

MONASTICISM AND CHURCH RENEWAL

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1. Introduction

The ecclesial dimension of monasticism has always remained very lively in the Eastern Churches and true monasticism was considered as the ideal of Christian life. It had its origin and early development in the East. It emerged, grew and developed in the Christian centres of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Persia and Asia Minor. Egypt was called the cradle of Christian monasticism.¹ Celibacy was considered the source of Eastern as well as Western monasticism.² The Eastern Churches point out celibacy as the central virtue of monastic life.³ Western Monasticism is the later flowering of its Eastern counterpart. Now it continues to be a rich and unique heritage of the Universal Church. Different religious orders in the Church are expressions of the ecclesial life based on the Gospel.⁴

In the Christian tradition, monasticism began as a counter-cultural movement against worldliness. St. Paul challenges, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern

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¹George Thomas Kallunkal, "Paurastya Sanyasam," in *Paurastya Daivasastra Darsanangal*, ed., Joseph Kallarangatt, Kottayam: OIRSI, 1997, 1076.

²Jean Gribomont, "Monasticism and Asceticism," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed., Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff and Jean Leclercq, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988, 90; Kuriakose Eliah, *Kizhakkinte Sakshyam*, Kottayam: Denha Services, 1990, 23.

³Varghese Pathikulangara, *Jeevitha Spandanangal*, Kottayam: Denha Services, 2009, 64.

⁴Kuriakose Eliah, *Kizhakkinte Sakshyam*, 23.

what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:1-2). Although it is a call to all Christians, the monastic communities seem to have taken it seriously.⁵ Thus Monastic movement began with the individuals and groups who decided to follow Jesus in a radical way.

Life of total renunciation is not just special to Christianity alone but it is seen in almost all established religions and cultures. This is an expression of the unquenchable thirst for God.⁶ In the Indian tradition, monasticism (*Ashram* Life) has a long history and a *sannyasi* is considered a holy man. Monasticism was advocated in the Indian Church not only to fight the consumerist tendencies in India, but also to provide the monks suitable ambience to spread the Christian message. Exploring the role of Eastern Monasticism in the renewal of the Church, this article invites the entire Church, especially the Indian Church, for a ‘change of heart’ to make herself credible and effective in the present context.

2. The Church: Its Pristine Beauty

The first seven Chapters of the Acts of the Apostles draw the picture of the first Christian community which was under the leadership of the apostles. The Apostles were the eye-witnesses to the death and resurrection of the Lord and hence their authority was unquestionable. Acts of the Apostles presents the original vision of the Church, “the Apostolic life” which was considered the model of Christian way of life.⁷ “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The life of the early Church consisted in witnessing the Gospel message. Their life was centred on prayer and breaking of the bread and it was a life of communion, each one having importance. It was a community of fraternal love, responsibility and fellowship. “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (Acts 4:32). They were aware of their call and mission. Thus the first Christians filled with the Holy Spirit sought to live in holiness. It was the resurrection of the Lord that united and strengthened the community.

The leadership in the first Christian community was primarily a leadership in bearing witness to what Jesus had said and done; for

⁵Varghese Pathikulangara, “Monasticism,” Editorial, *Christian Orient* 3, 3 (1982), 101.

⁶George Thomas Kallunkal, “Paurastya Sanyasam,” 1076-1078.

⁷Abraham Mattam, “Contribution of the East in the Development of Monasticism and Christian Spirituality,” *Ephrem’s Theological Journal* 4, 2 (2002), 99.

the leadership envisaged by Jesus was through life example (Mt 20:20-28, Mk 10:35-45, Lk 22:24-27, Jn 13:12-17). The Acts of the Apostles portrays Peter as both leader and spokesperson (Acts 1:15, 7:59-60, 9:1, 3:14, 5:31) but Peter was not above the community. It was the twelve as a group that decided to appoint deacons with the approval of the community (Acts 6:1-7).

The apostles, elders and overseers appointed to their ministry were stewards of the mysteries of Christ. They were interested only in establishing the Lordship of Christ and not in any power or authority. Stewards are not masters. The self-effacing image of Jesus is the model he prescribed for his followers. The authority given by Jesus is for the service of the people of God. The authority was in proportion to the authenticity of one's inner experience of Christ. This was true with regard to the leaders of the early Church.

