

THEOLOGY OF LENT IN MALANKARA LITURGY

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Introduction

Lex Orandi Lex Credenti is the dictum which governs our faith and sacramental life. In the Syriac Tradition, especially in the Malankara Syrian Catholic Church, any theological reflection should be based on its liturgical celebration. Thus, here our attempt is to identify the theological significance of the Lent as it is expressed in the liturgical texts, especially in the Liturgy of the Hours of

the Malankara Church. Going through the different stages and events of the Lenten days culminating in the Holy Week celebration is in fact an occasion of Theosis or Divinization for the faithful.

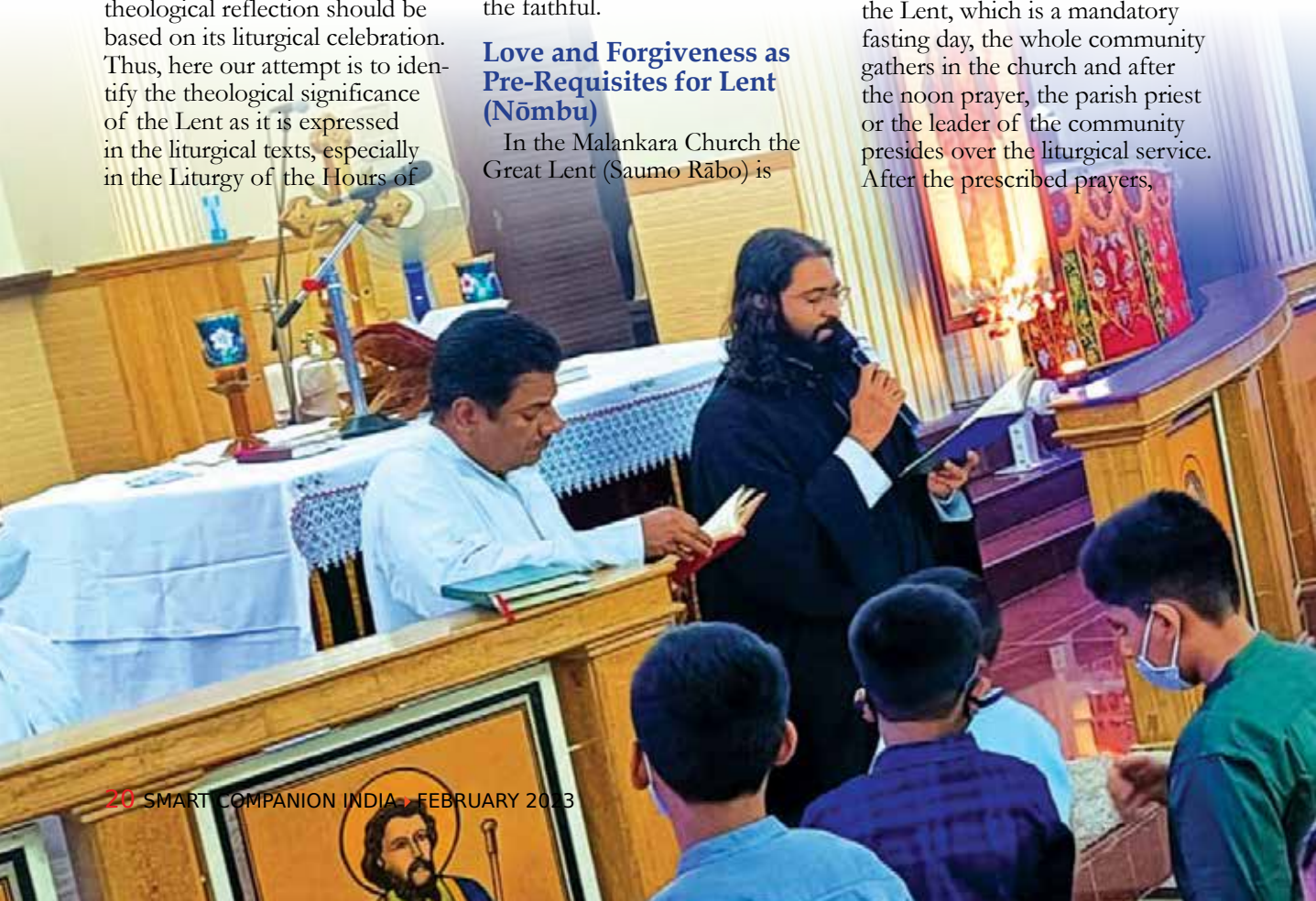
Love and Forgiveness as Pre-Requisites for Lent (Nōmbu)

