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INTERPRETING THE *ONAM* CULTURE OF KERALITES IN INDIA ACCORDING TO POPE BENEDICT XVI'S TRANSFORMATIVE CHARACTER OF THE EUCHARIST

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Introduction

This research examines the transformative character of the Eucharist within the cultural framework of Kerala, India, drawing inspiration from the teachings of Pope Benedict XVI. It explores how the Eucharist can address social challenges such as poverty, caste discrimination, secularism, and religious pluralism while fostering unity, justice, and communal harmony. The study emphasizes the Eucharist's relevance in shaping social and cultural practices, particularly during the *Onam* festival, which embodies values of gratitude, sharing, and inclusivity. By drawing parallels between the Eucharistic celebration and the communal spirit of *Onam*, this study

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seeks to deepen the faithful's understanding of the Eucharist in their daily lives.

Integrating theological insights with Kerala's traditions, this research contextualizes the Eucharist within the lived experiences of Christians. It highlights the Eucharist's role in promoting communion, service, and social responsibility, offering a practical framework for deepening faith and engagement with society. Furthermore, the study explores how the Eucharist can inspire social justice movements, encouraging active participation in building a more inclusive and compassionate community. Through this approach, the research provides pastoral guidelines that reinforce the Eucharist as a source of transformation in both personal and communal life, making it a dynamic force for spiritual renewal and social change.

Relevance of the Study

By linking the Eucharist to cultural practices like *Onam*, the study underscores its potential to foster unity, social justice, and Christian witnessing in a multi-religious society. It addresses challenges such as poverty, caste discrimination, and secularism, emphasizing the Eucharist as a source of renewal and communal harmony. At a universal level, the Eucharist is central to Christian worship, and this study contributes to the Church's mission of integrating faith with culture. In a globalized world, the Eucharist calls for humanization and social responsibility, making this research relevant for fostering a more engaged Christian community.

For the Church in India, where religious diversity and socio-political tensions prevail, the Eucharist offers a foundation for justice, equality, and interfaith dialogue. This study proposes a paradigm shift towards communion and community, reinforcing the Eucharist as the source of unity and charity. Despite strong Eucharistic devotion in Kerala, there is a need for deeper liturgical understanding among both clergy and laity. This study provides pastoral insights to enhance Eucharistic spirituality and promote unity among Kerala's three sui juris Churches.

Theologically, the research contributes to a contextual understanding of the Eucharist, shifting the focus from ritual observance to its impact on daily life, social engagement, and pastoral practice. Inspired by Pope Benedict XVI, the researcher seeks to deepen his ministry by making the Eucharist a practical force for transformation in the lives of Kerala's Christians.

Main Focus of the Research

This research examines how the Eucharist influences social dynamics, cultural practices, and Christian witnessing, drawing from the theological insights of Pope Benedict XVI. The study emphasizes the Eucharist's role in fostering social justice, unity, and equality, especially among marginalized groups such as *Dalits* and tribal communities. By integrating Eucharistic themes of thanksgiving (*Eucharistia*), communion (*Koinonia*), and service (*Diakonia*) with Kerala's rich traditions and socio-economic realities, the research seeks to contextualize the faith experience of Christians in Kerala.

The central inquiry investigates how the *Onam* festival interprets the transformative nature of the Eucharist in Kerala's Christian traditions. To address this, the study explores the challenges faced by Kerala's Christians, the theological insights of Pope Benedict XVI on Eucharistic transformation, and the relationship between *Onam* and the Eucharistic vision of renewal and social engagement. Ultimately, the research provides a pastoral framework that encourages the faithful to embody Eucharistic principles in daily life, fostering a just and united Christian community.

Scope and Limits of the Study

This study focuses on the transformative character of the Eucharist, particularly its social dimension, within the Keralite Christian community. It explores how the Eucharist influences faith formation, daily life, and social justice initiatives, especially in the context of local cultural practices like *Onam*. Rooted in Pope Benedict XVI's Eucharistic theology, the research examines the Eucharist as a pastoral and social force, addressing issues such as poverty, caste discrimination, and religious pluralism.