3. Monasticism: Context of Emergence

The Christian monasticism emerged from the spirituality of the first Christian community. Hence the first Christian community is called the forerunner of Christian monasticism.⁸ The lives of the apostles and their communities were based on the Gospel. In the early Church, martyrdom was considered as the perfect way of imitating Christ; for the martyrs participated in the life, passion and death of Christ. But when the period of persecution was over, the zeal and fervour of the spiritual life was also weakened. But there was a growing respect towards the martyrdom without blood.⁹ The monk was considered as a martyr because his or her life was seen as an ongoing martyrdom.¹⁰ Hence many ascetics withdrew to the forests and deserts to imitate Christ in an intense manner.

The original vision and life style of the Church as seen in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-46, 4:32-36) were changed into an organizational set up during the Middle Ages. "The persecuted Church had become the official religion of the Roman Empire from the time of the Emperor Constantine. Consequently it borrowed a corresponding juridical set up of privileges, power, titles and above all an administrative system, all after the imperial pattern."¹¹ The Church assumed the categories of a state-religion after the persecution and

⁸George Thomas Kallunkal, "Paurastya Sanyasam," 1079.

⁹George Thomas Kallunkal, "Paurastya Sanyasam," 1080.

¹⁰Sebastian Brock, "Prachina Syrian Sanyasam," trans., K. P. Joseph, in *Paurastya Daivasastra Darsanangal*, ed., Joseph Kallarangatt, Kottayam: OIRSI, 1997, 1049.

¹¹Xavier Koodapuzha, "The Impact of the Vatican Council II on the Syro-Malabar Church and the Present Challenges in Implementing the Councilor Teaching," in *Syro-Malabar Church: Forty Years After the Vatican Council II*, ed., Pauly Kanoorkadan, Kakkadan: LRC, 2007, 43.

Christianity became a status symbol and author of culture. Christians dominated in the cities and people of other faith and religions were considered to be the unenlightened ones, the "pagans"¹² or "heathen".¹³ Church became a political reality. By the "Gregorian Reform"¹⁴ the Church became a Papal Monarchy. The climax of Papal power is seen with Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) and Boniface VIII (1294-1303).¹⁵ The stewards who were to be faithful to the Lord (I Cor 4:1f) became unfaithful and acted as the masters forgetting what the Lord had instructed, "It shall not be so among you" (Mt 20:26). Authority protected the authority. The Church became an institution with its hierarchical structure.

At the later part of the 3rd century, monasticism emerged as a protest against the Church which had become too worldly, rich and powerful.¹⁶ "As Christianity spread, and the Church became more secularized, this realization of the costliness of grace gradually faded... Monasticism became a living protest against the secularization of Christianity and the cheapening of grace..."¹⁷ Kavunkal comments, "When Christianity became the state religion the life of the Christian began to conform more and more to the norms of Society than to the Christian ideal. As a reaction to the growing this-worldliness of the Church there arose the monastic movement."¹⁸ When the Church was losing its spirituality and was involved in the world, the ascetics retired to the lonely places away from the hustle and bustle of city life. It was to reform the Church and lead it to the original life based on the Gospel values. When the Christians followed the way of the world, the ascetics tried to preserve and live the Christian values. Thus the root of Christian monasticism is in the efforts of the ordinary Christians who tried to imitate Christ and follow the Gospel values.¹⁹

The Monastic life which started through the Christian ascetics during the later part of the 3rd century spread in the important Christian

¹²Pagani were those who lived in rural areas.

¹³Heathens were those whose homes were on the heath, barren open country. Cfr. Jacob Kavunkal, "Evolution of the Understanding of Christian Identity in the Course of the Centuries," in *The Church in India in Search of A New Identity*, ed., Kurien Kunnumpuram, Errol D'Lima and Jacob Parappally, Bangalore: N.B.C.L.C., 1997, 91.

¹⁴Kuncheria Pathil, *Theology of the Church: New Horizons*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2006, 26.

¹⁵Kuncheria Pathil, *Theology of the Church: New Horizons*, 27.

¹⁶Jean Gribomont, "Monasticism and Asceticism," 90.

¹⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1963, 49.

¹⁸Jacob Kavunkal, "Evolution of the Understanding of Christian...", 94.

