

HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF THE SYRO MALNKARA CATHOLIC CHURCH

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Introduction

The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church,¹ one of the twenty-three *Sui iuris* Eastern Catholic Churches in the Catholic communion, was founded on the Christ experience of St. Thomas the Apostle. SMCC is a Major Archiepiscopal Church, having full communion with the Bishop of Rome and following the West Syrian (Antiochene) Eucharistic liturgy of St. James. There are in the Antiochene traditions the West Syrian, East Syrian, Byzantine, and Armenian liturgical families. Antiochene Orthodox Church, Antiochene Catholic Church, Malankara Orthodox Church, Malankara Catholic Church in India, and Maronite Church use the West Syrian liturgy. The Malankara Church is one of the several Christian communities in India, known collectively as St. Thomas Christians,² having the apostolic origin of St. Thomas. Today among Catholics, the name *Malankara Church* is attributed only to the SMCC.³ The SMCC has its liturgical patrimony, discipline, and tradition and she is very particular in safeguarding these aspects of her rich heritage.

The Malankara Churches- History and Reunion

Jesus Christ sent his twelve disciples to the world's four corners to preach the Good News of salvation. According to the *Malankara* tradition, Apostle St. Thomas, one among the twelve, preached the Gospel in Kerala and other parts of India and laid the foundation for the Christian Church therein. And that Church is called as the Church of Thomas Christians in India. It stands as one of the ancient apostolic Churches in the world. The term *Malankara* generally refers to the Churches, which follow the Antiochene or West Syrian liturgical traditions in India. The

¹ Hereafter SMCC

² The ancient Christians of Kerala are commonly known in their homeland as St. Thomas Christians. It is because of the apostolate of St. Thomas, whom they call *Mar Thoma Sliha*. The words *Mar* and *Sliha* are Syriac words, which mean Lord and Apostle. See. Varghese Puthussery, *Reunion Efforts of St. Thomas Christians of India (1750-1773): A Historical – Critical Analysis of the Contemporary Documents* (Mannuthy: Marymatha Publications, 2008), 1.

³ Antony Kakkanatt, *Christological Catechesis of the Liturgy: A Study on the Great Feasts of Our Lord in the Malankara Church* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1996), 3.

Malankara Church is one of the several Christian communities in India having apostolic origin, known collectively as St. Thomas Christians. The early Christian community of India was of one faith and one Rite that is the East Syrian or Chaldean liturgy, until its division into two Christian denominations in 1653.⁴ The Schism in 1653 divided the early Church of St. Thomas Christians into two groups, one under the Latin Jurisdiction and the other independent of it, later known as the *Malankara* Community of the Thomas Christians.

After the division, one group accepted the missionaries and the other group entered into communion with the *Jacobite* Patriarch of Antioch and gradually received and accepted the Antiochean or West Syrian liturgy. The group, that accepted the authority of the missionaries, are called *Pazhayakutt* (old group) and the group, that denied the authority of the missionaries, are called *Puthenkutt* (new group). Today, the old group is known as the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church with East Syrian liturgy and the new group is commonly known as the *Malankara* Syrian Church with Antiochean liturgy or West Syrian liturgy. Both Churches have a common patrimony of the Syrian liturgical tradition.⁵ The independent *Malankara* community started to entertain an ecclesiastical relationship with the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch in the middle of the 17th century, which paved the way for the introduction of the West Syrian liturgy in the *Malankara* Church. This process was more or less completed by the declaration of the *Jacobite* Patriarch Peter IV in the Synod of Mulanthuruthy in Kerala in 1834.⁶ According to Paul Pallath, “The implantation of Antiochene liturgy in India was a long and ongoing process, which began only in 1665 with the arrival of the first Antiochene Prelate Mar Gregorios (1665-1670) and was completed during the period of the Antiochene bishop Mar Kurillos (1846-1866).”⁷ From 1751 onwards, the *Malankara* Church started to use Bar Hebraeus’ revised form of the Antiochene Syrian liturgy.⁸

It is true that after the great division happened in 1653, the *Malankara* Church remained one in love and union. Later this unity was also destroyed because of the political and liturgical crisis

⁴ Michael Vattappalam, “Relationship of the St. Thomas Christians to the See of Rome,” in *MTM*, 801.

⁵ Kakkanatt, *Christological Catechesis of the Liturgy*, 2-4.

⁶ George Thumpanirappel, *Christ in the East Syriac Tradition: A Study of the Christology of the Assyrian Church of the East and the Common Christological Declaration of 1994* (Satna: Ephrem’s Publication, 2003), 32-33.

⁷ Paul Pallath, *The Eucharistic Liturgy of the St. Thomas Christians and the Synod of Diamper* (Vadavathoor: OIRSI, 2008), 1.

