

IMAGO DEI: A RETROSPECT ON
SYRO MALABAR HISTORY, CULTURE AND DIGNITY

Introduction:

The Syro Malabar Church, as it stands today, has undergone several layers of change, and although the rituals, traditions, liturgy and lifestyle of this community have evolved, the community as a whole has stood the test of time since its origin until now. According to historical records, this community was, founded by Saint Thomas the Apostle, who landed on the Malabar coast (in the state of Kerala, India) and spread the good news of the Gospel in this region, and large populations of Hindus converted to Christianity. Hence, the first converts of Christianity in India were originally known as “Saint Thomas Christians”¹. Saint Thomas is said to have built seven churches or communities in different parts of the Malabar region before he was martyred in 72 AD.² ³The lifestyle, traditions and worship rituals of Christians in the Malabar region was heavily drawn from Hindu traditions and culture. Prior to the fourth century, there is limited information regarding any liturgy that was used, but one can assume that it was not very well-structured in terms of a Christian liturgy, given the deep influence of Hinduism in their worship. However, the language of the liturgy was likely Malayalam, which is the vernacular language of the Malabar (Kerala) region. From the fourth century until the middle of the sixteenth century, the early Christians adopted the East-Syrian (Chaldean) liturgy in allegiance to the Syrian patriarch of Antioch. This introduced Syrian language and culture into Malabar worship and rituals, giving a slightly better structure to the liturgy, but at the price of having a Syrian dominance in the liturgy. With the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, Saint Thomas Christian communities were forced into Latinization of the liturgy, and to accept Western Christendom. In many ways,

¹ Flinn, “Syro-Malabar Catholic Church.”

² Warner and Warner, “Eastern Catholic Churches.”

³ Melton, “Syro-Malabar Catholic Church.”

this was the end of the original Saint Thomas Christian lifestyle⁴. Although Latinization distorted the identity of Saint Thomas Christians, it further improved the liturgy and gave a stronger structure to this otherwise embryonic community, and these changes were officiated at the Synod of Diamper in 1599. One example of how Latinization brought about a change for the betterment of the community is evidenced by the establishments of centers of education as well as seminaries by Jesuit priests and missionaries. Saint Francis Xavier was the first Jesuit who connected with the Syro Malabar church in 1549. In a letter to Ignatius of Loyola, Francis narrated how there were many Christians (baptized by Saint Thomas) living in sixty villages in the Malabar region who would benefit from Jesuit priests being sent there to teach grammar to the seminarians of a small seminary, and to preach to the people on Sundays and festivals. In 1581, in another Malabar village, the Jesuits opened a college; and in 1554 another seminary was added to the college, in which Syrian youth, especially those who aspired to the priesthood were taught Portuguese, Latin and Syriac. Many Jesuit priests, by then, were well-versed with the Syriac language, and their literary works in Syriac are still widely circulated. In addition, in 1577, a Spanish Jesuit lay-brother, John Gonsalves helped establish the first catechism book in the native Malabar language of Malayalam called, “Catechism and Rudiments of Catholic Faith”⁵. However, even with all this progress, many were dissatisfied with the new changes caused by Latinization, and Saint Thomas Christians soon began grumbling against the Carmelite prelates and missionaries, which culminated in a cry for autonomous rule. An imminent revolt was in the air, which called for negotiations, however, the leadership at the Syrian (Chaldean) Church did not intervene for about five decades, and by then relations between the Saint Thomas Christians and the Carmelite

⁴ Mundadan, “Syro-Malabar Church.”