¹⁹George Thomas Kallunkal, "Paurastya Sanyasam," 1082-1083.

centres, especially Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Persia and Asia Minor. Slowly community life (cenobitical life) emerged from the single solitary life (anchorites).²⁰ St. Pachomius is considered the founder of the cenobitical life.²¹ St. Basil is known as the legislator of Eastern Monasticism.²² He organized the monastic life and made it intelligible to the people and places in Asia Minor.

4. Eastern Monasticism: Theological Foundation

The Eastern world has never been alien to monastic values. The great saints and sages of Asia opened their spiritual treasures through prayer, contemplation, ascetic way of lives, etc. The Second Vatican Council, which was convened for the renewal and reconciliation of the Churches, has taken note of this reality and reminds the whole Christian world of the unique importance of the monastic heritage of the Christian East:

Moreover in the East are to be found the riches of those spiritual traditions to which monasticism gives special expression. From the glorious days of the Holy Fathers, there flourished in the East that monastic spirituality which later flowed over into the Western world, and there provided a source from which the Latin monastic life took its rise and has drawn fresh vigour ever since. Therefore Catholics are strongly urged to avail themselves more often of these spiritual riches of the Eastern Fathers, riches which lift up the whole man to the contemplation of the divine mysteries.²³

The invitation of the Second Vatican Council is indeed a clear message to the whole Church, especially to the Eastern Christianity in India, to delve deep into the riches of the spiritual traditions of monasticism. Pope John Paul II states in *Oriente Lumen*:

With regard to monasticism, in consideration of its importance in Eastern Christianity, we would like it to flourish once more in the Eastern Catholic Churches, and that support be given to all those who feel called to work for its revitalization. In fact, in the East an intrinsic link exists between liturgical prayer, spiritual tradition and monastic life. For this reason precisely, a well trained and motivated renewal of monastic life could mean true ecclesial fruitfulness for them as well.²⁴

Pope John Paul II has clearly expressed in his apostolic letter *Oriente Lumen* that "Monasticism has always been the very soul of the Eastern Churches."²⁵ The first Christian monks were born in the East

²⁰George Thomas Kallunkal, "Paurastya Sanyasam" 1084.

²¹George Thomas Kallunkal, "Paurastya Sanyasam" 1093.

²²George Thomas Kallunkal, "Paurastya Sanyasam" 1111.

²³Vatican Council II, *Ecumenism*, 15.

²⁴John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Oriente Lumen*, 27.

²⁵*Oriente Lumen*, 9.

and the monastic life was an integral part of the East. It was passed on to the West by the great Fathers of the undivided Church. The Eastern Churches have to preserve and foster their venerable heritage whole and entire of which monasticism forms a vital part.²⁶

Monasticism is not an "establishment." It is to be understood as a living movement in the Church. But it is not as the Western concept of "religious Orders." "Monasticism is essentially a movement, away from lasting engagement in this world, toward the Lord's return. Therefore monasticism, since its very beginning has always been an anti-establishment medicine preventing her from getting too entangled in worldly things, enabling her to stay free for 'the things of the Father.'"²⁷ The worldly values like power, positions, possessions and prestige are not monastic or evangelical values. The power of monasticism lies in the Gospel and the living Holy tradition that are beyond the material values.²⁸

Monasticism stands in the heart of the Mystery of the Church. "Monasticism itself is first of all a Mystery i.e., 'a divine reality of salvation expressed in human forms,' in both its incarnational and eschatological dimensions."²⁹ Easterners understood it as the best way to express the fidelity to Christ.³⁰ "Monasticism was essentially, and still is, a covenant with Christ. The monks were, therefore, called *bnay qyama*, the sons of the covenant, and virgins *bnath qyama*, the daughters of the covenant."³¹ Syriac Orient is the cradle of 'Syriac Proto-Monasticism' which is expressed in the life of *bnay qyama*, sons of covenant. Their focus was on radical following of Christ. Such a life existed in Syria and Mesopotamia prior to the emergence of the classical monastic life in Egypt. Therefore it is called 'Proto-Monasticism.'³² Aphrahat (+345), the Persian sage explains about the ascetical life pattern of the sons of the covenant in the sixth demonstration³³ which is considered the earliest

²⁶Xavier Koodapuzha, "The Impact of the Vatican Council II...", 76.

²⁷Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 1993, 56.

²⁸Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 59.

²⁹Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 61.

³⁰Kuriakose Elisha, *Kizhakkinte Sakshyam*, 22.

