplines, codes of conduct and other doctrines proposed by Jain Acharyas.

Buddhism generally rejects the extreme asceticism of the Sanyasis of Jain and Brahmanic type as well as the Sacrifices of the Brahmins. After abandoning the existing extreme forms of Hindu asceticism and after achieving enlightenment, Buddha chose a “middle path” or Mdhyamaka with non-violence, chastity and poverty as fundamental virtues opposed to the capital sins of passion, hatred and self deception. This “middle way” became the organizing principle of Buddhism in general.

Asceticism and monasticism are said to be ‘foreign’ to Islam, whose piety was more social. However, they also had ascetic movements known as Zuhd, which is the word for self-denial, and Sufism, a mystical movement in the 8th century which is ascetical in nature. Ramadan is the Islamic month of strict observation of fasting in which they refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, sex etc. as prescribed in Koran. Fasting is said to direct the heart away from the worldly activities to cleanse the inner soul and to free it from harm. Islam teaches the Muslims to practice self-discipline, self-control, sacrifices and empathy for those who are less fortunate, thus encouraging charity and generosity.

Asceticism never occupied a central position in the Jewish culture and religion compared to the anthropological dualism of some other religions. We see prophets like Ezekiel (Ez. 4:4-15), Elijah and Osee who lived in deserts practiced mortification and fasting and preaching moral purity to achieve vision of God. Fasting, ‘the affliction of the soul’ was a universal practice of asceticism. (Is.58:3) Nazirites (Num.6) and Rechabites were ascetical groups among the Jewish religion who lived in the wilderness.
practicing fasting, abstention from wine and fermented liquors as part of their asceticism. Nazirites never cut their hair as a vow and the Rechabites were allowed to live only in tents not in any permanent houses.\(^7\)

Essenes\(^8\) and Therapeutes\(^9\) were two strong ascetic groups, who were contemporaries of early Christianity and who influenced in many ways the spirituality, asceticism and the evolution of monasticism in the early Church. These two groups lived in communities in the wilderness. They were celibates. They practiced extreme frugality in the use of material goods and led a very simple life.\(^10\) They were considered as athletes of virtues and their ‘exercises’ as having a more durable value for man than the athletes. They regarded their self-control the foundation for all the virtues. We come to know about the Essenes from the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran and of the Therapeuts from De Vita Contemplativa of Philo.\(^11\)

2. Christo-centric Asceticism of the Early Christians

For Christianity, which has its origin from the life of Jesus and his Gospels, asceticism was an integral part of its formation and it remained at the very source of her life. Christian asceticism is Christo-centric and it is rooted in his life and teachings. To be a disciple of Jesus one has to deny himself and take up the cross and to follow him (Mt 16:24). This call is not something merely rhetorical. Jesus has shown what he has preached through his life and death on the cross. He is present before the Church and at the hearts of the faithful as their unique model\(^12\). Therefore, St. Ignatius of Antioch urges the early Christians to imitate Christ in his cross, death, and resurrection in order to be united with him and to become justified.\(^13\)

In the formation of the ascetical life of the early Christianity, there were influences from the different ascetical groups of Judaism especially from those who were contemporaneous with Christ and his disciples.\(^14\) Jesus himself was following some of the ascetic practices of Judaism when he spent forty days in the desert, fasting (Mt 4:2-3) and when he placed ‘selling their possessions and distributing the money to the poor and then following him’ (Mt 19:21) as the necessary condition for Christian perfection. This was a practice among the Jewish ascetics like Essenes and Therapeutes and it was followed among the first Christians of the apostolic time.

The early Christian asceticism was also inspired by John the Baptist, a strong ascetic figure in the Gospels (Mt 3:4) who was a representative of Judaic asceticism contemporary to Jesus. As an ascetic he summoned a crowd to him and preached ‘Metanoia’ (Mt 4:5-10) that is a complete transformation of their mentality to prepare themselves for those ways of God, of which the prophet spoke, which are not our ways\(^15\).

The asceticism of the early Christians was characterized by their eschatological vision of the immanent expectation of the second coming of our Lord. They were living under the impression that the second coming of our Lord is immanent, though they were uncertain of the exact time of these happenings. This eschatological vision brought them to the realization that it profited them little to accumulate worldly possessions or be overly pre-occupied with worldly affairs. However, even during the period when this idea of immanent Parousia slowly disappeared from their minds, they did not lose sight of the other world and the second coming of Christ as taught by the Gospels. Their ascetic spirit and practices were strongly influenced by the second coming of Christ. The lives of these Christians were described in the following words taken from the Letter to Diogentus.

They dwell in their fatherlands but as if sojourners in them; they share all things as citizens, suffer all things as strangers... They marry as all men, they bear children but they do not expose their offspring. They give free hospitality but guard their purity. Their lot is cast “in the flesh” but
they do not live “after the flesh” They pass their
time upon earth, but they have their citizenship
in heaven.”

When we speak about the ascetical character
of early Christianity, the term ‘ascetical’ has to be
taken in its positive sense of practice of virtues rather
than the practice of severe austerities and self-
mortification that developed later. The moral teachings
of Didache expose how these Christians were
renowned for their virtues of fraternal charity, humility,
patience, obedience, chastity and practice of prayer.
They considered the practice of some degree of
austerity, separation from the world and renunciation
as means to cultivate and safeguard these virtues.
Freely accepted practice of celibacy by both sexes
was an important form of ascetical practice widely
accepted and esteemed. But charity was considered
as the greatest of all virtues and its supreme
importance was always upheld by the early Fathers.

3. Asceticism Prepares the Martyrs

The ascetic spirit of the early Christians aimed
at the following of Christ finds its perfect and fullest
expression at the time of persecution and martyrdom.
Martyrdom was considered the supreme example
of the imitation of Christ. Through martyrdom, a
Christian fully participates in the life, suffering and
death of Christ. It brings about the presence of
Christ in the martyrs and theirs in him. “But
martyrdom for the first Christian generations was in
any case the ideal instance of union with Christ, in
trial leading to perfect union with him in the life of
charity.” In this sense, martyrdom was the highest
form of asceticism for the early Christians. There was
always a strong desire among them to become a
martyr. “It was the Christian prayer in those days”
says St. Jerome, “that he might for Christ’s sake die
by sword.”

The strong and positive character of the desire
for martyrdom, manifested by the early Church makes
it ever clear the strong and positive dimension of
Christian asceticism. The authentic Christian
asceticism is never a condemnation but a preference
for the Imitation of Christ. In the same way, we could
say that asceticism which has appeared as a
preparation for the Parousia, for the passage of this
world and for the coming of the other in Christ, would
have prepared the early church for martyrdom. In
this sense martyrdom appears as the fullest expression
of Christian asceticism.

4. Ascetics in the Christian
Communities: ‘The Living Martyrs’

The already existing question of a substitute
for Martyrdom, or some equivalents to martyrdom
that would have the same value before God,
was a necessary answer to the end of the
period of persecution and martyrdom in the early
Church. The Christian Fathers of that period like
Origen, Cyprian, Tertullian, and Clement of
Alexandria gave the answer that everyone who
follows Jesus and obeys his commandments as
faithfully and as perfectly as possible is a martyr in
his life and in his words. Such a life presupposes
self renunciation and self mortification. It is a life of
“daily martyrdom of Conscience.” Such a life makes
a distinction between a bloody and
non-bloody martyrdom and white martyrdom. Thus
there emerged also a new theology of martyrdom.

This new understanding of martyrdom as well
as the degrading quality of Christian life after the
period of persecution inspired some fervent and
enthusiastic Christians to follow a radical form of
evangelical life in the Christian communities. As a result
there existed Christians of both sexes who were living
by keeping a certain distance from the profane way
of life and at the same time remaining in their families.
They have distributed their wealth and other
resources to the poor and led a simple life. They led
a celibate life and dedicated their services to the
Christian communities around them. Because of their
strict and earnest ascetical way of life, they were
called Ascetics. The Christians as well as the pagans
always held their status of celibate life in high
esteem.
Later these Ascetics took a vow of Virginity in public before the head of the community. The violation of this promise was punished. At the same, it was not a permanent one. One could abandon the celibate status and get married if there is sufficient reason. They enjoyed special positions and privileges in the community and were entrusted with different functions. They became a force to be reckoned with. The Christian community recognized that it was in the ascetics that the spirit of martyrdom survived and it is continued through them. They realized in their life the true Imitation of Christ. They were given appropriate titles like, ‘more illustrious part of Christ’s flock, “Elect of the Elect”, and “Bride of Christ”.

Early Christianity in Syria Palestine and Mesopotamia was characterized by its strict and very rigorous ascetical traditions. They were described as ‘ascetically oriented ‘or ‘ascetically colored’ Christianity. The ascetic works like Doctrina Addei, Tatian’s Diatesseron, Odes of Solomon, Aphrhat’s Demonstration, Acts of Thomas and Works of St.Ephrem give witness to this fact. The ‘covenant consciousness’ was the decisive factor which determined their Christian way of life. Christian faith was perceived as a new covenant (Qeiama) with God. Christians are Covenanters. The covenant really meant commitment to asceticism. In fact asceticism stood at the cradle of Syrian spirituality. From among these Christians also there emerged Ascetics, who took the voluntary promise of virginity and were known as Sons and Daughters of the Covenant (Benai Qeiama and Benat Qeiama). For the sake of the new covenant with God, they have sacrificed passions, marriage and any link with this world. Extreme seriousness was given to their commitment to ascetic life.

5. Monasticism: Radical Living of Christian Asceticism

Monasticism was a new evolution within the Christian communities pioneered by the Ascetics who wanted to live the evangelical precepts scrupulously and as perfectly as possible during the 3rd and 4th centuries. Therefore, it is Christian asceticism, which was a necessary institution for those who wanted to realize radically the authentic ideals of Jesus or a life perfectly according to the Gospel that has prepared the rise of monasticism. Monasticism, however, is not simply asceticism, but an asceticism having a life separated from the world, apart from the world, as its salient characteristic.

Monasticism appeared in the form of Anchoretism (solitary life) in the deserts, mountains and other lonely places of Egypt and Syria. These Anchorites who were flourishing in the deserts saw their ascetic life as a type of “martyrdom in intent”, a daily exercising of the will and subduing of the flesh in imitation, of suffering Christ. St. Athanasius speaks of St. Antony, the great representative of early monks, as the one who spent his life as a solitary since martyrdom was not his lot, dying daily to self in imitation of Christ.

To their corporeal asceticism, they have added mental asceticism. Their corporeal ascetical practices included many physical austerities like fasting, exposure to the heat and cold, rejection of comforts in any forms, abstention from sexual activity and lack of sleep. In the area of mental discipline they have included self denial to an advanced degree and they have tried to understand evil desires and thoughts so as to get rid of them. Corporeal asceticism does not imply contempt of the body or killing of the nature as sometimes people believe and write. Asceticism contributes to the purification of the soul so that divine charity may overcome all evil forces in us. John Cassian compares it to the ploughman removing the brambles and thorns from his field so that it may produce an abundant harvest.

There were many instances of extremely severe, exaggerated, hard, inhuman and sometimes spectacular kind of asceticism, practiced by the monks of Egypt and Syria. These rude and extravagant instances have prompted some historians...
to regard this ascesis as an aberration and to give it a ‘comical description’. However the Desert fathers generally stood for moderation and sobriety. They did not hesitate to condemn all sorts of excessiveness and to warn against inordinately severe ascetic practices.  

According to Cassian, “Excessive fasting brings about the same evil as gluttony.” In the words of Paul Evdokimov, “Exteriorly these ascesis strike as an extravagance bordering on inhuman, but within we discover a great sobriety and perfect moderation.”

These monks of the desert taught that asceticism must be practiced with humility, discretion and one must not lose sight of its aim which is charity. Humility helps a person to totally rely on God and to thwart vainglory. Discretion, which is the mother and guardian and moderator of all virtues, helps to avoid all excessiveness. Charity is the ultimate goal of ascetical efforts. In the words of an Elder, “Let us acquire the main virtue, charity. Fasting is nothing, vigil is nothing, and any painstaking is nothing in the absence of charity.” Asceticism and monasticism must never be opposed in their concrete forms of practice.

In the coenobitical form of monastic life where monks began to live in communities under obedience to a common Rule and a Superior, the practice of asceticism was given a new dimension. In many respects the basic orientations of anchoritic and coenobitic life are similar. Both forms are rooted in the evangelical principles of total renunciation, purity of heart, love of God and neighbor and complete conversion to God with all one’s mind and heart. But the manner of their living is different. In the case of anchorites, it was a solitary struggle under the guidance of a spiritual father. In cenobetism, they took the path of mutual service. The asceticism of the cenobite background was geared towards the life of mutual service. ‘Dying daily to self’ amidst others in the community, where commitment to one’s neighbor as oneself became a daily lived experience.

Besides the poverty and celibacy of the anchoretic life, obedience became a distinguishing character of coenobitical life. Obedience to the Superior and the codified Rule is a condition sine qua non for harmonious community life. “Obedience now dominated the whole of life: materially, it ruled all its details, spiritually because it became the basis of all asceticism.” The ascetic spirit of a monk in the community was incorporated into the ‘labor of obedience’.

The importance of ascetical practices in monastic life was strongly emphasized by the founders of community life, like Pachomius, Amoun, Basil the Great, Cassian and Benedict. At the same time they insisted on the aspect of moderation and were always against any sort of excessiveness. A harmonious development of communal life based on the values of asceticism was given primacy against individual ascetic extravagances. The Pachomian sources make it very clear that, “bodily mortifications are without any value if they are not accompanied by humility, charity, obedience, chastity and other virtues and if they are not subordinated to other spiritual realities.” The entire life of a monk even in coenobitism is rooted in asceticism, “which stressed communal rather than individual aspects, sharing of monastic goods rather than personal possessions, celibacy rather than intimate affection for one person, and obedience to the will of another rather than addiction to one’s own will.”

As an integral part of Church’s life and holiness monasticism always remained the fertile soil for asceticism in the Church. Asceticism received different models and radicalism in the monastic atmosphere of both cenobetism and anchoritism. Monks were the carriers and faithful witnesses of Christian asceticism throughout the centuries.

6. The Spirit Filled Asceticism of Oriental Christians

According to Eastern Fathers, the goal of spiritual life, which is an activity of the Holy Spirit,
the third person of the Trinity, consists in love of God that leads to union with Him. Eastern Fathers often used the term Theosis (Deification or Divinization) to denote union with God. Theosis expresses the newness of the condition to which man has been restored through the Incarnation of the Son of God. Clement of Alexandria gave this doctrine adequate expression with the terminology of Theosis or Deification. “The Word of God became man in order that you may learn from man how man may become God.”

Our human nature is not changed into a divine nature but the life of Christ is shared so abundantly that through his gifts we share in the divine nature and are taken up into the Trinitarian relationship of love. The goal of asceticism is our being conformed to this love. It is God’s Spirit who affects this process and our participation in this process is again caused by his grace.

Theosis is possible because man is being created in the image and likeness of God (Gen.1:26-27). The image is but an incipient deification or theosis. Its goal is to become as like God as possible by a human being. The ascension from image to likeness of God is the aim of spiritual life and spiritual praxis or asceticism. The presence of evil in the created world and its influence in human nature obstructs this progress in love towards union with God. Good and evil, the two opposite forces, are working in man and in the world. ‘To renounce the world and to mortify the body’ does not mean that the world and human body are not good. One must always profess that human body and the material world are created by God and they are good.

The trichotomic anthropology of the Easterners show that human being is a composite of body, soul and Spirit as against the dichotomic concept of the human composition of body and soul. By Spirit, Eastern Fathers mean Holy Spirit. It is our obligation to help the Spirit to penetrate more and more our body and soul. This is achieved through the mortification of the flesh. The flesh here means everything in the soul and body which resist the Holy Spirit. In the words of Fr. Spidlik, “The Spirit must grow and penetrate more in our soul and body. Therefore, the Spirit divinizes us and thus it becomes the soul of our soul. Thus, the Spirit transforms our whole existence. It is the meaning of Incarnation. God became man in order to make man divine.”

Resistance to the Spirit comes from sin in us or the ‘flesh’. St. Paul describes (Rom.7) how flesh and spirit are opposed to each other and working in us. In this understanding of the “flesh” the basic aim of asceticism is to destroy flesh. “It is a necessary condition that man could be dominated by the Holy Spirit. Such is the Eastern Christian teaching. This is how East Syrian Christianity interprets asceticism.”

The indispensable aspect of removing the obstacles is to listen to the Spirit and obey his commandments by giving our body and soul to his total disposition. In order to remove the obstacles one has to fight against vices within him and outside. One must fight against passions, evil thoughts and desires that are root of all vices and cause of every sin. A human person’s growth in the Spirit is characterized by his growth in virtues, especially in the virtue of charity. It is also a sign of his being guided by the Spirit.

Through these ascetic efforts humans return to his natural status, original (paradisisic) status in which he was created, that status in which man enjoyed total intimacy with God, with other humans and other creatures. Asceticism helps one to achieve the purity of the soul and body, so that one can see everything, created world and human beings, without causing any harm or injury to his soul and body. What is important is one’s interior attitude to these external realities. In this sense, the practice of asceticism helps one to bring the “memory of God,” “the remembrance of God”(St.Basil) in him. “The goal of the renunciation of the world is to return to the world, to the “paradisal” state of man, where everything nourishes the remembrance of God. The asceticism is a holy thing as far as it is considered not as a goal, but a means to arrive the goal, the happiness to see God everywhere and in everything.”

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7. Paschal Dimension of Christian Asceticism

Christian life as such is a living of the paschal mystery and consists in the passage from death to life that is sacramentally expressed especially in Baptism and Eucharist and existentially lived in daily life. The negative and positive dimensions of Christian asceticism characterize this passage from death to life. The Vatican Council reminds us that through the Paschal Mystery, “we continue to bear about in our body the dying of Jesus so that life of Jesus may also be made manifest in our bodily frame”. The paschal mystery, cross, death and resurrection subsume all the vicissitudes of Christian life. Human being is a paschal being (Homo Paschalis). An unceasing Passover takes place in the very depth of one’s humanity. Participation in the paschal mysteries though asceticism realizes in a Christian, the death to the old man and a new life in the Spirit.

According to St Athanasius, the Christian Pasch is the epitome of Christian life. He spoke about the practice of ascetic withdrawal with the metaphor of death. The metaphor of death expressed the goal of ascetic renunciation as the withdrawal of the soul from bodily passions, which he calls ascetic death. Celebration of the Easter again epitomized Christian life according to Athanasius. Death and Resurrection of Christ is a living reminder to the Christians, how they could successfully ascend to heaven through the practice of ascetic withdrawal from the world. For him the Passover of Israelites provided a symbolic prototype of this withdrawal as the way to cross over from earth to heaven. In this background Easter enables Christians to redouble their efforts to withdraw from the world and thereby to ascend to the heavenly city. Christian asceticism as sharing in the paschal mystery of Jesus is a sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus to the end of sharing in his glory. It is a passing through death in order to receive new life.

The Paschal mystery is a sign of Christ’s victory over death by willingly accepting death so as to destroy it through his resurrection. Likewise every voluntary denial of self in asceticism, every voluntary mortification of the ego-centricity, is a dynamic destruction of death and triumph for the life of the person and through him to the society. In the paschal vision of Christian asceticism what ultimately counts is not abnegation, refusal, suffering, destruction or death, but the transfiguration and transformation which stands for resurrection, a new life, a new reality. This is the glorious aspect of Christian asceticism, which is brightened by the glorious resurrection of Christ.

The centrality of the Joy of Pascha is another important aspect of Christian asceticism. Christ’s suffering, and death on the cross is a passage to his glorious resurrection and the consequent paschal joy. Resurrection means victory over sin and death. The ascetic death of a Christian makes him participate in the victory of resurrection and the intoxicating joy of the Pascha. This joy one has to take into the world and to proclaim in and through one’s life. The foundation of paschal joy is the liberating power of Jesus’ resurrection and of his Spirit. Asceticism as a paschal experience of liberation leads one to this joy. This joy cannot be taken away by the dark sides of life, which deform the true face of man. It is stronger than all human failures. This is the reason behind St. Paul’s counsel to ‘rejoice always’ (1Thes 5:18).

The Desert Fathers and later monks radiated this paschal joy in the midst of their hard and austere ascetic efforts. They considered their asceticism as a source of happiness even in this life. “The Fathers of the Desert aimed positively at being happy men, and at teaching happiness to others.” According to Fr. Spidlik, Eastern spirituality and asceticism always preached the joy of resurrection and the paschal joy of the Eastern Churches. That is why it is said that Eastern asceticism is an experience of Paschal Joy, a true ‘Gaudium Paschale.’
8. Towards a Contemporary Asceticism

“A Christian life without the spirit of asceticism cannot maintain itself and persevere in fruitful spiritual richness and as an apostolic testimony” are the words of Pope Paul VI pointing to the essential need of asceticism to the Christian life. The ascetical phenomenon, which we have been discussing in this article, voluntarily undertaken and practiced by the followers of Christ is not something outmoded or out of place. Its relevance as human strategies under the help and guidance of the Spirit to achieve higher perfection in life cannot be questioned.

At the same Christian asceticism as a spiritual method in the service of humans in this world has to adapt itself to the exigencies of modern times. The present age, that gives emphasis to the incarnational than eschatological dimensions of life opts for a more positive, outgoing, resurrection oriented spirituality and asceticism. People today are impatient with the cross separated from resurrection and with fabricated penances.

In the deserts of Thebaid extreme fasts and constraints were imposed. Today the combat is not the same. We no longer need added pain. Hair shirts, chains and flagellation would risk uselessly breaking us. Today mortification would be liberation from every kind of addiction, speed, noise, alcohol, and all kinds of stimulants. Asceticism would be necessary rest, the discipline of regular periods of calm and silence, when one could regain the ability to stop for prayer and contemplation even in the heart of all noise of the world and above all then to listen to the presence of others. Fasting instead of doing violence to the flesh could be our renunciation of the superfluous, our sharing with the poor and a joyful balance in all things.

On this background, contemporary asceticism should account for the whole person, not dividing body and soul and avoiding the traditional mistrust and contempt of the body. Spiritual perfection is possible only as an outgrowth of human wholeness.

Practice of Christian asceticism must involve one’s neighbor, not to be concerned only with the needs and desires of the solitary self. Efforts of personal salvation include the needs and sufferings of others. Christian fast is for the sake of others in the name of God. The denial of oneself and self sufficiency through asceticism should strengthen one to take the risk of being hurt, misunderstood, affected by fault, suffering and death in order to commit oneself for others.

In this fast changing world of nervousness, noise, tension and conflicts our asceticism must teach others the deeper dimensions of life. We need an asceticism that is able to restore inner calm, concentration and the ability to pray; an asceticism of open eyes and compassionate heart, sensitivity to other people and to the fate of nature.

The destructive hold of consumerism on human beings is a dangerous phenomenon of modern society. Consumerism functions by rousing insatiable desire for material goods. The consumerist lust for a better life destabilizes one’s life and makes him a slave to dissatisfaction, time and money. In this situation, Christian asceticism has to show them the way to discipline their appetites so that they can be satisfied with sufficiency in spirit and body. Christian asceticism must enable them to enact the self-emptying love of Christ in their daily life. Through self denial, prayer, and good works they should be urged to become free from the consumerist bondage and become able to humanize the society around them.

Contemporary Christian asceticism has to bring a greater capacity to love, grow humanly, yearn for what is not yet, experience the presence of God in ordinary and extra ordinary moments of life and embrace everybody with joy.

Contemporary asceticism must urge everyone to freely and joyfully give up even such good things for a greater good, for a greater love and to have a larger share in the paschal joy, the Gaudium Paschale, God wants to bestow.
ENDNOTES


23. Hugo Koch, Quellen zur Geschicthe der Askese und des Monchturns in der alten Kirche, Tubingen, 1931, 23-76.


36. Conferences, II, 16.

43 Marcel Driot, _Desert Fathers_, 50-56.
41 Rosemary Rader, _Asceticism_, 26.
42 Louis Bouyer, _History of Christian Spirituality_, 328.
44 Rosemary Rader, _Asceticism_, 26.
46 Tomas Spidlik, _Spirituality of the Christian East_, 55-60.
47 Tomas Spidlik, 93-94.
51 Tomas Spidlik, _East Syrian Asceticism_, 142.
52 Vat. II, SC, no.12.
57 Tomas Spidlik, _East Syrian Asceticism_, 141.
58 Paul Evdokimov, _Ages of the Spiritual Life_, 64.
61 L. Cunningham and K. J. Eagen, _Christian Spirituality_, 121.
Introduction

Jesus Christ, the great mystery and wonder, has been interpreted variously from the first century onwards by believers and non-believers, intellectuals, philosophers, poets, etc. Though there are innumerable books about him, Christ still remains a great mystery to be interpreted. Christ who is living in the Church is the same incarnated, crucified and resurrected God who has always been worshipped by the faithful and interpreted and defined by the Councils. Therefore, the Christ of the Church of today is the result of the faith life of the last twenty centuries. The Christ of the Church is not only the Christ of the NT, but also a figure which is formed by the Sacred Tradition and the faith life of the Church. Here we mean the transition of the Jesus of history or Jesus of the Gospels to the Christ of faith or the Christ of the Church. In order to interpret Christ, a true believer should accept both the Sacred Scripture and the Tradition.\(^1\)

The answer to the question “who is Christ”? would not be derived directly from the NT. The answer comes from the living Tradition of the Church, and the NT bears witness to the apostolic authenticity of that living Tradition. It is the Church which proclaimed who Jesus Christ was, and it is the same Church which proclaims the same message today. The NT is an integral part of the Tradition of the Church which is kept alive from generation to generation, and is the mind and the memory of the Church. Thus the Church gains more complex knowledge and stores it up from generation to generation. The Holy Spirit forms the Tradition and keeps it alive and growing. Therefore, a believer in this Tradition cannot be empty-handed in interpreting the Bible and Christ. The Tradition forms and informs our mind and trains us to understand the Bible in its proper sense. The Malankara Church interprets the person of Christ in relation to its faith Tradition. Therefore, any authentic interpretation of Christ in the Malankara Church should be based on the faith
life of the Malankara Church and deepened by the Scripture. As Karl Adam observes, it is not in the university lecture hall that we encounter Christ, but in the Holy places of the living Church. It is the Church’s image of Christ that supports our faith. He, therefore, emphasizes the image of Christ of the Church.

In this study, we are focusing on the Christ of the Church, especially the Christ of the Malankara Church by analyzing the liturgy of the Malankara Church. On the basis of the different liturgical, spiritual, theological and disciplinary traditions, there are different Sui iuris Churches (Rites) in the universal Church. These differences in the traditions of the Church show that Christ who is living in these Churches has different faces or images. By this we mean that each Church sui iuris presents its own figure of Christ, or each Church has a dominant image of Christ and this image is the Christological uniqueness of each Church.

In order to present the image of Christ in the liturgy of the Malankara Church, we are concentrating more on the liturgy of the great feasts of our Lord. Since the great feasts commemorate all the main salvific events of Christ from Incarnation to Pentecost, we can find the whole person of Christ there. The Malankara Church belongs to the West Syrian liturgical family and therefore, the main sources of this study are the liturgical texts of the great feasts in the West Syrian Tradition. In this study we use Ma’dé’dono, the book of the Church festivals according to the ancient rite of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and the Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit (PHS Vol.2,3,4). The Divine Office for Sundays and great feasts in the liturgical year of the Antiochean Tradition is originally called Penqitho. We also use Tirunalukal, the Malayalam Text of the Church festivals of the Malankara Catholic Church and the order of the Holy Qurbono of the Syro-Malankara Church. Both Ma’dé’dono and Tirunalukal are similar liturgical texts.

There are seven great feasts of our Lord in the liturgical year of the Malankara Church: Christmas (Yaldo), Epiphany and Baptism (Denho), The Entrance of our Lord into the Temple (Ma’alto), Easter (Qyomto), Ascension (Suloqo) Pentecost and the feast of Transfiguration (Mtale). These feasts are the commemoration of the salvific events or the historical events of the life of Jesus Christ. The liturgical year of the Malankara Church is based on these events. Among these great feasts of our Lord, the entrance of our Lord into the Temple and the Transfiguration are less solemn feasts than the other five.

1. Titles, Symbolic Images and Attributes of Jesus in the Liturgy

We shall examine the figure of Christ in the liturgy analysing the various titles, images and attributes of Christ used in the prayers of the great feasts. None of the titles can comprehend all the aspects of his person and work. Each of them shows one particular aspect of the whole wealth of conviction of faith about Jesus. Only when we investigate all the different titles and the images of Jesus in the great feasts, we shall arrive at the true understanding of the whole figure of Christ of the great feasts.

In this section we divide the titles of Christ into different categories. The messianic titles, Messiah or Christ, King, Son of David, Son of Man, Judge, Bridegroom and Master, show the OT fulfilment of the expected Messiah. Pre-existential titles, Son of God, Word of God, Firstborn, Beloved Son, Only Begotten, Holy One, manifest the relationship between Jesus the Son and God the Father and these titles reveal the Sonship, Pre-existence and divinity of Christ. Soteriological titles, Saviour, Mediator, High Priest, Lamb of God, Divine Physician, Good Shepherd show the salvific figure of Christ and manifest the salvific work of Christ for humanity, and they highlight who Jesus Christ is for the whole humanity. The titles common to the Trinity, Lord and God, reveal the equality of Jesus as God; the symbolic images and attributes of Jesus Christ, which highlight the qualities of the person of Christ.
A definite and absolute classification of these titles is difficult. All the titles are inter-related and dependent. Therefore the classification of the titles has just the function of providing a framework to understand the whole figure of Christ in the great feasts.

Before entering into a treatment of the Messianic titles, we must examine the proper name, Jesus. For the Christians, the name ‘Jesus’ is more precious than any other name. Jesus is the proper name given by the angel of the Lord at the time of the Annunciation: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). The name Jesus means God’s salvation. Though the name ‘Jesus’ is very frequent in the NT, the name ‘Jesus’ alone is not used in the great feasts. On the other hand the title Jesus is mentioned together with the name of God many times. In the night vigil of the feast of the Nativity the Church prays: “Jesus, God, the prophets of the truth prophesied Your mysteries by the Holy Spirit”; “Glory to you Jesus, God who are not divided”.

The titles like Jesus the Messiah, or Christ, Jesus the Lord, Lord Jesus Christ etc. are very frequent. This shows that the proper name Jesus alone is not presented as a common title in the prayers of the great feasts, though it is very usual in the NT. Since the name ‘Jesus’ is very common among the Jews, the name ‘Jesus’ alone may present more the humanity and the historicity of the incarnated God than his divinity. The change of emphasis in the prayers clearly shows the progression from Jesus of History to the Christ of Faith in the Malankara Church. We can say that the Malankara Church does not want to manifest the humanity of Jesus alone. But rather, the Church wants to manifest more the divinity of Christ rather than his humanity alone.

1.1. Messianic Titles

Here we deal with the Messianic titles of Jesus in the great feasts. The prominent Messianic titles are: Messiah or Christ, King, Son of David, Son of Man, Judge, Bridegroom and Master. In the NT the Messianic titles are related to the expectation of the Jews about the future political and the eschatological Messiah, ‘the anointed one’ who is the great king, prophet and priest in the dynasty of David. On the basis of this expectation Jesus is addressed as the expected Messiah with various Messianic titles in the NT.

In the great feasts the title ‘Messiah’ or ‘Christ’ is one of the most prominent titles of Jesus, and it has assumed more a divine character in the great feasts which was not fully clear in the NT. The title ‘Christ’ is presented together with more divine titles such as Christ our God, Christ God, Christ the Lord, Christ the life-giving God, etc. All these expressions manifest the tendency of emphasizing the divine character of Christ.

All of the seven Messianic titles in one way or another highlight the different Messianic faces of Jesus. The title Messiah and other Messianic titles and attributes of the great feasts are fully biblical, and these biblical titles receive their theological and spiritual fullness from the early ecclesial community, especially in the liturgical milieu. Therefore, we find a continuation of the Messianic figure from the OT to the NT and from the NT to Christ who is living in the Church, especially in the Malankara Church.

Though these messianic titles manifest more the historic, human and suffering nature of Jesus in the gospels, these titles in the great feasts assume a more divine glorified, majestic and eschatological nature and become titles with deep religious meaning. The tendency of excluding the Messianic titles with more human and historic nature is also evident in the prayers. That is why the titles like ‘Son of David’, ‘Son of Man’, ‘Master’, and prophet are very rare in the liturgical prayers.

Therefore, the title ‘Christ’ does not signify the same in the NT and in the Malankara Church today, but rather we find a growth of the significance of this title in the Malankara Church. The transition from the Messiah of the Gospel to the Messiah of the Malankara Church is clear in the Messianic titles of Jesus.
1.2. Titles Related to the Pre-existence and Sonship of Jesus Christ

In order to understand the person of Christ, we analyze here the titles related to the Pre-existence, Sonship and Divinity. All these titles which we find here, namely Son of God, Word of God, Firstborn, Beloved Son, Only Begotten, Holy One, manifest the relationship between Jesus the Son and God the Father.

The title ‘Son of God’ has deep roots both in the OT and in the NT. The OT concept of the Son of God is essentially characterized by the idea of election to participate in the divine work through the execution of a particular commission, and by the idea of strict obedience to God who elects. This does not mean that Jesus is adopted by the Father; rather the title ‘Son of God’ signifies the proper and intimate relation with the Father. In the Gospel we find the use of the title ‘Son of God’ in a different context.

Among these titles, one of the most frequent titles of the great feasts is the ‘Son of God’. It shows the relationship between God the Father and the Son, Jesus. In the night vigil of the feast of the Nativity the Church sings: “Mary was carrying the Son of God”. It appears in the evening prayer of the Epiphany: “In river Jordan the Son of God is baptized”. This title is frequently used in the service of the Great Friday: “The Son of God is stretched out himself on the Cross of Crucifixion”. In all these cases it is clear that the title ‘Son of God’ is used to refer to Jesus or to speak about his historic events as the events of God. The eternity of the Father and of the Son is revealed and the eternal birth of the Son is highlighted in the following Titles: “Eternal Child” (PHS. Vol. 2, 385), “Eternal Son” (PHS. Vol. 2. 385), “Eternal Son of the Father” (PHS, Vol. 2, 608), and “Eternal Son of the Eternal Father” (Ma’dedono, 15). The expression like “Perfect Image of the Perfect Father” (Ma’dedono 129), The image of the Invisible Father” (Ma’dedono 129), show that the Father and the Son share the same divine substance and the Son is the perfect image of the Father. We can find various attributes applying to the Son and the Father: The Son of the Good One, Glorious Son, O Son of the Father, O son of the Most High, Living Son, Beloved Son.

Thus the title ‘Son of God’ signifies today in the Church that Jesus is the eternal Son of the Father, and he is the Son of God neither by election nor by adoption, rather his Sonship is eternal. Jesus as Son of God manifests also his perfect divinity, his pre-existence and perfect oneness with the Father. This leads to the concept that Jesus is true God. The gradual growth of the meaning of title from the OT to the NT and from the NT to the Church of today is evident.

Through these various titles related to the pre-existence and the Sonship, the great feasts emphasize not only Jesus’ Pre-existential and divine nature with God the Father, but also the position of Christ in the Trinity as the Son, the second Person. Above all, the transition from Jesus of Nazareth to the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, the only begotten of the Father, is evident through these titles. Moreover these titles highlight the role of the Father and his love towards the Son. The great feasts also point out the trans-historical and the divine existence of Jesus before his historical and human existence.

1.3. Soteriological Titles of Jesus Christ

Here we deal with the titles which reveal the salvific significance of Jesus Christ in the great feasts. The titles like Saviour, Mediator, High Priest, Lamb of God, Divine Physician, Good Shepherd show the salvific figure of Christ, and they highlight who Jesus Christ is for the whole humanity.

The title ‘Saviour’ has roots in Judaism, and this can be seen in the OT where Yahweh is called ‘Saviour’. It is certain that this title originally referred to God. We find that this title ‘Saviour’ was occasionally conferred upon him. At the birth of Jesus the angel said: “For you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour” (Lk 2:11, Mt 1:21, Jn 4:42, 1 Jn 4:14). Jesus is Saviour because the name Jesus itself
signifies it. “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21).

The title ‘Saviour’ is common in the prayers in relation to Jesus’ unique salvific nature. In many of the prayers Jesus is directly called Saviour. On the feast of the Nativity, the Church sings: “O our Saviour, on the day of your Nativity the churches rejoice and exult and their people sing praise” (PHS, Vol. 2, 429). The expressions like “the Saviour of the whole creation” (PHS, Vol. 2, 492), “the Saviour of the world” (PHS, Vol. 2, 603), “the Redeemer and the Deliverer of us all” (PHS, Vol. 2, 485) and “the Liberator” (PHS, Vol. 3, 534, 548 554) reveal the personality of Jesus as Saviour of all humanity and the whole creation.

All the soteriological titles in the great feasts manifest the different faces of Christ’s saving actions. The title Saviour includes all the significance of Christ’s saving actions. The titles Mediator and High Priest show the mediatory role of the Saviour between God and man. Lamb of God reflects the self denial and the sacrificing image of the Saviour. Divine Physician reveals the purifying and the sanctifying role of the Saviour. Good shepherd manifests the love, care, protection and the mercy of the Saviour. In all these salvific titles, we find the transition and the growth in understanding from the historical Jesus to the Saviour Jesus Christ of the Malankara Church.

1.4. Titles Common to the Persons of the Trinity

During the great feasts we address the most important two titles of Jesus: ‘Lord’ and ‘God’, which are commonly used for the persons of the Trinity. Whenever the titles ‘Lord’ and ‘God’ appear in the prayers, it is not easy to identify which person of the Trinity, they are addressed. Only from the context or from the following qualifications of these titles can we discover whether it is the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit. Almost all the prayers in the Eucharistic celebration end with a Trinitarian Doxology. ‘Lord our God, [...] we offer praise and thanksgiving to you and your Son and your Holy spirit’. Here these titles are addressed to the Father. ‘Lord our God, [...] we offer praise and thanksgiving to you and your Father and your Holy Spirit’. Here these titles are addressed to the Son. Therefore, the title ‘Lord’ and ‘God’ is addressed to both Father and the Son in the Eucharistic celebration.

The title Lord is the common name of Yahweh in the OT. In the Gospels we can see that Jesus designated himself the title Kyrios (Lord) many times (Mk 11:3, Mt 7:21, Mt 24:42). The disciples also called him Lord (Mt 8:25). Jesus himself accepted this title during his ministry (Jn 13:13). In what sense Jesus used this title for himself is not fully clear. It is certain that the title Kyrios, applied to Jesus, received its full meaning only after his death and exaltation, in the context of the worship of the early Christians (Acts 11:17, 15:26). The first Christians expressed the deep conviction in Jesus as Kyrios in their confession of faith: ‘Jesus is Lord’.

The title ‘Lord’ is the most commonly used title for Jesus in the prayers and songs of the great feasts. Many times the title Lord is used together with God. The title Lord is presented in the great feasts in a variety of forms: O Most Compassionate Lord, Holy Holy Holy O Lord, Lord of the universe, Lord of all creation, Lord of Kings, Lord of heavenly hosts, Lord of Light, Lord of Adam, Lord of all, Lord of Angels, Lord of Mysteries, Lord of glory, Lord of two covenants, Lord of the living and the dead, Lord of Graciousness. Various attribute are added to this title: Sublime, Exalted, Strong, Mighty, Merciful, Loving, Bountiful, etc.

The gospel of John and the letter to the Hebrews provide the clearest and least ambiguous evidence of the attribution of Theos to Jesus. The designation of Jesus as ‘God’ is really clear in the NT Bible passages (Jn 1:1, Jn 20:28, Heb 1:9). The concept that Jesus is God received its full significance in the resurrection experience of the disciples and in
the worship of the early Church.

The title ‘God’ is very frequent in the great feasts. We can see there are various titles combined with the title ‘God’: Christ God, Lord God, Christ our God. The attributes like Mighty, Powerful, Strong are added to the title ‘God’ to show the power and the glory of Jesus, the God.

These are the two prominent titles of Jesus in the great feasts. The growth of the significance of these titles from the OT to the NT and from the NT to the Church, especially in the Malankara Church is clear in the liturgical prayers. Various adjectives and attributes added to the title ‘Lord’ and ‘God’, reveal the growth of the significance of these titles. Addressing Jesus as Lord and God in the great feasts shows that Jesus shares the same divinity of the Father and the Holy Spirit. By calling Jesus as Lord and God, which is the name of the God in the OT, reveals the unity and the relationship between God in the OT and Jesus Christ in the NT. Thus these two titles reveal Jesus as the invisible God of the OT. Above all, these titles and the various adjectives proclaim the divinity, the glory and the majesty of Jesus Christ. These two frequent titles of Jesus in the great feasts affirm the divinity of Jesus and his equality within the Trinity as God and Lord.

1.5. The Symbolic Images Related to the Person of Jesus Christ

We can find different symbolic images of Jesus in the great feasts such as Creator, Light, Fire, Love, Peace, Sun of Righteousness, and Wonderful. These images are not prevalent during the historic life of Jesus, but rather they developed among the early Christians and in the life of the Church. All these images of Jesus are related to his divine nature and his personal qualities as Lord and God. As Creator, Christ enjoys authority over the whole universe. The image of Fire, Light, and the Sun of Righteousness manifest the awesomeness, majesty, and greatness of Christ. The supreme goodness of God is revealed through the images of Love and Peace. The image ‘Wonderful’ reveals the creature’s approach to God as everything wonderful and marvellous. All these images of Christ together present a face of glory, majesty, authority, power, divinity, awesomeness and goodness.

1.6. The Attributes of Jesus Christ in the Liturgy

It is the ecclesiastical tradition which gives different kinds of attributes to Jesus in accordance with his divine personality. The liturgy of the great feasts contains many attributes given to the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is referred to as Mighty God, Strong God, Powerful God, and Hero God in the feast of Baptism (PHS, Vol. 2, 489). During the service of Great Friday Jesus is presented as Noble One, Glorious One, and Exalted One (PHS, Vol. 3, 547). There are many attributes related to Jesus’ divinity and holiness. Jesus is addressed as Most Gracious, Most Holy, O Holy One of Israel, O Eternal and Omnipotent God, Great One, Pure One, Holy One, Almighty and Immortal. There are various attributes related to life which are used to refer Jesus as Fountain of life, Master of life, Living One, Giver of life, and Haven of True life. In relation to the various virtues of Jesus, several qualifications emerge with his name such as Merciful Lord, Fountain of Goodness, Righteous One, Good One, Compassionate One, Sea of Mercies, Commander, Gracious Physician, Wise Physician, and Good Physician etc.

Though there are various titles, images and attributes presenting to us the figure of Christ, none of these titles or images of Jesus can present the whole mystery of Christ. All the titles and images together with multiple adjectives describe the whole mystery of the person of Christ. Therefore, the figure of Christ in the great feasts is unique because ultimately it was finally shaped by the faith-life of the Antiochean Church in the Syrian background. Above all the titles in the NT assume more divine significance in the later life of the Church. Therefore, we can notice the transition and the growth of understanding from
Jesus of the gospels or Jesus of the history to the Christ of the faith or the Christ of the Church especially the Christ of the Malankara Church.

2. Some Dominant Images of Christ in the Malankara Liturgy

After having seen the titles, images and the different dimensions of the person of Christ, the question emerges whether Christ has a unique image in the Malankara liturgy, and if there is, what is that image. It is a complex task to present a unique image of Christ in the liturgy of the Malankara Church which is different from other churches. However, we can point out some dominant images of Christ which are prevalent in the great feasts.

2.1. Jesus Christ the Invisible God of the Old Testament

Jesus Christ who was born from the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem and lived in Nazareth is the invisible God of the OT. In the OT God revealed himself to the Fathers and spoke through the Prophets. The invisible God of the OT became visible, human and historical. The reality ‘God became man’ signifies that the invisible God of the OT became man. The feast of the Nativity proclaims that Jesus Christ is the God of the Fathers.

The morning service of the Great Friday shows that the Creator of the world became man and suffered on the cross. It also manifests itself such that the God of the OT who created the world in the beginning became man and suffered on the cross. The Church prays:

Praise to You and thanksgiving to You, Wise Creator. In the beginning, by six words in six days You brought into being the world and all that it contains, and in your wisdom you set it in order. But in one day, through Your Passion, You fulfilled all the mysteries and You renewed Your creation.

Furthermore the unity of the OT God and Jesus Christ is beautifully treated in the evening service of the Passover. This liturgy refers to Jesus Christ as one who manifested himself to Abraham during the sacrifice of Isaac and to Moses in the mystery of the lamb offered in the evening. Therefore, Jesus Christ himself is the God of the Fathers.

We praise You Lord of the Mysteries, Christ our Saviour, Who were spoken of in Mysteries by the prophets. Abraham desired to see Your day and saw it and rejoiced, when on the summit of the mountain You revealed Yourself to him, a glorious manifestation, in the ram which was offered in sacrifice instead of Isaac who was delivered from the knife. You also manifested Yourself beautifully to Moses in the Mystery of the lamb offered in the evening as a ransom for the first born of Israel. The intervention of God to Moses through fire in the bush prefigured Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The morning service of the Great Friday shows that the Creator of the world became man and suffered on the cross. It also manifests itself such that the God of the OT who created the world in the beginning became man and suffered on the cross. The Church prays:

Praise to You and thanksgiving to You, Wise Creator. In the beginning, by six words in six days You brought into being the world and all that it contains, and in your wisdom you set it in order. But in one day, through Your Passion, You fulfilled all the mysteries and You renewed Your creation.

Not only Jesus Christ but also the Holy Spirit is the invisible God of the OT. So many prayers in the service of Pentecost manifest this. This shows that the Son and the Holy Spirit are invisibly active in the OT. When we say the OT God, we have to see the whole Trinity. Every intervention of God in the OT is the gradual revelation of the Son of God through types and symbols, until the Son reveals himself visibly through his incarnation. Therefore, the creative and the salvific will of the Father is executed.
by the Son with the cooperation of the Spirit in the OT in an invisible manner and, in a more visible manner in the NT. In other words, God the Father took a medium to reveal himself, and that is His own Son. The Son in cooperation with Holy Spirit revealed himself invisibly in the OT and visibly in the NT. In the NT God revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; but in the OT God was invisible and hidden. This image of Christ as the invisible God of the OT is one of the dominant images of Christ in the Malankara Church.

2.2. The Glory and Majesty of Jesus Christ

The splendour and the greatness of Jesus and his glory and majesty are very much emphasized in the great feasts. The feast of Ascension and the feast of Transfiguration present the glory and majesty of Jesus Christ in a very solemn way. There are many prayers which deal with the glory and the majesty of Christ in the great feasts. During the Sunday of Hosanna the Church sings: “How glorious is Your name through all the earth, Your Majesty is praised above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants You were given praise, while the mighty were rebuked and the enemies put to silence”.21 The Sedro of the evening prayer of the feast of Ascension says: “Today the doors of heaven lift up their heads that they may receive the king of glory, who is the Lord of glory and the God of strength”.22 There are many prayers which deal with the glory and the majesty of Jesus Christ.23

The images like Strong God, Mighty God, Powerful God, and Hero God, reveal the power and the majesty of Jesus Christ. Jesus is also addressed as the Wonderful, Fire, Light, Judge, Holy One, Lord of Universe, Lord of all creation, Lord of Glory, Great king of glory, King of kings, etc. All these images and attributes of Jesus reveal his glory, majesty, power and divinity. We can, therefore, affirm that the great feasts present a glorious, majestic, powerful, and authoritative Christ rather than a sorrowful, suffering, tragic and weak Christ. This image of Christ is very much related to the OT image of Yahweh as a majestic and glorious God. This dominant face of Christ is very common in all the liturgical prayers of the Malankara Church.