The study analyzes the gap between faith and life in Kerala, considering social, cultural, economic, and political challenges faced by Christians. It draws from existing literature and authoritative sources, including the Bishops' Conferences of India, to understand the real-life struggles of Kerala's Christian community. However, it does not investigate the liturgical form or rituals of the Eucharist nor propose changes to its worship practices. Additionally, it relies on secondary sources for contextual analysis rather than conducting original quantitative or qualitative research.

Methodology

This study employs the pastoral circle See-Judge-Act to examine the transformative character of the Eucharist within Kerala's cultural context. The SEE stage explores the Eucharist's limited influence on Christian life, where it is often seen as a mere ritual with little impact on daily living or societal engagement. The JUDGE stage analyzes this issue through Pope Benedict XVI's Eucharistic theology, emphasizing its transformative power. Finally, the ACT stage proposes theological principles to restore the Eucharist's transformative role by integrating it with Kerala's cultural values and symbols. This study is based on archival and library research, utilizing Church documents, theological writings, and translations of Indian-language sources, with Pope Benedict XVI's works as key references.

Overview of the Chapters

This dissertation consists of five chapters, along with a general introduction and conclusion. Chapter I provides an overview of the study, including its background, research problem, significance, objectives, scope, methodology, and literature review. Chapter II examines the Eucharistic life of Kerala's Christians, identifying gaps and challenges, particularly in integrating the Eucharist with daily life and family values. Chapter III explores the transformative theology of the Eucharist in the Bible, Church Fathers, and Church documents, with a special focus on Pope Benedict XVI's theology and its relevance to Kerala's cultural and religious traditions. Chapter IV analyzes the Eucharist's impact on Christian life in Kerala, particularly in community and personal conscience, and integrates it with cultural expressions like the *Onam* festival. Chapter V concludes the study by summarizing key findings, addressing research problems, and offering recommendations to bridge the gap between Eucharistic theology and daily life.

Major Findings and Recommendations

Findings

1. The issues and challenges faced by the Christians in Kerala, India

Christians in Kerala face various challenges, including poverty, caste discrimination, economic deprivation, globalization's impacts, social injustice, gender inequality, and abuse. Additionally, migration and its socio-economic repercussions strain community cohesion.

These issues are compounded by cultural and systemic barriers, requiring a nuanced, inclusive response.

To address these challenges, integrating the transformative principles of Pope Benedict XVI's Eucharist with the cultural values of *Onam* offers a solution rooted in gratitude, solidarity, and sharing. This holistic approach fosters unity, compassion, and active social engagement to empower individuals and communities.

2. The transformative character of the Eucharist in the theology of Benedict XVI

The transformative character of the Eucharist in Pope Benedict XVI's theology emphasizes its power to profoundly change believers' lives through faith, conversion, repentance, and metanoia. It fosters a deep personal encounter with Christ, inspiring spiritual renewal, ethical living, and active participation in the Church while breaking barriers of division and promoting unity and love among believers.

This study interprets the transformative Eucharist as a framework for addressing challenges faced by Christians in Kerala. It integrates Eucharistic values such as gratitude, self-sacrifice, and solidarity into practical solutions, inspiring believers to navigate issues like caste discrimination, social injustice, and cultural tensions with a renewed moral vision rooted in Eucharistic theology.

3. The Eucharistic celebration enhances its social-transformative character by integrating *Onam's* cultural values and family traditions, fostering unity, inclusivity, and communal harmony.