³¹Patros Yousif, "An Introduction to the East Syrian Spirituality: Liturgical, Ecclesiological and Theological Dimensions," in *East Syrian Spirituality*, ed. Augustine Thottakara, Rome: CIIS and Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1990, 52; *Bnay/Bnat qyama* (Sons/Daughters of the Covenant) made a covenant with Christ to remain celibate for life to love him and serve him wholeheartedly. Cfr. Abraham Mattam, "Contribution of the East in the Development of Monasticism and Christian Spirituality," 106.

³²Thomas Kollamparambil, "Syriac Spiritual, Ascetical and Mystical Legacy," *Journal of Dharma* 36, 1 (January-March 2011) 42-43.

³³Demonstrations of Aphrahat, *Patrologia Syriaca*, vol. 1, Paris: Brepols, 1894; Kuriakose Valavanolickal, *Aphrahat Demonstrations*, vol. 1, Changanassery: HIRS Publications, 1999; *Aphrahat: Demonstrations I*, Kottayam: SEERI, 2005.

and most reliable exposition. They vowed to dedicate themselves to lead a life without marriage in the model of Christ for imitating him very effectively.³⁴ From the very inception of the Eastern Monasticism, the two important characteristics are its close relation to the Gospels and its ecclesial nature.

4.1. Faithfulness to the Gospel

Monasticism wants the return to the evangelical simplicity of life totally geared towards the essentials of the Gospel. Patros Yousif calls monasticism as an expression of the evangelical life of the Church.³⁵ Monks take the Gospel seriously as the paramount vision of their lives and live this out in daily practice and observances.³⁶ "A monk, in fact, is a man of the Gospel, a man who thirsts after salvation in the risen Lord."³⁷ The monastic theology, spirituality and charism flow straight from the Gospel, the core of all Christian life. Taken seriously in its full and life giving power, the Gospels are being kept alive by unwavering faithfulness. By living the Gospel values to the fullest monks prove that it can be lived and that the Gospel is worth living and even dying for.³⁸ The '*Book of Steps*' (*Book of Grades*)³⁹ which had greatly influenced the Eastern monasticism also advocates Gospel values for Christian perfection, for the author (unknown) was intimately related to monasticism. In short, monks displayed a constructive enthusiasm for the Gospel teachings and an orthodox lay person attached great importance to this model of obedience to the Gospel teachings, an icon of love for God and one's neighbour.⁴⁰

4.2. Ecclesial Nature

Monasticism is for the growth and good of the Church. Therefore, the monks and monasteries are to stand for the cause and growth of the Church remaining ever faithful to the basic spirit of the Church. The monks proclaim the faith of the Church and express that faith through the liturgy, for the fidelity to the faith of the Church means fidelity to the liturgy and liturgical spirituality of the Church.⁴¹ Hence

³⁴Thomas Kollamparambil, "Syriac Spiritual...", 43.

³⁵Patros Yousif, "An Introduction to the East Syrian Spirituality...", 51.

³⁶Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 81.

³⁷Varghese Pathikulangara, "Monasticism," 101.

³⁸Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 88; Jean Gribomont, "Monasticism and Asceticism," 108.

³⁹The '*Book of Steps*' was originally written in Syriac with the title *Ktawa d-msqatha* either at the end of the 4th C or at the beginning of the 5th C. It deals with spirituality and asceticism. Cfr. Kuriakose Elia Vadakketh, ed., *Adhytmika Sopanangal*, Kottayam: Denha Services, 1987.

⁴⁰Jean Gribomont, "Monasticism and Asceticism," 107.

⁴¹Kuriakose Elisha, *Kizhakkinte Sakshyam*, 58.

the Monastic spirituality is very much ecclesial and liturgical in nature.⁴² The most important contribution of the monks is liturgical, for they enriched the liturgy of the Church singing the Psalms and celebrating the Divine Praises.⁴³

5. Eastern Monasticism: Riches and Relevance

Eastern Monasticism is the cradle of all consecrated life in the East and West.⁴⁴ Boniface expresses the true value and relevance of monasticism:

Eastern Monasticism has survived victoriously the heaviest attacks and crises of all kinds: the choking oppression by Islam, the brutal exterminations by communism, the allurements of bourgeois secularism, as well as the challenges of changing cultural contexts, and more, without ever losing its soul (i.e., its living continuity with the Gospel), leading every inculturation and surviving every crisis by faithfully giving its priority to the 'one thing necessary'.⁴⁵

