**CHURCHES OF ST THOMAS TRADITION**

It is a fact that there exist several Churches in India that claim the same apostolic patrimony of St Thomas the Apostle. The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church is the most important of them. The Christians of St Thomas of South India remained a unique Christian community in the soil of South India for almost sixteen centuries, assimilating the local traditions and cultural practices and at the same time remaining devoted to the Syrian liturgy and Syrian hierarchy with which they came into contact at the latest in the fourth century. But, with the arrival of the Christians from the Latin Padroado tradition and their interference in the practices of the Church of St Thomas Christians and their attempts to bring these Christians under the Latin padroado authority created ripples in the peaceful community and finally the Synod of Diamper created a deep wound in the conscience of these Christians which remain unhealed even today. The break that happened later in the Church and the resulting formation of various Churches has to be viewed and understood in this light. Today there are both Catholic and non-Catholic Churches which claim the same Thomasine apostolic patrimony. They are Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara in the Catholic tradition and Jacobite Church, Orthodox Church, Marthomites, Surais and Thozhiyoor Church in the non-Catholic tradition. Now let us examine in brief the origin and history of the other Churches of St Thomas tradition.

1. **Birth of *Puthenkur* Church**

The Church of St Thomas Christians of South India, established by the Apostle Thomas on the Malabar Coast, continued to flourish without any strife and division till 1653 when a major revolt occurred against the arrogant attitude of the Padroado authorities and Bishops. This event is called in popular terms ‘Coonan Cross oath’’. After the Coonan Cross oath the St Thomas Christian leaders met at Alangad on 22 May 1653 and decided to have the Archdeacon Thomas Parampil as their Bishop. The Episcopal ordination of Thomas Parampil was done in a strange manner. They knew very well that no Bishops in Malabar at the time would confer ordination on Parampil. Therefore, it was done by twelve priests placing their hands on the Archdeacon. The people were made understand that everything was done in the right way. He took the official name Marthoma. Four Councilors were appointed to help the Archbishop in the administration. They were Alexander Kadavil, Alexander Parampil, Ittithommen Anjilimoottil and George Vengoor.

On hearing these developments, Pope Alexander VII sent two Apostolic Commissaries, Guissepe a S. Maria O.C.D. (known to the Christians of Malabar as Sebastiani) and Hyacinth (Giacinto) de Vicentio, to Malabar through the Roman Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* endowed with special powers to investigate and settle the matter. Though they were able to win back several of the dissenters, especially the councilors to the Marthoma, they failed to convince the pseudo archbishop Marthoma. Among the councilors only Ittithommen remained loyal to Marthoma. The appointment of Alexander Parampil, a cousin of Thomas Parampil (Marthoma) as the Vicar apostolic for St Thomas Christians and successor to Mar Sebastiani and his consecration as Bishop by Mar Sebastiani on 1 February 1663 finally made the return of Marthoma to the Catholic Church practically impossible. Moreover, Sebastiani who had ordained Alexander Parampil as Bishop had also excommunicated Marthoma. By this time, eighty two parishes had deserted Marthoma to go back to the fold of the Catholic Church and only thirty-two parishes remained loyal to Marthoma. Therefore, Marthoma began efforts to get his Episcopal ordination validated and sent petitions to several Eastern Patriarchs requesting them to send a Bishop to Kerala.

As a result and in response to these letters in 1665 there came from Jerusalem a Bishop called Mar Gregorios abad Jaleel, sent by the Patriarch of Antioch. Mar Gregorios reached Ponnani, then an important port on the South Western coast of India, in 1665. Knowing the prevailing political climate, he traveled further south by land in disguise until he came across some Syrian rite Christians from the North Paravur church. He revealed his identity showing them the *Sthathikon* from the Patriarch of Antioch. They led him to their church and sent word to others. Marthoma and many people rushed to the place to welcome the Bishop. Soon after, Mar Gregorios is said to have canonically ordained him as Metropolitan Mar Thoma I. But there are no documents to prove that he actually did it. Some say that as Marthoma was already exercising his authority as a Bishop, the re-consecration was done in secret. Thus the group led by Marthoma, since they accepted a Bishop from a new rite (the Jacobite), came to be known as New Party (*puthenkutukar*). The group of St Thomas Christians led by Alexander Parampil came to be known as Old Party (*pazhayakutukatr*). It continued to be part of the Catholic Church. The *puthenkutukar* slowly became part of the Antiochian Church. It was the first formal split in the Church of St Thomas Christians. It gave rise to the birth of a new Church in Kerala, the *Puthenkur* Church who in later years officially became part of the Antiochian Jacobite Church.

