

The Saint Thomas Christians and Their Catholic Communion in the Pre-Diamper Period

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1. Introduction

The Syro-Malabar Church in India is as old as Christianity itself. It had its origin from the evangelizing ministry of St. Thomas, the Apostle of India.¹ The St. Thomas Christians (Syro-Malabar Church) of the Pre-Diamper period remain as a perfect model of inculturation and communion in the multi-religious context of Asia in general and India in particular. Multi-cultural and ecclesial context of India is also taken into account. Remaining in full Catholic communion and obedience to the Roman Pontiff, they lived also a life of close communion with the other religions and Churches. Placid Podipara qualified this Church as "Indian in Culture, Christian in Religion and Oriental in Worship."

Without being sensitive to the culture and ways of life of the Thomas Christians who lived their Christian faith in tune with Indian spiritual traditions, the Portuguese missionaries imposed the European practices leading to the cultural alienation of these Christians in their

¹ Placid J. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1970, 15; Placid J. Podipara, *Reflections on Liturgy*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 1983, 68; Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 1998, 30-48.

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own land. This article is an attempt to trace the relations of the Church of St. Thomas Christians with Rome in the Pre-Diamper Period and present it as a model of Catholic communion and Christian witnessing in the Asian context; for this Church was accused of its attachment to the Nestorianism until sixteenth century by the Portuguese missionaries and claimed that they brought her under the subjection of Papacy by the Synod of Diamper in 1599. It is not easy to make a complete history of the St. Thomas Christians in the Pre-Diamper Period, because their ancient documents were destroyed by fire at the Synod of Diamper.

The St. Thomas Christians had strong relation with the Seleucian Church. The relation of Syro-Malabar Church with Seleucia was for practical purposes.² So even if Seleucia did not have Catholic communion that never affected Malabar. The Seleucian Church never denied the Roman Primacy, but always acknowledged it.

2. The Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon

The Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon³ takes its name from the twin cities of Seleucia and Ctesiphon situated on either side of the river Tigris. The Seleucians generally believe that the Apostle Thomas sent Mar Addai and Mar Mari to Edessa and Mar Addai's disciple Mar Mari founded the Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. There is also another belief that the Bishops who were among the Christian captives preached faith in Seleucia.⁴

² Placid J. Podipara, "The Syrian Church of Malabar: Its Catholic Communion," in *Collected Works of Rev. Dr. Placid J. Podipara CMI*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas Kalayil, Mannanam: Sanjos Publications, 2007, 14; Antony Kalliath, "Indian Ecclesial Experience and Christian Mission: A Pilgrimage Ecclesiology in Formation" in *Blossoms from the East: Contribution of the Indian Church to World Mission*, ed. Joseph Mattam and Krickwin C. Marak, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 1999, 133; Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress of the Syro-Malabar Hierarchy*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 1980, 16-19.

³ This Church was and is known by many other names as the Church of the East due to the use of East Syriac language in their liturgy, the Babylonian Church as it was in the old Babylonian Empire, the Assyrian Church as it was the ancient Assyrian Empire, the Persian Church as it was the chief Christian Church in the Persian Empire and the Nestorian Church as they accepted Nestorius as the Doctor of the Church. The other names are Diphysite Church as it upheld the diphysite (double *Onome*) Christology, and the Church of the East, a name most dear to the members of the Chaldean Church. Cf. Geevarghese Chediath, "A Historico-Ecclesiological Development of the Chaldean Church," *Jeevadhara* 10 (1980) 269-270; Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 36; Placid J. Podipara, "Mariology of the Church of the East," *Christian Orient* 2 (1981)165.

⁴ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Faith and Communion of the Indian Church of the Saint Thomas Christians*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 1982, 37.

