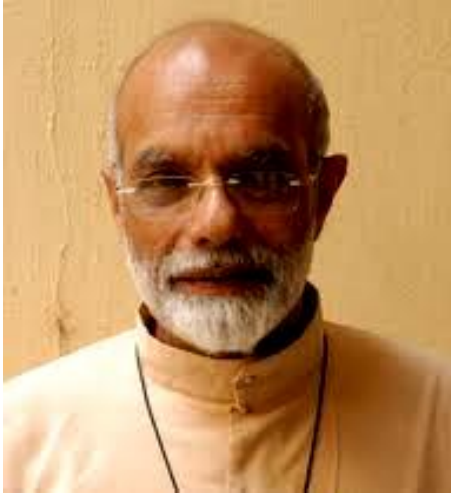


THOMAS CHRISTIANS: CHURCH OF THE EAST



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Church of the Thomas Christians of India, which is as old as Christianity itself in the Indian soil, is the legitimate heir of an unique ecclesial heritage among the Churches of the Catholic communion. The awareness of its unique identity and heritage is essential for its organic growth which will enable it to contribute its legitimate share to the renewal of the Universal Church. This contribution is of great importance in this post Vatican II period of renewal and reconciliation of the Churches which were the primary goals of the Council.

During the preparatory period of the Vatican Council II

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Pope John XXIII made a prophetic statement that in order to achieve the goal of Vatican Council II the Church should “shake off the dust of the Roman Empire which had crept into the Roman Church from the time of the Emperor Constantine”. The Pope encouraged the scholarly research of his friend Yves Congar O. P. on the secular inroads of the Roman imperial system into the Church. The results of his studies were first published in French with the title “Pour Une Eglise Servant Et Pauvre”. The book was quite timely and became very popular. Its English edition was published during the Council with the title “Power and Poverty in the Church” (transl. By Jennifer Nicholson, Geoffrey Chapman, and London-Dublin, 1965). Congar was made an official theologian (Peritus) of the Vatican Council II and his theological and historical studies had an effective impact on the deliberations of the Council. As a sign of official recognition for his contribution to the Church he was made a Cardinal. The studies of Congar and many other scholars have pointed out what had happened to the Roman Church during the course of the centuries. It had far reaching consequences also in the other Churches, which had come under the influence and rule of the missionaries from the West. It was very real from the time of the period of western colonization during which the missionaries worked with the support of their colonial masters. The Church of the Thomas Christians of India is a typical example of this ecclesiastical colonialism.

Similar to the studies made by Congar in the West, Fr. Placid J. Podipara, a great Son of the Church of the Thomas Christians of India, who was also made an expert theologian (Peritus) of the Vatican II, had his historical, canonical and theological research studies on the nature of the Catholic Church in general and

of the Eastern Churches in particular. He defined the pre-colonial Church of the Thomas Christians of India as “Indian Culture, Christian in Religion and Oriental in worship”. As Congar has pointed out what had happened to the Roman Church Placid did bring to the attention of the Christian world what had happened to the Church in India from the time of western colonialism and what still continues under the neo-colonial leadership of its own indigenous leadership! By neo-colonialism we mean the attitude of those who have a dislike towards their own venerable ecclesial heritage and want to perpetuate the alien system imposed during the period of western colonialism

2. THOMAS CHRISTIANS, CHURCH OF THE EAST

The Church of the Thomas Christians of India and the neighbouring Churches of the Persian Empire had their origin and development in the East, outside the Roman Empire. The general division of the Church into Western (Latin) and Oriental is based on the division of the Roman Empire. The Churches which had their origin and development within the Oriental regions of the Roman Empire began to be called Oriental Churches and those Churches in the Western regions called Roman or Latin Churches. From this it is clear that the Church of the Thomas Christians does not come strictly under the division based on the Roman Empire. It existed in the East outside the Roman Empire and hence called Church of the East in India with their apostolic tradition in communion with the other Churches especially of the St Thomas tradition.

The available evidences of the early period of the Church in India reveal to us the image of an indigenous Church maintaining ecclesiastical solidarity with the neighbouring Churches of the region. Here we can observe the common characteristics of the early Churches and their organizational development. The Church in India was in close alliance with the neighbouring Churches in the Persian Empire.