2.3. The Sorrow, Suffering and Weakness of Jesus Treated in Relation to His Glory and Majesty

Though the great feasts present a glorified and majestic Christ, they also manifest the sorrow and the suffering of the person of Jesus in history. All the lowness, sufferings and sorrow of Jesus are presented in the great feasts in relation to his glory and majesty. In other words, a sorrowful and pathetic image of Christ is not presented separately in the great feasts. His suffering and sorrow have meaning only in relation to his glory and majesty. Jesus suffered in history but now he is in glory. He is no more a suffering person. Any title, any image, or any presentation which manifests the sorrowful nature of Jesus more than his glory and majesty, is not in tune with the liturgical patrimony of the Malankara Church. In the feast of the Nativity of our Lord, Jesus is not presented as an infant Jesus with the limitations and weakness of a child but rather, God the Creator born as a child at Bethlehem. The first Sunday after the Nativity the Church sings:

Today he dwells in a cave, for whom the heavens are too narrow.
He is wrapped up in strips of cloth who is clothed in splendour.
He is cradled on the knees
Whose glory makes the Winged Creatures tremble.
He who provides nourishment for all creatures sucks a little milk.
Glory to his humility who willed to lower himself to our level
And because he was man, he embraced all that belongs to man.24

The cross and the suffering of the Lord are
remembered always in relation to his majesty and glory. In the opening prayer (Kauma) and in the beginning of the public service of the Holy Qurbono we pray: Holy are you O God, Holy are you the Strong, Holy are you the Deathless, who were crucified for us, Have mercy on us (3 times).

2.4. The Divine Image of Christ

Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man and he has both divine and human natures. However the divine image of Christ is one of the dominant faces of Christ in the great feasts. The titles like Son of God, First born, Only Begotten, the Word of the Father, and the Beloved Son themselves reveal the pre-existence and the divine character of Christ. Moreover, most of the titles always appear together with the divine titles such as Lord, God, Christ our God, etc. Almost all the titles manifest the divinity of Christ in one way or another. Above all, the main concern of the great feasts is to address Jesus as God, meditate his events as God’s events and pray to him by calling him God. The titles ‘God’ and ‘Lord’ are very frequent in the prayers referring to Jesus, and these same titles are used to invoke God the Father and the Holy Spirit. The symbolic images such as Creator, Light, Fire, Love, Peace, Sun of Righteousness, Wonderful and other various divine attributes of Christ are very much notable in the great feasts and these images reveal the divine image of Jesus. Therefore the dominant image of Christ in the great feasts is his divine image rather than his human image. All the feasts present the Christ-event as God’s event. Presenting Christ as the invisible Christ of the OT, emphasizing Christ’s glory and majesty, and revealing his divinity through divine titles, images and attributes, the Church manifests Jesus Christ as God like the powerful, strong, and authoritative God of the OT. At the same time the divinity of Jesus Christ is presented always together with the historic and human events of Jesus of Nazareth especially with his human sufferings and sorrows. Thus the image of Jesus as God becomes a living image, permutating the whole life of the faithful in the Malankara Church.

2.5. The Humanity of Jesus Treated in Relation to His Divinity

The approach of the great feasts towards the humanity of Jesus is unique. It is evident that the themes of the great feasts are the historic and the salvific events of Jesus Christ and therefore they are also human events. But the approach of the Malankara Church towards these events is not as a human-event, but rather as a divine-event in the history. The basic understanding is that Jesus Christ is God without beginning and end, and that he became man limiting himself to a particular time and space; then he returned to his glory, hence he is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Therefore, first of all Christ is God, then he is man. The Malankara Church cannot think of the humanity of Jesus without his divinity. In the great feasts this is very evident in the titles and images which manifest always the divine character of Christ.

In order to present Jesus’ historical events in the great feasts, the prayers never use terminologies which project only the humanity of Jesus. For example, we never see the proper name ‘Jesus’ alone to present Christ’s events, because that would emphasize more a historical Jesus and neglect the divine aspect of Christ. The titles which project more the divinity are used frequently in the great feasts to present the Christ’s events and the titles which reveal more the humanity is almost completely avoided. For example, we never see the expression that ‘Jesus’ was born in Bethlehem, but rather that “the Son of God was born in Bethlehem” (Ma’dé’dono, 29). We never read ‘Jesus’ came to be baptized in Jordan, but rather “the Son of God” came to be baptized in Jordan” (Ma’dé’dono’ 51). We can never find in the prayers the idea that Jesus suffered, Jesus died, rather “God suffered in his body” (PHS, Vol. 3, 468), “God hung on the cross” (Ma’dé’dono, 205), “The Son of God Almighty bent his head and died” (Ma’dé’dono, 109). These prayers show the dominating divine approach to the humanity and to the historic events of Jesus Christ.
It is evident that the great feasts present the humanity of Jesus only in relation to his divinity. The expressions, titles, images, types, which manifest only the human aspects of Jesus are neglected in the great feasts. At the same time Jesus’ human nature which invokes his humiliation, suffering, death on the cross, is clearly presented in the liturgical prayers together with his divinity. In short, the humanity of Jesus has significance only in relation to his divinity.

3. Christ According to the Malankara Church

The image of Christ in the Malankara Church challenges the increasing tendency of demythologizing religion in the West. In the Western society we find the trend of neglecting the transcendence of God and emphasizing more the immanence or the human face of God. We can see the denial of the divinity of Jesus from Arian heresy onwards in the early church. This denial is continued today in the West through the popular novels and the films, the Last Temptation of Kazan de Zakis and the Da Vinci Code of Dan Brown. The God of the Old Testament is a transcendent God. In the New Testament God became man and He is with us, “Emmanuel”. Here it is clear that the human image of God or the immanent God has meaning only in relation to his transcendence. Jesus Christ, fully God and man, is transcendent and immanent. Emphasizing more the human face of Jesus, the western society may lose gradually the divine image of Jesus. Thus God and religion are reduced to a human enterprise. Jesus Christ is presented as a Superman and a medium to solve the human problems. The demythologisation of Religion and gradual denial of the divine face of God has caused the deterioration of Christianity in the West. There are persons in the West who look eagerly to the East to have an experience of a transcendent God.

In this context the image of Christ in the Malankara Church has great significance, because it emphasizes more the divine and the glorious nature of Jesus and at the same time it keeps the human face of Jesus with all his sufferings and sorrows.

If this is the approach of the Malankara Church, the expressions like ‘Jesus of Nazareth’, ‘Jesus the Friend’, ‘Jesus the Brother’, and ‘Jesus the Guru’ are not the adequate titles of Christ for the faithful of the Malankara Church, because these expressions manifest more the humanity of Jesus than his divinity. According to the prayers of the Church, ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ is an expression of the nonbeliever who denies the divinity of God. The hymn of the night vigil of the Great Friday shows that the crucifiers call Jesus as ‘Jesus of Nazareth’. “Jesus advanced and said to them: Whom do you seek with swords and lathis? “They said, Jesus of Nazareth, son of Carpenter, who by his parables and teachings spoke against our leaders”.

The great feasts warn us against the tendency of presenting Jesus as ‘Friend’, ‘Brother’ and ‘Guru’. These titles are used in many of the Christian writings and devotional prayers. But the people of the Malankara Church cannot reduce Lord Jesus Christ to the ordinary images of our life. Even though Jesus calls his disciples friends, the disciples never call him or treat him as a friend. Though the disciples call Jesus as Guru or Master, the liturgy of the Malankara Church does not use these titles to invoke Jesus Christ.

This may be one of the reasons why the Malankara Church uses a plain cross or glorified cross (cross without the figure of Christ) in the liturgical celebrations. The faith in the resurrected, glorified, and divine Christ touches every moment of the life of the faithful. Any image contrary to this divine face of Christ is not agreeing with the figure of Christ living in the faithful of the Malankara Church. For the Malankara faithful, the cross with the crucified body of Christ manifests a sorrowful, miserable, and a pathetic image of Christ rather than a glorified and majestic image of Christ.

Whenever the faithful of the Malankara Church
see a glorified cross or a picture of the glorified Christ, their approach is unique. Looking on the cross and the picture, they see the Lord who suffered for them in the history, and who is now living in glory. They become confident that the Lord who is in glory can save them in their sufferings. Jesus Christ who is living in the Church is a glorified Christ and not a suffering Christ. He suffered only in history but now he is in glory and majesty.

Conclusion

We may say that all the titles and images which we have seen in the liturgy manifest the divine and the glorious character of Jesus, and it is very clear that all these titles assume gradually a full divine nature in the ecclesial tradition. Christ living in the Church assumes new dimensions and significance through the faith of the millions. Therefore, we can say that there is a perfect continuity and growth from the Jesus of the gospel to the Christ of the Malankara Church.

Though the same Christ is living in all the Churches of Latin, Greek, Syrian, Coptic and Armenian traditions, each Church has its own image of Christ. The dominant image of Christ in the Malankara Church is the invisible God of the OT, and we find the unity and continuity between the OT God and Jesus Christ. We can also see the Christ of glory, majesty, power and authority who lives in the heart of the faithful and permeates their whole life. The humanity of Jesus especially his humility, his sufferings, his death on the cross, and all his human weakness are presented in detail in the liturgical prayers, but only in relation to his divinity and glory. While the Christology of the great feasts emphasizes more the unity of the two natures of Jesus, it begins with the divinity of Christ rather than with his humanity. It is a Christology from above, not from below. We find a descending Christological approach rather than an ascending approach. The starting point is that “the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14). All the human events of Jesus are the events of God. Since the Malankara Church is following the West Syrian liturgical tradition, the image of Christ in the Malankara Church is the same one shared by all the Churches which follow the West Syrian liturgical tradition.

This image of Christ in the Malankara Church helps the faithful to proclaim that Jesus Christ is God and Lord and he is the Saviour of the world. At the same time this image of Christ affirms that Jesus Christ is equal in divinity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Since the image of Christ in the Malankara Church emphasizes more the divinity, there is no chance for doubt among the faithful about the divinity of Jesus Christ. The humanity of Jesus and all his events in the history become meaningful and salvific to the faithful of the Malankara Church on the basis of his divinity.

ENDNOTES

1 Cf. DV10.
5 PHS, Vol. 2. 394.
6 Cf. A. Kakkanatt, Christological Catechesis of the Liturgy –A Study on the Great Feast of our Lord in the Malankara Church, Mar Thoma Yogam, Rome 1996, 75-90.
7 Cf. Ex 4:22, Hos 11:1, 2 Sam 7:14, Ps. 2:7, Gen  6:2.
11 Ma’de’dono, 215, Cf, 29.75,77,119, 225. (Ma’de’dono, The Book of the Church Festivals According to the Ancient Rite of the Syrian Orthodox Church, A.Y.
During the service of Pentecost the Father is addressed as Lord and God: “We thank You O Lord God, the Father of all mercies, for when the days of Pentecost had come to an end, after the resurrection of Your Son […] You fulfilled with them the Holy Spirit” *Ma’de’dono*, 329. Again at the Pentecost the Son is addressed as Lord and God: “Our Lord, our God and our saviour Jesus Christ, renew Your Holy Spirit within our intellect, our mind and our hearts”, *Ma’de’dono* 331. The Holy spirit is also addressed as Lord and God during the service of Pentecost: Glory to the Lord, the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the invisible Father and takes from the adorable Son […] We pray You, O God, the comforter Spirit, by this sweet incense […]”, *Ma’de’dono* 351-353.

Cf. The Order of The Holy Qurbono of the Syro-Malankara Church.
Introduction

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, spirituality is not treated as a separate branch of theology and we do not find a definition of ‘spirituality’\(^1\). In the Syriac tradition we do not find any systematic discussion of ruhonuto/ruhanuta in the modern understanding of the term ‘spirituality’. There are a good number of ‘spiritual exhortations’ or ‘discourses’ in Syriac, giving practical advices on the appropriation of the Gospel by the members of the Church, both monks and married people. In a sense these treatises are the main sources to understand the Syriac notion of ‘spiritual life’.

Even in the Latin West, ‘spirituality’ as a separate branch of theology has its origin in the period of transition between the medieval world and the modern age. In fact the word ‘spirituality’ was an invention of the French Catholic theologians\(^2\). The famous *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique* (ed. Marcel Viller, Paris, 1932) which is still in the process of publication, gives a clue to the origin of the term. The qualification of spiritualité by the adjectives ascétique et mystique suggests the influence of the medieval Latin division of theology into three branches: dogmatic, moral and mystical. Dogmatic theology aimed at intellectual clarification, while moral theology dealt with the morally right or wrong actions.

The function of ascetical or mystical theology was to guide the life of ‘religious communities’ and individuals to attain the ‘beatific vision’ through purification or catharsis, illumination and union with the divine. It is this third area that was also called ‘spirituality’, though the medieval Latin theologians never used the abstract noun. In the second half of the twentieth century, especially after the Second Vatican Council, the use of the word ‘spirituality’ became banal and thus we hear about various types of spirituality: Catholic spirituality, Protestant spirituality, Orthodox Spirituality, and even of secular spirituality and Marxist spirituality (and even perhaps of ‘atheist spirituality’).

In the standard Catholic treatises on spirituality, we find the word used in a broader sense related to religious communities or their founders or a large number of subjects (monastic spirituality, lay
spirituality, spirituality of Eucharist etc.). I have given this introduction, which is found in a standard manual of ‘spirituality, to point out my difficulty in making a systematic presentation of the subject from a ‘Syro-antiochian perspective’. What I have written below is only an attempt to understand it.

1. Sources

The sources of the Syro-antiochian spirituality can be divided into two groups: early sources, which were less influenced by Greek thought and sources after 500 AD, which are largely influenced by the Greek fathers. St Ephrem, Jacob of Serugh (d.521) and Philoxenus of Mabbugh (d.523) are the representatives of the early stage, who continued to influence the West Syrians throughout their history. Philoxenus had made use of the Book of Steps, a fourth century East Syrian spiritual treatise. The hymns of St Ephrem and Jacob of Serugh were included in the offices of the liturgical celebrations. Through their hymns, these poet-theologians continue to guide the Church members in the paths of spiritual life.

Since the fifth century, Syriac writers came more and more under the influence of Greek culture and literature and major theological works in Greek were translated into Syriac. These works include the writings of the great Cappadocians (St Basil, Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa), and the Alexandrians (Origen, Athanasius as well as others). The Cathedral homilies of Severus of Antioch (d.536), who faithfully followed the tradition of the Greek fathers, were popular in the Syrian Orthodox Church. Syriac translations of Evagrius of Pontus, Macarius and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite played a very important role in the history of West Syriac spirituality.

Between seventh and eleventh centuries, the West Syriac tradition did not produce any writer similar to the East Syrian spiritual masters such as Martyrius, Dadisho, Simon the Graceful or Isaac of Nineveh. In the twelfth century, Gregorius Bar Hebraeus (d.1286) provided a systematic codification of ‘Christian life’ (Ethicon and the Book of Dove), using early Syriac and Greek authors, as well as the writings of certain Muslim writers who wrote on mystical life, notably al-Ghazali (d.1111). In the period between Philoxenos and Bar Hebraeus, the West Syriac writers attributed great authority to the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, of which several Syriac translations are available. A large number of Sedre, a typically West Syriac prayer and hymnody (often using the meters of St Ephrem and Jacob of Serugh) which became part of the festal Breviary (known as Penqitho) were composed during this period. They also provide a valuable source of Syriac spirituality.

2. Some Characteristic Traits of the Syro-Antiochian Spirituality

According to the Eastern understanding, man was created to live in communion with God. Therefore, worship is a vocation and means of self realization. Adam was created as a liturgical being, as the priestly guardian of the creation. He was placed in Paradise, which was a sanctuary, in which God was present. In a prayer of the Shehimo (Breviary), this idea has been vividly expressed:

You created me and placed Your hand upon me (Ps. 139:5 Peshitta). On Friday in the beginning, God created Adam from the dust and breathed on him the Spirit and gave him speech, that he might sing praise to him, halleluiah and gave thanks to his creation.

Thus Adam’s vocation was to offer praise to the Creator as a representative, as a ‘priest’ of the creation. The fall consisted of his failure to fulfill his ‘priestly vocation’ that is to live in communion with God. The goal of Christian life is communion with God and spiritual life means the effort to achieve this goal. Sacraments, especially, baptism and Eucharist are the means to achieve it and canonical hours guide us in the path towards it. Fasting and vigil are integral to this life.
part of the spiritual life, for they help us to live a life centered on God.

The idea of ‘communion with God’ has been expressed using various imageries, such as “imitating Christ”, “to be transfigured into the divine likeness”, “to be the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit” or “to become the temple of divinity”. These imageries are regularly found in the Sedre. In a Sedro of the pre-anaphora, we find:

May our breath be filled with Your fragrance; may our mouth be opened for Your praise and may our tongues sing Your praises; may our lips sound Your glorifications... Transfigure us into Your glorious likeness.

The goal of the incarnation was the restoration of the communion between God and man. Christ has given us the example of a life in communion with God, which is essentially a liturgical life. In other words, communion with God is achieved in and through worship. In baptism we are born again as children of God and we are granted the privilege and freedom to address God, ‘Our Father’. The essence of Christian worship is to address God as ‘Our Father’, which is the very expression of communion with God.

In fact salvation means the possibility to stand before God and worship Him. According to a prayer of the feast of Pentecost, Christ has made us perfect worshippers of the Holy Trinity:

Christ our God, by Your loving kindness, full of mercy and compassion towards us who were worshippers of the adversary (...), You turned us from the worship of idols and made us perfect and true worshippers of the Holy Trinity.

Salvation consists of restoration to the pre-lapsarian condition, which was a life of worship and adoration. In the Book of Revelation, the life in the heavenly kingdom is presented as a liturgical experience, where those who are saved will stand before the throne of the Lamb, “clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands” and worshipping God (Rev. 7:9-10).

Worship leads to the imitation of Christ, or “deification” (cfr. 2 Pet. 1:4: ‘partakers of divine nature’), which implies a total transfiguration of our nature to the original state in which it was created. Then our worship becomes “a living sacrifice well pleasing to God after the manner of Christ’s offering for us”.

The transfiguration (“deification”) begins in baptism, especially by the indwelling of the Spirit. By the indwelling of the Spirit we become ‘pneumatophore’ and we are ‘christified’, for in baptism we are incorporated into Christ, and the ‘Spirit of sonship’ has been granted to us (Gal. 4:6-7; Rom. 8:15-17). The Holy Spirit, who is the ‘Spirit of Communion’, enables us to pray. According to St Paul, ‘Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words’ (Rom 8:26). Every act of worship is an act in the Holy Spirit.

Eucharist is ‘the worship in Spirit and truth’. It is in the Spirit that the Church offers the Eucharist, for Christ “through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God” (Heb 9:14). This idea is central to the New Testament understanding of prayer, and has deeply influenced the Eastern Christian tradition.

Epiclesis, the central moment in the celebration of the Eucharist, is the affirmation of the permanent presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Thus in the anaphora of St James, as well as in other ancient West Syriac anaphoras, the Epiclesis is addressed to the Father to send down “the Holy Spirit upon us and upon this offering”. The Spirit is invoked upon the ‘Eucharistic community’ (i.e. the Church) as well as upon the Eucharist of the community. In the Eucharist the Pentecost is perpetuated and the Holy Spirit continues to descend and transform the ‘eucharistic gathering’ into the Church, the Body of Christ. Therefore, Eucharist is at the heart of spiritual
life, for Eucharist is the seal of our membership in the Body of Christ, the Church.

2.1. Prayer and Repentance

Spiritual life implies a new relationship between God and man, and repentance is its stepping stone. In fact the Kingdom of God is characterized by the change of heart of the human beings. Thus John the Baptist and our Lord began their ministries with the exhortation: "Repent; for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Math. 3:1; 4:17). The mission of the Holy Spirit includes leading men to repentance (cfr. John. 16:8-9).

In its worship, the Church exhorts its members to repent, the very condition for entering the Kingdom of God. Thus repentance is a principal theme of the West Syrian offices, especially the weekly and festal breviaries, offices of the Great lent as well as the anointing of the sick. In the daily offices, the theme of Sutoro (Compline) is always repentance. The prayers regularly refer to the biblical figures who have set an example of true repentance and thus encourage the sinner to approach the merciful Lord:

I have remembered You on my bed, O Lover of men, and by night I have meditated on You, because You are greatly to be feared; I see my stains and my defilement and I am ashamed to call on You, but the thief, the publican and the sinful woman encourage me, and the Caananite woman and the woman who was afflicted and the Samaritan woman at the well of water; they say to me: approach and receive mercy, because Your Lord is full of mercy.

Repentance is presented as the mark of true Christian. Thus Sedro of Monday evening asks God to “make us true penitents.” Repentance is the mark of life in Christ. It implies a state of alertness; a permanent preparedness for the coming of Christ like the wise virgins. Thus a qolo of Tuesday evening exhorts: “Repent, repent, sinners, said our Lord; that when the bridegroom appears you may enter the marriage-chamber with Him.”

2.2. Fasting as a Sign of Spiritual Alertness

Fasting is an essential element in spiritual life and is a sign of spiritual alertness, for the foolish servant, thinking that master will be delayed in coming, began to “eat and drink and get drunk” (Luke 12:45). The Syriac tradition speaks of an ‘institution of fasting’ by Christ, who ‘taught us to fast and thus to fight against Satan. Thus in the very first prayer of the Great lent we find:

O Christ, You humbled Yourself for our redemption and condescended to fast and to be tempted by the adversary and taught the Church to conquer with appropriate fasting and prayer the Satan who fight against her.”

The importance of fasting in the spiritual life is attested in the Syriac tradition since the early centuries. Thus in the Acts of Judas Thomas, the Apostle is presented as one who imitated Christ in every
respect\textsuperscript{16}. The Apostle Thomas is one who fasts and prays much\textsuperscript{17}. The Acts puts the meaning of the fasting as follows: “Our Lord fasted forty days and forty nights and tasted nothing; and the Messiah dwells in him who observes it”\textsuperscript{18}.

By his fasting, Christ has taught us the way of life which leads to the Father. Thus in a prayer of the Great lent we find:

“Our Saviour fasted and prepared the way of life for us that we shall walk in it towards His Sender, without being stumbled”\textsuperscript{19}.

If fasting and prayer are integral parts of spiritual life, they should be completed with the love for our brethren. Thus Severus of Antioch says: “When the fast lacks charity, it appears to be empty and vain”\textsuperscript{20}.

This idea appears often in the prayers of the Great lent: “Fasting is good and if any body fasts without love, his abstinence is without profit. Prayer is being loved [by God]; and if love does not strengthen its wings, it does not [ascend and] see the heights [where God dwells]”\textsuperscript{21}.

Again: “Fast is great and prayer is good. (But) love is nobler than them, as the apostle has written (cfr. I Cor. 13). Brethren, let us be armed with it and reconcile each other”\textsuperscript{22}.

Fasting is not merely to abstain from food. True fasting is a ‘spiritual attitude’ and a way of life. In the modern world where success is the most important value of life, ‘fasting’ is of great significance. Fasting is an act of Christian witness, when it implies abstinence from obsessive acquiring, from luxuries, and gadgets of megalomania such as expensive cars or other items of personal use, and hectic schedule and excessive traveling\textsuperscript{23}.

Conclusion

Spiritual life cannot be reduced to a few ‘acts of piety’. It embraces our whole life style. Everything that brings us closer to God and thus to have communion with God, comes under the notion of spiritual life. In his fortieth Cathedral Homily, Severus of Antioch writes:

All things that are accomplished and done in the Churches of God are aimed at only one goal: to correct us and to bring us nearer to what is best and to make us to progress towards the heights [of perfection], whether it is the observation of fasting or things of this kind\textsuperscript{24}.

Philanthropy, too, is an expression of the life in the Spirit; it is indeed a prayer, ‘an act of offering’ of royal priesthood of the believer\textsuperscript{25}. In the words of Paul Evdokimov, “All of life, each act, every gesture, even a smile of the human face, must become a hymn of adoration, an offering, a prayer”\textsuperscript{26}. Therefore the goal of spiritual life is God to be sure, communion with the Triune God. But it is also a process of becoming truly human\textsuperscript{27}.

ENDNOTES

1. See Stanley Samuel Harakas, “Spirituality: East and West”, in J.Breck, J.Meyendorff and E.Silk (eds), The Legacy of St Vladimir, (SVTP, New York, 1990), 179-195. Harakas writes: “…as an Orthodox theologian, I am not confident that I understand what ‘spirituality’ is. As an Orthodox theologian, the term has not been part of my vocabulary”, 179.


3. For the sources of both East and West Syriac spirituality, Sebastian Brock, Spirituality in Syriac Tradition, SEERI, Kottayam, (n.d), SEERI Correspondence Course (SCC)


Cfr. A prayer of the preparation rites (tuyobo): “Make us worthy that we may offer ourselves to Thee a living sacrifice well-pleasing unto Thee after the manner of Thy sacrifice for us”. Samuel Athanasius (ed.) Anaphora (1967), 9.


Tuesday, Lilyo, 3rd Qaumo, AS, 391.

Pharmakon athanasias, Eph. 20:2.

Tuesday, Sutoro, AS, 365.

Ibid. 203.

Ibid. 335-37.


Ch. 86.

Monday Morning, Prayers of the Great Lent, p. 34. Again, “Christ God of all fasted for us like a man and prepared a way for us that we should walk in it without being stumbled and inherit eternal life”. Ibid. 32-34.


Monday Morning, 35.

Ibid. 33.

Ibid. 33.


Homily 40, Patrologia Orientalis T.36, 9.


Introduction

The Assyrian Church of the East is the earliest established Christian community in India and its patrimony can be traced to the time of St. Thomas the Apostle. St. Thomas first went to Urmia and evangelized amongst the Zoroastrians there, converting them to Christianity and establishing churches. Then St Thomas entered North India in the land of King Gondaphores and converted many to Christianity. Traces of these early convert communities are not seen today however. St. Thomas had to travel the longest distance to spread the Good News compared to other disciples of Jesus. St Thomas arrived in South India only in 52. He built seven and half churches in Kerala. We do not know how many churches he built around Mylapore, near Chennai where he received the crown of martyrdom in 72 AD.

The Assyrian Church of the East in India uses Pre-Portuguese traditions and practices and has done so continuously without alteration to its two-millennia-long history. Some outsiders incorrectly accuse the Thrissur community of emanating from a 'Roccos or Mellusian schism'. The first name refers to Mar Thoma Roccos Metropolitan who came to India in 1861 AD Mar Roccos came to India during the return journey of Fr. Antony Thondanatt who had gone with Fr. Antony Kudukachira (who died on the way) to see the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch Mar Joseph Audo IV in Mosul. Mar Roccos was forced to return to Mesopotamia as a result of pressure from Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara before he had completed one year of residency in India.

The second name (Mellusian) refers to Mar Yohannan Elia Mellus Metropolitan who was in Thrissur from 1874 to 1882 AD. Both Metropolitans had a number of parishes outside Thrissur such as Kuruvilangad. Mar Mellus Metropolitan was opposed vehemently by Nidhiyirkal Mani Kathanar. After the Syro-Malabar hierarchy was formed by
the Pope in 1887 AD the Thrissur Church lost the parishes associated with it except the church in Pattikad which was founded in 1800AD

1. Liturgical Tradition of the Church

1.1. Liturgical Year

The East Syrian liturgical cycle is designated as a series of Šabo’e (्र &= weeks). The seasons are as follows: Annunciation (4 weeks), Epiphany (7 weeks), Fast (7 weeks), Resurrection (7 weeks), Apostles (7 weeks), Summer (7 weeks), Elia-Cross (7 weeks), Moses (7 weeks) and Dedication of the Church (4 weeks).

1.2. Liturgical Books:

- **Taksa dRaze** (contains three Qurbana or anaphoras and ‘The Rites’)
- **Addai and Mari** (original Syriac composition; late 3rd century; original composition has no Institution Narrative; used from Holy Saturday until Advent, masses of the dead, memorials of saints, ordinary days, and all low masses).
- **Nestorius** (indigenization of Byzantine anaphoras of St Basil and St John Chrysostom; 6th century; attributed to Mar Awa; used on five occasions: Epiphany, John the Baptist, Greek Doctors, Wednesday of the Supplication of Nineveh, and Holy Thursday).
- **Theodore** (based on Nestorius, Addai and Mari, and the Catechetical Homilies of Theodore of Mopsuestia; 6th century; attributed to Mar Thoma; used from the first Sunday of Advent to the Feast of Hosannas or Palm Sunday). Both anaphoras of Nestorius and Theodore were translated into Syriac from Greek by Mar Awa Catholicos.

1.3. Characteristics of the Liturgical Tradition

Išo'yab (650/651-658) was a liturgical reformer who gave the present East Syrian Liturgy its form. The marriage rite is particularly rich in imagery, preserving many Semitic customs including the construction and blessing of the bridal chamber. The rite of penance predates 420, is modeled on the Liturgy of the Word, and is still used by the Assyrian Church of the East as a general confession before the reception of communion. Different funeral rites are provided for clergy and laity. Only in the case of clerics does the body enter the church (Kathnita); for laity the Jewish sequence of preparing the body, procession to the grave, and burial is retained (Anidha).

Only Vespers (Ramša) and Morning Service (Sapra) are mandatory for laity, while some houses also recite the night service (Leyla). Scripture reading is not included in the daily office, except at Easter, a trait considered further evidence of the antiquity of the East Syrian Office. The daily office contains hymns attributed to Ephrem, his contemporary Jacob, bishop of Nisibis, Catholicos Simon bar Sabba’e, Marutha of Maiperqat, Narsai, and Babai the Great, the latter having explicit Nestorian phraseology. Vespers once contained the lighting of the evening lamp, as attested by Gabriel Qatraya (c.615).

Abstinence during the 50 days of Lent, 25 days before Christmas, 15 days prior to the
commemoration of St Mary on 15th August (shunaya), three days fast of the Rogation of Ninevites are observed strictly abstaining from meat, fish, egg and milk products. Episcopal celibacy is practiced; while the priests are allowed to marry even after the ordination. This Church prays for the faithful departed.

1.4. Liturgical Languages

Aramaic, also known as Eastern Syriac (lishana atiga) and Malayalam, the vernacular language, are used in the churches in Indian Archdiocese. Unfortunately in recent years some deacons were ordained before they learned this liturgical language. Thus the holy services are conducted in most part in the Malayalam language, except some priestly prayers are recited by celebrant who knows the Aramaic language. Even priest who knew the liturgical language began to recite prayers in Malayalam because not only the deacon who assists, but also the congregation, who participates in the Holy services, do not understand the meaning of the prayers for which they are expected to say Amen.

2. Sacraments of the Church

The official list of sacraments, and indeed the sacramental theology, of the Church of the East is based on the teaching of Mar Abdisho of Nisibis (+1318). It is important to remember though, that until the time of Mar Abdisho the Church of the East had never defined the number of the sacraments, and many other liturgical rites which exist in the Church today were considered sacramental at one point.1 He wrote: "The sacraments of the Church, according to the Divine Scriptures, are seven in number: 1) The Priesthood, which is the ministry of all the other Sacraments. 2) Holy Baptism 3) The Oil of Unction 4) The Oblation of the Body and Blood of Christ 5) Absolution 6) The Holy Leaven, namely, the King. 7) and The sign of the Life Giving Cross."2 Many fathers of the Church have written concerning the sacraments, basing their theologies on the Sacred Scriptures and the teachings of the Apostles and the Fathers. Timothy II (1318-1332 AD), the author of the famous Book of the Seven Causes of the Mysteries of the Church, gave us an other order of the sacraments namely 1) Priesthood 2) Consecration of the altar 3) Baptism 4) Eucharist 5) Perfection of Monks (i.e. tonsure) 6) Burial of the dead and 7) Matrimony. He includes the sacrament of absolution as an appendix to his treatise.

2.1. Special Features in the Sacraments

Holy Baptism - Fully immersed - two kinds of fonts in the churches - one for the small children and other for the grown ups

Baptismal rite includes pre-baptismal anointing, blessing of water, water bath (fully immersion), and post-baptismal anointing. The priests baptize the catechumen in the name of the Trinity. After the immersion they bring the baptized ones into the Haikala (sanctuary) of the church then the priest comes down with the Blessed oil to confirm of them. The baptized wear white dresses, are crowined and are anointed on the forehead. These are the special features of the post-baptismal liturgy.

The church consecrated the Deaconess in the Church for helping the priest in the baptism of adult ladies. The priests pour the oil of anointment on the hands of the deaconesses and they anoint the body of the person to be baptized.

Only in India is the Holy Qurbana given to baptized babies. Confirmation is given at the Conclusion of the baptism service. Therefore at the Holy Qurbana conducted in the same church the baptized babies are brought by the god-mothers for giving Holy Qurbana first to the babies. Just as human existence begins with birth and is sustained by eating, the Christian life begins with baptism and is fed by the Eucharist.

2.2. Holy Leaven (Malka)

The Assyrian Church of the East also practices the so called sacrament or mystery (Rasà) of Holy
Leaven. From time immemorial, the Assyrian tradition teaches the following: that Jesus took bread in his hands, which He then blessed, broke and gave to his disciples, and then gave two pieces to St. John. Jesus asked St. John to eat one piece and to carefully keep the other one. Tradition teaches that after Jesus' death, St. John dipped that piece of bread into the blood that proceeded from Jesus' side. Hence the name of "Holy Leaven" or 'Malka', is given to this consecrated bread which was dipped into the blood of Jesus. Until this day, the feast of the Holy Leaven has been kept and renewed annually in the Assyrian Church of the East. The local bishop renews it every year on Holy Thursday, mixing a remainder of the old Leaven with the new one. This is distributed to all parishes of his diocese, to be used by the priest during one year in preparing the bread for the Eucharist. Bread made without Holy Leaven is not used for the Eucharistic celebration. This tradition of the sacrament or mystery of the Holy Leaven, which precedes the actual Eucharistic celebration, is certainly to be seen as a visible sign of historic and symbolic continuity between the present Eucharistic celebration and the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus.

There is some confusion regarding the number of sacraments recognized by the Assyrian Church of the East. The sacred number of seven was counted around the 12th century in most of the Churches. The Marganeetha of Mar Abdisho d'Suwa lists seven of which, two are not in most of the other churches. The list given by Patriarch Mar Timothy II (who became Patriarch in 1318 AD, the year Mar Abdisho Metropolitan died) is slightly different from that of Mar Abdisho. This issue came up in the Vatican-Assyrian dialogue during the preparation of a joint document on the sacramental life of these two churches. As a result, the Eight Holy Synod under the presidency of His Holiness Mar Dinkha IV, Cathilicos Patriarch held in Chicago, USA in 2001 clarified that the number of sacraments in the Assyrian Church of the East are seven (Decree No. 10).

2.3. Eucharistic Tradition of the Church

One of the distinctive marks of the Assyrian Church of the East is the use of Anaphora of Mar Addai and Mar Mari without the inclusion of the "Words of Institution". The other two churches which use the same Anaphora, namely the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Syro Malabar Church use this Anaphora with the "Words of Institution". As the result of the discussion developed in the official Assyrian - Vatican Dialogue since 1995 as well as in the unofficial Dialogue of Pro-Oriente foundation in Vienna since 1992 an order was issued from Pope John Paul II in October 2001 stating that the Anaphora of Addai and Mari was valid even without the "Words of Institution" which is considered to be the original form.

Fasting is essential for entering into the altar and the communion of Holy Eucharist. It is compulsory to fast and wear urara and zunara and shoes or socks before entering the Holy Altar. This is strictly observed not only for entering the altar for conducting a ceremony, but also entering the altar to switch off the lights which have been left on after the Holy Qurbana. The Church did not allow the laity to enter into the Altar. Only the deacon can serve the priest at the time of Holy Raza. Communion is administered in both kinds, i.e., both bread and wine are given to the laity.

2.4. Empty Cross (Risen Cross)

The sacrament of the holy cross is the seventh of the mysteries of the Assyrian church of the East. Like the sacrament of the Holy Leaven, the Holy Cross is unique to the Church of the East. The cross, in the sacramental theology of the Church of the East, denotes the real and true presence of Christ among us. It is not merely a 'symbol' of Jesus' suffering and death, rather it is the 'emblem of our salvation' and
the powerful and life-giving sign of God's present and ultimate triumph over sin, death and the Satan.⁴

The Church of the East venerates only the original, bare cross of the resurrection. One of the distinctive marks of a home of the member of the Assyrian Church of the East is an empty cross made of teak wood, blessed by a priest or bishop and kept on the eastern side of the wall in every house. It is easy to recognize the houses of the members of this Church. In the homes of the members of the Assyrian Church of the East we will not find any iconography, statues or imagery.

2.5. Anointing of Sick, Marriage and Tonsure

In the Church of the East, neither extreme unction nor marriage is a sacrament. The anointing of the sick and marriage are considered among the seven sacraments in all of the apostolic Churches, but not in the Assyrian Church of the East. Similarly, the monastic tonsure is considered a sacramental rite (though, not one of the seven sacraments) in the Orthodox Churches, and Patriarch Mar Timothy II counts it as one in his treatise on the sacraments. The following are the special features of these liturgical things:

2.5.1. Khnana

Khnana⁵ is used to be mixed in the cup of wine during the marriage ceremony to be drunk by the bride and the groom during the wedding service. Khnana (Syriac for mercy) consists of the dust from the tombs of the saints of the church collected by the headquarters of the Church which is distributed to each parish church to be used for the marriages in those Churches. During the wedding ceremony a very small portion; let us say one hundredth of a tea spoon, is put into the marriage wine glass after putting wedding ring and a small cross after prayers for them. The priest prays a special prayer and then only gives it to the bride groom to drink two-thirds of its contents. The bride then drinks the remaining one-third of the blessed cup of wine.

Only small cups are used for the marriage service. Usually after pouring one spoon of wine the priest pours two spoons of water into it and blesses it and places it on the table along with the wedding ring, cross and Khnana. If there are two couples married during one marriage ceremony two cups are used. From the blessed wedding cup only the bride and the groom drink.

Bishop Mar Awa writes (pp. 351-352):

Khnana is earth gathered from the tombs of the martyrs or the saints. In the Early Church, it was taken exclusively from the shrines of the martyrs, as the earth upon which their holy blood was shed for the holy name of Christ. It was gathered up and collected by the faithful, and used as a blessing for healing. Later, with the end of the persecutions of the Church in the late fourth century, it was also taken from the tombs of the saints. It is mixed with olive oil and used for healing. It is also used to sign the marriage cup of blessing.

3. Monastic Tradition

Early on, the Church of the East developed a monastic movement, probably introduced by monks from Egypt, where Christian monasticism started. The first evidence of this Syrian monasticism was the B’nai Q’yama and the B’nai Q’yama (the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant), an ascetic group which began in the third century and gained ascendancy in the church during the fourth century.

Monasticism and asceticism were a significant part of the spirituality of the Church of the East throughout the church’s long and illustrious presence in Asia. Certainly, in a political atmosphere where physical persecution was common, it was tempting to retreat from the world. But the rise of Islam in the early seventh century brought about a major change...
in the way the Nestorian church functioned. By the 13th century most of the monasteries were disused. In 1996 Mar Geevarghese Sleewa, archbishop of Iraq, restarted the monastic tradition in the Assyrian Church of the East after a long gap of periods with Mart Mariam sisters and two years later the monastic movement started in India.

4. Christology of the Church

According to St Ephrem 'Christ has more than one birth; first in eternity, He was born from the Father without a mother. In time He took a body from the Virgin and was born from her without a Father'. The Christology of the Church of the East can be defined on the basis of the terminologies like one Parsōpa, two Qnome and two Kyane. These words are liable to be easily misunderstood and misinterpreted.

The Christology of the Antiochene School appeared in its developed and exaggerated form in Nestorianism. The distinction between the human and divine natures was insisted upon. He applied the term 'Christ' to the person of union in the man Jesus who was the special indwelling of God. Consequently Mary was 'Christotokos.' The term 'Theotokos' would be a blasphemy because that would mean that Mary gave birth to the Divinity. Nestorius' position can best be explained in his own words:

When I came here, I found a dispute among the members of the church, some of whom were calling the Blessed Virgin Mother of God, while others calling her Mother of man. Gathering both parties together, I suggested that she should be called Mother of Christ, a term which represented both God and man, as it is used in the gospels.

According to Babai's interpretation Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the one Parsōpa having the two natures in their proper qnome. In this way he affirms the real existence of two substances in Jesus Christ. Both natures have their properties without mixture, separation and independence. They are united in the one ontological Parsōpa of the filiation of the Word, the second qnome of the trinity. The union and distinction last forever. Jesus as a man does not have a distinct independent ontological person other than that of the Word of God. So there is unity and there is duality.

5. Mariology of the Church

Imme d'Mshiha is used to refer to Virgin Mary while the other Churches use imme d'alaha. The first thing between an Assyrian and a non-Assyrian begins with the argument "How can God have a mother?"

The title Theotokos (=bearer of God) had been the touchstone of orthodoxy since 431 but the East Syriac traditions gave their own interpretations to it and preferred the title Christotokos for the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Theodore of Mopsuestia preferred the term Christotokos. According to him, the Mary is Theotokos and Anthropotokos, the one by nature and the other by relation. She is really Theotokos, because God is in the man whom she brought forth; and she is truly Anthropotokos because the human nature is taken from her; the Word, however, did not originate from her. Nestorius and Babai preferred the expression 'Mother of Christ' (Yaldad Mðîhâ). When Cyril advocated the adoption of the non-biblical phrase 'Theotokos', Nestorius had hesitation in the unqualified use of it due to its ambiguity and insisted on the use of biblical expression 'Christotokos' as the appropriate phrase since she was the Mother of Christ (BH, 99). According to Nestorius, Christotokos removes the blasphemy of Paul of Samosata and the malice of Arius and Apollinarius. However, the opponents failed to understand Nestorius properly and hence he came to be considered a heretic.

In November 1994 the Common Christological Declaration was signed by Pope John Paul II...
and Patriarch Mardinkha IV. Accordingly the Assyrian Church decided not to accuse the Catholics of heresy when referring to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the same way Catholics do not ridicule the expression Christotokos used in the Assyrian Church.

The Church celebrates four commemorations for the Virgin Mary, i.e., first and important commemoration is on the first or second Friday after the Nativity of our Lord; the second is on May 15 and the third is on August 15 and the fourth, on September 8, the birth of Virgin Mary.

6. Rituals - Towards the East - Eschatological Thought

The rule of worshipping towards the East is an apostolic Canon, and is founded upon the sayings of our Blessed Lord: "For just as the lightening (Matt 24:27) flashes from the East, and is seen even in West, so will be the coming of the Son of Man", and "concerning (Mark 13:32) that day and that hour no man knows, not even the angels of heaven." It is necessary, therefore, that we should even be on the watch, with our faces turned towards the promise of His shining forth (coming). 9  The Church of the East believes that the Lord Jesus Christ will return to the earth from the East.

6.1. Church Facing East

All church buildings of the Chaldean Syrian or Assyrian Church of the East are built facing East. Even if there is enough space to construct an east-west building, they compromise about the shape of the church without changing the place of the altar in the east. A large veil extending from the roof to the floor of the altar is also present in every church. However, when the Holy Qurbana is being consecrated, the veil is opened. During the evening and morning prayers as well as other services, like the marriage ceremony, it is most likely that the veil will be closed for the duration of the service.

6.2. All Prayers Recited Facing East

All ceremonies are celebrated facing East. During the Holy Qurbana, when the priest or Bishop delivers the homily or reads the Gospel or deacons read the Old Testament and New Testament lessons, the clergy face West while the people face East.

6.3. Tombs Always East West and Dead Buried Facing East

"Facing East" is observed always, also in the case of burial. As a believer is facing east while praying at home or in the Churches, they continue that tradition even after they die. Since the bodies are buried inside the tombs they can pray facing east if only they are buried facing east.

During the burial service in the cemetery the clergy stands facing east at the western side of the grave. At the time of the blessing he goes to the eastern side of the grave and gives the final blessing facing the dead being buried. When the clergy comes for the 3rd day or 40th day, or annual prayers for the dead they stand at the western end of the tomb and recite prayers facing east.

6.4. Names of the Churches

This Assyrian Church uses the usual names of saints such as Mar Pathrose, Mar Paulose, Mar Mathai, etc. At the same time, names of some of their churches are named after Mar Narsai, Mar Shallitha, Mar Qardagh, Mar Yacob m'Pasqa and Mar Zaia Thuvana. Mar Timotheus is not seen anywhere in the Assyrian Church of the East except in India. Most common names used at present in the Church of the East are such as Mart Mariam, Mar Gheevarghese etc. The names of Mar Awgin Thuvana, Mar Aprem and Mar Slewa are seen in two or three churches other than the Church of the East in India.

Conclusion

The faith of the Assyrian church of the East in India is the same as the Assyrian Church universal.
Its heritage in India is similar to the Syro-Malabar church. At the same time the Church of the East in India is very ecumenical in its practice, being a member of the Kerala Council of Churches and National Council of Churches in India.

ENDNOTES
1 One example is a teacher of the 12th century Mar Shimun of Shanqalabad, who counts the Gospel Book and the reading of the Gospel as a sacrament! Cf. Mar Eshai Shimun, Marganitha, 44-45.
3 That document was not signed yet.
4 For the further study see Mar Awa Royal, Mysteries of the Kingdom: The Sacraments of the Assyrian Church of the East, California, 2011, 321-341.
5 Khnana = Pity, compassion, grace etc. But metaphorically it means 'a compound of oil, dust, and water mixed with the relics of Saints or with earth from holy places; this was used for anointing the sick, for anointing at betrothal etc, by the East Syrians. (See J. Payne Smith, A Compendious Syriac Dictionary, Oxford, 1979, 146).
7 A. Grillmeier, Christ in Christian Tradition; vol. 1, 451.
8 He made use of Syriac language and a great deal of the misunderstanding has occurred due to the use of the term “Qnôma”.
9 Mar Eshai Shimun, Marganitha, 64.
10 A combined name ‘Sts Peter and Paul’ is used indicating the name of the parishes in all the dioceses except Indian Archdiocese of the Assyrian Church of the East.
Introduction

The Syro-Malabar Church, the most ancient Church of India, has a continuous Christian history for the last twenty centuries. Her origin is traced back to the preaching St Thomas the Apostle (CE 52), one among the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ (Mark 3,18; Matt 10,3; Luke 6,15; Acts 1,13; John 11,16; 14,5; 20,24-28; 21,2). Recent studies have once again convincingly proved it. It is enough to mention the conclusion of a recent exhaustive study on this matter:

The convergence into a single focus of all the facts and traditions considered in our quest for the historical Thomas can generate a historical or moral certitude regarding the mission, apostolate and martyrdom in India of St Thomas the Apostle. From the standpoint of historical criticism the right explanation of this convergence is that it is based on a historical fact. When taken together with the massive patristic witness and the Indian tradition spread over the four foci, the response can be historically certain. In course of her history of growth and development, though her life is marked by sharing of the East Syriac Ecclesial tradition and recognizing of jurisdiction of the Chaldean Patriarch, at present the Syro-Malabar Church is a sui juris Church of Major Episcopal Status with its own particular rite. MarThoma Margam /The Law of Thomas, is the whole ethos of the life of St Thomas Christians. The members of Syro-Malabar developed it by the practice of faith and sacraments, shared by the seven Churches of Kerala and those of Mylapore, Edessa and Persia. Thoma Margam expresses itself in the ecclesial, liturgical and biblical theological heritage of the members of this Church. This particular style of life in India includes the unique apostolic heritage, liturgical traditions, theological vision, spiritual patrimony, administrative discipline and other customs and practices. Such life style is inherent in the life of every member of St Thomas Christians and the life and spirituality of every Religious Congregation in this sui juris Church, the second largest Church among...
the 21 Eastern Catholic Churches. In fact, this Church is blessed with vocations to religious life and this boom of vocations in Kerala has hit the headlines of world press in the past and present years. It is about these religious congregations of Syro-Malabar origin and the inspiration and influence of Mar Thoma Margam in their life of radical discipleship and apostolic activity that we make a brief study in this article.