Seleucian Church considered itself independent of the Metropolitan of Edessa and the Patriarch of Antioch. In 399, when Mar Isaac became the Bishop of Seleucia, different Churches in the Persian Empire were not under a single authority. In the Seleucian Synod in 410, there was an attempt to bring all of them under the Seleucian Bishop.⁵ Chediath states:

By the 4th century the Bishops of Seleucia became prominent and demanded a sort of supremacy over the other bishops in Persia. Papa bar Aggai (+341) reorganized the Persian Church and considered himself head of the Persians; it was opposed by the bishops of Fars and elsewhere. Papa was deposed, but he came to power with the help of the "Western Fathers", namely the Patriarch of Antioch and bishop of Edessa. In a Synod in 410 under Isaac, in Seleucia, the Persian bishops accepted the leadership of the Seleucian bishops and in 424 under Dadisho in Markabta the Persian Church was declared autocephalous.⁶

This should be seen as the thirst for the freedom of a local Church. There was a general tendency all over the East for every Church to be autocephalous.⁷

Political hostility between Persia and Byzantium was a major reason for the separation. The Sassanid Emperors especially Chosroes I and II persecuted the Chaldean Church. Due to the persecution in Byzantium, the number of the Christians increased in Persia. Thus in the 6th and 7th centuries, various, new communities with their theological vision differed from the Chaldean Church. The result was divisions and groupings among them.⁸ But many historians see this as the beginning of the heresy in the Persian Church. Seleucian Church never considers their autonomy as a heresy.⁹

3. 'Nestorian Heresy'

Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople (428-531) was a monk. Nestorianism has its name from Nestorius. Nestorianism taught that in Christ there were two persons.¹⁰ The Blessed Virgin Mary is the

⁵ Geevarghese Chediath and K. V. Joseph, *Synodicon Orientale: Paurastya Suriani Sabhayude Kanonika Samaharam*, Malayalam Translation of the Canonical Collection of the East Syrian Church, Kottayam: OIRSI, 1996, 9.

⁶ Geevarghese Chediath, "A Historico-Ecclesiological...", 274-275.

⁷ Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 39; Xavier Koodapuzha, *Thirusabhacharitam*, Nallathanni: Mar Thoma Sliha Dayara, 2008, 422.

⁸ Geevarghese Chediath, "A Historico-Ecclesiological...", 274.

⁹ Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 39; Xavier Koodapuzha, *Thirusabhacharitam*, 422.

¹⁰ Bernard Thoma, *Mar Thoma Kristianikal*, Ernakulam: CMI Publications, 1992, 241.

mother only of the man Jesus; there is only a moral union between the two persons in Jesus Christ. Mary, being the mother of the human person cannot really be called mother of God (*Theotokos*). She was mother of Christ (*Christotokos*) i.e. mother of Jesus in whom God dwelt.¹¹

4. Nestorianism of the Seleucian Church

The Seleucians feared that the expression "Mother of God" (*Theotokos*) may refer to the Trinity. So they preferred the expression "Mother of God the Word." They never deny the divine maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is for them truly the Mother of God. It did not mean that the divinity was taken from Blessed Virgin Mary, but the one who was born of her is truly God and man. She is not only Mother of God, but also mother of Jesus the man.¹² From this it is clear that the Seleucians did not accept the 'Nestorian Heresy', which was rejected by the Catholic Church.

5. Seleucian Church and Roman Primacy

Seleucian Church was cut off from Rome geographically, politically, culturally, linguistically, liturgically and canonically. The gradual process of centralization of the Roman Primacy was not felt in this Church which followed its own canon law and organization.¹³ But their belief in the divinely instituted Primacy of St. Peter is clear from all their official books such as the Pontificals, Divine Office, Collections of ecclesiastical laws etc.¹⁴

The East Syriac writers proclaimed the primacy of St. Peter and the ecclesiastical superiority of Rome over all the Churches. According to Podipara, such writings, the Nicaean or the Arabic canons and their commentaries insisted that the Roman Patriarch is the successor of St. Peter and has authority over all other Patriarchs without the exception of their own Patriarch.¹⁵ The so called Nicaean Canons

¹¹ Placid J. Podipara, "The Church of Seleusia and its Catholic Roman Communion," in *Collected Works of Rev. Dr. Placid J. Podipara CMI*, vol. 1, 66; P. T. Geevarghese, "Were the Syrian Christians Nestorians," in *Four Historic Documents*, ed. Kuriakose Corepiscopa Moolayil, Changanacherry: Mor Adai Study Centre, 2002, 115-116.

¹² Geevarghese Chediath, "A Historico-Ecclesiological...", 280.

¹³ Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 46.

¹⁴ Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 47.

