

The Eastern Churches in India

A Chronicle

by

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All the Eastern Churches of India consider St. Thomas the Apostle as the Founder of the Christian Church in their country. According to tradition, he worked there between 52 and 72 A.D. Which are these Churches? We have to discern

1. the Churches of the *East Syrian Rite* : (a) the Syro-Malabar Church in communion with the Roman Church, (b) the Syrian Chaldean Church separated from the former definitely in 1907 by accepting a hierarch from the Orthodox Chaldeans («Nestorians»);

2. the Churches of the *West Syrian Rite* : (a) the Orthodox Syrian Church of the East, separated from the Syro-Malabar Church since 1653, in formal communion with the Syrian Orthodox («Jacobite») Patriarchate of Antioch; (b) the Independant Syrian Church of Thozhiur; (c) the Mar Thoma Church; (d) the Syro-Malankara Church in communion with Rome since 1930. As the Mar Thoma Church, preserving Syrian forms externally, has accepted the Anglican Low Church theology and the Independant Syrian Church is in intercommunion with her, they do not figure in the following chronicle. The four Churches we are going to describe here, number about 3.500.000 faithful.

THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH

Present situation : Lacking a common hierarchical head, this Church consists of several units : (1) the Metropolitan Province of Ernakulam with the suffragan eparchies of Trichur, Palghat, Tellicherry, Mananthovady and Kothamangalam; (2) the Metropolitan province of Changanacherry with the suffragan sees of Palai and Kottayam (the latter's jurisdiction is personal for the social group called 'Southists', 'Knanaya', 'Thekhumbhagar'). Suffragans of Latin rite archdioceses are the six Apostolic Exarchates outside Kerala : Chanda (M.P.), Bijnor (U.P.), Jagdalpur (M.P.), Sagar (M.P.), Satna (M.P.), Ujjain (M.P.). A new mission territory is step by step given

over to Syro-Malabar missionaries by the Jesuits of Gujarath. — The number of faithful is above 2 millions.

Hierarchy : Changes in the hierarchy are to be noted since 1968. During his sejour in Kerala, the then Prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, Maximilian de Fürstenberg, consecrated the Kottayam auxiliary bishop, Mar Kuriakose Kunnacherry. In early 1969, the Metropolitan see of Ernakulam was given an auxiliary bishop in Mar Sebastian Mankuzhikary. In the same year the Archbishop of Ernakulam, Joseph Parecattil, became a Cardinal-priest of the Holy Roman Church. When taking possession of his titular church S. Maria »Regina Pacis«, strange enough, this Prelate celebrated a Latin Pontifical Mass in concelebration with other Syro-Malabar priests. After Mar Matthew Kavukatt's death, the Metropolitan see of Changanacherry received a new pastor in the person of Mar Antony Padiyara, the then Latin bishop of Ootacamund; a born Syro-Malabarian, this prelate had to embrace the Latin rite in his youth when becoming a missionary outside Kerala. The bishop of Trichur, Mar George Alapatt († 1973) resigned from his office in the same year and was replaced by Mar Joseph Kundukulam. The above mentioned exarchates of Chanda, Sagar, Satna, and Ujjain were established in the same year receiving their prelates without episcopal title : Januarius Palathuruthy CMI, Clemens Thottunkal CMI, Abraham D. Mattam VC, John Perumattam respectively. In 1972, Pope Paul VI consecrated at St Peter's Basilica Mar Joseph Powathil as auxiliary bishop for Changanacherry. In the same year the two Exarchates of Bijnor (Exarch Gratianus Mundadan CMI) and Jagdalpur (Paulinus Jeerakath CMI) were established. In 1973, the eparchy of Telli-cherry was divided. The new eparchy of Mananthovady received its first pastor in Mar Jacob Toomkuzhy. In the same year, also the old bishop of Palai, Mar Sebastian Vayalil (67), received an auxiliary bishop in the person of Mar Joseph Pallikapampil. The whole hierarchy consists hence of 2 Metropolitans, 6 bishops, 4 auxiliary bishops, and 6 Apostolic exarchs who are not bishops.