1. Recent Studies

Rarely we find some studies related to the subject ‘Religious Congregations and Marthoma-margam’, though the Rule of life of all the congregations of Syro-Malabar origin are directly/indirectly inspired and guided by the Mar thoma margam in their life style and spirituality. Most of the studies mentioned below hint at the role of religious congregations in the mission of the Syro-Malabar Church or refer to it while discussing the spirituality of Syro-Malabar Christians in various stages of the history or her origin and growth. Relevant among them are the following studies:


Going through these studies one notices easily that there are no exhaustive studies done on this matter making a comparative study of the Constitutions of Religious Congregations of Syro-Malabar origin relating it to the Mar Thoma Margam (The Law of Thomas). Hence, this is a new field to be explored taking into consideration various elements of it relating and limiting it to the Constitutions of the Congregations available to me at the moment.

2. Religious life in the Syro-Malabar Church from 1923 to 2010

Religious congregations of Syro-Malabar origin have been a blessing to this Church and universal Church and its vivacious religious life has contributed to the growth of life and mission and to nationbuilding. They made a remarkable contribution to the Church and nation and have assumed a significant role globally. Beyond that they are known
for the quality of their religious life, the variety of ministries especially for the marginalized, and their missionary and pastoral zeal. They are noted as men and women of conviction, contemplation, koinonia and commitment to God and never-ending solidarity with humanity. A comparison between the status in this regard before the hierarchical formation of the Syro-Malabar Church in 1923 and (2010) brings to light the origin and growth of various religious congregations in this Church as well as their generous commitment to the kingdom God following intensively the evangelical counsels:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Particulars</th>
<th>1896</th>
<th>1965</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitans</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eparchies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholics</td>
<td>29000</td>
<td>1685674</td>
<td>3674115</td>
<td>3806365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parishes</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>1240</td>
<td>3138</td>
<td>4229</td>
</tr>
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<td>1432</td>
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<td>3992</td>
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<td>215</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>2193</td>
<td>3144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Women</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>9874</td>
<td>29838</td>
<td>32917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminarians</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>938</td>
<td>2386</td>
<td>2410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleges &amp; Schools</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1104</td>
<td>4258</td>
<td>5881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Institutions</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>874</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An immense increase in number and origin of a good number of new congregations following various charisms as we would see below, points to the reality of a vibrant religious life in the Syro-Malabar Church. As usually observed by authors, the religious in the Syro-Malabar Church stood by the Church and did a praiseworthy work in spreading the gospel and in nation building through proclamation, education ministry, health care as well as social and charitable work. Naturally, being the religious of the Syro-Malabar Church, how far they assimilate the *Mar Thomma Margam* in their way of religious commitment both in theory and practice, is the matter of this study.

3. Religious Congregations of Syro-Malabar Origin

A similar presentation of the situation of the religious life of the congregations of Syro-Malabar origin from 1866-2011 would give us an approximately clear picture of the present day situation of the religious life in this church marked by the Mar Thoma Margam.

The Syro-Malabar Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life are generally classified as 1) Congregations for priests, 2) Congregations for Brothers, 3) Congregations for Sisters and 4) Secular Institutes. According to their nature and origin and nature of establishment in the Syro-Malabar Church they are usually classified into: 1) Congregations of Syro-Malabar Origin. 2) Latin Congregations having Syro-Malabar Provinces. 3) Latin Congregations with Syro-Malabar houses.

According to the Directory of Syro-Malabar Church (Kakkanad 2004), the following are the congregations of Syro-Malabar origin.

3.1. Congregations of Religious Men of Syro-Malabar Origin

- Congregation of the Mary Immaculate 1831
- Vincentian Congregation 1904
- Eparchial Society of the Oblates of Sacred Heart 1921
- Little Flower Congregation 1931
- Congregation of St Theresa of Lisieux 1931
- Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament 1933
- Malabar Missionary Brothers 1948
- Missionary Society of St Thomas the Apostle 1968
- ST. Pius X Missionary Society 1985
Catholic Congregation of the Blind 1990
Mar Thoma Sleeha Monastery 1997

3.2. Congregations of Religious Women of Syro-Malabar origin:
Congregation of the Mother Carmel 1866
Franciscan Clarist Congregation 1888
Sisters of Visitation of Blessed Virgin Mary 1892
Sisters of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament 1908
Sisters of Sacred Heart Congregation 1911
Congregation of the Holy Family 1914
Sisters of the Destitute 1927
Sisters of St Joseph Congregation 1928
Congregation of Sisters of Charity 1944
Medical Sisters of St Joseph 1946
Congregation of St Martha 1948
Congregation of Sisters of Nazareth 1948
Assisi Sisters of Mary Immaculate 1949
Josephine Sisters 1953
Missionaries of Little Flower 1959
Mary Immaculate Secular Institute 1960
Caritas Secular Institute 1961
Congregation of Samaritan Sisters 1961
Missionary Sisters of Mary Immaculate 1962
Missionary Sisters of Daughters of St Thomas 1969
Snehagiri Sisters 1969
Deenasevana Sabha 1969
St Martha’s Congregation 1970
Society of Nirmaldasikal 1971
Apostolic Sisters of Mary Immaculate 1974
Sisters of Charity of St Vincent De Paul 1974
Congregation of Nazareth Sisters 1975
Sadhusevana Sabha 1975
Sisters of Charity of St John of God 1977
Preshitharam Sisters 1977

Society of Kristudasis 1977
Deenabandhu Samaj 1978
Little Sisters of Divine Providence 1978
Sisters of Jesus 1980
Fervent Daughters of Scared Heart of Jesus 1981
Devapriya Sisters 1987
Sisters of St Thomas 1989
Disicple Sisters of Christ 1994
Sisters of St Joseph the Worker 1996
Sisters of St Alphonsa 1998
Deivadan Sisters 1998
Women’s Initiatives Network of Jesus 2001

Besides these congregations of Syro-Malabar origin, there are 11 Institutes of Consecrated Life/Societies of Apostolic Life having Syro-Malabar Provinces and 20 Congregations of Latin Rite having houses in Syro-Malabar Eparchies as well as 7 Latin congregations for Brothers having houses in the Syro-Malabar Eparchies. To complete the list, we need to note that there are 126 Latin Congregations of Religious Women and the Congregation of Daughters of Mary of Syro-Malankara Rite which have their houses in Syro-Malabar Eparchies. These Congregations of Latin and Syro-Malankara Rites have decided to share their charism and spirituality with the Syro-Malabar Church and they are graciously enriched by the numerous vocations from the Syro-Malabar Church. Similarly, many religious congregations of Syro-Malabar origin offer their services to the Dioceses of Latin rite in and outside India even on a long term basis. Further, many religious congregations have opened their Provincial Houses, formation centers and other institutions in the Latin territories. But we should be aware of the reality that there are signs of decline in vocations to religious congregations at present. This is and should be a matter of reflection and prayerful concern in the Syro-Malabar Church. It is in such a context of religious life and mission of the above mentioned Religious Congregations in the Syro-Malabar-Church, in India and in different continents of the
world, we observe that all these vocations in the religious life are inspired basically by St Thomas Christian Spirituality rooted in the Christ experience shared through St Thomas, their father in faith (Mark 3,18; Matt 10,3; Luke 6,15; Acts 1,13; John 11,16; 14,5; 20,24-28; 21,2). This spirituality has embraced the whole ethos of the life of St Thomas Christians, in particular, the life of the Religious Congregations of Syro-Malabar origin, their spiritual, ecclesial, liturgical, missionary and socio-political life. This way of life (John 14,5-6) has been viewed as a confluence of the three major paths in India, namely, jñana marga (path of knowledge), karma marga (path of action) and bhakti marga (path of devotion). \[11\]

4. Religious Congregations and Mar Thoma Margam

Mar Thoma Margam found in the warp and woof of Charism and the spiritual life of the Religious congregations of Syro-Malabar origin is evident in the affirmations of the Constitutions and Directory of these Congregations. Therefore, we need to discuss the various constituent elements of Mar Thoma Margam present in the Constitutions of Religious Congregations of Syro-Malabar origin.

4.1. The Christ- Experience of Thomas the Apostle

The biblical foundations of Mar Thoma Margam is found in the following texts of the New Testament Mark 3,18; Matt 10,3; Luke 6,15; Acts 1,13; John 11,16; 14,5; 20,24-28; 21,2. Thomas the Apostle is mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels as one among the Twelve called by Jesus in order to be with Him and to be sent out to proclaim the good news. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, for the author of the Fourth Gospel, Thomas is one among the prominent apostolic figures like Peter in 1,41-42; 13,1-11; 20,3-10; 21,15-23 and Andrew in 1,40-4; 6,8; 12,22 and Philip in 1,43; 12,22. \[12\] The fourth evangelist introduces him as ‘Thomas called the twin’ (11,16; 20,21; 21,2 Greek Didymos= twin (Hebrew to-’m ; Aramaic to-’ma’) without giving any explanation to it. \[13\]

These texts on the Christ- experience of Thomas the Apostle are mentioned in the Constitutions of different Congregations of our concern from the point of view of our study while expressing the charism, nature, identity and purpose as well as spiritual heritage of these congregations/Institutes of consecrated life. Naturally the emphasis varies according to the charism and nature of each congregation of Syro-Malabar origin and the expression of their spirituality/way of life. A few examples would clarify our statement:

The missionary society of St Thomas the Apostle (MST) is named after St Thomas the Apostle of India, our Father in faith, who evinced singular courage to go and die with Jesus (John 11,16), who was instrumental for the self-revelation of the Lord as the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14,5-6) and who confessed faith in Jesus: My Lord and My God (John 20,28). \[14\]

In the MCBS Congregation, the ideal is to consecrate the entire life to the realization of God’s kingdom (Matt 6,10), placing the Eucharist at the core of being. Drawing inspiration from the age-old spiritual wisdom of Eastern Christian Monasticism and quest for the sages (rishis) of India for the Absolute, the MCBS tries to reach out, in and through the Eucharist, to the God-experience of our father St Thomas, the Apostle of India, in his faith-surrender “My Lord and my God”. \[15\]

The motto of DST: “Let us also go that we may die with Him” summarily presents the supreme spirit of our congregation- the overflow of eternal love experienced by the Apostle St Thomas in being with Jesus which prompts one to be sent out to die with Jesus like St Thomas who fulfilled these words which he himself uttered.

Spirituality is a life style according to Christ experience. The unique style of God experience of St Thomas Christians is based upon the profound Christ experience of the Apostle Thomas who shared
the Risen Lord as the way to the Father. The lifestyle of St Thomas Christians is known as Mar Thoma Margam (Law of Thomas).  

The sisters of St Thomas (SST) profess to live and bear witness to Mar Thomma Margam, the lifestyle of the ancient Mar Thomma Nazaranees (St Thomas Christians), the core of which is the Christ experience of the Mar Thomma Sliha (Apostle St Thomas) to its perfection, as reflected in the genuine Syro- Malabar tradition.

Some Congregations mention these biblical texts and the implications of these texts as integral part of their spiritual heritage/identity and exemplary model of faith and proclamation (John 20,28). For example:

CMC: St Thomas, the Apostle of India, who proclaimed his faith in the words, “My Lord and My God” (John 21, 28) and shed his life-blood for the kingdom of the Lord be our inspiration in witnessing the good news of salvation. St Thomas the Apostle who proclaimed his faith saying “My Lord and My God” (John 20,28) is the exemplary model for our (SABS) life of faith and proclamation.

CST: We are called to preserve and promote the East Syrian tradition of St Thomas Christians; moreover our life is to be enriched by the Spirit and practice of the Oriental and Indian spirituality that teach us to seek God in the centre of our hearts and in the poor around us.

CMI: This heritage should define our identity and continuously inspire and move us forward in our life and work. Faithful to the East Syrian tradition of St Thomas Christians and the example and teaching of East Syrian Fathers, we must constantly endeavor to realize and celebrate the joy of Christ’s resurrection, and his personal presence in the community of our brethren.

As a Society in the Syro- Malabar Church the “Vincentian Congregation” shares the missionary responsibility to preach the gospel, preserving the identity and spiritual heritage of this particular Church.

SH: Our religious community rooted and grew up in the traditions of our courageous and charismatic fore-fathers, inspired the Mar Thoma Nazaranees of Kerala. We are inspired by the heroism of St Thomas the Apostle who said ‘ let us also go and die with him…(John 11,16).

CHF: We being a Congregation of the Syro- Malabar Church, are obliged to imbibe, protect and foster the traditions of St Thomas Christians and teaching and spirituality of the Oriental fathers.

4.2. Religious Life: A Call to True Discipleship and Thomas: The Genuine Disciple

The texts mentioned above from the Synoptic Gospels Mark 3,18; Matt 10,3; Luke 6,15; Acts 1,13 refer to Jesus’ call of the Twelve to be With Him and to be sent out to proclaim his message and to have the authority to cast out demons (Mark 3,13-15). Jesus’ call is a preferential choice, revealing his superiority and authority and his preference and predilection for those especially called. It is call to be in intimacy and fellowship with Him, which includes an exclusive interior attachment to Jesus and an external togetherness as well. It is to be in communion with Him by life of total commitment and allegiance to Him in permanency of relationship. It is also a call to share his life and ministry. These apostolic activities will be a continuation and extension of Jesus’ ministry. (Mark 1,16;3,14; 6,7-13). It is a call to move along with Jesus on His way (en te- hodo-i) Mark 8,27; 9,33-34; 10,17.32.46.52; Luke 23,5) and the way of Jesus the early Christians followed (Acts 9,2; 19,9.23; 22,14; 24,22; Exod 13,17; 15,13;Isa 43,16). It is the way of life passion death and resurrection of Jesus and his departure to the Father (Mark 9,33-34;10,32; Luke 24,51), an intimate way to go with faith, readily and enthusiastically (Mark 10, 46-52).

At a critical point of such a radical commitment to follow Jesus who prepares to move to Jerusalem, the city of his destiny, Thomas appears for the first time in the Gospel of John in 11,16 with a deliberative
and prophetic statement as a spokesman of the Twelve saying ‘Let us also go that we may die with Him’. In liberating Lazarus from death, Jesus enacts his identity as the ‘Resurrection and Life’ (11,25). But this great sign also triggers the final opposition to Jesus and puts in motion the plot that will lead to death. In such a hostile situation Thomas says ‘Let us go’ implying the ‘following’ with the purpose ‘that we may die with Him’. Genuine discipleship implies partaking in the destiny of the master who dies in order to give life to man (reflected in the case of Lazarus). Thomas is encouraging and challenging the disciples to respond courageously and positively following Jesus who is heading towards His death, resurrection and glorification. The true followers of Jesus also will have to die and rise with Him in order to become his true disciples. The disciple is a grain of wheat for he dies and rises with Jesus (John 12,24) and his life of following Jesus is one of faith and self-giving after Jesus’ example. In fact Thomas, the Apostle has realized it by laying down his own life for Jesus in India.

Understood in this line, all the Religious Congregations of Syro-Malabar origin following Mar Thoma Margam confess in their Rule of life and practice by their continued commitment to follow radically and intensively the way of salvation Jesus has shown to us, and by practicing the evangelical counsels they continue the ministry of Jesus in the society of today in manifold ways. For them religious commitment is a matter of dying and rising with Jesus (Rom 6.8 (1-14); Col 3,1-4), a call that reaches its climax in martyrdom leading to final glory with Jesus. The men and women religious of the Syro-Malabar Church through their ascetical practices centered around liturgy, and the re-enactment of Paschal Mystery, realize the spirit of dying and rising with Christ. The eminent and noble founders of these Congregations, the saintly men and women (St Alphonsa, Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Blessed Mariam Thressia, Blessed Euphrasia) who dedicated their lives for the success of the Gospel at home in the Mother Church and in the numerous mission fields, in and outside India with its recent examples of martyrdom Sr. Rani Maria and Sr. Valsa John for the cause of the marginalized, are all fruits of following the way of discipleship of St Thomas, their father in faith.

The different characteristics of the Law of Thomas come to light in the following ways of life. 1. A life of radical discipleship found in these Congregations. 2. The life of asceticism centered around the liturgy practiced in their way of life basing on the heritage of St Thomas Christians. 3. The dedicated life for the proclamation of the Gospel (to be sent out) for those who have faith to deepen their faith and to those who do not know the good news yet in various parts of India and outside (Matt 10,5-25; 28,16-20; Mark 16,14-19; Luke 24,47-48; John 20,21; Acts 1,8). It is enough to note that the Rule of Life of all the Congregations mentioned above insist on an ascetic way of life of the religious centered around the liturgy. The Syro-Malabar mission Eparchies, the Syro-Malabar Mission Regions in and outside India are fruit of the dedicated missionary work of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Mission Regions of Congregations of Syro-Malabar origin outside India and missionary witnessing of a worshipping, loving, sharing, culturally integrated community in dialogue and dedicated service to humanity speak volumes for inspiration of mar thomma margam and its influence on the life and mission of Religious Congregations of Syro-Malabar origin as those who are called and sent out (Mark 3,18; Matt 10,3; Luke 6,15; Acts 1,13) to continue the mission of Jesus exemplified in the life of St Thomas the Apostle.

4.3. Jesus the Way, Truth and Life (John 14: 5-6)

The revelation of Jesus as the way (hodos) to the Father occurs in the context of the farewell Speech of Jesus to the disciples in John 13-17. It is found in the form of ‘I am Saying’ (ego-eimi) (John 6,35-31; 8,12; 9,5; 10,7,9; 10,11,14;
which implies the revelation of the identity and mission of Jesus. Jesus knew that his hour has come and he is departing to the Father and his glorification through his passion, death and resurrection is at hand. He is going to prepare a place for them in the house of the Father and Jesus said to them “you know the way where I am going? It is at this point Thomas boldly raises the question as the spokesman of the disciples (we the first person pronoun plural)”Lord we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way? Jesus answers him through a revelatory formula “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me” (John 14,6; ego- eimi he- hodos kai he- ale-theia kai he- zoe-). Moloney says: Jesus is the only way to the Father, the unique and saving revelation of God (John 1,18.51;3,13; 5,37-38; 6,46; 10,1.7.11.14). God is revealed in the life and word of Jesus, and the disciples should know that Jesus’ departure to go the Father will be through the lifting up (3,14; 8,28; 12,32) and a death (10,16-18; 11,4; 12,23-24; 13,18-20). The way of Jesus is a loving and total gift of himself unto death. It must also become the way of his followers (14,16a; 13,15.34-35). Belief and trust in Jesus are the only way to their goal; and oneness with the Father (John 14,5-6). Thus the only way a Christian disciple can go to the Father is through a fellowship of faith and communion of life with Jesus, who leads us, who is the way to the Father because he is the truth, the self-revelation of God. The way of Jesus revealed to Thomas (together with its parallel expression in Synoptics (Luke 23,5; 24, 46-49; Acts 1,8;19,9,23; 13,11; 24,14-22) became the foundation of ‘the Law of Thomas’ (Mar Thoma Margam) in India where Thomas proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. The life according to the evangelical counsels is the expression of a life as a loving and total gift of oneself to God and sisters and brothers in Christ. Further, the way marked by liturgical life centered on Eucharist (raza), the celebration of faith and the practice of self-emptying attitude through various ministries of all these Congregations, the praying of Divine Praises, the Sacramental life, and the study of the Word of God etc. are clear expressions of the elements of Mar Thoma Margam present in the Rule of life of all the Congregations mentioned above. Unfortunately, those members of these Congregations who are working in various parts of the world, especially in territories of other rites, do not have the possibility of following their own liturgical traditions faithfully, though they are faithful to the Rule of life of their own Congregation.

4.4. My Lord and My God (Jn. 20,28)

This is a text often cited in the Constitutions of the Religious Congregations of Syro-Malabar origin while stating the nature and purpose of religious life relating it to the Christ-experience of St Thomas the Apostle. John 20 narrates the resurrection of Jesus (20,1-10) and the post-resurrectional appearances of Jesus first to Mary Magdalene (20,11-18), then to the disciples without Thomas (20,19-22) and finally to the disciples including Thomas a week later (20,26-29). These narrations bring to light the identity of the Risen Lord as well as the fact that Jesus has now entered into another condition of life which is different from earthly life. The apparition to Thomas is the last episode among them. Thomas the keen follower of Jesus in 11,16 and 14,5 now seems to be slow in grasping the mystery of the person of Jesus and looks for concrete and clear proofs of faith. Like Nathanael in John 1,45-49, he rejected the faith of the fellow-disciples who has seen the Lord (John 20,25; 1,45-46). He insisted on a personal experience based on seeing Him and touching Him (Jn 20,25.29). G. Miakuzhiyil notes:” Through a personal encounter with risen Jesus, who showed him the marks of crucifixion on his hands and the pierced side and who challenged him to become a believer in the reality of his resurrection, Thomas is led to confess his personal faith in the Lordship and divinity of the crucified-risen Christ in saying ‘My Lord and My God’ (John 20,28)”.
parallel is found in Ps 35,23 (LXX) Yhwh Lord) and Elohim (God). Here in John 20,28 Jesus is addressed in the same language in which Israel addressed Yhwh. This climatic statement makes the ultimate revelation of the fourth Evangelist about Jesus, written to create faith in Him leading to eternal life. It consists in the confession of faith in the Lordship and divinity of the crucified and risen Christ. The readers of the Gospel may consider the disciples of Jesus as blessed but the really blessed are those who believe without seeing him, namely through the insight of faith. It is faith that unites the disciples with the risen Lord and faith is the bond that binds all the disciples of all times and places with the risen Lord and one another (Jn 20,29). This heritage of faith in Jesus as the Lord and God is at the root of the charism, nature and spirituality and future vision of the Congregations of Syro-Malabar origin. They have placed it at the core of their religious life and mission as noted above. They have based their life style and mission on the apostolic experience of the Risen Lord and the charism and life situation of a community. It is reflected in the liturgy these Congregations celebrate, in which the prayers begin with the address, Our Lord and Our God, an adapted form of confession of Thomas the Apostle. Their proclamation of the Good News in various ways and the service done to others in their apostolic ministry is the expression of the faith in the Risen Lord and God, present in others. To recognize the Risen Lord in others and in creation is the inspiration to transform the society into new creation.

4.5. At the Breakfast with the Risen Lord (Jn 21,2)

Thomas appears in 21,2 for the last time in the Fourth Gospel. He is mentioned second to Peter (1,40; 6,8.68;13,6;9,24.36; 18,10.15.25; 20,2,6; 21,2,3,7,11) which is significant if we see it in the continuation of the scene in the last part of chapter 20. The Eucharistic overtones relate this passage to Chapter 6 where Jesus reveals himself to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. There Jesus revealed himself to the disciples through the sign of multiplication of loaves (sign Jn 6,1-14) and as the bread of life (I am saying) inviting them to be in communion with him. Here too, we have the Eucharistic overtones and the revelation of Jesus the Risen one in the context of the meal scene in which Thomas partakes (Jn 21,12). But this is no ordinary meal. There is no mention of conversation, not even of disciple’s eating. Jesus came to the gathered disciples by the lakeside in Galilee in a fishing scene (21,1-8) and at a meal (21,9-13); he as the host is absolutely central. He took bread, gave thanks (Jn 6,11,23) and gave it to the disciples and likewise the fish also. The nature of the simple breakfast is transformed in the presence of the Risen Lord and the disciples recognize him at table fellowship (Luke 24,3-35). At table with the Risen Lord means united with the Lord, and to recognize him in faith leading a life in the Church continuing the mission of Christ in the world today. The Fourth Gospel reveals the identity and mission of Jesus and Eucharist is at the heart of this revelation-Gospel. Religious life too has Eucharist as the source of its life and mission. The Rule of life of all the Congregations of Syro-Malabar origin without exception has taken the Eucharist as the source and model for their life and mission, celebrate it and live it by leading a life as a ransom for many (Mk 10,42-45; Jn 13,1-17).

Conclusion

The Institutes of Consecrated Life/ The Societies of Apostolic Life of Syro-Malabar origin are really influenced by the pattern of life of Mar Thoma Margam. As it is given expression in the Constitutions of several congregations noted above, they have based their life and mission on the Christ experience of Thomas the Apostle found mentioned in Mark 3,18; Matt 10,3; Lk 6,15; Acts 1,13; Jn 11,16; 14,5; 20,24-28; 21,2. The life and mission of these congregations have their definite roots in the Christ experience of St Thomas the Apostle, their father in faith and the life situation of their forefathers. This is evident from the Constitutions of these Congregations because they refer to the Christ
experience of St Thomas the Apostle, while defining the charism, nature and purpose of these Congregations of Syro-Malbar origin. Naturally, it is done from the perspective of the charism of each Congregation concerned and its further definition in context. But it is enveloped by the life pattern of Mar Thoma Margam, the special life-style germinated in our own motherland India through, St Thomas who lived with and experienced our Lord and God Jesus.

God has called these women and men religious to an intensive life of discipleship in order to be with Him as a community following the way shown by Jesus our Lord and God. It is a way of life following the footsteps of the master with faith participating in his passion, death, resurrection and continuing his mission to the ends of the earth placing their charism as the point of departure. The conviction of being called by God to follow Jesus, his mission, faith in Jesus the Lord and God and Eucharist centered life at the service of others are important dimensions of it. This is manifested in their community life based on the evangelical counsels and spiritual heritage of Mar Thoma Nazaranees, the spirituality centered around Qurbana/other sacraments, following the way of liturgical seasons, the praying of Divine Praises, keeping the fast and renunciation according to the genius of the liturgical year, the mission-mindedness and other devotional activities. Ample evidences for these and other elements of Mar Toma Margam are found in the Rule of Life and style of life of Institutes of Consecrated Life/ the Societies of Apostolic Life of Syro-Malabar origin.

ENDNOTES

1 G. Nedungatt, Quest For The Historical Thomas Apostle of India: A Rereading of Evidence (Bangalore 2008) 410.


11 For a detailed study on this cf. A. Thekkudan, “Sources of Spirituality Of The St Thomas Christian Church In The Pre-Diaper Period”, B.Puthur (ed.) The Life And Nature Of The St Thomas Christian Church...


16 Constitution And Directory. Missionary Sisters of Daughters of St Thomas (DST) (Pala 202) nos. 4.7.

17 Sisters of St Thomas Dayara (Monasterium Sui Iuris). Part II General Norms, 6.


20 Little Flower Congregation: Constitution and Directory -2010(CST) (Thirkkakara 2010) no.05.


22 Statutes And Practical Norms of “The Vincentian” Congregation (Kochi 2006) no.7b.

23 Constitution of the SH Congregation (Kottayam 2008)no.18.

24 Covenant of Love. The Congregation of Holy Family (Mannuthy 1995) no.4.


26 Vellanickal, “St Thomas’ Christ Experience”, 74-75.

27 J. McPolin, John (NTM6; Wilmington 1979) 120.


34 G. Mlakuzhyil, Path To Abundant Life in the Gospel of John (Delhi 2005)296-297.


38 On the theme of Table Fellowship and Eucharist cf. E. La Verdiere, Dining in the Kingdom of God (Chicago 1994) 189-199.
Faith Formation in the Syro-Malabar Church

Sri Jose Philip Medayil

Introduction

The Church of the Thomas Christians is an individual Church in the Catholic Communion founded on the Christ experience of St Thomas the apostle. Their way of life lived in accordance with the gospel message, an exemplary Christian witness among non-Christians, is a clear sign of a community well formed in Christian faith. This article is an attempt to present a historico-theological analysis of the different stages of catechetical ministry among the Catholic Thomas Christians in view of accelerating a proper renewal in the present Syro-Malabar catechesis.

The Church of the Thomas Christians has three distinctive phases of history from a catechetical point of view. The first is the pre-seventeenth century period in which it was strictly Indian and oriental. The second phase starts at the dawn of the sixteenth century which marks the beginning of the western interference with the arrival of Portuguese missionaries to India and continued up to Second Vatican Council. During these centuries the time honored ecclesial, liturgical and catechetical traditions and their indigenous ways of transmitting their faith were neither understood nor appreciated by the missionaries. As a consequence the catechetical outlook congenial to the early Christian and Patristic period was forcefully changed to suit the post-reformation Tridentine mentality of the west. The third phase of history begins with the epoch making event the Second Vatican Council, which gave an impetus to the Oriental churches by re-emphasizing the nature of the church as the communion of individual churches. Along with this the council opened up a profound renewal in the catechetical ministry, world wide, especially through the documents Lumen Gentium and Dei Verbum with its abiding visions on Revelation, Faith and Church.

1. The Catechetical Ministry in the Pre Seventeenth Century Church of the Thomas Christians

The Churches of apostolic origin formulated and developed an identity and individuality of their own as the manifestation of their response in faith to the apostolic Christ experience which they have received. The Apostolic Church of the Thomas
The Ecclesial Heritage of the St Thomas Christians

Mar Thoma Margam

The particular way of ecclesial life attuned to the Indian and Oriental ethos developed in response to the apostolic patrimony shared by St Thomas is known in history as the “Thommayude Margam” or the “way of Thomas”. This indigenous expression represents the sum total of their liturgical, ecclesial, ascetical and socio-cultural identity which is distinct from the ‘way of Peter’. It is not an easy task to delineate the Catechetical vision, systems and structures prevailed among the Thomas Christians, since direct historical documents referring to the catechetical structures and methods are lacking. If we plunge deep into the early history, the first, perhaps the only direct reference to catechetical instruction may be that of Melchior Nunes Barreto in 1563. After a visit to the Thomas Christians in company with the bishop of Cochin, he writes to his brethren in Europe:

I cannot tell you, my dear brethren, how much I am consoled in the Lord when I see and speak with these Christians who from the time, when St Thomas had been in these parts, as it is believed, have kept faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ in spite of the fact that they had been deprived of instruction, sacraments and other means which are preserved among us by the divine goodness, and even though they have been living among an infinite number of infidels, not only molested by the gentiles but even persecuted by the Moors and Jews, who are living among them, in spite of all this they have always preserved the veneration, obedience and faith of the Holy Cross and the memory of the mysteries of the Catholic Faith. And on all days before sunset they assemble in the church to recite the psalms and the lessons in Chaldean, and in the morning they do the same, the cassanars… reciting their matins at the altar and the people answering their alleluyas and other words with such impetus of the spirit that, although I do not understand the words, they provoke in me devotion.

At the first sight the words of Barreto incite in us a feeling that the Thomas Christians did not have proper catechetical formation. But when we read in between the lines along with other written documents from the missionaries our impression will be changed. Barreto viewing everything from a post-reformation and Tridentine background could not find a system of instruction like that of post reformation period based on the dogmas or precepts of the church. If we evaluate the “Thoma Marga” the undistorted way of life of the pre seventeenth century church with an understanding of the concept and systems of catechesis in the apostolic and post apostolic times we would be surprised to see a well formed living community in faith.

1.1 Faith Life of the Thomas Christians

1.1.1. Liturgical Life

As it is clear from the many Portuguese testimonies of the 16th century, the Thomas Christians were pious people, very devout in the practice of their religion. Many European missionaries bore witness to their patient devout and active participation in the long and sometimes tedious services conducted in the church in the Syriac language. The Thomas Christians had the greatest respect for and devotion to the Holy Eucharist. The Divine Liturgy which they called ‘Qurbana’ was celebrated with great solemnity.

They went to the church not to fulfill an obligation, but out of deep faith and conviction. Even before the introduction of Sunday obligation by the Synod of Diamper, people used to go to the Churches regularly, not only on Sundays and feast days but also on other week days to recite the divine office in morning and evening.

The Thomas Christians were not passive hearers of Divine services, but they actively took part in the prayers with actions and words. The long homilies preached by the priests were an occasion for effective liturgical catechesis. As Dionysio reports, these sermons were preached by their priests for many hours together. These long sermons helped
them to deepen their understanding of faith and grasp the meaning and significance of the Divine Liturgy and its theological content. Thus the Thomas Christians were able to develop an ecclesial spirituality based on the liturgical tradition of the Church. So the popular devotions which has no relation with the liturgical heritage of the church, could not find any place among the Thomas Christians of that time.

The liturgical assembly actively responded during ceremonies also with different postures and actions. When the incense burning vessel was passed among the congregation, the people made certain movements of their hands in order to make incense smoke come to them, which is a very meaningful liturgical expression. They exchanged peace or 'Kasturi' at appropriate times during the Holy Qurbana, at the beginning and end of the Divine office and at certain other occasions also. The Synod of Diamper appreciates the custom of giving the Kasturi which according to the usage of this diocese, contains in it a symbol of charity, communion and brotherly love.

Regarding the communion service we can notice the following facts from the decriptions of Monserrate, Barbosa, Vincent Maria and others. The Thomas Christians considered communion as indispensable part of the Qurbana and the whole congregation except public sinners communicated under both species. As in the early Church, a big loaf was consecrated, divided and distributed which they received in their hands. The main characteristic of their life was that it was centered around the liturgy, the re-enactment of the paschal mystery. The Divine Liturgy and the Liturgical calendar were fully capable of involving the faithful into the salvation history which has its focal point the mystery of Christ and of the Church.

The Holy week was celebrated in a special way by keeping vigils with long prayers and almsgiving. On Holy Thursday the father of the family would break unleavened bread and distribute it among the members of the family together with a sweet drink to commemorate the Last supper of our Lord. This celebration is a part of the family liturgy of the Thomas Christians. On Good Friday as a sign of sorrow, they withdrew themselves even from household activities and used to take bitter drinks. From Holy Thursday night till next Saturday, complete silence was observed and many would keep complete fasting.

The octave of Easter, which they called the new Sunday was solemnly celebrated in honour of St Thomas, who confessed his faith in the resurrected Lord with the words “My Lord and My God”. 03 July is their greatest feast on which they celebrate the martyrdom of the apostle St Thomas. The Feast is known as ‘Dukrana’ meaning commemoration and some families keep it as a day of ‘Chatam’.

Seventeenth century witnesses like Vincent Maria OCD and others attest that the Thomas Christians used to dedicate long hours to prayer. The lay people knew East Syriac enough to say their private prayers in it. Common family prayer in the morning and evening was very scrupulously observed. We have in the canon apostolorum that the laity also have to pray thrice a day. Late selusion laws in general say that clerics and lay people too should be diligent in reciting the office. N. Barretto in 1561 reported that the Malabar clergy with the laity recited the office both in the evening and in the morning. From all the above said laws and practices of the Thomas Christians we legitimately conclude that the Thomas Christians had recited the divine office in their families also both in the evening and the morning. They also celebrated the feasts and fasts in accordance with the spirit of the holy seasons in their families followed by traditional social ceremonies and the celebrations are effective means of family Catechesis in accordance with the Liturgical Year.

1.1.2. Ascetical Life

For the Thomas Christians, rigorous fasting was the most important form of their ascetical practices. For a reliable and clear picture of the
life of penance of the Thomas Christians we have to
depend on a few documents of the sixteenth and
seventeenth century in the form of reports of the
foreign missionaries. In 1579, Fr. Dionysio, S.J. From
Cochin writes that the Thomas Christians are friends
of fasts\(^1\) and in 1557 Fr. Carneiro S.J. found that
they observed their customs of fasting very perfectly\(^2\).
The fast day begins on the previous day when the
sun goes down. Fr. Jerome S.J. plainly confesses to
his superior that it is very difficult for the missionaries
to observe the local fasts in the same way as the
Christians did, because of their rigour and strictness\(^3\).

The Thomas Christians never considered
fasting to be an act of private devotion nor merely as
an obligation imposed by the ecclesiastical law. But
it was part and parcel of the Liturgical life of the
Thomas Chirstians. The celebration of the Holy
Qurbana, the recital of the Divine office by the whole
parish community, the reception of the Sacraments,
prayer and almsgiving were included in the
observance of fast\(^4\). According to Gouvea's report
(1606) people came to the Church three times a day,
during the season of lent and nobody was absent at
the morning and evening congregations\(^5\).

**1.1.3. Moral Life**

According to the available sources the life and
behaviour of the Thomas Christians were
synonymous with their social and religious status.
They were always esteemed and patronized by their
rulers as much for their general fidelity and regard
for truth, as for their skill and military powers\(^6\).
According to F. Day they were very faithful and
trustworthy\(^7\). Social and Moral virtues like fidelity,
regard for truth, trustworthiness etc., when possessed
by a community, it is indicative of the moral and
religious maturity\(^8\). History shows that the Thomas
Christians were esteemed and loved even by the
non - Christians. This is only because they have
possessed a very high degree of moral standards.
Gouvea says that no other community has great value
and esteem among the Malabarians as the Syrian
Christians\(^9\).

The Thomas Christians were courteous
tolerant and modest. Their courteous manners
contributed in great measure to preserve peace and
security in the community\(^10\). About their modesty and
respect for elders A.Ayyer makes the following
remarks, “They pay strict attention to the fifth
commandment, to honour their father and mother,
applying it to all their governors and teachers, spiritual
pastors and masters”\(^11\).

As a result of these moral qualities, quarrels
and moral evils were rare among the Thomas
Christians. Vincenzo Maria, an Italian Missionary,
tested that murder was unknown among them. He
admired this conduct and contrasted it with the
frequent assassinations both in Catholic Italy and all
the colonies of the Portuguese India\(^12\).

The Thomas Christian women were famous
for their modesty and chastity. In fact their dress and
behavior reflected their character. As A. Ayyar
reports they are seldom or never known to violate
the law of chastity\(^13\). Even in the midst of Hindus
and other non-Christians, divorce was unheard of
the Thomas Christians\(^14\). The missionaries admired,
the moral life, simplicity and innocence. Paulinus of
Bartholomeo said "one cannot find here the vice and
customs of the Europeans who have already
corrupted the costal cities of India”\(^15\).

**1.1.4 Missionary Consciousness**

To be on a mission to evangelise is the basic
obligation of every Christian and every Church.
“Evangelising is the grace and vocation proper to
the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order
to evangelize”\(^16\).

In the light of the studies so far made more
and more recognition is given to the fact that St
Thomas Christians were truly missionary minded.
Mar Abraham Mattam had highlighted this aspect
bringing out certain forgotten pieces of evidence to
our notice.\(^17\) Thomas Paremakkal who was well
aware of the pre-seventeenth century situation of the Thomas Christians, strongly affirms that there were "those who announced the faith", among them even before the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries.

We have a very clear reference in the report of Francis Roz, the first Latin Archbishop of the Thomas Christians. In his "Relaco de Serra" of 1604 he reports that the Northists among the Thomas Christians were always interested in conversions and that they used to baptize and add the non-Christians to their community. He continues to say that four principal families among the Thomas Christians were specially deputed by the community to receive and look after the new converts. This reference clearly shows that the laity actively cooperated with the ongoing process of evangelization. Evangelization is not considered as a duty of the clergy alone, but rather the whole community is interested in this task and this testifies the presence of the system of the catechumenate among the Thomas Christians. Moreover, the Thomas Christians kept intact their faith amidst the vast majority of Hindus. This is evangelization in its proper sense. They had positive influence on the society in which they were living. This is a life lived in accordance with the Gospel message as a Christian witness among the non-Christians.

1.2. Catechetical Approaches of 'Thomma Margam'

The analysis of the Thomma Marga, we have done so far brings to our mind certain salient features of an effective catechetical ministry present in the Church of the Thomas Christians.

1.2.1. Ecclesial Community: the subject, object and place of catechesis

Catechesis is not to be judged by the amount of intellectual information given through various means of instruction but rather by the depth of the faith life of a community as their response to the experience of divine Revelation entrusted to the Church. If Thomas Christians could preserve and transmit the apostolic patrimony they received from the Apostle St Thomas to the younger generations, that itself is the proof of an effective system of catechesis, and surely it was not the system of instruction based on the dogmas of the Church which appeared on the scene after the reformation and gained momentum in the post Tridentine Church.

Living Faith can be preserved nurtured and transmitted only by a self-conscious community which lives in interaction with a living tradition which shares a common story. From the narratives of the missionaries we get such a fascinating impression of a vibrant faith community and this faith community becomes the locus where the younger generations enjoy the fullness of revelation (GDC.141). Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting this word of God, as the ecclesial community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it (Cfr. GDC. 105, CC.74 - 95). The faith community is herself a living catechesis (GDC. 141).

1.2.2. Mystagogical Catechesis

The uniqueness of the ecclesial life of the 'Thomma Margam' really springs from their sacred Liturgy. It is in the Liturgy where the messianic mystery is unveiled, proclaimed, celebrated, and the worshipping community experiences the salvific mysteries. The famous principle 'Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi' explicitly states the locus of Liturgy as the font of catechesis. One is brought to the salvific mysteries of Christ in through and by the worshipping community. The Church is the worshipping community and the mystery is fully accomplished in the liturgical assembly. In the Thomma Marga the Eucharist is the 'Holy, life giving and divine mystery of Christ’s passion death, burial and resurrection.' Through the Eucharist, the Liturgical seasons, the Divine office and Sacraments, all the mysteries of Christian faith are presented to the faithful for experiencing the depth of these mysteries. This was attained by leading the faithful to the full, conscious
and active participation in liturgical celebrations through the long homilies preached by the priests during the ministry of the word which were typical examples of mystagogical catechesis.

The life and spirituality of the Thomma Marga was deeply rooted in the liturgical year. The Liturgical year provides a deeper knowledge of the whole content of divine revelation and the rich and lively experience of faith through the celebration of the mysteries of Christ and the Church in accordance with the basic rhythm of the various seasons. According to the teaching of the Sacrosanctum Concilium and Catechesi Tredendae (SC 105, CT-48), this is an effective means employed by the Church to complete the formation of the faithful.

1.2.3. Mission Oriented Formation

"If catechesis is done well, Christians will be eager to bear witness to their faith, to hand it on to their children, to make it known to others and to serve the human in every way" (CT-24). From the historical analysis of the Thoma Margam we are convinced of the missionary consciousness of the Thomas Christians. This is enough to conclude that the catechesis of the Thoma Margam was an effective mission oriented towards catechesis.

2. Period of Occidental influences

As a consequence of the Portuguese colonization in India in the early sixteenth century, the Thomas Christians were greatly influenced by the European missionaries. Missionaries in general failed to recognize the Thoma Margam. So they desired to conform them to the way of life of the Latin Church. Through the well known pseudo-synod of Diamper in 1599 the long standing relations with the East Syrian Church were terminated and The Thomas Christians were gradually brought under the Latin 'Padroado' jurisdiction. This 'Padroado' influence led to the gradual disappearance of the identity of the 'Thomma Margam'.

2.1. Catechism Centered Dogmatic Approach

Under the influence of the western missionaries the age old indigenous catechetical system in line with the Catechumenal and mystagogical catechesis of the post apostolic church gradually disappeared and catechism centered magisterial or dogmatic approach began to gain importance. In the synod of Diamper (1599) this movement to reorganize the catechetical system in accordance with post-Tridentine attitudes gained official recognition. The subsequent history of Syro-Malabar Catechesis is one of Latinization. Along with this the formation of the Syro-Malabar Clergy also fell into the hands of the Latin Missionaries. As a result of this distorted formation of both clergy and laity, even after the restoration of the Syro Malabar Hierarchy in 1923 with indigenous bishops, the process of formation remained along the lines of the western models. The formation of CBCI in 1944, influence of the Kerygmatic renewal and the lectures of J.H. Offinger S.J. all affected and motivated the Syro Malabar Church to go forward with the catechetical approaches of the Latin Church. The Syro Malabar Bishops could not find any defect in this because by this time the Syro Malabar clergy were fully conformed to the Latin tradition due to the priestly formation by the missionaries. This was the catechetical situation in the Syro Malabar Church at the dawn of the second Vatican Council.

2.2. Establishment of St Thomas Apostolic Seminary and Ecclesial Awareness

As a consequence of the restoration program initiated by the Oriental Congregation, the Holy see realized that the formation of the clergy according to the Oriental, Spiritual and Liturgical traditions of the Syro Malabar Church is a basic necessity for any renewal in this apostolic Church. As a result of this realization the St Thomas Apostolic Seminary was established at Kottayam on 3 July 1962 for the formation of the clergy. In 1973 the seminary was affiliated to the Pontifical Oriental Institute of Rome.
and became the Paurastya Vidyapitam. The establishment of the seminary and Vidyapitam generated greater awareness according to the teachings of Vatican II in the Oriental Churches of Kerala. The Vidyapitam facilitated deep theological studies on the Oriental, Liturgical, and Ecclesiological traditions of the St Thomas Christians. It is quiet natural that this illuminated the Catechetical milieu of the Syro-Malabar Church.

3. Vatican II and Catechetical Renaissances

The Second Vatican Council is hailed by everyone as an epoch-making event in the history of the Church. Even though the council produced no documents on catechesis, the influence of Vatican II on catechesis was decisive. It has stimulated a profound renewal in the field of catechesis by announcing the end of a mere intellectual approach to faith. Secondly it opened the way for a better understanding of the mystery of the Church by the re-discovery of the nature of the Church as the communion of Churches. This major achievement of the Council is very fundamental from an oriental catechetical point of view.

3.1. The Concept of Revelation and Faith and the Catechetical Consequences

Based on “Dei Filius” of Vatican I, faith is understood to be the submission of the intellect and will to revealed truths. According to this understanding catechesis was the task of memorizing dry and abstract theological formulae in the form of dogmas and definitions.

The dogmatic constitution of Vatican II ‘Dei Verbum’ offers a clear and most appropriate vision on faith. "By faith man freely commits his entire self to God making the full submission of his intellect and will to God who reveals and willingly ascending to the revelation given by him" (DV. 5). God invites man to a life of faith which is a life of communion with him. It is a lifelong covenant with God which consists not only the acceptance of the divine truth of revelation, but more than that it is also a commitment and personal surrender to God in love. Thus faith can be articulated as an inter-personal relationship developed gradually through a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the fullness of revelation. This relationship implies a positive response from the believer by surrendering one's whole being with a deep love and commitment. Jesus Christ, the ‘Word of God’ the fullness of revelation exists objectively and really in the Catholic Church to which the saviour has entrusted the mysteries given to him by the Father. Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting this ‘Word of God’ as the ecclesial community has received, understands, celebrates, lives and communicates it (cfr. GDC 105, CCC 74 - 95).