¹⁵ Placid J. Podipara, "The Thomas Christians and their Syriac Treasures," in *Collected Works of Rev. Dr. Placid J. Podipara CMI*, vol. 2 and 3, ed. Thomas Kalayil, (Mannanam: Sanjos Publications, 2007) 108.

that deal with Roman Primacy were accepted and favourably commented upon by the Seleucians after they had turned "Nestorian". Patriarch Isoyahb (650-660), Patriarch Timothy I, and Elias Damascenus clearly accepts and mentions the primacy of the Roman Patriarch as he holds the place of Peter. If they had denied the Roman primacy they would not have commented upon them.¹⁶

In ancient days, Churches far away from Rome settled their affairs by themselves. Due to this, the heads of such Churches were considered autonomous by their subordinates. But this autonomy had nothing to do with the dogma of the Roman Primacy which they admitted and believed in.

Though the Seleucian Church did not have direct relation with the Church of Rome, they were quite aware of the eminence of the Roman Church. They never considered their Church separated from and independent of Rome. It was only in 410 that they accepted the Council of Nicaea (325) with its decrees and creed; because it was only then it was duly proposed to them for their acceptance. They had not accepted the Council of Nicaea, nor had they rejected it before 410 because it had never been presented to them.¹⁷

A few instances of communion with the Rome can be traced. Babai the Great in his 'Book of Union' Speaks of blessed Leo who reigns in the Throne of St. Peter. Isoyahb III, Timothy I, Metropolitan Elias, Bannattius Abduso of Soba and Armenia and others have the same teaching. During the middle ages, the Patriarchs visited Roman Church and proclaimed its preeminence.¹⁸ When there were hostilities between the Byzantines and the Romans, it was not possible to have frequent communications. Communion need not necessarily imply communications.

7. Relations of the St. Thomas Christians with the Seleucian Church

Though bishops from Seleucia governed the Thomas Christians, they could remain unchanged with regard to their attitude towards Rome; for those bishops were not hostile to Rome. So the Thomas Christians could have friendly relations with missionaries and representatives sent by Rome.¹⁹

¹⁶ Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 48-51.

¹⁷ Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 53.

¹⁸ Geevarghese Chediath, "A Historico-Ecclesiological...", 285.

¹⁹ Placid J. Podipara, "The Syrian Church of Malabar: Its Catholic Communion," 14.

7.1. Liturgical Relations

The Thomas Christians had the liturgical rite and language (East Syriac/ Chaldean) of the Seleucian Church at least in 1301. This is clear from Vatican Syriac Codex 22 which is an epistolarium, written in Cragannore, in 1301. It is perhaps the oldest manuscript of the East Syrian liturgy of Malabar.²⁰ Three representatives of the lay leaders of Malabar wrote to the Pope in 1578: "Our Prayers are in Syriac or the Chaldean language which was handed on to us by our Lord St. Thomas. We and our predecessors have been taught this language."²¹ It speaks well of the strong attachment the St. Thomas Christians had to Syriac, and the reverence and respect they had to the Pope. There is no vestige of any other liturgical rite or language that existed among the Thomas Christians before 1301. It may be supposed that the only liturgical rite practised by the Thomas Christians from the early days was the East Syrian.²²

7.2. Petrine Primacy in East Syrian Liturgy

The Seleucia-Ctesiphon Church believed in and officially expressed in clear terms the divinely instituted Primacy of jurisdiction of St. Peter and his successors, the Roman pontiff, over the whole Church of Christ.²³ Podipara cites an example from the Divine Office:

"Rome says, forever is the Church built, and She shall not be conquered by kings and powers." (Third Sunday of *Qudas edtha*)²⁴

This is a clear sign of the acceptance of the Papal Primacy by this Church.

8. Hierarchical Relations with Seleucian Church

Since the St. Thomas Christians could not afford to have a full-fledged hierarchy with a Great Metropolitan, Metropolitans and Bishops, they had to depend on the East Syrian Church²⁵ that had a full hierarchical

²⁰ Placid J. Podipara, "Reflections on Liturgy," in *Collected Works of Rev. Dr. Placid J. Podipara CMI*, vol. 2 and 3, 163.

²¹ Placid J. Podipara, "Reflections on Liturgy," 163.

²² Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 73-74.

