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**New Scholars**

**ECCLESIAL VISION OF SAINT THOMAS  
CHRISTIANS IN THE LIGHT OF  
VARTHAMANAPPUSTHAKAM: A  
HISTORICO-THEOLOGICAL STUDY**

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This study on *Varthamanappusthakam* (VP) brings out the knowledge of the ecclesial identity, autonomy and ecclesial heritage of the Thomas Christians. The importance of VP with regard to the Malabar Church is that it is an eyewitness' account of the life of the said Church between 1778 and 1786. It is a praxis theology from the Indian soil. This is a research study on the VP from an ecclesiological point of view of the Thomas Christians but the accent is on *Pazhayakuttukar* (Old group) of the Malabar Church. The famous dictum *Sentire cum Ecclesia* was very much applicable in the lives of Malpan Joseph Cariattil and Cathanar Thomman Paremmakkal. This study helps to bring out the ecclesiological vision of the Thomas Christians from the internal evidences of VP, such as the ardent love

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for the Mother Church, their deep faith in God, the liturgical life, the spiritual heritage and the form of an indigenous administration. *VP* is used as the original source in the entire study.

### **Theological and Historical Background of this Research**

This study of *VP* gives the history of the Thomas Christians as well as its ecclesiology. It is actually a historical and contextual approach that directs the course of theology. Since it is a historico-theological study both theological and historical backgrounds are significant. The immediate theological background of this dissertation is the Second Vatican Council which was convened for the renewal and reunion of the Churches. There is a shift from the monarchical ecclesiology to the ecclesiology of communion. In this regard the ecclesiology of the Thomas Christians, which developed outside Roman Empire, is of unique importance. Historians classify the early Church into three categories: Syriac Orient, Greek East and Latin West. The Church of the Thomas Christians belongs to the Syriac Orient which is different and distinct from the other two categories. Paremmakkal says: "We are Syrians. From the time the Apostle St Thomas was in our country and gave us the treasure of the holy faith, we have been, until today, without any break, performing our ecclesiastical ceremonies and practices in the Syriac rite" (*VP OCA*, 247).

So the achievement of this research is the rediscovery of the indigenous ecclesiology. This research explores and rediscovers the awareness in the members of the Syro-Malabar Church on the indigenous ecclesiology, i.e. basing on *Mār Thōma Mārgam* (Way of Thomas) in which they lived and practiced before sixteenth century.

### **Structure of the Work**

This is a historico-theological study and this study has been divided into four Chapters.

**Chapter One:** Ecclesial identity and autonomy of the Thomas Christians and the historical antecedents to *varthamanappusthakam*. This chapter gives a short description of the origin of the Thomas Christians and their ecclesial identity. The whole individuality of the Malabar Church was summed up in the 'Way of Thomas.' The Thomas Christian community was well aware of the consciousness of its apostolic origin from St Thomas the Apostle. This chapter focuses also on the challenges the Thomas Christians met after the arrival of the western missionaries.

**Chapter Two:** The second chapter is an attempt to study the historiography of the *VP*. It gives the compilation of the *VP* and how it originated. A brief content of the *VP* is also given as historical vicissitudes reflected in this chapter.

**Chapter Three:** The third chapter is devoted mainly to all the events narrated by the delegates Cariattil and Paremmakkal in the *VP* and analyses and gives interpretation from an ecclesiological point of view. Thus it is an exegetical, hermeneutical and a textual study of different events that occurred in their long voyage. The important ten complaints against Thomas Christians and the responses to them are being discussed, analysed and interpreted in the perspective of the Thomas Christians' ecclesiology.

**Chapter Four:** The fourth chapter offers an elaborate study on the ecclesial vision of the Thomas Christians of India in the light of the *VP*. The ecclesiological vision of Cariattil and Paremmakkal is well imprinted in this book. Different ecclesiological characteristics of Thomas Christians are reviewed, reflected, analysed, interpreted and substantiated in the light of the *VP*. The administrative system was something unique and the bishops were considered as spiritually oriented heads. The archdeacon was actually managing the community. The Synod of *Udayamperur* (Diamper) marked the beginning of an alien mode of rule with its monarchical ecclesiology imposed on the indigenous Church of the Thomas Christians and thus their unity and autonomy were shattered.