⁸ Kurian Valuparampil, “St. James Anaphora, an Ecumenical Locus: A Survey of the Origin and Development of St. James Anaphora,” *Journal of Christian Orient* 8, No. 4 (March 1987): 184.

within. In 1772, an expelled bishop from the *Malankara* Orthodox Church, Mar Koorillos and his followers, formed a Christian community at Thozhiyoor, which is known today as the 'Independent Syrian Church of Malabar' (*Thozhiyoor* Church). Due to a prohibition, Mar Koorillos had to take refuge in British Malabar, where he established the Independent Syrian Church of Malabar, at Thozhiyoor, in the present district of Trichur. This church still exists today and only has a single diocese, with about 35000 followers. This Church also follows the West Syrian liturgy.⁹

After the division in 1653, letters were repeatedly sent to the *Jacobite* Patriarch in West Asia and as a result, in 1875, the Patriarch Peter III himself came here and convened a meeting in 1876 at Mulanthuruthy. It was with this Synod that the new group came under the jurisdiction of the *Jacobite* Patriarch of Antioch and the Church became part of the *Jacobite* Church. The new group adopted *Jacobite* as its name. Though it was a remarkable step in the history of the *Malankara* Church, the activities of the *Jacobite* Patriarch Peter III created a new sect among *Jacobites*. They are called the '*Marthoma* Syrian Church of Malabar.' There are two reasons, that resulted in the separation; namely, the internal clash among new groups¹⁰ and the crisis created by the Anglican missionaries. The *Marthoma* Church follows the West Syrian liturgy, partly Anglicised and is in harmony with protestant doctrines.¹¹

The union with the Syrian *Jacobite* Patriarch of Antioch helped solve the crisis created by the Anglican missionaries. However, it was only a temporary relief. As it is seen, the activities of the *Jacobite* Patriarch Peter III created a new division here in the *Malankara* Church. He did not try to lead the community together in the love of Jesus Christ; rather, he concentrated on safeguarding his vested interests.¹² Patriarch Peter III died in 1894; he was succeeded by Abd al Msiha II on 16 June 1895. In 1905, the Turkish sultan Habdul Hameed deposed Mar Abdul Messiah II, and subsequently Mar Ignatius Abdallah Saltuf was enthroned as the Patriarch on 28th August 1906.

⁹ Antony Kamukumpallil and Joseph Kollara, "The Churches under St. Thomas Christian Tradition," in *MTM*, 759-761.

¹⁰ Geevarghese Chediath, *The Malankara Catholic Church* (Vadavathoor: Bethany Sister's Publication, 2003), 81.

¹¹ Kamukumpallil and Kollara, "The Churches under St. Thomas Christian Tradition," in *MTM*, 761-762.

¹² Chediath, *The Malankara Catholic Church*, 81.

The Syrian Patriarch of Antioch, Mar Ignatius Abdallah Saltuf, came to Kerala in 1909 and claimed absolute authority over those, who professed their loyalty to the Syrian *Jacobite* Patriarchal See of Antioch. However, Dionysius VI (1909-1934), then the legitimate authority, argued that the Patriarch had supremacy only in spiritual matters.¹³ On the contrary, the Patriarch demanded that the *Malankara Jacobite* Church obey not only in spiritual matters but also in ecclesiastical administration. The bishop of the *Malankara* Church, however, was not prepared to accept such a claim. As a result, the community was divided into the Patriarch's Party and the Bishop's Party. The Bishop's Party succeeded in bringing the deposed Patriarch Abd al Msiha from Antioch, who established the *Catholicate*¹⁴ at Kottayam. The Bishop's Party came to be known as the 'Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church' and the Patriarch's Party as 'Malankara *Jacobite* Syrian Orthodox Church.'¹⁵ Both these Churches use West Syrian liturgy.

There were continuous efforts by the part of *Malankara* Syrian Orthodox Church to re-establish the lost unity of the Church.¹⁶ Mar Ivanios, the *Malankara* Orthodox Syrian bishop and a representative group including bishop Mar Theophilos entered communion with Rome on September 20, 1930.¹⁷ By bringing people back to the true Church, Mar Ivanios opened a new chapter in the history of the *Malankara* Church. The *Malankara* Church established communion with Rome and is known as the SMCC. When Mar Ivanios came into communion with the Catholic Church, he preferred to retain the Antiochene liturgy. The Holy See of Rome granted permission to follow the West Syrian liturgy.¹⁸

The SMCC: Catholic in Faith

This Church did not originate in 1930. By the reunion in *Malankara*, neither a new Church has been formed nor has the *Malankara* Church been absorbed into the Catholic Church, but it has only reentered into the Catholic communion. The Catholic Church believes that the unity of Jesus

¹³ Kamukumpallil and Kollara, "The Churches under St. Thomas Christian Tradition," in *MTM*, 762-763.

¹⁴ The jurisdiction of a *Catholicos* is known as *Catholicate*. *Catholicos* is a status, which means the head of the Church. The status of the *Catholicos* was below that of the Patriarch. See. Geevarghese Chediath, *The Catholicos of the East* (Trivandrum: Malankara Seminary Publications, 2005), 1-133.

¹⁵ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Oriental Churches an Introduction* (Vadavathoor: OIRSI, 1996), 115-116.

