

PROPOSAL FOR A SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY TO THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK 'CONTEXT-LITURGY-ETHICS'

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Abstract

Often we hear the plea for a theology emerging from the ecclesial, liturgical and cultural contexts of a Church *sui iuris*. In the field of sacramental theology too the case is not different. In reference to the present situation of the Syro-Malabar Church such this is a need of the time. Much research related to this has not been done. This article makes a humble attempt to develop a sacramental theology without losing one's own ecclesial and liturgical traditions in which one is born and brought up. After explicating a renewed understanding of the term sacrament and the mediatory role of the Church, we formulate the proposed sacramental theology of the Syro-Malabar Church today within the framework of context-liturgy-ethics. Such a way of doing sacramental theology will be done through a theological dialogue with the cultural context, the liturgical ethos and the pastoral concerns of the Syro-Malabar Christians today.

Keywords: Sacrament, Sacramental Theology, *Ekklēsia*, Liturgy, Contextual Theology, Theological Ethics, Cultural Discernment

Introduction

Let me begin with an inspiration from the Late Cardinal Mar Varkey Vithayathil, the former Major Archbishop of Syro-Malabar Archiepiscopal Church:

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the greatness of the Syro-Malabar Church is not to be limited to some ancient documents or rituals or some characteristic cultural traits. The uniqueness, the greatness and the individuality of the Church is to be seen in the life-style of her children who have imbibed these traditions and bear witness to them in their daily lives. It is only through the living examples of deep faith-life, unadulterated spirituality and selfless love, of every one of us, living in Kerala and outside Kerala, in India and abroad that we can live in this modern world without losing the relevance of our Church.¹

However, it is not our concern to discover some truth abstractly conceived as theology's final purpose, but rather to apprehend a living ideal worthy of devotion and capable of shaping behaviour in distinctive patterns.² Therefore, I humbly investigate the way to facilitate the Syro-Malabar Christians to live as Syro-Malabar Christians in the rapidly changing world. What the Syro-Malabar Christians need in their present pluralistic context, not only in India but also abroad, demands a new pastoral strategy in conformity with the teachings of the Church without losing one's own ecclesial and liturgical traditions in which one is born and brought up. The pastoral orientations towards being and becoming a Syro-Malabar Christian are liturgical evangelization, mystagogical catechesis, pastoral care and reactivating the awareness of Christian initiation.

Other than these pastoral orientations, the Syro-Malabar Christians have urgent need of a sacramental theology emerging from their ecclesial and liturgical and cultural contexts. Since there is not much research related to such an endeavour, I make a humble attempt to develop a sacramental theology, by explicating a renewed understanding of the term sacrament and the mediatory role of the Church. Then I formulate the proposed sacramental theology of the Syro-Malabar Church today in the framework of context-liturgy-ethics.

1. Sacrament: A Renewed Understanding

The *Sacrosanctum Concilium* exhorts that the sacraments sanctify those who participate in them, build up the body of Christ, and give worship to God. Since "they are signs they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it" (SC, 59). They "do indeed impart grace, but, in addition, the very act of celebrating them most effectively disposes the faithful to receive this grace in a fruitful manner, to

¹"Pastoral Letter on *Sabhadhinam* – Feast of *Dukrana*," in *Synodal News* 15, 1-2 (November, 2007) 92.

²Michael L. Raposa, "Pragmatism, Democracy and the Future of Catholic Theology," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 30, 3 (2009) 292.

