

## Priesthood in the Tradition of the St. Thomas Christians of India

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According to the strong tradition and belief of the St.Thomas Christians of India, it was St.Thomas, the Apostle of Christ, who preached the Gospel to their forefathers and baptized them.<sup>1</sup> The favourite term by which they designated themselves even from early centuries was *Nazrani*. This term meant *the follower of the Nazarene Jesus*. This is an analogue for the designation *Christian*. That the St.Thomas *Nazrani* community had Priests and Bishops ordained by St.Thomas himself is also a strong tradition among them.<sup>2</sup> It is but logical to think that St.Thomas ordained Bishops and Priests as the other Apostles did in the Churches founded by them.

The trade routes from the Middle East had brought St.Thomas to India. Later on we see that Christian traders from Mesopotamia and Persia had regular commercial relations with the South Indian Coasts. Many groups of Christians and clergy from Mesopotamia and Persia came along with the traders to India and settled there boosting the *Nazranis*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Placid J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, London-Bombay, 1970, 15-29.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Placid J. Podipara, 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Placid J. Podipara, 63-78.

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## 1. The Leadership of Indigenous Clergy

As in any other religion in India, the St. Thomas Christian or *Nazrani* Priests had an honoured position and leadership in the community. The clergy here was married as in the Primitive Church. As the Bishops had to be unmarried and erudite, a delegation would go to a monastery in Persia or Mesopotamia to choose an erudite and holy monk worthy to become a Bishop. The Catholic Patriarch of Babel (Babylon) would ordain and send him to India. As there were no Christian monasteries in India in the early centuries of the Christian era, and as Bishops had to be celibates according to the custom prevailing in the Oriental Churches ever since the Post-Apostolic times, Bishops were chosen by the Nazranis from the Persian or Mesopotamian monasteries. At times there were more than one Bishop in India to cater to the spiritual needs of the Nazrani Church. The main function of the Bishop was to perform Pontifical Rites. The Nazranis held these Bishops in high esteem and honour. There was a beautiful blending of spiritual and temporal administrations in the Nazrani community. The Bishops were overseeing the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy and spiritual care given by the priests to the Faithful. The responsibility to administer the temporal affairs of the whole Nazrani Community was vested with a prominent priest who had the title *Archdeacon*. He was considered *Jathicku Karthavyan* meaning *The Man responsible for the well-being of the Community*. For a long time the office of the Archdeacon was considered to be hereditary and therefore the Archdeacons hailed from the same family. The Nazrani Archdeacon had a retinue of guards and he was considered as a public dignitary by the native Hindu kings. Besides, the Nazrani men were good soldiers and they used to carry arms when they were going for some public functions. In front of some old churches there existed armoury buildings where the arms could be kept when they took part in the Liturgical functions in the church.

In Kerala it was the interference of the Latin missionaries in the Church affairs of the Nazranis that created a big havoc. They tried to grab the complete control of the Church affairs of the Nazranis. This disrupted the serenity and unity existing in the Nazrani Community before the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Archdeacon's Frustration and the Division of the Nazrani Community

Hearing that a Bishop had arrived in Kochi (Cochin) from Mesopotamia for the pastoral care of the Nazrani Community, the Archdeacon with the leaders and a large number of the Faithful

