

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR LIVING MAR THOMA MARGAM IN THE SYRO-MALABAR MIGRANT COMMUNITIES

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### **Abstract**

*Mar Thoma Margam* as the sum total of the tradition, theology, spirituality, and way of life of St Thomas Christians is their unique patrimony for centuries. It comprises elements of the unique Christ-experience of the Apostle, St Thomas, the linguistic and liturgical and disciplinary tradition of the East-Syrian Church, and the cultures of India. This special or unique Christian patrimony had been kept intact and flourished until the coming of the Western missionaries who misinterpreted and reformed it according to their ecclesiastical and theological views. The decrees of the Synod of Diamper, new adaptations, customs, rituals, and practices in line with the Western Church made *Mar Thoma Margam*, a blending of many essential and variable elements and traditions. Since the Syro-Malabar Church is grown beyond the borders of India, the migrant communities, having little contact with Indian customs, practices, and cultures are struggling to keep their ethnic and ecclesial

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identity together with their integration into the western and urban cultures. There is an urgent need for certain guiding principles that can distinguish the essential and adaptable elements of their ecclesiastical identity.

**Key Words:** Law of Thomas, *Mar Thoma Margam*, Migration, Syro-Malabar Migrant Communities, Syro-Malabar Church

## Introduction

Migration is a global phenomenon, which challenges the roots and the identity of persons and communities. People migrate from one place to another because of several reasons. Whatever may be the reason, the migrants should cut off their kith and kin, homeland, and culture and start anew in all matters in an alien context. It is the religious faith that helps many to begin in new situations. The pastoral care and communal belonging for Christians help them to foster their personal and spiritual life. But sometimes the cultures, traditions and practices, in their Christian tradition and the new circumstances can make many 'fish out of water.' They are struggling to be integrated into the new cultural situations because of their own religious and cultural backgrounds. There should be new guidelines and methodologies to understand, interpret, and live their way of life in the new migrant situation.

Since the 1950s, the St Thomas Christians migrated enormously from Kerala to different parts of India and from 1980 to foreign countries. A good number of them are living in countries like the USA, Canada, Australia, and the European Countries. The second and third generations of migrant communities, born and brought up outside India and having not much contact with Indian customs, practices, and cultures are trying to keep their ethnic and ecclesial identity together with their integration into the western and urban cultures. Many dioceses of the Syro-Malabar Church outside India are now trying their best to propagate and transmit the identity of the St. Thomas Christian community and the spirit and elements of their ecclesial heritage.<sup>1</sup> Since such attempts are in the process, there should be certain guiding principles that can distinguish the essential and adaptable elements of their ecclesiastical identity. This paper is a humble attempt in that line to show how to live the heritage of Syro-Malabar Christians in migrant communities.

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<sup>1</sup>For example, the diocese of Great Britten started a five-year pastoral plan from 2017 to 2022 with the theme, "Faith Formation of Children." See for details the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pastoral Letter of Bishop Joseph Srampickal on 25.11.2017.

## 1. *Mar Thoma Margam*:<sup>2</sup> A Unique Way of Living

*Mar Thoma Margam*, or the Law of Thomas, is the totality of the Christian patrimony and the way of life of the St Thomas Christians for centuries. It contains the tradition, theology, liturgy, and spirituality of Christianity in India. “The *Toma Marga*, like the Torah for Jews, was the sum total of the religious discipline of the Thomas Christians.”<sup>3</sup> The nature and the features of the Law of Thomas depended on the historical evolution and cultural adaptations of the St Thomas Christian community. Since the Christian community in India acquired its heritage from the Apostolic faith and developed through its relation with its commercial and ecclesial contacts with Greek, Jewish, and Persian worlds as well as from the influences of Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and natural religions, *Mar Thoma Margam* at its nascent stage had traits of a cosmopolitan culture. When the influence of Buddhism and Jainism declined by the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and the Aryan Hindu superiority and the caste system got established in Malabar to cope with the high caste Brahmins, the St Thomas Christian community Christianised many customs of the High caste Hindus.<sup>4</sup> Their noble status was approved by the privileges granted to them by the local rulers through “Copper Plate Grants.”<sup>5</sup>