worship God duly, and to practice charity" (SC, 59). Meanwhile, CCEO defines sacraments as the visible signs to communicate the Mystery of Christ. They are for the sanctification of the people by the power of the Holy Spirit. The sacraments make the faithful true worshipers of God the Father. They insert the faithful into the Church, the Body of Christ. Therefore, the Church is bound to dispense sacraments for the benefit of the faithful (CCEO, can. 667). This capacity to do things for the benefit of the faithful in the Church makes the sacraments worthy to be called the Church's actions in the "social process"³ in which Christ is the transformer of the world. In other words, the sacraments are themselves Christ's salvific actions of the Church, instituted by the Church, performed ultimately for the Church, i.e., the People of God and the Mystical Body of Christ. This implies that the sacraments are the public acts of the Church, by the Church, and for the Church. They are intended to nourish the Christian life as a journey in faith. They establish relationship between God and the human beings. At the same time, they have the collective capacity to perform things for the benefit of the faithful in the Church. This collective capacity is empowered by the Holy Spirit within the liturgical assembly through the ritual participation in the dispensation of Christ's Paschal Mystery. That is why, in the renewed understanding of the Syro-Malabar sacramental theology we argue that the sacraments are the contextualized realities of the Church, celebrated in the Church and ethically oriented for the benefit of the faithful in the Church.

From a liturgical point of view, the acting subject in the liturgy is the *ekklēsia* (Christian faithful/church) as such. At the same time, the *ekklēsia* as a liturgical assembly plays a vital role in the formation of

³The understanding of sacraments as social process is taken from John H. Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture," *Theology Today* 48, 1 (1991) 33-44. In this article, observing a commonality underlying five practices described in the New Testament, Yoder presents sacraments as social process. Those five practices are fraternal admonition, universality of Charisma, Spirit's freedom in the meeting, Breaking the Bread, and introduction into the New Humanity. All of these social/ ethical/ sacramental practices, as the author claims, are rooted formally in the order of redemption. Those practices constitute the believing community as a social body and function as a paradigm for ways in which other social groups might operate. Though they are by nature lay or public phenomena, they are enabled and illuminated by Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah and the Lord. They do not make the individual the pivot of change. Since they are derived from already existent cultural models, they are not the prerequisite for the community's right or capacity to reason morally. However, they transcend dichotomies in the Protestant and Catholic realms and each of them is a wholly human, empirically accessible practice — nothing esoteric.

Christian identity. In this relation, it is to be taken into account that *ekklēsia* is the “assembly” of “the body of Christ who presides over it and who exercises in its midst and on its behalf his unique and untransmissible priesthood.”⁴ As Chauvet argues,

*the liturgical assembly constitutes the fundamental “sacramental” representation of the presence of the absence of God. [...] Liturgical assembly is certainly not the exclusive place where this test [the major trial of becoming-Christian] takes place, but it is the principal symbolic place. One begins to get a sense of the pastoral work to be done in this direction. But at the same time one perhaps senses the powerful role that liturgical assembly itself can play in such a pedagogy of the faith.*⁵

This pedagogy of faith or the mediatory role of the Church means that to be a Christian is to belong to the church and to belong to the church is to take part in the liturgical assembly.⁶ In other words, only in the Church, *ekklēsia*, one confesses Jesus Christ. It is the venue in which one becomes a Christian who believes, celebrates, and witnesses to the Paschal Mystery into which one is initiated through the sacraments of Christian initiation. Through the frequent reception of the Eucharist and sacrament of reconciliation, and through other moments, he or she reactivates the Christian initiation consciousness. Thus, to be a Christian means to participate in the process of establishing a relationship between God and humanity, by seriously considering the tripod of one’s own faith expressions, i.e., believing, celebrating, and witnessing (tradition, liturgy, and care).

2. Proposed Sacramental Theology

A renewed understanding of the sacraments and the mediatory role of the Church together constitute a solid foundation for developing a renewed sacramental theology for the Syro-Malabar Church, looking at the sacraments through three lenses: context, liturgy and ethics. The need of such renewal in understanding sacramental theology is that, as J. Prasad Pinto observes,

today, however, parishes have become too removed from the life of the average man [or woman], too sacralized, too clerical and too vast. Some parishes are mere organizational units, and in some cases they may be just cogs in the machine of diocesan administration. There is in them little scope for active participation, for spontaneity and for the co-responsibility

⁴Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995, 183.

⁵Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 189.