reached Kochi to accord a cordial welcome to the Prelate. But the Portuguese authorities did not allow the Bishop to disembark from the ship, nor did they permit the Archdeacon to meet him in the ship. Soon a gossip spread that the Bishop was drowned by the Portuguese authorities off the coast of Kochi. The infuriated Archdeacon and the large number of Nazranis with him tied a rope to a Cross that was standing in the open air at Mattanchery near the Kochi port and holding the rope swore that they would no more remain subjected to the *Priests of Sampalur*. The Priests mentioned here were Portuguese Jesuit Fathers who had a residence under the patronage of St. Paul. Hence that locality was known in the vernacular as *Sampalur*. This event happened in 1653 and it is known as **Coonan Cross Oath**. The word *Coonan Cross* means bent cross. This was not a rebellion against the Pope as presented by some historians. After this the leaders as well as a number of clergymen assembled in the church at Alangad and there at the suggestion of some, twelve priests laid their hands on the Archdeacon and declared him Bishop. Consequently the Nazrani Community was divided. A number of Priests and Faithful opted to remain under the jurisdiction of the Archdeacon Thomas who assumed the title *Mar Thoma I*. They were eventually known as *Puthankur* (=New Party). Those who opted to remain under the Latin Archbishop despite their apathy towards him came to be known as *Pazhayakur* (=Old Party). The repeated attempts of the New Party for re-union were foiled by the Latin missionaries because of their insistence that *Mar Thoma I* should relinquish his claim to be the head and Bishop of the New Party and should serve the community as a priest. The New Party was not prepared to accept the condition posed by the missionaries. They were careful to keep the Holy See informed of their views only. After a period of time, one of the successors of *Mar Thoma I* got valid ordination from a Jacobite Archbishop from the Middle East. Even after this the New Party continued their attempts for re-union without any positive result because of the above-mentioned attitude of the Latin missionaries.<sup>4</sup> Direct communication with the Holy See was becoming easier and speedy in the course of time. Thanks to this, a group of the New Party directly contacted the Holy See under the leadership of Archbishop Mar Ivanios and the much desired re-union of at least a group of the separated brethren was materialized in 1930. The re-united Community has been acknowledged by the Holy See as the **Syro-Malankara Church** and

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Xavier Koodapuzha, *A History of the Church in India* (in Malayalam), Kottayam, 1998, 362-374; Cf. A.M. Mundadan, *Indian Christians. Search for Identity and Struggle for Autonomy*, Bangalore, 2000, 47-52.

it is an Individual Church in Catholic communion following the Syro-Antiochene Rite.

### 3. The Traditional Training System of Nazrani Priests

In early centuries there was no organized seminary among the Nazranis for the training of their priests. Boys who aspired to become priests would choose an erudite priest as his teacher and would stay with him for several years to learn from him the liturgical language Syriac and the other branches of sacred knowledge which a priest was supposed to know. There were several such erudite and holy priests, the majority of whom were elderly too, in different parts of Kerala. The title given to them was *Malpan*. This word originated from the Syriac word *Malpana* which means *teacher*. A Malpan would have several aspirants to priesthood under him. They would be staying with the Malpan at his residence in the church precincts. The expenses for their food and other needs had to be met by their families. Therefore, as a rule, only those families which could afford to meet such expenses were sending their boys for priestly studies. The system of priestly education was similar to the age-old custom of education in India called *Gurukulam Education*. In this system the boy would commence his education at the house of the *Guru* (=teacher) staying with him doing the household works and participating in all the other programmes of the family. There would be several boys staying with the *Guru* like this. The *Guru* would be instructing the students in different ways: He would speak to them, show them the different methods of work, take any opportunity to give them practical lessons and so on. This kind of education would continue till the time the boy becomes a youth and is mature to get married. The education and training of future priests under the Malpans resembled this system to a great extent. We may call such a place of priestly training by the name *Malpanate*.<sup>5</sup>

The Malpan was responsible for the correct instruction of the candidates for priesthood in spiritual, doctrinal, cultic and administrative matters. The candidate was to be presented to the Bishop for ordination by the *Palliyogam* (=parish assembly), the positive opinion of which was absolutely necessary for ordination. It was for a parish that a priest was ordained, and not for a diocese as done today in the case of the secular clergy. Generally the clergy were married. But the marriage of a clergyman was not allowed after his ordination to priesthood. The *Palliyogam* mentioned above

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Thomas Puthiakunnel, *The Seminaries in Kerala* (in Malayalam), Ernakulam, 1968, 3-5.

had to give a letter patent called *Desakkuri* when the candidate was presented to the Bishop for ordination. This letter gave the candidate the title to be maintained by the parish. The priests belonging to a parish would get a share of the income of the parish in cash as well as in the form of food items offered to the Church. A priest after the first Holy Mass would be solemnly received into his house and would be given precious gifts. The family had to entertain the guests with a sumptuous banquet.<sup>6</sup>

It was the right and duty of the Bishop to examine a candidate to priesthood regarding his spiritual and intellectual fitness as well as the knowledge of theology and liturgy needed for a priest, either personally or through another one, before ordaining him.

