

The Identity, vocation and mission of Malankara Syrian Catholic Church

Introduction

The Church grew up as individual churches- the Roman, Antochian, Alexandrian, Constantinople, Persian etc. Apostle St. Thomas preached the *evangelion* in the land of Kerala. He founded the church here; it shows the apostolicity of the Marthoma Nazaranies. This individual Church grew and being in communion with Roman Church through the Persian Chaldean Church. St. Thomas Christians were an integral part of Kerala. They adopted the social customs and cultural practices from the Hindu culture. They lived in tune with the political, social and cultural practices of the Indian society. Thus they lived as St. Thomas Indian Christians. So Fr. Placid Podippara CMI said that “Indian Christian Church is Hindu in Culture, Christian in religion and oriental in worship”.

In the year 1653, the *Koonan Cross Oath* destroyed peace of the Church. Later we see a history of division and quarrel. In 1930 a portion of divided church entered to the communion with the universal Church under the leadership of Servant of God Archbishop Mar Ivanios. In 1932 a hierarchy was installed and on 10 February 2005, the Church attained the Major Archie Episcopal status. The Malankara Syrian Catholic Church became an autonomous Church, a Church of its own right and self governing, in the communion of the universal Catholic Church.

Theology of the Individual Church

The Church is the people of God who are gathered by the call of God. This invitation is done through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Christ event). When the evangelists wrote down this Christ event they wrote it down according to the needs of the community and according to the culture of the community. Hence four different gospels came into existence on the same central theme of Christ event. The foundation of the Church is based on the Christ event. When apostles preached this Christ event, they preached it according to the cultural background and life situations of the community. So as four gospels exist on the same theme of Christ event, different local / individual Churches came into existence.

How and Why this Diversification

The main reason for this diversity is that: -

1. *The variety of gifts:* Christ experience of each Apostle differs one from another; even then historical Jesus was one and same to all. They preached the Christ whom they experienced.
2. *Diversity of those who receive it:* there was difference in the culture, language and symbols of the people who received it.

This different Christ experience of the apostles and diversity of those who received it led to the formation of different local Churches from the beginning of Christianity. In the New Testament

itself there are references to these local Churches. Eg. The Church of Corinth, the Church of Ephesus etc.

Individual Churches

Immediately after the time of the apostles. *Individual Churches* began to emerge from the matrix of the Local Churches. Local Churches were centred on the personality of some prominent Apostles like St. James in Jerusalem, St. Paul in the Churches of Asia Minor, Peter and Paul in Antioch and Rome, St. Thomas in India. Tradition of the Local Churches began to be grow according to the place they preached, the churches are known as liturgical families of the respective places like Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Jerusalem. Basing upon and originating from these Liturgical Traditions, Christian Centers began to develop their own theological, spiritual, and ecclesiastical disciplines. Vat.II gives the diversities of liturgical, theological and spiritual tradition and ecclesiastical discipline as the reason of existence of an Individual Church.

Individual Church - A Full Church

Individual Churches are the Churches, which enjoy their own liturgy, theology, ecclesial discipline and spirituality. It is true that there is no concrete existence of the universal Church without the individual Churches. The mystery of Christ's Church is fully realised in each of the individual Churches.

The Christ experience, which the apostles proclaimed through the word, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is the decisive element, which makes a Church individual. The Christ experience of the twelve was not uniform and identical. They received the salvific message and assimilated it in each one's status as an individual and in accordance with the grace each one received. The apostles went to different places and founded Christian communities from which emerged different individual Churches. So every Church was the concrete manifestation of the Church of Christ, which is fully realized, in a local context. These different Churches, which came into being in their own socio-cultural contexts, reveal the realization of the Christ event. The risen Lord is fully present in all of them through Holy Spirit. Such an individual Church, though a full Church in itself, does not exhaust the fullness of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Malankara Church's Mission and Vocation as the Church in India

What makes a Church an individual Church? Vat II clearly teaches that the Liturgical, Theological and Spiritual traditions and the Ecclesial Disciplines that are proper to it make an individual Church. It is important to note that Oriental Canon Law (CCEO No.28) adds to these four criteria the *special historic circumstances* as a sufficient reason for a Church becoming an Individual Church. The Malankara Catholic Church is a clear example for this last criterion. Malankara Catholic Church fully shares with the Syrian Catholic Church of the Middle East the liturgical, theological and spiritual traditions and to a great extent its ecclesial discipline. In spite of the identity in these matters with the Syrian Catholic Church in the Middle East, the historical circumstances prevailing at the time of Mar Ivanios made it necessary that the Malankara catholic Church comes into existence. For the Jacobites of Kerala who wished to come into full communion with the Universal Catholic Communion, the availability of a full *Individual Church* was necessary.

Now the Malankara Catholic Church is an individual Church of Major Archiepiscopal status. (On Feb.10th 2005, Pope John Paul II elevated MCC as Major Archiepiscopal Church through the Apostolic Bull '*Ab ipso sancto Thoma*'). The Major Archiepiscopal system enjoys a great deal of autonomy. In all matters, except the title, the Major Archbishop and his Synod functions with the same autonomy as that of the Patriarch and his synod.

Conclusion

The obstacles and challenges in the paradoxical situation of division call for the urgent need to relate with our sister churches in India. The Catholic Church in India which is communion of three individual churches (Latin, Syro- Malabar, and Syro- Malankara) must become a model of perfect union.