⁶Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001, 36.

of a community of brothers and sisters in faith and charity. Many urban parishes have become service institutions of liturgical and sacramental goods without any personal contact.⁷

2.1. Contextual Sacramental Theology

The sacramental theology has its true sense in its relation, origin and belonging. That means, it denotes a cultural rootedness as contextualization. Here we mean contextualization as to describe the relation between the liturgy and the culture. In other words, it is a process of understanding the liturgical celebrations of the Church within the framework of the context or culture of the faithful.⁸ In this process of doing contextual sacramental theology what is important is a cultural discernment. It is “possible only by a competent analysis and critique both of tradition and of modernity. While modernization reveals to us some important aspects of our existence, our tradition has some deeply human and therefore very precious features.”⁹ Here cultural discernment is an awareness.

At the outset of the cultural discernment we argue that the *contextual sacramental theology* is a process of understanding the liturgical celebrations of the Church within the framework of the context or culture and society of the faithful. Therefore, it consists of a sound theology pertaining to the Christian faith with pastoral concerns and aspirations as well as with openness to the new situations in which the Syro-Malabar Christian faithful live. Such theology is a renewal in the field of Syro-Malabar sacramental theology, because on the one hand it takes into account the faith and the lived experiences of the Syro-Malabar Christian faithful together and on the other hand it analyses and critically evaluates the cultural context of these faithful by means of cultural discernment. This renewal, as Kanichikattil claims, is “a life process, a part of human development. Individuals as well as communities need to undergo renewal in order to cope with the changing conditions.”¹⁰

⁷Cited in Kurian Kunnumpuram, “Inculturation and Ecclesiology,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 19, 1 (1997) 54. See, J. Prasad Pinto, “Basic Communities and Inculturation,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 50, 2 (1986) 267.

⁸For a more complete discussion, see Anscar J. Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity and Catechesis*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992.

⁹Subash Anand, “Inculturation in India: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” *Indian Missiological Review* 19, 1 (1997) 28-29.

¹⁰Francis Kanichikattil, “Liturgical Reform Movement: Some Observations,” in *Church in Context: Essays in Honour of Mathias Mundadan CMI*, ed. Francis Kanichikattil, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1996, 301.

As Paul Maniyattu puts it, "one's life of faith should enable the life of faith of one's neighbours."¹¹ That means, the sacramental practices, in their strict sense, are not "revealed from above or created from scratch; each was derived from already existent cultural models. Table fellowship, baptism, and the open meeting were not new ideas, yet in the gospel they have taken on new meanings and a new empowerment."¹² In the same way, the proposed contextual sacramental theology presents the symbols, rituals, signs, words, and acts having the cultural milieu. It is in this cultural milieu the Christian faithful gather for the sacramental celebrations and feel that those sacramental practices are theirs. In other words, for Anscar J. Chupungco, "where the Church has become indigenous, where the hierarchy and laity come from the ranks of the people, there her liturgy will have to be native. A borrowed rite is an alien rite. There should be no dichotomy between the liturgy and the life of a native Church."¹³ Having taken a lead from *Lumen Gentium* (no. 26), Kunnumpuram argued that "where the Word is proclaimed and believed, where the Eucharist is celebrated and where love is practiced, there the Church is."¹⁴

When the mutual relation between liturgy and life is gradually fading in a multi-cultured context, that of the Syro-Malabar Christians, the proposed renewed form of sacramental theology revitalizes the sacramental life of the Syro-Malabar Christian faithful, wherever they are and in whatever situations they live. That is to say, the contextual sacramental theology originates from within and nurtures the sacramental life of these faithful among themselves. Such awareness is well stated in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998),¹⁵ in which Pope John Paul II exhorts that "cultural context permits the living of Christian faith, which contributes in turn little by little to shaping that context. To every culture Christians bring the unchanging truth of God which he reveals in the history and culture of a people" (FR, 71). This call for the symbiosis between faith and the

¹¹Pauly Maniyattu, "Sources of the Syro-Malabar Theology," in *Syro-Malabar Theology in Context*, ed. Matthew Manakatt and Jose Puthenveetil, Kottayam: OIRSI, 2007, 113.

¹²John H. Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process," 42.