#### 4. Clerical Dress

The clerical dress of the Nazrani Priests was of an indigenous and ingenious design. It consisted of a pair of loose trousers reaching the ankles and a long loose gown with wide sleeves. A square shaped piece of cloth fastened to the shoulders hung from the shoulders and rested on the back of the body upon the gown like a flap of about 8 to 10 inches in length. The whole of this priestly dress had to be made of white cloth. The loose nature and white colour of the dress were to adapt it to the hot climate of Kerala. The shape of this clerical dress as a whole was designed to resemble the sign of the Cross. The square shaped piece of cloth hanging from the shoulder and resting upon the gown in the back was supposed to be the top portion of the Cross on which the head of the crucified Christ was resting. So, when a priest dressed like this stands up and extends his hands to the sides and the flap resting on his back is raised behind his head, the shape will be that of Jesus hanging on the Cross. So also, when the dress alone is spread out on a surface, one can see the shape of the Cross. Such a clerical dress, so ingeniously designed, was unique to the priests of the St. Thomas Nazranis.<sup>7</sup>

Today the Catholic Nazrani Priests do not wear the above described clerical dress. The reason for the abandonment of this dress was a happening in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at Verapoly. When a missionary from Europe arrived at Verapoly, the priests present there went to accord him a welcome. There the Latin Priests were wearing black cassock while the Nazrani Priests were dressed in the above mentioned clerical dress. The missionary misunderstood the Nazrani Priests as laymen and did not show them due

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Placid J. Podipara, 89

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Placid J. Podipara, 89.

reverence. This offended the Nazrani Priests. Fr. Thomas Palackal (later *Malpan*) who was present there took the initiative to make white cassocks of western type. At present this type of cassocks are worn also by many priests among the separated brethren of Oriental Rites in India, although some among them still prefer the old type clerical dress.

#### 4. The Nomenclature of Nazrani Priests

At present there are several terms by which the Nazrani Priests are known. The important ones among them are popularly transliterated as *Achchan*, *Vaidikan*, *Purohithan*, *Kasheesha*, and *Kathanar*. The title *Achchan* is the Malayalam translation of the word *Father* which seems to have been introduced by western Latin Missionaries. *Vaidikan* literally means *one who knows the Vedas*. This signifies that the Nazrani Priest knowing the Bible is on a par with the Hindu Pundit who knows the *Vedas*, the ancient Hindu Scriptures. The Nazranis believe that their priests know the Bible which is their Sacred Scripture as the Hindu Pundits know the Vedas. *Purohithan* is yet another word of Indian origin which means *one who is placed in front* because of his prominence. This also shows that Priests were held in high esteem in India. *Kasheesha* is a Syriac term and is the exact translation of the Greek term *Presbyteros* (=Elder), which was used to designate Priests in Apostolic Patristic Writings. Now the term *Kasheesha* is mainly used by the Oriental Non-Catholic brethren in India.

*Kathanar* (*Cathanar*) is a Malayalam honorific title which means *Lord, Nobleman etc.* It is used by all the Nazranis, Catholic and Non-Catholic, who follow the Oriental Rites. In the past there had been attempts to trace the origin of the term *Kathanar* from the Syriac language. But the explanations resulting from such attempts are not convincing. A research into the roots of this word will show that this is the combination of two Malayalam words, namely, *Karthan* and *-ar*. The word *Karthan* means *Lord, Nobleman etc.* The added letters *-ar* designate an honorific suffix added to nouns and titles. For example, *Nambiar* is an honoured *Nambi* =one who is faithful in temple services. Another example is *Nayanar* (=an honoured *Nayan*= *Nayakan*, i.e. Leader). The titles *Nambiar* and *Nayanar* were originally bestowed by native kings as a mark of honour. Later on they became names of communities.