The Western missionaries who came to India in the 16<sup>th</sup> century found the Law of Thomas interwoven with many Hindu practices to such an extent that some of them wondered whether the Thomas Christians were not more Hindu than Christians. By the decrees of the Synod of Diamper, and the influence of the missionaries, the Law of Thomas acquired new adaptations, customs, rituals, and practices that are in line with the Western Church. Gradually, *Mar Thoma Margam* became a mixture of Eastern and Western cultures and traditions.

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<sup>2</sup>The term *Marga* in Malayalam means the way. It was originally a Buddhist word to mean Buddhism as a way of life. When Christianity was introduced to South India, where Buddhism and Jainism were prevalent religions, it was considered the new ‘way’ of life or *Marga* for the Christians.

<sup>3</sup>Andrews Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of The Syro-Malabar Church: A Historico-Juridical Study*, Kottayam: OIRSI 106, 1987, 9.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of The Syro-Malabar Church*, 13; George Thomas Kuzhippallil, *The West Meets the East: A Study on the Interactions Between the European Missionaries and the St. Thomas Christians, 1500-1800*, Chisinau: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2022.

<sup>5</sup>M.O. Joseph Nedumkunnam gives a list of 72 privileges that are granted to the St Thomas Christians. See M.O. Joseph Nedumkunnam, *Kerala Kristianikal* (Malayalam), Cochin, 1972, 155-156. Koodapuzha gives the translations of the copper plates. Cf. Xavier Koodapuzha, *Bharatasbhacharitam* (Malayalam, 1st Edition in 1980), Kottayam: OIRSI 441, 2018 (Vth Edition), 248-264.

## 2. Some Authentic Sources

Since *Mar Thoma Margam* is not a written Law of certain rules and regulations according to which the St Thomas Christians build up their way of life, but a collective concept of the traditions, liturgy, customs, and practices, it is difficult to make clear cut criteria to distinguish the essential elements of it. But the following texts help us as sources for getting clear ideas on different elements of *Mar Thoma Margam*.

### 2.1. Varthamanapusthakam<sup>6</sup>

As writing a travelogue, even though Governador Thomas Paremmakel did not focus on explaining the elements, there is a clear consciousness of *Mar Thoma Margam* in *Varthamanapusthakam*. Paremmakel considered the Church itself as “the way” or *Margam* and the sum total of the customs and rites of the forefathers as the *Mar Thoma Margam*.<sup>7</sup>

#### 2.1.1. Apostolic Origin of Christian Faith

The fundamental element of *Mar Thoma Margam*, according to Paremmakel, is the Christian faith given by Apostle Thomas in Malabar.<sup>8</sup> He 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 Syrian rite.”<sup>9</sup> The St Thomas Christians have a spiritual and filial relation to the Apostle Thomas. *Varthamanapusthakam* gives a detailed description of the pilgrimage of Cariattil and Paremmakel to Mylapore and the veneration they showed at the tomb of St Thomas before starting their

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<sup>6</sup>*Varthamanapusthakam* is a travelogue written by Thomas Paremmakel during the years 1785-1786. We find there not only the description of the European mission of Mar Cariattil and himself but also his ardent love and commitment towards the Church of St. Thomas Christians. Cf. George Thomas Kuzhippallil, *The West Meets the East: A Study on the Interactions Between the European Missionaries and the St. Thomas Christians, 1500-1800*, 245-249; Jose Valiamangalam, *Ecclesial Vision of St. Thomas Christians in the Light of Varthamanapusthakam: A Historico Theological Study*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 439, 2018.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. George Kudilil, “Mar Thoma Margam as reflected in *Varthamanapusthakam*,” in Andrews Mekkattukunnel, ed., *Mar Thoma Margam: The Ecclesial Heritage of the St Thomas Christians*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 2012, 164-171; Valiamangalam, *Ecclesial Vision of St. Thomas Christians*, 190-197.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Valiamangalam, *Ecclesial Vision of St. Thomas Christians*, 254.