Canonisation processes : There are two at present : for Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, co-founder of the Congregation of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate († 1871), and for Sr. Alphonsa Muttathupadam († 1946).

Religious life : As religious life is flourishing in Kerala, many girls left their homeland for Europe to enter religious congregations. Due to the different circumstances (insufficient preparation, transplantation to Latin rite societies, superficial conscience of vocation etc.), many returned to secular life. In Kerala, during the last years, some congregations received the

status of pontifical right : the male Congregation of the Vincentians and the female Congregations of the Carmelite and the Adoration sisters got it in 1967/68. The Clarist Sisters were united into one unique Congregation in 1970 when they became pontifical. Other congregations were founded in the eparchies of Palai, Trichur, and Tellicherry. The bishop of Palai founded also the Missionary Society of St Thomas the Apostle, a society of secular priests dedicating themselves to missionary work; it has taken over the Ap. Exarchate of Ujjain.

Clerical Training : The inter-ritual seminary of Always run by European Discalced Carmelites for all the dioceses of Kerala regardless their ecclesiastical appartenance, has remained Latin in spirit inspite of some teaching priests from the local Oriental Churches. In the meantime, this institution became a Pontifical Faculty. As the seminary became too small, the new Seminary under the Syro-Malabar diocesan clergy at Vadavathoor, Kottayam-10, was inaugurated in 1962. It has a capacity of 450 students. Though, in theory, open for all, it became the seminary for the two Catholic Churches of Syrian traditions. In 1969, Card. de Fürstenberg, consecrated the seminary chapel. One of its former professors, Fr. Jacob Vellian, inaugurated, together with the Syrian Orthodox, the 'Indian Institute for the Eastern Churches' whose president became Fr. Paul Verghese of WCC fame. Fr. Vellian has also started 'The Syrian Churches Series', a collection of theological books, to foster the knowledge and appreciation of the authentic traditions of the Syrian Churches. The St Thomas Ap. Seminary of Vadavathoor was affiliated to the Pontifical Oriental Institute in 1973.

Education : In 1972, the school scheme of the Kerala Government provoked a strong, but peaceful resistance by the Catholics. It was planned a take-over of the secondary schools and colleges run by the Church. Many bishops, i.a. Syro-Malabar Mar Joseph Kundukulam of Trichur and Syro-Malankara Mar Athanasios of Tiruvalla lead the demonstrations in the streets of their residences.

Pastoral and Liturgical questions : In 1969, a Seminar held at Bangalore for all the Catholics of India, has shown that the prevailing thinking was typically Latin. The Oriental Individual Churches were considered as mere 'rites'. A realisation of the plans elaborated at Bangalore would not be profitable for the surviving of the Eastern Churches (cf. Eastern Churches Review 1969, 417f.). The conscience of the particular or individual Churches seems to have won more ground in the meantime. In 1973, a consultation was held at Vadavathoor seminary with large participation of the 'Syrian' hierarchy. Some call it 'the Synod of Vadavathoor' in opposition to the

so-called Synod of Diamper (1599) and its disastrous consequences the Indian Orientals are suffering from till our days. The papers of this consultation are in print.

The liturgical renewal which so hopefully started in 1962 and which was continuously prepared by a group of scholars nominated by the Oriental Congregation, came to a sudden end in 1968 when a liturgical committee was established by the metropolitan of Ernakulam with members lacking the necessary qualifications (cf. *Eastern Churches Review* 1971, 330) and a strong latinising tendency (cf. J. Madey, *The so-called Liturgical Reform of the Syro-Malabar Church*, in *Diakonia* 9 [New York 1974] 138-156).