A *Nazrani Priest* was designated in early times by the locals by the title *Karthanar* because of the honour attached to the Priestly Office. Besides, *Nazrani Priests* hailed from aristocratic families. This must have been another reason for the nobility attributed to the Nazrani Priests. Later on the form *Karthanar* became *Kathanar* in common

parlance, the first “r” in the title being elided. Such elisions are common in the Malayalam Language.

Formerly the Nazrani Priests were designated in the official documents of the Eparchies by the title Kathanar (Cathanar). In such a context “Mathai Kathanar” meant “the honoured Lord Mathai, the Priest”. Now I would suggest that the elided “r” be restored and the full form of the title – Karthanar – be used to designate the Nazrani Priests as a rule. During this YEAR FOR PRIESTS such a move will encourage the Priests and the Faithful of the Nazrani Community to appreciate the dignity of Priesthood and to foster Vocations to Priesthood.

## **5. Priestly Formation of Catholic Candidates in Organized Seminaries**

In 1551 a Portuguese Franciscan missionary by name Frey Vincente de Lagos started a seminary in Kodungallur (Cranganore). Many Nazrani candidates for priesthood joined the seminary. But since Vincente did not know Syriac, the liturgical language of the Nazranis, the candidates were trained in Latin liturgical tradition. After their ordination the Nazranis did not permit them to celebrate the sacred liturgical rites in their churches. But the seminary started in 1581 by the Jesuits at Vaipicotta and later shifted to Ampazhakkad took care to teach Syriac and therefore the Nazranis accepted the priests trained in these seminaries. Another seminary which catered to the needs of the Nazrani candidates for Priesthood was established by a Dominican missionary priest named Donati. He established the seminary at Kaduthuruthy in 1624. This seminary was well attended and appreciated by the Nazranis because those who taught in the seminary knew Syriac. But this seminary did not last for long.<sup>8</sup>

Although some seminaries came to existence to train the Nazrani candidates for priesthood, the *Malpanate* system was continuing in some far flung places from where the candidates could not come to attend the organized seminaries.

### **5.1. The C.M.I. Congregation and the establishment of Seminaries by them**

The religious congregation, Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (C.M.I.) was started by Nazrani Priests in 1831 at Mannanam, Kerala, to cater to the spiritual, social and other such needs of the indigenous Christians as well as of others. The name of the Congregation was

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Puthiakunnel, 8-13.

at first The Congregation of the Servants of Mary Immaculate of Mount Carmel. But the Italian Carmelite Missionaries slowly influenced the early Fathers of the Congregation and managed to designate their Congregation as the Third Order of Carmelites Discalced (T.O.C.D.) But at the advice of the Holy See the Constitutions of the Congregation were revised in 1958 and the name of the Congregation was fixed as Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (C.M.I.). The Founding Priests were Thomas Palackal, Thomas Porukara and Kuriakose Chavara. They were assisted by Jacob Kaniyanthara who joined the Congregation as a lay brother. The Founding Fathers realized the need of an organized seminary with greater facilities to train the candidates for Priesthood in the Nazrani Church. Therefore they started the seminary in 1833 and it was functioning along with the Religious Community at Mannanam. Candidates for Priesthood from the Religious Community as well as candidates for Priesthood to work as diocesan priests were studying together in the seminary. At that time the St.Thomas Christians or Nazranis were under the jurisdiction of Latin Prelates, partly under Verapoly and partly under the *Padroado*. The majority of Nazranis were under the jurisdiction of the Carmelite Missionary Bishop of Verapoly. The Mannanam Religious Community was under the jurisdiction of Verapoly. After starting the seminary at Mannanam, the common seminary at Puthenpally was started in 1866. In the same year a seminary was started at Vazhakulam and another one at Elthuruthu in 1868 and later on at Pulinkunnu and Mutholy attached to the C.M.I. monasteries and under the auspices of the C.M.I. Congregation. The Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly, Monsignor Bernardino Baccinelli ordered to close down the Malpanates and asked the candidates for priesthood to join any of these seminaries.<sup>9</sup>