¹³Anscar J. Chupungco, "The Theological Principle of Adaptation," in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: A Reader*, ed. Dwight W. Vogel, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000, 246.

¹⁴Kunnumpuram, "Inculturation and Ecclesiology," 49.

¹⁵John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101_998_fides-et-ratio_en.html, (accessed on 14-09-2012).

culture enables the Syro-Malabar Christians to consider sacramental celebrations as their faith expressions received from generation to generation in relation with the context in which they live. That implies, only through a proper cultural discernment, the Syro-Malabar Christians can thus have a contextual sacramental theology. Then such theology helps them understand adaptation and creativity in strict sense. That is to say, adaptation and creativity have to be done in restructuring, revising, and creating liturgical texts by making use of cultural signs and symbols in liturgical celebrations.

2.2. Liturgical Sacramental Theology

The sacramental theology functions as a cause or being a means or instrument for the benefit of the faithful. This capacity to do things for the benefit of others comes from the liturgical celebrations itself. Here liturgy becomes the locus for theologizing. In this regard, the Christian faithful have to recognize the celebrating aspect of the sacramental theology other than that of the contextual sacramental theology. Here not only the faith and life-experience but also the celebrational aspect of the liturgy is taken into account. Such theology is in fact liturgically oriented and functions in a re-cognitive level. There arises a question: how does the proposed sacramental theology function as a liturgical theology?

In general, liturgical theology is understood as what liturgical theologians do. But, liturgical theology includes more than that. It has its source in worship, in liturgy and theologically reflects upon its relationship with the lived-experience. In this sense, liturgical theology is a theology that deals with liturgy in a theological manner. Such liturgical theology engages in a theological reflection on not only the celebrations of sacraments but also the all liturgical celebrations as Church's acts of worship together with the active and conscious participation in them.¹⁶ This liturgical sacramental theology, as Poovathanikkunnel claims, considers liturgy as an ecclesial ritual praxis based on *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*. Such

¹⁶A detailed study on the well-known research with respect to liturgical theology, see Dwight W. Vogel, "What is Liturgical Theology?" in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: A Reader*, ed. Dwight W. Vogel, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000, 1-13; Kevin W. Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994; David W. Fagerberg, *What is Liturgical Theology: A Study in Methodology*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992; David W. Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?*, Chicago/Mundelin, Illinois: Hillenbrand Books, 2004; Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*; and Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, trans. Asheleigh E. Moorehouse, Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003.

sacramental theology interprets liturgy from historical and action dimensions. At the same time, it makes use of the present liturgical texts and the liturgical celebrations as the tools for interpretation.¹⁷

Ultimately, sacramental theology functions as something to cause or being a means or instrument for the benefit of the faithful. This capacity to do things for the benefit of others comes from the liturgical celebrations themselves. At the same time, it focuses on the active and conscious participation of the people in the liturgical celebration. To explicate this point, it is very pertinent to note that there was a social custom among the Keralites to ask permission before starting a ceremony or a rite. This social custom has a deeper meaning of showing the whole-hearted involvement of the community present. Such custom is adapted to the Syro-Malabar Qurbana at the very beginning: Celebrant: "Let us begin this Qurbana as the Lord has commanded us." Response: "It is indeed in accordance with the command of Christ that we offer this Qurbana" (*The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana*, 2005). This custom reminds the Syro-Malabar faithful of their role in discerning God's will, in the process of sanctification, and in the glorification of the Triune God by means of liturgical celebrations. The same reactivating process takes place throughout the Qurbana. This theology in fact orients the faithful towards praxis, an ethical praxis. In this sense, liturgical sacramental theology is necessarily having the beneficial dimension.