### **Ecclesial Vision**

The three levels of their ecclesiastical system viz., at the local level, Palliyogam; at the community level, Archdiaconate; and at the hierarchical level, Metropolitan. This way they manifested their ecclesial communion. The Malabar Church assemblies and their *Padiolas*<sup>1</sup> manifested the effective nature of their ecclesial system.

The strong consciousness of the Thomas Christians, being an Apostolic Church of India, is a living factor. In the first sentence of the *VP* itself the author Paremmakkal speaks of having a deep rooted apostolic consciousness of the Thomas Christians: "By infinite mercy of God and by the merits of the Apostle St Thomas... its first apostle and founder, our community has until now followed faithfully..."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Padiolas* means palm leaves. In olden times the palm leaves were used for writing letters and documents.

<sup>2</sup>Paremmakkal, *Varthamanappusthakam*, trans. Placid J. Podipara, Roma: OCA (190), 29.

*Mārgam* is the word used by Paremmakkal to designate the sum total of the ecclesial life of the Thomas Christians which includes theology, liturgy, spirituality, discipline, and traditions. Paremmakkal states clearly the intention of their long journey made to Rome: "We did not ask anything for any private person, but only for such things as are necessary for the good of all our Churches of Malabar."<sup>3</sup> Thus this journey was not for any individual or personal gains but for the good of the Malabar Church.

### Liturgical Life

*Lex Orandi est Lex Credenti* means 'the law of prayer is the law of faith.' This ecclesial principle was very much realized and applied very well in the lives of the Thomas Christians especially as reflected in the lives of Cariattil and Paremmakkal. First of all they were very particular to celebrate the Holy Qurbana every day. On their journey when they came to Bahia in South America they celebrated Holy Qurbana in Syriac rite. After the Qurbana the archbishop said to them that since in Europe this rite of celebration was not in use he would give them the permission to celebrate the Latin Qurbana. Then they responded to him with much conviction: "We thanked him for his love and for the favour he was doing us; but we said that it was not proper for us to change our rite in which we were born and which was in use in our country."<sup>4</sup> Thus they were having a genuine love and deep respect for their liturgical life. The Thomas Christians were very faithful and they loved always to keep the Syriac identity.

### Unity and Ecumenical Vision

The urge to reconstruct the damaged unity is one of the themes of *VP*. This study envisages to create an ecumenical urge among the Thomas Christians inspired by the lives of Cariattil and Paremmakkal, for a deeper communion in this third millennium.

When Mar Thoma VI showed his concern and intention to come back to *Pazhayakuttukar* — the Catholic communion — Cariattil said to him: "I will do all I can... to gain this end even if I have to go to Rome once again for you, sacrificing my life to God."<sup>5</sup> Hence there is every reason for considering *VP* as an important source book for

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<sup>3</sup>Paremmakkal, *VP*, 108.

<sup>4</sup>Paremmakkal, *VP*, 96.

<sup>5</sup>Paremmakkal, *VP*, 60; *UR* 1.

depicting the ecumenical vision and the urge for the unity of the Thomas Christians.

### ***Varthamanappusthakam* and the Second Vatican Council**

The *VP* manifests that the Thomas Christians had a passionate love for the Malabar Church and their life was deeply rooted in the Word of God; they had a deep vision regarding liturgical life and a great respect towards the Church Fathers. The ecclesiology of Second Vatican Council is based on the Bible, the Church Fathers and the Liturgical life of each Church *sui iuris*. The study on *VP* expresses clearly that the Thomas Christians were living a theology in tune with that of the Vatican II. According to the tradition of the Thomas Christians the lay people were given good prominence and they had an influential participatory role in Malabar Church assemblies and all were considered as people of God having equality.