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**A SACRAMENTAL REINTERPRETATION
OF SYRO-MALABAR CHRISTIAN
IDENTITY IN DIALOGUE WITH LOUIS-
MARIE CHAUVET**

Bilju Vazhappilly Francis[♦]

University: Katholieke Universiteit (KU) Leuven, Belgium

Faculty: Theology and Religious Studies

Director: Prof. Dr Joris Geldhof

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Introduction

The proposal for a sacramental reinterpretation of contemporary Syro-Malabar Christian identity in dialogue with Louis-Marie Chauvet's theology requires an encompassing and dialogical engagement with the works of and on Chauvet as well as with the Syro-Malabar Church, its tradition, its self-understanding, and particularly its liturgy. To discern the elements that make one a Syro-Malabar Christian in the contemporary context, I engaged with diverse views and sources pertaining to both Chauvet's theology and the Syro-Malabar Church. In addition, the present study involved both Chauvet's theology of Christian identity and an encompassing

[♦]**Bilju Vazhappilly Francis, PhD** is a Syro-Malabar Catholic priest belonging to the Archdiocese of Trichur, Kerala India. He holds a Master of Religious Studies from KU Leuven (2007), both STL and Master of Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion from KU Leuven (2008) and Doctorate in Theology from the KU Leuven. He teaches Theology in the Mary Matha Major Seminary and DBCLC, Trichur. Email: biljuv@gmail.com

interpretation of St Thomas' Christ-experience. At the same time, the present endeavor underlined the place of the sacraments of Christian initiation of the Syro-Malabar Church in the formation of the Syro-Malabar Christian identity.

Use of Sources

The present doctoral project thus employs an interdisciplinary and dialogical approach based on the study of the theological opus of Chauvet (available in English), and recent Anglophone scholarship about Chauvet's theology. The present liturgical texts of the Syro-Malabar Church (*The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana* and *The Sacraments of the Syro-Malabar Church*), and other source materials regarding the Syro-Malabar liturgy, (especially Holy Qurbana and the rites of Christian initiation) as well as the sacramental theology in general are used. Liturgical Research Centre's research seminars (from 1999 to 2011, 37 seminars) and publications, Synodal News (since 1992), the Pastoral Letters (since 1992) of the Major Archbishops of Syro-Malabar Church given on *Dukrana (Sabhadinam – Church Day, July 3rd)*, and the publications from the Oriental Institute of Religious Studies in India (OIRSI, Kottayam), other source materials regarding the Syro-Malabar Church and its liturgy, Church documents, relevant patristic and scholastic sources as well as other theological literature are given due importance in the project.

An Overview of the Chapters

In the present sacramental reinterpretation of Syro-Malabar Christian identity, I reviewed the concrete situation of the Syro-Malabar Christians, evaluated it in the light of Chauvet's theology of Christian existence and St Thomas' Christ-experience, and then proposed pastoral and theological insights to implement a future-oriented self-understanding of Syro-Malabar Christians. This doctoral project thus becomes a way of reading and responding to the contemporary situation of the Syro-Malabar Christians. Therefore, regarding the overall logic between the chapters, I have claimed that the entire study is symbolic, in the sense of taking all together and is thus structured into six chapters.

In the *first* and *second chapters*, we situate the question of Christian identity as a burning issue in a pluralistic context. In the Indian context in particular, to be a Christian or to keep one's Christian identity is a great challenge. Recent popular Indian films, cheap literature, and interviews with Christian leaders of the different

churches from different parts of India portray Christian characters as bad or culturally alienated persons, that is, with certain negative images, such as non-identifying with Indian culture, non-participating in the cultural festivals, and non-living according to the local culture. Meanwhile, in the Kerala context, historians and anthropologists observe that there is an increasing tendency to deny the contributions of Christians to the renaissance of Kerala society and culture. They are often depicted as mere colonial agents and colonial intruders as well as traders, merchants, and unauthorized or illegal occupants of land. However, keeping their Christian faith, these Christians continue to enrich the composite culture of the land through various and valuable contributions. Given this challenging context, in this section, we interpret and critically evaluate Placid J. Podipara's classical understanding of the Syro-Malabar Christian identity as 'Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion and Oriental in Worship'. In addition, considering this classical identity's relation to the Law of Thomas, the sum and substance of the ecclesial life of Malabar Christians, we analyze the diverse factors contributing to the distortion of this identity in the course of their history. At the same time, we investigate the tension between the restorative and reformative groups regarding matters of liturgy as well as the eagerness to implement the Second Vatican Council directives, because these factors have been contributing to the identity crisis of the contemporary Syro-Malabar Christians.

In this challenging context, Syro-Malabar Christians have to keep their ecclesial identity, celebrate their liturgy, and live what they believe and celebrate. At this juncture, the uniqueness, greatness, and individuality of the Syro-Malabar Christians are not limited to some ancient documents or rituals or to some characteristic cultural traits. Rather, their identity is to be seen in their life-style, imbibing the traditions and bearing witness to them in their daily lives.