2.3. Ethical Sacramental Theology

The beneficial dimension of sacraments or liturgical celebrations is to be well articulated in an ethical sacramental theology. The notions like living in or after the Mass, becoming Eucharist, and the symbolic labour clearly manifest the beneficial or existential sacramentality of the liturgical celebrations. Such sacramentality denotes an ongoing passage to thanksgiving as well as a living-in-grace. Therefore we argue that the proposed sacramental theology makes the Syro-Malabar faithful respond to God who gives grace and who is revealed in Jesus.¹⁸

However, each element in the proposed sacramental theology finds its value only by reference to the others. Therefore, it would be absurd to think that one could be a Christian without any ethical concern for others. Here those who follow the process of being and

¹⁷Thomas Poovathanikunnel, "A Methodology for Syro-Malabar Sacramental Theology," *Christian Orient* 18, 3 (1997) 157-160.

¹⁸Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 446.

becoming Christian should bear in mind the words of Jesus: "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40), and "in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me" (Mt 25:45). In this sense, the ethical sacramental theology, as Chauvet considers, must be "the theory of practice. Its object is the Church's celebration itself. It has nothing relevant to say that does not stem from the way the Church confers the sacraments. If one had always obeyed this golden rule many deviations would have been avoided."¹⁹ This implies that, unless sacramental theology is intrinsically connected to liturgical praxis, it would remain as an isolated academic study. Therefore, sacramental theology and liturgical practice have to be understood as intrinsically united with each other.

In this context, the task of a sacramental theologian is to unpack the liturgical experience to understand sacramental life in the existential situation of the Syro-Malabar Christians. Theologically, what makes existential life a Christian reality, as Chauvet argues, is

neither its scope...nor its degree of refinement...nor its level of generosity...what makes it Christian is not its "matter" but the "form" which is given it by love understood as a response to God's love, which came first (1Cor 13). The liturgy is the place where this priority of the love of God freely bestowed is attested...in the measure in which the ethical life of service to others is lived as a response to this primary gift, and therefore takes its source in the sacraments, in that same measure it finds its Christian identity.²⁰

That is, being a theory of practice, the ethical sacramental theology unfolds the concrete experience of the Church's sacramental practices and affirms that "sacraments only exist in the *doing*, in the *celebrating*."²¹ Recalling Joseph Martos' view, one might argue that "sacramental theologies are therefore better understood as models of what *can be* but *might not be* going on in concrete sacramental practices. And depending on one's doctrinal, liturgical and pastoral orientation, such theologies can provide models of what *should be* or *should not be* going on when Christians gather for sacramental worship."²²

¹⁹Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 48.

²⁰Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 41-42.

²¹Kenan B. Osborne, *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World: A Theology for the Third Millennium*, New York: Paulist Press, 1999, 12.

²²Joseph Martos, *The Catholic Sacraments*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983, 169.

Meanwhile, in the ethical sacramental theology one has to consider, as Chauvet claims, "*the Other who is like God*" as the Crucified One and the Church acknowledges Him as "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15).²³ So the members of this Church are given the mission to be the Other who is like God, in the daily life. It is a task ever achieved. That is to recognize others as like us in their very otherness. Here one has to take into account the triadic structure of human inter-subjectivity (I-You-It) as a hermeneutical tool. In this regard Chauvet argues that the relationship within the Trinity is relevant in understanding the difference and otherness. This is a symbolic scheme. In this symbolic scheme of otherness, every difference is intrinsically connected to an identity or likeness between two realities. This identity and difference refer to belonging to one another.²⁴ In this symbolic scheme, the Other/It/Third becomes "the symbolic place where all communication can take place, because the other is a subject, not an object."²⁵ Thus, the other-centeredness shows a link between action, witness and hermeneutics in exploring the role of theology and the most appropriate discourse on God. It is verified in the ethical field. For instance, "Breaking of the Bread without corresponding charitable acts, the celebration of the Eucharist without fraternal love and sacrificial living are some of the major challenges that the Syro-Malabar Church has to face in her spirituality."²⁶ Those challenges the Syro-Malabar Church facing today are, lack of fraternal love and sacrificial living, insufficiency in faith formation, laxity in the proclamation of the Word of God, absence of life witness, lack of deep and loving relationship with the laity, considerable decrease in vocation and lack of attention to the family apostolate.²⁷ These challenges, in fact, highlight the relevance of the ethical sacramental theology in the recent Syro-Malabar Christian context.