One can experience the fullness of this revelation only by entering into the Church community through Baptism and participating in the sacramental life of the Church. In other words, the faith experience and the life of faith of an individual faithful resulting from that ecclesial experience should be definitely ecclesial. Since the universal church is the communion of individual churches, this ecclesial faith experience can be acquired only from the apostolic tradition of a particular individual Church which is part of the divinely revealed, undivided heritage of the universal Church (OE - 1). The insistence of the Holy Father John Paul II that Catechesis should be capable of announcing the content of revelation in its entirety (CT - 58) must be understood in the light of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. The divine tradition which is part of the single sacred deposit of the word of God (DV. 10), entrusted to the Church, is really existing in the ecclesial faith traditions of the individual churches. Therefore in determining the content of catechesis, the living ecclesial faith traditions have an undeniable significance.

Vatican II urges the faithful of the Eastern Churches to preserve their own legitimate ecclesial traditions and way of life which includes their liturgy, spirituality, theology and discipline and to observe all the prescriptions with great fidelity. The Council

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also demands a more perfect knowledge and practice of these traditions (OE - 6). All these instructions of the Council really point to the need of a catechesis proper to the individual ecclesial traditions. This sincere desire of the universal church to safeguard the traditions of each church ‘sui iuris’ whole and entire by adapting its own way of life to the needs of different time and place (OE -2 ) could be realized only through a catechesis firmly based on that particular ecclesial tradition.  

3.2. Post Vatican Catechetical Context of the Syro Malabar Church

Even the catechetical ministry in India, after Vatican II, has developed a lot systematically; the oriental Churches in India were forced to preserve the rudiments of religious colonialism, so that they could not develop a catechetical approach proper to the Oriental ecclesial traditions. The Catholic Church in India, which is the communion of three individual Churches, could not impart proper convictions regarding the communion ecclesiology of the council; of course there are certain exceptions here and there.

As an after effect of the Vatican II, important decisions affecting catechesis were taken in the CBCI meeting held at Delhi in 1966, which resulted in the establishment of NBCLC at Bangalore. Gradually the catechetical, liturgical and Biblical formation programmes for the clergy, religious and laity were organized by NBCLC at different parts of the country disregarding the multi-ecclesial context of India. As a consequence most of the religious and lay leaders of the Oriental Churches trained here are unable to give a formation congenial to their ecclesial identity. In 1971 NBCLC managed to publish a common catechetical Text Book series named 'God with us' and eventually adapted anthropological approach and methodology known as 'sign method'. Even though the text series had no impact in Kerala, the 'sign method' found acceptance in certain regions.

In Kerala as a joint venture of the three individual Churches P.O.C. was established in 1968 as the regional Pastoral Centre governed by K.C.B.C. This institution having a multi ecclesial character focused attention on a doctrinal and biblical formation without any consideration for the ecclesial dimension. In 1970 a common text book series 'Pithavin Pakkaleck' and in 1980 a new series called 'Krishthuvinte Pinnale' were published for use in Sunday Schools from P.O.C. As the Syro Malabar Catechetical directory confesses, the serious draw back of these texts was that it could not pay sufficient attention to the particular characteristics and traditions of the individual churches.

3.3. The Beginning of the New Era in Syro Malabar Catechesis

A meeting of the CBCI was held at Trichy in 1982 from the 9th to 16th of January. The major topic of discussion was the relationship among the catholic churches of India. Mar Joseph Powathil and Cyril Mar Baselius representing Syro Malabar Church and Malankara Church respectively presented papers on the issue. This conference marked the beginning of great awareness of the identity of the individual oriental Churches of India.

Mar Joseph Powathil, as a devoted son of the Syro Malabar Church, was always in the forefront in the struggle for the restoration of its identity as an individual Church. He took a keen interest in the study of the ancient patrimony of the St Thomas Christians and led the faithful to a greater awareness of the mystery of the church in accordance with the theological vision of Vatican II.

He did a great deal to promote an ecclesial formation befitting to the identity of St Thomas Christians. It is his strong conviction that the variety of liturgical traditions of the Church serve to manifest the richness of the mystery of Christ and the divine plan of salvation. Therefore, as the primary custodian of the Patrimony of the Churches he is guided by the principle that the patrimony of all the Churches must remain whole and entire and the church should return
to those traditions ‘if they have fallen away due to the vicissitudes of time or persons’. Keeping these principles in mind, he took commendable initiatives to give solid liturgical and catechetical formation for the faithful of the Archdiocese of Changanassery, which later became a blue print for renewal process especially in the field of Catechetical and mystagogical formation in the whole of the Syro Malabar Church\(^4\). Thus he opened up a new era of Ecclesial Catechesis true to the Apostolic heritage of the individual churches of Catholic Communion, ever in the history of catholic catechesis.

3.4. **Synodal Commission for Catechesis**

As an after effect of the increased ecclesial awareness among the oriental catholics, especially in the ecclesiastical province of Changanachery, a catechism series for use in the whole of the Syro Malabar Church became a felt need. In the absence of any positive attempts from the catechetical commission, the diocese under the province of Changanachery constituted an interdiocesan commission for catechesis in 1989 and published a new series of catechetical texts for use in Sunday Schools, called ‘Daivam Nammodukoode’. Though some voices were raised from different corners against this movement, in 1998 the KCBC agreed to hand over the catechetical responsibility to the respective commissions of the three individual churches. By this time the Syro Malabar Church was raised to the status of a Major Archiepiscopal Church. The Syro Malabar Catechetical commission was re-constituted with Mar George Alencherry as the Chairman. This commission within a short period published the catechetical Directory of the Syro Malabar Church with the title ‘Call and Response’, the first of its kind among the oriental catholic churches. Following this, the new catechetical Text Book Series “Rakshayude Pathayil” was published which is now used in all the dioceses of the Syro Malabar Church.

3.5. **Ecclesial Faith Pilgrimage Approach**

When the post Vatican documents define catechesis, the emphasis is not on imparting theoretical knowledge of the dogmas, but on the life of faith. From an oriental point of view this life of faith manifests itself as a progressive ‘deification’ of the faithful by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Full participation in the divine nature through communion with the mystery of the Holy Trinity is the final goal of this faith journey (OL.6). Hence catechesis can be defined as that form of ecclesial action which accelerates this process of deification in both the Church and its members. This special goal of catechesis differentiates the catechetical pedagogy from all other methods of secular education. Considering this goal along with the distinctive nature and content of the Syro Malabar catechesis we may feel the need of an appropriate pedagogical approach and method for an effective catechesis. The Ecclesial faith pilgrimage approach, introduced by Sandesanilayam, the first diocesan catechetical centre of India, is an answer for this felt need. Since there exists at present no other catechetical approaches congenial to the Ecclesial faith traditions of the Syro Malabar Church, this unique approach and method is all the more important.

This approach perceives catechesis as an ongoing process of growth, a journey undertaken together with all the members of the ecclesial community the goal of which is the communion with the Holy Trinity. During her faith journey the Church incorporates the faithful more and more deeply into the ecclesial way of life.

3.6. **Viswasolsavam’**

This is a new scheme and methodology introduced for the intensive catechesis in summer holidays for children, based on the child centered activity keeping the integrity of the content and theology of the Syro Malabar Catechesis. This faith formation programme initiated by the Archdiocese of Changanacherry in 2001 has drawn attention of all in the catechetical sphere and gained approval and praise by all. This catechetical programme is firmly...
rooted on catechetical technology and modern scientific educational approaches and principles. The content of this programme is so arranged that it can effect an ecclesial, biblical and mystagogical faith formation by using a creative catechetical methodology.

The Church in Kerala has recognized this novel faith formation concept as the one to be proud of and almost all Eparchies in Kerala have introduced this into their scheme of faith formation with necessary modification to suit the situations available there. 'Viswasolsavam' the feast of faith are days of pleasure that are free from the boring routine schedule of insensitive, lifeless and dry atmosphere that is the trade mark of the classroom confined instruction, text based teaching and teacher centered dogmatic catechesis.

**Conclusion**

I like to conclude this study on the catechesis of the Syro Malabar Church with two proposals. The first one is a proposal regarding the publication of a ‘Catechism of the Syro Malabar Church’. If we have to realize an ecclesial catechesis as envisaged by the Universal Church, we should have the possibility to enter deeply into the divine mysteries which are manifested through the Sacred traditions of this individual Church. In the prologue of the CCC it is made clear that the CCC does not provide the necessary adaptations of doctrinal presentation required by the differences of ecclesial conditions. It is the responsibility of an individual Church to present the content of catechesis congenial to the Ecclesial Faith traditions of a particular individual Church. Considering this responsibility, it is an imperative to have a Catechism of the Syro Malabar Church which could serve as the basic reference text for the catechism series that would be formed in the future in different situations of ecclesial existence. This could be realized by the Synodal Commission for Catechesis through a very serious research into the ecclesial traditions of this Church.

The second proposal concerns the establishment of a catechetical research and training institute for the Syro Malabar Church which is an urgent need of this Church. As an individual church of the Catholic Communion it is our responsibility to preserve, live and transmit the apostolic patrimony we have received from the Apostle St Thomas. The preservation and transmission of this heritage is not possible without a proper ecclesial formation. Since we are far behind the ideal; in this respect, we should make an earnest attempt to renew our catechetical milieu.

**ENDNOTES**

5. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
16. Ibid, 162.
24  Ibid. 241.
28  Paulinus of Bertholomeo, *Viaggio All India Orientali*, Rome 1796, 108.
29  Evangelli Nuntiandi, 14.
33  Cf. General Directory for Catechesis, 41.
34  Cf. GDC, 105, CCC 74 - 75.
35  Cf. GDC, 141.
36  Cf. Syro Malabar ‘Raza’.
37  Cf. SC. 105, CT - 48.
38  Cf. GDC 105, CCC 74 - 95.
39  Cf. OE 1.
40  Cf. CT. 58.
41  Cf. OE 2, 6.
Introduction

The dignity and vocation of women is a subject of constant human and Christian reflection. This can be seen in the statements of the Church’s Magisterium which is clearly expressed in the closing message Vat. 11: “The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women, imbued with a spirit of the Gospel, can do so much to aid humanity in not falling”.¹ This message sums up what had already been expressed in the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes² and in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity: Apostolicam Actuositatem.³

1. Basic Dimensions of Women’s Vocation in the Magisterial Teachings of the Church

As stated by Pope John Paul II, motherhood and virginity are two particular dimensions of the fulfilment of the female personality. In the light of the Gospel they acquire their full meaning and value in Mary, who, as a Virgin became the Mother of the Son of God. These two dimensions of the female vocation were united in Our Lady in an exceptional manner in such a way that one did not exclude the other but wonderfully complemented it. Indeed the person of the Mother of God helps every woman to see how these two dimensions in the vocation of women as persons explain and complete each other.

1.1. Motherhood

According to Vatican II, the human being - both male and female - is the only being in the world which God willed for its own sake. Thus the human being is a person, who decides for himself. At the same time man “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self”⁴. This description of the person corresponds to the fundamental biblical truth about the creation of the human being - man and woman - in the image and likeness of God. This truth again opens up the path to a full understanding of women’s motherhood. Motherhood is the fruit of that biblical “knowledge” which corresponds to the “union of the two in one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). On the woman’s part, this brings about a special gift of self
as an expression of that spousal love whereby the two are united to each other so closely that they become “one flesh”. This mutual gift of the person in marriage unseals the gift of a new life, a new human being, who is also a person in the likeness of his/her parents. Motherhood implies a special openness to the new person: and this is precisely the woman’s ‘part’. In this openness, in conceiving and giving birth to a child, the woman “discovers herself through a sincere gift of self”.

Motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life, as it develops in the woman’s womb. The mother is filled with wonder and she accepts and loves as a person the child she is carrying in her womb. This unique contact with the human being, developing within her, gives rise to an attitude not only towards her own child, but to every human being, which profoundly marks the woman’s personality. Compared to men, women are more capable of paying attention to another person, and it is motherhood that develops this predisposition even more. The mother’s contribution, therefore, is decisive in laying the foundation for a new personality. Hence, the words of Pope John Paul II: “Thank you, women who are mothers! You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God’s own smile upon the new-born child, the one who guides your child’s first steps, who helps it to grow, and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life”.

1.2. Virginity for the Kingdom of God

In the teaching of Christ, motherhood is connected with virginity, at the same time distinct from it. Fundamental to this is Jesus’ statement in the conversation on the indissolubility of marriage. Having heard Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees, the disciples said: “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry” (Mt. 19:10). Jesus takes this mistaken opinion as a starting point for instructing the disciples on the value of celibacy. He distinguishes celibacy which results from natural defects from “celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven”. Christ said: “…and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mt. 19:12). It is, thus, a voluntary celibacy, chosen for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, in view of man’s eschatological vocation to union with God. Jesus then added: “He, who is able to receive this, let him receive it”. Consequently, celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven results not only from a free choice on the part of man, but also from a special grace on the part of God, who invites a particular person to live celibacy. While this is a special sign of the Kingdom of God to come, it also serves as a way to devote all the energies of soul and body during one’s earthly life exclusively for the sake of the eschatological Kingdom.

In this wider context, however, virginity has to be considered also as a path for women, a path on which they realize their womanhood in a way different from marriage. By freely choosing virginity, women confirm themselves as persons, whom the Creator, from the beginning, has willed for their own sake. At the same time, they should realize the personal value of their own femininity by becoming “a sincere gift” for God who has revealed Himself in Christ, and “a spousal gift” for Christ, the Redeemer and Spouse of souls. Hence Pope John Paul II thank them saying: “Thank You, Consecrated women! Following the example of the greatest of women, the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, you open yourselves, with obedience and fidelity, to the gift of God’s love. You help the Church and all mankind to experience a “spousal” relationship to God, one which magnificently expresses the fellowship which God wishes to establish with His creatures”.

2. Women in Syrian Christian Tradition

The Acts of Thomas, a Syriac apocryphal, holds that the Apostle, Judas Thomas, came to India in the middle of the first century AD introducing

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Christianity into the Indian subcontinent. At the beginning of the document, there takes place two striking encounters with women. The first occurs soon after Thomas arrives in India, and was brought to serve King Gundaphorus as a carpenter, the only person to recognize that Thomas is not what he seems is a woman, a young Hebrew flute girl. Being a servant girl, she is portrayed as one whom others consider of no account. Yet it is she who perceives that Thomas is a messenger of God and a minister of heavenly works. Declaring that Thomas is an apostle of God and confessing her faith, she leaves her livelihood, and devotes herself to the service of the preaching of Thomas. Shortly afterwards the king takes Thomas to bless his newly-wed daughter in her bridal chamber. Thomas’ prayer brings about the appearance of Christ to the bridal couple, which converts the young couple to Christianity, and specifically to the life of virginity. “This decision represents an assault on the social and moral code of the kingdom: bold and unveiled, a woman turns away from all that society dictates she should do. Soon, more women will follow her example as Thomas preaches his message throughout the land. Fearing the destruction of their social and political order— an order dependent on defined gender roles fulfilled through the patriarchal family and its biological procreation— the horrified husbands finally murder Thomas.”

The Acts of Thomas is one of our earliest documents for the history of Syrian Christianity. In it, women are the first to receive and the first to pursue the Gospel. Just as the Virgin Mary was the first to learn of God’s salvific plan by the mystery of annunciation; Just as Mary Magdalene, who had left her home and family to travel with her Lord on his ministry, was the first to receive the news of the resurrection and to see the Risen Lord; so, too, are the women of the Acts of Thomas the first to hear and act. Thus two unnamed Syrian women, a servant flute girl and a royal bride of India, encapsulate in their brief stories the imagery of women in Syrian Christian tradition. The Syrian legend not only portrays a direct continuity from the Gospel model by presenting women as the first to respond to God’s call, but it also identifies virginity as a sign and symbol for Christian conversion, an element most disturbing to the non-Christian social order. Although men in the legend also take vows of celibacy, it is women’s determination in this respect that creates political and social chaos leading to Thomas’ martyrdom.

For women, virginity held profound practical implications. Celibacy made possible a life of active service and works, the life to which Syrian women understood themselves to be called as Christians. Thus the privileging of celibacy was arguably the most significant factor affecting women’s place in the early Syrian Christianity. Into the third century, and perhaps longer, celibacy was often a vow both men and women took at baptism; this vow was taken also later after having one or two children. Two categories of celibacy were recognized: the btule or virgins, and the qaddishe or holy ones, the married who practiced continence. The way of the qaddishe was often called “spiritual marriage”, and was commonly followed as a means of combining the social functions of marriage with the life of faith.

In short, asceticism as a mode of life characterized Syrian Christianity from its inception. For Syrian Christians, single-hearted devotion to God was demonstrated through service to the Church community. Lifelong virginity (btuluta) or chastity in marriage (qaddishuta); simplicity in food, clothing, and possessions; a life of prayer that included both study of Scripture and care for the poor, sick, and suffering; these were the active traits of early Syrian Christian devotion for women and men both. The most basic concept of Syrian monasticism, ihidayuta, “singleness” or “single heartedness”, was applied to a much larger scale of Christian activity than that of the strictly contemplative life. Accordingly, it was
not celibacy _per se_ that determined sanctity in the Syrian tradition. For example, Ephrem could speak of consecrated virgins who would be shut out of paradise\(^\text{15}\) because their virginity had not been adorned with good works among the poor and the suffering, while married women who instead prove to be the exemplars of the holy life would be let in, because their work among the needy expressed their perfect devotion to Christ\(^\text{16}\).

Just like the early Church, Syrian Christianity developed a variety of defined positions for women, first as widows, women deacons, and virgins, and later as consecrated lay women and nuns. Sometimes these ministries were specifically by women and for women. The fifth century story of St Pelagia describes such a role for the woman-deacon, Romana. Here Romana’s duties involved spiritual instruction as well as liturgical service, as she assisted in Pelagia’s baptism, a role necessary during an era of adult baptism by immersion\(^\text{17}\). By the third century, Syrian Christianity had developed the lay order of the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant (Bnay and BnatQyama), which lasted well into the medieval times. Living in separate households within the Christian community, and working in the service of the Church, these men and women took vows of poverty and celibacy. However, particular ministries such as the chanting of psalms and _madrashe_ (sacred hymns of the Church) could be assigned to the Daughters of the Covenant. In the opinion of Susan Harvey, women’s choirs in the Syrian Orient may have been a form of consecrated ministry. The Daughters of the Covenant also worked in the women’s hospital run by the Church in the city of Edessa. Moreover, they assisted the clergy in both villages and cities\(^\text{18}\). During the fourth century persecutions of Christians in Roman territory and later in Persia, Daughters of the Covenant seem to have been specifically targeted along with other clergy for martyrdom\(^\text{19}\).

The stress on asceticism as a life of service within the Church community, and on the importance of the lay order of the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant, led to a situation in which women’s religious vocations were often enacted from within households rather than separated convents. Widowed mothers and virgin daughters, and widowed or virgin sisters, aunts, and nieces, whether or not consecrated as Daughters of the Covenant, are often described as living together in their own independent households, pursuing their vocations of prayer and service within the urban community. While women’s religious communities developed as part of the monastic movement in the fourth century, there was already a longstanding tradition of women’s vocations pursued within the civic context and this continued unabated. In the sixth century, the widow Euphemia and her daughter Maria pursued a shared life of rigorous prayer practice, combined with active social service in the city of Amida (Diyarbekir in eastern Turkey)\(^\text{20}\). The seventh century holy woman Shirin from the village of monastic writer Martyrios (Sahdona) devoted herself to a severely ascetic prayer routine focused on recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours and _LexioDivina_. Apart from being the spiritual director for the whole village, monks and abbots from the area sought her counsel while pilgrims came from throughout the region for her teachings and prayers\(^\text{21}\).

The Daughters of the Covenant may have survived as an office until the tenth century; the ministries of widow and woman deacon had disappeared well before that. All three, however, had been ministries that involved teaching. Thus Syrian Christianity developed a wide range of official and personal ministries for women. In this tradition, women’s mobility, independence of action, education, and moral authority all seem to have derived from the central idea of _ihidayuta_, single-hearted devotion to God. Women of all walks of life could choose to define themselves solely in relation to their Heavenly Bridegroom in service of his
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The Syrian Christian girls in India used to get married off either before or soon after they reach adulthood. Marriage, always considered as a sacrament, takes place in the Church, in the presence of a priest. In the matrimonial traditions of St Thomas Christians, the liturgy followed the Chaldean rite, while the social practices followed the native customs. The St Thomas Christians used to have arranged marriages. Courtship as practised in the west was not in vogue among the Malabar Christians. It was the responsibility of the parents to find suitable partners for their children. There was a special blessing of the chalice in the liturgical celebration of the rite of betrothal. The priest blessed the chalice with the sign of the cross and dipped a St Thomas Cross into it. The Cross was lowered into the chalice of wine mixed with water and the two betrothed were directed to drink from it. The most important rite in the celebration of marriage was the tying of the tali or minnu, whereby the bridegroom attached a golden cross of twenty-one minute beads around the neck of the bride. The thread of the tali is drawn from the bridal veil or mantrakodi. The tying of the tali was so important that in those places where a priest was not available, it signified the sealing of the bond of marriage.

3.1. Woman as Bride

Created in the image and likeness of God as a ‘unity of the two’, both man and woman have been called to a spousal love in marriage. This image of spousal love, together with the image of Christ as the Bridegroom and the Church as his Bride, finds its crowning confirmation in the letter to the Ephesians (5: 23-32): “Husbands, love your wives”, love them because of that special and unique bond, whereby in marriage a man and a woman become “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:31). In this love there is a fundamental affirmation of the woman as a person, making it possible for the female personality to develop fully and be enriched. Thus Pope John Paul II said: “Thank you, women who are wives! You irrevocably join your future to that of your husbands, in a relationship of mutual giving, at the service of love and life. Into the heart of the family, and then of all society, you bring the richness of your sensitivity, your intuitiveness, your generosity and fidelity.

The role of St Thomas Christian women in the family, by the way, is central to the life and destiny of the family. If the St Thomas Christian families, especially of the pre-post-modern period, are reputed for their unity and harmony, the credit, to a great extent, must go to the mother who unites the other members of the family in herself. A good mother is definitely a good wife. In the husband-wife relationship, it is very often, the goodness and generosity of the wife that is fundamental to the stability and wellbeing of the family. As history bears witness, it is her deep spiritual vision and values, conspicuously her understanding of salvific suffering that had contributed and still contribute to the well being of St Thomas Christian families. The sacrifice of St Thomas Christian women of the past, catering to the needs of not less than seven or eight children and other members of the family, at a time when the present comforts and luxuries of life were not available, are to be placed on record and be gratefully remembered by the entire community of Thomas Christians. Another aspect of St Thomas Christian women which has to be emphasised here is their commitment to conjugal fidelity. Their modesty in dress and behaviour were praised even by the European missionaries. This has been one of the great values of Indian culture, often known as ‘Pathivruthyam’, for which our women were true witnesses. With the onslaught of modern life styles
and with the advent of modern communications, and ever growing contacts with western civilisations, at present, there is genuine cause of concern in this area.

3.2. Woman as Man’s Fulfilment

The Catholic view of marriage stands in direct relation to the Old Testament Hebrew view. Marriage was given its basic law in what the creation narrative speaks about the relationship between man and wife: from the very beginning, human being has been created “male and female” (Gen. 1:27); therefore, even though man is surrounded by the innumerable creatures of the created world, he realizes that “he is alone” (Gen. 2:20). God intervenes in order to help him escape from this situation of solitude: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:18). The creation of woman is thus marked by the ‘principle of help’, a help which is not one-sided, but mutual. Woman complements man, just as man complements woman. Womanhood expresses the “human” as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way. When the Book of Genesis speaks of “help” it is not referring merely to acting, but also to being. Womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological. It is only through the duality of the “masculine” and the “feminine” that the “human” finds full realization.

Coming to the St Thomas Christians of India, even though their familial and social structure is patriarchal, woman plays a vital role in the ‘ontology’ of the family and society. Though the right of inheritance (until recently) and the very family-name go from the father to the son, it is the woman who completes and complements the ‘esse’ and essence’ of life in the family. It is true that the figure of the ‘Father’ among the Thomas Christians stands first in the family and household relationships, it is, however, the woman who often transforms the ‘house’ into a ‘home’ through her love and commitment to the marriage bond. Again, at the level of inter-personal relationships, it is the woman, with her understanding and caring love, who often helps the man to be upright and undefiled, ‘helping’ him to become what he is. While the ‘Father’ of the family gets interested and fulfils the affairs that are particular to the society outside, it is the ‘mother’ who, for the most part, looks after the domestic affairs or transactions within the family. This can be viewed as an excellent example of complementarity between man and woman among the St Thomas Christians; and it should not be looked down upon as a ‘social taboo’ which reduces the life of a woman within the confines of her house. In fact, the love and devotion of St Thomas Christian women to their husbands is proverbial. They used to take great interest in the comfort and welfare not only of their husbands, but also of their in-laws. For the growth and welfare of the household they themselves are willing to work hard, and are clever in making their husbands also work hard. The ‘Syrian Christian women’ seemed to have been very particular about their prayer life and the liturgical worship of the Church. They are equally interested in the spiritual welfare of the children and other members of the family. In short, the Syrian Christian women are known for nobility, modesty, chastity as well as selfless love and commitment for the family.

3.3. Woman as Mother and Guardian of Life

Woman is closer to the sources of life than man. The distinctiveness of women belongs to two areas at the same time: the transmission and preservation of life and the relation with the ‘other’. To be a woman means to aspire to fulfil oneself by welcoming the other, by bringing into the world ‘another’ life that has been allowed to grow inside oneself and which must be lovingly cared for. “The mother, even before giving birth, does not only give shape to the child’s body, but also, in an indirect way, to the child’s whole personality.”

In one of his important epic poems, viz., Athmanuthapam (Compunction of the Soul), Bl. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a blessed son of St Thomas Christians, draws a very impressive picture of a

Sr Dr Prasanna Vazheeparampil CMC
‘woman as mother’, who is none other than his own mother. His reflections are equally applicable to the very concept of motherhood among the St Thomas Christians:

What shall I render You, my Lord, my God?
For all Your wondrous gifts of mercy and love…
Through baptism’s grace, You made me Your cherished son
And showed me Heaven’s joys to tend me grow
Gave me parents grounded in faith secure
And faith in me engraved full firm, besides
A mother to feed me while yet a feeble babe
To shield me from pain and sorrow and tend me soft.
To pour that tender love You filled her with,
That nectar, unto my tiny blissful heart.
Mixed in her sweet milk, she regaled me
With thoughts of heaven, and words of grace so pure!
And when reason grew strong, my little mind
Patiently, informed, to lisp holy names.
Huddled close to her feet, I learnt aright
Gently, of matters sublime, of my faith
As at midnight she rose and knelt at prayer
Warding off sleep and petty dullness to the air
Long hours, on her knee in prayer she stayed
Leaning on her then I would seat myself
While devoutly a string of pious words
To Mother of God and Christ, King of Kings.
In thanks and praise, heart strung with solid faith:
“Light Eternal, Jesus Christ, save us all
Hail, earth-born flower, Lord Immortal!”
Thus she would pray in her melodious voice
And I, listening to the lullaby sweet
Near my gentle mother quietly reposed.
And, when my infant tongue began to lisp,
Up to the sky, her finger pointing oft
The holy names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph
She my noble mother made me repeat … 33

The Indian culture puts the figure of ‘mother’ at the highest pedestal as the source not only of life, but also of tender and caring love, affection, compassion, and understanding. Literary expressions like ‘mother land’, ‘mother earth’, ‘mother nature’, ‘mother Church’, ‘mother tongue’, etc. are very common in this culture. The ‘woman as mother’ serves as the ‘salt’ of the St Thomas Christian families. In fact, she is also the ‘light’, for she, through the light of her love and discretion, brings the other members of the family together, binding them altogether in the cord of communion. Thus the mother, more than the father, is the source and bond of union and unity in the family. The mothers of Thomas Christian families, in the particular socio-cultural frame work, are at the service of the ‘other’ in the household from early morning till late night without looking for rest or entertainments. They fulfil both tasks of bringing the ‘other’ to the world, and nurturing life to its fruition exemplarily. Among the St Thomas Christians, the woman as mother is not only the guardian of physical life, but also the custodian and wellspring of the spiritual and emotional life of her children. It is often the mother who introduces her children into the life of the ‘other world’ providing an eschatological dimension to their life.

4. St Thomas Christian Woman: her Image in Church and Society

4.1. Woman: Messenger of Evangelium Vitae

In this hi-tech era of ultra-modernization, when life is aborted before birth and destroyed after birth in various ways like infanticide, murder and euthanasia, women (lay women as well as consecrated women) have to be messengers of the good news of life. For, upholding the dignity of human life and respecting the right of every person to live, is part of evangelization. In his encyclical Evangelium Vitae, Pope John Paul II stigmatizes all sorts of killings as immoral, advocating human-kind to overcome the culture of death by promoting strong human values and the culture of life: “By the authority which Christ
conferred upon Peter and his successors, and in communion with the bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral. That means, no one can permit, killing of an innocent human being, whether a foetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, or an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying.34

The history of St Thomas Christians bear testimony to the protection and promotion of life at all stages of human life. St Thomas Christian women especially have been great promoters of life. The large numbers of children they have nurtured and the hard work they have invested for a better quality of life for their family and children have been praiseworthy. Due to the Catholic upbringing, the number of abortions is very less among the Catholic Thomas Christians when compared to other denominations of faith. The Pro-life movement is very active in every diocese of the Church. Moreover, our women are rendering great service to protect their sick and dying. The number of Catholic women working in the medical field as nurses and doctors is really commendable. Respect for the elders, and care for the old and bedridden people at home, are still very much part and parcel of Thomas Christians. In fact, women have a greater role, among the St Thomas Christians of India, in the realm of respecting, promoting and serving a culture of life.

The consecrated women of the Syro-Malabar Church are also definitely great promoters of the gospel of life. Many of them serve in hospitals, in the care-homes for the aged, the orphans, the physically handicapped, the mentally challenged, and in the home for the terminally sick; in kindergarten, schools, colleges, etc. Several Congregations of women-religious have been started with a medical apostolate as their special charism. Women religious - theologians as well as school/college teachers - sincerely cooperate to prepare the ground for the promotion of pro-life projects in the Syro-Malabar Church.

4.2. Woman as Evangelizer: Women Theologians and Catechists

All the baptized, men as well as women, participate in the threefold mission of Jesus Christ: of the priest, prophet and king. Therefore, they are sharers in the fundamental mission of the Church, viz., evangelization. A woman is specially called to invest in this apostolate the gifts which are properly hers: first of all, the gift of her very dignity as a person, exercised in the word and testimony of her own life; and the gifts that are connected with her vocation as woman. According to Pope Paul VI, we cannot change what our Lord did, nor his call to women; but we can recognize and promote the role of women in the mission of evangelization and in the life of Christian community.35 Accordingly the great Carmelite mystics, St Theresa of Avila (by Pope Paul VI, in 1970) and St Little Therese of Lissieux (by Pope John Paul II, in 1994) and St Catherine of Sienna (by Pope Paul VI, in 1970) were declared "Doctors of the Universal Church."36

The Syro Malabar Church has a good number of women theologians, ninety-nine percent of them being nuns and members of other Apostolic Institutes. Nowadays Religious Congregations do not seem to forget to equip themselves with good theologians, competent enough to teach in their own theological institutes, and also to help the local Church in need. There are women religious as well as qualified lay women, though not many, who teach in the various minor and major seminaries of the Syro Malabar Church. There are also women representatives in diocesan pastoral councils and synodal commissions of the Church. Given their profound understanding of the mystery of salvation and their expertise in the sacred and related sciences and current problems, women theologians can thus elucidate the faith of the Church, to defend it and to pave the way of doctrinal progress, always faithfully submitting to the authentic Magisterium of the Church.37
Another important form of ministry in which women play a very important role is the field of catechism of the Syro-Malabar Church. Regarding the faith formation of a child, a mother has a very unique role to play. The first months of a child’s presence in the mother’s womb bring about a particular bond which already possesses an educational significance of its own. In fact, Christian parents are the primary and irreplaceable catechists of their children. Moreover, innumerable women, both religious and lay, are ministering the Word of God as catechists of the Church. Throughout history, women religious, in a special way, have been deeply committed to the Church’s catechetical activity, doing particularly effective work especially to impart the first notions of catechism and the preparation for the sacrament of penance, for the reception of the rites of initiation.

4.3. Woman-Participation in Political Life

In the Indian context, traditionally, women have been keeping aloof from political life leaving it to men-politicians. Women’s political participation, however, is an urgent need of the time. There is much that women can offer in the political realm for the alleviation of poverty and violation against women. In India, with 33.33% reservation for women in panchayats, municipality, etc., there is an urgent need that women from all walks of life be trained for leadership.

In her book viz., 1114 nteKadha (The Story of 1114), Smt. Akkamma Varkey, the pride of Kerala, narrates the history of a successful political career as a St Thomas Christian woman, over a decade from 1938 onwards. The 12th president of the Travancore State Congress, Akkamma Cherian of Kanjiarpally alias akkamma Varkey is known as the “modern Joan of Arc.” The childhood in which she imbibed the spirit of freedom, the convent where she stayed for her education, the subject (history) she selected for study- all these filled her with a deep rooted fascination for her motherland’s struggle for independence. The contemporary society is made an interesting object for her analytical observation:

During my school days, I never came across lady lawyers, judges, doctors or engineers. Mrs. Punnan Lukose was the only lady doctor in those days. No one was aware of the need for educating women. Men, especially the Syrian Catholic Youth refused to marry the educated girls. May be they were obsessed with the fear of the loss of a dominant status. The concept of equality of the sexes was not even there in the wildest dreams of the society. Women were supposed to be imprisoned in their homes, their duties were just maintaining the family affairs intact and bringing forth the next generation. It was the freedom struggle as well as leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that created awareness that women should have a role to perform in the national struggle as the citizens of this nation.

That moment when she stood as the leader swaying ecstatically in the surges of the People’s Movement which was organized in the capital city of Trivandrum, on the 7th of Thulam 1114 (Malayalam era) is regarded by her as a happy and proud occasion in her social life. About her political career which spanned over ten years, she remarks: “there were certain undercurrents which could have demolished or at least totally altered my life. My political life had indeed been a period of ceaseless struggle and ultimate success. I hope by revealing that past of trials and tribulations, I may provide an inspiring model for posterity”. This autobiographical note, which serves also as a story of an individual’s struggle against a hostile society and a lesson in the art of successfully overcoming all that to fulfil one’s own vocation and mission should be a challenge for St Thomas Christian women to copy into their own lives.
4.4. Women Writers, Poets and Musicians among St Thomas Christians

There are a number of songs in Malayalam composed by St Thomas Christians for their marriage festivities. These songs throw much light on the various customs and traditions in connection with marriage and other socio-religious ceremonies of the St Thomas Christians. More than three hundred ancient songs were popularised in the 16th and 17th centuries. Biblical, historical and cultural themes were illustrated in these songs, of which many were songs meant for women: MarthommanPattu, MayilanchiPattu, AnthamCharthuPattu, AyniPattu, VattakkaliPattu (Mangalyam Vattakkaly, EttuthiraVattakkali, VazhuPattu, AdachuthuraPattu, Ennappattu, Kulipattu, VilakkuthodalPattu), etc. were accompanied by a variety of dances. MayilanchiPattu was sung, as the girl to be given in marriage was pigmented and decorated with a paste of henna leaves. AnthamCharthuPattu was sung by women while the bridegroom was given a ceremonial shaving and bathing, after which he was well dressed and adorned. With the accompaniment of songs sung by women escorted by musical instruments and drums, and climaxed by Aarpuvili and Vayikurava, he is then taken to the pandal in procession. After the marriage, the newly wedded couple is given a grand reception mainly with a musical accompaniment and Vattakkali dance (dance in circles).

Among the St Thomas Christians, there are well-known women writers in Malayalam and English literature who have made very important contributions to the literary field. Most of the women who have contributed in the form of literary works are upper-caste women and Christian women. In fact, much of the good modernist and post-modernist fiction and poetry published over the second half of the century has been by women. During the first half of the century, fiction writers like Annie Thayyil and poets like Mary John Thottam (Sr. Benigna), and Mary John Koothattukulam had emerged as major figures in a largely upper-caste, male-dominated world of Malayalam literature. In those days, even Christian and Muslim male writers did not find favourable critical attention because cultural production was monopolised too long by the upper-caste Hindus. In such a situation, women faced ‘exclusionism’ of the worst kind: the social structure simply did not allow them to write, for they had “no room of their own” to engage in a creative act. However, Kavitharamam (19 poems) by a Catholic nun named Sister Mary Benigna, became a best-seller (over 100,000 copies) and another collection, viz., LokameYathra (Farewell, Oh World!), a brooding farewell song justifying her decision to abandon the world in favour of the cloister, remains a classic work among romantic poems.

Hailing from Champakulam in the district of Allepuzha, M.C. AnnammaMaliekal was a very widely accepted musician from among the St Thomas Christian community. Born in the 1920s, she was invited to sing at the first Catholic Congress held at Cherthalai, at the age of fifteen. It is worthy of note that she had a Higher Diploma in Classical Music, and was appointed music teacher at schools run by the government.

Born in Shillong, Meghalaya, India, to Ranjit Roy, a Bengali Hindu tea planter and Mary Roy, a Malayali Syrian Christian women’s rights activist, Arundhati Roy is a literary superstar and a famous Indian novelist, essayist and activist. Spending her childhood in Aymanam, in Kerala, and went to school at Corpus Christi, Kottayam, Arundhati studied architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. Her novel, The God of Small Things, has won Britain’s top literary award, the Booker Prize in 1997, and she has also written...
two screenplays, fourteen books, and several collections of essays in English. She has to her credit more than a dozen speeches and interviews and lectures given in India and abroad. She was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize in 2004. Her writings on various social, environmental and political issues, however, have sometimes been a subject of major controversy in India.

Mary Roy, Arundhati Roy’s mother, fought against the Christian inheritance law in India, winning a landmark Supreme Court verdict that granted Christian women in Kerala the right to their parents’ property. After a 30-year relentless campaign for women’s rights, Mary Roy now leads a quiet life at Kottayam where she runs the much sought-after Corpus Christi school (also known as Pallikoodam) at Kalathipadi. In one of her recent interviews with Rediff on the NeT’s George Iype, Mary Roy affirmed:

“Women in India are still under the dominance of men. There are few women who are able to work and support their families in India. Indian women need more economic independence. One absolute certainty in India is that women are born to get married; and marriage means getting a dowry; and getting a dowry means staying with your parents; and staying with your parents is to get social acceptance. Or else, your daughter will not get the right bridegroom. This is the biggest hurdle that women face in India today. What we need is mental and financial independence for women so that they can exist as Indian citizens with equal rights with men”.

4.5. Women Scientists and Technologists

Science and technology have been an integral part of Indian civilization and culture. Since Independence, Indians have been promoting science and technology as one of the most important elements of national development. The Scientific Policy of 1958 and the Technology Policy Statement of 1983 enunciated the principles on which growth and technology in India has been based over the past several decades and continued to inspire us till date. The major scientific revolutions of the last century have opened the doors to many remarkable technologies in the fields of health, agriculture, communication and energy.

Although India is a traditional country where women are respected mainly as mothers and housewives, over the years women have been trying to overcome the traditional mind sets and have excelled in professions like teaching, medicine, and pure sciences. Women have made important contributions in all walks of life and made inroads into new fields like engineering and information technology. In Kerala Dr. Tessy Thomas is an example for womenfolk to follow and emulate. Known as Mother India’s ‘Agni Putri’ or ‘Rocket Woman,’ Tessy Thomas is the first-ever woman director of an Indian missile, viz. Agni IV. Hailing from Alappuzha district in Kerala, Tessy was handpicked by India’s former president and ‘Father of Missiles’ Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam to the missile projects. She has been appointed Project Director developing the advanced version of Agni II missile. Having been with Agni programmes since 1988, Tessy has designed the guidance programmes for all the Agni missiles. What matters is that gender is not called into question at her work place. There she is considered as a scientist, not a woman. Having systematically broken gender barriers in the decidedly male preserve of strategic weapons and nuclear-capable ballistic missiles over the last two decades, Tessy does not feel out of place, for ‘Science has no gender’.

4.6. Women Saints among the St Thomas Christians

Belonging to the Franciscan Clarist Congregation, Sr. Alphonsa Muttathupadom (+July
28, 1946) from the parish of Kudamaloor, Kerala, has been declared a saint by His Holiness Pope Benedict XV1 on October 12, 2008. Thus, God has been pleased to bestow on our generation the grace to see a daughter of the ancient St Thomas Christian community beatified (on February 8, 1986 by Pope John Paul 11) in her homeland; and canonized in Rome. A mystic in her life of prayer and union with God, and a partner in the suffering of Jesus her Spouse, through cheerfully accepting the repeated spells of sickness and pain, Alphonsa is the first saint to be canonized in the present Syro-Malabar Church, and declared worthy to be venerated at the altar of the St Thomas Christians.

Bl. Mariam Thresia, the founder of Holy Family Congregation was beatified on April 9, 2000 by Pope John Paul 11. Born on April 26, 1876, she lost her mother as she passed away on March 2, 1888. Having adopted the name Mariam Thresia, she started living in an Ekanthabhavan in 1913 under the guidance of her spiritual father Rev. Fr. Joseph Vithayathil. On May 14, 1914, the present Holy Family Congregation was canonically erected, appointing Mariam Thresia as the superior, and Fr. Vithayathil as the chaplain of the Congregation. With great apostolic zeal, Mariam Thresia hastened to the midst of sinners, to the downtrodden and to the abandoned to wipe out their tears and to lift them out of their sinful life, filling them with the love of Christ. On June 8, 1926 Mother Mariam Thresia died, and Holy Father Pope John Paul 11 declared her venerable on June 28, 1999. After about ten months, on April 9, 2000 Mother Mariam Thresia was beatified.

Another daughter of the Church of St Thomas Christians, who was beatified, is a nun belonging to the Congregation of Mother of Carmel (CMC). Born on October 17, 1877, Sister Euphrasia (Rose) belonged to the parish of Edathuruthy of the undivided eparchy of Trichur. Residing at the boarding house at Koonammavu Aspirant Rose was sent to Ambazhakad, where she received her veil with the name Sister Euphrasia of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On January 10, 1898, she took her first profession. Though frail in health, Sr. Euphrasia exhibited rare moral courage, spiritual power and a very high sense of responsibility, and so she was soon appointed novice mistress in which position she worked for nine years. Prayer was her life breath wherever she was. Known as “the praying mother” and “mobile tabernacle”, she used to spend long hours before the Holy Eucharist. She wanted everyone to love the Eucharistic Lord and to do reparation for the sufferings he undergoes from sinners. She was also an exemplary model of charity. Her love, care and prayer reached out to everyone in need. Having lived blessed life of 75 years, she died on August 29, 1952. On December 3, 2006, she was beatified in Ollur, with the declaration of Major Archbishop Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil, on behalf of Pope Benedict XV1.

5. Woman as Nun: Female Monasticism of the East

Looking at the vast panorama of Eastern Christianity from a specific vantage point which affords a view of monasticism, Pope John Paul 11 recalled: “I would like to mention the splendid witness of nuns in the Christian East. This witness has offered an example of giving full value in the Church to what is specifically feminine, even breaking through the mentality of the time. During recent persecutions, especially in Eastern European countries, when many male monasteries were forcibly closed, female monasticism kept the torch of the monastic life burning. The nun’s charism, with its own specific characteristics, is a visible sign of that motherhood of God to which Sacred Scripture often refers.”

5.1. Monasticism among the St Thomas Christian Women

One could gather the existence of monastic life of the St Thomas Christian Women in the 15/16th centuries from the testimony of Joseph the Indian. According to him, the Thomas Christians had
hermitages where monks in black habit lived in perfect continence and poverty; and they had also many nuns.\textsuperscript{49} At the end of the 18th century, Paulinus of St Bartholomew saw in Malabar, ruins of monasteries at Angamaly, Edappally, and Mylacompu.\textsuperscript{50} Citing various Portuguese documents, D. De Goes also speaks about the existence of monasteries in Malabar with nuns and monks who lived in great poverty, chastity and obedience.\textsuperscript{51} According to Francis Roz SJ, the first Latin prelate of the St Thomas Christians, there was a hermitage of the saints Gervasius and Protasius at Angamaly.\textsuperscript{52}

Apart from the historical testimonies mentioned above, the origin in Malabar of various Syriac manuscripts concerning the administering of sacraments, may also point to the Syriac mode of origin and development of monastic life among the St Thomas Christians: Ms. Vat. Syr. 45, for example, is a pontifical containing not only the ordination rites, but also the vestition of monks and the tonsure of monks & nuns and the rite of imposition of hands (syamida) of a deaconess. Ms. Vat. Syr. 66 is another pontifical, also containing ordination rites of priests and deacons and the vestition ceremony of monks and the tonsure of monks\textsuperscript{53} and nuns. Above all, the spiritual leadership of the Malabar Church by East Syrian bishops, who were monks, is an added proof for the existence and promotion of monastic life in its early Syriac form among the St Thomas Christians of Malabar.\textsuperscript{54}

5.2. Consecrated Life for St Thomas Christian Women

The first indigenous Congregation for men was founded at Mannanan, Kerala, in 1831. In 1864, Fr. Chavara shifted his residence to Koonammavu, where he met Fr. Leopold Beccaro, an Italian Carmelite missionary, with whose cooperation Chavara realized his long cherished dream of founding a religious congregation for women. Thus in 1866, the first indigenous Congregation for St Thomas Christian women, the present Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC) with the charism of a creative blending of contemplation and action was begun at Koonammavu. The present religious congregations in the Syro-Malabar Church have been originally inspired and sometimes copied from the spiritual traditions of the Latin West; it is a historical fact, however, that today they are part and parcel of the life of this Church; and these religious congregations have been rendering extraordinary service in the various apostolates of the Church, especially in the fields of education, healing service, home Mission and in the fields of social and pastoral activities.

The Directory of the Syro-Malabar Church (2004) published by the Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Curia, offers us the following information regarding Religious Orders and Congregations for women in the Church. As far as the Congregations for Sisters are concerned, we have 44 Syro-Malabar Congregations, founded between 1866 (CMC) and 2001 (WIN centres) including the monastic institute of the Sisters of St Thomas, a twin-sister of the Mar Thoma Sleeha Monastery at Nallathanny. However, there are 125 Latin Congregations having houses in various Syro-Malabar eparchies. Daughters of Mary (DM) is a Malankara Congregation, which has houses in the Syro-Malabar Church. We also have not less than 4 Secular Institutes (AO, CS, CCB $ MISI), while there is only one Latin Secular Institute, viz. International Missionary Association (IMA) having houses in the Syro-Malabar dioceses.\textsuperscript{55}

The Consecrated life is a gift of God to the Church. Every religious institute in the Church, whether it is purely contemplative or active, is founded on this gift. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church, which allows her to follow Christ more intimately. In other words, consecrated life is meant for the Church, in the Church and by the Church:
hence monasteries and congregations need to be considered, first and foremost, as ecclesiological entities (CCEO, c. 415/1). The Syro-Malabar Church, being an Apostolic Church of Eastern identity, Religious communities in this Church should, have to bear witness to the Oriental identity and ecclesial tradition of the Church; for, consecrated life has relevance only insofar as it is Church in its miniature form. In other words, Syro-Malabar religious communities should be communities that experience, assimilate, live and proclaim the authentic liturgy and theology of the Individual Church.