Monastic community embodies the values of the Kingdom of God (*Basileic Community*). Kingdom of God⁴⁶ is a call to be in relationship of authentic love with God and fellow humans.⁴⁷ According to St. Paul it is a state of life identified with righteousness, peace and joy (Rom 14:17). Monastic community is an effective witness of the 'Church as a sign of the Kingdom of God.'⁴⁸ "Monasticism represents the fullness of the Church, anticipating the Kingdom of God."⁴⁹ Monasticism is, in fact, a "sign", a "paradigm", an anticipation and foretaste of the Kingdom of God; a "transfiguration."⁵⁰ Being tempted to conform themselves to the standards of this world, different individual Churches, both in the East and in the West, tried to shut their eyes against the necessary tension between "already and not yet." During such crises the monastic communities came forward as a "sign" proclaiming the kingdom of God – as a paradigm of the *Parousia*.⁵¹ Monasticism as a counter culture⁵² disseminates the values of the Gospel. A monk is a "symbol of salvation" in this world.⁵³ Hence monasticism is to be protected and promoted in the Church.

⁴²Kuriakose Elisha, *Kizhakkinte Sakshyam*, 71.

⁴³Kuriakose Elisha, *Kizhakkinte Sakshyam*, 41-42.

⁴⁴Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 15.

⁴⁵Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 15.

⁴⁶Cfr. Davis Varayilan, *Spirit and the Pilgrim Church: A Study of Yves Congar and the FABC Documents*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2008, 169-171.

⁴⁷Shaji George Kochuthara, "Fundamentalism: The Only Way to Redeem Religious Ethics?" *Journal of Dharma* 35, 4 (October-December 2010) 343-349.

⁴⁸Davis Varayilan, *Spirit and the Pilgrim Church*, 171-172.

⁴⁹Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 80.

⁵⁰Varghese Pathikulangara, "Monasticism," 101.

⁵¹Varghese Pathikulangara, "Monasticism," 101.

⁵²Edward G. Farrugia, *Tradition in Transition: The Vitality of the Christian East*, ed., Prasanna Vazheparampil and James Palackal, Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1996, 109.

⁵³Varghese Pathikulangara, "Monasticism," 102.

6. Monasticism: Recovery and Renewal of the Church

The paradigm function of monasticism is meant originally for the whole Church at large, for it is the expression and guarantor of her primary contemplative character. Monasticism by its very existence in the Church reminds her of the original beauty and call for the most effective form of life-witness. Boniface speaks about the importance of monasticism in the renewal of the Church:

The uninterrupted flow of life-giving holy wisdom, issuing from the Gospel through the Apostolic Community and irrigating the whole of Holy Tradition until now forms the mainstay and constant reference for healthy monasticism and for its recovery after crises, so that it can be used by the Holy Spirit for the constant strength and orthodoxy of the Church at large. Therefore, monasticism should be fostered perhaps more than other institutions in the Church, because it is not peripheral or ephemeral but stands right at the heart of the Church and her constant need of revival.⁵⁴

Being the carrier and guarantor of the living heritage of true Christian life, throughout all the ages, especially in the Eastern Churches, monasticism is an important contribution to the Church. For this reason, the Eastern Churches have often been called “Monastic Churches,” deeply nourished, and supported by it.

7. Eastern and Western Religious Life: Differences

In the Eastern Church, there are no “different kinds” of religious life. They have only monastic state but in the West it is divided into Orders, Congregations and Secular Institutes.⁵⁵ Monastery is the home of one or many monks and it had its own autonomy (*Monasterium Sui Juris*).⁵⁶

In the West, the Abbot is the result of the consensus of a number of monks who already exist, so that the monks “make” the Abbot. But in the East, the Abbot with his charismatic grace gather candidates around him and makes the monks by sharing with them his own fertile fatherhood that comes from his model, Christ, so that the group grows both in holiness and numbers as a true “family of Jesus.”⁵⁷

In the West the “orders” were found to attend to horizontal needs so that Western orders stick to the “charism of their founders.” In the East they are just “monks” whose identity and status flow from their faithfulness to the core of Christianity in the Bible and Tradition.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 80.

⁵⁵Kuriakose Elisha, *Kizhakkinte Sakshyam*, 60.

⁵⁶Kuriakose Elisha, *Kizhakkinte Sakshyam*, 62.