During the Inaugural address to the 12th Syro-Malabar Bishops' Synod at Mount St Thomas, Kakkanad (held from 1-13 November, 2004), Varkey Vithayathil exhorted the bishops about the significance

²³Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 506.

²⁴Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 503.

²⁵Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 503.

²⁶Litty, LSDP, "Challenges Faced by the Syro-Malabar Church in Day-today Living for Her Spirituality," in LRC *Seminar XXX*, Kakkanad: Mount St Thomas, on July 17-19, 2007, "The Spirituality of the Syro-Malabar Church," available at LRC Archives No. 10, 62.

²⁷Litty LSDP, "Challenges Faced by the Syro-Malabar Church," 62-64.

of taking more effective measures in witnessing to the Christian life in a multi-religious context of India that

the Church, the People of God, is called to be the witness of Christ in the World. This witnessing is to take place both at the micro level and at the macro level. At the micro level we shall discuss the issue of family, how our families could be motivated and helped to become more effective witnesses of Christian living...At the macro level, at the level of the society and at the level of the organized Church, we shall discuss the issue of education and examine whether our educational institutions really serve as a means to witness to Christ and his values.²⁸

Therefore, we emphasize that the proposed ethical sacramental theology functions at praxis level as well as at the existential level. In preparing the effective measures for witnessing Christian life both at micro and macro levels, it is worthwhile to take into account "the level of people's basic human experiences, aspirations, problems, values, situations, etc. — through a process of reflection and interpretation."²⁹ By considering these elements, we are thus able to form the Syro-Malabar Christians in this rapidly changing and challenging world.

3. Relevance of the New Proposal: A Symbiosis

The relevance of developing a sacramental theology for the Syro-Malabar Church points to the following: such sacramental theology is contextualized theology in the sense of its origin or belonging to the context of the Faithful; it is liturgical sacramental theology in which liturgy is the source of theology; and it is ethical sacramental theology, since it is meant for the benefit of the Faithful. The proposed sacramental theology (which is contextual, liturgical, and ethical) also articulates the experience of the Syro-Malabar Christian faithfully praying together and celebrating the Christ-event received from St Thomas the Apostle. In addition, this theology enables the Syro-Malabar Christians to strengthen the relationship between liturgy and ethics, the Church and society, theology and culture. Such a way of doing sacramental theology is an outcome of a theological dialogue with the cultural context, the liturgical ethos and the

²⁸"Inaugural Address of the Major Archbishop," in *Synodal News* 12, 2 (December, 2004) 9.

²⁹D.S. Amalorpavadass, "The Catechetical Pedagogy for the Youth," in *Joyful Response to the Challenge of Faith-Formation*, ed. D.S. Amalorpavadass, Bangalore, India: NBCLC, 1981, 219-220. See also, Barnes Mawrie, "A Catechesis of Accompaniment: The Emmausian Method of Faith Formation," *Mission Today* 8, 1 (2006) 69.

pastoral concerns of the Syro-Malabar Christians today. At the same time, this theology seriously takes into account the *sensus fidelium* of these Christian faithful. Since this sacramental theology is a composite of context, liturgy and ethics, we thus made a case for a sacramental theology which has its root in the living context of the Syro-Malabar Christian faithful, is centred on the liturgical celebrations and is extended to the benefit of the faithful, i.e., to live as better Christians in the world. In this sense, the proposed sacramental theology is purely founded on the Christian faith received from generation to generation, celebrated in liturgy and witnessed in the life-experience.

In other words, such sacramental theology gives a theological orientation towards the Christian identity formation of the Syro-Malabar Christians.

