

New Methodologies in Syro Malabar Catechesis:
Digital media and hands-on projects vs. Textbooks

History and Theory of Catechesis, Final Research Paper

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Introduction:

Early Christians in the southern part of India known as the Malabar region (now known as Kerala) had very little formal catechesis. Catechetical methodologies were poorly structured until the arrival of Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century, which led to the Latinization of the native St. Thomas Christians (now known as the Syro Malabar catholic community). Although Latinization brought about structured catechesis, discontentment with Latinization eventually led to the separation of the Saint Thomas Christians from Latin jurisdiction in 1887. In 1923, the Syro Malabar (SM) hierarchy was established in India, granting the Church autonomous status in communion with Rome. Over time, the SM Church has achieved even greater autonomy, gaining major archepiscopal status in 1992 established by Pope John Paul II¹.

Textbooks as local catechism of SM church:

The SM archdiocese in Kerala in India has since then developed several series of textbooks for catechetical teaching. These textbooks are specifically designed to educate and guide students from 1st through 12th grade in the teachings of the Catholic church with text adapted from the holy scripture, Catechism of the Catholic church and the SM liturgy. Because these textbooks serve to teach the traditions of the SM Catholic Church, they play a crucial role in catechesis as they cover various aspects of faith, sacraments, liturgy, and moral teachings within the realm of the SM tradition. In this context, they may even be referred to as “local catechisms” due to their significance in faith education and catechesis within the regional culture. Local catechisms are instrumental in bringing the newness of the Gospel into different

¹ Andrews George Mekkattukunnel, *Mar Thoma Margam: The Ecclesial Heritage of the St Thomas Christians* (Oriental Institute of Religious Studies India Publications, 2012).

cultures. Through these catechisms, the universal Church communicates the Gospel in a way that is accessible to the faithful, so that they may encounter it where they live, in their culture, and in the environment where they live. The Code of Canon law for Eastern Churches (CCEO) specifies that “each Church *sui iuris* and particularly their bishops have the serious duty of providing catechesis, by which faith matures and the disciple of Christ is formed through a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the teaching of Christ and through an increasingly stronger commitment to the person of Christ”². The responsibility of the synod of bishops is, “to issue norms on catechetical formation, arranged in a catechetical directory”³. It is important that every *sui iuris* Eastern Catholic Church, reaping the benefit of its own tradition, undertake the production of its catechism, adapted to the various groups of the faithful and supplemented with aids and instruments. The synod of bishops, by means of a catechetical commission, also has the task of promoting and coordinating various catechetical initiatives⁴. The catechetical directory of the SM Diocese in Chicago, aptly called Echo⁵ lays down guidelines for catechesis in SM churches in the US.

In this paper I will explore certain elements of the catechetical textbook namely “Church: The worshipping community” prescribed by the SM Diocese for ninth graders⁶. I will specifically focus only on relevant chapters of this textbook, which illustrate various aspects SM

² Canon Law Society of America, ed., *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches: Latin-English* (Washington, D.C: Canon Law Society of Amer, 2001). c. 617

³ “Code of Canons of Eastern Churches,” c. 621.

⁴ “Code of Canons of Eastern Churches,” c. 622

⁵ Catechesis St.Thomas Syro Malabar Diocese of Chicago, “Echo: Catechetical Directory,” accessed July 14, 2023, <https://www.syromalabarcatechesischicago.org/website/page/MjM=>.

⁶ Catechesis St.Thomas Syro Malabar Diocese of Chicago, “Grade 9: Online Textbook,” accessed July 14, 2023, <https://www.syromalabarcatechesischicago.org/website/page/MzI=>.

qurbana (Mass). My goal is to explain how these chapters may be more effective if taught with visual aid. Although the textbook has several illustrations, my intent is to show that video clippings of the SM liturgy rubrics and other aspects, while elucidating the literature in the textbook may be more beneficial for the students. I believe that a visual reinforcement along with oral delivery will have a greater impact in the minds of the high-schoolers and they are likely to retain the information better, in comparison to solely reading or looking at pictorial representations in a textbook. One of the drawbacks of this method is the need for a specific space to project the visual content, which may be challenging in smaller churches where there is no dedicated space for catechesis. However, in those situations, laptops or tablets may be used to show the videos. Additionally, the students may even be taken on a tour around the church to see and touch the various places, articles, vestments used during *qurbana*. This will further engage them in the process of learning about the Eucharistic liturgy.