⁵ Unknown Author, “In Mission Fields: The Thomas Christians in India.”

missionaries had further deteriorated. The separation of the Saint Thomas Christians from the Latin jurisdiction finally happened in 1887, and in 1923, the Syro-Malabar hierarchy was established. Thus, the Church of Saint Thomas Christians gained an autonomous, self-ruled Church in communion with the See of Rome. Although it was made independent of any intermediary jurisdiction of the Latin missionaries or Chaldean-Syrian church, the hierarchy followed the Western church, and not the oriental church. Even the autonomy achieved was partial and limited, until Pope John Paul II elevated the Church to its major archiepiscopal status in 1992⁶. It is evident that changes in the liturgy and to some extent, dominance of one culture over the other does bring about progress. However, on the theological basis of *Imago Dei*, we see how Saint Thomas Christians recognized Christ as their savior, and accepted the Gospel preached to them by a foreigner, yet in an attempt to retain the dignity of their identity, resisted the waves of change that threatened to drown the Indian culture and roots of their worship of Christ. This signifies that the image of God is not in the rubrics of worship, but in the hearts of people, and culture plays a crucial role in linking the divine to the human.

Syro-Malabar Liturgy:

The Syro Malabar liturgy of the first Saint Thomas Christians was likely very simple and comprehensible in the context of the natives in the Malabar region during the first century. The documents of the Synod of Diamper point unequivocally to the fact that the Indian Christians generally followed the East-Syrian (Chaldean) liturgical tradition in East Syriac language. The accounts and stories of missionaries on the lives and customs of the Indian Christians in the 16th century concur with this picture. Sacramental ceremonies including baptisms, weddings and

⁶ Mundadan, "Syro-Malabar Church."

funerals were prevalent, but the Church and the liturgy lacked structure, both literally and figuratively. In fact, many of the churches were built architecturally similar to Hindu temples, because there were no guidelines on how a Church should be built. Latinization brought about a drastic change, and Syro Malabar church architecture started resembling Portuguese architectural style⁷. The liturgy was also highly latinized, and new elements were introduced into the text of the Eucharistic liturgy; the liturgy and rituals of the sacraments were also patterned using Latin rite liturgy. All these changes were likely for the convenience of the Latin missionaries, who were for the most part unaware or negligent of Oriental worship practices and Indian customs. The Latinized East-Syrian liturgical structure remained in use for over three centuries in the Syro Malabar church. However, towards the end of the 19th century, when the Syro Malabar church gained autonomy, differences of opinion emerged on its identity and on the question of its liturgical reform. Some believed that the liturgy should be restored to the initial liturgy which was prevalent during Saint Thomas' ministry in India, which was rich in the regional and local cultures and was in the original regional language of Malayalam⁸. They pointed out that Saint Thomas Christians, after having accepted the faith continued to retain the socio-cultural life of their Hindu neighbors. And, even with the retention of Hindu cultural aspects including food, dress, ablutions, marriage and other family and social customs, they were devoted to Christ, which made their inculturations acceptable to God through the Gospel they had received from Saint Thomas, and the prayers he had taught them⁹. This liturgical style of worship would have continued, had not the Syrian influence happened, followed by Latinization of the liturgy. To appease pro-restoration protesters

⁷ Mundadan, "Syro-Malabar Liturgy."

⁸ Kanichikattil, "Liturgical Renewal in the Syro-Malabar Church."

⁹ Mundadan, "Syro-Malabar Church."

in 1958, some parts of the Syrian liturgy were translated to the vernacular language of Malayalam and a reformed liturgy was established in 1962, which was part Syriac and part Malayalam. Further revisions to the liturgy were made, until finally in 1968, an acceptable liturgy in Malayalam approved by all the bishops, was introduced with the consent of Rome. Around late 1960s all Syro Malabar dioceses introduced the practice of the celebrant facing the people (versus populum) during the whole liturgy as is done in Latin rite. However, those opposed to Latinization lobbied strongly for the practice of celebrants facing the altar as is done in the Chaldean rite during the whole liturgy¹⁰. Subsequently, the Synod of the Syro-Malabar Church adopted a compromise wherein the celebrant would face the people during the first half of Mass, and face the altar during and after the anaphora¹¹.