1. **Churches of Jacobite Tradition**

The Puthenkoor section of St Thomas Christians, because of various reasons, got divided into several Churches in the course of history.

1. **Thozhiyur Church (Malabar Independent Syrian Church)**

The Malabar Independent Syrian Church was born in 1772 from the Puthenkoor Church. It waSas founded by Bishop Kurillos who was earlier known as Kattumangatt Kurian. After Mar Dionosius I was consecrated as the Malankara Metropolitan by Mar Gregorios, and Antiochian Bishop, becasue of some misunderstanding with the former, Mar Gregoris consecrtaed Kattumangatt also as Bishop. Dionosius never accepted this consecration and got Kuriloos expelled from the territory of the King of Cochin. Kurillos went over to Thozhiyur which was under the british Malabar rule and established himself there. There he started an independent Church with the name Malabar independent Syrian Church, which came to be known as Thozhiyur Church. His Church was always small, but maintained stability by attracting devoted priests and emphasizing regularity in the ecclesiastical order. As a result of a court case in 1862, the Madras High Court confirmed the Thozhiyur church an independent Malankara church, and it has subsequently been known as the Malabar Independent Syrian Church. Although the Church is independent, its faith and traditions are strictly Oriental Orthodox, adhering to the West Syriac Rite and consistently using west Syriac and Malayalam for the liturgical celebrations. Today the Church remains small, with about 35,000 members and maintains good relations with the other Malankara churches.

1. **Marthoma Church**

The Marthoma Church originated from the Puthenkoor section of St Thomas Christians as a result of the Anglican influence. There was a strong group among the Jacobites of Kerala who wanted to reform their Church in tune with the Anglican Church practices. This group was led by Malpan Palakkunnath Abraham. However, the metropolitan Mar Dionosius IV realized inherent danger in it and decided to get closer to the Antiochian Patriarch who himself came down to Kerala and in a Synod at Mulanthuruthy in 1876 excommunicated the Reformists. The excommunicated group organized themselves into a Church now known as Marthoma Church or Malankara Marthoma Syrian Church. . It is a Church following the tradition of St Thomas Syrian Church, but at the same influenced by Anglican evangelical doctrines. They follow Syrian liturgy reformed in tune with the Anglican doctrines.

The Reformed Jacobites known today as the Marthomites got nothing from the verdict of the Royal Court of Appeal. They had to build up everything from scratches. They succeeded in doing it with the help of the British government.

The Mar Thoma Church is officially known as Malankara Marthoma Syrian Church. The Church has at present the leadership of twelve Bishops and is headed by Most Rev. Dr. Joseph Mar Thoma Metropolitan. The Church is served by 1037 clergy through thirteen dioceses. The headquarters is located at SCS Campus, Thiruvalla, Kerala and has over a million adherents spread worldwide.

1. **Orthodox Church (Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church)**