Concluding Remarks

Theological reflection on the role and status of women according to the Christian mystery brings to light the wonderful mysteries that women represent otherwise in the life of humanity. Virginity and motherhood are two particular dimensions of the fulfilment, not only of the female personality, but also of humanity as a whole. With the co-existence of virginity and motherhood, woman radiates life and love, challenging humanity to enter into a new consciousness of being and becoming human.

Woman is kept in prism and focus as we realize that innumerable women saints and martyrs have influenced the magisterium of the Church throughout the centuries. Thus Pope Paul VI conferred the title “Doctor of the Church” upon St Theresa of Avila (September 27, 1970) and St Catherine of Sienna (October 4, 1970). Similarly, the life and doctrine of Mother Theresa of Calcutta, ‘the Indian Social Saint’ and ‘Mother of the Poor’ certainly has an impact on the magisterium of the post-modern Church. St Alphonsa, Bl. Mariam Thresia and Bl. Euphrasia of the Syro Malabar Church have witnessed to the Lord by their holy lives of prayer and suffering. The recent martyrdom of two Syro Malabar nuns, viz. Sr. Rani Maria FCC, a missionary in Udaim Nagar, in the diocese of Indoor, Madhyapradesh, and Sr. Valsa John SCJM, a visionary spearheading an anti-displacement movement against a private coal mining company at Pachwara village in Pakur district, Jharkhand, is a powerful witness to the Gospel of love and selfless service. Thus Pope John Paul II said: “I have drawn inspiration from the life and witness of great women within the Church throughout the centuries who have been pioneers within society as mothers, as workers, as leaders in the political and social fields, in the caring professions and as thinkers and spiritual leaders”.

ENDNOTES

2 GS 8-9, 60.
3 Apostolicam Actuositatem (AA) 9
4 GS24.
5 Mulieris Dignitatem, no. 18.
7 Mulieris Dignitatem, 20.
8 GS24.
9 Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women, 5.
“Letter to Publius”, sec.15-16.


See the Persian martyr texts translated in Brock & Harvey, Holy Women, 63-99; Susan Harvey, “Women in the Syrian Tradition”, 73-74.


Brock & Harvey, (trans.), Holy Women, 177-182; also Susan Harvey, Women in the Syrian Tradition, 75.


A. Raes, Le mariage sa celebration et saspiritualitedans le Eglises’Orient, Chevetogne, 1959, 173.


P. J. Podipara, Namnude Ritu, Mannanam, 1944, 38.

This analogy has its precedents in the Old Testament, especially, in the Prophets Hosea (1:2; 2:16-18), Jeremiah (2:2), Ezekiel (16:8), and Isaiah (50:1; 54:4-10).
of hemorrhage, and she took her solemn profession on August 12, 1936.


52 Mundadan, *Sixteenth Century Traditions*, 149.


55 Apart from the *Mar Thoma Sliha* Monastery at Nallathanny (MTSM:1997) we have 7 other Syro-Malabar Congregations for priests, viz. CMI, CST, MCBS, MSP, MST, VC and OSH founded between 1831 (CMI) and 1985 (MSP). There are 11 Latin Congregations for priests having Syro-Malabar provinces; and another 20 Latin Congregations having Houses in the Syro-Malabar Dioceses. As far as Congregations for Brothers are concerned, we have 2 Syro-Malabar Congregations, viz. CST Brothers and Malabar Missionary Brothers (MMB), whereas, there are 7 Latin Congregations, having Houses in the various dioceses of the Syro-Malabar Church.


58 L’Osservatore Romano, Weekly edition in English, August 30, 1995, 1; see also, Paul Pallath, “Participation of Women in the Teaching Office of the Church”, 271.
Introduction

“Beauty is a path to God,” affirmed Pope Benedict XVI addressing pilgrims during his General Audience on 31 August 2011 in Castel Gandolfo, Italy. In this address the Pope has once again returned to his favourite theme “via pulchritudinis,” “the way of beauty,” of which he has spoken on different occasions. The Holy Father continued: “Art is capable of expressing and of making visible, man’s need to go beyond what he sees; it reveals his thirst and his search for the infinite…” These words express the realization of the immense spiritual potential of art. It can give us the experience of the sublime and elevate us to God. An artwork can support us in prayer. Hence the Pope urges his listeners to rediscover the importance of art as a way of prayer, keeping us in a living relationship with God.

1. Efforts to Reinstate Art in the Church

Seeing beauty as a path to God who is the very source of beauty is an authentically Catholic tradition and Pope Benedict has emphasized the importance of beauty in our search for God, following the footsteps of his predecessors Pope John Paul II and Pope Paul VI.

A daring initiative was taken by Pope Paul VI when he expressed the Church’s willingness to mend her broken relationship with the artists and the world of art in an unprecedented manner in his address to the artists in the Sistine Chapel on 7 May 1964. He said to the artists:

We need your collaboration in order to carry out our ministry, which consists, as you know, in preaching and rendering accessible and comprehensible to the minds and hearts of our people the things of the spirit, the invisible, the ineffable, the things of God himself. And in this activity … you are masters. It is your task, your mission, and your art consists in grasping treasures from the heavenly realm of the spirit and clothing them in words, colours, forms – making them accessible.

Pope John Paul II in his “Letter to the Artists” in 1999 urged all those who are engaged in creative
works as artists to dedicate themselves passionately to search for new “epiphanies of beauty,” so that through their creative works they may continue the creative work of God in the world.

The central point of reference for understanding the mystery of human existence, the world and God himself is Jesus Christ. He is the supreme revealer and revelation of divine mysteries, being the privileged Mediator between God and the world. As St. Paul would say, he is the “perfect image” of the invisible Father on whose face the Father’s glory is reflected. The term “image” refers to visibility. It implies a consummate experience of revelation, not only of hearing but also of seeing the power and glory of God, revealed in Jesus Christ. What is now needed is a corresponding human response to this revealed image of God. It consists in accepting the revelation in faith, communicating it in love and realizing it in the bliss of transfiguration. It is a process of transformation that has to take place in all conditions of human life, in all realms of human awareness and in all fields of human action. The finality of this transformation is a new earth and a new heaven.

2. Response to the Divine Revelation as an “Artistic” Task

When Pope John Paul II encourages the artists to continue the creative work of God in the world, he considers Christian response to divine revelation as an “artistic” task which implies human creativity. The divine glory – the dazzling light of truth, goodness and beauty – is to be manifested in the world through different creative endeavours which only can unveil the hidden mystery of God.

This prime epiphany of “God who is Mystery” is both an encouragement and a challenge to Christians, also at the level of artistic creativity. From it has come a flowering of beauty which has drawn its sap precisely from the mystery of Incarnation. In becoming man, the Son of God has introduced into human history all the evangelical wealth of the true and the good, and with this he has also unveiled a new dimension of beauty, of which the Gospel message is filled to the brim.

Definitely the Holy Father is proposing a renewed approach to communicate the message of the Gospel, liberating it from the conceptual frameworks it has been constrained to for a long time. The response to the Word of God must involve the whole person – body, heart as well as mind. It should be perceived by the senses, felt by the heart and grasped by the mind. All these requirements can be satisfied only by the creative process that takes place in art. In his Letter to Artists the Holy Father highlighted the Church’s need for art in the following words:

In order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, the Church needs art. Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God…. The Church has need especially of those who can do this on the literary and figurative level, using the endless possibilities of images and their symbolic force. Christ himself made extensive use of images in his preaching, fully in keeping with his willingness to become, in the Incarnation, the icon of the unseen God.

The infinite potential of art, implied in its privileged position of mediation between matter and the spirit, is evoked by the Pope in his Letter. In fact the original rendering of the Good News by Jesus, as presented by the evangelists, was not in a mere verbalized form. He made use of images, symbols, stories, poems, sayings, actions and role plays to communicate his message. Words of mere practical meanings would not have sufficed to convey effectively the mystery of the Kingdom of God and to achieve a radical conversion...
of the human person. Jesus’ preaching was intended to make the invisible God visible as a loving, caring and forgiving Father. He was not just making a “theory” of God, but sharing his own intense experience of God as Abba. Conversion to the Kingdom of God, according to Jesus, is not an intellectual assent but an inner transformation of the person leading to a new awareness and corresponding actions.

The Evangelists have taken their cue from Jesus’ method while adopting their theological approach in the New Testament. They address primarily to the hearts of their listeners, not to their minds alone. The narrative style of the theology of the Early Church which we find in the Gospels is appealing not only to the ears, but also to the eyes. It is capable of evoking “memories” rather than provoking “thoughts.”

The theologians of the early Christian communities were eloquent in telling the story of Jesus in the light of their faith in Jesus, motivated by love and admiration for his person. Their intention was not to give some abstract concepts or moral precepts, but to impart the same faith and love they experienced with Jesus. As the testimony of their faith they told the story of Jesus in terms of concrete experiences of what they saw, heard, touched and even tasted (1 Jn 1:1). Their narrations of the various events in the life of Jesus are rendered not only in descriptive words, but also in colourful images of life with artistic fineness, imaginative flair and prophetic vision. They depict scenes of dramatic actions of healings, conflicts, violence and bloodshed. They are interwoven with stories of love, mercy, repentance, forgiveness and celebration. They are laid out in the settings of everyday life situations, in the country side, market places, the sea shore where Jesus preached and performed and the hillocks where he retreated for solitude to be alone with his Father in prayer.

We can find a broad range of emotions expressed by Jesus as he loves, pities, condemning, provokes and challenges his listeners. One cannot fully absorb the impact of the words of Jesus, unless one is sensitive to their emotional content too. Such words which are laden with emotions are “imaginal” in nature. They are pluri-dimensional and cannot be grasped by hearing alone. The meanings perceived directly in them cannot fully cover all those dimensions. Moreover, they are constantly evolving to attain newer realizations. That is the reason why the understanding of the Gospel message is not exhausted by reading and listening to the written words. It has to be accessible not only to the ears but also to the eyes and to all other faculties of human perception. In the new dispensation, where Jesus Christ as the Image of God holds the central position of mediation, it is appropriate that divine-human communication takes place also through visual medium. The Word of the Gospel can culminate in “images” of beauty as well as in “concepts” of truth. We have to accept the possibility of a “visible” Gospel along with an “audible” Gospel.

3. Controversy about Art in the Early Church

At this point we may raise some questions: Was the transmission of the Gospel message in the Early Church exclusively through verbal means? Were the Christians of the early centuries only hearers of the Word who were reluctant to see it in images? Even though the overwhelming experience of the Incarnation, which is fundamental to the characteristic Christian understanding of God and the world, contradicts the possibility of an iconoclastic attitude in the early Church, there is a widespread opinion that at the earliest stages the Church was against the use of images of any kind. The possibility of such an attitude is imagined on the basis of the Judaic background of the early Christians. Those scholars and historians who attribute iconoclastic mentality to the early Church refer to the Old Testament prohibition of images (Dt 6:13; Ex 20:4) which the Jewish Christians must have strictly observed in their worship.
According to Leonid Ouspensky, an eminent Orthodox theologian, a wider circulation of this opinion was initiated in the 18th century. The English scholar Edward Gibbon who authored *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) maintained that till the 4th century there was no practice of image worship among Christians. They were against the use of images due to their Jewish background. According to another scholar Louis Bréhier “Christian art is born outside the Church and, at least in the beginning, developed almost against its will.” He also shares the view Gibbon that the Jewish origins of Christianity made it hostile to images to avoid the danger of idolatry. Referring to some ancient authors who favour his position, Bréhier concludes: “The Church did not create Christian art. In all probability, it did not retain an indifferent and uninterested attitude towards it for long; in accepting it the Church most probably restricted it in certain ways, but it was created upon the initiative of the faithful”. Another eminent scholar Louis Réau writes that Christian art at its origin is only a concession to the ignorance of the faithful. He attributes its remarkable development to an almost general ignorance. In this opinion we hear the resonance of the 7th century Pope Gregory the Great’s oft quoted statement: “Painting can do for the illiterate what writing does for those who can read.” He makes this comment in a private letter referring to the less descriptive kind of popular image-signs found in the sixth century funerary paintings or decorations of small baptisteries or various articles designed for religious purposes on which religious subjects were represented.

Leonid Ouspensky, writing about the theology of the icons, takes strong exception to all the skeptical views of Bréhier and others. According to him, it is not fair to say that Christian art was born outside the Church upon the initiative of the faithful. The presupposition of an opposition between the clergy and the believers and the identification of the clergy with the Church is not tenable. The Christians of the first centuries did not separate the clergy from the believers; they together made up the body of the Church. Hence the view that Christian art developed in opposition to the will of the hierarchy is not acceptable. Secondly, Bréhier fails to understand the difference between a Christian image and an idol. In fact from the earlier times onwards the Church had drawn clear distinctions between these two notions. About the view of Réau who attributes the development of images to ignorance of the people, Ouspensky remarks that such a view expresses complete incomprehension of the significance and the purpose Christian iconography.

Ouspensky observes that the theories which reflect a negative attitude towards sacred images are based on the texts of some writers of antiquity who are qualified as “Fathers of the Church,” and are supposedly opposed to sacred images. Some of them like Tertullian, Origen and Eusebius, though great scholars, are not dependable as far as the orthodoxy of their views are concerned. They cannot be considered to represent the Church. In the case of others, even if their objections are taken seriously, their intentions are to be properly clarified. Their protest against images was in fact directed against idols and not against Christian images. Clement of Alexandria writes about the deceptive nature of images: “Art deceives and fascinates, bringing one if not to love, then at least to respect and to venerate statues and paintings. The same holds true for painting. This art is praiseworthy, but let no one mistake it for the truth”. This criticism is directed against false and deceiving images, not against authentic Christian images. Those who misinterpret him confuse idolatry with veneration of icons.

There is another text of Clement of Alexandria in which he expressly recommends the use of Christian symbols such as dove, fish, ship, lyre, anchor, fishermen etc., while engraving images on seals. At the same time, he criticizes the practice of engraving pagan gods and goddesses by Christians on their seals, swords and arrows.
Even though many scholars in the past took for granted that the Jewish faith and the Fathers of the Church were opposed to images, recent studies about early Christian religious art have changed the previous opinions to some extent. Studying the texts of the Fathers in their contexts, it has been found that at least in some cases the implications of the negative attitudes originally attributed to them are not there. Although one has to admit the existence of both positive and negative attitudes to images in the early Church, some texts previously interpreted as negative, are open to reinterpretation.

The critics who refuse to accept the early origins of Christian art succumb to the temptation of attributing the development of art in Christianity to the patronage of Emperor Constantine (ca. 274-337). According to them the development of religious art in Christianity is a degeneration of the original simplicity and purity of Christian faith under the influence of the royal patronage which the Church began to enjoy from the time of Constantine. But there are many archaeological discoveries which provide sufficient evidences to the fact that already from the beginning of the third century the tradition of Christian art had been established not only in the West, but also in the East. Contemporary researches show that we cannot find a sharp distinction between the Church before and after Constantine from the point of view of art.

The excavations made under the Vatican Basilica have brought to light the earliest Christian vault and wall mosaics so far known. They belong to the first half of the third century. The depictions on the wall include images of the Good Shepherd, Fishermen and Jonas swallowed by the whale, symbolizing resurrection of Christ. On the ceiling there is a figure of Christ the Sun riding on a chariot of white horses, surrounded by green branches of vine.

But on the strength of the material evidences alone we cannot trace the tradition of Christian art to apostolic times. Church tradition and clues from history may provide some help in the matter. Tradition traces the origin of the first icons to the lifetime of the Saviour himself and to the period immediately after him. Its possibility cannot be denied, considering the popularity of the art of portraiture in the Roman Empire during that time. It is possible to suppose that many of the early Christians who were converts from a non-Jewish milieu and had pagan cultural roots might have spontaneously turned to art and made images of Christ, the apostles and the Christian witnesses to express homage to them. Besides, during that time even in Judaism which adhered to the Old Testament prohibition of images there were growing liberal attitudes towards art and the making of human images.

One of the early references to Christian images is found in a Syriac apocryphal story related to King Abgar of Edessa. According to this story Jesus himself produced the first icon. King Abgar, a leper, heard of Jesus’ healing powers, and sent a messenger to bring Jesus to heal him. Along with a letter declining the invitation because of his pressing mission, Jesus sent the mandilion, a cloth on which the image of his face was miraculously reproduced. Reference to this portrait is made by John Damascene who tries to show that the tradition of images goes back to the time of Jesus himself.

Eusebius of Caesarea (265-340) who was an iconoclast and disapproved the use of images, mentions in his Church History about the practice of making and keeping the images of Christ and the apostles by those who are influenced by the habit of Gentiles. He also speaks of a monumental statue erected by “the woman with an issue of blood” (Mt 9:20-23) at the gates of her house to thank and honour Jesus for the healing. Eusebius’ purpose was to discredit the practice of making images showing it as a vestige of the pagan past. But the information provided by Eusebius can defend the contention of the image lovers that images were there among
Christians from the beginning of Christianity.

4. Theological and Anthropological Roots of the Image Language

The roots of a visual theology can be traced into the matrix of Christian tradition. The “Word made Flesh” has healed matter from all its infirmities and elevated its status to a valid medium of divine-human communication. The “fallen” matter is now “rectified” and corrected by Resurrection with the wisdom of the Cross, and perfected and glorified by Transfiguration with the power of the Spirit. It is now prepared for use as the means for a consummate experience of God as Truth and Beauty. At the same time, the Gospel of Christ has sanctified all the human faculties’ sense perception. The original experience of the Gospel was not only hearing, but also seeing. Christ said, “blessed are your eyes, for they see and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Mt 13:16-17). In the New Testament “seeing” replaces or rather complements “hearing.”

The word tends to establish the truth of something, prove it through speech and the image tends to show that truth, to make it visible. All through the Old Testament, we read about the struggle against those false images called idols. This history and struggle were thus a kind of waiting period looking forward to the appearance of the true Image. At the end of the waiting period, God revealed his human face, the word became the object of contemplation: “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see” (Lk 10:23).19

Of all experiences, vision is considered to be the most fulfilling one, realizing every human longing for the saving presence of God. The immediacy of the experience of vision makes seeing a model of the beatific experience. Seeing “face to face” is the highest form of realization, the fullness of knowledge and love, awaiting us. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12-13). Seeing is naturally more attractive and effective than hearing. An image can make a quicker, deeper and lasting impression than spoken or written words, since it is accessible to sight. According to Theodore the Studite, sight has precedence over hearing “by its local position and by the nature of its sense experience.”

In the proclamation of the Gospel by Jesus there was a coordination of seeing and hearing. The word was accompanied by actions of power. This effective unity of word and action can be maintained only through a visual presentation of the divine message along with the word of mouth. Those who find the theological potential of icons consider them as present-day substitutes for the miracles and other powerful deeds of Christ which the disciples were privileged to behold.

In the development of the tradition of icons in the Middle Ages we can trace a direct continuity with early Christian theology of vision. In the early Church the function of images was to instruct the newly baptized Christians and to establish them in faith. St. Basil the Great (330-379) has said: “A painting presents and shows silently to the eyes what the word brings to hearing through description.” The contention of the promoters of icons was that the written words of the Gospel and the painted images have the same content. The Gospel writers had written of Christ describing in words about what they had seen with their eyes and touched with their hands (1 Jn 1:1). It means that the power of the word springs from the visual experience of the writer. The makers of icons could, therefore, write of Christ with gold and make his image as eloquent as the word. Even though the means were different, the content was the same, since
the same history was seen in both. The equivalency of the word and the image was a serious matter of contention during the iconoclastic controversy.

It is the iconoclastic conflict that triggered serious theological reflections on the meaning of the image and on the importance of vision as a theological experience. The debate that ensued shed light on the implications of Christian creativity and art. The iconoclasts, even though they accepted Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as the image of the invisible God, in whom the fullness of God dwells (Col 1:19), objected to any kind of depiction or pictorial representation, arguing that it would amount to circumscribing divinity. Who can imagine God who is beyond all human comprehension? St. John Damascene (c.652 – c. 750) is one of the pioneers who defended the theology of divine visibility in his apologetic discourses against the iconoclasts. He based his arguments on the unique nature of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son, in whom the invisible God is revealed through his union with our visible, creaturely humanity. We cannot ignore the fact that God united human nature with the person of the Son. It is an irrevocable truth about God. Consequently Christian worship is not possible independently of the humanity of Christ.

5. Conflicting Positions of Image-Making and Image-Breaking

With reference to the Old Testament prohibition of making and worshiping images (Dt 6:13; Ex 20:4) St. John Damascene says that the real aim of God’s prohibition was to hinder the worship of created things in the place of the Creator. Only God is worthy of worship. Making images was prohibited to the Hebrews, because it is impossible to make an image of God who is immeasurable, un-circumscribed and invisible. Any human attempt to make an image of God would naturally end up in idolatry. Idols are products of human imagination, which are not authorized by God. Can human beings imagine the invisible God independently of God’s self-revelation? What they imagine on their own are mere projections of their ignorance, greed, pride and selfishness. Their makings do not have any reference beyond what they are. That is why idols are despised as expressions of human ignorance (Jer 2:11; 5:7). They do not reveal anything more than what they are as material products, since their purpose is limited to practical use and gratification of sensual desire (Jer 44:15). Their value is not more than their material cost and what greed and pride assign to them. The worship of such objects is, therefore, rightly condemned.

According to St. John Damascene, God’s prohibition of making images is to be distinguished from God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. He tried to tackle the question raised by the iconoclasts about the “circumscription” of God in Christian images. Distinction is to be made between “what is un-circumscribable and un-depictable” and what is “visible and depictable.” There is no doubt about the fact that God cannot be depicted, because nobody has seen God’s form. It would be a sin either to make an image of the invisible God or to make an image of man and call it God. The Christian icon does not make such claims. But since the invisible God has taken a human form and made himself visible in that form, we can draw a depiction of that human form. But it is God’s own form, not of any man’s. God has condescended to be seen and we are justified in drawing and exhibiting all the different moments of that condescension in words and colours and in all forms of expression. This would not have been possible before the Incarnation. What was impossible before the Incarnation is now made possible. The incorporeal and formless God has now taken flesh and become one among us, being visible and tangible, appropriating matter as a means of self-revelation and human salvation. Hence we can circumscribe Jesus Christ who circumscribed himself in his bodily life, even though he was equal to God. John Damascene further clarified question in what
sense Christ is said to be circumscribed. Christ who is both God and man was uncircumscribed according to his divine nature, but circumscribed according to his human nature. Otherwise it would amount to negating the distinction between the two natures. Again, somebody who could not be circumscribed could not also suffer. But the Scriptures say that Christ emptied himself and took the form of a servant, suffered and died on the cross (Phil 2:1-5). To deny the right to make icons of Christ is equal to underrating his humanity.

St. Nicephorus (758-829), the Patriarch of Constantinople was another important theologian who clarified the theological notion of the image. He distinguished between “circumscription” and “resemblance.” According to him, the problem in making icons was not precisely that of circumscription, but of resemblance. He argued that circumscription could not be a constituent element of the image. A thing could be circumscribed according to place, time, forms and even understanding. Circumscription, therefore, had to do with the realm of ideas. As far as an image is concerned, what matters is its visible similarity to the prototype. He asked the question: “Did Christ have a visible aspect that we can represent?” Using facts from the gospel he showed that the body of Christ could be seen and recognized. It kept its visible and identifiable resemblance even after resurrection.

The iconoclastic controversy further developed into serious debates on the notion of the image. Both groups agreed on the point that every image is known to be a copy of some original. But then the question was raised how an image was related to its prototype. The Byzantine Emperor Constantine V who spearheaded the iconoclastic movement developed a definition of the image in which he held that a genuine image was “identical in essence with that which it portrays.” On the basis of this definition, only the Eucharist could claim essential identity with its prototype, Jesus Christ. All other images of Christ were false, because no image could be identical in essence with the person of Jesus Christ. Theodore the Studite came forward to explain in what way is the prototype present in the icon. For that he employed the notion of hypostasis.

Theodore the Studite explained that there is no attempt to represent the nature of Christ in the icon. What is depicted is his hypostasis, his person. When the invisible Word of God, born from the invisible Father became visible to our eyes, we saw the very person of the Word of God, his hypostasis.

How could a nature be portrayed unless it were contemplated in a hypostasis? For example, Peter is not portrayed in so far as he is animate, rational, mortal, capable of thought and understanding; for this does not define Peter only but also Paul and John, and all those of the same species. But insofar as he adds along with the common definition certain properties... he is distinguished from the other individuals of the same species.

In the same way, the incarnate Word did not become man in general, because human nature does not exist except in individuals. The Word became a specific man, the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Individual traits belong to the person and not to the nature. Thus Theodore the Studite argued that the features of Jesus’ face were the features of the divine person. He said: “If He assumed humanity in truth, as we confess, then the hypostasis of Christ is circumscribable: not according to its divinity, which no one has ever beheld, but according to the humanity which is contemplated in an individual manner in it.”

On the basis of this explanation Theodore answered the question in what way the prototype is present in the icon. “The prototype is not essentially in the image. If it were, the image would be called prototype, as conversely the prototype would be called image. This is not admissible, the nature of each has its own definition. Rather, the prototype is in the image by the similarity of hypostasis.”
The defenders of icons upheld the dignity of matter which the iconoclasts were prone to negate. They said that the images were made of “inglorious and lifeless matter” and were to be despised, not venerated. They insisted on “mental observation” or contemplation, since, according to them, divine worship pertained to the mind. St. John Damascene justified the veneration rendered to matter on the basis of the dignity given to it by the Creator by condescending to dwell in it. He clarified that matter is not venerated as God, but as the instrument through which human beings are saved. At the same time, divinity can be accorded to matter in so far as it constitutes God’s body in an irreducible manner, even though with its natural limitations as flesh with a rational soul and mind. It is on the basis of this theological understanding of matter as instrument of salvation that Christian worship approves veneration of the blessed wood of the cross, the holy images, the holy Eucharist, the altar, the holy places and all those materials related to the history and mystery of salvation.

6. Divergence of Christian Art in the East and in the West

The theology of the image and of beauty initially belonged to the common heritage of the Church in the West as well as in the East till the Middle Ages. As the “iconoclast crisis” was over with the definitive approval of the icons and the legitimacy of their veneration by the Council of Nicaea in 787, the tradition of Christian art began to flourish unhindered in the succeeding centuries. But these developments had their characteristic differences in the East and in the West which reflected their particular social, cultural and political conditions. “In the East the art of the icon continued to flourish, obeying theological and aesthetic norms charged with meaning and sustained by the conviction that, in a sense, the icon is a sacrament. By analogy with what occurs in the sacraments, the icon makes present the mystery of the Incarnation in one or other of its aspects.” The varied artistic achievements of the West include also the art and architecture of the Romanesque and the Gothic styles which effectively expressed the transcendence of the faith experience, its mysterious and awesome nature. But during the Renaissance religious art in the West, even with the marvelous achievements of the great geniuses of the time, slipped into new tendencies which gave greater importance to humanistic values rather than the values of the Spirit. With the support of rich patrons the Renaissance artists experimented with new forms, styles and contents of artistic expression. Greater emphasis was given to the dexterity of the artist to portray anatomical perfection, youthfulness, natural realism and perspective. Paul Evdokimov observes:

Up to the twelfth century, western art remained faithful to the common tradition of both East and West. This unified tradition is fully alive and visible in the magnificent works of Romanesque art, in the miracle of Chartres Cathedral and in the Italian paintings whose creators continued to cultivate the maniera bizantina.

But starting in the 13th century, Giotto, Duccio, and Cimabue introduced into their works optical illusion, perspective, depth, chiaroscuro [play of light and shadows], and trompe-l’oeil [still-life deception]. Such art, though more refined and more reflective of the natural world, lost the ability to directly grasp and portray the transcendent. But having broken with the artistic canons of tradition, western Christian art could no longer be integrated into the liturgical mystery...

The secularizing of art in the West led to its alienation from the realm of religion. This situation was further aggravated by certain developments in theological reflection which gave greater importance to mind and rationality rather than to heart and emotions. The balance of faith and reason, once achieved by Scholasticism, could not be maintained in the subsequent centuries. Thus, on the one hand, theology sacrificed its poetic, imaginative and emotional aspects for the sake of scientific exactitude,
while, on the other hand, the modern aesthetics purged truth from beauty by reducing beauty into a matter of sensations. Traditionally, the perception of the harmonious and inseparable co-existence of truth, goodness and beauty was the key to the enjoyment of beauty. The physical aspects of a beautiful thing were considered as reflections of its ideal content. Evdokimov explains this traditional understanding of beauty in the following words:

An artist reveals the restored fullness of being and makes it possible for us to contemplate its ideal aspects... the artist allows us to see “another nature,” a buried and hidden truth. Beauty thus presents one of three faces that make up the ideal trinity of truth, the good and the beautiful. The artist brings his light into the darkness, but he neither reproduces nor copies. He rather creates forms perceivable by the senses, and these forms become containers of an idealistic content.

As theology and art parted ways in the West, the Eastern Church kept alive their spiritual bond through the tradition of the icons and liturgical celebrations. The principle of lex orandi, lex credendi has been the guiding norm of the theology of the Eastern Churches. “We prove God’s existence by worshipping him and not by advancing so-called proofs. We have here the liturgical and iconographic argument for the existence of God.” A theology that flourished in worship and prayer could naturally find place for poetic and artistic expressions of faith which are the fruits of fervent devotion and love. Today the Church in the West is more and more aware of its loss. Efforts are being made to recover the spiritual sense of art through a renewed dialogue with the estranged world of art.

7. Artwork as a Source of Theology

An expanded understanding of divine revelation has made it possible to recognize the theological value of an artwork and accept it as a possible source of theology. The Word entered history not only to be heard, but also to be seen and to be touched. St. John writes in his first letter concerning the Word he proclaims: “that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched ... we proclaim what we have seen and heard” (1Jn 1:1-3). Every creative word has the power in it to be seen as well as heard. The visual image is as intelligible as the audible word. This shows the intimate relationship between the word and the image and their concomitance in divine revelation.

We find in the Bible many instances where the words surpass their audibility and become visions. In the apocalyptic passages in the Gospels and in the Book of Revelation, words seem to exhaust their power, while describing the ultimate and the final, the eschaton. Hence it is natural that apocalyptic and similar kinds of literature take recourse to grandiose and glorious visions with highly imaginative forms and situations in order to convey their purported meanings with spatial effects of pulsating plasticity. According to Evdokimov: “In the Bible, the word and the image are in dialogue, they call to one another and express complementary elements of one and the same Revelation... The word tends to establish the truth of something, prove it through speech and the image tends to show that truth, to make it visible... From the moment of the Incarnation, the image was to become an essential part of...
Christianity, on the same level as the word"\textsuperscript{35}.

The Vatican II has already rediscovered and recognized the power of art as a theological language. According to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World\textit{ Gaudium et Spes} “the knowledge of God can be better revealed and the preaching of the Gospel can become clearer to the mind” by the work of the artists.\textsuperscript{36} Fr. Marie Dominique Chenu has rightly observed that the history of theology, in order to be complete, must consider works of art as genuine “sources” of theology\textsuperscript{37}.

In this context we can see a very significant development in the Church’s awareness about the resourcefulness of art as a means of theological reflection and action. The enthusiastic encouragement given by Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessors Pope John Paul II and Pope Paul VI to artists and theologians is noteworthy. Art is to be considered as an important path to follow in their insatiable quest for the Ultimate Mystery. It is a “way of beauty” – “\textit{via pulchritudinis}” which is at once an aesthetic journey and a journey of faith, a theological enquiry\textsuperscript{38}. Pope Benedict XVI has in one of his addresses proposed the different areas of theological search where the “\textit{via pulchritudinis}” can lead to greater and deeper understanding.

Theological and spiritual reflection, liturgy, Marian devotion, and artistic representation truly form a whole, a complete and effective message, capable of arousing the wonder of eyes, of touching the heart and of enticing the intelligence to a more profound understanding of the mystery of Mary in which we see our destiny reflected clearly and our hope proclaimed. Therefore, I take advantage of this occasion to invite experts in theology and Mariology to follow the \textit{via pulchritudinis}, and I hope that, also in our days, thanks to a greater collaboration between theologians, liturgists and artists, incisive and effective messages can be offered to the admiration and contemplation of all\textsuperscript{39}.

To consider art as a source of theology is to look beyond its “instrumental” or “practical” value as a medium of communication and understand it as a means of “transformation” and “communion” – as a spiritual \textit{sādhana}. Art demands us to surpass the visible world and go beyond the daily routine of life. While it expresses the creative capacity of the artist it questions the visible reality, challenges structures and provokes minds. Art involves a struggle to transform the visible reality and to manifest its hidden beauty and truth. In his reflection on art in Castel Gandolfo Pope Benedict XVI said:

A work of art is a product of the creative capacity of the human being who in questioning visible reality, seeks to discover its deep meaning and to communicate it through the language of forms, colour and sound. Art is able to manifest and make visible the human need to surpass the visible; it expresses the thirst and the quest for the infinite. Indeed it resembles a door open on to the infinite, on to a beauty and a truth that go beyond the daily routine. And a work of art can open the eyes of the mind and of the heart, impelling us upward\textsuperscript{40}.

The relevance of art in theology is evident in the fact that theology has more affinity with art than with the sciences. Theology cannot be a science like other sciences, because they do not have in their vocabulary the notions of mystery and transcendence. Sciences seek exact and exhaustive knowledge of the objective reality employing tools of experiment and analysis. Theology on the other hand does not operate within the frameworks of objective knowledge; it goes beyond the finite world to explore the realm of the Infinite, involving the seeker subjectively. In this respect art and theology have much in common. Both are open to the transcendent, seeking to broaden the horizons of human awareness, while being in touch with the reality here and now. Both look forward to a future in a
prophetic manner. According to Aristotle, artists and poets are people who imitate things as they are ought to be, neither as they were nor as they are thought to be (Poetics XXVI, 6). Their concern is a “higher reality.” The difference between history and poetry consists not in the fact one is written in prose and the other in verse, but one relates what happened and the other what may happen. Similarly theology, unlike other sciences, exercises a hermeneutic function in a prophetic manner which is shared also by art.

8. Art and Symbolism among Indian Christians

Even though there is a highly developed theology of images generally in all Eastern Churches, the ancient Church of St Thomas Christians does not seem to have any conspicuous achievement to contribute to that tradition. Looking at the enormous output of religious art and architecture of other Indian religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism it is difficult to explain why Indian Christians, who share the same cultural and artistic milieu, were reluctant to produce art to celebrate their faith. Of course, it is found that architecturally the Christian places of worship had much in common with the Hindu temples of the time. But they were different in the matter of the images. Instead of the images of deities they had only crosses in the churches.

The Synod of Diamper took note of the bare Churches in Malabar and gave instructions to set up images in the churches. The assumption of the Synod was that it was due to the influence of Nestorianism. But J.S. Assemani (Yusuf ibn Sim'un as-Sim'ani), a Lebanese orientalist, who studied the history of Eastern Churches observes that the tradition of image worship was alive among Chaldeans everywhere, in Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia and Tartoria. The absence of images in the churches in Malabar could be, according to him, due to the deficiency of artists, not because of Nestorian prohibition.

The tradition of pictorial art among St Thomas Christians remains mostly a matter of conjectures. Still there are a few instances of paintings and wood carvings in some ancient churches of Kerala which have come down to us. The pioneering efforts of Prof. George Menachery have brought to light many interesting pieces of religious art scattered in different churches of Kerala. They had been given scant attention. Among them the baptismal fonts, the lamp posts and the open air crosses in some ancient churches deserve careful study. They may help us to look at the artistic creativity of St. Thomas Christians from a different perspective.

From the existing evidences of religious art we find that the pre-seventeenth century Christians of Malabar did not form a culturally and religiously isolated community alienated from the local cultural milieu. And they were not strangers to the world of Christian art and symbolism which flourished in the East and spread to other parts of the world. It is evident from the kind of artistic language developed and employed by them in the art and architecture of their places of worship and in their various cult objects. We find in them a meaningful and effective fusion of Indian imagery and Christian mystery. In fact, it might not have been for them a laborious task, because all the ancient cultures of the world in the East and in the West shared the same symbolic mentality and world-view and language in many respects.

The East Syrian liturgy and theology have significantly influenced the symbolic world view of the Christians of Malabar. The notion of “mystery” is fundamental in this world view, which is reflected in the poetic writings of the great theologians of Eastern Christianity like St. Ephrem (d. 373) and St. Aphraates (c. 345). Theology, as we can judge from the efforts of these theologians, is not our search into the divine mystery, but is rather the mystery opening its windows to us and showing its marvels for our admiration. The theologian cannot but be overwhelmed by the divine mystery. It implies an inherent ambivalence in the theological language.
since it seeks to express the otherworldly realities in the language of this world, to incarnate the eternal truths of the Spirit in time and space, in flesh and blood. This explains why the theology of the Eastern Christianity is celebrated in poetic and artistic expressions, in music and in colour. Symbolic language can be understood only by a symbolic mentality because every symbol has in it a spirit-matter tension which eludes the grasp of our practical, pragmatic sense. A symbol unravels its mystery not in our ordinary awareness of time and space, but in a spatial-temporal consciousness of transcendent nature. Since the expression of the mystery entails the notions of dynamism and action, it is characteristically ritual and liturgical.

The different symbolic elements of the liturgy, namely words, things and actions are intended to create a condition in which our ordinary concepts of time and space are no more valid. The liturgical time is different from the historical time, since it transcends the temporal succession of past, present and future and actualizes an eternal “now” in which transcendent events of eternal significance take place. This awareness of time is important in the East Syrian liturgical tradition. It is evident in the eschatological vision which predominates in the East Syrian theology and in liturgy. It seeks to see the realities of “here and now” in the light of the transcendent realm of “there and then”, i.e. “fullness of time”. In connection with this new time-space awareness, it is relevant to note that one of the important images used in the poetic theology of Ephrem and Aphraates is that of the paradise and the tree of life. It is a powerful biblical image with sufficient resources to explain the history and mystery of salvation very effectively. Aphraates writes on the blessings of the paradise after the coming of the Saviour:

Now by the coming of the Child of the Blessed Mary, ... the point of the sword has been taken away from in front of the tree of life, and food has been given to the faithful; paradise has been promised to the blessed, to virgins and the ‘holy’, and the fruits of the tree of life have been given as food to the faithful and to virgins.

According to Ephrem, the paradise is a sublime mountain which offers different levels of life. There is a “for-paradise” besides the paradise proper. At the summit of the paradise is the revelation of the glory of God. For both Ephrem and Aphraates the “tree of life” is central to the picture of the paradise. The “tree of life” stands for Christ himself. The image of Christ as the “Tree of Life” is thematically very significant, because it summarizes the entire history of redemption beginning from the earthly paradise to the eschatological paradise. The resurrected Christ opened the gates of the paradise to the believers. Paradisiacal happiness consists in tasting and enjoying of the fruits of the “Tree of Life”.

The passage of Christ through humiliation and death to resurrection and glory is symbolically celebrated in the exaltation of the cross. It comprises the events of Christ’s birth, suffering and death on earth, decent into sheol and ascent into heaven. The cross can be seen as passing through the three worlds of awareness – the world of the present, the world of the past and the world of the future. Inherent in the nature of this awareness is a tension between remembrance and realization. For the believer the celebration of salvation is basically an act of remembering the saving deeds of Christ, looking forward to its fuller realization in future. It evokes a dynamic memory which moves backward to the past and forward to the future, reconstituting the present with an enhanced awareness of a new spiritual regeneration. The believer is reborn by the power of the Spirit of God.

The exalted cross signifies the glorious and conclusive victory won by Christ over all sorts of polarities which characterize our human, earthly existence. Our human condition is a struggle between these opposites in an effort to go beyond them to the ultimate Unity, the One who is transcendent, changeless and eternally true. Christ
fought this struggle victoriously and saved humanity from its slavery to the vagaries of the opposites. In the iconography, the cross stands both for the arduous way and the final victory. The tree of life symbolism expresses this idea of the heroic passage and the glorious victory through its iconographic elements. We see the cross as enthroned victoriously between some heraldic beings attending on both sides. These heraldic beings could be plants or animals, as seen in various representations of the tree of life from ancient times onwards. Their duality shows, on the one hand, the dangerous passage to victory and, on the other hand the sovereignty of the victor who now commands their attentive service as heralds of his heroism.

The tree symbolism is also expressive of the fullness of life offered by the Saviour to all believers, sometimes represented as birds perching on the branches of the tree. It is the abode of all living beings on earth and in heaven. The physical features of a tree – roots, trunk and branches – can be seen as belonging to the three worlds of existence – netherworld, earth and heaven. It can be interpreted as having three levels of awareness related the temporal succession of past, present and future. The cross as the universal tree assumes a cosmic dimension in its spatial and temporal significance and thus aptly expresses through its iconographic features the meaning of Christ and his work.

The symbolic tradition of the Persian crosses in India belongs to a wider Christian tradition of the East which has also spread to other parts of the world. Eastern Christian art has left its glorious monuments in Ravenna in Italy, where we can find some striking parallels to the crosses found in India. For example, the cross depicted on the sarcophagus of the Archbishop Theodore 51 (691) speaks the same symbolic language, but in a more detailed manner. The centrality of the cross is highlighted in both cases by heraldic motifs. In the Ravenna cross we find two birds attending the cross on both sides resting on tendrilous growths in flowering fullness. Another conspicuous difference is the separation of the higher and lower realms of earth and heaven which are separated by a demarcation. The two realms are mediated by the mouth of a lion. Evidently, it is the “narrow” gate to heaven which implies a “dangerous” passage through death to resurrection. There is an earthly cross which seems to emerge from a pot, suggestive of the fountain of life. There is a heavenly cross over the head of the lion enthroned in its eschatological glory.

In liturgical art and worship the cross is the ultimate symbol which can embody and express the mystery of salvation in all its dimensions, in depth, breadth and height. It is in itself a celebration of the mystery through various experiences of remembrance, action, participation, passage, rebirth, realization and vision. All other images are extensions or explications of the cross and its hidden meanings. The finality of Christian art is the eschatological vision in which we see the entire universe in the inter-relatedness of the many embedded in the One. The cross is the symbol of that universe as the Cosmic Tree of Life which shelters all forms of life. It stands for fullness and fulfillment, revelation and realization, divine gift and human effort.

**Conclusion**

Considering the role played by art in the life of faith from the early centuries onwards, we can rightly assume that it is an important aspect of Christian vocation. The word of God addressed to the world in different contexts in different modes has to find effective expressions in every age. Humanity loses its vitality and zest when its fountain of creativity dries up. The flourishing of arts is the way to renew humanity for our age. A humanity manifesting Divine Beauty is the finality of creation and redemption, the works of the Divine Artist. Thus we can find an inner connection between Beauty and the Christian vocation to manifest the presence of God in this world.
ENDNOTES


3 Pope Paul VI to artists during the “Messa dell’Artista” in the Sistine Chapel, 7 May 1964; Cf. Acta Apostolicae Sedis 56 (1964), 438-444.

4 John Paul II, Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists (April 4, 1999), No. 5

5 John Paul II, Ibid., 12


7 L. Bréhier, L’art chrétien, son développement iconographique des origines à nos jours (Paris, 1928), 13&16.


10 Ouspensky, Theology of the Icon, 41.

11 Clement of Alexandria, Protrepticos, Chap. 4, PG 8:156C as quoted in Ouspensky, Theology of the Icon, 43.

12 Clement of Alexandria, Paedagogos, 1, 3, c. 11, PG 8:633.


22 Nicephorus of Constantinople, Patriarch, Refutation (Antirrehticus) in Patrologia Graeca 100:256.


24 See Nicephorus, Refutation 1.15; Patrologia Graeca 100:225


26 Ibid., 87

27 Ibid., 102

28 John Paul II, Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists, 8.

29 The Byzantine Christ, elkomenos, humiliated and suffering, alone climbs the final ascent as the Lord of all things. St. John Chrysostom said that “I look at Christ crucified and I see the King.” But in western art after the 13th century, Jesus the man of sorrows seems to be the very image of suffering, to be abandoned by the Holy Spirit like the Christ of Andernach, Cologne, and the Dévot Christ of Perpignan. The search for realism in the 15th century became even more absorbed by the image of suffering and death. It centered on the cult of the five wounds, the Holy Blood, the instruments of passion.


31 Ibid., 20.
“Beauty, whether that of the natural universe or that expressed in art, precisely because it opens up and broadens the horizons of human awareness, pointing us beyond ourselves, bringing us face to face with the abyss of Infinity, can become a path towards the transcendent, towards the ultimate Mystery, towards God... In this regard, one may speak of a *via pulchritudinis*, a path of beauty which is at the same time an artistic and aesthetic journey, a journey of faith, of theological enquiry” - Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Artists on 21 November 2009; See Zenit.org, ZE09112202 - 2009-11-22.

For example, the baptismal fonts of Edappally, Muthalakkodam, Kaduthuruthy and Kanjoor churches, open air crosses of Muttuchira, Kaduthuruthy, Kanjoor, Angamaly and Changanacherry churches, Persian crosses in Mylapore, Kottayam and Kadamattam churches etc. See G. Menachery, *Pallikkalakalum Mattum* (Malayalam) (Trichur: Eiffel Books, 1984), 97-144.


According to his traditionalist thinking, the underlying spiritual unity of all ancient traditions was destroyed by the emergence of modern materialist thinking which neglected the Spirit. See various essays art and symbolism in Coomaraswamy, Vol. I: *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).
Introduction

The Way of Thomas is essentially a Way to Holiness. The wayfarers would be all too happy to hear about the success stories of those who have already reached their destination. The saints and beati are like beacons of hope guiding, encouraging and helping the pilgrim. The cult of saints, however, is fraught with certain ambiguities. The following article argues that such apparent contradictions are ingrained in the very fabric of Christianity. I begin by juxtaposing a few opposing, yet equally plausible, viewpoints or sensibilities. I go on to present Pope Benedict’s “hermeneutic of continuity” as a key to resolve the dilemma. Finally, I make a brief life sketch of the prominent Roman Catholic Syrian Christian Saints.

1. Already/Not Yet

St Paul, in opening some of his epistles like Romans and First Corinthians, greets his community as the “Holy Ones” (the Greek hagioi is also translated as “saints”). He is doing so because he sees these little communities as being “in Christ” and the recipients of divine grace. They are thus holy. Everyone who remembers God in life, everyone who seeks forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ, is holy precisely because he or she is oriented to the one who is holy. The holiness that we are talking about is primarily a divine gift. It is given by God the Father in the Body of Christ through the operation of the Holy Spirit. This gift is freely given and is totally gratuitous and so in essence it can never be an achievement of human effort, because God does not owe anything to anyone and everything He gives is free.