Jubilee of Ecumenical Importance : The 19th centenary of the martyrdom of St Thomas the Apostle was celebrated in all the eparchies, especially at Mylapore-Madras where the Apostle's tomb is venerated. In the Latin Cathedral, an eucharistic liturgy celebrated by the Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan Philipose Mar Theophilos of Ankamali, a joint service of the representatives of the Tamil Lutheran Church, the Mar Thoma Church and the Church of South India, and on the following day, a Syro-Malankara pontifical liturgy. The Syro-Malabar Liturgy was celebrated on the Island Grounds, the festal campus. In connection with this jubilee, there appeared an ecumenical lexicon entitled »The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopaedia of India«, edited by George Menacherry (2 volumes), and an ecumenical Church history »Christianity in India«, edited by H. C. Perumalil and E. R. Hambye.

Commission for the Codification of the Oriental Canon Law : This commission was instituted by Pope Paul VI on 10 June 1972. The metropolitan of Ernakulam, Card. Parecattil, was nominated its president. Among the consultors there are about eight priests from both the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches.

Conclusion : In spite of all what preceded, ecclesiastically, the last ten years were of a bitter experience for all those Syro-Malabarians who have a conscience of their particular Church. The strong tendency towards latinisation has consequently brought forth a loss of the authentic and genuine traditions. It is to be feared that the Syro-Malabar Church may lose its identity and even its entity if she continues her way. A precious patrimony is being neglected and given up. If this loss is not effectively repaired, the irreparable consequences may be foreseen. Much will depend on the new young bishops, the clergy educated at Vadavathoor, and the faithful whom they have to educate, because most of them have not even an idea of belonging to an Oriental Church.

THE SYRIAN CHALDEAN CHURCH

Present situation and hierarchy : The 15,000 Syrian Chaldean faithful, mostly in the region of Trichur, but also in Ernakulam (Cochin), Madras, Bangalore, Bombay etc. are divided into two groups : the larger one who follow their local pastor and a smaller one (2,000) who are called the 'Mar Shimun' or 'Patriarchal party'. The present hierarch is Mar Aprem (George Mooken) who was consecrated bishop and metropolitan by his predecessor Mar Thoma Darmo when the latter eventually became the Patriarch of his followers (those of the Chaldean Orthodox who were against hereditary succession of Patriarchs). His assistant bishop is Mar Poulouse (K. A. Paul), who also was consecrated bishop in 1968 by Mar Thoma Darmo. The 'Mar Shimun' party has a bishop of their own, consecrated a few years ago by the Patriarch Mar Shimun († 1975). The bishop's name is Mar Timotheus (C. C. Timothy). The two groups have together 21 churches and 3 chapels, about 20 priests and 21 deacons, 1 seminary, 2 high schools, 4 elementary schools, 1 orphanage, 1 printing house (Mar Narsai Press). There is a small monthly in English 'Voice of the East'. Mar Aprem's wish is to revive monastic life in the Church under his jurisdiction. A plot of land has been recently acquired for this end. On 10th January 1974, the Kerala High Court has decreed the suspension of Mar Thoma Darmo pronounced by Mar Shimun as invalid. The injunction issued by the Trichur court on Mar Aprem in 1968, prohibiting him the use of his metropolitan title and the exercise of pontificals still continues. This is why there were ordinations of clerics only in early 1976 after the return of Mar Poulouse from America. At present efforts are made by Mar Aprem to restore peace and concord among the two groups of the Chaldean Syrian Church. The young hierarch (born on 12th June 1940) has submitted his doctoral thesis on the history of the Chaldean Syrian Church to Serampore College.

Major events : In 1972, the parish church of Ernakulam celebrated its silver jubilee. Also the new church in Madras received its blessing.