As it had been the custom of the early Church, the Church in India also formed part of the regional grouping of the Churches. The local Churches in the East outside the Greco-Roman world developed a kind of solidarity and the Patriarchal see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon merged as its centre. This ecclesiastical alliance was based on several factors. Among them the St Thomas tradition is the most fundamental one. The Church in Persia holds on to the tradition that St Thomas on his way to India did visit Persia and founded their first Christian community. The St Thomas Christians always believed that St Thomas is the founder of their Church. The Church in Edessa claims the same apostolic tradition through Mar Addai, a disciple of St Thomas while the Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon also defends the St Thomas tradition on the ground that Mar Mari, a disciple of Mar Addai, founded the Church there. This ecclesiastical solidarity based on the apostolic tradition may be an ex-pression of their Thomistic affinity. Such a common patrimony did build up a common solidarity. In 1552 when the Seleucian Patriarch, John Siud Sulaqa, went to Rome requesting confirmation of his Patriarchal election and the Pope Julius III accepted his request and gave the name Chaldean to the Church under him to distinguish it from the rival faction under the Patriarch, Simon Bar Mama. Thus the title Chaldean of the

Church of the East is of 16th century origin.

The close commercial relations which existed between the Middle East and India brought the Churches of these countries into closer contact. The presence of the colonies of the Jewish merchants and the early converts from among them paved the way for the use of the Syriac language for worship. From the very beginning of their Church the Syriac heritage has always been a source of inspiration and prestige for the Thomas Christians. It was a means of their communion and close link with the centers of the early Christianity.

The Thomas Christians were always conscious of their apostolic heritage and were eager to maintain intimate relation with the other Churches, which are associated with the apostle St Thomas. They firmly believed that the way of life initiated by their Apostle St Thomas which they called *Thomayude Margam*, was the criterion of their fidelity to the Catholic Church.

“It included sacraments, form of worship, disciplinary laws etc. Above all, it created an oriental ethos in the Malabar community. The Thomas Christians sincerely believed that they inherited all these from the Apostle, and so called it the Law of Thomas’. And it is the Law of Thomas that gave a distinctive mark to the spiritual heritage of this particular community”. (James Aerthayil, *The Spirituality of the St Thomas Christians*, Bangalore, 1982, p. 219.)

Thomayude Margam means the sum total of the ecclesial heritage of the Thomas Christians, which they have inherited from their Apostle St Thomas, the founder of their

Church. This Margam was the basis of their ecclesial identity and way of life. When the Portuguese tried to interfere into their ecclesiastical system they resisted pointing out that they follow the Thomayude Margam while Portuguese follow the *PatrosinteMargam*.

3. AWARENESS OF THEIR APOSTOLIC HERITAGE AND SYRIAC LITURGY ..

The Thomas Christians followed faithfully their liturgy and valued it as an integral part of their apostolic heritage. This profound consciousness of the Thomas Christians of their liturgical heritage has been constantly expressed as a sign of their ecclesial identity. A letter sent in 1585 by a group of lay leaders from their centre at Angamaly unveils their attitude to their Syriac heritage.

“Our worship, (liturgy) is in the Syriac language which was handed down to us by our Father St Thomas. Our forefathers and we ourselves are well instructed in this (Syriac) language”. (Archive Vat. Secr. Armad. VII, Caps. V, No. 14; Cfr. S. Giamil, *Genuinae relations...* Roma, 1902, p. 85).

The St Thomas Christians esteemed their East Syrian liturgical heritage as an integral part of their apostolic heritage. Their attachment to this language and liturgy was very deep rooted. The following statement reacting against the Latinising policy of the European missionaries Administrator Thoma Paremmakkal manifests

the profound attachment to their Syriac heritage.

“From the time the Apostle St Thomas was in our country and gave us the treasure of the Holy Faith, we have been until today without any break, performing our ecclesiastical ceremonies and practices in the Syriac rite. Your predecessors tried their best to change this ancient Syriac rite of ours. But they realized that they could not. What then is your aim? Is it better than that of your predecessors?” (Paremmakkal Thomma Kathanar, Varthamanappusthakam, transl. By P.J. Podipara, Rome, 1971, p. 247).