Nevertheless, individual Christians cannot claim to be holy. Even the Church as a body refrains from making such pompous claims. She willingly admits that the expression ecclesia semper reformanda better describes her situation than that of societas perfecta. Human beings not only have to receive the free gift of God, but also have to work for it, or prove themselves worthy of it. In other words, human beings have to hallow the name of
God by freely submitting to His will and keeping His word, in short, by following the path of spiritual perfection and sainthood. This path towards spiritual perfection and sainthood is possible only through union of the believers with Christ which is achieved through faith and prayer within the Church, that is to say, within the historic Body of Christ which is extended in the history of salvation through the operation of the Holy Spirit and through participation in the sacramental life of the Church.

2. Universal/Particular

The “communion of saints” should serve as the doctrinal matrix within which to appreciate the role of individual saints. The communion of saints refers to the fellowship or spiritual solidarity of all God’s people, on earth, in heaven, and in purgatory. However, the communion of the Saints refers not only to the communion of holy people, but also to a communion of holy things. The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes this important connection:

Sancta sanctis! (“God’s holy gifts for God’s holy people”) is proclaimed by the celebrant in most Eastern liturgies during the elevation of the holy Gifts before the distribution of communion. The faithful (sancti) are fed by Christ’s holy body and blood (sancta) to grow in the communion of the Holy Spirit (koinonia) and to communicate it to the world (CCC 948).

Thus, the Church has communion in the Faith, the Sacraments (above all the Eucharist), the charisms and charity. These riches are communicated to Christ’s Body through the Sacraments. Those in the Church partake of these goods received from Christ; these holy things from God make us a holy people (CCC 949-952).

This communion of holy people, like the Catholic Church itself, is universal: it spans history, geography, nationality, race, and all other temporal barriers we might erect. The Catechism explains the vast scope of the Catholic teaching:

We believe in the communion of all the faithful of Christ, those who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are being purified, and the blessed in heaven, all together forming one Church; and we believe that in this communion, the merciful love of God and his saints is always [attentive] to our prayers (CCC 962).

The Church has also singled out unique individuals who are with God in heaven, holy men and women worthy of imitation. This process of becoming an officially recognized Saint is called canonization. Because the lives of these individuals have been thoroughly examined and found holy, and because miracles have been associated with their intercession, we can be assured that they are role models in faith, and powerful intercessors before God on our behalf.

These individual saints exercise an apologetic function as well in the Church. From the advent of Protestantism, Catholic apologists have drawn upon the sanctity of the Church and of its saints in particular to construct an argument for the truth and genuineness of the Roman Catholic Church (argumentum ex notis Ecclesiae).

The cult of these individual saints is the most conspicuous expression of local, regional and national identity. Individual Churches and particular Churches have their own preferred saints. Devotion to these saints adopts a variety of inculturated expressive forms.

3. Prophetic/Priestly

The characteristic feature of the prophet is that he or she sees more deeply into events, has a sharper appreciation of the impact of power upon those who are powerless, of wealth upon those who are poor and of injustice upon its victims. In other words, ‘prophetic’ is the word we use in the Christian tradition to speak of social justice. The prophetic saint is one who is called by God to witness against the unjust power structures of society, and who
speaks for the mission of God, the God whose arms are stretched out in judgement and mercy to this troubled world. 5

The most influential and popular saints embodied the prophetic dimension of the Church. Their life was radical in many ways. They posed a challenge to their contemporaries by adopting a counter cultural stance. Always ahead of their times, they took upon themselves the task of accustoming people to change. It is proverbial how some outspoken saints have forced those in authority to mend their ways.

Holiness is impossible without the grace of God. The priestly dimension comes into play here. The faithful must have recourse to God’s choicest channels of grace. Daily participation in the Eucharist and frequent confessions are essential in the journey to holiness. It is understandable that the clergy (and the religious), who have easy access to these resources, make the cut far too easily.

4. Holiness: a Rare Thing/for All

The heroism of virtue is the litmus test for holiness. Where there is a real saint, there is also heroic virtue. Miracles and extraordinary deeds do but attest to the divine origin of those virtues and serve to manifest the eminent degree of sanctifying grace. Since grace cannot be perceived by the senses, the judgment of holiness is based on the heroism of virtue. 6

Since the infused virtues are interrelated, a saint’s spiritual organism will comprise the ensemble of the moral virtues to an eminent degree. The least fault in the infused moral virtues will be the sign that in the person concerned there is not a consummate degree of sanctifying grace.

There are two reasons why holiness – and hence canonization, which gives it in example – is something rare: one is the absolute transcendence of grace in relation to nature, and the other is the corruption of original sin. And we can add a third reason. The holiness that is recognized by canonization takes on the value of an example. Now, what is given as an example must attract attention, and in order to do that it must present something of the singular, of the extraordinary according to the etymology of the word.

We can conclude that holiness, the basis of every canonization, is an extraordinary state of supernatural life, extraordinary in the sense of being well beyond the common way.

At the same time every believer is called to be holy. The universal call to holiness is a remarkable teaching of the Second Vatican Council. This teaching is found primarily in the fifth chapter of Lumen Gentium. 7 In his 2001 Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte, Pope John Paul II wrote: “Holiness, whether ascribed to popes well-known to history or to humble lay and religious figures . . . has emerged more clearly as the dimension which expresses best the mystery of the Church” (no. 7). Repeating the words of Lumen Gentium, the Holy Father calls holiness a duty which concerns not only certain Christians: “All the Christian faithful, of whatever state or rank, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity” (no. 30).

With his frequent beatifications and canonizations, Pope John Paul II sent an important message to all Christians: You, too, can be a saint! You, too, must be a saint if you are to achieve the end for which God created you! Until the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, the ranks of the blessed and the saints were filled mostly with clergy and religious: popes, bishops, priests, and founders of religious communities. Lay men and women were not to be found in great numbers among the beatified and canonized of the Church. The picture is very different now. Pope John Paul II beatified 215 lay people and canonized 245 lay people. Holiness is not the prerogative solely of the ordained and consecrated religious. Nor is holiness manifested only in extraordinary ways. Many lay people achieved holiness in the most ordinary circumstances of life.
In his General Audience on 21 August 2008, Pope Benedict XVI reiterated the stand of his predecessor. “Holiness is not a luxury, a privilege of the few; something impossible for ordinary people, but is instead the normal vocation of all those who are baptized, something which is offered to everyone”.

5. Maximalist/Minimalist View

There exists both a maximalist and a minimalist view on the cult of saints in particular and popular piety in general. The former holds the cult of saints in great esteem. According to this view, popular piety manifests the particular relationship of the faithful with the Divine Persons, or the Blessed Virgin Mary in her privileges of grace and those of her titles which express them, or with the Saints in their configuration with Christ or in their role in the Church’s life. The fruits of grace and sanctity which popular piety has produced, and continues to produce, within the ecclesial body, make it a veritable treasure of the people of God.

Authentic popular piety in virtue of its essentially Catholic roots, is an antidote to the sects and a guarantee of fidelity to the message of salvation. It has been a providential means of preserving the faith in situations where Christians have been deprived of pastoral care. In areas where evangelization has been deficient, the people for the most part express their faith primarily through popular piety.

The advocates of the minimalist view consider the Sacrosanctum Concilium as their magna carta: “Every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body, which is the Church, it is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title or to the same degree” (SC 16). Hence, the ambivalence that the Liturgy is not “popular” must be overcome. The liturgical renewal of the Council set out to promote the participation of the people in the celebration of the Liturgy, at certain times and places (through hymns, active participation, and lay ministries), which had previously given rise to forms of prayer alternative to, or substitutive of, the liturgical action itself.

The faithful should be made conscious of the preeminence of Liturgical prayers and the Liturgical year over any other possible form of devotion. While sacramental actions are necessary to life in Christ, the various forms of popular piety are properly optional. Such is clearly proven by the Church’s precept which obliges attendance at Sunday Mass. The central fact of Christianity is the Paschal mystery, of which Liturgy is an actualization. Other salvific mysteries in the life of Christ, of the Blessed Virgin Mary or indeed of the Angels and Saints stand lower in the “hierarchy of truths”.

The faithful require instruction on the character of Christian prayer, which is directed to the Father, through the mediation of the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is far removed from mere sentimentality and emotional satisfaction.

6. Hermeneutic of Continuity

With respect to the implementation of the Second Vatican Council, Benedict XVI has repeatedly called for a “hermeneutic of continuity and reform” rather than the too prevalent “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture”.

For over two centuries now, Western intellectual life has been dominated increasingly by a “hermeneutic of rupture”, a broad principle of interpretation which dismisses tradition and opts instead for the latest ideas, as if by the very fact of coming later in time, these ideas must be superior—a misconception arising largely from the Western notion of “progress”. Such a hermeneutic has led to the polarization of the Church into “pre-Vatican” and “post-Vatican”. Not infrequently, some groups and practices are dubbed “pre-Vatican” and relegated to the margins.

For Pope John Paul II and for Pope Benedict XVI the solution consists in recapturing the renewal
called for at the Second Vatican Council, to take the implementation of Vatican II out of the hands of those who have consistently advocated distortions in the name of the Council’s “spirit”, and to encourage true renewal according to the Council’s actual documents and their subsequent development in the teachings and directives of the Magisterium of the Church. For Pope Benedict, one of the keys to doing this successfully is to emphasize that authentic renewal cannot be the product of a “hermeneutic of rupture”. Any new development in Catholic teaching, Catholic devotion, Catholic discipline and Catholic worship must be understood as a development which corroborates and confirms what has come before, even as it proposes a new and deeper insight, a more precise formulation, or an important emphasis that has either been overlooked or has special relevance to our current situation.

Once we adopt the proper hermeneutic, the apparent contradictions get resolved. The Second Vatican Council has indeed put popular piety in proper perspective. The contemporary Magisterium has insistently stressed the need to “evangelize” popular piety. However, Pastoral sensibility recommends that the work of “evangelizing” popular piety should proceed patiently, tolerantly, and with great prudence, following the methodology adopted by the Church throughout the centuries. Liturgy and popular piety can coexist in the Church. Both have their distinctive roles to play in the life of the Church. The faithful must be given extensive and intensive catechesis before radical changes are introduced with regard to popular piety.

The teaching that every baptized Christian is called to be nothing less than a saint did not originate with the Second Vatican Council. Jesus Himself calls us to sanctity: “[B]e perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). St Francis de Sales, a 17th century saint, is known for his teaching that all Christians are called to holiness. In Casti Connubii Pope Pius XI says precisely that “all men of every condition can and ought to imitate that most perfect example of holiness found in Christ”. Nevertheless, the universal call to holiness is a particularly special emphasis of the Council. The same Council, all the same, chose to start the decree on the renewal of religious life with the expression Perfectae Caritatis.

God’s providential action doesn’t bypass or ignore the priestly or hierarchical dimension. Saints are considered as pre-eminent members of the mystical body only when the hierarchy, in virtue of its teaching and ruling office, has recognized the genuineness of the Holy Spirit’s activity in them. Moreover, in quite a few saints we find the happy union of both dimensions.

7. Four Stages on the Road to Sainthood

The Catholic Church doesn’t make saints like Hollywood makes movie stars. Catholics saints are men and women who lived holy lives in obedience to God’s will, and they became saints at the moment they entered heaven. However, the Church does recognize those souls that the Church can confirm are in heaven as saints.

The process for being declared a saint is ancient, traditional, and often mysterious. Evidence must be presented to persuade Church officials that the person in question in fact lived a virtuous life, had faith, and had the support and help of God. The Church also looks at miracles as evidence that God is working through that person.  

7.1. Stage One: Servant of God

For a candidate’s cause for sainthood to begin, five years must pass from the time of their death. This is to allow time to gain greater objectivity in evaluating the case. The waiting period is not mandatory and can be dispensed by the Pope which is evaluated on a case by case basis.

The cause for sainthood is started by the local Bishop where the candidate died. Often this bishop will consult with his fellow bishops to solicit their opinions on the merit and timeliness of introducing
the cause. Once the decision to proceed is made, the local bishop asks Rome to open the investigation. Once permission is granted and an investigation is opened, a ‘nihil obstat’ is obtained from the Holy See and a diocesan tribunal is set up. Witnesses are then called to recount concrete facts regarding the Christian virtues which made the candidate an outstanding role model of the faith. In addition to this recounting, all documents written by and about the candidate are gathered and examined and the general public is petitioned asking for anyone with knowledge of the candidate to come forward. As soon as the person is accepted for consideration, he or she is called a Servant of God.

The cause for sainthood is in its first stage for many bishops, priests and women religious belonging to the Syro-Malabar Church. Special mention is due to Puthenparampil Thommachen, the only layman to be declared a Servant of God. He is known as Kerala Assisi.

7.2. Stage Two: Venerables

Once the diocesan investigation has concluded, the documentation is sent to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome. Here a public copy of the information is put together which summarizes the heroic exercise of virtue or martyrdom of the individual. This summary then is examined by nine theologians who give their vote. If the majority of theologians are in favour, the cause is passed on for examination by the Congregation’s Cardinals and Bishops. If their judgment is favourable, the prefect of the Congregation presents the results to the pope who gives his approval and authorizes the congregation to draft a decree. At this stage the candidate becomes “Venerable”. As of now, the Syro-Malabar Church has only one person declared Venerable.

7.2.1. Kadalikattil Matthew (1872-1935)

Father Kadalikattil Matthew was born in Edapady, Palai, on April 25, 1872. He was ordained priest on February 17, 1901, and thereafter served in parishes where the confessional and the pulpit became the two main thrusts of his pastoral ministry. The priest formed the Congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 1911. He died at Palai on May 23, 1935. Father Matthew Kadalikattil is known for his great devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a special compassion for the poor and downtrodden, particularly the untouchables. His cause of canonization began in 1989 and he was declared Servant of God. On 27 June 2011, Pope Benedict XVI authorized the promulgation of the decree concerning the Servant of God’s practice of heroic virtues.

7.3. Stage Three: Blessed

For a Venerable to become beatified, a miracle must be attributed to his/her intercession. The required miracle must be proven through the appropriate canonical investigation following a similar procedure to that for heroic virtues. If authenticated, a decree is granted. Once the two decrees are granted (regarding the heroic virtues/martyrdom and the miracle) the Holy Father decides on beatification, giving the candidate the title “Blessed”. This title allows for limited public veneration, often limited to the diocese, region, or religious community in which the Servant of God lived. Currently there are four Beati from the Syro-Malabar Church.

7.3.1. Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871)

Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara was born on 10 February 1805 at Kainakary. For nearly all of his sixty-five years of earthly life he laboured generously for the renewal and enrichment of Christian life. His deep love for Christ filled him with apostolic zeal and made him especially careful to promote the unity of the Church. With great generosity he collaborated with others, especially brother priests and religious, in the work of salvation.

In co-operation with Fathers Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, Father Kuriakose founded...
an Indian religious congregation for men, now known as the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate. Later, with the help of an Italian missionary, Father Leopold Beccaro, he started an Indian religious congregation for women, the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel. These congregations grew and flourished, and religious vocations became better understood and appreciated. Through the common efforts of the members of new religious families, his hopes and works were multiplied many times over.

Father Kuriakose’s life, and the lives of these new religious, were dedicated to the service of the Syro-Malabar Church. Under his leadership or inspiration, a good number of apostolic initiatives were undertaken: the establishment of seminaries for the education and formation of the clergy, the introduction of annual retreats, a publishing house for Catholic works, a house to care for the destitute and dying, schools for general education and programmes for the training of catechumens. He contributed to the Syro-Malabar liturgy and spread devotion to the Holy Eucharist and the Holy Family. In particular, he dedicated himself to encouraging and counselling Christian families, convinced as he was of the fundamental role of the family in the life of society and the Church.

But no apostolic cause was dearer to the heart of this great man of faith than that of the unity and harmony within the Church. It was as if he had always before his mind the prayer of Jesus, on the night before his Sacrifice on the Cross: “That they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us”. Today the Church solemnly recalls with love and gratitude all his efforts to resist threats of disunity and to encourage the clergy and faithful to maintain unity with the See of Peter and the universal Church. His success in this, as in all his many undertakings, was undoubtedly due to the intense charity and prayer which characterised his daily life, his close communion with Christ and his love for the Church as the visible Body of Christ on earth.

He died on January 3, 1871, aged 65, at Koonammavu of natural causes. He was beatified, along with Saint Alphonsa on February 8, 1986, by Pope John Paul II.

73.2. Mariam Thresia
Chiramel Mankidiyan (1876-1926)

Mariam Thresia was born on 26 April 1876 in the village of Puthenchira, Trichur District. Thresia grew up in piety and holiness under the loving guidance of her saintly mother. As she wrote later in her Autobiography (a small document of hardly six pages written under obedience to her spiritual father), from early childhood Thresia was moved by an intense desire to love God.

When Thresia was only twelve years old, her mother died and with it her school education ended. She was now set on a long search to discern her own vocation in life. In her love for Jesus she wanted to be like him in his toil and apostolate. Hence she helped the poor, nursed the sick, visited and comforted the lonely people of her parish. Thresia and her three companions formed a group of prayer and of apostolate. Breaking with the custom of not leaving the house unless accompanied by men, they were on the roads and visited the families in need. Revolutionary novelty in their little world, which did not spare its criticism (not without moralising clerical support) of “the girls taking to the streets”!

Mariam Thresia had to wait almost a decade before her request to build a prayer house was sanctioned by her bishop Mar John Menachery. Thresia moved in, and her three companions joined her soon. They led a life of prayer and austere penance like hermits but continued to visit the sick and help the poor and the needy irrespective of religion or caste. The bishop discerned that here was...
in gestation a new religious Congregation for the
service of the family. On 14 May 1914 he erected it
canonically and named it the Congregation of the Holy
Family while receiving the perpetual profession of
Mariam Thresia. Her three companions were enrolled
as postulants in the new Congregation, while she was
appointed its first Superior with Father Joseph
Vithayathil as chaplain.

During and after the difficult years of the First
World War, with indomitable energy and utter trust
in divine providence, she built, in less than twelve
years, three new convents, two schools, two hostels,
a study house, and an orphanage. Education of girls
was Mariam Thresia’s liberation theology in action,
without the slogan.

Mother Mariam Thresia died on 8 June 1926
from a wound on the leg caused by a falling object.
The wound defied cure owing to her diabetes. After
her death the fame of Mariam Thresia spread as she
continued from heaven to succour the sick and the
needy through miraculous favours. She was beatified
on 9 April 2000 by Pope John Paul II.

7.3.3. Thevarparampil Augustine,
“Kunjachan” (1891-1973)

Thevarparampil Kunjachan was a humble
priest who spent his life for the spiritual and temporal
well being of the Dalits. He served as an assistant in
his home parish for 47 years. Although his real name
was Augustine, everyone called him Kunjachan,
because he was short in stature.

Augustine was born on 1 April 1891 at
Rampuram in the present diocese of Palai. After
the elementary school, he joined the Parel Seminary,
Changanacherry for his priestly training. On 17
December 1921 he was ordained priest by Mar
Thomas Kurialacherry.

It is the singular achievement of Kunjachan that
he had been able to baptize by himself no less than
5000 Dalits. He is to be counted as one of the
foremost missionaries among the Dalits in India. In
fact, he neither made use of eloquent sermons nor of
any human techniques in order to gain people for
Christ. He preached with his works of charity. His
daily program included visits to the homes and
workplaces of the Dalits. He created a very firm bond
with the people he served. He called them “my
children” and they called him “our priest.” He knew
them all, young and old, by name. He kept a spiritual
diary in three volumes containing detailed information
about them, about the relationship between the
members of each family, births, weddings, deaths,
annual confessions, etc.

Kunjachan led a very simple life for the poor
and wished to be with them even after death. He
spent everything he had for the poor. He wrote in his
Testament: “I do not possess anything either as landed
property or as cash account.... My funeral must be
conducted in the most simple way. Ever since 1926,
I had been staying with the Harijan (Dalit) Christians.
Even after death, I would like to be with them.
Therefore my dead body should be buried where
the Harijan Christians are buried”.

After a brief period of serious illness Kunjachan
died on 16 October 1973 at the age of 82. Kunjachan
had the reputation of a holy man even
while he was alive. People irrespective of caste and
religion, used to approach him in their manifold needs
and they got favours through his prayers and
blessings. Within a few days after his death his tomb
at Rampuram became a centre of pilgrimage for
people from far and wide. Venerable Kunjachan was
Beatified by Card. Varkey Vithayathil, Major Arch
bishop of the Syro-Malabar Church on 30 April 2006
at the very same village Rampuram where he was
born, worked, died and buried.

7.3.4. Euphrasia of the
Sacred Heart of Jesus (1877-1952)

Euphrasia Eluvathingal (Rosa) was born on 17
October 1877, in the village of Kattur, in
the archdiocese of Thrissur. Her mother’s deep piety and

Fr Mathew Alapattumeadayil
great devotion to the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, had a strong influence on little Rosa from her childhood.\textsuperscript{14}

Notwithstanding the initial opposition of her father, who wanted Rose to marry into a rich family, she managed to join the convent of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel at Koonammavu, the first indigenous congregation of the Syro-Malabar Church.

On 10 May 1897 Rose became a postulant and took the name Sr Euphrasia of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and on 10 January 1898 she received the holy habit of Carmel. On 24 May 1900 St Mary’s Convent was founded at Ollur, and on the same day Sr Euphrasia made her perpetual vows to God. From 1904 to 1913 Sr Euphrasia was entrusted with the duty of novice mistress and, sustained by the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit, she formed the future members of her Congregation. In their Mother Mistress the novices saw the heroic virtues of humility, poverty, penance, obedience and abandonment to God’s will.

For almost 48 years the convent of St Mary was home to Mother Euphrasia. Observing her life of prayer and holiness, the local people called her “Praying Mother”, and her Sisters in community referred to her as the “Mobile Tabernacle”, because the divine presence she kept within her radiated to all she encountered.

Mother Euphrasia spent much of her day in the convent chapel before the Blessed Sacrament and she also nourished a great love and devotion for the Blessed Virgin Mary; as a result, she was naturally an apostle of the Eucharist and of the Rosary. She was totally dedicated to love and was continually consoled by the Crucified Lord.

Mother Euphrasia had a profound sense of Church and she personally felt the sorrows and problems of the Church of her day. She offered her mortifications and penances for the conversion of schismatics and asked the novices and children to pray for them. She prayed ardently before the Blessed Sacrament for the Holy Father, for Bishops, priests and Religious.

Mother Euphrasia offered her life in sacrifice for love of God. She abandoned herself to his will and finally joined him in the heavenly embrace with her holy death on 29 August 1952.

After Mother Euphrasia’s death many of those who had obtained her help during her lifetime now continued to beseech her help at her tomb. On Sunday, 3 December 2006, she became the fifth Blessed of Kerala.

7.4. Stage Four: Saint

For canonization another miracle is needed, attributed to the intercession of the Blessed and having occurred after his/her beatification. This miracle is verified in the same way as done for the beatification. Canonization is required for the public veneration in the Universal Church and with Canonization, the Blessed acquires the title of Saint. The Syro-Malabar Church boasts of only one Canonized Saint.

7.4.1. Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception (1910–1946)

St Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception was born at Kudamalur in the archdiocese of Changanacherry, India, on the 19th of August 1910, of the ancient and noble family of Muttathupadathu.\textsuperscript{15} From birth, her life was marked by the cross, which would be progressively revealed to her as the royal way to conform herself to Christ. Her mother died three months later. Annakutty, as she was fondly called, passed her infancy in the home of her grandparents and in the home of her aunt. She received the Eucharistic bread for the first time on the 11 of November 1917. She used to say to her friends: “Do you know why I am so particularly happy today? It is because I have Jesus in my heart!” In a letter to her spiritual father, on the 30 of November 1943, she confided the following:
“Already from the age of seven I was no longer mine. I was totally dedicated to my divine Spouse. Your reverence knows it well”.

Already at a very young age, Sister Alphonsa desired to serve the Lord as a religious, but it was not without enduring trials that she was finally able to pursue this goal. When it became possible, she joined the Franciscan Clarist Congregation. Throughout her life, which was a brief thirty-six years, she continually gave thanks to God for the joy and privilege of her religious vocation, for the grace of her vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

It was Fr. James Muricken, her confessor, who directed her towards Franciscan spirituality and put her in contact with the Congregation of the Franciscan Clarists. Annakutty entered their college in Bharananganam in the diocese of Palai, to attend seventh class, as an intern student, on the 24th of May 1927. She was clothed in the religious habit on the 19th of May 1930, during the first pastoral visit made to Bharananganam by the Bishop, Msgr. James Kalacherry.

The canonical novitiate was introduced into the Congregation of the Franciscan Clarists in 1934. Though wishing to enter immediately, the Blessed was only admitted on the 12th of August 1935 because of her ill health. Having restarted her novitiate, she wrote the following proposals in her spiritual diary: "I do not wish to act or speak according to my inclinations. Every time I fail, I will do penance... I want to be careful never to reject anyone. I will only speak sweet words to others. I want to control my eyes with rigour. I will ask pardon of the Lord for every little failure and I will atone for it through penance. No matter what my sufferings may be, I will never complain and if I have to undergo any humiliation, I will seek refuge in the Sacred Heart of Jesus”.

The 12th of August 1936, the feast of St. Clare, the day of her perpetual profession, was a day of inexpressible spiritual joy. She had realised her desire, guarded for a long time in her heart and confided to her sister Elizabeth when she was only 12 years old: “Jesus is my only Spouse, and none other”.

Jesus, however, wished to lead His spouse to perfection through a life of suffering. “I made my perpetual profession on the 12th of August 1936 and came here to Bharananganam on the following 14th. From that time, it seems, I was entrusted with a part of the cross of Christ. There are abundant occasions of suffering... I have a great desire to suffer with joy. It seems that my Spouse wishes to fulfill this desire”.

Painful illnesses followed each other: typhoid fever, double pneumonia, and, the most serious of all, a dramatic nervous shock, the result of a fright on seeing a thief during the night of the 18th of October 1940. Her state of psychic incapacity lasted for about a year, during which she was unable to read or write.

In every situation, Sister Alphonsa always maintained a great reservation and charitable attitude towards the Sisters, silently undergoing her sufferings. In 1945 she had a violent outbreak of illness. A tumour, which had spread throughout her organs, transformed her final year of life into a continuous agony. Gastroenteritis and liver problems caused violent convulsions and vomiting up to forty times a day: “I feel that the Lord has destined me to be an oblation, a sacrifice of suffering... I consider a day in which I have not suffered as a day lost to me”.

With this attitude of a victim for the love of the Lord, happy until the final moment and with a smile of innocence always on her lips, Sister Alphonsa quietly and joyfully brought her earthly journey to a close in the convent of the Franciscan Clarists at Bharananganam at 12.30 on the 28th July 1946, leaving behind the memory of a Sister full of love and a saint.

Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception was proclaimed Blessed by Pope John Paul II in
Kottayam, India, on 8 February 1986. She was canonized on 12 October 2008, in a ceremony held at St Peter’s Square, Rome led by Pope Benedict XVI.

ENDNOTES
4 Paul Molinari, Saints: *Their Place in the Church*, Sheed and Ward, New York 1965, 27
8 This section makes frequent reference to *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, December 2001, Vatican City.
9 Jeff Mirus, Benedict’s Hermeneutic of Continuity, http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=296
14 This section is summarized from: http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns lit doc 20061203 eufrasia.en.html.
15 This section is extracted from: http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/2008/ns lit doc 20081012 alfonsa.en.html.
Introduction

Syriac or Aramaic is one of the most ancient languages. Audo says: “It is the first language and in it God spoke with Adam.” At least it is one of the languages in which God Communicated himself with man. During the long period of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, they learned the Aramaic language of the place and forgot their Hebrew. Hence, later it was known as the Recent Hebrew and was the language which Jesus Christ, His Blessed Mother Mary and the apostles spoke. It is a member of the Western Asian family called the Semitic group. The earliest inscriptions in the linear alphabet date back to the tenth century B.C.

In the early centuries Jews were carrying trade with India, China and the east. Muziris or Cranganore was the main port of trade. And so Syriac was the commercial language in the early India and there was an edict of Emperor Asoka in Syriac. The presence of the Jews in India made St Thomas to come to India and we became blessed by the faith in Jesus Christ. Thomas Christians are those who claim their Christian origin from the apostle St. Thomas. Formerly there were Thomas Christians in several parts of India and also in Persia. Only those of the south west coast of India have come down to the present day. They alone are the subject of this treatise.

Syriac was the liturgical language of the Thomas Christians and they loved it as a sacred heritage. They blended the faith they received with the culture of the place where they lived and called it The Thoma Margam. Mar thoma Margam is the social, cultural, religious, theological, spiritual, liturgical and administrative set up, of the apostolic faith community of India, its diversity and unity of the catholic faith founded on the apostolic faith experience of St Thomas, which he imparted to us. Syriac, as their liturgical language, helped them to live this Thoma Margam effectively.

Our ancestors knew Syriac and, as the Synod of Diamper testifies, our family prayers were in Syriac. Later though Syriac was restricted to the
liturgical language, (mass or liturgy, sacraments and breviary or the liturgy of the hours) many knew how to read Syriac and participate in the services of the church.

In the early stages, the reading of Syriac was transmitted by word of mouth. To get the correct reading, they adopted the dot system in about the third century A.D. in the schools of Edessa and Nisibis and that led to the division of East syriac, from the old script which was called Estrangela. In about the fifth century A.D. some began to use the Greek vowels in writing and that brought in the West Syriac script and it was fully developed by the seventh century. There are manuscripts using both the Eastern as well as the Greek vowels in the same document.

Fr. Andrews Kalappura has done a lot for Syriac. He was the professor in the Puthenpally Seminary. He published a Syriac Malayalam dictionary. Fr. Mathew Vadakkel and Fr. Joseph Puthenpura taught in the Mangalapuzha Seminary. Fr. Vadakkel revised the dictionary of Kalappura. Later Fr. Jerome C.M.I. too taught at the Mangalapuzha Seminary. Fr. Jerome published a Syriac grammar in Malayalam.

His Eminence Cardinal Tisserant who was a scholar and promoter of Syriac worked for the establishment of the Vadavathoor Seminary to promote our Rite and Liturgy.

Mar Mathew Kavukatt had been the professor of Syriac at the St. Berchmans College, Changanacherry. Mar Sebastian Vayalil was a promoter of Syriac who took a bold step for our liturgical renewal when it was stagnant at a critical situation.

Rev. Dr. Placid C.M.I. was a great lover and promoter of Syriac and our Liturgy who has done a lot for the restoration of our Liturgy. He knew our church and loved it and served it. He had doctorate in Philosophy, Theology and Canon Law. Later he served as a secretary to cardinal Tisserant when he visited India. Rome made him a Consultant of the Sacred Congregation for Oriental Churches. He has published a history of the Thomas Christians in India. As Fr. Placid was asked by the Kerala University he prepared and presented a history of the Thomas Christians for it.

Fr. Bernard T.O.C.D. was the doyen of the history of the Thomas Christians and had published his work in two volumes. Fr. Fabian C.M.I. was a scholar in the Syriac language and he with Dr. Placid revised the Syriac study of our seminary and allotted bible portions of Syriac for each year and that raised the standard of our study for many years.

Rev. Fr. Gabriel T. O. C. D. and Fr. Ludovic C.M.I. were great scholars who enriched us with their grammars. Fr. Henry Suzo C.M.I. was a learned scholar in Syriac who loved and taught the language in different places. Fr. Joseph Augustin C.M.I. was a clever teacher and promoter of Syriac. Fr. Erasmus C.M.I. was a good teacher of Syriac. Fr. Antony C.M.I. was a Syriac scholar and was an expert in proof reading and served the St. Joseph Press Mannanam for long.

Rev. Fr. Basil (C.M.I. old T.O.C.D.) was well versed in the notation of our Syriac songs. Fr. Justin (who later left the Carmelite congregation) with Rev. Fr. Saldhana S.J. compiled and published the notes of almost all our liturgical services. Fr. Amos C.M.I. was a musician and he helped the German Scholar Dr. Hussman to compose and publish the notes of the liturgy and breviary. When Dr. Husman went to Iraq to study and publish Syriac tunes, with the blessing of the Sacred Oriental Congregation, the bishops directed him to Kerala since their music system had been lost. He stayed in the Prior General’s House at Ernakulam and learned and prepared the notes. Fr. Alexander Kattakayam C.M.I. was clear and clever in the notes of the Syriac music and used to sing melodiously.

Nidhirickal Manikkathanar was a multi-lingual scholar and a lover and promoter of Syriac. Rev. Dr. Thomas Arayathinal M.O.L. was a deep scholar in Syriac and blessed us with his Grammar and Exercises. He had a good collection of Syriac books and was thorough with them. His grammar was first prepared in West Syriac, when he was assisting Mar
Ivanios at Trivandrum. His Syriac books were donated to the St. Thomas Seminary Vadavathoor by his family. Fr. Marcel C.M.I. was a promoter of Syriac and was for a time the board member of the M.G. University.

Fr. Emmanuel C.M.I. (Andumalil) the famous Manikkathanar, translated and published the New Testament from the Pshitha with commentary. He translated and published the Pentateuch too from the Syriac Pshitha. He has published a poetical version of the Book Of Ecclesiasticus with commentary. Fr. Paschaisius C.M.I. was a Syriac scholar and worked in the C.M.I. Bible translation committee and prepared a version of the Minor Prophets. Fr. Bernardine C.M.I., Fr. Cletus C.M.I. and Fr. Abundius C.M.I. too were Syriac scholars and worked in the C.M.I. Bible translation committee.

Rev. Dr. Varghese Pathikulangara is a lover and promoter of Syriac. Rev. Fr. John Bosco Thottakkara C.M.I. was a hero of Syriac and he published a “Help to Syriac studies” in Malayalam under the title by Guru Jo Hend. Dr. Charles Payngot C.M.I. is a Syriac Scholar and lover and teacher of Syriac who imparts the spirit of Syriac and has worked for us with the Sacred Oriental Congregation as well as with the Syro-Malabar hierarchy especially in the translation of the Syriac Text and publication of the Breviary.

In 1961 Fr. Emmanuel revised the Syro-Chaldaic Grammar of Fr. Gabriel which was intended to accommodate with the then Latin studies of Jean’s Grammar, like four conjugations etc. into the syriac form. He published a gist of Syriac study (poem) in Malayalam. In 1999 he published a Syriac-English – Malayalam Lexicon to suit the seminary studies as well as the college studies. He published An Introduction to Syriac Studies – (a mini-grammar) in 2002. He too was a board member of Syriac in the M.G. for a term. Fr. Gabriel C.M.I. (Padma Bhushan) is a Syriac scholar and has degrees (Malpan and Sappor) from the Madras University and is a promoter of Syriac and has been a Board Member of the Kerala as well as the Calicut Universities.

The Syro-Malankara church seems to keep up the study of Syriac. The SEERI has a faculty from the M.G University which conducts Syriac studies and bestows M.A and Ph.D. It conducts diploma courses too and promotes the study by all means. Rev. Dr. Jacob Thekkeparampil, the director of SEERI, has collected Syriac books from all over the world and brought in photostats of all famous documents to the institution. The World Syriac Conference at Kottayam SEERI, has brought in many foreign scholars here like the famous Dr. Sebastian Brock and has promoted Syriac studies here.

The starting of Mar Aprem Dayra (near Kanjirathanam) by Rev. Dr. Thomas Konammakkal, for genuine Syro-Malabar liturgical life, study and promotion of Syriac, is a cornerstone for a bright future. He has been teaching Syriac at Vadavathoor and SEERI.

The Madras University once had the faculty in Syriac to bestow degrees. Archbishop Mar Ivanios, Rev. Fr. Romeo Thomas C.M.I. and Rev. Fr. William C.M.I. were there in the Syriac Board. Kerala University seems to keep up its study in Syriac. Fr. William and Romeo were board members in the Kerla too.

The Assyrian Church of the East keeps up Syriac studies to a certain extent. They have published liturgical, catechetical and patristic texts in Syriac from their Mar Narsai Press at Thrissur.

St. Joseph’s Press at Mannanam has been always a contributor to Syriac studies. Similarly Mar Thoma Sleeha Press Puthenpally, started by Fr. Andrews Kalappura, contributed a good deal to the same. Pampakuda has been publishing books in West syriac.

Now many learned and employed youngsters, especially those outside Kerala, love this language and study and promote it by all means and are ready for any sacrifice for it and it is surely a good omen to the future of the Syriac language among us.
Introduction

The St Thomas Christians of Kerala laid an indelible imprint on the cultural strata of the land. All the scholars, beyond any dispute, converge on the point that the Thomistic community of Malabar had imparted significant contributions to the formation of the much applauded culture of Kerala. Language remains the most powerful medium of exposing the culture of a particular society and most of the languages resort to their own script forms to express themselves. It is to be alluded in this context that Malayalam, the language of Kerala was opulent with manifold script forms ie. Vattezhuth, Kolezhuth, Grantha, Arya etc. Centuries back, another script system that was entirely different from the earlier ones, began to evolve in Syrian Christian context to write Malayalam and that is called Karshon. This particular script that remains is an inevitable factor in the heritage of St. Thomas Christians of Kerala can be considered to be a major contribution of the community to the Malayalam language. This article is a modest attempt to throw light upon the same.

Anchoring on the wider milieu of Syriac language only we can ponder upon Malayalam Karshon. Syriac had its roots in Aramaic; in other words Syriac is the transformed face of the Aramaic language. Aramaic belongs to the North-West branch of the semitic group of languages; all the semitic languages form part of the West-Asian family of languages. On this occasion it is to be noted that the Hebrew language bears all the characteristics of the semetic language and is closely associated to Aramaic. Aramaic was the mother tongue of the present eastern Syria and northern Iraq. It was the official language of the Chaldean empire (BC7-6 century) and Persian empire (BC 6-4 centuries). In the fourth century BC, Aramaic became the commercial language of all the nations of West-Asia.

In the seventh and sixth centuries BC Nabuchodonosor, the Chaldian emperor, deported most of the Jews of Judea to Babylon, where also, the common means of communication was Aramaic. Later, Cyrus the emperor of Persia abolished the Chaldean empire and in 536 B.C. he liberated the Jews and permitted them to go back to their homeland. During the Babylonian exile, that extented
to almost 70 long years, the Jews learned more Aramaic and Hebrew became alien to them. Even after they returned to Palestine, Aramaic continued to be their spoken language; by that time Aramaic became the most prominent language of the world. Some sections on the Sacred Books also were written in Aramaic. An Aramaic inscription had been found out from Thakshasila and that indicates that the language was prevalent up to the border of ancient India.

In the second century AD Aramaic got christened as Syriac. Syriac flourished in Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia. The Christians of those countries enriched the Syriac language through their writings. Hence the language came to be known as Christian Aramaic. By 640 A.D. the Muslim Arabs conquered and occupied all the Aramaic speaking countries and consequently Arabic, the language of the conquerors became the official language of the regions. In course of time Syriac became either a dormant or a dead language and it lost its prominence. Today Syriac is used as the liturgical language in some parts of Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

As Aramaic had been transformed into Syriac, as mentioned above, progressive alterations were effected in its script forms and grammar system.

Syriac, like other Semitic languages, is written from right to left. The earliest form of the Syriac scripts is known as Estrangela. The word Estrangela is derived from the Greek term strangle meaning round. Here it is to be remembered that the Aramaic Characters were square in form. During the fourth and the following few centuries two other script forms were evolved out of the Estrangela characters to write Syriac: East Syriac and West Syriac scripts. The former one is also called Nestorian or Chaldaic and the latter is named as Jacobite or Maronite scripts. The east Syriac scripts were patronized mainly by the Nestorian Christians and the west Syriac characters were chiefly used by the Jacobite Christians. Conspicuous distinction does exist in the form of these two scripts. With the evolution of the east and west Syriac characters the Estrangela scripts lost its protuberance.

The St. Thomas Christians of Kerala since their genesis have had a very great reverence, affection and esteem for the Syriac language as it was the language of Jesus and His Apostles. It is quite reasonable to have devotion to the Medium of the Divine Revelation. The eastern branch of Syriac was adopted to be the official liturgical language of the community. The philosophy behind the terminologies of the Syro Malabar Church and Syrian Christians is the same. Thus the St. Thomas Christians who were attuned to the atmosphere of the Syriac language, took initiative for formulating a novel script system - Karshon - to represent the language of the soil. These characters were also named as Kurasani; Mainly Syriac scripts were employed for that.

The Christians of the middle east had the custom of writing Arabic with the Syriac scripts. That way of writing Arabic was known to be carshon, carshuni etc. The specific meaning of these words of Mesopotomian origin can not be traced. The term Karshon is speculated to have been derived from the name of the person who invented the new mode of writing Arabic. But this hypothesis is not accepted by all. Like Malayalam and Arabic, the Armenian language also is represented in Syriac scripts and that methodology too is called Karshon.

As it has been already indicated Malayalam Karshon is comprised mainly of east Syriac scripts. Here, while dwelling on Malayalam Karshon, it becomes imperative to introduce the east Syriac characters. Like other Semitic languages, in Syriac too its consonants enjoy prominence. Each of the Semitic languages possesses twenty two consonants and the same fact holds good also in the case of Syriac. In accordance with its position in a word some of the east Syriac consonant - scripts assume slight alteration. In other words, at the initial point
some of them have their own particular forms; in between two other letters take another shape; at the final part these consonants there appears with still another style. It is to be emphasized that the above mentioned variation of consonants in appearance is not a glaring one. Below are given the photocopy of the east Syrian consonant characters with their variant shapes.

The vowel system in Syriac consists of dots placed above or below the consonants with or without special letters. There are seven vowel symbols in the language and they are illustrated here:

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<th>Vowel symbol</th>
<th>Value in Malayalam</th>
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It is a clear fact that there are more letters in Malayalam than in Syriac; please note that Malayalam belongs to the Dravidian family of languages. It was not possible to represent all the Malayalam consonants with the twenty two Syriac characters. Therefore it became inevitable for the pioneers of Karshon to invent more characters and they were appended to the Syriac scripts. Dr. Thomas kathanar (1997:61) enlisted them and they are exhibited here:

The vowel symbol of these scripts is that of Syriac characters and doubling is effectuated by marking a small line below the letter concerned.

Besides these, ⟨bha⟩, ⟨ja⟩ had been incorporated to the Karshon system from the already existing Arya scripts employed to write Malayalam.

To put in a nutshell, Malayalam Karshon is...
a combination of East Syriac scripts, newly invented letters and borrowed characters. It is believed that this particular system of writing Malayalam with Karshon scripts commenced even before the synod of Diampher (1599). The most important work written in Karshon is Vedatharkam of Mar Joseph Kariatti, the brave son...
of St. Thomas Christians. In order to have a bird’s eye view of Malayalam Karshon, a brief portion from the book is rendered here:

**Its Transliteration**

It is evident that Malayalam Karshon is a heritage symbol of the Mar Thoma Christians of Kerala. This mode of writing is assessed to be a valuable contribution of the community to the Malayalam language. A good number of books and documents in Karshon lie dormant in many of the archives of Kerala and abroad. We, now, shoulder the heavy responsibility of bringing them to the public attention. It is learnt that a few research activities are being carried out, currently, on Malayalam Karshon at the university level. Yet, more and more research endeavours of this sort are required. It will be beneficial to the study of secular as well as the ecclesiastical history of Kerala.

**ENDNOTES**

3. Ibid.
The Cultural Heritage of the Thomas Christians and Our Efforts to Preserve It

Prof. George Menachery

Introduction

It is indeed a privilege to associate oneself with this publication of the St. Thomas Apostolic Seminary especially because of discussing the particular topic viz. The Cultural Heritage of the Thomas Christians and Our Efforts to Preserve It, one perhaps could hardly find a more appropriate forum. The writer remembers with gratitude the kind gesture of Dr Joseph Pallikkaparambil, the then Rector, in the years 1971-72 when he placed at the disposal of the St Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India the services of the Theology students of the institution to write hundreds of minor articles. One also remembers the St. Thomas Jubilee Expo organized by the Seminary in 1973 by a committee consisting of Dr Francis Kalassery, Dr Xavier Koodapuzha and this writer, which expo has now grown into a veritable historical and cultural museum.

The topic of this article, one feels, has been wisely chosen by the editors since there cannot be two opinions about the invaluable nature of the cultural wealth of the St. Thomas Christians. There is to be found today, especially after the efforts of scholars from the early seventies, considerable unanimity of opinion among all the Churches of the St Thomas Christians and among the sub-groups thereof, both among scholars and the People of God in general, regarding the need to study, research, preserve, and propagate this unique heritage - everyone expressing the strongest desire to earnestly cooperate, actively collaborate, and determinedly work together towards that end without any reservations. It has been discovered and accepted that the cultural heritage of the community could be an effective binding force and one of the strongest rallying points - perhaps the chief one at the end of the 20th century - that could unite all the groups and all the Churches that adhere to the St. Thomas tradition in a meaningful spirit of ecumenism.

What is Kerala culture? Who are the true
inheritors of Kerala culture? When one looks at the near consensus among scholars that the Brahmins (Nampoothiris) arrive in Kerala only much later than the third century A.D., their dominance discernible only after the 9th-10th centuries, and that the Nairs appear on the scene only after the twelfth century and even then only as Sudras as they are till this date. One might reasonably surmise that Mar Thoma Nazranies were the most influential community in Kerala in the first centuries. Perhaps up to the year 849 (24 M.E.) when Ayyanadikal confers once again the seventy-two aristocratic/royal privileges on the Palli (Church) and the Palliyars (Christians) these Christians combined in themselves all the attributes of the Brahmins (Purohitas), the Kshatriyas (soldiers and rulers), and the Vysyas (traders and entrepeneurs).

In order to understand the nature, antiquity, and special features of the Syro Malabar culture, as mentioned earlier, it may be useful to examine the opinion that in Kerala Christianity is older than Vedic Hinduism. It may even be that the Syriac script and liturgy - surely the Pahlavi script - were in Kerala much before the Devanagari and the Vedas found their foothold here. Most historians today believe that the Parasurama story is only a legend and the Brahmins arrive in Kerala for all practical purposes only in the 4th century or later, and the Brahmins or Namboodiris establish dominance only around the end of the first millennium A.D.

The name Hinduism from Sindhu > Hindusthan is geographical in origin. Even today the river Sindhu for the westerner is the Indus. In this sense Hinduism is a western term for religious beliefs and practices of most of the peoples in India referring to almost everything in the land or lands across the Indus sometimes even up to China. In this broad sense Kerala formed a part of India and thus could be considered Hindu from the first century onwards (cf. the first century BC/AD writings of Roman authors like Pliny, which author calls Muziris primum emporium Indiae). It is possible that many Greek and Roman writers when they spoke of India had mainly Kerala in their mind. In this geographical sense of Hinduism, and only in that sense, was Kerala the abode of Hindu and Hinduism from the earliest centuries.

Even much before the nineteen-seventies historians were fully convinced that Vedic Hinduism and the Brahmins must have arrived in Kerala only much later than the first centuries BC/AD. The extensive studies made by Dr. M.G.S. Narayanan, the then head of the department of history at the University of Calicut, and later the chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) together with Dr. Veluthat Kesavan, sometime HOD, department of history, Mangalore University, shed much light on the beginnings of the Brahmin community in Kerala.