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church was born after a vertical split in the Puthenkoor Church. The occassion for the spilt was the visit of the Antiochian Patriarch Mar Abdulla Satef to Malankara. During his visit in 1909 – 1911 the Patriarch excommunicated Metroplotan Vattasseril Dionosius. Vattasseril never accepted the excommunicaiton and a considerable number of the faithul of the Puthenkoor community supported him. The rival Patriarch in Anticohian Church Abdel Massih was brought down to Malankara in 1911 and he declared the excommunication invalid. He declared the independence of the Church of Malankara and established a Catholicate here by installing Paulose Murimattathil as the Catholicose on 15 September 1912. The Indian Orthodox Church was thus divided into two factions. One group refused to acknowledge the actions of Mar Abdel Messih, and adhered to the supremacy of Patriarch Mar Abdalla. These were called the Patriarch’s party or Bawa party. Those who sided with the Metropolitan of Malankara, Mar Dionysius and the Catholicose consecrated under his leadership, were called the Catholicose party or Metran party. The Patriarch Abdel Massih went back after signing a document. According to the document at the demise of the Catholicose the new one could be elected by the Bishops of Church of Malankara. Catholicose remained the spiritual head and would consecrate Bishops. Metropolitan looked after the temporalities of the Church. In fact, Catholicose was a nominal head; the actual government of the Church was in the hands of the Metropolitan Dionosius VI. In 1934, after the death of Dionysius VI, the constitution of the Malankara Church was drafted and formally adopted, upon which the office of Metropolitan of the Church and Catholicose was combined. This Constitution would later help the Orthodox faction establish themselves as the legal custodians of the Malankara Church in the Supreme Court.

Since 1912, from the establishment of the Catholicate by Mar Abdel Massih, there are two Churches of Jacobite tradition in Malankara. Both have the same liturgy, theology and rite. Both have Catholicose as the heads of the respective Churches. Though there was a brief period of reconciliation from 1958 to 1972, these two Churches always existed in antagonism and even today do not lose any opportunity to defeat the other. Today the Church led by the Catholicose residing at Devalokam, Kottayam is known as the Orthodox Church and the other which accepts the spiritual sovereignty of the Patriarch of Antioch is known as the Jacobite Church. According to its website, the Orthodox Church now consists of about 2.5 million members, who are spread all over the world, though the majority reside in the state of Kerala in South West India. The Supreme Head of the Church and the present Catholicos is H.H. Baselios Mar Thoma Paulose II. The residence and the Head-quarters of the Church is in Kottayam in the Kerala State of the South-West India. The Church as a whole is divided into 30 ecclesial units called dioceses and each diocese is served by a bishop, administratively and spiritually.

1. **Jacobite Church (Jacobite Syrian Christian Church)**

The Patriarch appointed Mar Kurillos (Kochuparampil Paulose who had been consecrated by the Patriarch along with Mar Vattasseril) as the Metropolitan of the Church of Malankara in after the excommunication of Vattasseril. The group in the Puthenkoor community which supported the Metropolitan appointed by the Patriarch came to be known as Patriarch’s party (Bavakakshi). Once the split became formal and well established, this group has been called Jacobite Church. The Jacobite Church also has established a Catholicate for it. They claim that the supressed Maphrianate was re-established in India. We read in their official website thus: In 1860 the office of Maphrianate was abolished as per the decision of the Syrian Orthodox Church Synod held at Deyrul'al Zafran Monastery (Kurkumo Dayro) under Patriarch Ignatius Ya`qub II. The same was re-established in India in 1964 by the Universal Synod held at Kottayam, presided by Patriarch Mor Ignatius Ya`qub III. From the days of the establishment of this Maphrianate in India, the Church started to officially use the title 'Catholicose of the East', with his jurisdiction limited to India in the East. In 2002 the office of the Maphrianate was renamed as 'Catholicose of India' in accordance with its actual jurisdiction. Present headquarters of this ancient Maphrianate/Catholicate of the Syrian Orthodox Church is at Puthencuriz, Cochin, with Catholicose Mor Baselios Thomas I as the Chief of the Church in India. The Church has a membership of 1.2 million faithful.