Ecumenical relations : Mar Aprem is the second Vice-President of the Church History Association of India its president and first vice-president being Rev. Prof. D. V. Singh and Rev. Prof. Dr. E. R. Hambye S.J. respectively. On the social level, there is a close cooperation with Mar Philexinos III of the Independent Syrian Church of Thozhiur. Also the relations with the Syro-Malabar bishop of Trichur Mar Joseph Kundukulam have considerably improved. The Chaldean Syrian Church which broke away

from the Syro-Malabar Church and consequently from the Catholic unity at the beginning of this century because of the unsupportable latinisations, seems to take serious her ecumenical vocation. It is therefore to be wished that the years long struggles among her own members, with innumerable and costly processes before civil courts come to an end.

THE ORTHODOX SYRIAN CHURCH OF THE EAST

Present situation : This Church which is also called 'Syrian Orthodox Church of Malankara' or simply 'Jacobite' Church is in formal communion with the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch whose Patriarch is Moran Mar Ignatius Yacoub III. It belongs to the pre-Chalcedonian Oriental Orthodox Churches. Its present hierarchical head is His Holiness Moran Mar Baselius Augen I, Catholicos of the East and Metropolitan of Malankara. He succeeded Mar Baselius II in 1964, and his installation took place in the presence of the Antiochian Patriarch who approved the election. The Church has ten dioceses which are governed by bishops in the rank of Metropolitan. One of these dioceses is personal for the faithful living outside Kerala, another is for the 'Southists' or 'Knanaya' (cf. Syro-Malabar Church). The number of faithful is estimated to 1,5 millions. The pastoral work is assured by 857 priests in 1135 churches and chapels.

Hierarchy : An important event in the life of the Orthodox Syrian Church took place when on 31st December 1970 the Episcopal Synod, the Managing Committee and the General Assembly of the Malankara Association (about 3,000 representatives) elected the Metropolitan for the faithful outside Kerala, Mathews Mar Athanasios, Catholicos-elect, a function corresponding to the Latin coadjutor with the right of succession. This prelate is born in 1907 and was consecrated bishop in 1953.

Religious life : There are 11 monasteries and convents of different type : monastic as well as active. The number of monks is 101, that of Sisters 105. One of the hieromonks, Navakatish John Thomas, Principal of St. Stephen College, Pathanapuram (Kerala), has published his doctoral thesis »Die Syrisch-Orthodox Kirche der Südindischen Thomas-Christen. Geschichte-Kirchenverfassung-Lehre« (Würzburg 1967).

Clerical Training : It is assured by the Orthodox Theological Seminary at Kottayam which is affiliated to the University of Serampore at the Bachelor of Divinity (B.D.) level.

Events of ecumenical importance : It was a historical event when His Holiness the Catholicos of the East met His Holiness Pope Paul VI in Bombay

during the Eucharist Congress. In 1965, the Metropolitan of Quilon, Mathews Mar Coorilos, was received in audience by the Pope in Rome. In February 1967, Card. de Fürstenberg also visited the Catholics during his tour in Kerala. At this remarkable meeting were present the Orthodox hierarchs Mar Theophilos of Ankamali, Mar Ivanios of Kottayam, Mar Coorilos of Quilon, Mar Clemis of Knanaya, Fr. Paul Verghese and the Syro-Malabar hierarchs Mar Mathew Kavukatt, then archbishop-Metropolitan of Changan-cherry and Mar Kuriakose Kunnacherry, auxiliary of Kottayam. There are friendly relations between the Syrian Orthodox and the Rumanian Orthodox Churches whose Patriarch Justinian paid a visit to the Catholicos. In his presence, the new Theological Seminary was inaugurated on 7th January 1969. The Patriarch paid a short visit to the Syro-Malabar Seminary of Vadavathoor, too. An All-India Commission on Faith and Order whose main promotor was Fr. Paul Verghese, came into existence in January 1970 upon an agreement of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, the National Christian Council and the Orthodox Syrian Church, with Bishop Newbegin (Anglican), Fr. Paul Verghese (Syr. Orth.) and Msgr. Exross (Rom. Cath.) as co-chairmen.