Textbook layout and traditional methodology:

Each chapter in the ninth-grade textbook has about 1500 words (around three 8"x11" pages). At the end of each chapter, there are various activities listed out, and a list of chapter revision questions. Following this, there is a highlighted section that contains literature quoted directly from the CCC or You Cat pertaining to the particular topic covered in the chapter. The activities are related to the chapter and include a scriptural reference that the students should read as homework, a scripture verse to reflect upon, a short prayer, a resolution or application to real life related to what they were taught, and a couple of group activities to discuss the chapter's main theme.

The purpose of the questions and activities at the end of each chapter is to engage the students into thinking deeper about the topic, which is thought to benefit their understanding of the topic. However, there are several drawbacks of this method of engagement. The first drawback is that students and the catechist may not be motivated to complete one or several of these activities on-site or as homework. Another drawback is that assignments and revision questions may make it seem very didactic and monotonous, taking the joy out of learning about Christian faith and in particular, the Eucharist. Yet another drawback is the lack of a connection to the real world, making the topics seem abstract with no engagement of the senses that link the words in the text to real-life events.

New methodology:

Therefore, I propose various modern pedagogical methods that engage all the senses of the students towards a realistic experience of the *qurbana*. The following sections delve deeper into the topics discussed in chapters 3 through 7 of the textbook. After a brief description of the content of each chapter, I will elaborate on methods that may be employed to give the students a more hands-on experience of the *qurbana* compared to the activities listed at the end of each chapter. The italicized words are either Syriac or Malayalam words used in the SM church and will be explained in parentheses.

Application of the new methodology: signs and symbols:

Chapters 3 and 4 of the ninth-grade textbook illustrate the eucharistic worship of God through various signs and symbols that facilitate a deeper understanding of the liturgy. These signs and symbols include places, individuals, objects, sacred vestments, gestures and postures.

For context, the first part of the following section will describe the textbook content of chapters 3 and 4 followed by my proposal for supplementary or novel methodologies that may be used for a more hands-on approach to catechesis. The italicized words in the section denote Syriac words still used in SM liturgy.

Places: the temple of God, or the church, is a place of worship and symbolizes God's presence. The church typically faces the east and contains the *hykla*, *bema* and *madbaha*. The *hykla* is where the community gathers, the *bema*, usually a step above the *hykla*, symbolizes the earthly paradise and contains a table (with a traditional SM cross and the missal). On either side of the table are lecterns for the liturgy of the word. The celebrant stands at the table in the *bema* to begin celebrating the *qurbana* and remains here until the end of the liturgy of the word. The *madbaha* (sanctuary) is three steps higher than the *bema* and is referred to as the holiest of the holies, and hence, elevated to represent heaven. In some churches this area is covered with a veil until the resurrection hymn in the *qurbana*. The Altar is at the center of the holy sanctuary, symbolizing the divine throne and Christ's tomb. the tabernacle holds the holy eucharist, while the *bethgaze* (placed on either side of the altar) contains the offerings of bread, water and wine. the *bethsahade* is placed on the right side of the sanctuary stores relics of saints, the *questroma* separates the sanctuary and the *hykla*, and is the place where the choir stands. the baptismal font is for baptisms and the sacristy is where the clergy prepare for the liturgy.

Individuals: the individuals who take part in the holy *qurbana*, include the baptized community, the celebrant (priests, bishops, cardinals) and lastly, the deacons and altar servers who symbolize the role of angels, as messengers and intermediaries between God and humanity.

Objects: several objects hold symbolic significance within the context of worship and the holy *qurbana* including the traditional *sleeve* (smaller cross) placed on the table in the *bema* and

the altar in the sanctuary while the much bigger crucifix seen in most churches above the sanctuary. The traditional SM *sleeve* is unique in its design, and its symbolism. The book containing only the gospels is placed on the right side of the altar, symbolizing Jesus' position at the right hand of the Father. The lecterns contain scripture readings from the Old Testament and epistles read during the liturgy of the word. Bread and wine are symbolic elements that represent the body and blood of Jesus, respectively. The sacred vessels include the chalice, paten, ciborium, thurible and aspergillum are essential sacred vessels used in the holy *qurbana*. The eternal lamp signifies the eternal presence of Jesus placed within the sanctuary. Church art includes sacred art, icons, architectural designs of the altar, bema and sanctuary, the architecture of the flagpole outside SM churches, all of which make the *qurbana* meaningful.