To understand the origin and spread of Brahmins or Namboodiris in Kerala let us go through the words of Dr. Veluthat Kesavan in some detail: The Brahmins of Kerala are known as Nambudiris. Historical evidences as well as their own traditions suggest that they came from North India and settled down in Kerala, migrating along the West Coast. It is clear that they constitute links in a long chain of migration along the West Coast of India, carrying with them the tradition that Parasurama created their land and donated it to them. In fact, one sees this tradition all along the West Coast from Sourashtra on; and the Brahmanical tradition in the Canarese and Malabar Coasts is nearly identical to one another. According to that tradition, Parasurama created the land between Gokarna and Kanyakumari and settled Brahmins there in sixty-four gramas or villages. As a result, the Brahmins of Kerala share several common features with the Brahmins of the Canarese coast; this also distinguishes them from their counterparts in the rest of South India. In a historical inquiry, this is extremely important. What is necessary is not to look for the place of their origin or the identity and date of Parasurama but to ascertain the social
function of such a tradition and examine the extent of linkages between the two regions and their cultures. It is stated that thirty-two out of the sixty-four gramas are in the Tulu speaking region and the remaining thirty-two in the Malayalam speaking region in Kerala. Recent historical research has identified these settlements on either side of the border. Those in Kerala proper are listed in the Keralolpatti, the narrative of Kerala history.

The settlements are:

a) Between rivers Perumpuzha and Karumanpuzha:

b) Between rivers Karumanpuzha and Churni:

c) Between river Churni and Kanya Kumari:

Of these, most survive today with the continuing Brahmanical traditions and the structural temples known as gramakshetras. Many find mention in the epigraphical records dating from the ninth century and a few are mentioned in literature. Moreover, every Nambudiri house claims to belong to one or the other of these thirty-two settlements in Kerala. The historicity of the grama affiliation of the Nambudiris, therefore, cannot be doubted. It is possible that these (Brahman) settlements came up between the third and ninth centuries of the Christian era, i.e., the close of the early historical period in the history of South India, which historians describe as the Sangam Age, and the establishment of the Chera kingdom of Mahodayapuram.

And Dr. M.G.S. Narayanan concurs: This situation helps us to confirm that the ancestors of present day Nambudiris established their temple-centred Gramas in the span of the 8th-9th centuries. As the Brahmins in the historical epochs have always been clan-conscious and conservative, they must have been Brahmins by birth only. They are found to have followed the laws of Dharmasastra texts according to the internal epigraphic evidence. There is no question of conversion of non-Brahmins or the recruitment of non-Brahmins as Brahmins into the Brahmin fold, as these practices are foreign to Dharmasastra literature. As we know from the contemporary records that these Brahmins had brought all the paraphernalia of the Vedic-Sastric-Puranic Brahminism of the Gangetic valley, they could not have been indigenous to Kerala.

The above authorities incontrovertibly establish the fact that Brahmins and Brahminism along with Vedic Hinduism arrived in Kerala only many centuries later than the commencement of the Christian era. The Nairs, who belong to the Chaturvarna or four castes, though they form the lowest rung of the caste system as they are Sudras, appear on the scene even much later than the Brahmins, perhaps as late as the 12th century A.D. Centuries before there was any trace of Vedic Hinduism in Kerala there are many well established evidences for the existence of Christians in Kerala. Christianity would appear to be the oldest existing religion in Kerala, much older than any other organised religion including Islam.

Vigrahas or images of vedic Hindu gods and goddesses appear in Kerala only after the 11th
century, much later than the rock crosses. Even at the Salem, Erode portions of the Chera Kingdom and the Venad, Kanyakumari sector they appear only mostly after the 9th century. In fact all the Vigrahas or images of Hindu gods and goddesses appearing anywhere in Kerala are datable to a period much later than the time of the Pahlavi crosses of St. Thomas Mount, Kottayam, Kadamattam, Muttuchira, and Alangad.


One might here genuinely ask about the existence of innumerable old temples in Kerala, and temple festivals. Most of these temples are Kavus dedicated to Bhagavathy or an ancient mother-goddess. The well-known Trichur Pooram festival, for example, is only a get-together of a dozen Bhagavathies, and Shiva or Vadakkunnathan has nothing whatsoever to do with it, although the festivities take place around the Vadakkunnathan or Shiva temple. The Thidambu or image in gold or silver carried by the elephants depict only or chiefly the Bhagavathy of Paramekkavu, Thiruvambady etc. and there is no proper Hindu god or goddess honoured during these festivals.

Sankara in his 64 Anacharams or code of conduct for Namboodiris or Malayalee Brahmans specify that only a white dress must be worn by members of the community. Now it is well known that Brahmin women in S. India in Karnataka or Tamil Nadu or Andhra wear only dark coloured Chelas from Kancheepuram or elsewhere. The Christian women of Kerala are well known for their white dress with the beautiful fan-like arrangement at the back called njori which adds to their beauty and testify their admirable modesty. By adopting the white dress and the njori the Brahmins of Kerala were trying to ensure their aristocracy.

Sankara further enjoins his community to eschew all nasal ornaments: Nasabharanam Nishidham, although Brahmin women elsewhere in India are addicted to nasal ornaments. It is for the Christian community of Kerala alone that Nasabharanam is Nishidham and nasal ornaments still remain taboo.

As far as the similarity of many other customs of the Brahmins and Christians it is not necessary to enter here. Although the similarities in the birth ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, and funeral ceremonies of these two communities are quite striking, often indicating that, the Brahmins when they arrived in Kerala borrowed the customs of the then ruling community of Kerala viz., the Christians.

Although many of the matters mentioned in this paper must have been well understood by the Brahmin and upper caste scholars, somehow efforts to make these matters common knowledge were never made. One theory that helped keep things hidden was the Lacuna theory or Dark Chapters theory. Those who wrote history said that the second half of the first millennium in Kerala history was a dark age and a lacuna existed in our knowledge of this period. These 500 years between 500 AD and 1000 AD were precisely the centuries when age-old Christian dominance in Kerala declined, giving way
to Brahmin asendancy. However there are many documents dealing with this period which are ignored or deliberately overlooked by such historians.

Many of the earliest existing documents in Kerala history deal with the Christians or Mar Thoma Nazranies of Kerala often called the Syrian Christians. The half a dozen Pahlavi crosses are one set of such records. The Kinayi Thoman copper plates, the Thazhekkad Rock inscription, the Tharisappalli copper plates, are another set of records, all these belong, certainly, to the first millennium AD.

The oldest places in Kerala are connected with the ancient Christian community of Kerala. Palayoor, Parur and Kodungalloor are instances of this. It may be remembered that these three places, which occupy a place of pride in the St. Thomas Apostolic story, are all on the oldest and biggest geological plate underground, so that generally these places were never affected by earthquakes. Tsunamis also, mostly confined to the Bay of Bengal and beyond to the East never troubled the West Coast, thus allowing continuous existence of the Christian community here.

By the reverse projection of Kerala’s population we may arrive at a figure like 300,000 for the population of Kerala in the 1st century. If the stories of conversion of people by St. Thomas has any credibility the majority of people in Kerala, mostly inhabiting the 7 places where the apostle worked, must have become Christians and the types of political and social systems and institutions of the Sangham age were perhaps very much influenced by this huge and powerful Christian Community.

The high status and social position of the Christians in the early centuries is also noteworthy. Only hundred and fifty years back when women in Kerala tried to cover the upper part of their body there was a huge commotion which resulted in the Channar Lahala or the mutiny of the Channar caste. But then 1500 years back Christians in Kerala were wearing silk gowns, silk turbans, gold ornaments on their head and on their body. Even today the gold business in Kerala is mostly in the hands of Nazranies: Alappatt, Palathingal, Josco, Chemmannur, Thottan, and Alukkas, etc. The 72 privileges enjoyed by Christians even before the different copper plate grants reassured their right to continue to enjoy those privileges indicate that the Christians were the predominant and ruling community of Kerala before the Brahmins gained dominance towards the end of the first millennium. The marriage customs of the Christians throws considerable light on the royal privileges and aristocratic status of the Christian community in Kerala during the past well-nigh 1900 years.

The art and architecture of these Christians – with their rock work, metal work, wood work, ivory work and artistic creations in every known medium – and with their deepastamba or lampstand, dwajasthamba, or flagstaff, rock crosses inside and outside the churches, their baptismal fonts bear ample testimony to their place in society in bygone centuries. The base or pedestal of the open-air crosses are like the balikkallu or Sacrificial altar stone of the temples. But the bali on the balikkallu in the rock crosses is the supreme bali of Jesus symbolized by the cross - the MahaBali. Also it is interesting to note that all the crosses rise up from the lotus. In fact the national flower lotus, the national bird peacock, and perhaps even the national animal tiger first appear in Kerala art on the rock crosses.

Before proceeding any further let us take another look at this oft-used but much abused term culture. One uses the word culture in different contexts: When we say in English, ‘She’s a very
cultured woman’, what we generally mean is She had a good education and knows a lot about art, music, painting etc. Similarly ‘She’s a person of culture’ would mean She likes and knows a lot about literature, art, music, etc. But there is much more to culture than all this.

Other phrases come to mind: phrases like Culture Shock, Culture Gap, Cultural Stereotype, Cultural Cringe, and Culture Vulture. Culture has been defined in various ways, but the truth is, so far a universally accepted definition of culture has not yet been found. Kroeber and Kluckhohn list in their book *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* about 250 definitions and even this list is not complete. Not to become too involved philosophically attention may simply be directed to the excellent article “Culture at the Service of Evangelisation in India” by Stephen Fuchs.

In order to emphasize the point that in the phrase Cultural Heritage, Culture means much more than art, architecture, sculpture, literature, and music, a few more quotations one may be kindly permitted to reproduce:

Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Culture is everything. Culture is the way we dress, the way we carry our heads, the way we walk, the way we tie our ties; it is not only the act of writing books or building houses.

The Nature of Culture: Culture is based on the uniquely human capacity to classify experiences, encode such classifications symbolically, and teach such abstractions to others. It is usually acquired through inculturation, the process through which an older generation induces and compels a younger generation to reproduce the established lifestyle; consequently, culture is embedded in a person’s way of life. Culture is difficult to quantify, because it frequently exists at an unconscious level, or at least tends to be so pervasive that it escapes everyday thought.

Thus the existence and use of culture depends upon an ability possessed by humans alone. It refers to behaviour peculiar to *Homo sapiens*, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behaviour. Hence culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, and ceremonies, among other elements.

The rock edicts and copperplate grants, various Granthavaries, the Ramban Song, the Margam Kali Pattukal, the Pallippattukal, and other such songs, the letters and reports of the Portuguese and the Dutch, the Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper contain much information for the various aspects of the culture of the St Thomas Christians. But the most important source is the collective memory of the people, and the existing customs and traditions, in addition to the extant works of art, architecture etc. Works by Ferroli, Schurhammer, and Placid, and the efforts of the three Hs: Heras, Hosten, and Hambye have contributed greatly to our knowledge and understanding of the Thomas Christian cultural heritage. A special word about Henry Hosten is perhaps in place: His efforts to photograph the many Kerala churches and their artistic and cultural treasures have not been fully understood. A number of photos he had collected in 1924 which could be actually accessed only in the late nineties, first perhaps by this writer, are reproduced from the Hosten collection (originally at Kurseong but now at Delhi) in Vol. III of the *St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India*, 2010, Ollur.

To understand, appreciate and conserve the cultural heritage of the Syro-Malabar Church one must study all the aspects mentioned above in detail vis-a-vis the cultural heritage of all the other Thomas Christians and the cultural heritage of Kerala. These streams are generally quite similar and often identical with each other. In a short article of this length justice cannot be done to even a single aspect of this
heritage. However let us deal with some items at random, knowing full well that the selection is bound to be arbitrary, and the treatment haphazard.

The documentary video of 2006 continuously screened in the St. Thomas Christian Museum at Mount St. Thomas, Kakkanad, scripted and supervised by this writer, shows a large number of examples of the various works of art in the Syro-Malabar churches. For some 300 original photographs dealing with the topic see, STCEI, II, 1973. Suffice it to say the works of art and architecture in wood, metal, ivory, stone, colours, plaster, shells, cloth, etc. in the Syro-Malabar churches and households form a considerable proportion of art objects in Kerala and their position qualitatively and quantitatively in the hierarchy of Kerala’s art tradition cannot be questioned. Among the objects in these churches which contribute much to the artistic superiority of Kerala may be counted the huge pillarless roofs and roof decorations, the belfrys, the altarpieces, the ceilings, the wooden rostra (Pushpakkoodu), the processional Roopakkoodu, the wooden candlesticks, the open-air granite crosses, the copper-sheathed flagstaffs, the rock lampstands and the array of rock (chuttuvilakku) lamps on the huge Aanamathil, facades and their plaster images, baptismal fonts, bronze bells and vessels, wood and ivory statues, wooden boxes, gold and silver crosses, colourful processional umbrellas, mural paintings, wooden panels, goldcoated woodcarvings, and a thousand and one other items. True some of these are of post-Portuguese origin. But typologically and from the point of view of the techniques used most of these are typically Keralite and often typically Christian in origin and use. An example is the architectural superiority of the pillarless wooden roofing of the Kerala churches to the Ayiramkal Mandapams of say, Madura, Chidambaram, or Kancheepuram.

One of India’s most celebrated festivals is the Pooram festival of Thrissur. This festival was planned, organised and established by Shaktan Tamburan of Cochin just two centuries ago. Perhaps the most attractive item of this festival is the celebrated Thekkottirakkam with the heavenly sight of the changing of the colourful umbrellas or parasols. It is this changing of the umbrellas that brings to the Thekkinkad Maidan lakhs of visitors from India and hundreds from abroad every year. Although even the smallest Syro-Malabar Church has a dozen colourful Muthukkudas or colour umbrellas in its possession from the time of its establishment (the Puthuppally church alone has eight hundred such umbrellas), it being an item of the 1500 years old 72 privileges of Kerala Christians, these churches or their festivals are not very famous compared to the two centuries old Pooram. It is not having these art objects that matters, but using one’s cultural wealth to the best advantage for the greater glory of God and man.

Adi Sankaracharya or as Dr. M.G.S. Narayanan would have it (cf. his Introduction to the Glimpses of Nazraney Heritage by this writer) one of the later Sankaracharyas in his 64 so-called anacharams made white cloth compulsory for Brahmin men and women. He made nasal ornaments taboo for Kerala Brahmin womenfolk (i.e., the Antharjanams). Today the njori forms part of the costume of aristocratic Nampoothiri women. Brahmin women everywhere else i.e. outside Kerala, say in Tamilnadu or Karnataka, use dark-coloured dresses. Outside Kerala they always use nasal ornaments. In Kerala traditionally only Mar Thoma Nazrany women have these two customs. Did Sankaracharya who lived in Kalady at the centre of Christian communities of Malayattoor, Angamaly, Parur, Edappally, etc., easily accessible by river, borrow these customs from the aristocratic Nazranies to promote Brahmin acceptability? In any case a white dress has always been a part of Christian culture in Kerala as also the taboo concerning the use of nasal ornaments. Here one might also make mention of the large number of similarities found between nampoothiri and Nazrany customs regarding ornaments, marriage, birth, and death related ceremonies and observances, costumes, daily utensils and food items etc.
Here, in passing, one might draw the attention of the reader to the findings of Dr. Mini Kariappa based on DNA tests at the Hyderabad Center about the similarities between the DNAs of the Namboothiris, the Nazranies, and the Jews. This writer first made her findings known to the Christian scholars at the 13th Triennial of the Church History Association of India (Goa, 2005) when discussing the Idea of Clean and Unclean among the three communities (cf. the paper ‘The Idea of Clean and Unclean among the Brahmins, the Jews, and the Christians of Kerala’ also read at the World Syriac Conference and published in the HARP and elsewhere) and later through her papers at the Kuruvilangad Panditha Sammelanam and the 15th Triennial of CHAI at Hyderabad (both in 2011) to the outer world. This can have lasting consequences on the study of Thomas Christian culture by future historians.

Kerala Christians have their own customs and traditions regarding many other matters, as in the names chosen for their children or in the type of Palaharams they make for Holy days and festivals. There are even some curries and side dishes which are peculiar to the Christians of Kerala.

Every Syro-Malabar baptismal name and especially its colloquial or pet version either harks back to the original Greek or Middle Eastern style or is typically a Malayalam style term fully vernacularised. Thus Paul is Paulose as in the original Greek. Chandy is derived from Alexander. Lonappan, Lona, Yohannan, are John. Varghese, Varu, Varunny, Varappan, are all from Geevarghese. Ittira is Itti Avira i.e., Abraham. Ihthak is Issac. And so on.

Many are called by typical Kerala names Kunjumon, Kochumon, Kochappu (Joseph), Ittiannam or Kunjethy or Naithy (Anna), Kunjila or Eliamma or Eliakkutty (Elizabeth). Another interesting aspect is that almost all Christian names in Kerala before the arrival of the Portuguese were derivations of George, Cyriac, or Thomas for men and Mary, Anna, and Elizabeth for women.

Kuzhalappam of the Ollur St. Raphael’s festival, Mandayappam of the Akapparambu festival are well known. The Kallappam or Velleppam or Pattani Appam of Thissur is famous all over the country and now even abroad. Cheeda, Madakkucheeda, Unda, Achappam, Inderi, Kalthappam, Karappam or Unniappam, Neyyappam, Kinneppam, Vatteppam, Kozhukkata, are typical preparations of the Nazranies.

There is no curry more indigenous than the Christian preparation of fish. The typical Meen-curry makes use of fish from our own rivers or from our own ponds, coconut milk from coconuts plucked from the trees of our own orchard, and mango from our own mango trees. This is a curry which deserves to be considered the most Keralite of dishes.

Similarly look at the Pindi Kuthi Perunnal or Denaha Perunnal commemorating the visit of the three wise men or kings from the East. The pindies are from our own plantain trees. The coconut leaves used to decorate the pindi and to make the rings and the arangu are from our orchards. The ‘nails’ used are the ‘bones’ of the coconut leaves. The oil used for the torches is the coconut oil of Kerala and the Chirads made of Marottikkaya are also of local origin. The Plantain trees and bunches of plantains and bunches of coconuts used for decoration are also of indigenous origin. It is really a ‘Keralite’ festival.

Thus we can see that the whole culture of the Syro Malabarians is rooted in the soil and of Kerala or Bharata vintage.

Institutions like Palliyogam and Pallikkoodam prospered under the Christian aegis.

Liturgy, liturgical art and architecture, music, musical instruments, vestments, gestures, feasts, festivals and other celebrations all formed another important part of the cultural richness of the Syro-Malabar Church.
Down from the first century we find Kerala Christians almost invariably open to all the sections of world Christianity and willing to give a warm welcome to fellow Christians irrespective of their nationality or allegiance. For the Kerala Christian, Christianity was always the same whether it was of one brand or another. It is only much later that lack of unity and divisions become permanent features of Kerala Christianity, especially after the Portuguese intervention.

Kerala perhaps is the part of India which has come into contact with the maximum number of different cultures from all parts of the world at least from the first centuries BC. Kerala also came into contact with almost all world religions at an early stage. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam arrived in present day India first at Muziris which was in the vicinity of Kodungallur in Kerala. This exposure to world religions, and world cultures was maximum in the case of the Christians of Kerala as they had a monopoly on sea trade from time immemorial (caste Hindus considered crossing the sea taboo). Hence Kerala Christians became world citizens before other parts of India became even aware of the existence of other cultures and other religions. This had had its positive and negative effects on the character and conduct of Keralites in general and Kerala Christians in particular. This is well reflected in the cultural heritage of the Kerala Christians. While this has helped the Thomas Christians to absorb some of the best things from all cultures, it has also led to their changing too fast and discarding the ways of their forefathers without much hesitation. This is best seen in their attitude to their cultural heritage.

In spite of the Vatican setting up various commissions and other bodies for promoting the protection and preservation of the cultural wealth of individual Churches and for the promotion of better methods in the preservation of old records and monuments, very little progress has been made by the Syro-Malabar Church in these matters. The writings and speeches of the Holy Father regarding these matters appear to have had little impact on this Church. This negligence is visible in the attitude to all aspects of culture, although here and there one could see some solitary efforts being made to remedy matters. The leadership being given by the ecclesiastical dignitaries, it may be hoped, will bear fruit in the not too distant future. Already some success is visible in many churches having put up granite lamp-stands (deepa sthambas), rock open-air crosses, and metal sheathed flag-staffs (dwaja sthambas).

Perhaps this is the place to sound a much needed warning to our own people to preserve their cultural and historical heritage. Anyone who has worked in the field knows the neglect and even vandalism of Kerala Christians towards their cultural heritage. Old churches and monuments are demolished and replaced with ugly concrete structures, ancient paintings are rubbed off, and copperplate grants are sold for metal value; valuable records perish without being copied. And the general outrage to history and antiquity borders on the criminal. It is high time this is stopped.

We may conclude with Goethe:

Men are so inclined to content themselves with what is commonest; the spirit and the senses so easily grow dead to the impressions of the beautiful and perfect, that every one should study, by all methods, to nourish in his mind the faculty of feeling these things. For this reason, one ought every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and, if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words.

ENDNOTES

1. Cf., f. i., Questions 2 and 3 (226) on universally / commonly acceptable artistic / architectural features in the St. Thomas tradition and such features of the Palliyogam along with the answers (226, 227) given during the Group Discussions and the general recommendations (229 et. sq.) of the seminar on The Life and Nature of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period, in Bosco Puthur (Ed.), LRC Publication No.1, LRC, Kochi, 2000. The different papers reproduced and responses thereto also may
throw considerable light on this aspect.

2 The views of Dr. M. G. S. Narayanan and Dr. Veluthattu Kesavan who have exhaustively studied the question of the arrival of Nampoothiri Brahmins in Kerala and their early settlements in Kerala may be read in their papers for the LRC Seminar on some of the Historical Questions related to 1. the Nampoothiris, 2. the Jews, and 3. the Samgham Literature held here in September 2000. Prof. Rajan Gurukkal and Prof. Scaria Zacharia gave prepared responses to the paper on the Early History of Nampoodiris in Kerala.

3 It is especially stated [in the copper plates] that Vijayaragadeva the kings representative, Ayyan Atikal the governor, Rama Thiruvatikal the governors heir apparent, Prakriti (chief citizens), Adhikarar (officers), Arunnurruvar (The Six Hundred), and the Patis (local chiefs) of Punnaittalai and Polaikkutti were present on the occasion of this gift and this in itself conveys its importance. - M. G. S. Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*, Kerala Historical Society, Trivandrum, 1972, 36.

4 Because the 72 privileges have more rights and freedoms and authority incorporated into them than enjoyed even by Azhvancheri Thamparakkal, both a ruler and top Nampoothiri. (Read the Tharisappalli plates along with the Jewish plates for some eleven of these privileges or Viduperus: Earth and water on elephant-back, day lamp, spreading cloth, palanquin, umbrella, northern drum, bugle, locked gate, arch, arch-decoration, and arrow.) Vide M. G. S. Narayanan, op. cit., ibid.

5 Cf. Paper ‘Christianity Older then Hinduism in Kerala’ by this writer at the World Syriac Conference 2002 -SEERI – Kottayam – also published in the HARP.


9 Sir E. B. Tylor.

10 Aime Cesair 7.

11 Encyclopaedia Brittanica.

12 Like the Thazhekkat rock inscription and the later foundation stones and tomb inscriptions of many churches.

13 Like the Tharisappalli plates and the Palayur plates.


16 Vide supra f.n.14.


18 See the separate articles in the ecumenical *St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India*, ed. G. Menachery, Vol.II, Trichur, 1973. Vol.I (1984), and II (1982) of the History of Christianity in India (CHAI - ed. A. M. Mundadan) and the *Malayalam Kraisthava Vijnana Kosham* (Alleppey, 1976) also have much useful material. The STCEI and The Nazranies together have nearly one thousand photographs dealing with the cultural heritage of the Thomas Christians. A collection of articles by this writer entitled *Pallikkalakalum Mattum* in Malayalam (Trichur, 1984) has given as appendices a number of rather exhaustive lists of objects of art of the St. Thomas Christians gathered from churches and households for the various exhibitions organized by the STCEI from 1971 onwards and for the Christian Cultural Museum of Trichur (1980).

19 Yet when the local churches brought forth all their Muthukkudas in 1983 for the Holy Year cultual rally it was a wonderful sight indeed that left the onlookers dumbfounded with joy. From that time onwards more and more processions in the State and even abroad are displaying the Muthukkudas and Historico-cultural floats to advantage.


Introduction

Among the Christians of Kerala, India, there are three performing arts. Margamkali is a male dance among the Syrians, mainly among the Knanites. The Latin Christians have chavuttunatakam, a western type drama. Sharing with the Hindus and Muslims the Christians, both Syrians and Latins of Kerala, perform parachamuttukali, a gladiatorial dance with swords and shields.

The Term Margamkali

The Malayalam term margamkali means “the play” (kali of “the way” (màrgam); The term màrgam is biblical: derek in Hebrew and hodos in Greek. Thus, there is reference to “the way” in Acts 9:2 “He found many belonging to the way”, Acts 18:25 “instructed in the way of the Lord”, Acts 18:26 “explained to him the way of God”, Acts 19:9 “speaking evil of the way” Acts 22:4 “Paul persecuted this way to death binding and delivering to prison both men and women”, Acts 24:14 “According to the way which they call a sect”, and in Acts 24:22; Roman governor Felix having a rather accurate knowledge of “the way. Generally speaking, “the way” is Christian faith and religion. In Malayalam to join Christianity is rendered màrgam cheruka, and those converts to Christianity are called màrga vasikal. Hence, màrgamkali is a play in which the story about Christ and Christianity is portrayed.

In fact the songs of margamkali sung during this dance are based on the theme of an ancient Syriac apocryphal called “Acts of Thomas” written in the third century in Syria. It is believed that in the early part of the third century a basilica was erected in Edessa, where the relics of St Thomas the apostle were kept, after having been’ brought from the tomb of the Apostle St Thomas in Mylapore, India. This book consisting of the Apostolate of St Thomas and his martyrdom in India was composed most likely for the benefit of the pilgrims who came to the shrine of St Thomas to venerate his relics.
The Malayalam rendering of the story of St Thomas based on the Syriac text was adapted to the Kerala situation. There, instead of the reference to the King Gundaphor of North India, the Malayalam text has the reference to the King of Chozha Empire situated in South India. It is this King who wanted to get a skilled carpenter to build a beautiful and prestigious palace for himself in par with Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem. The King sent his minister to Jerusalem where Jesus appeared and entrusted Thomas with the task of building the palace. Instead of building the earthly palace, the Apostle helped the poor with resources given by the King, and preached “the way” of the Lord Jesus to the people. The story continues with how the people accepted the way of Christ, and how because of “the way”, St Thomas was persecuted and martyred. Hence the name margamkali, “the play of the Way.” Jesus said, “I am the way”

Historical Sketch

A sociological survey made by Dr. Chummar Choondal of Trissur in 1981 has brought to light the fact that 95% of the margamkali performance and margamkali teams are among the Knanaya Christian.2

A convoking of all the margamkali ashans in 1984 resulted in getting 33 ashans who were all Knanites or who learned the dance from Knanite teachers.

It is interesting to note that in a report by Hosten S.J. in Indian Antiquity3, it is said:

“On February 7, 1924, at the Sacred Heart Hill in Kottayam, I witnessed some of the very dances and listened to the very songs which 325 years earlier had delighted Dom Menezes and his numerous party. Some of these songs are in the collection now presented. It was 8.00 p.m. A party of men, Southists, armed with bucklers and rhinoceros hide and swords, came to take their Bishop and his party from the Priest’s Home on the top of the Hill. They conducted us amid a display of their fencing to the new school hall, where a crowd had assembled to witness the thamasha (entertainment). Around a big brass lamp with 12 wicks, in honor of the Apostles, an antique piece of furniture, a 12 petal lotus, the dances went on in endless variety for 2 hours, with clapping of hand gesticulations and prostration; all the time the men sang, resting only for a change of tune. They recounted in verse the birth of Christ our Lord, the adoration of the Magi, Christ’s life in passion; St Thomas’ coming to Malabar, and his death in Chinna Malai (Little Mount, Mylapore).

“Thomas Cana leaving Mesopotomia with his party of colonists, the farewell on the seashore, and the recommendation to bear in mind the Ten (Commandments) and the seven (sacraments), the meeting between Thomas Cana and the Parumal of Malabar, the privileges granted on the occasion etc. They might have continued ‘till 1 o’clock after

The Background

Not much is known about the early history of Christianity in India. The earliest witness even to the Apostolate of St Thomas is the third century Acts of Thomas mentioned earlier. So also, the second most important event in the history of the Indian church, the immigration of Jewish Christians from Mesopotamia in 345 A.D., under the leadership of Thomas of Knai (Knai Thoma, Thomas of Cana), Does not have a fourth century testimony. But these great traditions are embedded in the hearts off the Syrian Christians and the Knanaya Christians. These are expressed and handed down through the “Ancient Songs” of these Christians. These Songs were edited by P.U. Lukas under the title The Ancient Songs of the Syrian Christians of Malayala (Purathana Pattukal), Kottayam 1910; the ninth edition by Jacob Vellian, Kottayam, 1999 pp. 140-153 contains the margamkali pattu covering the history of St Thomas1
midnight. But, alas, these songs and dances are now going out of fashion.”

Fr. Hoseten SJ., the European, was enamored of this dance and wished to take the dancers of margamkali for a performance to Rome for the Missions Exhibition at the Vatican (1925). He wanted to bring home to the church of Europe the primitive soul of the ancient people, the Indian children of St Thomas the Apostle. With sadness he noted that the non Knanites resented taking the dancers to Rome which for them “might ridicule all the St Thomas Christians” since it was an uncouth cultural performance. Hence, margamkali was not represented in the Vatican during the exhibition. These testimonies show that there were Christian dances with various Christian themes to entertain people and that the Knanites were fully involved in such dances.

Gouvea, the secretary of Archbishop Menezes (1607) has given a similar narration with salient features of the margamkali performance. “The text of their songs comprised of folk tales-church songs and songs about Saints. Singing songs were composed praising his achievements and blaming the Patriarch of Babylon who had deceived them. Although tired, the archbishop attended a dance at night, which started at eight o’clock and finished at one in the morning. Before the men danced, they first had signed themselves with a cross and recited the Lord’s Prayer, followed by a song concerning the life of Christ or the doings of the saints. A party of men armed like their ancestors with round shields and swords came to meet the bishop, then they danced round a big brass lamp with twelve wicks, a twelve-petal lotus which stood for Christ, and the dance went on for two hours with endless clapping of hands, gesticulation and prostrations. They sang of Christ, of the life of St Thomas Cana and the Perumal.”

Margamkali, the dance, is generally performed on the occasion of reception of eminent persons, parish festivals, wedding celebrations, and so on.

A piece of information about the existence of margamkali is seen in the sculptures at the bottom of the famous “Granite Cross” of Kaduthuruthy, blessed on December, 1559. There are 8 sides for the base of the cross, and on 2 of them, on the front and the left side, as we face the church, dance scenes are carved; they represent parichamuttukali and margamkali. In fact, other sculptures with the scenes of war, Our Lady and the Child Jesus, Kynai Thoma, and of hunting represent in art the history and tradition of the Knanaya people at the foot of the cross of their mother church at Kaduthuruthy. Naturally, margamkali and parichamuttukali found a place among the sculptures.

The antiquity of the margamkali songs containing 14 stanza’s (padams) can be derived from the Syriac and Tamil words, which were included in its composition. There was a time when the Syriac language was used as a trade language (Lingua Franca) in Kodungalloor and surroundings. At least from the fourth century, the Knanites as well as the rest of the Syrian Christians in Malabar used the Syriac language in their liturgical celebrations. They firmly believed that the Syriac language was sacred, since Jesus Christ, His mother, and the Apostles used it, and the holy mass (qurbana) was instituted by Christ in that language. These were reasons” for the Syrian Christians of Kerala to maintain and use the Syriac language even in their cultural performances. Words like maran (our Lord), alaha (God), mar thoma (St Thomas), malaka (angel), kandeesa (Saint), ruha (spirit), nivyalanmar (prophets), Iso (Jesus), Mishiya (Christ) are seen in the lyrics. These and other Syriac words; in fact, are incorporated presently into the Malayalam vocabulary. The Tamil words like meyu (body), peeli (dress), etc. indicate an early period of the history of the Malayalam literature, which contained Tamil words. A good part of the lyrics’ of margamkali goes to the sixteenth century and a few parts like vandanaganam (the initial prayer song) may even
antedate this period. The poet Ulloor in his history of Malayalam literature affirms this.7

In 1982, because of the literary value of the margamkali lyrics a book that was written by Professor Kurian Vempeni and myself on its literature under the title Sweet Songs of Tradition, the Songs of Margamkali (Thanimayude Madhugeethi: Margamkali Pattu) was accepted as a text book for the Sri Shankaracharya University in Kalady for Malayalam MA students.8

Authorship

As any other folklore, margamkali songs also do not have an author. It seems that the traditionally handed down lyrics were modified from time to time by the ashans (teachers) of margamkali. A certain Knanite priest, called Anjilimoottil Ittithoman Kathanar, of Kallisserry of the seventeenth century is considered to be the one who reformed the lyrics as we have them today.

Marganikali Lyrics

In 1910 Mr. P.D. Lukas edited the margamkali songs based on palm leaf manuscripts. In 1984, Dr. Chummar Choondal and myself once again referred to manuscripts before we printed the song text in full with interjections and endings. There we found that although parichamuttukali songs were sung during margamkali and they were incorrectly called margamkali songs, in reality they do not form part of margamkali. Hence, we grouped the 14 padams of margamkali found with that title in manuscripts as margamkali songs, and the rest were grouped under parichamuttukali.

Numbering and Content of the Fourteen Pàdams

In fact there was not a distinct vandanaganam (prayer song for màngamkali). Hence, the first pàdam was made the vandanapadam, taking into account the prayer nature of the lyrics. While discussing the choreography of margamkali with ashans, it was evident that màngamkali had lost much of its hand gestures, probably, also because of the fact that with one hand the players had to hold the hem of their loin clothe lest it should fall. To give vandanapadam a style of rangapuja certain gestures with folded, hands were introduced with the consent of the ashans.

In order to keep the exact number of 14 for padams, the second padam was divided into 2 calling its first part first padam and the second part second pàdam. The 14 pàdams have the following themes:.

Vandanapadam, which is rangapuja or a prayer song, invokes the presence of Christ in the venue of performance. There is an allusion to a peacock wounded by an arrow, which reminds us of a story in which at the time of his martyrdom St Thomas was praying in Mylapore (Village of Peacocks), where he was seen seated on a beautiful peacock, in the midst of other peacocks. The prayer also refers to the immigration of the Knanites and their jubilant wish to stay together without disintegration for which they expect the help of St Thomas.9

First Pàdam : which pictures the vision of King Solomon’s temple by the Chozhan Emperor in Kerala who wanted to build a palace like that.

Second Pàdam : speaks about sending Avan, the minister of Chozhan to the country flowing with milk and honey to look for expert carpenters (thachar), who took much money along with him for his voyage westward.

Third Pàdam: After going through the voyage of violent wind and weather, Avan safely reached the city of Mahosa, where Jesus appeared to him.

Fourth pàdam: After a conversation between Our Lord and Avan, Our Lord promised to give him an architect within a quarter of an hour.
Fifth Pàdam: Our Lord described the skills of the promised architect. Meanwhile, angels brought Thomas, as an artisan and he stood before Him who holds the world in His left hand.

Sixth Pàdam: Avan finds an expert architect in Thomas, and was willing to pay for him. The Lord imparts a farewell message to Thomas, but Thomas was perturbed at the thought of going to India.

Seventh Pàdam: Thomas’ apprehensions and hesitations to go to India are expressed; it is a country with serpents, with shameless leaders of inhuman people, where “sathi” (the bride dying with the dead husband in his funeral pyre), the custom of people marrying the corpse of the dead girl in case she was unmarried, people who cremate the dead, and people without parent-children love. These were the impressions of the Westerners regarding India at the time.

Further, he complained that to all other places two disciples were sent together and to India Thomas alone was sent.10

Eighth Pàdam: Jesus strengthened Thomas by saying, “Think not that you are alone. I will be with you wherever you go. People in India are humane. I will direct your words, looks and thoughts. Your thinking is all my thinking.” Avan gave a heavy sum of money to Jesus who gave the sale deed to Avan. Jesus gave the money to Thomas and sent him off speaking tender words to his heart’s content. Thomas and Avan set sail and reached the kingdom of Chozhan. Thomas drew the plans for the palace and the King was pleased with it. He entrusted Thomas with the construction of the palace, and ordered Avan to supply whatever the architect wanted. Thomas left the place saying that he would return within a year. Thomas gave away the money to the needy.

Nineth Pàdam: Thomas went beyond Chozhan’s Kingdom preaching the gospel. Once, he attended the wedding of Paul’s daughter, possibly a Jew in Kodungalloor. He blessed the bride, and one of the participants got offended at it, slapped the Apostle on the face. A tiger did bite off the right hand of the offender and a dog managed to bring it back to the Apostle, who restored it to the owner and healed him. At this, Paul and his family believed and were baptized.

Thomas went to Malacka and China. To keep his word he returned to Mylapore. Then he went to Mallyankara near Kodungalloor where he preached the gospel, erected a cross and ordained worthy ministers. He then went southward and preached and erected crosses at Kollam, Niranam, Chayal, Kokamangalam, Kottakayal and Palur. In his absence people spoke ill of him. The King became angry and sent for Thomas, who was brought to his presence. He accused Thomas of not even laying the foundation stones of the palace, even after spending a lot of money. Thomas said that a beautiful palace was already built which the King would see after his death. The King ordered Thomas and Avan to be imprisoned

Tenth Pàdam: Chozhan wanted to resign the post of the King, and to hand it over to his brother, who, in turn, was also distressed (and died). Angels took his soul to heaven, where he saw the mansion inscribed to the name of King Chozhan.

Eleventh Pàdam: The King’s brother returned to life, and explained the beauty of the mansion he saw in heaven. Being fully satisfied the King and his brother went to the prison, fell prostrate before Thomas, begged for forgiveness, and set the imprisoned free.

Twelfth Pàdam: The people did not understand the whole thing. They started murmuring as to what should be done to the squanderer of the kingdom’s wealth. Some suggested the punishment of execution and others banishment. But, King Chozhan, his brother, Avan and many others received baptism, and joined “the Way”.

Dr Jacob Vellian
**Thirteenth Pàdam:** It narrates the steady growth of the church. Once, during his journey he passed by a grove temple dedicated to the goddess Kaali. He was identified, and surrounded. He was asked to worship the goddess, but the Apostle refused and threatened to destroy the temple by fire. The temple was burned by fire. A priest escaped the flames and inflicted a mortal wound on the heart of Thomas with a lance.

**Fourteenth Pàdam:** The angels carried the body of Thomas in a palanquin to the Little Mount, “Chinna Malai”. In the midst of heavenly symphonies they carried his soul to the throne of God. Children placed his body in the church. By God’s blessings, followers of His law may live happily free of dangers.

**Version of the Story in the Acts of Thomas**

The themes of the first nine pàdams of margamkali are based on the first Act of the Acts of Thomas; but there is a slight change in the presentation; Thomas got the lot to go to India. He was reluctant. At that time, Gundaphor, the King of Thakshasila, sent Avan to abroad to find a smart carpenter (architect). Jesus saw Avan walking in the streets (of Jerusalem). He sold Thomas to him for 20 silver coins, which Jesus gave to Thomas. Avan and Thomas reached Chandragiri (Andra).

In Chandragiri there was the wedding of a princess in which Thomas and Avan participated. While all were eating and drinking, Thomas simply spent time in prayer. At the time there was the dance of a Jewish girl to entertain the participants. Though while dancing she approached Thomas, he did not want to take notice of her, and hence a servant at the banquet slapped him on the cheek. Thomas only replied, “I will see dogs dragging your arm.” While that servant was drawing water from a stream in the forest, a fox attacked him and killed him. Dogs took away his flesh and limbs. A dog carried a severed hand to the banquet hall. The Hebrew girl recognized that it was the hand that had beaten Thomas. She remembered the Hebrew words which Thomas had spoken to the servant, “A dog will drag your arm.”

The King also came to know about this. He took him to the bride chamber and asked him to pray for his daughter. He prayed for the new couple, and they changed their lifestyle and became immersed in the adoration of God.

The second Act deals with the palace built in heaven by Thomas, and this is the theme of the 10th and 11th padams of margamkali. The 12th padam gives the murmuring and condemnation of people about him, not knowing what had happened in the palace. The 13th padam narrates how Thomas was asked to worship the goddess Kaali and how his refusal led to his persecution. The church spread rapidly. The 14th padam is about the survival and carrying of the soul of Thomas to heaven.

The narration is a little different from that of the margamkali song. Thomas was introduced to the King, who entrusted him with the construction of the palace and gave him sufficient money for it. Thomas distributed the money to the poor and the suffering.

After a long while, having ‘no news about Thomas of the palace, the King furiously summoned Thomas to his presence. Thomas said that long ago he had built the palace, but the King would be able to see it only when he departs from the world after death. The King ordered Avan and Thomas to be imprisoned and to kill them after having questioned them.

Meanwhile, the brother of the King became seriously ill. His last wish was to kill Thomas “the magician;” he expressed it before the King, and entered into a long deep sleep. The sick man saw angels carrying his soul to heaven. He saw, a beautiful mansion in heaven. He wanted to live there, but the angels told him that it was a palace built by Thomas for the King, his brother. By the time the brother of the King was awakened to reality. Upon hearing the news, King Gundaphor set Thomas and Avan free, and expressed his desire to
worship Thomas’ God. The King and his family repented and were baptized. Thomas celebrated the Eucharist for them.

**Other Ancient Songs on St Thomas**

Another ancient song on St Thomas called *Ramban Song* presumably rewritten in 1601 AD by Maliekal Thomas Ramban of Niranam, the successor of the first Thomas Ramban of the family. This song, (448 lines) to which a dance is not seemingly attached, has practically much of the, content of *margamkali*. The text has more Sanskrit words and it gives many miracles, and conversions in thousands (17,550). According to this, St Thomas died on the third of the month of Karkadakam in AD 72. *Ramban pattu* wants to be very meticulous when it states that Thomas stayed four and a half months in Mylapore and four and a half months in China. It refers to Thiruvanchikulam and Malayattoor, which is not in *Margamkali Pattu*. It is interesting to note that 2 lines of *margamkali* songs are seen as such in the “Ramban Pattu”, which suggests that the *Ramban Pattu* is posterior to *Margamkali Pattu*.1

*Mar Thoma Parvam* this text is different from *Ramban Pattu*. It is unpublished. Dr. Jacob Kollaparambil

**Language of Margamkali**

Some of the *margamkali* songs, though not always, have, resemblance with the Tamn *chinthu*. They are mostly governed by Malayalam poetic meters like, *kakali oonakakali*, *keka*, and *nathonnatha*. 

Musically they follow beats like *mishracap* (*rangapuja* and seventh *padam*), *aadithalam* (*padams* 1,3,4,5,6, 11, 12, 13, and 14), *roopakam* (*padams* 2 and 9), and *ekathalam* (*padams* 8 and 10).

**The Dance Form of Margamkali**

The students of *margamkali* generally get their training in the *kalari* of the *ashan*. The *arangettam*, the first public performance of the dance, takes place on an auspicious day in the church premises or in a *pandal*. A brass lamp with 12 wicks is placed in the center of the performing area (on a raised platform of on a stool). The *ashan* on barefoot approaches the lamp and lights the wicks. The dancers come forward, touch the flames of the lamp symbolically and then touch their own chest and forehead. They then touch the feet of the *ashan*, and while doing this, the ashan blesses each one by placing his hands on the head of the disciple. Then the 12 stand in a circle around the lamp which represents Jesus Christ, and themselves representing His disciples. The *āshān* recites the *vandanagānam*, which is the initial song for the *rangapuja*. With a *kalasam* the *vandanaganam* is concluded, then follow the subsequent *pādam*.

**A Note on Dance in Circle**

The basic form of dance is circular. Dr. Chummar Choondal points out that the Gnostic dance ritual of the early church bears some resemblance to *margamkali*. In both dances the participants are arranged in a moving circle and they sing in response to a leader in the center. Though no historical connection between these two can be established, in both the round dance is a Christian expression of togetherness. Thus, it helps to obtain a special sense of the sacred.

The round dance indicates that a group is mastering an area within the circle. The round dance is a symbol of conquest and possession. Choondal believes that the shifting texture of the movement to the right and to the left before a lighted lamp, is an effective expression of the sun’s radiance. In several respects *margamkali* resembles an ancient Greek dance, *oklesma* in which dancers bearing swords and crescent shaped shields moved in a sinking to the ground and then rising again. The Greeks said that originally this dance came from Persia. This perhaps creates a historical link of *margamkali* with Syrian origin (R. Swidarski).

The folk dance of Kerala, like *poorakkali*, *kanniarkali*, *Ivarkalli*, *parichamuttukali*, and *chavittukali* are performed in the round style.
This shows that margamkali also followed the nature of the traditional South Indian choreographic structure. Footwork in velakali of Alappuzha and kanniyarkali of Palghat are seen in margamkali. According to Dr. Choonnal, an attakali portion of kanniyarkali has close resemblance with the ninth padam of margamkali.13

The Basic Steps of Margamkali

At the beginning of the training the students are taught the basic steps. They are called kachappadam, irattivattam, mukkanni, and tintaka tintaka tinta tei.14

Music of Margamkali

The margamkali song has much in common with Syriac liturgical music. The beginning of First Padam sounds very much like a folklore song when, it repeats the ending sounds of a few of the first words of the padam. For example, thamburan-anumbake-ke. No musical instruments were used for accompaniment. At present for competition in student youth festivals, a timet (jallara) is permitted.

It is important to note that the dancers not only dance, but also sing along during the performance. Hence, it is tiresome. Now that the padams are long and the dance is swift, to get relaxed after a few padams, they sing edapattu (songs in between), which could be humorous ones ‘or’ “narrating the history of the parish church. Generally, the singing is slow at the beginning of the padam and it goes on faster and winds up in a very fast mood. Vandana padam demands a devotional mood; The choreography does not conform literally to the meaning of the lyrics.

The Dress of Margamkali

The dress used for the margamkali is the traditional dress of the Syrian Christians. Men wear two white pieces of clothes - mundu thorthu. Mundu is a long piece of white cloth tied tightly around the waist. Recently a red belt made of cloth is tied over the mundu at the waist for tightness. Thorthu is a long but narrow silken white towel that is tied around the head as a headdress.

When ladies were introduced into the field of margamkali they were given the beautiful traditional dress of Syrian women: pudava (white double mundu), panichatta (decorated top for women), kunuku. (a one inch golden earring at the top of the ear), kasumala (necklace with coin pendants), silken kavini (thorthu), specific hair style called mayikettu, golden bracelets, and silver anklets.

The Systematization of Margamkali

Folklore dance like the margamkali, unless the community or other cultural agency supports it, can languish or even die out. The margamkali ashans of the past were not given any financial support as such for propagating this art form. In the long run, the margamkali lost its popularity, and the ashans and the proponents became less in number and in interest. At the turn of the last century it was an art-form which was not well appreciated even by the Knanaya community members. Very few appreciated it because of the fact that they did not appreciate tradition, nor esteemed its antiquity.