1. Syro-Malankara Catholic Church

Syro-Malankara Church is one of the *sui-juris* Catholic Churches in Kerala with Major-Archiepiscopal status. It belongs to the West Syriac family of Churches. Syro-Malankara Church was born out of the Orthodox section among the Puthenkur Christians of Kerala. Ever since the division in the Church after the Coonan Cross, both Pazhakur and Puthenkur (Catholic and Jacobites) wanted to come to union. Both were descendants of the converts of St Thomas. But talks did not progress as a result of unwillingness of Europeans and the question of validity of the consecration of Jacobite Bishops. The final stage of the ecumenical talks began during the time of Dionosius VI after he was ex-communicated by the Antiochian Patriarch in 1911. When Vattassery Mar Dionosius went to meet the Antiochian Patriarch he also met the Syrian Catholic Patriarch and expressed his wish to join the Catholic Church. When he returned to Kerala he got a letter form Antiochian Catholic Patriarch ensuring the possibilities of re-union. He entrusted the task of responding to the letter to Mar Ivanios. The plan was to begin ecumenical dialogue with Antiochian Patriarch. But it was held up because of several political reasons. Hence, in 1926 they decided to hold dialogue with Rome. The first petition to Rome was sent in 1926. Their demands were mainly two: ancient tradition of St Thomas Christians must be allowed to continue, and the authority of Bishops and the synod must be recognized. Correspondence between Rome and Mar Ivanios continued. In July 1930 Rome decided to receive those who wanted reunion: to receive the Bishops as they are with authority. Rome made these communication to Mar Ivanios through Benziger Bishop of Kollam. The reunion took place on 19th Sept 1930 when only two Bishops, Mar Ivanios and Mar Theophilos joined the Catholic Church in the presence of Mar Benziger of Kollam, Mar James Kalassery of Changanachery and Mar Lawrence Perera of Kottar. On the next day Pulikkottil Joseph and Cheppatt Philoppose Rambans too joined the reunion movement. Most of the members of Bethany ashram, founded by Mar Ivanios, sooon joined Catholic Church. Thus it became a great movement of reunion and the number of the people joining the Catholic Church began to increase day by day. Finally they formed a separate Church in the Catholic communion with the name Syro-Malankara Church. The Syro Malankara hierarchy was established in 1932. The apostolic Constitution ‘*Christo PastorumPricipi’* was the decree which established the Syro-Malankara Hierarchy. Trivandrum became the archdiocese and Thiuvalla the suffragan diocese. Mar Ivanios became arch bishop; Theophilos was the Bishop of Thiruvalla.

Today the Syro-Malankara Church is a Major Archiepiscopal Church with its headquarters at Thiruvanathapuram in Kerala. There are now over 400,000 faithful in over 12 dioceses in India and across the world. Moran Mor Baselios Cleemis is the present Major Archbishop – Catholicos of this Church.

1. **Churches of Chaldean Tradition**

There are two Churches of St Thomas Christian patrimony belonging to the Chaldean tradition. They are Syro-Malabar Church and the Church of the east popularly known as the Surayis. The Church of the East in India or the Chaldean Syrian Church of India is an Eastern Christian denomination, based in Thrissur, Kerala. It is organized as a metropolitan province of the Assyrian Church of the East, and represents traditional Christian communities of the East Syriac Rite along the Malabar Coast of India. The origin of this Church dates back to the times of the Melusian schism in the Church of Malabar. Elias Melus who had reached Malabar sent by Joseph Audo, the East Syrian patriarch but without the knowledge of the Pope started a schism in Malabar. Once Melus went back from Malabar in 1882, most of his followers returned to the Catholic Church. But, some 8,000 people remained as a separate group accepting the leadership of Mar Abdiso (Antony Thondanatt). This Antony Thondanatt had received episcopal ordination from the Nestorian Patriarch. This group was mainly based in the church of Our Lady of Dolores at Trichur. At the time of the establishment of the Thrissur Vicariate for the Syro-Malabar Church this church did not join it. Thou gh the Bishop of Trissur had approached the court for the possession of this church the verdict was against him. After the death of Abdiso there was no Bishop for them for a brief period and a certain priest known as Augustine led this group.

In 1907, Mar Shimun XIX, Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East sent Mar Abimalek Timotheus as metropolitan bishop for this people. He reached Thrissur in February 1908, and took over the administration. Thus, they became formally part of the Nestorian Church. Abimalek Thomotheus organized ecclesiastical order and revived East Syriac rites and teachings in the local Thrissur church. These reforms caused some followers to break away and formed a separate group with the name Independents. Law suits followed for the possession of the Church properties and the Independents lost them. So they joined the Catholic Church in 1925. The Surai Church is now divided into two, each of the sections accepting either of the Nestorian Patriarchs. They have a total number of around 15,000 people.