²³ Placid J. Podipara, "Reflections on Liturgy," 155.

²⁴ Placid J. Podipara, "Reflections on Liturgy," 155.

²⁵ Jacob Kollamparambil, "Sources on the Hierarchical Structure of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period," in *The Life and Nature of the St. Thomas Christian Church in the Pre-Diamper Period*, ed. Bosco Puthur, Kochi: LRC, 2000, 163.

structure. Its Great Metropolitan or Catholicos had his seat at Seleucia-Ctesiphon. From early centuries, India had commercial and cultural relations with Persia. Therefore, it was easy for the Indian Church to tide over the hierarchical crisis by forging relations with the Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.²⁶

From 4th century onwards bishops came from the Babylonian Church which also shared the Thomistic liturgical heritage. Patriarch of Babylonian Church was the canonical head of the Indian Church until the nomination of the first Latin bishop on 20th December, 1599.²⁷

From the time of Patriarch John (Simon) Sulaqa (1551-1555) a section of the Assyrian Church of the East entered into full communion with the Roman Church. Patriarch John (Simon) Sulaqa reached Rome on 18th November, 1552 and made the profession of faith on 15th February 1553. The Seleucians who sent Sulaqa to Rome in their letter to the Pope acknowledged the Roman Primacy and called themselves "Nestorians" "the humble sinful children of the Pope. In their letter there is not even a hint that they were reuniting with Rome through conversion.²⁸ The profession of faith which Sulaka made in Rome is a clear proof that the Nestorians acknowledged the Roman Primacy. Pope Julius III (1550-1555) acknowledged the jurisdiction of the Chaldean Patriarch in India. On April 28, 1553 he also received pallium from the Pope as a sign of full pontifical power.²⁹ After Sulaqa, Abdisho, Yahbalaha and Simon Denha made the profession of faith and obtained pallium from the Pope of their time.³⁰

A conjoined letter of the Chaldean Prelates sent in 1580, to Pope Gregory XIII on the occasion of the election of Mar Simon Denha as their Patriarch, contains many honorary titles for the Supreme Pontiff, as the Father and head of all Christendom, Successor to Blessed Peter, the Prince of the Apostles and the Vicar of Christ upon earth. They moreover implored with deep respect and submission for themselves and for their faithful the blessings and prayers of the Holy Father.³¹

²⁶ Jacob Kollamparambil, 165.

²⁷ Paul Pallath, "Were the St. Thomas Christians in India Nestorians at the Time of the Synod of Diamper in 1599?" *Ephrem's Theological Journal* 5 (2001) 41-42.

²⁸ Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 51.

²⁹ Paul Pallath, "Were the St. Thomas Christians in India..." 42.

³⁰ Paul Pallath, "Were the St. Thomas Christians in India..." 43.

³¹ George C. J. Cathanar, *The Orthodoxy of the St. Thomas Christians: Together with Some Vatican Documents and Notes on the Syrian Church in Malabar*, Kottayam: C. J. George Cathanar, 1904, v.

Thus it is evident that at the time of the Synod of Diamper in 1599, the Chaldean Patriarch Mar Simon Denha, the head of the St. Thomas Christians in India was in full ecclesiastical and hierarchical communion with the Roman Pontiff.³² It is this Catholic Patriarch Simon Denha who was condemned in the Synod of Diamper by Archbishop Menezes as a Nestorian heretic and schismatic out of the Catholic Church and out of the obedience of the Roman Pontiff. Infact, he was in ecclesiastical and hierarchical communion with the Roman Pontiff ³³

The Portuguese historians as well as the authors of the Synod of Diamper condemn the Thomas Christians as Nestorians for 1200 years without any interruption till 1599, the year of the Synod of Diamper. But Nestorianism originated only in the year 430 AD. This shows that the Portuguese were rash in condemning the Thomas Christians as Nestorians, thirty years before the origin of Nestorianism.³⁴

We see that the bishops of the St. Thomas Christians around the period of the Synod of Diamper personally went to Rome, professed their Catholic faith and signed all the necessary documents regarding the acts of faith. Therefore at the time of the synod of Diamper the St. Thomas Christians in India were in full and explicit communion with the Roman Pontiff.