<sup>9</sup>Paremmakel Thomman Kathanar, *Varthamanapusthakam: Travelogue of Dr. Joseph Kariattil and Paremmakel Thomman Kathanar to Lisbon and Rome 1778-1786* (Malayalam), Kottayam: OIRSI, 1989. English Translation rendered by Placid J. Podipara, *Varthamanapusthakam*, Rome: Orientalia Christiana, 1971, 247.

voyage. By writing the details about the pilgrimage, he wanted to present that the St Thomas Christian community in India had nobody as their father of faith other than St Thomas.

For Paremmakel, *Mar Thoma Margam* is the life of faith based on the Scriptures. The usage of numerous biblical passages and images in *Varthamanapusthakam* shows the depth of their faith which is rooted in the Bible. By quoting various biblical passages, Paremmakel compared their journey to Europe to the Exodus event and Cariattil as Moses.<sup>10</sup> As it was in the life of Israel and the life of the St Thomas Christians, the word of God was the motivational force for both Cariattil and Paremmakel when they faced a lot of difficulties in their journey. Every struggle and difficulty that they experienced in their journey was seen and interpreted based on their faith in the providence of God.<sup>11</sup> They were always thankful to God and the blessed Virgin Mary and St Thomas for protecting them from dangers.<sup>12</sup> From the explanation of Paremmakel, we can also notice that the faith of St Thomas Christians is related to or expressed through charity works.<sup>13</sup> He says: "Those who accepted it (the Christian faith), as children of the same father, procured everything needed for soul and body and for the whole community in the spirit of Christian charity and unity without any quarrel and misunderstanding."<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1.2. Oriental Character in Worship

Another important aspect of *Mar Thoma Margam* reflected in *Varthamanapusthakam* is the oriental character in their worship. Paremmakel was proud to proclaim the relationship with the East-Syrian Church. He says, "We are St. Thomas Christians... our rite and language are different. All communities have their bishops and religious heads who are of their own rite and way of life."<sup>15</sup> He affirms that the community appreciated, accepted, and grew in the East-Syrian liturgical tradition. The historical voyage of Cariattil and Paremmakel was to protect this patrimony from the Latinization of western missionaries. Paremmakel also says that they tried in Rome to collect some books of St Ephrem in Syriac, which was not granted by Roman authorities. But they procured the Holy Bible and Breviaries in the Syriac language for the use of the priests and

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<sup>10</sup>Paremmakel, *Varthamanapusthakam*, 259; Valiamangalam, *Ecclesial Vision of St. Thomas Christians*, 201.

<sup>11</sup>Paremmakel, *Varthamanapusthakam*, 104; Kudilil, "Mar Thoma Margam," 167.

<sup>12</sup>Paremmakel, *Varthamanapusthakam*, 128; Kudilil, "Mar Thoma Margam," 167.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Kudilil, "Mar Thoma Margam," 168.

<sup>14</sup>Paremmakel, *Varthamanapusthakam*, 263.

<sup>15</sup>Paremmakel, *Varthamanapusthakam*, 132.

seminarians.<sup>16</sup> Cariattil and Paremmakel were against the proposal to change over to the Latin rite before the episcopal consecration of Cariattil in Lisbon.<sup>17</sup> They also celebrated Holy Qurbana in many places in their own rite which was appreciated by many.<sup>18</sup>

### 2.1.3. Indian Cultural Context

From *Varthamanapusthakam* we can also understand that there are numerous cultural adaptations of local customs of Hindu neighbours in the *Mar Thoma Margam*. The misunderstandings of the missionaries regarding the cultural elements in the Law of Thomas were the reason for the troubles and division among St Thomas Christians. The concept of priesthood and bishopric as spiritual leaders or God-man of the community was one of the vivid examples of the Indian tradition. The *Mar Thoma Margam* vested clerics only with spiritual duties for the community when the laypersons in *Yogam* (Assembly), handle the secular needs or administrative requirements of the community. There are a number of references to *Yogam* in the different levels in *Varthamanapusthakam*.<sup>19</sup> He also narrates about celebrations of some feasts, processions and customs related to birth, marriage, and death which are also clear examples of the adaptation of Indian culture.

