

ASIAN  
HORIZONS  
Vol. 15, No. 3, September 2021  
Pages: 658-663

## New Scholars

# SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL AND ST THOMAS CHRISTIANS IN INDIA A Historico-Hermeneutical Study with Special Reference to Placid J. Podipara

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**Year of Doctoral Defence:** 2021

This research evolves within the framework of Church History and in particular Indian Church History. Therefore, the formal object of this study has been a re-reading of the history of the St Thomas Christians in India in retrospection to the past from the view of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. I have utilised historical and hermeneutical ways in this study in order to arrive at the conclusions presented.

### 1. The Topic: Novelty and Originality

As the topic says, this study marks a retrospective journey of the living Catholicism of one of the ancient Christian communities, St Thomas Christians, in the light of the Second Vatican Council. As the

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Church of the St Thomas Christians is concerned, Vatican Council II was a providential event which affirmed the living traditions of the St Thomas Christians.

The novelty and relevance of this study is concerned with the contributions of St Thomas Christians to the universal Church on the eve of the Second Vatican Council. A couple of studies are made on the Indian participation in Vatican Council II: Prof. Paul Pulikkan made a study on *Indian Church at Vatican II*, in which he dealt with the general participation of the bishops from India but mainly concentrated on the interventions of the Latin bishops but he skipped the involvement of the Oriental bishops in the Council and Placid Podipara as *peritus*. Yet another study by Prof. Francis Thonippara on *The Intervention of Mar Sebastian Valloppilly in the Second Vatican Council for the Rightful Autonomy of the Oriental Catholic Churches in India*, where he concentrated only on Bishop Valloppilly. The participation of the Oriental bishops of India and Placid J. Podipara as *peritus* represented the St Thomas Church in the Second Vatican Council, their interventions, special concerns, perspectives, and approaches have been a neglected area in the field of contemporary research on the history of the Second Vatican Council. Their contributions in the Council, pointing out their interests, concerns and interventions, based on the traditions of St Thomas Christians, are the novelty and significance of this study. However, this study would be the first ever done based on the primary sources on the role of a flourishing Church, St Thomas Church in the Second Vatican Council. Therefore, this dissertation would be a contribution to the area of Indian Church History especially in the history of the participation in the Second Vatican Council. No other scientific study has ever been made on Podipara's Seven-Pointed Memorandum which he submitted to Eugene Cardinal Tisserant in 1953 in the light of Vatican Council documents. This is the relevance and novelty of this dissertation.

## 2. The Sources

The material objects or the sources of this study include: First, most importantly are the published volumes of *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II Apparando, Antepreparatoria* (Antepreparatory Period); *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II Apparando, Praeparatoria* (Preparatory Period); *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (Council Sessions), and 16 documents of the Second Vatican Council. Secondly, the study mainly depends on the sources such as Works of Placid J. Podipara, Literature including

General works on Vatican Council II, Books and Essays, Articles from periodicals and journals, and sitography are clearly included; then the works of Placid J. Podipara, Pastoral Letters of Council Fathers, Council Speeches, and Archival Materials and Manuscripts from different dioceses and institutions, which offer a unique opportunity of study with regard to the involvement and participation of ten Oriental bishops and Podipara as *peritus* from India in the Second Vatican Council.

### 3. The structure

Apart from the General Introduction and the General Conclusion, this scientific study on the Second Vatican Council and St Thomas Christians in India consists of four chapters.

**In the first chapter**, the period chosen for this study is the history of St Thomas Christians until the eve of the Second Vatican Council (52 CE-1962). In this introductory chapter we explore the history of St Thomas Christians until the eve of the Second Vatican Council and this chapter serves as a background and base of the forthcoming chapters.

**The second chapter** discusses the participation of Oriental bishops from India in the Second Vatican Council from its Antepreparatory phase, and Council periods which lasted from June 1959 till December 1965. This chapter has two parts, the first part deals with the *vota* of the Oriental bishops of India comprising their concerns on the Ecumenical Council, members of the body of Christ, important areas of reform, the Church and the world, and various observations regarding ecclesial life. The second part deals with both verbal and written interventions of the bishops in the four different sessions of the Council. Thus, this chapter tries to give a comprehensive picture of involvement and active participation of Oriental bishops of India in the Second Vatican Council.

**The third chapter** is about Placid J. Podipara, one of the theological experts (*periti*) in the Second Vatican Council and his involvement in the Council sessions. Being a Consultor of Pontifical Commission for Preparing the agenda of Vatican Council II, as the Papal Expert and Consultor for the Commission for the Oriental churches, and a member of the Commission for the Oriental churches we see how Podipara played a significant role during the Council period. The submission of the Seven-pointed Memorandum to Eugene Cardinal Tisserant to Kerala in 1953, and further collaboration with him, advanced a lot in the ecclesial growth of the Syro-Malabar Church. The Memorandum and various other questions put forward by

Podipara justified by the succeeding developments accredited by the teachings of Vatican Council II, especially on the nature and mission of the Church through, *Lumen Gentium*, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, and so on.