⁵⁷Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 62.

⁵⁸Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 63.

All consecrated life in the East and West stem from the urge for evangelical perfection. The Western institutes are rightly urged to return to the "charism of the founder," but in the Eastern monasticism it has always been understood that the "Founder" and immediate inspiration is Christ Himself.⁵⁹

8. Monasticism and Ecclesial Renewal

The history of the Church both in the East and the West sheds light on the important role of monasticism in the building up and renewal of an individual Church.⁶⁰ The monastic life has a crucial role in the growth of the Church. In all the ancient monasteries, liturgy had the prime importance. The monks supported the Church through the singing of the Psalms and celebrating the Divine Praises.⁶¹ One of the main contributions of early monasticism to the Churches was their eagerness to worship; monks were the main authors of Christian prayer and worship, which became the official prayer of the Church, the Liturgy of the Hours.⁶²

For the monks, worship was not only the re-enactment of the Mysteries in the Eucharist, Sacraments, Divine Praises, and Liturgical Year, but was equally the expression and food of their personal prayer lives. Their prayerfulness pervaded liturgical prayer, to the great benefit of clergy and faithful alike. The early monks put the best of their spirituality into their worship, especially into the Divine Praises. It should be the main source of spirituality and true monastic formation of the modern monks and religious.⁶³

Liturgy expresses the identity of the Church. There is a deep rooted relation between liturgy and Church.⁶⁴ One is not without the other. Liturgical renewal can be done only in the context of the proper liturgical traditions of the Church. Since the nature of liturgy radically affects the nature of the Church, liturgical renewal will have a direct impact on the nature of the Church. That means liturgical renewal is not a simple renewal of a text but the renewal of the Church. The Church knows herself and forms herself in the liturgy. Liturgy is the brain and chunk of the *ecclesia*. Therefore, what is to be done in the liturgical renewal is the restoration and renewal of the

⁵⁹Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 91.

⁶⁰Varghese Pathikulangara, *Qyamta w-hayye w-hudata Resurrection Life and Renewal: A Theological Study of the Liturgical Celebration of the Great Saturday and the Sunday of Resurrection in the Chaldeo-Indian Church*, Bangalore - Kottayam: Dharmaram Publications and OIRSI, 1982, 293.

⁶¹Kuriakose Elisha, *Kizhakkinte Sakshyam*, 42.

⁶²Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 129.

⁶³Archimandrite Boniface, *Eastern Monasticism...*, 131.

⁶⁴Joseph Kallarangatt, "Church as the Meeting Place of Liturgy and Theology," *Christian Orient* 15, 1 (March 1994) 41.

proper traditions of the Church. The venerable patrimonies of the Church should be cherished and fostered.⁶⁵

The monastery is a living icon of the Church. The Eastern monasticism has helped to preserve and promote the heritages of the Church by living the Gospel values to its fullness and by being faithful to the Church. Since reading and reflection of the Word of God are very essential to knowing God, the scriptural readings are given due importance in the Eastern liturgy.⁶⁶ When the monks lead a life based on the Gospels they strengthen the ecclesial and liturgical life of the Church itself. Thus Eastern monasticism is marked by an intense life of liturgical spirituality.

The monastic communities were attentive to relish and present the unfathomable riches of the heritage received from the traditions of their respective Churches. "In fact, in the East an intrinsic link exists between liturgical prayer, spiritual tradition and monastic life. For this reason precisely, a well trained and motivated renewal of monastic life could mean true ecclesial fruitfulness for them as well."⁶⁷ This is the charism of the monastic life.

The monastic communities recognize the identity of the individual Church to which they belong, in her liturgy, theology, spirituality and discipline and live and bear witness to it in all possible ways. Moreover, they have to help their mother Church to rediscover her identity and build upon it with creative intuition. Hence, they lead an authentic liturgical life according to the genius of their individual Church. Monasteries being the common property of the Church,⁶⁸ the monks take measures to provide ample facilities for the people to experience the monastic life and engage in serious research of the sources and bring them to the reach of the ordinary faithful in the Church.