### 2.2. Placid J. Podipara: A Great Visionary

The famous statement of Placid. J. Podipara on St. Thomas Christians, “Hindu in culture, Christian in religion and Oriental in worship”<sup>20</sup> became the dictum of *Mar Thoma Margam* by many authors. According to him, the St Thomas Christians are totally integrated into the Hindu culture and the body politic of the land with their oriental character in worship and Christian faith.<sup>21</sup> The high caste status, equal to the rank of the Brahmins allowed them to keep many common customs and cultural practices related to the birth, schooling,

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<sup>16</sup>Cf. Kudilil, “Mar Thoma Margam,” 169.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Paremmakel, *Varthamanapusthakam*, 96; Charles Payngot, “Mar Joseph Cariattil Archbishop of Cranganore: Life and Activities,” in Payngot, ed., *Homage to Mar Cariattil: Pioneer Malabar Ecumenist*, Kottayam: OIRSI 150, 1992, 35-64.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Paremmakel, *Varthamanapusthakam*, 96, 111, 214-215, Cf. Valiamangalam, *Ecclesial Vision of St. Thomas Christians*, 204-205.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Paremmakel, *Varthamanapusthakam*, 32-33; 144.

<sup>20</sup>Placid J. Podipara, “Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship,” in George Menachery, ed., *Thomopedia*, Ollur, 2000, 107-112. Archbishop Joseph Powathil paraphrased this dictum as “Indian in Culture, Christian in Religion and Syro-Oriental in Worship.” See Joseph Powathil, *Church as the Mystery of Communion: A Tribute to the Ecclesial Vision of Father Placid J. Podipara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 23.

<sup>21</sup>Podipara, “Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship,” 107.

marriage, and death of a person. Podipara explains in detail different Christianised cultural practices and ceremonies.<sup>22</sup> He also mentions professional diversifications of St Thomas Christians as agriculturists, merchants, and militia. For him, the spirit of hard work, truthfulness, loyalty, accountability, and courageousness are significant traits of the character of a St Thomas Christians.<sup>23</sup>

Podipara also mentions the architecture of the church buildings and the processions related to church feasts which are similar to those of the non-Christian temples.<sup>24</sup> He states that St Thomas Christians found peaceful co-existence with the Hindu and Buddhist majority and other religious minorities like Jews, and Muslims. They lived as a separate caste of Hinduism which refrained themselves from conversions on a large scale.<sup>25</sup> They preserved themselves as a powerful and influential community in society.<sup>26</sup> They have adapted many non-Christian customs and interpreted them with the Christian faith. Podipara also emphasizes the oriental character of their worship.<sup>27</sup> He gives details about their liturgical and linguistic relationship with the East Syrian Church and elaborate descriptions of the administration of sacraments in which the St Thomas Christians used the East Syrian rite and local adaptations.<sup>28</sup> They had profound Christian faith, the highest respect towards eucharistic celebrations and their life was church-centered.<sup>29</sup> They also scrupulously observed all the fasts and abstinence prescribed by East Syrian rite. During the Holy week, they had the practice of keeping vigils and giving alms in a special way. On Holy Thursday, they had their ceremony of *Pesaha* and on Good Friday they tasted the bitter water.<sup>30</sup>

### 2.3. Mar Thoma Margam: As a Juridical Source

While studying the juridical sources of the Syro-Malabar Church, Archbishop Andrews Thazhathu explains elaborately about the Law of Thomas.<sup>31</sup> Based on the scattered customs, traditions, and few documents he presents *Mar Thoma Margam* is almost as a juridical

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<sup>22</sup>Podipara, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship," 107, Powathil, Powathil, *Church as the Mystery of Communion*, 24.