Therefore, the *third* and *fourth chapters* put forward a sacramental reinterpretation of Christian identity and thereby particularly focus on the place of St Thomas' Christ-experience in Christian identity formation. In this regard, we first examine Chauvet's theology of Christian identity by means of a dialogue with his theological opus (for which we restrict ourselves to sources available in English) and with recent Anglophone studies about his theological views. In addition, seeing the relevant and positive aspects of Chauvet's symbolic sacramental reinterpretation of Christian identity we make a case for a new identity structure. Chauvet's is both a source of

inspiration and the deliverer of a conceptual framework for our own reflections about a sacramental reinterpretation of Syro-Malabar Christian self-understanding. Hence, our aim is not to present another comprehensive reading of Chauvet's theological oeuvre but rather to make use of his theological and pastoral insights with a view to developing a renewed sacramental theology of the Syro-Malabar Church today. Building up an adequate platform for a sacramental reinterpretation of the Christian identity of Syro-Malabar Christians, we reaffirm the place of St Thomas' Christ-experience in their self-understanding. For, a re-reading of the apostle's Christ-experience depicted in the Gospel of John (11:1-16; 14:1-7; and 20:24-29) reveals the process of being and becoming a true believer. From a Christian identity perspective, this Christ-experience also discloses that faith is the core of Christian identity and that the faith is expressed in believing, celebrating and witnessing, i.e., in theological, liturgical, and existential dimensions of faith. This theological framework further substantiates a possible structure of Syro-Malabar Christian identity in terms of tradition, liturgy, and care. Each element has relevance only inasmuch as it is in relation to the other elements. This implies a symbolic passage from tradition (the believing pole) to liturgy (the celebrating pole) and then to care (the witnessing pole) in a triangular manner.

However, at present the Syro-Malabar Christians in Kerala and elsewhere in India and abroad face serious pastoral and liturgical problems within their Church itself. This is mainly on account of the wounds inflicted by an excessive interest for Latinization and Chaldeanization. In addition, due to the strained relationships between the Latin and the Oriental Churches in India and abroad regarding the pastoral care of the migrants, the Syro-Malabar Christians in one way or other are seriously challenged to keep their identity as Syro-Malabar Christians. The negative impact of secularization and globalization in Kerala society, a possible conflict between politics (the government) and the Church, and the communal and religious tensions within the pluralistic context of India are a hindrance to initiate this Church's mission in a fruitful manner.

Hence, the *fifth* and the *sixth chapters* of the dissertation propose some liturgical, pastoral, and theological underpinnings of being and becoming a Syro-Malabar Christian in the contemporary context. This implies that by receiving the faith as gift, by celebrating that gift as reception, and by being living examples of a deep faith-life,

unadulterated spirituality, and selfless love towards brothers and sisters, Syro-Malabar Christians become capable of keeping their identity in the present world. Hence, this section mainly focuses on a liturgico-theological study of the New Rites of Christian Initiation (NRCI 2005, i.e., *Sacraments of SMC* 2005 and *Order of Qurbana* 2005) of the Syro-Malabar Church in order to revitalize the process of being and becoming a Syro-Malabar Christian today. That is why this section investigates the pivotal role of the various processions, liturgy of the Word, movements, words, persons, gestures, symbols, rituals, signs, art, space and time, etc. in the ritual celebration of the sacraments of initiation, with a view to laying bare the process of Christian identity formation. Syro-Malabar Christian identity formation is then an ongoing journey in faith advancing the faithful for the dispensation (*dabbrānūta*) of Jesus Christ's Paschal Mystery and thus leading to the pledge of future glory. In addition, this study focuses on the sacramental theology of the Syro-Malabar Church as it is rooted in the living context of the Syro-Malabar faithful, is centred on the liturgical celebrations, and is oriented to cope with the existential situations of these faithful. Thus, the renewed understanding of sacramental theology of the Syro-Malabar Church comprehends the contextual, liturgical and ethical dimensions of a sacramental theology.

In brief, the interpretative and dialogical engagement with the aforementioned relevant source materials opens the door to propose a new and future-oriented Christian identity structure for the Syro-Malabar Christians. It helps the Syro-Malabarians to keep their identity by receiving the faith as gift, by celebrating that gift as reception, and by being the living examples of deep faith-life, unadulterated spirituality, and selfless love towards their fellow Christian faithful and all their other neighbours. The present study also intends to rejuvenate their liturgical, pastoral and theological perspectives regarding the sacraments of Christian initiation. Thus we hope for a Christian identity formation as a journey in faith, in special reference to the renewed Christian identity structure, irrespective of wherever Syro-Malabarians are and in whatever situation they live. Besides, such an attempt also proposes a renewed understanding of the Syro-Malabar sacramental theology as a culturally, liturgically and ethically oriented and at the same time symbolically structured theology. Such a theology orients the Syro-Malabar Christians to live a life in accord with the renewed Christian identity structure and to establish a living communion between the faithful and God through the mediations of culture, language, symbols, rituals, and social engagement.