The Malankara Church in the Catholic Communion

(Fr. Geevarghese Chediath)

According to the living tradition, the Church in India, the Malankara Church, was established by St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. The presence of the Jews in Kerala was one of the reasons that motivated St. Thomas to come to India. He established seven Christian centres, where the Jews had their settlement. The Church, he established, came to be known as the Malankara Church. On his arrival from West Asia, the Apostle landed at a place called Malyankara near Cranganore. It was there that he first proclaimed the Gospel and founded the Church. On account of this, the Church he founded is known as the Malankara Church. The Christians came to be known as Malankara Nazranikal, St. Thomas Christians and Nazrsani Mappila.

St. Thomas was martyred at Mylapore near Chennai. His relics were transferred to Edessa (Sanliurfa in Turkey) and later to the island Kios and finally to Ortona in Central Italy. Several Christian writers, ancient documents and liturgical traditions of various Churches bear testimony to the Apostolate of St. Thomas in India.

This Church had contact and communion with the nearby Persian Church. From the Apostolic time till the 7th century, it seems that there were local bishops as the successors of St. Thomas. From the 7th c. onwards the Persian bishops mention the Indian Church here and there in their writings. The history up to the 16th c. is shrouded in darkness.

When the Portuguese missionaries came to India in the 16th c. They saws West Asian (East Syrian) bishops here. The Portuguese had good contact with the three bishops during the 16th century: Mar Jacob Abuna, Mar Joseph, Mar Abraham (+1597). We are not quite sure from which time onwards the Persian bishops began to visit this Church. The administration of the temporalities was done here by the local ecclesiastical leader called Archdeacon (Arkan). The liturgy in use here was the same as the liturgy of the Church of the East or the Persian Church and it was celebrated in the East Syriac language.

The Western Missionaries

During the 16th c. Several Western missionaries, especially the Portuguese, came to India together with the merchants. In the beginning they maintained good relationship with the native Thomas Christians. St. Francis Xavier (+1552) testify to the Orthodox Faith of this community and its bishop. Slowly the missionaries began to introduce changes in the liturgy and Church life. When the last Persian bishop, Mar Abraham, died in 1597, the Portuguese seized control of this Church and in the Synod of Diamper (Udayamperur) in 1599, they introduced a lot of changes in the liturgy and Church life. They brought this Church under the Portuguese patronage (Padroado), hindered the coming of the East Syrian West Asian bishops and appointed Western bishops. They began to accuse the Church of Nestorianism.

Archbishop Dom Menezes, the Portuguese bishop of Goa, convoked the Synod of Diamper in 1599 when there was no bishop here. He formulated several decrees in the light of the Council of Trent. After the Synod, the Church came under the Portuguese missionaries. From 1599 to 1653 there
were three missionary Jesuit bishops over the Thomas Christians: Bishop Francisco Roz sj. (1599-1624), Bishop Estevavo (Stefano)de Britto sj. (1624-41), and Bishop Francisco Garcia Mendez sj. (1641-59).

The protests and hostility of the Malankara Christians towards the Portuguese reached its culmination in 1653 at the time of Bishop Garcia. In that year the representatives of the whole Malankara Church made an oath known as the Coonan Cross Oath at Mattanchery near Cochin against the ecclesiastical domination of the Portuguese missionaries. It was precisely against the Jesuit bishop Garcia. Both priests and laity participated in the oath. They decided that they would never remain under the Jesuit bishops, who were residing at Sampalur.

Soon the leaders of the Church contacted Rome, but it took several years to get a reply from there. The community in the meantime elected the Archdeacon as their bishop. Basing on a false document, fabricated by a priest named Anjilimoottil Ittithomman Cathanar, 12 priests imposed their hands on the Archdeacon and called him bishop.

Rome sent two delegations. The delegation of Joseph Maria Sebastiani reached here in 1657 and the other led by Hyacinth in 1658. Both interviewed several priests and laity. Eventually Sebastiani went to Rome, became bishop and returned in 1661. Because of the activities of the two delegations, many returned to the missionaries. It was a period of Dutch invasion in Kerala and Sebastiani had to leave the country.

Before he left the country he ordained Parambil Chandy Cathanar, a relative of the Archdeacon Thoma, the leader of the faction. Sebastiani did not listen to the petition of Mar Thoma, the leader, to rectify his Episcopal ordination. With this ordination the community was divided into two factions, under two leaderships: under Mar Thoma and under Chandy Metran. The vast majority of the Malankara Christians joined Chandy Metran.