B. Vadakkekara makes the following observation:

“The seminary in Cranganore established by the Franciscans had to be wound up all too prematurely because its authorities had failed to gauge the supreme importance that Syriac had for the St Thomas Christians. But for the compromising attitude of the missionaries in permitting the continued use of Syriac, the St Thomas Christians would not have got reconciled with the decrees of the Synod of Diamper” Benedict Vadakkekara, *Origin of India’s Thomas Christians: A Historiographical Critique*, Media House, Delhi, 1995, p. 24).

The Latin missionaries on the other hand, were not prepared to respect the sensibilities of the Thomas Christians and were unable to understand and appreciate any other liturgical language except Latin, which they tried to propagate by all means. The Latin language was considered as the official language of the Catholic Church, which

they taught in their seminaries, which they started. This kind of negative attitude of the missionaries towards the Syriac language was one of the main causes of tensions with the missionaries from the West. Daniel Bertoli, a historian of the Society of Jesus has pointed out this attitude of the missionaries towards the Thomas Christians and their liturgical language. (Cfr. Daniello Bartoli, Dell'istori della compagnia di Gesu', VII, L'Asia, Firenze, 1833, 162f.)

4. PRACTICAL AUTNOMY WITH THREE LEVELS OF COMMUNION

The Church of the Thomas Christians of India was conscious of the basic nature of the Catholic Church as People of God and that the Catholicity consisted in their communion with the other Churches. This communion and co-responsibility were expressed in their ecclesial life. The pre-Vatican II western concept of the Catholic Church as a monarchical society was alien to their ecclesiology.

The Syro-Malabar Church is legitimate heir to the ecclesiology of an apostolic tradition. The excessive clericalism, which developed in the Western monarchical vision of the Church, has become a real threat to the very concept of the Church as the community of the People of God. The Vatican II wants us to shake off the dust of the Empire from the Church of Christ. In this recovery process of the earliest Christian tradition the ecclesiology of the Thomas Christians, can become a real source of inspiration to the Catholic Church as a whole.

This Church existed in the heart of Asia. Their Palliyogam, which

consisted of the local clergy and representatives of the families, was not a mere consultative body but a decision making and decision taking body. (Cfr. Paulinus of Bartholomew, *Viaggio alle Indie Orientali*, Rome, 1796, pp. 136-39.

A three tier ecclesiastical leadership was at practice with the Thomas Christians.

1. At the local level: Palliyogam
2. At the community level: Archdiaconate
3. At the hierarchical level: Metropolitanate, Patriarchate and Petrine Ministry

These three levels of ecclesiastical set up and administration bear witness to their ecclesial life and communion with the other Churches. The Thomas Christians firmly believed that the Catholic Church is the communion of Churches, which was presided over by their own hierarchy.

5. MIND OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* No. 23 explicitly teaches the basic structure of the Catholic Church as a communion of Churches with their own liturgy, spirituality, theology, tradition and canonical set up. In the Decree on the Oriental Churches (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*) No. 3 was formulated taking into account the unjust situation that prevailed in India. It explicitly

states the equality of the rights and obligation of the Churches for evangelization. The No. 4 of the same Decree specifies the equality of the Churches for pastoral care. Rome appointed even an Apostolic Visitor to inquire into the delay in implementing the above decisions of the Council. As the official secretary of the Apostolic Visitor this author is a real witness of the opposition to this appointment from Rome. I am also an eyewitness of the Roman scene of the Vatican II in which the above Decrees were discussed, formulated and passed by the Council. The Indian scene made Archbishop Padiyara to present a paper at the Roman Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 1985. This Synod was to evaluate the implementation of the teaching of the Vatican Council II. In his paper the archbishop who was also the Apostolic Visitor appointed by Rome, sorrowfully affirmed that the tragic Indian ecclesiastical scene of opposition to the implementation of the decision of the Vatican II on the equality of the Churches for evangelization and pastoral care, is a continuation of the western ecclesiastical colonialism even after India has become independent.

The Vatican Council II categorically confirms and solemnly teaches that the Catholic Church is the communion of Churches – Churches that have equal rights and obligations. These Churches are the legitimate heirs of “that tradition which was handed down from the Apostles through the Fathers and which forms part of the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the Universal Church” (Oriental Churches 1).

The mind of the Vatican II is explicit in the conciliar documents:

“This sacred Synod declares that this entire heritage of spirituality and liturgy, of discipline and theology, in their various traditions, belongs to the full catholic and apostolic character of the Church” (Ecumenism, 17).