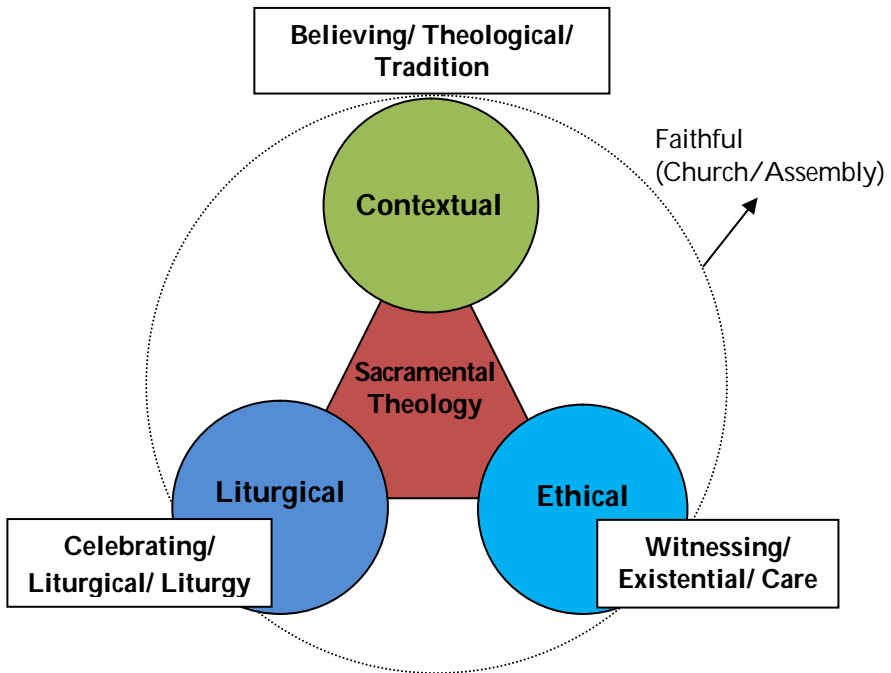


Diagram: Sacramental Theology of the Syro-Malabar Church Today

As depicted in the diagram above, the renewed understanding of the Syro-Malabar sacramental theology has a symbolic cohesion of its contextual, liturgical and ethical dimensions through the mediation of the Church. To be precise, the sacramental theology thus formed is culturally rooted, liturgically and ethically oriented. A symbiosis of contextual, liturgical and ethical dimensions of sacramental theology

gives a hope to the present and future generations of the Syro-Malabarians. For, these Christians “want to practice a religion that gives more importance to human values, adopting valuable elements from their own cultural ethos than a rigid uniform religious practice.”³⁰ In addition, since experiences are fundamental to human life, they can also “stimulate people to a change of life.”³¹ Therefore, basing on the actual context of the people, the Syro-Malabar Christian identity formation becomes a culturally bound formation which, as Barnes Mawrie understands, “forms part and parcel of the people’s day to day experience,” and which “makes the Christian message more intelligible to the people.”³²

Conclusion

In brief, the sacramental theology, we thus proposed is a balanced vision of cultural, liturgical and ethical sacramental theology. It helps each Syro-Malabar Christian to make a relationship with God and with others by means of theological charity and hope through the mediation of the Church. This ultimate purpose of the proposed sacramental theology enables each person “to confront his/her belief and to accept what is revealed to him/her and thereby discover his/her existence.”³³ Here we have to consider that to establish relationship between God and His Faithful is a constant process or an ongoing journey in faith. This process thus aims at forming better Christians within the symbolic web of Christian faith expressions derived from St Thomas’ Christ-experience (believing-celebrating-witnessing). This implies “a process of ‘creating’ a person into a ‘new being’” and “a process of transforming people”³⁴ towards conversion and renewal. This formation through transformation is, in fact, an activity of Triune God, i.e., by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ for the glory of God as well as for the sanctification of the faithful. In other words, from the part of the faithful, this is an act of *theosis*, a journey in faith, a maturing into the likeness of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

³⁰Francis Kanichikattil, “Indigenous People, Indigenous Worship,” *Journal of Dharma* 31, 3 (2006) 345.

³¹Mawrie, “A Catechesis of Accompaniment,” 68-69.

³²Mawrie, “A Catechesis of Accompaniment,” 68-69.

³³Mawrie, “A Catechesis of Accompaniment,” 70.

³⁴Mawrie, “A Catechesis of Accompaniment,” 72-73.