9. St. Thomas Christians and the Catholic Communion in the Pre-Diamper Period.

The Portuguese Missionaries of the sixteenth century considered the *Way of Thomas*³⁵ of the Thomas Christians as heresy and superstition. Alexis de Menezes, the Archbishop of Goa and the Portuguese missionaries spread the wrong information that the St. Thomas Christians were under the jurisdiction of the Nestorian heretic Patriarchs of Babylon. They were governed by heretic Bishops sent by those Patriarchs who were Nestorians and schismatics. They were

³² Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 138; Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress of the Syro-Malabar Hierarchy*, 22.

³³ Paul Pallath, "Were the St. Thomas Christians in India..." 43.

³⁴ George C. J. Cathanar, *The Orthodoxy of the St. Thomas Christians*, 66.

³⁵ The individuality of this Church as expressed in its autonomy, East Syriac Liturgy and the Christianized Hindu customs were the 'Way of Thomas' for the Thomas Christians. They called their ancient traditions the 'Way of Thomas.' The 'Way of Thomas' was the sum total of their Christian heritage. They were not prepared to make any modifications in this heritage.

out of the Catholic Church and out of obedience of the Roman Pontiff. Alexis de Menezes claimed that in the Synod of Diamper, St. Thomas Christians were reunited with the Catholic Church. In the Synod of Diamper the Chaldean Patriarch, the canonical head of the St. Thomas Christians at that time and the Chaldean bishops sent by him were condemned and anathematized as Nestorians. Immediately after the synod, Menezes and the missionaries informed Rome and the Portuguese authorities about the conversion and reunion of the Nestorians in India. Such false propaganda about the Thomas Christians spread in the West.³⁶

9.1. Faith

St. Thomas Christians faithfully preserved, lived and handed over the faith they had received from the Apostle Thomas, their father in faith. They had their ancient faith uninfluenced by the theological controversies. Hence it is difficult to believe that the Thomas Christians knowingly accepted the 'Nestorianism'.³⁷ "Their Nestorianism remained a dead letter in practice even if their liturgical books contained objectionable formulas."³⁸

The letter written in 1578 by Fr. Dionysio,³⁹ Rector of the Jesuit residence at Cochin is a clear testimony of the orthodox faith of the St. Thomas Christians. He says, "These Christians commonly believe in all the articles of the Nicean creed and the equality of the divine persons and the two natures and one person in Christ. The same is held by the Archbishop and the Archdeacon. They regard the Pope as the Vicar of Christ our Redeemer on earth, and their Patriarch as subject to the Pope from whom his powers are communicated to him."⁴⁰ It is a clear evidence and testimony of the orthodox faith and practice of the Thomas Christians.

³⁶ Paul Pallath, "Were the St. Thomas Christians in India..." 35-36.

³⁷ Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 103.

³⁸ Eugene Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India: A History of the Syro-Malabar Church from the Earliest Time to the Present Day*, Calcutta: Calcutta Press, 1957, 18.

³⁹ K. S. Mathew, "St. Thomas Christians in Malabar from the 9th to the 16th Centuries," in *St. Thomas Christians and Nambudiris Jews and Sangam Literature: A Historical Appraisal*, ed. Bosco Puthur, Thrikkakara: LRC, 2003, 66.

⁴⁰ Jonas Thaliath, *The Synod of Diamper*, Roma: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1958, Indian Reprint, Bangalore: Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, 1999, 13; A.M. Mundadan, *Paths of Indian Theology*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1998, 41.

Francis Ros SJ, who became the first Latin Bishop of the St. Thomas Christians, admitted the truth that they professed the "Roman Catholic Faith" and from the epoch of Apostle Thomas till this time "they have always stood very firm in the faith", in spite of the "Nestorian Doctrines" or errors found in their books.⁴¹ Actually what Ros considered Nestorian errors in some of the books of Thomas Christians were not really heretical doctrines. It was the result of misunderstandings and terminological confusion caused by the reading of the original Syriac concepts and idioms into Latin technical terms and western categories.⁴²