Monastic communities are neither a threat nor a challenge to other religious congregations or orders, rather, they give strength and support to them. The *ashrams* exist to deepen the faith of the people including the religious. Hence, the faithful are encouraged to participate in the liturgical celebrations in the monasteries and experience the faith-life.⁶⁹

9. Monasticism in Syro-Malabar Church in India

"As the legitimate heirs of an apostolic tradition, the Syro-Malabar Church which is as old as Christianity itself, has got a unique role to

⁶⁵Joseph Kallarangatt, "Church as the Meeting Place...", 43.

⁶⁶Kuriakose Elia, *Vyakthisaphalyam*, Kottayam: Denha Services, 1984, 39.

⁶⁷*Oriente Lumen* 27.

⁶⁸Varghese Pathikulangara, *Jeevitha Spandanangal*, 15.

⁶⁹Varghese Pathikulangara, *Jeevitha Spandanangal*, 15-16.

play in the Universal Church and the world at large. An adequate awareness and appreciation of our identity and prospective unique role are essential for enabling ourselves to face challenges and fulfilling our mission meaningfully."⁷⁰ The attempts to start monasteries are signs of positive development in evangelization and renewal in the Church. The Syro-Malabar Church has taken modest attempts in establishing monasteries. The *Bet-Toma* at Palamattom in the archdiocese of Changanasery, Kerala in India and the Mar Thoma Sliha Monastery at Nallathanny in the eparchy of Kanjirapally, Kerala in India are pioneering attempts to begin monastic life in the present day Syro-Malabar Church. It does not mean that monasticism is quite new to the Syro-Malabar Church. Though the details are not available, there existed Christian monasticism in this Church centred around Angamaly, Mylakkombu and Edappally before the sixteenth century.⁷¹ The desire for radical life and the influence of Persian monks might have paved the way for monastic life in the Pre-Diamper period.⁷²

The fidelity to the *ecclesia* centred life is the characteristic of these movements. They take the interests of the Church to the heart. Once Prof. Xavier Koodapuzha, the architect and founding superior of the Mar Thoma Sliha Monastery, Nallathanny described the life style of the monastery as follows: "The charism of the Church is the charism of the monastery." At the heart of the monastic discipline are the sanctification of time and the renewal by unceasing prayer. With the elements of simplicity and renunciation, these monasteries are effective pointers of a counter-culture in the midst of today's consumerist culture.

9.1. A Brief History of the First Monastic Community

Having explored the intimate relation between Church and Liturgy and realizing the role of a monastic community in the ecclesial renewal, Pathikulangara proposed such a community in the Syro-Malabar Church for the renewal, growth and experiential celebration of its liturgy and to rediscover and preserve the identity of this apostolic Church.⁷³ He also presented the idea in 1982 through an editorial on "Monasticism" in *Christian Orient*, a journal of Eastern Churches for creative theological thinking.⁷⁴

⁷⁰Xavier Koodapuzha, "The Impact of the Vatican Council II...", 77.

⁷¹Varghese Pathikulangara, *Jeevitha Spandanangal*, 14.

⁷²Liturgical Research Centre of the Syro-Malabar Church, "Life and Nature of the Church of St. Thomas Christians in the Pre-Diamper Period," *Journal of St. Thomas Christians* 11, 1 (June 2000) 101.

⁷³It was one of the concluding proposals of his doctoral dissertaion. Cfr. Varghese Pathikulangara, *Resurrection Life and Renewal*, 293.

⁷⁴Varghese Pathikulangara, "Monasticism," 101-103.

Having contemplated for several years on the need for a monastic movement in the Syro-Malabar Church, Mar Joseph Powathil, then eparchial Bishop of Kanjirapally, Fr. Xavier Koodapuzha, Professor at Paurastya Vidyapitham, Kottayam, Fr. Quriaqos Elijah Vadaketh CMI, member of the CMI novitiate house at Kapadu and Fr. Varghese Pathikulangara CMI, Professor at Dharmaram College, Bangalore, discussed the feasibility of such a spiritual movement in 1983 and decided to commit themselves to make it a reality. On April 28-30, 1985, they met at Nallathanny near Murinjapuzha in the eparchy of Kanjirappally in Kerala and prayerfully deliberated and decided to start two autonomous monastic communities of the one Family, *Mar Toma Sangham*; one for men, and the other for women. They decided to start the community for the women at Nallathanny and Mar Joseph Powathil, eparchial Bishop of Kanjirapally gave the ecclesial sanction. The first community consisted of five candidates. Later, they moved to the MOC Campus at Manganam, Kottayam as Mar Joseph Powathil was transferred to Changanasery as the Metropolitan Archbishop. On July 3, 1989, this community was erected as a pious union with the name "Sisters of Saint Thomas" (SST) by His Grace Mar Joseph Powathil. On December 18, 1989, the community moved to its own house *Bet-Toma* in the MOC campus, Kottayam. The first *ashram* of this community was established at Palamattom, in the territory of Assumption Parish of Kurumpanadom belonging to the Metropolitan Eparchy of Changanassery and was blessed by His Grace Pedro Lopez Quintana, the Apostolic Nuncio, on 11 February 2005.