New tensions: Between the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and the Orthodox Syrian Church of the East, the tensions of old which had come to an end about ten years ago, were revived when the former tried to interfere into the interior life of the Malankara Church. Within this Church, there are again two parties, one holding to the Patriarch, the other to the Catholicos. For some years, there was an Apostolic Delegate of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, lastly Metropolitan Mar Timotheos Aphrem Aboodi who resided at Mar Ignatius Daira, Mathoor. He tried to exercise powers like a Roman Apostolic Nuncio. As he was not recognised by the Catholicos, the Indian Government withdraw his permit of residence and sent him back to Syria. To replace him by a person of his confidence, the Patriarch consecrated Episcopo the Indian priest K. P. Paul under the name Poulouse Mar Athanasios and with the title of 'missionary bishop'. The Patriarch's party proposed two more priests for consecration by the Patriarch, namely Fr. C. M. Thomas (Thomas Mar Dionysios) and Fr. P. M. Gheevarghese (Gheevarghese Mar Gregorios) who received the episcopal consecration at Damascus on February 24th, 1974. On March 17th, the Patriarch's adherents gave the three new bishops a rousing welcome announcing publicly their rejection of the Catholicos and their allegiance to the Patriarch. According to informations received from Kerala, the Knanaya Metropolitan Mar Clemis and the Metropolitan Mar Philoxinos are

holding to the Patriarch, too. The Catholicos has sent a delegation to the Patriarch to talk about the settlement of this unhappy dispute, but in vain. Now there is a serious split or schism a sad reality. There are now seven hierarchs with the Catholicos (the see of Niranam is vacant) and five with the Patriarch whose followers call themselves 'Jacobites'. Many faithful get tired of these continuous quarrels within their Church and ask for being received into the Catholic Syro-Malankara Church. On 25th March, for example, 50 families went over to this Catholic Church of their tradition. Issued from the Catholicos's party in 1930, the sympathy of the Syro-Malankara Church is with that group; she favours the independence of her original Church from Antioch and wishes a successful result of the discussions with the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate.

THE SYRO-MALANKARA CHURCH

Present situation : The hierarchical head of this Church (most of whose members were originally belonging to the Orthodox Syrian Church and to the Mar Thoma Church) is the Metropolitan of Trivandrum, Benedict Mar Gregorios, a disciple of Metropolitan Mar Ivanios who is to be regarded as the 'Father of the Reunion Movement'. His only suffragan bishop is that of Tiruvalla, Zacharias Mar Athanasios. The number of faithful is approximately 240000.

Religious life : The Order of Imitation of Christ whose founder, Mar Ivanios, has inaugurated the reunion movement in 1930 and to which also his successor, the present Metropolitan, belongs, is flourishing. It has become of pontifical right as well as the Sisterhood of Imitation of Christ. Monastic life according to the Cistercian way of life, but adapted to the Syro-Indian tradition is to be found at the Kurisumala Ashram (Monastery) and its dependencies or new foundations. There is another female Congregation in the Syro-Malankara Church, called 'The Daughters of Mary' who now are working also in Germany.

Clerical training : As the Syro-Malankara Church has no seminary of her own, her alumni are studying at Vadavathoor, Alwaye, Poona, Rome etc. The consequence of this state is that some are coming back to their eparchies with a latinised mind. It should be the best solution to make them study at Vadavathoor or at the University of the Holy Spirit, Kaslik, Lebanon. The seminary training at Königstein (Taunus, Germany) did not bring the results expected from both sides.

Oriental renewal : The hierarchy of the Syro-Malankara Church seems to

have a sense for an Oriental 'aggiornamento'. The hierarchs have sent a good number of able priests abroad to study subjects pertinent to their ecclesiastical tradition : Syriac patrology, liturgy, canon law etc. We find this trend now also among the Syrian Orthodox who are, as we have shown above, of the same tradition. — Recently the Syro-Malankara Church has published a new edition of the book containing the text for the eucharistic sacrifice containing nine anaphoras ; this is a great enrichment (cf. J. Madey, Die liturgischen Bücher der Syro-Malankara-Kirche, in *Ostkirchliche Studien* 22, 1973, 55-57). The bishop of Tiruvalla published a prayer book for the faithful thus permitting them to share better in the liturgical prayer of the Church (Tiruvalla 1972).