The Archdeacon Thoma was trying to get his Episcopal ordination rectified. As a result a certain Jacobite Bishop, Mar Gregorios by name, came here from Jerusalem in 1665. The Apostolic Malankara Church was Catholic as any other Ancient Apostolic Church. Later the Western missionaries accused it of Nestorianism, because of its connection with the Persian Church. But the documents in connection with the Synod of Diamper and Coonan Cross Oath and the reports and testimonies sent to Rome by various writers clearly prove that the Malankara Church from the Apostolic time till 1653 was the holy Catholic Church of Christ.

With the arrival of Mar Gregorios, the Jacobite bishop of Jerusalem, a group of the Thomas Christians drifted away from the full Catholic communion and eventually became the Jacobite Church. Slowly they abandoned the ancient East Syriac liturgy and adopted the liturgy used by the Syriac Antiochene Jacobite Church. Eventually they began to be called Puthen kootukar (people of the new faction) and later they were known as the Jacobites. The vast majority returned to the Western missionaries and they are today’s Syro-Malabar Catholics. They continued to use the ancient East Syriac liturgy, with the modifications made by the missionaries. They came to be known as the Pazhaya kootukar (people of the old faction).

The Puthenkoor Jacobite community witnessed several further divisions:
In 1772 a small group was separated from the main body and they are today's Thozhiyoor Church.

With the arrival of the Anglican missionaries and their activities among the Jacobites, a group (around 6000 people) joined the CMS Anglican Church in 1836.

In 1889, after 10 years of civil litigations(1879-89) a group of Jacobites, influenced by the Protestant ideals formed the Reformed Jacobite Church. Today they are known as the Mar Thoma Syrian Church.

In 1912 after the establishment of the Catholicate, there was further division in the Jacobite Church. A group under Vattasseril Mar Dionysius came to be known as the Metran Kakshy. They are today’s’ Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church.

In 1930 a group of Orthodox under the leadership of Archbishop Geevarghese Mar Ivanios of Bethany joined the Catholic Church and re-established the lost communion.

The groups of Puthenkookttukar: The Thozhiyoor Church (1772), The Mar Thoma Church (1889), The Orthodox Church (1912), The Malankara Catholic Church (1930), The Jacobite Church (2002 as a registered society).

Since 1913 there were several civil litigations between the Malankara Orthodox (Metran Kakshy) and the Malankara Jacobite group (known as the Bawa Kakshy). Even today it continues and there are several cases pending for church properties in the civil courts.

The ecumenical activities of the Malankara Orthodox Church

In 1926 the Orthodox Bishops initiated an ecumenical dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church to re-establish the lost communion. The Synod of bishops, met at Parumala (Kerala), authorized Mar Ivanios of Bethany to negotiate with Rome. It was a period of civil litigation between the Orthodox and the Jacobite groups. Mar Ivanios first contacted with the Syrian Catholic Patriarch of Antioch, Mar Ignatius Ephraem Rahmani. Later Mar Ivanios had direct contact with Rome. In 1928 Mar Ivanios got a positive reply from Rome and in 1930 September 20 Mar Ivanios re-established the lost communion. This is known as the Reunion Movement. At the time of Reunion, only one bishop, Mar Theophilos from the Orthodox group followed Mar Ivanios. Neither Vattasseril Mar Dionysius the leader of the Orthodox nor the other bishops of the group followed Mar Ivanios.

Characteristics of the Reunion Movement

The Reunion Movement had several special characteristics:

1. This is the unique ecumenical movement in the 20th century which culminated in the full communion of a particular Church with the Roman Catholic Church. There were in the last century several ecumenical discussions both before and after the Vatican Council. But this is unique in establishing the canonical communion. Of course both the leaders of the Roman Church and of the Malankara Church were guided by the ecclesiology of those days. They could not be blamed for not having the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council or the post-Vatican developments. In the light of today’s vision of communion there may be imperfection. However, it was a praiseworthy attempt to bring two Churches into full communion.
2. The initiative for communion came from within the Malankara Church. There was no external force or persuasion in this ecumenical endeavour. It was not the result of any missionary activity from the part of the Roman Catholic Church. From the time of the separation in 1653, the leaders of both the groups were earnestly trying to reunite the two factions of the ancient Thomas Christians. The reunion of 1930 was the culmination of these attempts.

3. Since this ecumenical activity was the fulfilment of God’s will, God blessed it abundantly. It is very rich in vocations and missionary activity today.

4. The conviction of Mar Ivanios and his prophetic vision, that only the communion with the successor of Peter in Rome would bring about lasting peace and progress for the Malankara Church proved to be true. When Mar Ivanios began to reflect on the nature of the Church of Christ and its missionary dimension, he realized that isolated existence of separated groups was contrary to the will of Christ. United witnessing is far more fruitful than that of the tiny groups. History has proved that he was correct in his judgment.