<sup>23</sup>Podipara, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship," 108.

<sup>24</sup>Podipara, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship," 110.

<sup>25</sup>Podipara, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship," 110.

<sup>26</sup>Kollaparampil, *The Archdeacon of All India: A Historico-Juridical Study*, Rome, 1972, 4.

<sup>27</sup>Podipara, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship," 110.

<sup>28</sup>Podipara, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship," 110.

<sup>29</sup>Podipara, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship," 110.

<sup>30</sup>Podipara, "Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship," 111.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Andrews Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of The Syro-Malabar Church: A Historico-Juridical Study*, Kottayam: OIRSI 106, 1987, 8-63.

source of the identity of St Thomas Christians. Based on the western and local sources regarding the existence of several customs, traditions, and rituals, he gives a small history of the evolution of the Law of Thomas. While making a brief survey of the Law of Thomas in the socio-political life, socio-economic life, and liturgico-religious life of the St Thomas Christians he says, "The Law of Thomas is to be drawn from the complex socio-politico-religious system of the Thomas Christian community. It has zealously preserved several pristine elements of early Christianity. At the same time, it adapted itself to the existential cultural situation of India."<sup>32</sup>

According to Thazhath, St Thomas Christians had high social status in Indian or Malabar society. Their name as "Nasrani Mappila," (Nasrani Nobles) designates their Christian identity and their honorable status. Their unity was so strong that they were named as a "Christian Republic."<sup>33</sup> He also gives descriptions of the education system, occupations, architecture, festivals and the law of inheritance with regard to the socio-political life of St Thomas Christians. The laity, the priests, and the prelates had their own role in the socio-ecclesiastical life of St Thomas Christians. The participatory and equally enhancing role of the laity and the clergy made their Church as people of God of the New Testament.

Thazhath also speaks about the liturgico-religious life of St. Thomas Christians, which is a mixture of East Syrian rituals and Christianised Indian customs. He says, "The rites of Baptism, Eucharist, and Ordination were more in conformity with the Chaldean liturgy...By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the liturgy of the Thomas Christians became a Malabarised Chaldean liturgy."<sup>34</sup> By concluding the survey of the Law of Thomas, Thazhath says that when the existing usages and practices were found inadequate to their growing needs, St. Thomas Christians sought norms from similar churches and communities. They consider such adaptations as enrichment. He says, "In order to keep up the identity and individuality of the Church of the Thomas Christians, in particular of the Syro-Malabar Church today, the Law of Thomas has to be made incarnate in its existential situation."<sup>35</sup>

### 3. Essential Elements of *Mar Thoma Margam*

The above-mentioned three sources generally explain the same elements of Christian faith, eastern tradition, and Indian culture in

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<sup>32</sup>Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of The Syro-Malabar Church*, 22-23.

<sup>33</sup>Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of The Syro-Malabar Church*, 24.

<sup>34</sup>Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of The Syro-Malabar Church*, 45.

<sup>35</sup>Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of The Syro-Malabar Church*, 63.



*Mar Thoma Margam*. Based on these sources, the Syro-Malabar migrant communities can distinguish the essential and adaptable elements, which can help them as guiding principles.

### 3.1. Apostolic Faith and Affinity

First of all, the uniqueness of Thomasine faith and the filial love towards the Apostle can be seen as the fundamental element of *Mar Thoma Margam*.<sup>36</sup> From the very beginning onwards, St Thomas Christians had a profound faith and special relationship with St. Thomas, as their father of faith. They are proud to be known as children of St Thomas. They take pains to make long pilgrimages to the tomb of St Thomas in Mylapore and to the footprints on the mountain at Malayattoor. For them, the unique faith of St Thomas in the Son of God is the foundation of their entire Christian life and especially of the Law of Thomas.

