

## **KNANAYA CATHOLIC REGION: STRUGGLES, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND DREAMS**

- Fr. Abraham Mutholath

When Knanaya Catholics belonging to the Diocese of Kottayam migrated to the United States, they began to get organized, first with other Kerala associations, then Catholic associations, and later as Knanaya Catholic Associations. Along with social and cultural activities, the pioneer Knanaya immigrants, met their pastoral needs in the local Latin parishes. However, they wished to start Syro-Malabar Knanaya Catholic Missions in the main cities of the USA to meet their pastoral needs according to the liturgical traditions they had practiced in Kerala by Knanaya Catholic priests. When they approached the then Bishop of Kottayam Mar Kuriakose Kunnacherry, he agreed to send his priests for Knanaya Catholic ministry. However, he had no jurisdiction to appoint priests for pastoral service outside the proper territory of his diocese. So he had contacted local US bishops. They allowed to start Knanaya missions only because Knanaya Catholics belong to the Syro-Malabar rite. According to the policy of the Catholic Church, Eastern churches like Syro-Malabarians have the right and responsibility to establish their own parishes and eparchy in wherever they migrate.

### **STRUGGLES**

Many Knanaya missions and parishes in the USA faced challenges throughout their history and the issues continue.

#### ***(1) Archdiocese of Chicago***

The struggle started even at the establishment of the first Knanaya mission in Chicago. That struggle was to convince the Archdiocese of Chicago to start the mission exclusively for Knanaya Catholics. The reason was the objections from other Kerala Catholics in Chicago who did not want it to limit for Knanaites. The attempt to send a priest from Kottayam to Chicago was started in January 1981 and was fulfilled in 1983 October 28 when Rev. Fr. Jacob Chollampel reached Chicago. The archdiocese granted him permission not to serve Knanaites alone, but to start a special ministry for Kerala Catholics. In October 1984, Non-Knanaya Catholics in Chicago appealed to Kerala Catholic Bishop's Conference and Syro-Malabar Bishop's Conference asking for separate ministry for them. When that was granted, Fr. Chollampel's mission became a Knanaya Catholic Mission. Thus, a conflict led to a better result for the Knanaya Community.

#### ***(2) Division in the Community on Endogamous Issue***

The next struggle for the priests serving in the Knanaya Catholic Mission was opposition from Knanaites who married from outside the community and many endogamous Knanaites who favored them. When those married from outside the community demanded membership in the Knanaya Mission, the Archdiocese of Chicago favored them and insisted the priest in charge of the Knanaya mission who was the appointee of the Archdiocese to follow their instruction to include the non-endogamous people. The priest was in between those who demanded endogamous practice and those who objected such membership criteria and the archdiocese that supported them. When the archdiocese reported the issue to the Oriental Congregation, the congregation supported the recommendation of the Archdiocese of Chicago by issuing a rescript in 1986 favoring the non-endogamous group. Thus, even many who practiced endogamy were initially in favor of non-endogamous practice in the Knanaya missions and contributed in getting a negative order for the

community that has long lasting destructive impact in the community. Later, most of them realized their mistake and changed the side favoring endogamous practice and began to fight against the order that they themselves achieved by mistake from the Vatican.

***(3) St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Diocese of Chicago***

Pope John Paul II established the Syro-Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago on March 13, 2001. When it was inaugurated on July 1, 2001, Knanaya Catholics had nine missions in the main cities of the United States under the Latin dioceses. They were Chicago (1983), Brooklyn, NY (1993), Westchester and Bronx, NY (1993), Houston (1994), Dallas (1996), Newark, New Jersey (1996), Rockland, NY (1996), Philadelphia (1999), and San Jose (2000). With the establishment of the St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago, all the Knanaya Catholics and Knanaya Catholic Missions in the U.S. came under this diocese. Bishop Mar Jacob Angadiath appointed Rev. Fr. Abraham Mutholath as Syncellus (Vicar General) of the Eparchy on October 3, 2001.

Bishop Mar Jacob Angadiath established Knanaya Catholic Region in the diocese on April 30, 2006. Fr. Abraham Mutholath, the Vicar General of the diocese, was appointed as the director of the region. This region consists of all the Knanaya Catholic missions, parishes, and all Knanaya Catholic faithful living within the boundary of the St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago (all over the United States). Hence, the Vicar General for the Knanaya Catholics is the proper pastor of all the Knanaya Catholics in this diocese that do not belong to a Knanaya Catholic mission or parish. All the pastoral activities of the Knanaya Catholics in the diocese are coordinated through the region director and vicar general assigned for the Knanaya Catholics. On February 8, 2014, Bishop Mar Jacob Angadiath appointed Rev. Fr. Thomas Mulavanal as the Vicar General and director of the Knanaya Catholic Region. Many new missions were added to the region and churches were bought starting in Chicago in 2006, under the able guidance of the region directors, efficient leadership of Knanaya priests from Kottayam, and great support of Knanaya lay people.

There were many advantages for the community for moving from the jurisdiction of the Latin dioceses to the Syro-Malabar diocese.

- (a) Establishment of Knanaya Missions all over the United States became easier because the Syro-Malabar bishop could understand the cultural and ethnic background of the Knanaya community.
- (b) Unification of the Knanaya missions and parishes in the national level under the leadership of a Knanaya Region Director with the rank of Vicar General of the diocese.
- (c) Permission from the diocese to send priests from the Archdiocese of Kottayam and their visa process became convenient than before. Placement and transfer of priests in the region became smooth.
- (d) Purchase of church buildings for developing missions to parishes became feasible. When the community was under the Latin hierarchy, no church was bought because they had to be bought as property of the Latin dioceses. After the establishment of the Syro-Malabar diocese in Chicago, Knanaya Churches were bought by the Knanaya Parishes as juridic persons.

