



FROM THE WEBSITE OF THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH

The Syro-Malabar Church was known as the Church of the St. Thomas Christians until the 18th century because it was founded by St Thomas, one of the apostles of Jesus Christ. St. Thomas came to India in 52 A.D. He died as a Martyr in a place called Mylapore near the present town of Chennai (Madras). His tomb is still venerated there.

As a Church that existed outside the Roman Empire, the Church of the St. Thomas Christians had little contact with the Roman or the other Churches within the Empire. At the same time it maintained communion with the Church of Rome through the Church in the Persian Empire, which later came to be known as the East Syrian or Chaldean or Babylonian Church. It is believed that Christianity in Persian Empire was introduced by the disciples of St. Thomas. It seems that the Christians in India had contact with these Christians of the Persian Empire from very early times. Given the commercial relations of India of those days such a contact was possible.

In the middle of the 4th century or later a group of Christians from these communities under the leadership of a merchant called Thomas of Kinayi migrated to the southern parts of India known as Kerala now. The descendants of this latter group are called Knananites or Southists and the former Northists. Both of them belong to the Syro-Malabar Church. Even now they live as two separate communities with their own diocese and parishes.

For some unknown reasons at least from the 8th century until the end of the 16th century the Bishops of the Syro-Malabar Church were sent from the East Syrian Church, appointed by the Patriarch of the East Syrian Church. There is a tradition which says that there were Indian Bishops in the beginning. But written proofs are very few to say anything concrete about them.

Because of the Portuguese colonisation of parts of India in the early 16th century and of the consequent ecclesiastical arrangements, from 1600 onwards European Bishops from the Latin Church were appointed by the Pope to govern the St. Thomas Christians. Their rule ended in 1896 in which year indigenous Bishops from among the St. Thomas Christians were appointed to the Church of St. Thomas Christians. By that time the ancient name "Church of St. Thomas Christians" had given way to the present name "Syro-Malabar Church".

During the period from 1653 to 1887 many divisions took place in the Syro-Malabar Church mainly in the attempt of the Syro-Malabarians to get rid of the rule of the Latin Bishops who often gave little value to the ancient system of administration of the St. Thomas Christians and their Christian heritage. The missionaries seem to have had the impression that the St. Thomas Christians were not Catholics but Nestorians since they accepted Bishops from the East Syrian Church which officially had adopted Nestorianism. As they were living at a time soon after the council of Trent in which decision was taken to deal toughly with heretics, they were all out to "reduce the Syro-Malabarians to the Roman obedience." There were also the commercial interests of the Portuguese behind the appointment of Latin Bishops to rule the Syro-Malabarians. As the last Bishop appointed by the East Syrian Patriarch died in 1597 the Portuguese tightened their hold on the Syro-Malabarians and never permitted any more East Syrian Bishops to enter Malabar. In 1599 the Latin archbishop of Goa convened a synod at Udayamperoor in the present Kerala and made the

people accept many customs with which they were not familiar. He also spread the news in Europe that Syro-Malabarians were "reduced to the Roman obedience" and accepted Catholicism as well the authority of the Pope in this Synod. The fact, however, was not so. The Syro-Malabarians had never accepted Nestorianism even though they had contact with the East Syrians and they were not at all involved in any of the Christological controversies. On the contrary whenever they got a chance they reiterated their allegiance to the Pope and their communion with the Church of Rome. In any case the rule of the Latin Bishops was never accepted by the Syro-Malabarians and the climax of their protest was what is known in the history as Coonan Cross Oath. The leadership of the St. Thomas Christian community pledged in this oath not to accept any more the rule of the Jesuit missionaries from among whom the Bishops were appointed. It was in 1653. History tells us that the St. Thomas Christians who gathered at Mattancherry near Fort Kochi under the leadership of the archdeacon to receive a Bishop from Persia took the oath touching the cross there that they would not obey any more the Jesuits who were the main European Missionaries in India at that time; Coonan Cross Oath was a revolt against the oppressive rule of the Europeans and not against the Pope or the Holy See. After the Oath 12 priests at the instigation of one of them laid hands on the head of the archdeacon and "ordained him Bishop". There began the division in the Church of the St. Thomas Christians.

There was tension in the Church because the faithful wanted to keep the true faith but not under the Bishop who was appointed by the Portuguese crown. Some remained in schism while others came back to the obedience of the Latin Bishop. Those who remained under the "pseudo Bishop" later accepted the tradition of the Antiochian non-Catholic tradition and were known as the Orthodox Church. Later because of the missionary work of the Protestants there arose other non-Catholic Churches in India, particularly in Kerala.

There were continuous attempts for reestablishing the lost communion. But nothing succeeded mainly because of the opposition from the European missionaries. It was to obtain permission for receiving this group into the Catholic Church that Fr. Joseph Kariattil and Fr. Thomas Paremmakkal, two priests from the Church of St. Thomas Christians, went to Rome in the 18th century. Fr. Kariattil was ordained archbishop of the St. Thomas Christians, and had received a mandate to receive the dissident group with its bishop to the Catholic communion. Unfortunately Bishop Kariattil on his way to Kerala died in Goa in 1786. Finally, in 1930 a group of them under the leadership of their archbishop called Mar Ivanios reestablished their communion with the Catholic Church and the Holy See accepted it as a separate Catholic Church with the name of Syro-Malankara Church.

Those who remained in communion of Pope after the Coonan Cross Oath later came to be known as the Syro-Malabarians. It was a name given by the Roman authorities to refer to the Catholic St. Thomas Christians. The name Syro-Malabar was chosen apparently to avoid confusion with the Malabar rite which existed as a part of the Latin Church in the Coromandel coast of India. Even those who remained in communion were fighting for getting Bishops of their own rite and nation. It became a reality only in 1896 when the Apostolic Vicariates of Trichur, Ernakulam and Changanachery were established and three indigenous priests were appointed as vicars apostolic.