5. The Reunion of 1930 was preceded by intense spiritual renewal in the Orthodox Church. Only prophetic people could plunge themselves into the mystery of Truth and achieve such great things as the Reunion of 1930. When Mar Ivanios entered into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, he entered into communion with the whole Catholic Church throughout the world. It was those Orthodox who entered into canonical communion with the Bishop of Rome in 1930, that gave leadership to the formation of the Malankara Catholic Church. Through this canonical communion, what they had constantly professed in the Creed namely, “I believe in the one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church” became a reality closer to objectivity. These Orthodox had the firm conviction that the canonical communion with the bishop of Rome was essential to the ecclesial perfection of the Church. The movement to which they gave leadership, resulted in full communion with the Catholic Church.

**The Reunion attempts**

After the split in the Malankara community during the 17th century, the desire for reunion was very much alive in both the sections of the Thomas Christians. They were earnest in their reunion attempts throughout centuries. But it was crowned with success only in 1930. Archbishop Mar Ivanios maintained alive the ecumenical thought, that the Churches of the Thomas tradition should reunite and become once again one as they were for 17 centuries. He, in fact, made it clear in his speech after his Episcopal ordination in 1925 at the Niranam Church.

It was those Orthodox who could establish the autonomy and individuality of the Church through the establishment of the Catholicate, that introduced the idea of the canonical communion of this Church with the ancient Apostolic Roman See. The Bethany monastic establishment gave the lead in this new great ecumenical venture. The Bethany monks aimed at the internal renewal through prayer and penance. All those who came under the influence of Bethany imbibed this spirit of renewal. Upon those who were renewed internally, and became thus purified and sanctified, God showered his gift of unity. It was certainly God Himself, who brought about the reunion of 1930. It was beyond the ability of frail human beings to achieve such a gigantic goal. All the reunions are divine actions. By re-establishing the canonical communion with the See of St. Peter in Rome, the visible symbol of unity in the Church established by our Lord, the Malankara Orthodox Church has entered into a new stage of its growth.

**The Malankara Catholic Church**
The Malankara Catholic Church by entering into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church achieved the two ecclesial realities, namely individuality and communion. The ecclesial perfection is achieved through communion with the See of St. Peter in Rome. Church of Christ is one and it is founded on the College of the Apostles, headed by St. Peter. After his resurrection, our Lord gave authority to all the Apostles, but he established only one Primatial Chair among them. In order to make clear the aspect of unity, the Lord authoritatively gave it one center of unity. Through the appointment of one person as leader, he wanted to show that His Church is one and indivisible. All the Apostles were shepherds, but through the appointment of St. Peter, our Lord showed that they had only one sheepfold to be fed. Those who had the firm conviction that unity with the successor of St. Peter in Rome was essential to the ecclesiality of any Church and that it was in accordance with the will of the Lord of the Church, tried to spread the message of unity in 1930. Among the Churches in full communion, the Church is fully realized in the liturgical community where the Eucharist is celebrated under the leadership of the bishop. But, alas! today Christianity presents a different picture to the world. The Christian world is divided into innumerable Churches and communities, devoid of full communion or canonical communion. Division is contrary to the very nature of Christianity itself. Christ the new man came to reunite the whole mankind. God in His Only Son established His Church as the body of His Son, not as isolated groups without communion and concord but as an integral organic one. He knew that there should be a visible element of unity to unite all. That is the leadership of St. Peter. It does not mean that the other Apostles received ordination and authority to serve from St. Peter. But it shows that the only one sheepfold of Christ had to be fed in mutual trust and concord.

The Church of the Thomas Christians in India was the one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. It had no share in the ecclesial disputes and controversies of the Churches of the Roman and the Persian Empires. Neither did it accept, nor reject any of the Synods of those Churches. During the period between 1599 to 1653 it was brought under the direct rule of the Bishop of Rome through the Western Portuguese missionaries. They tried to make this Catholic Church, part of the Roman Catholic (Latin) Church. It resulted in its fractionalization. Eventually the Antiochene and Protestant contacts resulted in the loss of the canonical communion with the Roman See. The separated community witnessed several further divisions. It was in this context that some Orthodox leaders thought about the reunion of all the Thomas Christians as it was before 1653. The civil litigations among the two factions of the Puthenkur community also opened the eyes of some for a rethinking. The community was miserably entangled in civil litigations. Those who were seriously concerned about the reformation of the Church realized that it was practically impossible to renew the Church in the midst of the civil litigations and isolated existence. They thought of establishing a closer communion and contact with some other ancient Churches, especially with the ancient Church of Rome. They thought also that this was the only way for peace and prosperity for the community and for the realization of God’s plan for His Church. In order to achieve this objective, they had to abandon their allegiance to the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch. They had to leave also their friends and relatives who were not prepared to follow them. But time has proved that the activity of those enlightened leaders of 1930 was correct and in accordance with the will of the Lord.