Conflict began with the bishop of the St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago when the bishop got special instruction from the Oriental Congregation based on 1986 rescript that endogamy should not play any role in establishing the membership criteria of Knanaya missions or parishes. This became a block for establishing additional Knanaya missions. Knanaya Catholic

Congress of North America (KCCNA) declared non-cooperation with the Syro-Malabar Diocese of Chicago. The already established Knanaya Missions became stagnant because of the membership issue. With the intervention of Auxiliary Bishop of Kottayam Mar Mathew Moolakkatt and with the consent of Bishop Mar Kuriakose Kunnacherry, priests and lay people who were in favor of establishing missions reached an understanding with Bishop Mar Jacob Angadiath. On October 29, 2003 Mar Jacob Angadiath officially recognized the nine Knanaya Catholic Mission Missions that were formed under the Latin dioceses in the USA, along with St. Pius X Knanaya Catholic Mission of Los Angeles that Bishop Mar Angadiath established on March 17, 2002, as missions of the St. Thomas Diocese of Chicago. Since then, new Knanaya Missions were established and churches were purchased to elevate the missions to parishes. At present Knanaya Region has 14 parishes and eight missions in the USA. More details of the missions, parishes, and region are available at [www.knanayaregion.us](http://www.knanayaregion.us).

#### ***(4) Continuation of Holy Qurbana at Community Centers***

Knanaya Catholic Associations in most towns have bought community centers. Holy Qurbana was offered in such centers before the establishment of the Syro-Malabar Diocese of Chicago. Once the community began to buy churches, some people objected buying churches for the Knanaya Community because they wanted to continue the Holy Qurbana in the community centers. This created division in the community in some places. So few of the community members still do not cooperate with the Knanaya Catholic parishes and organize Holy Mass in some community centers without permission from proper ecclesiastical authorities.

#### ***(5) Trent to join Latin parishes***

Some of the Knanaya community members, who are not convinced of their Syro-Malabar heritage and liturgical contribution to the Kerala church along with the Knanaya migration in 345 AD, still want to continue their membership in the Latin churches. Some young people who had received the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation) in the Latin parishes want their weddings to be blessed in the Latin parishes and want to remain as members in those parishes. Unfortunately, some Knanaya priests who serve in the Latin parishes support them though they have no pastoral jurisdiction over those Knanaya Catholics. There are very few Knanaites who oppose establishing Knanaya missions and buying churches for Knanaya community because their priority is only preserving the endogamous community and they are least concerned about Syro-Malabar liturgy or even Catholic faith.

### **ACHIEVEMENTS**

When there are struggles and oppositions, the development will also be stronger and faster. All the Knanaya Catholic missions and parishes in the United States are active with various programs for all age groups. Besides the regular pastoral services, the parishes and missions are also organizing activities like religious education schools, Malayalam class, Dance Class, pilgrimages, seminars, health camps, and cultural programs. The parishes and missions are vibrant assuring involvement of the lay people with various pious associations and ministries for all age groups. The faithful are supporting the missions and parishes and taking care of the running expenses. The parishes have been supporting one another to buy churches for their Knanaya brethren in other cities. Rectories, Convents and Knanaya Cemeteries are also established in many parishes.

The Knanaya Missions and parishes are beneficial for the following groups:

- (a) Along with active members of the parishes, retired people and senior citizens enjoy attending daily Holy Qurbana in the Syro-Malabar rite in Malayalam. This is especially helpful for the elderly Malayalam speaking generation.
- (b) Those who can follow Malayalam and those who have attended liturgy in Kerala like to attend Christmas, Holy Week services, retreat and adoration also in the Knanaya parishes.
- (c) Young couples like to bring their children for their faith formation and balanced community awareness and involvement in the Knanaya churches.
- (d) Children who are baptized and trained in Knanaya churches are very much associated with the Knanaya churches and consider Knanaya churches as their second home.
- (e) Knanaya Catholics who migrate from other countries find it easy to join Knanaya parishes to meet their pastoral needs and to mingle with people of their community.

## **DREAMS**

- The vision of those who support the Knanaya missions is to develop their mission as parish by acquiring their own church.

- The dream of the Knanaya Catholic missions and parishes is to keep up the endogamous nature of the Knanaya community and to keep up the membership of the Knanaya churches as it has been practiced in the Archeparchy of Kottayam.

- The community members hope to keep up the Knanaya traditions including Syro-Malabar liturgy, Knanaya ethnicity through endogamous marriage, Catholic faith and Knanaya Catholic values. They want these to be handed over to the coming generations in the USA through Knanaya parishes.

- Knanaya Community is happy to have a centralized pastoral setup by means of Knanaya Region. However, the community would like to have a bishop to govern the Knanaya Region and develop it eventually as a Knanaya diocese in the United States.

- The global Knanaya Community wishes to have the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Kottayam extended to Knanaya Catholics all over the world. Practicing diverse policies under different Syro-Malabar dioceses in various parts of the world is complicated when Knanaya people keep moving from one country to another.

The sense of “Knanaya Catholic Community” is to be properly understood and practiced. It is the responsibility of the Knanaya associations and parishes to promote a balanced view of the Knanaya Community. While respecting and cooperating with the non-Knanaya people, we need to preserve our identity through the centuries old practice of endogamous marriages. Catholic faith with the Chaldean (Syro-Malabar) rite that the Knanaya forefathers brought to Kerala is to be maintained. Parents should encourage their children to attend Knanaya churches regularly and assure that their weddings also take place in Knanaya Churches. The word community derives from cum (with) and unity. There cannot be any community without unity. Those who try to defy the traditions of the community or avoid cooperating with the Knanaya parishes are acting against the unity of the Knanaya Catholic Community.