The celebration of the Eucharist can enhance its social-transformative character by adapting the *Onam* cultural festival and the family values enshrined therein, fostering inclusivity, unity, and communal harmony. Both the Eucharist and *Onam* emphasize gratitude, generosity, and community, making their integration a powerful platform for social transformation. The Eucharist deepens the spiritual dimension of *Onam* by inspiring acts of generosity, social responsibility, and care for the less fortunate, transcending cultural and religious differences. By blending Eucharistic values with *Onam's* celebratory practices, Christians in Kerala can foster a culture of sharing, unity, and inclusivity that strengthens bonds among people of different faiths and backgrounds. This approach aligns with Pope Benedict XVI's emphasis on inculturation, adapting the Eucharistic celebration to resonate with local traditions.

Incorporating Eucharistic values into *Onam* promotes practical social change by encouraging individuals to embody Gospel principles in their daily lives, such as self-sacrifice, love of neighbour, and justice. The communal sharing central to both traditions highlights the importance of addressing societal needs and supporting marginalized communities. This integration not only enriches the spiritual experience of *Onam* for Christians but also serves as a bridge for interfaith dialogue, fostering a sense of unity amidst cultural diversity. By adapting *Onam* within Christian contexts, the Church in Kerala contributes to social harmony, inclusivity, and a more equitable society while respecting and celebrating the region's rich cultural heritage.

Recommendations

To enhance the social-transformative character of the Eucharist in Kerala, a holistic approach integrating the *Onam* festival and family values is essential. First, understanding the transformative nature of the Eucharist requires education and awareness, promoting its core values of gratitude, unity, generosity, and social responsibility. The Church should also celebrate Kerala's liturgical diversity by fostering unity among the Latin, Syro-Malabar, and Syro-Malankara Churches. Integrating the *Onam* festival into Eucharistic celebrations can help bridge faith and culture by emphasizing shared values such as community, hospitality, and sharing. This can be achieved by incorporating meaningful *Onam* symbols and rituals, such as communal meals and charitable acts, into Eucharistic practices.

Strengthening family values is crucial in making the Eucharist more impactful. Encouraging family-centered worship fosters a sense of belonging, while outreach programs involving education, healthcare, and social service promote communal well-being. The Church must also address modern challenges affecting Christian families, such as the impact of technology, migration, and social media, through effective pastoral responses. A strong commitment to social justice should be prioritized, with advocacy efforts against caste discrimination and empowerment programs for marginalized groups, particularly *Dalits* within the Christian community.

Engaging in interfaith and ecumenical dialogue is essential for fostering peace and social harmony. Collaboration with other religious communities can help address communal violence and intolerance, while the Church can play a proactive role in promoting justice and

human rights. Further, education and awareness initiatives should equip clergy and laity with knowledge of social advocacy and inclusivity, while workshops and seminars can address issues such as caste-based discrimination. Utilizing the resources of the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council (KCBC) can enhance the Church's pastoral outreach.

Finally, continuous reflection and evaluation are necessary to ensure the Eucharistic celebration remains relevant in Kerala's social and cultural landscape. Regular assessments should measure the impact of these initiatives, and community feedback should guide ongoing improvements. By blending the spiritual richness of the Eucharist with Kerala's cultural heritage and social concerns, the Church can foster a more inclusive, transformative, and relevant faith experience for its people.

Conclusion

Integrating the Eucharist with *Onam's* cultural values deepens its meaning for Kerala's Christian community. *Onam's* themes of gratitude, sharing, and unity align with the Eucharistic principles of thanksgiving, communal sharing, and inclusivity. The *Onasadya* feast reflects Eucharistic symbolism, while the festival's spirit of harmony mirrors the Eucharistic call to unity. By interpreting the Eucharist through the *Onam* framework, Christians can bridge faith and tradition, making it more tangible and relevant.

This approach aligns with Pope Benedict XVI's teachings on the Eucharist's transformative character, emphasizing the integration of local traditions with universal Christian values. *Onam's* themes of generosity, inclusivity, and social responsibility encourage believers to embody Gospel values in daily life. This synthesis not only enriches spiritual and cultural life but also fosters a more holistic and inclusive expression of faith.