In the 1970’s and 80’s Dr. Chummar Choonnal and myself took the pains to revitalize the margamkali. We interviewed all the then existing margamkali ashans. The evolution and changes, which caused diversity in singing arid performing the
margamkali among-ashans were studied. The various singing styles were tape-recorded. Dancing and choreographic pieces were videotaped. After a scrutiny of these and a study of the palm leaf manuscripts of the lyrics, we decided to conduct a symposia and kalaris in the presence of and with the help of ashans. In order to perpetuate this dance form, we decided to take measures to introduce this art form as an item of competition in the annual state school youth festivals. In order to convince the government and education departments of the importance and beauty of margamkali we produced a 16mm. color documentary film, 14 minutes long, on margamkali and circulated it among cultural and educational institutions. We presented the Minister of Education with a copy of the film, who had graciously inaugurated the “switching on ceremony” of filming.

Fifty Days of Research

In the presence of 33 ashans who were full fledged, half-fledged and quarter fledged in efficiency and knowledge of the margamkali, 25 students were trained. But first making use of a videotape of the 14 padams played by a group, we critically and systematically evaluated the performance of all ashans. Verse by verse of the lyrics and piece by piece of the choreography, we critically examined. It led to the emergence of a systematization of singing and dancing which all could agree upon. In three phases, 50 days of kalari took place. Experts in the allied dance forms and folklore were invited to give lectures. The students were trained in physical exercise under the guidance of a university physical education professor every morning. The text of the lyrics was analysed literally by scholars for our students.

Actually some form of fixing and systematizing was necessary to create norms for competition. When the music and dance of the margamkali were fixed, we were very particular not to do any violence to the original features of this art form.

Margamkali Aattaprakara

In the light of our study and research and with the help of the ashans we prepared the margamkali aattaprakaram containing rules and methodology of teaching and performing the margamkali. So also the texts of margamkali songs were printed and after a critical evaluation and systematization were rendered into audio tapes, and recently it is available on CD.

Hadusa, the Margamkali Institute

Once these works were done, we looked for a formal centre for the furthering of margamkali and allied Christian art forms. Bishop Kuriakose Kunnacherry of the Kavanaya diocese of Kottayam graciously came to our rescue. As a result, Hadusa (the Syriac word means “dancing”, “rejoicing”) was formally inaugurated as an All India Institute of Christian Performing Arts by the then State Governor of Kerala Mr. P. Ramachandran on the 10th of August 1995, in the B.C.M. College Auditorium, Kottayam.

One of the great services of Hadusa was that the male dance of the margamkali was made open to girls also, who really have taken up the cause of perpetuating this art form. In fact today in competitions of school youth festivals, 90% of the participants are girls.

Training in Margamkali

Ever since the foundation of Hadusa, groups of young ashans were trained under the auspices of Hadusa. To this date, 58 such kalaris were held in Kottayam, Trivandrum, Changanacherry, Pala, Bharananganam, Emakulam, Trissur, Tellicherry, and Kannur. Each, session lasted from 3-7 days. A few ashans completing the full ‘course and having mastery over all the 14 padams were given the Certificate of Hadusa.

Hadusa gives the training in the margamkali to students with different ends in view: to be able to perform this art form well, to be able to train others in it, and to be able to do the judging at margamkali
competitions. Hence, the students have to attend several sessions in order to get mastery of the entire margamkali performance. In this process they are, also given a general initiation into allied art forms. Some 750 persons were trained in the margamkali from all over Kerala, and these are the ones who have been teaching margamkali in various schools, colleges and other institutions in “Kerala and outside. There is a core team of ashans who stand close to Hadusa. They also act as judges various state level competitions” held in the context of schools, colleges, parishes and dioceses. It is satisfying to note that all revenue jillas are represented in the final Central State competitions for the past 15 years for which we are grateful to the dedicated ashans.

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Training in Parichamuttukali

In the process of supporting and propagating allied ad forms Hadusa concentrated also on parichamuttukali. Four All State parichamuttukali seminars were held (1986, 1990, 1993, 1996) in which altogether 42 ashans took part. Common norms for: competitions and judgement of parichamuttukali were unanimously arrived at, which are practically used, for competitions of this art form in the school and college youth festivals. 15

Mr. M.C. Cherian of Pachady, Iduki, a famous parichamuttukali ashan, is a member of the Hadusa staff and Hadusa has honored him with an award.

The Builders of Hadusa

Hadusa is indebted to His Excellency Mar Kuriakose Kunnacherry of Kottayam for his patronage in commencing and advancing a programme of revitalizing margamkali centered around Hadusa. The late Dr. Chummar Choondal, the great folklorist of Kerala Folklore Academy, was inspirational and very active in the systematization of the margamkali and preparation of the Margamkali Aattaprakaram, for which he spent busy days and sleepless nights.

He was the dean of studies of Hadusa. Prayerfully we wish eternal rest to our beloved Chummar. Dr. Jacob Kollammparambil helped us with his research and presence among us. Thanks to the late Kurian Vellian and Mr. John Pullappally who helped us in planning and organizing the early kalaris of Hadusa at S.H. Mount, Kottayam, in 1994-1995, and for the filming of the 16mm color documentary of margamkali in Olassa in 1982: We remember with gratitude all the elderly ashans of the last generation like Indumoottil Kutty, Indumoottil Kocheppu (Manjoor) and Mudiparambil Mathai (Neendoor) who in their lifetime did selfless service in teaching and propagating the art form.

Award Winners

Hadusa is privileged to honor a few margamkali ashans with a cash award and certificate of recognition for their dedicated services and collaboration. Thus, Dr. Chummar Choondal (Thrissur), Mr. Marangattil Thomman Luka (Manjoor), P.T. Joseph Paiathadathil (Chaniakala), Vattothuparambil Thomman Uthup (Njeezhoor), Valiaputhenpurackal Chummar (Neendoor), and Uralil Eppu (Madmbam) were our men honored with awards. Other awards were given to Mr. M.C. Cherian for parichamitta-kali, Kottayam Joy for music, and S. Kurian Vempeni for Malayalam literature and art.

Margamkali on the Stage

Hadusa, the Margamkali Institute, has given specific regulations concerning the presentation of margamkali for competitions for the State youth festivals:

1. Instead of 12 participants, it will be sufficient to have 6 players and a singer.

2. Players have to follow strictly the rules concerning the song text, the dress (for details on dress and makeup see Margamkali
Aataprakaram pp 19-22), and the tunes that are given by Hadusa.

3. Boys and girls should have different groups.

4. There should be at least 3 wicks lighted in the lamp during the performance.

5. No background singing or instruments except ilathalam (Jallara).

6. Sword and shield form part of parichamuttu-kali and not of margamkali

ENDNOTES

1 The history of Knanites - their immigration from southern Mesopotamia arrival at Kodungalloor, Kerala and reception by the local King, and granting of seventy two privileges are given in the various songs of this book.

2 Dr. Choomar says : “Knanaya Christians have the most ancient and varied art forms. Margamkali is their dance form. Generally, it is said that margamkali is said in vogue among the Syrian Christians, but a close and critical observation will show that the practice and propagation of margamkali were among the Knanites. During my research in the 1960’s, I could not find this art form practiced in the regions life Trissur and Pala where the Syrians are thickly populated. The traditions of margamkali can thus by anlyzed: 70% among Knanaya Catholics and 25% among Knanaya Jacobites.” He further says that 100% of the margamkali teams at that time were from among the Kananites, so also, the genuine generation of margamkali ashans. See Silver Jubilee Souvenir of Rev. Dr. Francis Kalarackal, Kottappuram, 1993, 57-62

3 Vol.57, July 1928, 123

4 Jounada, 87

5 J. Vellian “Prayer at the Foot of the open Air Cross at Kaduthuruthy” in Folly of the Cross souvenir for V. Pathykulangara, Bangalore 2000.

6 J. Vellian, “The Use of the Syriac Words in Malayalam.” Symposium Synacum, OCA 236 (Reme 1990, 331-334

7 Ulloor, S.P. Sahithya Chrithram, Trivandrum, 1957.

8 J. Vellian, Thanimayude Madhugeethi: Margamkalipattu, Kottayam, 1995

9 Stay together “always remember my children that the relationship may not be severed.” (From the song “Innu Nee Njangala,” Purathanapattukal, 8)

10 Jacob of Serugh, a Syrian writer (sixth century) taking up such feelings of St Thomas wrote three homilies under the title “ I will not go to India” (See J. Vellian “Thanimayude Madhugeethi” 70-74).


12 (Choondal, margamkali “Symposium on Knanites” ed. J. Vellian, Kottayam, 1986, 7-9)


14 For details see Margamkali Aataprakaram, 25

Mar Thoma Margam as reflected in Varthamanapusthakam

Dr George Kudilil

Introduction

Mar Thoma Margam is a word pregnant with meaning expression which signifies the totality of the ecclesial experience of Saint Thomas Christians. There are not many treatises from ancient times dealing with it. In order to gather an idea regarding Mar Thoma Margam one has to depend upon the writings of European missionaries who landed in the Malabar coast along with the seafarer folk from various European nations. An indigenous priest, Kathanar Thomas Parammakkal, has written an account of his epoch making journey to Rome and Lisbon in the last quarter of the 18th century. The book is titled Varthamanapusthakam and it is a mine of information regarding the ecclesia of Malabar which traces its roots to the apostolic preaching of Saint Thomas the Apostle. In this article my attempt is to make a study of the characteristic elements of Mar Thoma Margam as reflected in Varthamanapusthakam.

1. Mar Thoma Margam

Margam or way is a common concept that recurs in the scientific study of the history of religions. Eastern religions like Taoism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism are rich in theological articulations involving way. In the Bible, both in the Old Testament and New Testament, there are numerous instances of the expression way, denoting the way of salvation. Life is often symbolically presented as the way in the books of the Old Testament (Josh 23,14; 1 Kgs 2,2; Job 31,4; Prov 20,24 etc). According to the Synoptics Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem (Mk 10,32; Mt 20,17-19; Lk 18,31-34). He is the way to the Father (Jn 14,6). He teaches the way to God (Mk 12,14). Therefore considering the statements of Jesus about the way the ecclesia of believers gathered around the resurrected Jesus called itself the Way of the Lord (Acts 9,2; 19,9,23 etc). As the first disciples, the new community of believers have accepted the call of Jesus “to follow” him (Mk 1,17; 2,14). Hence the naming of the community as the Way.
From early times onwards the Thomas Christians who take pride in the apostolic origin of their church through the preaching of St Thomas the Apostle have designated their Christian life as “the Way of Thomas” (Marthoma Margam). They called the occidental Christian expression as lived, preached and witnessed by the western Latin church as the Way of Peter (Pathrosinte Margam). The Thomas Christians understood both ways as equally valid and legitimate ways of living the Christian faith. As they had been living in the Malabar coast, far away from Christian west, their contact with that church started in a considerable manner only with the arrival of the western missionaries in the end of the fifteenth century. Formerly there were only sporadic visits by missionaries and lay adventurers to Malabar.

Marthoma Margam or the Way of Saint Thomas stands for the ecclesial life of Saint Thomas Christians of India. It may be considered as their icon. “It is the gem of their tradition. It symbolizes the social, cultural, religious, theological, spiritual, liturgical and administrative set up of the apostolic faith community in India”. Further, it “could be presented as the confluence of the three major paths in India, namely, the jnana marga (path of knowledge), the karma marga (path of action), and the bhakti marga (path of devotion)”.

The creed, code and cult of the Saint Thomas Christians are the components of the Marthoma Mârgam. It is explained through the axiom, “Indian in culture, Christian in faith and oriental in worship”. In sum it “is the particular Christian lifestyle, introduced in India by Mar Toma, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus”.

2. Varthamanapusthakam

Though the concept Marthoma Margam was in common use among the Saint Thomas Christians, unfortunately we do not possess any ancient testimonies regarding it. What we do have is scanty material in the letters and a handful of works of western missionaries. An eyewitness’ account of Marthoma Margam does not simply exist. What comes closer to such an account is the report of Joseph the Indian which deals with the physical features of the land, agricultural products, means of life and the like. The next work would be Varthamanapusthakam by Kathanar Thomas Paremmakkal in 1785. It is a travelogue and was not written with a view to expose a precise account of Marthoma Mârgam. It is not a limitation of the book but enhances the beauty in that the author is always free in his formulations, enabling the reader to make judicious conclusions.

Varthamanapusthakam (=Book of Narratives) has the reputation of the first travelogue ever written in Indian languages. Written in 1785, it exemplifies the best form of Malayalam prose of the eighteenth century. But the importance of Varthamanapusthakam with regard to the Malabar Church is that it is an eyewitness’ account of the said church between 1775 and 1786. The book is not a dry description of historical events of the period. It faithfully records the experiences which the two travelers to Rome, delegated by the Saint Thomas Christians, had during the journey, which they undertook on behalf of the church in the years 1778 to 1786. The book is revolutionary in many respects. It not only portrays the honesty and boldness of the author but also his submission to the divine will and obedience to proper authority. He is never soft in attacking injustices and foreign domination. Though some of his remarks are emotionally charged, he never parts with nobility and decorum. His sharp intellect, power of critical observation, child like piety, practical wisdom, sense of dedication to the cause of the church, etc. have few parallels in the history of the church.

According to the author he wrote the Varthamanapusthakam during the return journey with Archbishop Cariattil. The book begins with the events following the death of Bishop Florence, vicar Apostolic of Malabar in 1773 and ends with the approach of the ship at the eastern coast of Ceylon on 16th March, 1786. The original manuscript of Kathanar Paremmakkal was copied down and circulated among the Saint Thomas Christians. It was a custom to read a chapter of Varthamanapusthakam in the churches following the Sunday Liturgy. The circulation and reading of the book was prohibited by the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly in 1862. The prohibition was not able to stop the circulation of the
book. The first printed edition was published in 1936 at Athirampuzha. This was reprinted in 1977 and 1989. A rendering into modern Malayalam was published in 1983. An English translation of the book was prepared and published with notes and an introduction by Prof. Dr. Placid J. Podipara CMI from Rome in 1971. In this article reference numbers are given to this volume. The original manuscript as well as three copies are kept in various libraries in Kerala.

3. Dramatis Personae – Cariattil and Paremmakkal

Varthamanapusthakam describes the journey of these two leaders of Saint Thomas Christians to Rome. Therefore it is necessary to get acquainted with them.

Joseph Cariattil was born on May 5, 1742 at Alangatt in the Vicariate of Malabar under the jurisdiction of Propaganda congregation. Carmelite missionaries sent him to Rome for philosophical and theological studies in his studies. He entered the Propaganda College on April 7, 1755 and was ordained a priest on February 25, 1766. On August 2, the same year he was awarded doctorates in philosophy and theology and the title of Missionary Apostolic. Back in Malabar, he was appointed Malpan (Professor) of the seminary at Alangatt. Having acquired a firm basis in theology and a profound awareness of the problems of the Malabar Church his main orientation in life was formed during his tenure as the Malpan, i.e. unity of the Saint Thomas Christians who had been divided into two groups- Pazhayakuttukar (=the old party, Catholics) and Puthenkuttukar (=the new party, the Jacobites). For the Saint Thomas Christians he wrote some 12 works, most famous among them being Vedatarkam (=Dogmatic Discusssion) written in 1768 which logically analyses the Petrine primacy.

Cathanar (=Priest) Thomas Paremmakkal was born on September 10, 1736 at Kadanad in the Archdiocese of Cranganore under the Padroado jurisdiction. He was ex-alumnus of the seminary at Alangatt and was ordained in 1761. After serving a few parishes he was deputed to Kadanad as its parish priest. He was well versed in Malayalam, Syriac, Latin and Sanskrit and had a working knowledge of Italian and Portuguese. Paremmakkal wrote more than a dozen treatises on various topics including a translation of the Imitation of Christ. But he is renowned as the author of Varthamanapusthakam far and wide. After the historic journey to Rome he reached back Malabar in 1786 and he served the Malabar Church as the Administrator of the Archdiocese of Cranganore, from places like Vadayar, Kadanad and Ramapuram as the political situation prompted, until his death on March 20, 1799 at Ramapuram where he was buried.

4. Marthoma Margam as Reflected in Varthamanapusthakam

A book like Varthamanapusthakam cannot be evaluated in isolation. It is the fruition of the religious culture of Saint Thomas Christians. The author was a deeply religious person, an Indian, a priest of an oriental Catholic church. He was a patriot to the core. He calls his church ‘the Way’. He was proud of this Way – the Margam – and he had been experiencing the loss of its valuable traditions and treasures and the pain of the scandalous divisions being perpetuated by the foreign powers, both Western and Eastern, for power and influence. The author says in the foreword that the “community has until now followed faithfully as far as it could, the customs and the rites of our forefathers who confessed the name of God and suffered much for the same in the midst of pagans and other peoples” (p. 29). What he means by “customs and rites of our forefathers” is the Marthoma Margam which owes its origin to the preaching of St Thomas the Apostle.

4.1. Christian in Faith

Christianity is called the religion of the book. The role of Bible o the life of a Christian is unique. All the oriental liturgies venerate the Sacred Scripture as the very revelation of God and carry the Word of God in solemn procession. Syro-Malabar liturgy foresees a ‘Table of the Word’ for the proclamation of the Word in parallel to the ‘Table of Bread’. Though the Church of Saint Thomas Christians (=CTC) has no ancient manuscripts of the Sacred
Scripture as its venerable antiquity may suggest, the community was in no way ignorant of the content of the Bible. The chief means of acquaintance with the Bible for the people were sermons in the church. The priests were well versed in the Scripture.

It is amazing that the Varthamanapusthakam is strewn with Biblical references in abundance. The book was written with a view to wide circulation in the community. “Let our brethren read what is written in this book and recognize the special favour God has pleased to bestow upon our community” (p. 29). The many references to the Bible, the comparisons he makes between the experiences of the Israelites and the CTC and the references to the teachings of Jesus show not only the well founded Biblical scholarship and hermeneutic skills of Paremmakkal but also the knowledge of his would be readers in matters biblical. His craftsmanship in comparing the events in the Bible with those in the history of the CTC is not a mere academic enterprise. It shows the profound knowledge of his audience of the events and characters and of both the Old Testament and New Testament. He never explains Biblical events in detail but gives only the necessary hints.

From the Biblical references one may infer that the author as well as the community had imbibed the spirit of the Word of God and had inherited a spirituality based on the Bible. The author always finds solace in the way God brings justice to the afflicted and whose justice is trampled by the rich and powerful. Therefore he never loses hope neither complains. The history of salvation has been thus interpreted by the author as actual even in the life of the faithful. It helps the author to interpret everyday life in the light of the Sacred Scripture. So he can draw strength from the Scripture which portrays the destruction of the wicked, failure of the jealous and success of the devotees of the Lord.

According to the author the history of the people of God in the old dispensation continues in the new. This continuation is more evident in the history of the CTC. Paremmakkal compares the journey of the Malpan Cariattil and himself to the Exodus. They saw always and everywhere the hand of God and his providential care. There are numerous instances where the very simple yet profound faith of both the travelers come to the forefront: “The God of infinite mercy and kindness teaches us how ignorant and simple persons in the hour of their sorrows and doubts are helped and consoled by the advice of those who are loving and thoughtful” (p. 104). As the announcement of the election of Malpan Cariattil tot eh See of Cranganore was made, Paremmakkal comments: “The special kindness and the protection of God over our persecuted Church was manifested through the document of election mentioned above” (p. 207). So the travelers were always conscious of their duty to thank God for his care and protection and the author exhorts his readers to do the same. “We returned home expressing immense thanks for this great benefit to God who protected us always from all dangers and to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of the Son of God” (p. 228). In a final letter Paremmakkal wrote: “By your prayers and supplications both of us are in good health and condition. We entreat all of you earnestly not to be remiss in praying for us to God and to the Virgin Mother” (p. 295).

Cariattil and Paremmakkal undertook the hazardous voyage in a spirit of prayer. Paremmakkal says often that the events happened “by the unending grace of God”. They ventured to this journey after praying at the tomb of St Thomas the Apostle at Mylapore (p. 80-81). The diocese of Cranganore and the needs of the people were always in the prayers of Cariattil and Paremmakal. The author writes: “As soon as we were in sight of the city of Rome, before we passed the gate, as instructed by the Malpan, we prayed to Saints Pete and Paul that our affairs might be brought to a happy conclusion by the mercy of God. We thanked the Virgin Mother for having helped us to arrive safely in Rome without any danger on the way” (p. 131). During the return journey there was a sea storm and the Archbishop went to the upper deck, blessed the sea and prayed (p. 289). It happened on the 23rd June 1785. On each and every occasion they prayed and thanked God. Among the Saints they trusted in the intercessory prayer of the Blessed Virgin Mary and
The Ecclesial Heritage of the St Thomas Christians

St Thomas the Apostle. They believed that suffering was necessary for salvation. Therefore they always relied on prayer and waited for the intervention of God as Daniel persecuted by Darius (p. 42).

Besides personal prayer and canonical hours Cariattil and Paremmakkal offered the Holy Eucharist daily. The author mentions the celebration of the Eucharist some 50 times. They went about looking for a church where they could celebrate the Eucharist. They were strict in celebrating it in the East Syrian tradition. Most of the sacraments are mentioned in Varthamanapusthakam. A change from the temporal cycle as practiced in the Eastern tradition to the sanctoral cycle is discernible in Varthamana-pusthakam. Spiritual exercises like novenas, rosary, monthly devotions, indulgences etc. of the Western tradition find mention in the book as well as mention of saints venerated in the West (p. 29, 76, 87, 110, 114 etc).

The ecclesiology of Cariattil and Paremmakkal was Biblical. They understood the Church as the body of Christ: “The Christians of the place… should set aside the thought of superiority and of the other things that might infringe Christian charity and union of mind, and should live in perfect charity in all equality as members of one single body. They should treat with all kindness as their brethren in Jesus Christ those who become Christians from among the heathens” (p. 146). All the faithful are brothers and sisters in Christ. “Those who accepted it (the Christian faith), as children of the same father, procured everything needed for soul and body and for the whole community in the spirit of Christian charity and unity without any quarrel and misunderstanding” (p. 263).

Margam is the word used by Paremmakkal to designate the sum total of the ecclesial life of the CTC. According to him it stands for the “praise of God, welfare of the community, teaching of the gospel and tradition of the Church” (ch. 75). Respect for the Episcopal dignitaries, elders and teachers and anxiety on the well-being and progress of the church were some other aspects of their ecclesial identity.

4.2. Oriental in Worship

Paremmakkal was fully conscious of the oriental character of the CTC and its invaluable spiritual treasures and traditions. But it does not mean that he undervalued the Western traditions or liturgy. He had believed in the equality of Churches within the Catholic communion. Cariattil and Paremmakkal always sought to celebrate the Divine Liturgy in their own eastern tradition and were never ashamed of it. On the contrary they were proud of their ancient patrimony and tried with all means to restore it to its pristine purity because some crucial elements of their ecclesial life were lost due to the intervention of the Western missionaries. Paremmakkal writes: “There is no doubt that there were faithful, priests and bishops before you and all your people had heard of the words of faith and of Jesus Christ” (p. 261). He continues: “But after you and your predecessors set foot in Malabar, because of your evil behaviour and unworthy actions, even the holy faith has suffered infamy and injury at the hands of the gentiles” (p. 263).

The exceptional devotion of Cariattil and Paremmakkal toward St Thomas is understandable because he is venerated all over Malabar as their Apostle and father in faith. Devotion to St Thomas is a patrimony of the Syriac Churches. Before embarking on the ship Cariattil and Paremmakkal spent two days in Mylapore beseeching the intercession of the Apostle at his tomb. The author writes: “We are Syrians. From the time Apostle St
Thomas was in our country and gave us the treasure of the holy faith, we have been, until today, without any break, performing our ecclesiastical ceremonies and practices in the Syriac rite. Your predecessors tried their best to change the ancient rite of ours. But they realised they could not” (p. 247). It was their custom to pray for the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St Thomas and St Francis Xavier (as usual we prayed: p. 109, 111).

The pride and joy of Paremmakkal in the Syriac patrimony of the Malabar Church is strongly heard in the Varthamanapusthakam. The proposal to change over to the Latin rite was rejected by Cariattil and Paremmakkal though it was made by the Archbishop of Archbishop of Bahia (but we said that it was not proper for us to change our rite in which we were born and which was in use in our country: p. 96). They wanted to collect some books of Mar Aprem in Syriac. This request was not granted by the Roman authorities. Then they tried to procure the Holy Bible, Breviaries in Syriac, etc. for the use of priests and Seminarians in Malabar. In order to print such books in Malabar they dreamt of taking Syriac types along with them to Malabar. Paremmakkal writes: “Without our name being mentioned we had brought from Rome through him the matrices for casting the Syro-Chaldaic and the Malayalam characters” (p. 283). The Eastern identity of the CTC was not an issue at all for Cariattil and Paremmakkal. They are the “two priests sent to Your Holiness by the 72 churches of the Chaldean Syrian rite of Malabar” (p. 146).

The yogam convened at Angamaly demanded to establish a seminary at Alangat and not at Verapoly which was a centre of Latin missionaries (p. 44). In this seminary, they insisted, two native priests should be appointed who could teach Syriac. Besides, they wanted to collect the Holy Bible, breviaries and other books in the Syriac language for the use in the seminary (p. 147). That means, the two delegates of the CTC to Rome were aware of the importance of formation in seminary for the transmission of tradition and patrimony. Paremmakkal criticizes insufficient knowledge imparted in the seminary in Malabar. “By means of the humbug written in Malayalam, you have deprived the students even of the knowledge of the S. Scriptures which, in spite of the afflictions and the persecutions suffered by our community, our ancestors, as a treasure, have by the grace of God, transmitted to us (p. 248).

4.3. Indian in Culture

The CTC grew as an indigenous church imbibing elements from the Indian culture and ambience. In social and cultural life, they adapted many of the local customs. Their lifestyle was totally Indian and tropical. They were always proud of being Indian but respected other cultures and peoples. Thomas Christians considered the Western Christians as their brothers in faith and therefore equals. Their relation with the missionaries and Western Christians was cordial and the quality of this relationship deteriorated as the identity and individuality of the Indian Church were disrespected by the foreigners.

In the Indian tradition priests were held in high esteem and considered as god-men. Their main occupation was the reflection of eternal truths and intercessory prayer for the people. They went about doing good, possessed no personal property and lived as mendicants. Likewise the priests and bishops of CTC were considered spiritual leaders and not as worldly authorities. The same is a Biblically founded tradition (Acts 6,2-4). Therefore the faithful are obliged to pay obedience to their legitimate leaders (p. 31). The CTC had always kept this tradition alive and is justly well known for the honour they accord on their spiritual leaders.

The CTC had developed appropriate ecclesiastical structures for the governance of the Church which was democratic and Christian. In this Church bishops functioned as spiritual leaders and the power over the temporalities was wielded by the “Archdeacon”. This title was abolished by the Western usurpers and Cariattil and Paremmakkal had tried to reestablish it in Malabar but in vain. The disunity and divisions in the CTC are caused by the missionaries because they did not respect the lawful traditions of the Church. “This confusion is nothing but the great confusion in our churches. You alone, and no one else, are its cause” (p. 252).
The role of the laity in the Church was well defined in the CTC. The various structures of the laity in the parochial, provincial and pan ecclesial levels had convened occasionally and discussed matters pertaining to their proper authority. The meetings or yogams were attended seriously and the spiritual character of the Church was never forgotten. According to Varthamanapusthakam the members gathered and deliberated as if they were attending a retreat (p. 37-38). There were also homilies in the yogams. Such meetings were concluded with a common festive meal. The insults on this community was rather severely responded by Paremmakkal: “But some of the things you wrote in the letter mentioned above, vilify and insult not only us, but also our Malabar community as a whole. I will therefore answer you rather sharply. Never mind, this zeal is but natural. It is the duty of everyone as far as it lies in him, to clear away the disgrace that falls on his own community” (p. 245).

The general Church assembly had wielded great authority in the church. The yogam convened at Angamaly had proclaimed that nine Western missionaries were unworthy of mission work in Malabar (p. 53). It was the yogam that decided to send Cariattil and Paremmakkal as representation to Rome, even after selling off their properties and Church treasures in order to raise money for their journey and had authorized them to do all the necessary things for the good of the church. Likewise, the yogam had complete authority over the affairs of the Church. Cariattil replied in the following words to Cardianl Antonelli: “It is true that we are two poor priests. What we have we have said not in our own name, but in the name of 72 churches in Malabar” (p. 165). They were delegated by the yogam and they had no personal motives in this undertaking. Their responsibility was towards it (p. 373).

The sense of independence which Cariattil and Paremmakkal possessed is based on the Biblical idea of the freedom of the children of God. Paremmakkal says: “Neither you nor your predecessors built our churches. If our Church Assembly wants to accept you, it will; if it does not, you cannot make it do so by force” (p. 266). It was the yogam that sent Seminarians to Rome and they have the power to do that. The venerable traditions of the CTC have originated from the Bible, cultural ethos of the Indian people and their lifestyle. It is the result of a symbiosis taken place between such elements. Liberation of the Church from the religious and social supremacy of the Europeans was the set aim of the two representatives of the CTC (p. 70, 199, 280-82, 276-78 etc). To reach that aim and to replace the self proclaimed saviours they sent Seminarians to be trained. “These boys after acquiring knowledge and sanctity will return to their country and will certainly produce more fruits than the missionaries who are there. The missionaries who are there now, to speak with modesty and charity, do not do anything the propagation of faith. Nay, they labour only to fervent the above mentioned quarrels” (p. 147).

The sense of equality with the European people and their confidence in their demands are expressed in many passages. For example, they submitted an application to canonize Deva Sahayam Pilla, the famous martyr from South India (p. 272). If the delegation fails to achieve the goals, they had other plans for the liberation of the community. “If the affairs should not be concluded within that periods we decided between ourselves, to go begging even as far as Diakbkr in the Kingdom of Turkey, to the residence of Mar Joseph the Patriarch of the Chaldeans. Our idea was to get a bishop from the Patriarch and to liberate ourselves from the slavery and the contempt of these foreigners” (p. 199). They were convinced that superiority of a people rests not on the colour of the skin. “So then I ask you: What do you think, do you think that family nobility consists in white or black skin. No. No. This is a very foolish idea” (p. 254). How Cariattil speaks with the Pope in a genuine manner, convinced and with a sense of desperation at the behaviour of the Pope: “I have come not to see the glories of the city of Rome, but to submit at the feet of your Holiness the profession of faith of the said Metropolitan” (p. 143).

**Conclusion**

The representation sent to Rome by the CTC was a historic undertaking. The Church in Malabar
had full confidence in the Pope and the Roman authorities that they will stand by the truth and work out justice. It was with this conviction that the two priests set out for Rome. The book narrates the events and their experiences in true colour and so it is a narration not only of their grievances but also of their hopes and aspirations. Their patience and truthfulness, their time tested traditions and religious convictions, their nobility and dedication to the cause etc. shine through the pages of Varthamanapusthakam. Cardinal Marofoschi of the Propaganda had this opinion about Cariattil: “I am fully convinced of his diligence, knowledge, obedience, good conduct and sincerity; who then can believe that he and his companion have come here for something untrue from such a distant country undergoing much fatigue and inconvenience” (p. 155-56).

The narratives give us insight into the faith, worship and culture of the CTC of the 18th century. They were Catholics in faith, Oriental in worship and culture. Their conduct and behaviour testify to this. They acted in compliance with the decisions of the Malabar Church Assembly. But what they met with in Rome was not according to their wish. The reason for this is to be sought in the clash between the two traditions, Eastern and Western.13 The vested interests of Padroado and Propaganda regimes in Malabar also contributed to the failure of the mission (p. 281). They wanted to defeat each other rather than to preach the gospel.

The two priests from Malabar were examples of incessant prayer (p. 205). Their aim was the unity of the Church and therefore he criticizes the divide and rule policy of the Europeans. Being head of the church (p. 169) they expected an impartial settlement from the Pope of the issues between the missionaries and the CTC. The community which sent them to Rome had their venerable traditions and they considered them sacrosanct. They were literate and well informed of the precepts of their faith, rooted in Sacred Scripture and Tradition. The book was written for the information of the Church.

ENDNOTES

3 P. Kochappilly, “Mar Toma Margam”, 52. This axiom was formulated by Placid J. Podipara, in an article in Ostkirchliche Studien, 1959, 89-104 wherein he uses ‘Hindu’ instead of ‘Indian’.
7 See foot note no. 6.
10 Mekkattukunnel–Puthukulangra, Vedapusthakam, 87-95.
11 Mekkattukunnel-Puthukulangara, Vedapusthakam, 116.
The Contributions of the Mar Thoma Christians to Malayalam Literature

Prof. Mathew Ulakamthara

Introduction

The Malayalam Language and Literature owe much to the Mar Thoma Christians for its growth and development. The Mar Thoma Christians paved the foundation of the modern Malayalam prose. The dawn of modern Malayalam prose becomes visible in the canons of the Diamper Synod of 1599. The translation of the canons was done by a certain Nazrani from Palluruthy. The next attempt towards modern prose is seen in Archbishop Joseph Kariyattil’s Vedatharkam published in 1768 as he was serving the Church as a malpan. According to Elamkulam Kunjanpilla, “this book deals with religious matters. The book aims at abolishing the division prevalent in the Kerala Church at that time and pleads for reinventing unity”. Varthamana-pusthakam written by Paremakkal Thoma Kathanar, the co-traveller of Archbishop Kariyattil to Rome and Lisbon, may be named the first prose work having high literary quality in Malayalam. This book is the first travelogue written in Indian languages and scholars have high regard for this book and its literary style. Padmashree Shooranattu Kunjanpilla writes, “Varthamana-pusthakam may be regarded primarily as a travelogue, but as we explore deeply we realize that this book goes beyond the consideration of a particular literary genre and avows much honour from us as a literary gem”. Mahakavi Ulloor is of the opinion, “From any perspective Thoma Kathanar’s work is a precious ornament to Malayalam literature. This book is to be studied not just as a renowned book, but as the one which depicts the history of the place and community and many other matters in clear and profound manner. Thus as a literary treasure it demands our wholehearted praise and acclaim”.

Sathyvadakhedam(1861) of Rev George Mathen is the next contribution to Modern Malayalam prose. The book Malayalanmayude Vyakaranam (Grammar of Malayalam) by the same author has the credit of being the first Malayalam Grammar book written by a Malayalee. The commendable service of Blessed Chavara Kuriakose Elias to Malayalam
prose and poetry is worth mentioning. His popular
and solid works like Naalagamam, Rokus
sheeshmayude charithram, Nalla Appante
chavarul, and Dhynasallapangal are eminent
models of pure and simple Malayalam language. His
sole aim in establishing the press and Sanskrit School
at Mannanam was the empowerment of the mother
tongue.

Nidheerickal Manikathanar, a scholar and
multilinguist, contributed much to foster the mother
tongue. His seminal writings include Shibha Raja
Vijayam, Kripavathy (plays) Holy Jerusalem
(travelogue) and they were published in the second
half of the 19th century in simple Malayalam. The
Nazrani Deepika (at present the Deepika
Newspaper) is his brainchild and the inception of
Malayala Manorama too owes so much to him.
Kandathil Varghese Mappila (1858-1904) is another
legend to be remembered as the founder of
Malayala Manorama Daily. He opened up various
columns and features in Manorama for fostering literature and
established the Bhashaposhini Sabha. Darppavichedam, Yosha bhoooshanam, Vismaya-
jananam, Hebraiyakutty (play), and Keerthanan-
ma la are his famous works. His successors
Mariyamma and Kocheeppan Tharakan (Dramatist)
also found place in the literary history of Kerala due
to their service to the mother tongue.

The beginning of printing press and Newspaper
are the two most important contributions of Mar
Thoma Christians in the service of their mother tongue
Malayalam. The foundation of prose literature in
Malayalam also was laid by the same people. CMS
press Kottayam and St Joseph’s press Mannanam
popularized print media with their yeomen service
for a long time. The foreign missionaries did help a
lot to establish the print technology in Kerala and the
printing ultimately inspired the growth of prose in Malayalam.

Among the history books in Malayalam, the
Indian History (1825) of Aymanom P John is of great
importance and the book was republished in 1860
from the CMS press for the use of all schools under
the Christian management. Other famous historians
from this community are M.O. Joseph Nedunkunnam,
N K Jose, and John Kachiramattam. The first novel
in Malayalam was authored by Umman Philoppose
(1838-1880) entitled Aalmaraatam. He was the
editor of Pashchimatharaka, one of the first
newspapers in Malayalam and he has penned a
dictionary named Amarakoshapradeepika.

The first biography in Malayalam was published from Mannanam titled Serapha
Ammathresiyayude Jeevecharithram (Biography
of Theresa of Avila) and the author was a priest from
the order of Carmelites of Mary Immaculate. The
author is unwilling to reveal his name in obedience to
his religious norms, but he dedicates the book to Fr
Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the then superior of his
order. P K Balakrishnan makes a keen observation
on the language of this book. “A comparison with
the language of this book and our present everyday
language would lead us to the conclusion that even if
the book abounds in the use of dated words and
phrases, the structure and style remain the same. The
priest author excels in translating the foreign thoughts
and ideas with the help of the ordinary and the
common words of our everyday life”.

The various schisms in the Church of St
Thomas did divide the people of this community into
various churches and certain Syrian families opted
to stay with the Latin church at Varappuzha
(Veropoly) during such troubled times and they were
gradually assimilated into the Latin Church. The fact
that Archbishop Cornelius Elenjikal of happy memory
belongs to the family of Elanjickal Tharyatu
Kunjithomman does bear witness to this. It being so
we shall not forget Satyanada Kahalam newspaper
(later the Satyanadam weekly) published from Cochin
from 1876 and the men of letters who grew with it.
Sahityanilayam K A Paul and the historian T M
Chummar and a lot many others enriched the
Malayalam language and literature with their
writings.

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Aaalmaraattam of Umman Philippose was an adaptation of an English drama into a novel, but Archdeacon Kosi’s Pullelikunchu is an original novel and shall be considered the first novel in Malayalam. The other pioneer catholic novelists are Karottu C George of Muttuchira and John Peter Thottam (a relative of Sr Mary Beninijja). George wrote the novel Thresiamma, while John authored Chandalaputhri and Sankarapuri. The famous popular novelist Muttathu Varkey also deserves special mention. Parappurathu, Kanam E J, E M Kovoor are other novelists from this community. The contemporary novelists from this community are known to the present generation, but some of them demand mention. Prof. Joseph Mattam, who received the Appan Thampuran award for translation and Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for his overall contribution to Malayalam literature, is a person who has made his presence palpable with his satirical and lucid style of writing. P C Erikadu is another novelist who has written so many novels with religious and moral undertones and intentions. This man of talent is conveniently ignored by the Malayalam critics. His novel Velichathinte Vazhikal depicts the missionary work of St Thomas in Kerala and this big novel is the fruit of a concerted research. Other novels from this author, namely, Pazhayum Sunyamayum, Neethimante Maranam, Magdalena Mariam are thematically biblical. Brother Louis Manjaly also has written novels based on Bible stories. Many of the young novelists of talent of the time, like Vinayak Nirmal and Sunny Mattakara being tied up in the small world of Christian magazines and journals, are not recognized by the secular world.

The line of famous short story writers range from K M Thevara to Babu Kuzhimattam. The famous script writers of this community are Muttathu Varkey and Dr George Onakoor. Dr George’s Ulkadal was made a movie and his other fictions include Hrudayathil Oru Vaal and so on.

The Mar Thoma Christians made their presence evident even in the field of literary criticism. C. Anthappai is the pioneer in this field and then Prof. Joseph Mundassery and M P Paul entered the field. Fr Abraham Vadakkel became an authority in this field with his two introductions to the books of Kainikkara Padmanabha Pillai and Changampuzha Krishna pillai. The known modern critics from this community include Prof K M Tharakan, Prof Mathew Ulakamthara, Dr Thomas Mathew and Dr Kurias Kumbalakuzhy. John Pattarkuzhy is a critic with difference as he approaches criticism with the tools of humour and satire. Short Story writer Jose Panachippuram is another famous humorist.

The contribution of this community in the field of drama is commendable. The plays of C J Thomas are to be ever honoured in the history of Malayalam drama and literature. Fr Joseph Nedumchira of Kottayam Arhdiocese is a dramatist who could attract the audience of a generation. Other famous playwrights are Chevalier C L Jose, Paravoor George and T M Abraham.

The Mar Thoma Christians are blessed to be living amidst a community deeply rooted in the poetic tradition. The evening prayers of the native Hindu families like Harinamakeerthanam, Ganeshasthuthi, Devisthavam and so on are framed in poetic diction that can be sung with melody and the metres are all Dravidian which are essentially musical. Their scriptures like Ramayana and Bhagavata are also poetry in design. The first attempt of the Christians in such a poetically rich culture should be the search for presenting Good News in poetic form and that will be best cultural adaptation possible. The Church authorities think and preach a lot about cultural adaptation and conduct a lot of seminars on the theme, but the practical epiphanies of the same are least visible. The people who personally make such attempts are not even promoted by the Church in this regard and so they too leave the scene all the sooner and find safer ways of writing. It is to be remembered that even at the time of foreign missionaries, they promoted the chanting of Puthenpana of Arnos Pathiri during the season of Lent.
There are so many poets in the Malayalam language from among the Mar Thoma Christians. Kattakayam Cherian Mappila’s ‘Sree Yesu Vijayam’ is of great significance. This epic is one of the fine poetries in Malayalam on account of its simple language, enormity of vocabulary, and befitting imagination. Ullor S Parameswara Aiyer would call this poem “the younger sister of Umakeralam”. The deplorable thing is that at present no student of literature, not even a Catholic student and teacher is willing to study this poem. It is believed that in the 17th century there lived a poet named Chandi Mappila at Mallosserikara near Kottayam. His lyric piece beginning with “Ammayaya Rajakanni” (Mother and Queen Virgin) is an extraordinary gift to the mother tongue. Chekotasan who compiled the “Mar Allesu Pana” is also a poet of great honour.

Pravithanam P M Devasia has to his credit five epics (Mahakavyam) entitled Israel Vamsam, Mahaprasthanam, Rajakkanmar, Tobith and Christhu Geetha and they are written in perfect Sanskrit metres. Some of his poems, especially Israel Vamsam is made a text book in the University of Madras and Prof Mathew Ulakamthara prepared the commentary for the same. The Mary Vijayam of Vidwan Fr S Thermadam and the Sree Mary Vijayam of Koorkamattathil Scaria Kathanar are two epics in the ancient epic order. Prof Thomas Kanayamplavan’s Vedasagaram is the last epic written by a Christian and this is crafted after the metre and rhythm of Kousalyasuprajarama, a famous Hindu devotional hymn. Vedasagaram covers the whole Old Testament and it is written in the Octameter named Anushtuppu.

Prof PC Devasia was a great Sanskrit scholar who could write an epic in Sanskrit itself. His Christhu Bhagavatham is written in the poetic style of the great poet Kalidassa and it received the praise and recognition of the Sanskrit scholars from various parts of India. Chevalier I C Chacko wrote the poem Christhunama Sahasram in Sanskrit modelled after the Vishnumama Sahasram of Hindu tradition. Prof P U Chacko following the footsteps of I C Chacko wrote a poem named Misihanama Sahasram in the Sanskrit language.

There are so many poems written in the Dravidian metres like Keka, Kakali, Manjari and so on. There is a Christhucharitham Kilippattu written in 1909 after the model of Puthen Pana and it was published from the Bharatavilasam press Trichur. The author of this largely unknown piece is an A K K M and the person is unwilling to reveal his name, even if he procured the imprimatur for publication from the then Bishop of Thrissur Mar John Menacherry. Mahakavi K V Simon’s Veda Viharam (1920) is another poem written in the Kilippattu style. This poem is thematically a representation of the book of Genesis and its poetic grandeur is almost equal to that of Thunchathu Ezhuthachan. This poem ences the first reference to the concept of Prajapathi Yagam which is very prevalent in the Vedas.

K V Simon’s nephew Edayarannula K M Varghese authored the Christhu Deva Charitham based on the New Testament. This poem excels in its use of uncommon vocabulary and the imagination of the poet often deviates from the mainstream biblical events. Another epic based on New Testament is Viswadeepam of Puthenkavu Mathu Tharakan. The annunciation moment is captured in Sanskrit while the poem is written in Dravidian metre. Rev Dr Cherian Kuniamthodathu in his Thejomayan depicts the Christ experience of St Paul. In this epic the speciality is that the stream of consciousness of Paul is portrayed in prose while the story is in poetic diction. This is something original from the author to the edifice of Malayalam literature.

Prof Mathew Ulakamthara’s Christhugatha is modelled after the Krishnsagatha of Cherusserry. This Mahakavya is written in the Manjari metre and has a very lucid style and in-depth emotional impact. This collection provides the poetic taste of the New Testament events in a possible chronological order.

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This book grabbed many covetable literary prizes in Kerala like the Ulloor Award, K C B C Award, and Mary Beninja Award and the literary critics like Dr M Leelavathy showered praises on it. According to Sooranattu Kunjan Pillai, “this book is the great fortune of Malayalam language”.

Fr Joseph Nedumchira’s contribution to the field of Khandakavya also is to be mentioned. His poems Rakthakanthi and Soosanna were adapted into Kathapasangam by many artists in this field. The two Khandakavyas of Vidwan M O Avira, namely, Mahathyagi and Thiruvathazham were prescribed text books in Madras University. We shall also remember the unfading contributions of C J Mannummodu and Chemmanam Chacko the satirist. Prof Ulakamthara’s Sahityapeedika, Vimarsanasopanam and Alochanamrutham are books of high quality literary criticism and they were text books in various universities.

The feminine presence from the Marthoma Christian community in the field of literature is very meagre. Sr Mary Beninja began her literary career as Mary John Thottam and has authored many poems. There are three Mahakavyas to her credit in Malayalam literature, namely, Marthoma Vijayam (in Sanskrit metre), Gandhi Jayanthi and Bharatha Maha Lakshmi. The only Malayali woman to write Mahakavya is Sr Mary Beninja till the day. Her Lokame Yathra is an elegiac soliloquy of profound fervour. The poem Isaprasadam depicts the story of Abraham the patriarch and the father of faith, while Vidhivaibhavan narrates the life and call of Joseph in the Old Testament. Oru Atmavinte Sneha Geetha is the only mystic poem in Malayalam. Her autobiography is titled Vanampady. The variety of themes and style of her poetry demands serious research. Dr Kurias Kumbalakuzhy has published the Collected works (Beninja Kavithakalude Sampoorna Samaharam) of Sr Beninja.

The prose poetry of Rose Mary and the fictions of Sarah Joseph are very popular in the contemporary literary arena of Kerala. There are also poets, novelists and short story writers from this community who have produced anti-Christian works. The list of such writers begin from Ponkunnam Varkey and at present Paul Zachariah is prominent among them. The iconoclastic presence of Kakkadan shall not be ignored.

The literary endowment of the Mar Thoma Christians is enormous and the gifted and talented people are to be responsible and accountable to the Source of all these inspiration. This community is to voice in the mother tongue the religious and moral values in and through their writings. The guidance of the leaders of this community is pertinent in this regard and the talented are to make a concerted effort to glorify the Name and the Kingdom of God.