9.2. Communion

The communion of the St. Thomas Christians of India has to be understood in the concrete background of the Indian Church before the 16th Century. The lack of facilities for communication with Rome had forced them to develop a kind of practical autonomy. The canonical collections of the Seleucian Church with which they had hierarchical relations have explicit statements admitting the Roman Primacy. The Persian Church too had developed a kind of practical autonomy as the other ancient Eastern Churches.⁴³ The Eastern Christianity in India had its own Metropolitan. He was the head of the Indian Church having jurisdiction all over India.⁴⁴

For the Portuguese missionaries, the acceptance of the Roman liturgy and discipline was essential to have full communion with the Roman Church. They wanted to impose the Latin rite upon the Thomas Christians because for them anything that was not Latin was heresy and schism. The resistance of the Thomas Christians to this policy was branded as a sign of schism!⁴⁵

The Bishops of the Thomas Christians were invited to the provincial councils of Goa. Mar Abraham who was the bishop of the Thomas Christians did not take part in these councils as he was not under the Goan jurisdiction. But when Pope Gregory XIII (1572-85) wrote to him to attend the Goan councils, Mar Abraham obeyed him and took part in the Goan council in 1585.⁴⁶ This shows his obedience and

⁴¹ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Faith and Communion...*, 113; Paul Pallath, "Were the St. Thomas Christians in India..." 59.

⁴² Xavier Koodapuzha, *Faith and Communion...*, 113-121.

⁴³ Xavier Koodapuzha, "The Faith and Communion of the Thomas Christians," in *The Thomapedia*, ed. George Menachery, Thiruvananthapuram: St. Joseph's Press, 2000, 28.

⁴⁴ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 75-78.

⁴⁵ Varkey Vithayathil, *The Origin and Progress of the Syro-Malabar Hierarchy*, 20.

⁴⁶ Bernard Thoma, *Mar Thoma Kristianikal*, 331.

communion with the Pope. But in this council many decisions were taken in order to suppress the Eastern liturgy and to introduce the Latin liturgy among the Thomas Christians. Fr. Francis Ros SJ was put in charge of implementing these decrees. The resistance of Mar Abraham in executing these decisions was followed by strong accusations of heresy and schism by Ros SJ.⁴⁷

With the death of Mar Abraham in 1597, the Goan Archbishop proceeded to Malabar to bring the Thomas Christians under the Goan jurisdiction. The priests and delegates of the Thomas Christians were ordered to be present at Diamper for a synod under the penalty of excommunication. The Papal letters especially the request to take part in the Goan councils, and the convocatory letter of the 'Synod' of Diamper threatening with excommunication etc. reveal that the Thomas Christians of India were already in full Catholic communion.⁴⁸

In the Christian orient, all metropolitans, bishops, priests, deacons and the community of Christian faithful, governed by Eastern Patriarch confirmed by the Roman Pontiff were considered to be in full communion with the Roman Church.⁴⁹ We can never charge any one with schism till one has broken the communion with Rome. The St. Thomas Christians faithfully kept up the communion with Rome. They always considered the Pope as the Vicar of Christ on earth and the Patriarch as subject to the Pope.⁵⁰

It is not possible to attribute any kind of heresy to the Thomas Christians of the Pre-sixteenth century. They were really offended when their orthodoxy was questioned. The Archdeacon, their local leader immediately wrote to the Jesuit General in Rome calling these accusations as serious calumnies, unjustly attributed to their Church. "Errors, perhaps, there might have been; but heresies, which have to be confirmed with pertinacity, No. And if this Church were infected with heresy, the Fathers of the Society of Jesus and other Catholic Religions would not have been admitted into it; for this reason one can see the falsity of what they attributed to us."⁵¹ This was the spontaneous

⁴⁷ Xavier Koodapuzha, "The Faith and Communion of the Thomas Christians," 28.

⁴⁸ Xavier Koodapuzha, "The Faith and Communion of the Thomas Christians," 28.

⁴⁹ Paul Pallath, "Were the St. Thomas Christians in India..." 40-41.

⁵⁰ Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 114-115.

⁵¹ Xavier Koodapuzha, "The Faith and Communion of the Thomas Christians," 29.

reaction when their faith was questioned. They were fully prepared to correct when mistakes were pointed out to them. This is the genuine Catholic position which allows no shade of heresy. We cannot say that one would become a heretic or schismatic if one is unable to communicate with the Roman Pontiff due to geographical and socio-political circumstances.⁵²

10. St. Thomas Christians and Communications with Rome

Though the St. Thomas Christians were geographically far away from Rome, they maintained a close relation and affinity to the Holy Father by way of communicating through letters. They used to inform the important events among them and sought permission when required. Here are a few examples of the communications with Rome.