These conflicts remain unresolved to this day, and even today there is vast opposition from certain factions of the Syro Malabar community, who want the celebrant facing the altar during the entire celebration of the Holy Eucharist. In the light of *Imago Dei*, we may better understand the root of these conflicts. The Syro Malabar community, in an attempt to regain their foundational dignity that was endangered by Chaldeanization and Latinization, is striving to cling to the unique culture that was prevalent in the early church in India. However, one wonders whether the fight to regain this nascent culture is unreasonable and regressive, causing divisions in the Syro Malabar community, in stark contrast to the spirituality underlying *Imago Dei*, which calls all Christians to be united in the image of God.

¹⁰ Mundadan, "Syro-Malabar Liturgy."

¹¹ Mundadan.

Signs and Symbols of the Syro Malabar liturgy:

Syro Malabar liturgy is rampant with signs and symbols. In the socio-cultural and religious milieu of India, much attention is paid to symbols and rituals. Symbols in general are external manifestations of a mystery, which make the mystery a concrete reality¹². Symbolism in the Syro Malabar liturgy include placing of the altar in the East of the Church, so that the celebrant is facing the East for most part of the Mass. Other architectural symbols include having a lower altar (bema), and a higher altar or the holy of holies, and the priest bows three times as he makes his way up to the holy of holies. There are many parts during the liturgy where the altar is incensed, recalling the words in the Bible about prayers of his saints rising to God through the censers (Rev 8:3). The Bible is placed on the right of the Holy of holies and during the liturgy of the word, the priest hides his face behind the Bible, as he descends from there to the pulpit to read the Gospel, indicating Jesus coming down to the people. All these signs and symbols add richness into the Syro Malabar liturgy, and each celebration of the Eucharist is a spiritual and deeply mystagogical experience, the essence of which lies at the heart of *Imago Dei*.

The Syro Malabar Church in the USA:

On March 13, 2001, the Holy See and the major archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church announced the creation of a new diocese for the Syro-Malabar Church in the United States. Headquartered in Chicago, this new diocese is known as the Saint Thomas Syro-Malabar Diocese of Chicago, with Jacob Angadiath as its first bishop. This was a milestone in the history of the Syro Malabar Church, as it is the first Syro-Malabar diocese outside of India established for the growing Syro Malabar communities in the US. While the people living in the Malabar region of

¹² Poovathanikunnel, "The Sacramental Mysteries."

India comprised mostly of 60% Hindus, 20% Muslims, and 20% Christians, those who migrated to the U.S. were mostly Christians. In general, the Christians in the Malabar region can be broadly subdivided into “Syrian Christians”, “Latin Christians”, and “newly-converted Christians”¹³. This determination was based on when one was converted and to which Hindu caste the convert belonged prior to conversion. The Syrian and newly-converted Christians, include Catholics as well as non-Catholics. All Christians in Kerala discreetly rank themselves within the traditional social hierarchy and are, therefore, indirectly part of the caste system. Syrian Christians consider themselves upper-caste, and so intermarriages between them and Latin Christians or newly-converted Christians (whom they regard as low-caste groups) were infrequent. There is another group of Catholics, called Knanaya (pronounced Kananaya) Catholics who also follow the Syro Malabar liturgy (historically belonging to a Persian ancestry). This group is very stringent about intermarriages. They are infamous for marrying only within the Knanaya community, and ostracizing members who marry people outside their community. Because of this vast diversity and stringency within various cultural groups of the Christian and Syro Malabar communities of Kerala, the second-generation Indian-Americans of this community feel lost and disillusioned when it comes to choosing a spouse for marriage.

In one study, adult Christians from Kerala who had been teenagers when they arrived in the U.S. were interviewed regarding their marriage ceremony and choice of spouses. As teenagers they felt a huge cultural rift between their lifestyle, and that of their parents, who were first-generation Indian-Americans when dealing with issues including dating, drinking, and frequenting bars and discos¹⁴. Nevertheless, when it came down to marriage, most of them seemed to follow

¹³ Lindberg, “Transformation of Marriage Patterns in the Kerala Diaspora in the U.S.”