Our lord commanded his disciples to preach the Gospel to the whole world. It was the Roman Catholic Church which entered into a world-wide missionary activity and even today it continues to carry out that God-given mandate. The Malankara Catholic Church, which entered into that communion, also inherited this missionary dimension. The Malankara Catholic Church has entered into a vigorous missionary activity since 1930 and it has enabled thousands to know Christ and accept Christ, the unique Saviour of mankind. According to the New Testament ecclesiology, the Church is local and universal at the same time. This is realized in the Roman Catholic Church. On the day of Pentecost, the Universal Church was present in the upper room. The mandate to preach the Gospel rests upon all believers. Many of the isolated and sectarian communities and Churches seem to keep the received light hidden under the bushel. To overcome this missionary stagnation and isolation, communion with the Roman Catholic Church is a must. This is the humble lesson which the Malankara Catholic Church gives to our neighbours.
In the same way, it is the Roman Catholic Church which is earnestly engaged in the universal ecumenical service. No other Church can undertake such a universal service. The disciples of Christ must be united in faith, sacraments and in the divine hierarchy. Through its communion with the bishop of Rome, the Malankara Catholic Church is united with the world wide Catholic Church. In this way the Malankara Catholic Church rose from the level of a regional or local Church to the level of a universal one. It is indeed a great achievement. Christian Church is not meant to be restricted to any particular place or among one people alone. By nature the Church is universal and Catholic. The Church of Christ cannot but be Catholic. The Malankara Church regained its Catholicity in 1930.

Through the Reunion Movement of 1930 the door to the integral truth of the Gospel was opened. It was not possible for the separated Churches or communities. They cannot profess to be Catholic, nor can they express catholicity in its fullness. So also they are unable to present the whole Christian message in its entirety. Those who became non-Chalcedonians accepted only the doctrinal developments up to 451; after that they had an isolated existence. Those who drifted away to Protestantism also lost several of the apostolic elements of Christianity. But only the Roman Catholic Church alone can integrate the various liturgical, spiritual and doctrinal developments and present a unity in diversity. Today the Roman Catholic Church is able to make a distinction between the “content of faith” and “formulation of faith”. It believes also in the “hierarchy of Truths”.

The commitment of the Malankara Catholic Church is to proclaim the unity of Christians in accordance with the will of the Lord. Together with that it is committed to proclaim the Lord of Salvation to the masses in a united voice and enlighten them in the light of the Gospel. We do not believe in getting a few people from other communities and increase the number of the faithful in our fold. We do not aim at merging the Malankara Church with the Roman Catholic Church. Rather we aim at the reunion of the Malankara Churches as they were one for 17 centuries and prepare the Malankara Churches for the united proclamation of Christ in the vast Indian sub-continent and throughout the world and make the evangelical witnessing more effective: “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the end of the world.”

Unity of the Thomas Christians

It is very urgent that all the various groups of the Thomas Christians should reunite once again as they were for 17 centuries from the Apostolic times. The various leaders of the factions and their followers must be prepared for a change of attitude and should pave the way for wider unity. All the groups have to make a re-evaluation of their positions and stance. The various factions of the Malankara Church have gained a lot from their contact with the Latin, Anglican and Antiochene Churches. And these positive achievements should be combined with the Indian cultural background and shared among the various groups for a vigorous Malankara Church. We must learn the lessons from the past and aim for a strong Malankara Church. All the goods, coming from the diverse sources of East and West are the common good of all. We need not maintain an untouchability to any ecclesial tradition.

Since the Church of Christ is the communion of Churches, the particular traditions of each Church should be respected and recognized by all. They are to be maintained, preserved and cultivated. In case any Church has deviated from the authentic Apostolic tradition due to the impact of time, persons, circumstances and accepted traditions of partial significance or non-organic developments, there is necessarily the need for a return to the authentic sources and to a renewal. We need not be the custodians of meaningless past. What is imperative for us is to present Christ, the Saviour of mankind, in a language understandable to our contemporaries. We must use all our energies to give Christ to the thirsting souls of India. We should live in the present. We should not continue as people looking always to the past and cursing it. We must be forward looking with genuine Christian hope. In the past there might have been acts of injustice from the part of some of the Western missionaries. Our share in the mistakes cannot be ignored or neglected. We too are culpable. Unless some of us had collaborated with the Westerners, those things would not have taken place. We all carry the burden of the past; we all carry a lot of meaningless observances; we are in one way or other slaves of the past, slaves of terminology, slaves of formulations and slaves of historical past. We fight for the past and we do not see the present in which we stand and walk.
we do not see the future, we do not strive for it. We must be ready to get rid of all kinds of burdens. We must give priority to the Gospel, to the Gospel values, to the interpretation given to it by the Fathers and the love and unity taught by them and practiced by them. We must be ready to remove every obstacle to the values. We must be ready for renewal and reunion.