Ever since the Syro-Malabar Church grew phenomenally in all aspects. Because of the increased mobility of people many members of the Syro-Malabar Church emigrated to other parts of India and foreign countries. Though they remain members of the Syro-Malabar Church, they had little chance of following their own traditions in their life of faith because only the Latin Church was present in many of the lands they migrated as U.S.A and Canada. As a result of the teaching of the second Vatican council there was an awakening both in the Bishops of this Church as well as the faithful scattered all over the world about their identity

and their duty to preserve and promote their tradition. The Code of Canons of the Oriental Churches or the Oriental Canon Law prescribes that these traditions be preserved and fostered. That means that provision must be made for these faithful to practice and grow in their own tradition everywhere in the world.

Various ways are prescribed for providing pastoral care for these migrant Eastern Christians. The first one is to set apart a priest in the Latin Parish for the care of Eastern Christians. If that does not ensure proper care, then vicar general under the local Bishop is to be appointed. If that too becomes ineffective because of any reason, particularly because the number of the faithful to be taken care of is too big, then a diocese should be established for them.

The Knanaya community had their own parishes and in 1911 a separate vicariate apostolic, Kottayam was erected for them. Bishop Kuriakose Kunnacherry is their present bishop. He has jurisdiction over all the Kananaya faithful within the provinces of Ernakulam, Changanacherry, Trichur and Tellicherry. The auxiliary bishop of Kottayam as Syncellus or representative of the Bishop of Kottayam resides at Kannur in Northern Kerala and looks after the needs of the Kananaya faithful in the Northern Kerala.

At the time of the Coonan Cross Oath many of the Kananaya parishes also had accepted the "pseudo bishop" ordained by the twelve priests. In the course of time they too accepted the Antiochean way of worship and customs. When the reestablishment of communion came about in 1930 some of the Kananaya parishes also followed the same. However instead of joining the Syro-Malankara Church they joined the diocese of Kottayam in the Syro-Malabar Church even though they follow the Antiochean liturgy. They have separate parishes and parish priests within the diocese of Kottayam.

The St. Thomas Christians in India were under the rule of the Latin bishops from 1600 to 1896. In 1887 the St. Thomas Christians were given two separate ecclesiastical circumscriptions called Apostolic vicariates. They were Trichur and Kottayam. In 1896 there took place a reorganization as a result three vicariates, namely Trichur, Ernakulam and Changanacherry came into existence. Three Syro - Malabar priests were ordained bishops and put in charge of these units. These indigenous bishops were John Menacherry (Trichur), Louis Pazheparampil (Ernakulam) and Mathew Makeil (Changanacherry). In 1911 a new vicariate at Kottayam was established for the Knananites and Mar Makell was transferred to this new vicariate. Later in 1923 the Apostolic Vicariates were made dioceses and the diocese of Ernakulam was made Archdiocese and its bishop archbishop. In the same year the Syro-Malabar hierarchy was established. In 1957 the diocese of Changanacherry was made archdiocese. Having two archbishops with no common head is not customary in the Eastern Churches. So this new provision created an anomalous juridical situation in the Syro - Malabar Church. As the new Oriental Canon Law was promulgated in 1990 this situation could not be continued.

Canon Law foresees only four categories of sui iuris Churches and the Syro-Malabar Church did not fall into any of them. The four categories are the following: Patriarchal, Major Archiepiscopal, Metropolitan and other. So on 16 December 1992 Pope John Paul II declared the Syro- Malabar Church as a Major Archiepiscopal Church and appointed Cardinal Antony Padiyara, the then Archbishop of Ernakulam as the first Major Archbishop. Had such a step not been taken the functioning of the Syro-Malabar Church would have been very difficult. Taking into consideration the particular situation of the Syro - Malabar Church and the poor state of health of Cardinal Antony Padiyara the Pope had appointed also a delegate of him to discharge the duties of the Major Archbishop. He was Archbishop Abraham

Kattumana, who was a Vatican Ambassador in African countries. Archbishop Kattumana died unexpectedly during his visit to Rome in April 1995. Since the post was a temporary one none else was appointed to take his place.

According to the Oriental Canon Law the Major Archbishop is the head of the Syro - Malabar Church immediately under the Pope. However his authority is limited to the dioceses that are the suffragans of the archdioceses of Ernakulam, Changanacherry , Trichur and Tellicherry. The Syro - Malabar dioceses in other parts of India and abroad are directly under the Pope. Even though according to the Oriental Canon Law the Major Archbishop of this Church has the right appoint new bishops, these rights are yet reserved to the Pope.

In November 1996 Cardinal Padiyara resigned from his office as Major Archbishop. In his place instead of allowing the synod to elect a new Major Archbishop the Pope appointed an Administrator in the person of Archbishop Varkey Vithayathil, C.Ss.R. He was a priest belonging to the Redemptorist Congregation. In December 1998 he was appointed Major Archbishop by the Pope. In February 2001 Archbishop Vithayathil was created a Cardinal by Pope John Paul II.

The Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church is automatically the archbishop of Ernakulam - Angamaly archdiocese also because it is determined so by the Holy See. So whoever is elected as Major Archbishop or whoever exercises his authority unless otherwise decided by the Holy See will have two offices. As Archbishop of Ernakulam - Angamaly he has his office at Ernakulam. His office as Major Archbishop is at Mount St. Thomas.

[Taken from <http://www.thesyromalabarchurch.org/history.htm>]