¹⁴ Joseph, “Rethinking Hybridity: The Syro-Malabar Church In North America.”

their parents' preferences. The majority of Christian Malayalees born in the U.S. select their spouses from within their own communities. For some, marriages were arranged with prospective spouses still living in Kerala, India. Over the years, however, this issue has resolved with the advent of online dating sites catering to Syro Malabar communities. The first-generation parents have come to terms with intercultural marriages, and respect the dignity and identity of their American-born children. There has also been a marked increase in Syro Malabar families migrating to the US, opening up wider options for the young Indian Americans to choose their spouse. Syro Malabar churches have been a great blessing for these communities as places to for worship and fellowship with different families. It is in acceptance of change, and respect for the dignity of others, that one can evolve as a human being and as a Christian, in line with the truth behind *Imago Dei*.

In marriages that are arranged between second generation Indian-Americans and spouses from India, major cultural gaps have often caused irreparable rifts leading to separation or divorce. Most often, given that Syro Malabar communities are considerably male-dominated and somewhat misogynistic, the second-generation Indian-American women tended to suffer greater prejudices than their male counterparts in imbalanced and incompatible marriages. A glimpse of the gender imbalance is evident in the wedding rituals and liturgy of the Syro-Malabar church in Kerala. The rituals are for the most part adopted from Hinduism as part of church's inculturation process that presents a male-dominant culture in India¹⁵. Rather than a liturgy that depicts a balanced role for the bride and groom, the Syro Malabar wedding liturgy tips towards androcentrism. The wedding rites include, tying the *Thali* (gold pendant), which the groom ties around the bride's neck, and

¹⁵ Madeckal, "Inculturation - An Analysis of the Wedding Rituals and the Wedding Liturgy of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala."

offering the *Mantrakodi* (a nuptial vestment), which the groom uses to cover the head of the bride. Such rites place the groom as the doer of the action while the bride is only a passive recipient of the action without agency. The androcentrism of the Syro-Malabar wedding liturgy is also evident in the language of the wedding liturgy that invokes the biblical story of creation and other references from the Bible in a way that confers women having a secondary role as compared to men¹⁶. However, the Syro Malabar wedding liturgy also illustrates Christ being the bridegroom, especially the words of a song sung during the wedding ceremony that describes how Christ, by sacrificing his life on the cross paid the ultimate price to own His bride. The song is sung in a very melodious, yet intensely Indian classical tune, often heard in Hindu temples, indicating inculturation of the liturgy, but also presenting the Christocentric nature of the liturgy in line with the spirituality of being united in Christ and reflecting the image of God.

Champions of *Imago Dei*:

Scripture tells us that human beings were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) to live in a continuous relationship with God. God had a clear purpose for creating humankind, which can be fulfilled only if it maintains its relationship with God as God's image-bearer and representative. Because of our connection to and dependence on God, our freedom and relationship are inseparable in the context of *Imago Dei*. Therefore, it is imperative for humanity in the image of God to promote the spirit of love and respect, a sense of belongingness, and an attitude of mutual recognition within communities of ethnic diversities¹⁷. In such contexts, to be created in the image

¹⁶ Madeckal, "Inculturation - An Analysis of the Wedding Rituals and the Wedding Liturgy of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala."

¹⁷ Sonessa, "Imago Dei and the Tensions of Ethnic Identity."

of God means that we are accountable to each other regardless of our ethnic heritages, and regardless of being male or female.

In this context, there were several heroes who fought against the caste system and gender bias of India in their struggle to unite all people, regardless of family, lineage and gender. Caste system was prevalent throughout India until the 19th century. Even now, caste discreetly plays a huge role in the lifestyle, career, education and general acceptance of people in India. Many people, including many Hindus fought against the regressive caste system. However, as a conclusion of this paper, I have chosen three people who I have termed as champions of *Imago Dei* as they championed for the rights of people ostracized for various reasons. Through their actions, they preached that all people are born with equal rights as children of God and restored the dignity of the people made in the image of God. The following is a brief account of Blessed Devasahayam Pillai, Saint Chavara Kuriakose and Blessed Agostino Thevaraparmabil (pronounced Kunyachan).