The profession of faith made by Mar Abraham in Malabar in 1577, was sent to the Pontiff Gregory XIII.⁵³ This is a clear evidence of the communion in faith they had and their obedience to the Pope.

The chief men among the Thomas Christians in 1578, petitioning the Roman Pontiff, Gregory XIII, say that from the primordial ages of the Christian era they had their liturgical prayers from the Apostle St. Thomas in Syro-Chaldaic, that they want to receive their Bishops and Archbishops from the Assyrians of the East and that they had the Orders of Priesthood and deaconate from the same. Imploring the mercy of the Holy Father they pray that they may not be left orphans, but he may give the necessary orders to the Patriarch of the Assyrians or Chaldeans that he may send Bishops according to the ancient custom.⁵⁴

Mar Abraham, Archbishop of Angamaly, in his letter sent to Pope Gregory XIII on January 13, 1584 informs him of the Synod convened by him, of the pride his subjects took of being in the Catholic faith, of the necessity of establishing there a new Seminary for the training up of youth for the sacred ministry, and of the necessity of increasing the number of the Jesuit fathers in that province. Mar Abraham asks for the Pope's confirmation to the election of the Archdeacon, George of Christ, as Bishop of Palur, Coadjutor and successor to him. This election was made by the power granted to Mar Abraham by the Assyrian Patriarch.⁵⁵

⁵² Paul Pallath, "Were the St. Thomas Christians in India..." 41.

⁵³ George C. J. Cathanar, *The Orthodoxy of the St. Thomas Christians*, iv.

⁵⁴ George C. J. Cathanar, *The Orthodoxy of the St. Thomas Christians*, iv.

⁵⁵ George C. J. Cathanar, *The Orthodoxy of the St. Thomas Christians*, v.

Pope Gregory XIII not only sent the relics of many saints to but also about 50000 rosaries blessed by the Pope himself to Mar Abraham and Archdeacon Geevarghese. Those rosaries were to distribute among the faithful. And they received them with great devotion.⁵⁶ In 1580, Mar Abraham welcomed the Jesuit priests to preach in their churches and to teach the people regarding the Catholic teachings and morality. He also extended cooperation and all the helps for the same. He made corrections in the texts as per the directions of those Jesuit priests.⁵⁷

Though the Portuguese missionaries constantly tried to accuse Mar Abraham of relapsing into the errors of Nestorian heresy, and even informed Pope Clement VIII that Mar Abraham did not permit to correct the Chaldean books filled with errors, it was not possible to prove the accusations against him, who publicly and solemnly professed the Catholic faith and always acted according to the directions of the Roman Pontiff and the Holy Sea. All the officially written communications between Mar Abraham and the Roman Pontiffs demonstrate the explicit and full communion of Mar Abraham with the Roman Pontiff and his profound veneration towards the successors of St. Peter. Despite the continuous accusations by the missionaries who turned to be his enemies, Mar Abraham persisted in the Catholic faith and maintained the communion with the Roman Pontiff. For no Catholic Bishop becomes non-catholic only because his enemies have accused him of heresy and schism.⁵⁸

Pope Gregory XIII directs a letter in 1580, to the clergy and laity of the Christians of St. Thomas in Malabar admonishing them to guard themselves against a certain Simeon who feigns himself to be lawful Bishop and exhorting to be obedient to their Prelates.⁵⁹

These instances speak well of the orthodoxy and the communications the St. Thomas Christians had with Rome. The words of Pope Pius XII in connection with the 19th century celebration of the coming of St. Thomas in 1952 are quite significant.

During the centuries that India was quite cut off from the west and despite many trying vicissitudes, the Christian community formed by the Apostle St. Thomas conserved intact the legacy he left them. And as soon as the

⁵⁶ Bernard Thoma, *Mar Thoma Kristhianikal*, 327.

⁵⁷ Bernard Thoma, *Mar Thoma Kristhianikal*, 327-328.