## 5.2. Seminaries under the Jurisdiction of the Bishops

When the Nazranis were removed from under the jurisdiction of the Latin Bishops of Verapoly and Padroado, two Apostolic Vicariates were established exclusively for them under two Latin Bishops in 1887. These Apostolic Vicariates were Kottayam under Bishop Charles Lavigne S.J. and Trichur under Bishop Mdlcott. After this the C.M.I. seminaries to train secular clergy were closed down and all the candidates for diocesan priesthood were asked to join the central seminary for them at Puthenpally. In 1934 this seminary was shifted from Puthenpally to Mangalapuzha in Alwaye (Aluva) and it is continuing there. The C.M.I. Congregation established a major seminary exclusively for its own candidates

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Puthiakunnel, 13-15.



for priesthood at Chethipuzha near Changanacherry in 1918. It was shifted to Bangalore in 1957 and was named Dharmaram College. "Dharmaram" means *Garden of Virtues* which represents the Sacred Heart of Jesus who was the Patron of the Major Seminary at Chethipuzha too.

Besides the Major Seminary for diocesan priests at Mangalapuzha, another one was started at Vadavathoor near Kottayam in 1962 under the jurisdiction of the Syro-Malabar Hierarchy. At Mangalapuzha candidates for priesthood from the Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara and Latin Rites were accommodated till a decade ago. At present the erstwhile Philosophy Section called Carmelagiri, designed as a separate complex on the campus is under the Latin Hierarchy and is exclusively set apart for students from the Latin Rite. But the classes are common to all the students belonging to the different Rites. The Vadavathoor Seminary was established to foster Oriental Studies. The students belonging to the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara eparchies were accommodated there. Now the Syro-Malankara Church has its own Major Seminary at Thiruvananthapuram. Besides these, there are Major Seminaries in Trichur, Tellicherry, Ujjain and Satna directly under the Syro-Malabar eparchies in these places. The Syro-Malabar Bishops send their candidates for priesthood to the Latin Seminaries in India and abroad also.

### 5.3. Major Seminaries of the Religious Congregations

As mentioned above, the CMI Congregation which pioneered the establishment of Major Seminaries for the Nazrani secular clergy, after closing down such seminaries at Mannanam, Vazhakulam, Elthuruthu, Pulinkunnu and Mutholy, established their own Major Seminary at Chethipuzha which was shifted to Bangalore. Now, besides Dharmaram College, the CMI Congregation has a Mission Philosophate at Wardha and a Mission Theologate at Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh with its extension centres in Jagdalpur and Rishikesh. Many other Religious Congregations of the Nazranis have their own Major Seminaries. Many of these seminaries are open to the students from Latin Rite as well as to Religious Sisters and even to qualified lay people.<sup>10</sup>

### 5.4. Vocations and Missions

God has blessed the Nazrani Community with abundant vocations to Priesthood and Religious life. Ever since the western Latin missionaries began mission work in North India, the indomitable

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Placid J. Podipara, 198.

mission zeal of Nazrani young men found ample scope in the North Indian Missions. The Mission Dioceses as well as Religious Congregations of the Latin Rite working in the Missions and elsewhere found the Nazrani Community as a rich quarry of vocations. But such recruits could not unfortunately get any opportunity to study about their oriental roots and heritage. The spirit of II Vatican Council that the Orientals should be aware of their identity and worth should work in future for the benefit of the Universal Church.