**In the fourth chapter** significant attempt is placed on comprehending the dynamics of the Law of Thomas in the St Thomas Church before the Second Vatican Council. Thus, it principally deals with historical research on the individuality and status of the laity in the St Thomas Church and Kerala society through its existential systems and traditions such as, Law of Thomas and *Palliṃyogam*. The participation of the laity representatives in the decision-making process of the Church affairs through Church assemblies, the participation of laymen in the diocesan synods, and practice of co-responsibility between clergy and laity show the very life and privileges of laity in the mission and governance of the Church life. Here one finds the foreshadow of the post-Vatican II concept of “synodality” in the Church of St Thomas Christians.

#### 4. The Findings of the Thesis

**An Effective Minority in the Council:** The inclusion and effective involvement of the Oriental Catholic churches was a welcome event in the conciliar history of the Catholic Church. As the Oriental churches in India are concerned, Vatican Council II was the first ecumenical Council in which the native bishops participated for the first time in history. Although minority in number, the Council was an occasion for a great rethinking for them. The interventions and proposals of Oriental bishops, Parecattil, Thangalathil, Valloppilly and Palathuruthy are concretised in the documents like, *Nostra Aetate*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* and *Christus Dominus*.

**Pastoral and Ecumenical Approach of Oriental Bishops from India:** The prominent concerns in the *vota* and interventions of the oriental bishops from India were pastorally and ecumenically oriented. The interventions of Parecattil, Valloppilly and Thangalathil indicate more precisely the pastorally oriented needs of the Church in India. The nucleus of some of the interventions of the bishops were centred around ecumenism and the need of unity among Christian churches.

**Podipara’s Memorandum Anticipated the Council’s Teachings:** The “Spirit of the Second Vatican Council” had been anticipated in his Seven-Pointed Memorandum, submitted to Eugene Cardinal Tisserant in 1953. However, many of his ecclesial visions and concerns in the Memorandum were authenticated in the Council

documents; *Lumen Gentium*, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Optatam Totius*, *Perfectae Caritatis*, and *Christus Dominus*.

**Affirming the Living Traditions of the St Thomas Christians:** The Second Vatican Council was an event of affirmation of the living traditions of the St Thomas Christians. The Council also reactivated St Thomas Christians who have a long history of their own individuality, and the Council became an epoch of recapture of the lost traditions of an ancient Church. The Council asked the Oriental churches in general to go back to the roots to enhance and rediscover their age-old treasured traditions and orientations with adaptations in the present and future Church life.

## 5. Contributions to the Historiography of the Second Vatican Council

**The image of People's Church:** The St Thomas Church was already a 'People's Church' from its foundation. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* stressed the collective character of the Church based on radical equality, dignity and active role of all. The concept of People's Church contributes to the historiography of the Second Vatican Council and new understanding of the Church on laity since Vatican Council II.

**Openness Towards the World:** Opening the windows to the world was a new desire and attitude of the Council. One of the focal points of the intervention of the Oriental bishops in the Council session was the "necessity of inter-religious dialogue," precisely speaking of a Hindu-Christian dialogue. St Thomas Church being a missionary Church, contributed the proclaiming and living messages to all peoples in their own cultural context without diluting one's identity. Podipara articulated this identity as "Hindu in culture, Christian in religion, and Oriental in worship."

**The Universality of the Church:** The universality of the Church is concretely manifested in the communion with all particular churches whose bishops are in communion with the Roman Pontiff. In this study we came across the statement of Parecattil that the Oriental churches are not mere ornaments or decoration for the Church but integral parts of the universal Church. They were not merely ornaments but indivisible members of the ecclesial body.

## 6. The limitation

Limitation of this work is nothing other than the unavailability of some primary sources. Although the St Thomas Church is proud of

its historical events and relevance, there is less concern about the culture of preserving or keeping ancient records in the archives. There is no proper archival system in many of the dioceses in Kerala. Another limitation is that we do not intend to treat a general history of the Council. Our study is limited to the interventions of the Oriental bishops from India both in the Preparatory Period and during the Council sessions. The work of the Oriental bishops in different commissions could not be described sufficiently due to the unavailability of sources.

Before concluding, in general, I must say that the announcement of a Council was warmly received throughout the Catholic world, but for Oriental bishops from India it was a new event of participation in their pastoral life. Therefore, the Council was a watershed for new experiences and convictions for the Oriental Bishops. In this, they were joining together with many bishops in the world, who were concerned with the Church's future in the modern world. Vatican Council II continues to be a reality very much alive in the Church in general and the Church of the St Thomas Christians in particular today. One of the greatest challenges to the Church is to re-establish the continuity between the present Church and the Church throughout the centuries, to revalidate the tradition of the Church.