¹⁶ Thomas Inchackalody, *Archbishop Mar Ivanios*, Vol. I. (Trivandrum: Bethany Publications, 1957), 263-264.

¹⁷ Vattappalam, "Relationship of the St. Thomas Christians to the See of Rome," in *MTM*, 800-801.

¹⁸ Kuriakose Kulapurath, "Liturgy as a Means of Union with God: Mar Ivanios' Vision on Liturgy," in *The Theological Visions of Mar Ivanios*, ed. Antony Valiyavilayil (Pune: Bethany Veda VijnanaPeeth Publications, 2004), 106.

Christ essentially subsists in the universal Church and that other Churches perfect their union with Christ only when they are in communion with the Catholic Church. We know that the fundamental element of the Church instituted by Jesus Christ as the people of God is the universal Christian communion. The communion of different local and apostolic ecclesial communities forms the universal Church in history. They all were united by receiving the same Jesus Christ and the same Holy Spirit and formed as people of God and one Church by this unifying communion.¹⁹

The SMCC follows the general laws of the Catholic Church in all matters concerning the Catholic faith and morals. However, they are not bound by the disciplinary laws, which are promulgated specifically for the Latin Church or other Churches within the Catholic communion. There is a common law ‘*Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium*’ dated October 18, 1990, promulgated for all the Oriental Catholic Churches; it came into force in 1991.²⁰ The CCEO asserts four degrees of ecclesial status. They are the Patriarchal Churches, the Major-Archiepiscopal Churches, the Metropolitan Churches, and other Churches governed by *Episcopos*. Today, the SMCC stands in the second rank as a Major-Archiepiscopal Church²¹ after the Patriarchal Churches.²²

On June 11, 1932, the Syro-Malankara Catholic Hierarchy was established by Pope Pius XI.²³ *Christo Pastorum Principi* the Apostolic Constitution by Pope Pius XI issued on June 11, 1932, is the first official papal document to the SMCC after its reunion with the Universal Catholic Church. At the very outset, the Pope expresses his immense joy and gratitude to Christ about the reunion and appreciates Mar Ivanios for his strong decision. Then, the Pope mentions the erection of the new ecclesiastical provinces for the SMCC faithful of the Antiochene Rite. It consisted of the Archiepiscopal See of Trivandrum and the Episcopal See of Thiruvalla. The Pope also mentions the constitution of a Hierarchy for the SMCC.²⁴ By the norms of CCEO, on 10 February 2005,

¹⁹ Kanjiramukalil, *Ecclesial Identity of the Malankara Catholic Church*, 69-72.

²⁰ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India* (Vadavathoor: OIRSI, 1998), 61.

²¹ Pope John Paul II raised the *Malankara Church* to a Major Archiepiscopal Church in 2005 through the Apostolic Decree *Ab Ipso Sancto Thoma*. By seeing the surprising growth of this Church Pope John Paul II commented that *Malankara Church* is one of the fastest growing Churches in the world. See. Baselios Cleemis, *Huyodo* (Pattom: The Synodal Commission for Communication Media, 2011), 3.

²² Philip Chempakassery, “The Ecclesiality of the Malankara Catholic Community as a Major Archiepiscopal-Catholicate Church,” in *Theologizing in the Malankara Catholic Church*, 72.

²³ Pallath, *Important Roman Documents Concerning the Catholic Church in India*, 262-263.

²⁴ Sr. Ardra, “An Overview of the Papal Documents Specific to the Malankara Catholic Church,” in *Theologizing in the Malankara Catholic Church*, 57.

Pope John Paul II elevated this Church to the status of a Major-Archiepiscopal Church and nominated Moran Mor Cyril Baselios as the first Major Archbishop, *Catholicos*.²⁵ The present Major Archbishop of the SMCC is Moran Mor Baselios Cardinal Cleemis *Catholicos*.

The Church has its indigenous religious congregations like Bethany, Daughters of Mary and a few others. The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church is fast-growing church in theological and canonical studies. Many authors have contributed to the development of the field of theology and canon law in its growth and also its social interference. Besides the canonical institutions of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church, various associations including the Malankara Catholic Youth Movement (MCYM), Malankara Catholic Children's League (MCCL), Malankara Catholic Association (MCA), Matruvedi, Pithruvedi, emerged and functioning as nourishing factors of the Church spiritually and socially.

Conclusion

The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church stands as a testament to India's enduring faith and cultural heritage. With its unique blend of Eastern liturgy and Catholic communion, it represents a distinctive branch of Christianity that has carved a significant niche in both Indian and global Christianity. Its commitment to service, faith, and tradition continues to shape its identity in the contemporary world, making it a dynamic and influential religious institution. Recalling the richness of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church Pope John Paul II while addressing the bishops of this Church on their 'Ad Limina' visit on 13th May 2003 said, "You have become one of the fastest growing Catholic communities in the world, boasting large numbers of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and your 'pusillus grex' is home to many educational and welfare institutions".²⁶

²⁵ *Malankara: Synodal Acts and Voice of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (July 2005): 14-15.

²⁶ https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20030513_syro-malankara-church.html

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