9.2. Life-Style of the First Monastic Community

'Sisters of Saint Thomas' (SST) is a community based on the values of 'Costly Discipleship'⁷⁵ which was the monastic style in the early Syriac Churches. It is a community dedicated to the study, celebration and proclamation of the original apostolic and ecclesial life of the Syro-Malabar Church, a community which considers the *Mar Toma Margam* (Way of Thomas)⁷⁶ as its rule of life. They try to understand the Syro-Malabar liturgical and ecclesial spirituality and live it wholeheartedly. They spend sufficient time to meditate on the biblical, liturgical, patristic and ecclesial sources to assimilate and translate them into daily life. They also make serious search into these sources and display them before the members of the Church for their consideration, using all possible means of communication.

⁷⁵*Lumen Gentium*, 44.

⁷⁶The individuality of this Church as expressed in its autonomy, East Syriac Liturgy and the Christianized Hindu customs were the *Mar Toma Margam* (Way of Thomas) for the Thomas Christians. The 'Way of Thomas' was the sum total of their Christian heritage and ancient traditions.

The Holy *Qurbana* being a comprehensive celebration of the salvific action accomplished by Lord Jesus, they celebrate it as solemnly as possible and try to experience it in their life. The Divine Praises or Liturgy of the Hours being an extension of the Holy *Qurbana* to the various hours of the day,⁷⁷ they gather seven times⁷⁸ a day to praise the Lord in tune with the biblical tradition⁷⁹ and the liturgical genius of the Syro-Malabar Church.

Conclusion

The quintessence of monastic life is the paradigm of the perfect Church community seen in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 2 and 4. In the East, monasticism was not conceived as a separate condition meant for a particular group of people but was an ecclesial expression of all the baptized. Monasticism was a spontaneous expression of the Church. For the Syriac Churches it was a way of life.⁸⁰ Monasticism played a significant role in formulating and sustaining the unique liturgy, spirituality and tradition of the Church. The principle of returning to the Gospel was the inspiration and model of action of the monastic movement. Thus monasticism kept alive the awareness of the Gospel by taking it seriously, by living it entirely and by celebrating it joyfully in a life style totally permeated by love for God and for neighbour. This contains the inexhaustible spiritual wealth and lasting actuality of monasticism. In the Indian context marked by economic poverty, corruption, oppression, exploitation and terrorism, the Church has to re-live its pristine beauty, remaining ever faithful to the Word. Monasticism is one of the ways to re-live it and make the Church credible and her ministry laudable to address herself to the pressing problems that India faces today.

⁷⁷Varghese Pathikulangara, *Divine Praises and Liturgical Year*, Kottayam: Denhas Services, 2000, 13.

⁷⁸The present schedule of Liturgy of the Hours in the *Ashram* is: *Ramsa*, the Evening Liturgy at 6.30 pm, *Lelya*, the Night Liturgy at 9.00 pm, *Qala d-Sahra*, the Vigil Liturgy at 4.15 am, *Sapra*, the Morning Liturgy at 5.45 am, *Quta'a*, the Third Hour Liturgy at 9.00 am, *Endana*, the Noon Liturgy at 12.00 noon and the Ninth Hour Liturgy at 3.00 pm.

⁷⁹Varghese Pathikulangara, *Divine Praises and Liturgical Year*, 17-19; Naiju Jose Kalambukattu, "Liturgy of the Hours: A Response to the Spiritual Ideal of Ceaseless Prayer" in *The Way of Life*, ed., Paulachan Kochappilly, Geo Pallikkunnel and Joseph Kureethara, Kottayam: Denha Services, 2011, 196-197.

⁸⁰Joseph Kallarangatt, "Orientale Lumen: An Evaluation from the Syriac Perspective," *Christian Orient* 16, 1 (December 1995) 176.