In the Malankara Church the Great Lent (Saumo Rābo) is



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marked with a Reconciliation Service known as Shubkōno at the beginning of the Lent and it ends also with another Service of Peace during the Easter Liturgy. The placement of the Lent between these two services clearly shows the spiritual, theological as well as sociological significance of love, mercy and forgiveness as a pre-requisite for the Lent. In the Reconciliation Service held at noon on the first Monday of the Lent, which is a mandatory fasting day, the whole community gathers in the church and after the noon prayer, the parish priest or the leader of the community presides over the liturgical service. After the prescribed prayers,



psalms, hymns, etc., which are centred on the theme of love, forgiveness and repentance come the scripture readings 1 Jn. 4: 11–21, 1 Cor. 13: 4–10, the famous passages dealing with love; love of God and love of man. Finally, the main celebrant makes the Gospel proclamation which is taken from Mt. 18: 18–35 which deals with the question raised by St. Peter: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” we know the answer given by Our Lord.

The Qōlo which precedes the readings summarises the whole sense of the readings. It describes the love of God as tree which is desirable (reminding us of the Tree of Life in Gen. 2:9) and says: “O blessed tree of love, how desirable are you? The place where you dwell will be auspicious by you. Because of you, God dwelt with Abram. Because of you, the priests entered the Sanctuary. Because of you St. Paul said: “no afflictions or torments can separate me from the love of God” Hallelujah Blessed is the One who gave this. So, the

love of (for) God is the basic inspiration and source of any piety and prayer or the driving force behind any fasting, sacrifice or lent. The second Qōlo brings out the real irony contradiction in our normal way of fasting and observing lent. It sings: Let us love each other, my brethren; Those who fast in order to fulfil the commandment (law).

After the Gospel reading, the main celebrant exhorts them to forgive. He then prostrates before them and asks and requests them to forgive him. This he does three times one after the other. To each request the community replies in return: “Father, forgive us and bless us.” After this all of them get up and kiss the hands of the priest and forms a round in the church where each and every one gathered there goes to the other and exchange the kiss of peace as a sign of mutual forgiveness. Thus, we enter into the Lent as members of one body reconciled and united in love. The Lent ends also with a Service of the Exchange of Peace, which is the message of Resurrection. After the whole liturgical service which

takes place before the Holy Eucharist the main celebrant passes on the Kiss of Peace to the whole community of the worshippers and every one present there just like in the Shubkōno service.

What is Lent?

In the Sedro prayer of the Evening prayer on Monday the Church prays and explains: “lent is the vigilant servant who sows good seeds in our souls. Lent is that expert treatment or therapy which heals all ailments. Lent is also the farmer who plucks all wickedness and removes all evil from the crops. Lent is also the marvellous ladder which raises us to heaven.” The sentence, “the Holy Lent is the sign of victory and the unrelenting weapon against the wicked” is umpteen times repeated in the prayers. Perfect lent is love and nothing else. The prayer reminds us on the basis of the teachings of the Gospel: “We should not hate our brethren and neighbours. We should love our enemies and those who hate us. This is the lent our Lord has commanded us.”



Jesus Set us Free through His Lent

This is one of the most important theological and soteriological aspect we proclaim and experience in the Malankara liturgy. Almost every Bōutho of Mor Jacob of Serugh in the Lenten prayers start with the line “Lord, who did set us free through your fasting, have mercy upon us.” In other places it is made clearer through another version: “Christ, who saved us from our sins by your lent, accept our lent and have mercy on us.” So Christ made us free from our sins through his fasting. And we are celebrating this freedom once again when we are fasting.