The Catholic Church wants each individual Church to preserve and foster this heritage.

“For it is the mind of the Catholic Church that each individual Church or rite retain its traditions whole and entire, while adjusting its way of life to the various needs of time and place” (Oriental Churches, 2).

The particular laws of a Church are to preserve and foster its identity. Self-government is sine qua non to preserve and foster the heritage of each Church. If a Church depends on another Church this dependence will adversely affect the identity of the dependant. Therefore, the Council categorically asserts that individual Churches have got the right and obligation for self-government.

“This sacred Synod therefore, not only honors this ecclesiastical and spiritual heritage with merited esteem and rightful praise, but also unhesitatingly looks upon it as the heritage of Christ’s Universal Church. For this reason, it solemnly declares that the Churches of the East as much as those of the West, fully enjoy the right, and are in duty bound to rule themselves” (Oriental Churches, 5).

The right for self-government is a necessary precondition to any meaningful dialogue with the separated Eastern Churches. Therefore,

the Council assures the Oriental Churches their right for self-government and owns up the failures of the past.

“To remove any shadow of doubt, then, this sacred Synod solemnly declares that the Churches of the East, while keeping in mind the necessary unity of the whole Church, have the power to govern themselves according to their own disciplines, since these are better suited to the temperament of their faithful and better adapted to foster the good of souls. Although it has not always been honoured, the strict observance of this traditional principle is among the prerequisites for any restoration of unity” (Ecumenism: 16)

The Vatican Council II acknowledges and affirms the legitimate diversity that exists in the Church from its very beginning.

“However, the heritage handed down by the apostles was received in different forms and ways, so that from the very beginnings of the Church it has had a varied development in various places, thanks to a similar variety of natural gifts and conditions of life” (Ecumenism, No. 14).

6. PRESENT UNJUST SITUATION IN INDIA

The official teaching of the doctrine of the Communion of Churches implies the equality of the rights and obligations of the Churches within the Catholic communion. The fundamental right and obligation divinely commissioned to the Church are evangelization and pastoral care. These are specified in the Nos. 3 and 4 of the Decree on the Oriental Churches. The commentators of the Council

Documents point out that the Council Fathers specially took into account the anomalous situation that existed in India for a long period when they formulated Nos. 3 & 4 of the Decree on the Oriental Churches.

The following data reveal the situation imposed on the Catholic Oriental Churches of India up to 1953:

Total area of India. 3125944 sq. km

Total area of Kerala: 38855 sq. km

Restricted area of the Syro-Malabar Church: 2613 sq. km

Compared to the total Area of India:..... . 0. 47%

Missionaries of India from the Syro-Malabar Church: 67%

7. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PRESENT UNJUST SITUATION IN INDIA

A. GENERAL BACKGROUND: ROMAN CENTRALIZATION

Gradually when Rome had emerged as the religious and political centre, the Churches in the West were forced to conform themselves to the Roman pattern under their Patriarch who was also the successor of St Peter in Rome. Though Christians were persecuted during the early centuries at the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (305-337), Christianity was granted freedom and it gradually became the official religion. Congar observes what

had happened to the Roman Church from that period.

“Under these conditions, we ought perhaps to expect that authority would change its character and that it would acquire much more secular, much more juridical meaning, based simply on the relation of superior to subordinate. It would cease to open on to the higher sphere of a marked charismatic action on God’s part and on to the lowest sphere of the influence of the action of the community, and so close in on itself and become authority for its own sake, authority pure and simple... Such a danger was very real” (Congar, *op. cit.* p. 47).

With the fall of the Western Roman Empire with its capital in Rome, the Pope of Rome became very powerful and gradually he became the head of a political and religious reality called the Papal States. The emergence of the Papacy with its imperial background together with the official religious leadership at the very capital of the Western Roman Empire became a determining factor in the religious and political leadership in the West. It was with this background the Portuguese missionaries were sent to the East under the banner of the Catholic kings of Portugal with their colonial interests. This political and religious background was evident in the so called synod of Diamper of 1599 in which the Church of the Thomas Christians of India was brought under the Padroado (Patronage) of the King of Portugal.

The sharp contrast between the vision of the Church which existed in the East outside the Roman Empire, and that of the Church of the colonizers from the West with their imperial background, is obvious

in the following canon of the 'Synod' of Diamper, which was convened and presided over by Dom Alexis Menezes, the Portuguese archbishop of Goa.