### 6. Some Prominent Nazrani Priests

The St. Thomas Nazranis, an Apostolic Church, can be proud of so many luminary priests who laboured to enrich the Universal Church by enriching this Individual or Particular Church. According to the teaching of the II Vatican Council, the Catholic Church is the communion of Individual or Particular Churches. Malpan Joseph Cariattil (later Archbishop) and Cathanar Thomman Paremakkal played a very important role in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for the re-union of the separated brethren of the Nazrani Community. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the prominent figure was Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871), one of the Founding Fathers of the CMI Congregation and the long-lived one among them whose far-sighted initiatives in the fields of pastoral activities, education, conversion of the outcastes, press apostolate, social work etc. have been bearing fruit. He was so holy that his contemporaries could style him as a man filled with the Holy Spirit and was declared Blessed in 1986. After him we see Fr. Emmanuel Nidiry (Nidhirikkal Mani Kathanar :1842-1904), who was an all-rounder and a prominent figure in the Nazrani Community of his times. His ambitions were to see a native Nazrani Bishop and to effect the re-union of the separated brethren. He was working hand in hand with the CMI Congregation and was a regular visitor at Mannanam. He was the mastermind behind the starting the *Deepika* daily newspaper in 1887 in the form of a Weekly then, to be published from Mannanam under the title *Nazrani Deepika*. Fr. Nidiry had wide ranging plans for the uplift of the Nazrani Community. He served as the Vicar General of Bishop Charles Lavigne for a short term. But the Bishop misunderstood him so much so that he was removed from the Office of Vicar General. He was a man of efficient leadership and could pacify the people when some decisions from Rome were contrary to their expectations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. George Menachery, ed., *Thomapedika*, Ollur, 2000, 211; Cf. Xavier Koodapuzha, 546-549.

Another humble and simple priest like St. John Vianney was Fr. Kunjachan (Augustine) Thevarparampil (1891-1973). He was active as a Nazrani Priest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He studied at Mannanam High School and was inspired by the CMI Fathers to do a fruitful Apostolate among the Dalits. He was beatified on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2006. Another prominent, erudite and holy priest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Rev. Dr. Placid J. Podipara CMI (1899-1985). It was he who wrote profusely about the St. Thomas Nazrani Church to bring its traditions, worth and heritage to the lime-light. His writings in between 1930 and 1954 were mainly aimed at the re-union of the separated brethren of the Nazrani Community. He was an extra-ordinary boost to Archbishop Mar Ivanios, the champion of the re-union movement and another luminary in the Nazrani Community. Fr. Placid was called to Rome to be an Adviser to the Holy See regarding Oriental matters, especially regarding the St. Thomas Nazranis. He stayed in Rome for 26 years which was the period of the steady growth of the Catholic Nazrani Church and it was master-minded by him. The restoration of the text of the Holy Mass, the extension of the territory of jurisdiction of the Syro-Malabar hierarchy etc. happened only because of the untiring labours and fervent requests of Fr. Placid. During his funeral oration, Mar Joseph Powathil, the then Bishop of Kanjirappally, stated that Fr. Placid was worthy to be called the Father of the Syro-Malabar Church.<sup>12</sup>

### **7. The Worth of the Nazrani Priests**

The hallmark of the Nazrani priests is their dedicated hard work. The parishes and different institutions in Kerala, and the enormous growth in some North Indian Missions are the living monuments of the untiring works of the Nazrani Priests. In the pastoral field their ingenuity and zeal are remarkable. The profound Christian life of the Nazrani families is the background of the success story of the Nazrani priests. Evening prayer is compulsory in every Nazrani family. Their Pastors know them and encourage them. What will be the future of the Nazrani community is a matter of concern because of the scandals, secular and anti-clerical ideas propagated by printed and visual media! In addition to these, the families are becoming smaller with one child or two at the most. A heavenly intervention only will solve these problems which are prone to eclipse Christianity as a whole.

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<sup>12</sup> Xavier Koodapuzha, 557-558.