How to Observe Lent?

How intensely the spirit of lent shall permeate over the whole life and physical organs of a believer is expressed in the following Sedro of Tuesday morning: “Grant us Lord, eyes which see only goodness, ears which listen to the divine revelations, nose that inhales your breath, lips that always proclaim your glory, and legs and hands which move only for almsgiving and other good deeds.” In fact, it is an invitation and initiation to mysticism. Again, in the Sedro of the Wednesday morning prayer, Lent is considered to be the armour which protects our body, and with which we overcome the desires of the senses that cause death and destruction.

Observation of Lent in the Malankara Liturgical spirituality encompasses the whole life and realms of the faithful. Inner and spiritual aspects of lent are very much stressed in the prayers. “It is good and desirable that one keeps himself away from rivalry and observe the lent with purity of heart. God has promised that the one who abstain from food as well as evil, and observe the lent in a worthy manner, will rejoice in

the bridal chamber of light”. Giving alms and sharing makes any lent meaningful and perfect. “He is blessed who fasts in purity, and shares his bread with the needy. He will get his reward from the merciful Lord and inherit the kingdom of heaven.” Not only that, “the one who observes the lent of our Lord, should separate his thoughts from all wicked desires and turn his eyes to God.”

Fasting is something that not only applies to the body. There is also the so-called spiritual fasting. We pray on Wednesday morning like this: “It is befitting that body and soul fast simultaneously. When the body abstains from food, the soul should be free from vices. Such a lent is useless where the soul does not fast from desires and bad thoughts and only the body avoids food [...] In the forty days fasting of Moses, not only was his body free from food, but also his soul from all evil”. Doing justice and taking care of the poor is an inevitable side of the Lent. In the noon prayer on Thursday the Church prays and teaches: “Dear fastener, invite the poor and feed him. Do not wait for him to come to you. Rather you go after him and satiate him. For, the fields do not go after the farmer, rather the farmer himself carries the seeds and go to the field to sow”.

Gains from Nōmbu

Lent gains superior beauty for those who observe it. Observation of lent in Malankara Tradition is an invitation to enter into a mystical way of life together with the Lord. The most quoted example which appears in almost every hour of the prayer is that of Moses who face became dazzling bright like the beauty of the Sun at the Mount Sinai. The spiritual gains of lent in the present-day life of the church are clearly mentioned in the prayer on Tuesday

morning: “O King of kings and the one who weaves crowns for the kings, let your sheep prosper and flourish by grazing in the meadows of lent and be glad in holiness, be led in brilliance and glory and be protected in purity.” In the noon prayer of Tuesday the fortune of those who engage in fasting are mentioned: “Those who observe nōmbu are very fortunate at the morning when the light appears. They will rejoice in the kingdom of heaven together with the just and the righteous. they will be glad over the result of their thoughts and deeds.” Effects of lent are numerous. “Through lent debts are forgiven and sins are removed. By the lent filth and stain are rubbed off from the soul and the soul becomes clean and spiritual wings are grown to it.”

Conclusion

At the end of the forty days lent and at the beginning of the Holy Week, there is a special liturgical celebration in the Malankara Church which marks the passion week. It is known as the Arrival at the Shore (Vāde d’almīno) at the end of the Nōmbu. The Holy lent was a voyage through the sea of life full of storm and thunder. However, the faithful through the strict and faithful observance of the lent, was able to reach the harbour/shore of salvation (Golgotha), where the celebration of the paschal mysteries, namely the passion, death burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ takes place. Lent for a Malankarite is a pilgrimage to the ‘Harbour of Life’ and the voyage is very hard and tiresome. Cleanliness of heart, forgiveness and harmony with the fellow beings, love of God and love for the other, almsgiving, steadfast prayer, justice, care of the poor and the hungry, etc., are various factors that make our lent meaningful and worthy.