"Furthermore, that Catholic Church is one and the same all over the world, having for its pastor the chief Bishop of Rome successor in the chair of the blessed prince of the Apostles, St. Peter, to whom and by him to his successors, our Lord Jesus Christ delivered the full power of ruling and governing his whole Church; for whence it is, that the Roman Church is the head of the whole Church, and the father, master and doctor of all Christians; and the prelate of all in common, and of all priests, bishops, archbishops, primates and patriarchs, of whatsoever church they are; as also the pastor of all emperors, kings, princes and lords: in a word, of all that are Christians, and of all the faithful people. Hence it is, that all that are not under the obedience of the said Roman Bishop, the Vicar of Christ upon earth, are out of a state of salvation, and shall be condemned to hell as heretics and schismatics for their disobedience to the commands of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the order that he left in his Church."(Session III, Decree I, Chapter XIII; Hough James, History of Christianity in India, Vol. II, London 1845,p.537).

An ecclesiastical leadership with this colonial and imperial attitude ruled over the Church of the Church in India for three centuries, which is being almost continued by its indigenous leadership, which we called neo-colonialism. It means the servile attitude to the colonial heritage and its ecclesiastical set up by those who are Indians or Oriental by birth but alien to their own indigenous ecclesial patrimony.

B. ITS APPLICATION TO THE CHURCH IN INDIA

The imperial administrative divisions of the Roman Empire into Dioceses, Prefectures and Provinces were unknown in India until the arrival of the colonial masters from the West in the 16th century. The first diocese was erected in 1534 at Goa, the Portuguese colonial capital in India. There began the claim of jurisdiction and struggle to bring the Church of the East under their control. An apostolic Church, which could maintain its unity and harmony until the 16th century was disastrously divided, its form of worship was mutilated and Latinized, and above all its venerable heritage was hybridised. It has become neither Eastern nor Western.

The “Synod” of Diamper convened by the Portuguese padroado archbishop of Goa, was a turning point in the history of the St Thomas Christians. The following events took place immediately after this Synod.

1. Appointment of a Latin bishop over the Thomas Christians (November 5, 1599).
2. Suppression of the Metropolitan See of Angamaly as a suffragan see of the new Padroado Latin Archdiocese of Goa (December 20, 1599).
3. Extension of the Padroado of the Portuguese king over to the Thomas Christians (August 5, 1600).

4. Protest of the Thomas Christians and the Restoration of their Metropolitan title (December 22, 1608).

The Prelate of the St Thomas Christians had the title of “Metropolita Indiarum” up to the 16th century. He was also known as the “Metropolitan and Door of India”. In 1534 the diocese of Goa was established under the Portuguese Padroado. It was made an archdiocese already in 1557. In 1553 Pope Julius III had recognized and confirmed the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Babylon in India.

Ever since the erection of the diocese of Goa there existed two jurisdictions i. e. Latin and Oriental, in India. After the “Synod” of Diamper in 1599 on 5th November 1599 Francis Roz SJ, the first Latin bishop was appointed to rule over the Thomas Christians under the archdiocese of Goa. The history of the “double jurisdiction” in India started with the introduction of the Latin Padroado rule in the 16th century.

The subsequent history of the ancient Oriental Church of the Thomas Christians is one of Latinization, domination, tension, division and instances of humiliation! The unity of the ancient Church in India was shattered, liturgy mutilated and ecclesial identity obliterated to a Latin conformism. A prolonged, agonising, three hundred year old struggle was to be paid as cost for emancipation from the foreign domination. And this was in 1896 when the Thomas Christians succeeded to obtain for themselves bishops from their own Church. But their territorial jurisdiction was confined to less than half a percent of the Indian territory. Their territorial jurisdiction, however, continued to be smothered, reaching out to less than half a percent of

the political Indian geography.

The Thomas Christians of the 17th century were profoundly grief-stricken at this humiliation meted out to their Church after the Synod of Diamper in 1599. Their protest to the Latin bishop Francis Roz ran like this:

“What wrong have we done that His Holiness (the Pope) should take away from our Church a title it has always had? Is it because we make our submission to the Apostolic See? Did an Apostle not found our Church? Is it not the most ancient Church in India? Oh! We know very well that this is the doing of the Archbishop of Goa; for, how can he be the Primate of our Church?” (Letter of Roz SJ to Alvarez, cited by Heras H. SJ, *The Examiner*, March 26, Bombay, 1938).