Ecumenical relations : Both the hierarchs are very open for ecumenical work. The antagonism which existed between the Syrian Orthodox and the Syro-Malankara Churches after the latter's secession from the former, seems to be lessened to a considerable degree. When in 1964, the Syrian Patriarch of Antioch, Moran Mar Ignatios Yacoub III was in India, he paid a visit also to Mar Gregorios in the company of the then Catholicos, Moran Mar Baselios Augen I, three Syrian Orthodox Metropolitans from the Near East, the Orthodox Syrian Metropolitan of Quilon (Kerala), some priests, deacons and laymen (cf. *Proche-Orient chrétien* 15, 1965, 76-78). All the hierarchs visited together the new Cathedral of the Syro-Malankara archbishop. On Pentecost 1968, 34 bishops of different Churches of Kerala, published a common declaration in which all Christians are urged to cooperate in a housing programme for the poor without regard of their religious or social appartenance. The Churches called 'episcopal', i.e. the Orthodox Syrian, the Catholic, the Mar Thoma Churches and the Church of South India decided to build a common hospital for which one of the Church of South India bishops has donated 25 acres of land. An important document was signed by four bishops representing the above mentioned four Churches on receiving members of other Churches. This document constitutes an ecumenical progress. When Mar Gregorios celebrated the silver jubilee of his priestly ordination in August 1969, among the guests, there were also six bishops of non-Catholic Churches five of whom remained for some days in the hospital atmosphere of the Archbishop's House.

Inter-Catholic relations : It is a pitiful fact that the relations between the Latin Church and the Eastern Churches in communion with her, are not the best ones. While non-Catholic Oriental Churches enjoy full liberty to assure pastoral work for their faithful outside Kerala, this is not so for the Catholic Orientals. This is why there are not even parishes for Orientals in cities

like Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Madras etc. where more Orientals are living than e.g. the Apostolic Exarchates for the Ukrainians in France, Germany or elsewhere have which are under bishops of their own. Mar Gregorios has recently pleaded for facilitating pastoral work for the Orientals outside the Oriental territories proper, but the Latin hierarchy's resistance was too great to come through. 'No double jurisdiction in the same territory!' is their always repeated argument. Is it a disadvantage for Orientals of being Catholic? — The contacts with the National Christian Council of India and the Syrian Orthodox Church in order to form a Central Council of all the Christian Churches in India were successful. A joint commission was recently established with Philipose Mar Theophilos, Orthodox Syrian Metropolitan of Ankamali, Msgr. William Gomes, Roman Catholic Bishop of Pune and Chairman of the Ecumenical Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, and M. A. Z. Rolston, General Secretary of the National Christian Council of India, as executive members and Fr. Alphonse Padinjarekanjirathinkal CMI, as secretary.

Social activities : In both eparchies, there exist a well developed and efficient social programme for housing the poor, helping the sick, the unmarried poor girls to find a suitable partner, assisting the aged priests, for whom a home was built at Pushpagiri (cf. *Der christliche Osten* 1964, 83f. and the annual review [in German] of the Tiruvalla eparchy *Reunion Record*).

Other important events : In 1964, Mrs. George Joseph and Mr. Alexander Nellimoottil were the first lay people who received the order 'Pro Ecclesias et Pontifice'. — During the Eucharistic Congress at Bombay, Pope Paul VI preached in the liturgy celebrated by Mar Gregorios. This remarkable speech was published in *L'Osservatore Romano* on 4th December 1964 (German translation in '*Der christliche Osten*' 20, 1965, 53f.). In 1965 the new Cathedral of Trivandrum was consecrated, in 1973 the Cathedral of Tiruvalla; the latter is the first Church built in modern times in the traditional Kerala temple style.