Sacred vestments hold deep symbolic meaning in the celebration of sacraments, reflecting ancestral traditions. The *kotina*, a long white tunic worn as the bottom-most layer, it signifies the abandonment of the old self and the embrace of the new self in Christ. The *urara*: is draped behind the neck and symbolizes priestly authority and purity. The *zunara* is worn over the *kotina*, and represents chastity and service. The *zande* are sleeves symbolizing the readiness of the priest's hands to serve. The *paina*, the outermost layer worn by the priest, is considered a vestment of justice. The *sosappa*, a square-shaped covering or veil used for covering the body and blood of Christ, symbolizes the shroud covering Jesus.

As seen above, there are numerous signs and symbols used in the SM eucharist, and understanding the terminology is critical in learning about the traditional aspects of the *qurbana*. However, it can be quite overwhelming and likely meaningless if read from a textbook. Visual cues including videos, tours or exhibits can greatly enhance the experience of faith formation and lead to a deeper understanding of the Eucharist. Places as described above can be shown to the

student on a video or on a tour of a SM church. Video recordings of SM churches in India can help them appreciate and differentiate between ancient architecture and the more recent churches built with modern adaptations. Indian churches could be compared to SM churches built here in the US, specifically the church that the students attend. I believe that a visual display of the art and architecture will be very significant to the students and will heighten their appreciation for SM culture.

The role of pastoral ministers in the *qurbana* may be shown to the students on video. Alternatively, a pastor or deacon could be invited to briefly talk to the students about their vocation and SM seminary formation in India and the US, and what it means to be a SM priest as well as the various rubrics of the *qurbana*. Altar servers, sacristans and catechist may also be interviewed regarding their role in the *qurbana*.

Objects and sacred vestments may be exhibited to get a more hands-on experience. With may even be allowed to touch and feel the materials and texture as SM vestments are heavy and rich in intricate embroidery that are symbolic. The sacred vessels used in the *qurbana* are very ornate and have many textures. Involving the senses of touch and vision can greatly enhance the catechetical experience. Alternatively, videos of the objects may be pre-recorded and shown to the students.

Application of the new methodology: holy *qurbana* liturgy

Chapters 5 through 7 in the textbook illustrate the SM liturgy for the holy *qurbana* (mass). The different parts of the liturgy include, the introductory rites, the liturgy of the word, the preparation of the gifts, the anaphora (consecration), the rite of reconciliation, the holy communion and the concluding prayers. In the early SM church, the liturgy was entirely in

Syriac, and only clergy were taught the language, while the people were taught to respond without being told what the words meant. This liturgical practice changed in the post-Vatican II era, and SM liturgy was translated into the native language of Kerala, called Malayalam to get the community more involved in the Eucharist. Although the bulk of the liturgical prayers and responses are mostly in Malayalam, some Syriac as well as Greek words have been retained. The SM liturgy has also been translated to English and many Indian languages. The following sections describe the SM *qurbana* as seen in the textbook. The liturgy is rich with many different prayers, gestures and symbols. Hence, it is important that these aspects be visually shown to the students to heighten their experience of the *qurbana*. Merely reading a textbook will likely not have the same effect.

The introductory service in the holy *qurbana* is a significant part of the liturgical celebration. it encompasses various prayers and hymns that sets the tone and prepares the worshipers for the holy eucharist. the first introductory words in Malayalam, *anna pesacha thirunalil* (on that day of the paschal feast) reminds the faithful gathered of the importance of celebrating the holy *qurbana* according to Jesus' command during the last supper. The next few prayers are praises, and include glory to God in the highest, the Lord's prayer (repeated twice in succession on solemn occasions), psalms according to the liturgical season, and the resurrection hymn, during which the veil covering the sanctuary opens and the Holy Trinity is manifested.

With the conclusion of the introductory service, the liturgy of the word begins with the first reading from the Pentateuch, the second reading from the prophets, the third reading from the epistles, and the fourth reading by the celebrant is the proclamation of the gospel. This section includes the trisagion, readings from sacred scripture, the procession with the Gospel

book, the homily, the karoza prayer (prayer of the faithful), and prayers of blessing that prepare the worshipers for the preparatory service.

The preparatory service includes the incensing of the sacred vessels, prostration, washing of hands, recital of creed, and solemn entry into the elevated sanctuary (madbaha or holy of holies) by bowing three times at each step and kissing the altar three times.

The anaphora, the central part of the Holy *qurbana*, consists of four prayer cycles, each divided into four subdivisions: prayer request, private prayer, g'hantha prayer, and prayer of praise. The word g'hantha in Syriac means bowing, and it is named so because the celebrant bows himself during this prayer. Additionally, it is also referred to as the thanksgiving prayer because expressing gratitude is its primary purpose.