⁵⁸ Paul Pallath, "The Orthodoxy of Mar Abraham, the Last Chaldean Metropolitan of the St. Thomas Christians in India," 24-25.

⁵⁹ George C. J. Cathanar, *The Orthodoxy of the St. Thomas Christians*, vi.

sea-passage at the close of the 15th century offered a link with their fellow Christians of the west, their union with them was spontaneous. This Apostolic lineage, beloved sons and daughters, is the proud privilege of many among you who glory in the name of Thomas Christians and we are happy on this occasion to acknowledge and bear witness to it.⁶⁰

The St. Thomas Christians never considered themselves a Church separated from Rome. They always believed in the primacy of Peter and were well aware of their Catholic communion.

11. St. Thomas Christians and the Threat of Excommunication

“Excommunication is the putting away of one from the communion or fellowship of another or others.”⁶¹ Excommunication means only exclusion from ecclesiastical and hierarchical communion because the ontological sacramental communion effected by the valid celebration of baptism, and Episcopal ordination cannot be nullified by any juridical act.⁶² Menezes, the Archbishop of Goa, was fully aware of the fact that the St. Thomas Christians in India were in full ecclesiastical communion with the Roman Church. That is why he could have easily resorted to the weapon of excommunication⁶³ to achieve his designs. Since the St. Thomas Christians were practicing Catholics, they never desired to break communion with Rome. If the St. Thomas Christians were Nestorians and heretics as Menezes had stated, they were already out of the Catholic Church and hence the threat of excommunication would have been of no use,⁶⁴ and they would have never feared it.

12. Conclusion

St. Thomas Christians were in full and explicit communion with the Roman Pontiff at the epoch of the Synod of Diamper. The Portuguese thought communion meant full adoption of the Latin rite and the jurisdiction of the Bishops presented by the Portuguese kings. In fact at the epoch of the synod, the Chaldean Patriarchs, the canonical heads of the St. Thomas Christians were true Catholics, who made the profession of faith and obtained pallium of the Roman Church, after they had satisfied all the requirements of ecclesiastical

⁶⁰ Xavier Koodapuzha, “The Faith and Communion of the Thomas Christians,” 29.

⁶¹ Placid J. Podipara, “The Church of Seleucia and its Catholic Communion,” in *Collected Works of Rev. Dr. Placid Podipara CMI*, vol.1, 47.

⁶² Paul Pallath, “Were the St. Thomas Christians in India...” 55.

⁶³ Placid J. Podipara, *St. Thomas Christians*, 137.

⁶⁴ Paul Pallath, “Were the St. Thomas Christians in India...” 55-57.

communion. Similarly, the Bishops of the St. Thomas Christians at that time personally went to Rome and proved their orthodox faith. They also obtained recommendation letters personally signed by the Roman Pontiff.

The whole history of the 16th century shows that the Thomas Christians were not heretics or schismatics though their books contained "errors". If they were not heretics or schismatics in the 16th century, they were not so at any time before. In brief, the Thomas Christians were Catholics in full communion with the Roman Pontiff before the Synod of Diamper. That is why Archbishop Menezes could threaten them by the weapon of excommunication. If the Thomas Christians were not in Catholic communion, what is the relevance of excommunication and why should they be scared of it? So the real purpose of Menezes was to Westernize and Latinize this Oriental Church.

The Christianized Hindu customs of the Thomas Christians in their socio-political life, manner of worship, church construction...etc. prove that before the 16th Century, they had led a life of perfect harmony and communion with the other religions and thus emerge as a model of inculturation. Their way of life which they called 'Way of Thomas', the sum total of their Christian heritage, was alien to the western missionaries who considered it as heresy and superstition. Therefore, in the Indian context where there are three Individual Churches, there is an urgent need for the proper understanding of the Church as a communion of Individual Churches, each having its own liturgy, theology, spirituality and discipline. Otherwise one may fail to appreciate the other and block its growth. Secondly, evangelization and Christian witnessing in Asia in general and India in particular calls for a thorough learning and understanding of the life situation and culture of the people and a life of full and explicit communion with them that we may not present the Gospel "salt" without its "taste" (Mt 5:13), repeating the errors of the past, that is, the violence of condemning everything unfamiliar as heresy and schism.