

# SYRO MALABAR RITE

The SyroMalabar Catholic Church is one of the 22 Eastern (Oriental) Catholic Churches in full communion with Rome. It is the second largest Eastern Catholic Church after the Ukrainian Church and the largest of the Saint Thomas Christian (Nazrani) denominations with 4.6 million believers. It is a sui juris Church governed by the Synod of Bishops headed by the Major Archbishop. The SyroMalabar Church, with its deep-rooted spirituality and high rate of vocations to priesthood and religious life, can be considered as the most vibrant Catholic community in the world. The present Kerala State (India) is the home of this Church. For centuries, St. Thomas Christians lived in the kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin.

The first step of migration of our people was to the Malabar region to the north and High Ranges to the East. Since the faithful were mostly farmers, they were looking for farm land and wherever they settled, they built Churches and established their own faith communities. The first diocese established for the migrants was Tellicherry in 1953 with Bishop Mar Sebastian Valloppilly. Then in 1956, the diocese of Kothamangalam was established for those who were in High Ranges with Bishop Mar Mathew Pothanamuzhy. Tellicherry has become Archdiocese with four suffragan dioceses and Kothamangalam has been bifurcated to form Idukki diocese.

The second step of migration was to different cities of India, like Bombay, Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore and Calcutta. In 1988, Kalyan Diocese was established in Bombay for our Syro-Malabar faithful, with Bishop Mar Paul Chittilappally. This diocese is growing fast now under the leadership of present bishop Mar Thomas Elavanal, MCBS. Bangalore, Chennai and Delhi are eagerly waiting to be established as dioceses.

The third step of migration was to Europe and United States of America. In late nineteen sixties and seventies there were large flow of people to United States in search of better opportunities. Professionals of our Church found better prospects in this new world. Among the professionals, nurses outranked every other group. They came in great numbers, as there was shortage of nurses in USA. They settled in major metropolitan cities and they brought their family members. Wherever our faithful settled they were eager to have Syro-Malabar liturgy whenever it was possible with the help of visiting priests or student priests from our Church. Small communities were formed in this fashion.

## The St. Thomas Christians (Nazranis)

The SyroMalabar Church is an Apostolic Church which traces its origin to the St. Thomas, the Apostle, who landed at Cranganore (Muziris) in 52 AD and founded seven Christian communities in Kerala, at Palayur, Cranganore, Kokkamangalam, Kottakavu (Parur), Quilon, Niranam, and Chayal. St. Thomas was martyred in A.D. 72 at Mylapore, near Chennai/Madras. The early Christian community in India was known as St. Thomas Christians. They were also called Nazranis, meaning those who follow the path of Jesus of Nazareth.

## The East Syrian (Chaldean) Connection

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

## The Arrival of Portuguese and the Influence of the Latin Church

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

The SyroMalabar Church In 1886 the Padroado jurisdiction over the whole Malabar (Kerala) was suppressed and in 1887 Pope Leo XIII re-organized the SyroMalabar Catholics into two independent Vicariates of Kottayam and Trissur. Finally, the SyroMalabar Church obtained bishops of their own rites and nationality in 1896, when they were further reorganized into three vicariates of Trissur, Changanacherry and Ernakulam by Pope Leo XIII through his Brief Quae rei Sacrae. Later, the SyroMalabar Hierarchy was established on December 21, 1923, by the Apostolic Constitution Romani Pontifices of Pope Pius XI (Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 16 [1924], pp. 257-262), with Ernakulam as the Metropolitan See and Trichur, Changanacherry and Kottayam (established in 1911 for the Southists) as suffragans. In 1956 Changanacherry was raised to the status of a Metropolitan See, with Pala as a suffragan diocese.

The restoration of the hierarchy initiated a process of liturgical reform that sought to restore the oriental identity of the Latinized SyroMalabar rite, which was approved by Pius XII in 1957 and introduced in 1962. In subsequent years several new dioceses were established both within and outside Kerala. From 1962, the Church began to set up mission centers in Northern India, which later became dioceses. Last 40 years have been a period of steady growth for the SyroMalabar Church.

## The Syro Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Church

On December 16, 1992, Pope John Paul II, by the Apostolic Constitution Quae maiori (Acta Apostolicae Sedis, 85[1993], pp. 398-399), raised the SyroMalabar Church to the status of Major Archiepiscopal sui iuris Church with the title of Ernakulam-Angamaly. Mar Antony Paidyara, the then Metropolitan of Ernakulam was appointed its First Major Archbishop with Mar Abraham Kattumana as the Pontifical Delegate who discharged the duties of the Major Archbishop. Archbishop Kattumana died unexpectedly during his visit to Rome in April 1995 and Mar Padiyara was given the powers of the Major Archbishop. In November 1996 Cardinal Padiyara resigned from his office as Major Archbishop. In his place Archbishop Varkey Vithayathil, C.Ss.R. was appointed as the Apostolic Administrator. In December 1998 he was appointed Major Archbishop by the Pope. In February 2001 Archbishop Vithayathil was created a Cardinal by Pope John Paul II. In 2004, the Holy See granted full administrative powers to the SyroMalabar Church, including the power to elect bishops.

Major Archbishop Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil passed away on April 1, 2011. On 24 May 2011 Mar George Alencherry was elected Major Archbishop. Pope Benedict XVI confirmed the election on 25 May 2011. He is the first head of the SyroMalabar Church to be elected by its Synod. On February 18, 2012 Major Archbishop George Alencherry was made Cardinal and a member of the Consistory.