Blessed Devasahayam Pillai: Born Neelakanda Pillai in the year 1712, he was baptized to Christianity in the year 1745 and changed his name to Devasahayam (which means God's help in Malayalam). He was born into a Brahmin family depicted by his last name Pillai. Brahmins are considered the highest caste among Hindus and only they were allowed to worship in temples. During a difficult time in his life, he came across a Dutch captain who introduced Christ into his life¹⁸. This new faith was a solace to him and after Baptism, he called himself Lazarus, as one who was raised from the dead to life by Jesus. Christianity also taught him that Jesus came to save everyone, and distinction based on caste is sinful in the eyes of God. He was martyred for not giving up his Christian faith, and for associating with people of lower castes by dining with them

¹⁸ ICM, "Blessed Devasahayam Pillai – The First Lay Indian Martyr."

regularly. He will be canonized by Pope Francis this month, on May 14, 2022, and will be the first lay man to become a Saint in India¹⁹.

Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: Chavara was born in 1805 in Kerala. In 1831, he enrolled in one of the seminaries established by Portuguese missionaries. He eventually became the founder of a religious congregation for men, Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (C.M.I.), and a similar religious congregation for women called the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (C.M.C.). The latter is the first religious congregation that was established exclusively for women to promote education for women. Women were not encouraged to pursue higher education, but with the construction of schools by Chavara, women could stay on campus in dormitories and pursue higher education. Thus, he was a champion for women's empowerment in Kerala. These congregations even today, continue to pursue Saint Chavara's vision of universal and affordable education through educational institutions across the country. In the spirit of *Imago Dei*, Saint Chavara brought about a major renaissance to alleviate distress of ostracized people, and infused them with a sense of pride and dignity in themselves.^{20 21}

Blessed Agostino Thevaraparmabil: Known popularly as *Kunjachan* (little priest) because of his short stature, Bl. Agostino had a huge heart for the downtrodden. In the caste-ridden system of India, the *Dalits* or *Harijan* Christians were known as the lowest caste, and were called untouchables because higher caste people literally would not touch or come near them. The people of this caste were treated as slaves and suffered atrocities at the hands of higher caste Hindus for many years. Fr. Agostino would visit the Dalit communities of his Parish and alleviate the pain of

¹⁹ Elphinston, "A Courageous Convert and a Living Legend."

²⁰ Mukkuzhy, "Blessed Kuriakose Chavara: A Loving Father of Families."

²¹ Panthapalacal, "Life and Pioneering Services of Blessed Chavara."

people who needed spiritual, economic, and social care. He spread the good news of the Gospel to everyone regardless of their caste and lineage and treated everyone with compassion and respect to promote their education and bring the healing word of Jesus to all. During his last days on earth, his wish was to be buried where the Harijan Christians are buried, (in the outskirts of the village because of their caste) because that was where he belonged.^{22 23}

Conclusion:

“Preach the gospel every day and if needed, use words”. I believe that the spirituality of *Imago Dei* is fulfilled in these words of Saint Francis of Assisi. The gospels point to a loving God who sent his only begotten so that whosoever believes in him will have eternal life (John 3:16). God did not send his son to save only the Jewish people, but to save the whole world. The image of God is reflected in men and women of all races and cultures. It is up to us to discern that divine image in the human beings around us. The Syro Malabar community started out being a small and weak community in a small region of the country. However, the layers of changes that this community accepted and tolerated over the centuries, helped them evolve, and today they are pioneers of education in India. Today Syro Malabar priests and religious nuns are sent for missionary works to all parts of the world, including the US, to bring the good news of the gospel to everyone. Change was painful, but it was necessary to empower this community to produce fruits, seen through the lives of people including, Saint Alphonsa, Saint Chavara, Saint Euphrasia, Bl. Agostino and Bl. Devasahayam. These saints from Kerala continue to preach the gospel through their spiritual legacy and the holy lives they led.

²² DeCelles, “Thevarparampil, Augustiona, Bl.”

²³ Jadav, “Apostle of India’s Untouchables.”

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