

Rogation of the Ninevites (ܩܘܪܒܐ ܕܩܝܢܝܘܬܐ)

This fast is known as Rogation of the Ninevites in English, Moonnu Noyambu in Malayalam, and Ba-oosa D'Ninvaye in Syriac. It is a three day fast observed by the East and West Syrian Churches. The fast of the rogation of the Ninevites comes in Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of the 5th week of the period of Denha.

Under the title “The cause of Bauta” (ܩܘܪܒܐ ܕܒܘܬܐ) the Hudra gives an explanation of this fast. In the year 570-581 [during the days of Mar Sabrisho‘, the metropolitan-bishop of Beit Slokh] a plague spread through Bethgarmai, Athur and Nineveh in Mesopotamia. When [Mar Sabrisho‘] prayed to God because of the rod of wrath which was destroying his flock he heard the voice of an angel saying, “Proclaim a fast and make petition, and the pestilence will be removed from you.” They fasted and prayed diligently and received Holy Communion at the Mass on the following Friday. The plague then left them and they decided to commemorate this event thereafter every year.

Later this celebration was placed in relation to the fast of the Ninevites in the time of Prophet Jonah (Jon 3, 4-10). When God asked Jonah to warn and save the Ninevites, Jonah was hesitant as the pagan Assyrians were the traditional enemies of Israelites. Jonah takes a ship in the opposite direction and the ship is caught in turbulent waves. Jonah confesses to the sailors that he is responsible for the unpleasant situation. The sailors throw him out of the ship and a whale swallows him. Three days later he is miraculously saved. Jonah then proceeds to Nineveh and preached the gospel of repentance. Then, they repented about their sins and fasted for 40 days and are spared.

The St. Thomas Christians call this rogation Moonnu Noyambu (Three day fast). There are ancient records about how St. Thomas Christians celebrated this feast. The following is an extract of a letter written by Archbishop Francis Roz in 1612 AD about ”Moonnu Noyambu” of the St. Thomas Christians. “The clerics would assemble in the church and recite the whole of the Psalter with a number of antiphons and hymns. Then they would read aloud several sermons of St. Ephrem, which are very pious, but very long, in which he treats of the penance of the Ninevites and exhorts his hearers to imitate them by weeping for their sins. After that a priest vested in surplice and stole would stand in front of the altar and sing in a most pathetic tone certain prayers in the form of a litany, and at each verse, all those in the church would prostrate themselves on the pavement and say amen. When these various ceremonies were over, and after sunset, all would sit in good order on the verandas around the church and eat the rice and other eatables

prepared beforehand by the Christians. After the meal they would say the grace, and each one would retire to his house. The same thing would be repeated on the two following days. On the fourth day, which was a day of obligation, they would all hear mass and end their fast. The Christians were so faithful in keeping it that they would not allow any occupation or any journey to come in its way. They believed that if they omitted it, some misfortune would befall them. The Children also took part in it.”

Every year in the Major Archiepiscopal Marth Mariam Pilgrim Church in Kuravilangad, the ritual of “kappalottam” or “racing ship” is the centre of attraction during the fasting period. The “kappalottam” ritual is in imitation of Jonah being thrown out of the ship. A wooden ship with a statue of Jonah is violently carried around the church by barefooted volunteers in the midday sun. This symbolizes the ship struggling in the turbulent sea. Finally, the statue of Jonah is thrown out of the ship.

This fast falls on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, 18 days before the beginning of the Great Fast. Therefore, this fast is known as “Pathinettamida Noyambu”. These three days of rigorous fasting comes to an end with the veneration of the cross and feast celebration on the fourth day. The purpose of this fast is to declare a spiritual warfare against daily iniquities and vices as the plagues in spiritual life. Let us try to observe this fast with diligence and repentance. Only then the real conversion will happen in our daily Christian life.

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