The first g'hantha cycle includes the diptychs (memorial prayer), prayer of the celebrant, wishing of peace, incensing, and responsory prayers. The second g'hantha cycle contains the singing of the hosanna, the third g'hantha cycle contains Christ's words at the last supper and the fourth g'hantha cycle includes intercessory prayers and invocation of the holy spirit on the body and blood of Christ.

This is followed by the elevation of the body and blood of Christ, rites of fraction and reconciliation, the Lord's prayer, the Holy Communion and finally, the concluding prayers.

As seen above, the SM holy *qurbana* is liturgically rich and has many scriptural references and connections to the Old Testament. These are features that cannot be described through words in a textbook. The *qurbana* needs to be shown to students as video clippings in three or four parts, with side-by-side commentary of what each part means. Because of the

pandemic there is a plethora of holy *qurbana* recordings and resources on YouTube⁷⁸. In addition, recordings of *qurbanas* celebrating various sacraments and liturgical seasons are available in plenitude and should be put to use for educational purposes⁹¹⁰.

One of the aspects of the SM *qurbana* rubrics that caught my attention is the presence of a scriptural thread that weaves through the Passover in the Exodus, the Jewish tradition of offering animals sacrifices, the last supper in the Gospels and the explanation of Jesus as the High priest and unblemished lamb sacrificed for humanity in the letter to the Hebrews. A digitized version of the mystical aspects of the *qurbana* would highly benefit the students and help them appreciate the Eucharistic celebration, especially, why we do what we do.

Digital engagement of students:

While the new methodologies listed above may seem to have an edge over textbook delivery of information, it still remains a one-way traffic. For effective catechesis, the catechist must find tools to engage the students in a dialog, either digitally or socially to get feedback on what they learned and the relevance of the educational material they received in their lives. There are several ways this could be done including having them participate in Kahoot quizzes, having the students do a digital presentation of the favorite part of the *qurbana*, having them do a digital presentation to compare the art and architecture of SM churches in India and in the US, having them build a digital church with all the aspects of the internal architecture, having them build digital versions of the sacred vestments, and finally, if some of them have a particular flair for

⁷ *Holy Qurbana (Malayalam)*, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fPaN7Hh_AE.

⁸ *Syro Malabar Qurbana (English)*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jrd0Zec9ias>.

⁹ *Holy Communion - Syro Malaba*, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phBxaUom6FI>.

¹⁰ *Priestly Ordination of Deacon George Parayil | St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago*, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lbmn2QmL6Pc>.

coding and computer programming, having them build a digital database or website that contains all the various Syriac terminologies used in the SM *qurbana* with images or videos to help users understand what they mean.

Challenges:

While the use of modern technology including digital media offer immense potential, they also present unique challenges. In using digital technology, the catechist must navigate the complexities of the secular culture and ensure that the message remains authentic, relevant, and faithful to the teachings of the Church. Digitally acquired catechetical materials need to be subjected to rigorous doctrinal scrutiny. Catechists need to be proficient in the use of technology, discerning in their selection of digital resources, and capable of effectively integrating them into the catechetical process. These challenges are diminished when textbooks alone are used in catechesis. In the US, most SM churches are rudimentary and lack resources, hence, availability of adequate space, digital equipment and other material and financial resources are crucial factors in employing new methodologies in catechesis. Textbooks are comparatively cheaper and do not require much space or equipment for use. Apart from this, the attitude of the catechists, DRE and pastor is critical in the implementation of new pedagogical methods in catechesis. Out-of-the-box thinking is usually shrouded by “if it isn’t broken why fix it” attitude and sticking to conventional methods including textbooks seem to be the comfortable and safe route to employ in SM catechesis in India and abroad.

Conclusion:

The emergence of the digital age has brought about profound changes in various aspects of human life. This paradigm shift in social communication has significant implications for the Church's pastoral and evangelizing mission. As information and communication technology permeates nearly every facet of personal and collective existence, the Church faces new pastoral challenges that were either non-existent in the past or possess unique characteristics brought about by the digital age.

Catechesis should maintain a holistic approach that combines real-world experiences, personal encounters, and traditional forms of instruction alongside digital tools. Striking a balance between modern and conventional dimensions of catechesis ensures a comprehensive and integrated formation that addresses the human person in their entirety.

Pope John Paul II says that the focus on finding the best forms of expression or following trendy pedagogical tools has sometimes resulted in works that confuse or omit important elements of the faith. To ensure that catechetical works fulfill their purpose, it is necessary for them to be connected to the real-life experiences of the intended audience, use language that is easily understood, present the complete message of Christ and the Church, and strive to deepen knowledge and promote genuine conversion and alignment with God's will¹¹.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, no. 21