Beltrami Giuseppe who made a comprehensive study of the contemporary documents of the Synod of Diamper laments on the helplessness of the Thomas Christians and the unjust imposition of the Latin Rule over them.

“What a disgrace, in Rome the Malabarians had no voice that could be heard and the Chaldean Patriarch, Simon Denha, was living being confined to Persia. So the Portuguese, the absolute masters of the situation, made an easy joke of the affair and the whole history was for them” (Beltrami Giuseppe, *La Chiesa Caldea nel Secolo dell’Unione*, Roma, 1933, p. 130).

In order to appease the vexed Thomas Christians Rome created a parallel jurisdiction directly under itself and called it Propaganda Fide Jurisdiction. Those who would opt not to be under the Padroado jurisdiction of Portugal could, instead, be under the Propaganda Fide Jurisdiction. Even after the Koonan Cross Oath of 1653 the Prelates of the Puthenkur community (those who welcomed a Syrian Jacobite Bishop from Antioch) used the traditional “All India” title. Mar Alexander Parampil (1663-1687) used their traditional title “Metropolitan of India or of All India”. The Archdeacon of the Thomas Christians also used the title “Archdeacon of all India”. Jesuit missionaries also testify to it that the Prelates of the Thomas Christians were known as archbishops, having their jurisdiction over the whole of India.

But the Portuguese treated Cranganore as a Latin Padroado See and therefore when Joseph Kariattil, a Malabarian was appointed Archbishop of Cranganore in 1782, his rite had, by implication, got to be changed into the Latin! He was forbidden to return to his own venerable ecclesial heritage

“Promoveatur cum indulto quod Latinum ritum amplecti, in eodem licite remanere ... possit...vetito tamen ad ejus nativum Syro-Chaldaicum ritum quocumque regressu” (Vatican Archives Acta Camerari. Sacri Collegii S. R. E. Cardinalium, Vol. 39, fol. 238)

8. CONCLUSION

The Vatican II was convened to shake off the dust of the Roman

Empire which was gathered into the Roman Church from the fourth century i.e. to purify it from the man made accretions ensuing from a secular imperialism. The method of the Council was to “return to the authentic sources. It is in this context the venerable heritage of the Church of the Thomas Christians of India becomes a matter of unique and universal importance to the Catholic Church as a whole. The Church of the East had never become an official religion of any Empire. It was deeply rooted in the spiritual, religious and cultural reality of Asia and of India in particular. This indigenous ecclesial set up of the Indian Church was entirely free from every kind of imperial influence.

The Vatican Council II has opened up the horizon. It is the God-given duty to rediscover the venerable heritage and to convert it into a living reality. It is a hard and painstaking process which needs hard work, fidelity to the Church, self effacing sacrificial life, patient study, firmness of faith and courage of conviction. If there is a corresponding enlightened leadership to guide, this process becomes easier and quicker. On the one side there is the danger of the abdication of the rights and on the other side, the danger of arrogation. At the ecclesiastical level, colonialism has not yet entirely disappeared from the horizon.

The history of the last two millennia records the successes and failures of the Church in her mission. The Church is a holy but sinful in her members, members ranging from the top to the bottom. Though imperialism and colonialism as such are obsolete things of the past posing no real threat to contemporary society, those who have inherited its legacy in the ecclesiastical realm still seem to have

great fulfilment in possessing prestigious titles and extensive exclusive territories under their jurisdiction. These secular roads into the holy of holies continue to plague the divine mission of the Church.

The need of repentance and reform is not to be attributed only to the other Churches or to the Roman Curia but also to the Syro-Malabar Church in all its ranks. The mystery of the Cross-continues to be the challenge to all at all times. It is an invitation to involve everybody into the divine revolution of the Reign of God in our hearts, a radical metanoia of surrendering ourselves to the will of God. It is a spiritual revolution that Jesus Christ announced as Kingdom of God. It is fully realized and fulfilled in the radical and everlasting victory on the cross in which he who was in the form of God humbled himself, and died the death of a slave, turning death into life and shame into glory (Phil 2: 6-9).**