The Thomasine faith is primarily based on the personality of St. Thomas and his exclusive experience of the resurrection of Christ in his life. Unlike any other Apostle of Jesus, the personality of Thomas had certain particular characteristics. As we read in the gospel of St John, he is a person, who “saw what he ought to do,” (Jn. 11:6); “saw what he ought to do and he wanted urgently to know how to do it,” (Jn. 14:5); “saw what he had to do what he had to believe, he urgently wanted to prove it,” (Jn.20: 24-29).<sup>37</sup> The main traits of his personality are (1) devoted- he declared his loyalty to the master at any cost; (2) challenging- he challenged anything uncertain; (3) doubting- he will not be swept off his feet by the testimony of others; (4) believing- he removed all his doubts by seeing and believed totally in the resurrected Lord. Through his brave and committed trust in Jesus, he experienced that Jesus is the source and giver of life, the way to the Father, and the Lord and God.<sup>38</sup>

He had also tangible and stronger evidence for the resurrection of Jesus as the same person who was crucified, died, and was buried. When Jesus showed his wound signs to him, he experienced the

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<sup>36</sup>Cf. Saijo Thaikattil, “Ecclesiological Identity of the Syro-Malabar Church: Prospects and Challenges,” in Peter Kannampuzha, ed., *Tradition and Identity of the Syro-Malabar Church*, Kakkannad: LRC Publications 30, 2019, 98-114.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. Martin G. Collins, Faithful Thomas, in Forerunner, January 1992 available from <https://www.cgg.org/index.cfm/library/article/id/559/faithful-thomas.htm>, accessed on 12.02.2022

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Vincent Alappatt, “Christ-Experience of Mar Thoma Sliha,” in Andrews Mekkattukunnel, ed., *Mar Thoma Margam: The Ecclesial Heritage of the St Thomas Christians*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 2012, 13-22.

doubled love of Jesus.<sup>39</sup> Christ assured his presence with him and his followers until the end of the world. This faith in the resurrected Lord was the central concern and matter of his preaching of the gospel. Based on the Thomasine faith, St Thomas Christians had a deep faith in the resurrected Lord. That is why *Mar Thoma Sreeba*, which represents the resurrected Lord became the important symbol of St. Thomas Christians. As the Apostle acquired a privileged personal encounter with the resurrected Lord, St Thomas Christians are called to acquire this personal Christ experience and evangelize this faith through personal sharing in every context in which they live. This is the first task of the Syro-Malabar migrant communities.

### 3.2. Significance of Eastern Spirituality

The spirituality of St. Thomas Christians is the combination of their Thomasine faith, affinity to Eastern traditions, and Indian cultural background. Unlike in the Western Church, they do not have different types of spiritualities proposed by any saints or schools.<sup>40</sup> They remember and live all the phases of Salvation history in their liturgical year. "By meditating on the mysteries of salvation and by participating in the Eucharist and the liturgical hours of the Church, they can spontaneously grow in genuine Christian spirituality."<sup>41</sup> Each season has its own spiritual attitude and practices, which include fasting, penance, celebrations, feasts etc. The devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary is also very important in their spirituality. They remember Mary on all Wednesdays in their liturgy and there are different feast days dedicated to her. They keep special fast days like Eight Days Fast before 8<sup>th</sup> September or Fifteen days fast before 15<sup>th</sup> August.

Their spirituality is ecclesial and sacramental-centered. Their participation and reception of sacraments are the main spiritual practices to keep their holiness of life. They are attending long liturgical ceremonies related to the administration of sacraments. Priests and the Religious have a special place in their life. Their spiritual life is fostered not only in the parish but is practiced and experienced in their whole life through the good religious traditions

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<sup>39</sup>Cf. Johnson Thomaskutty, *Saint Thomas the Apostle: New Testament, Apocrypha and Historical Traditions*, London: T& Clark Publications, 2018, 57-68.

<sup>40</sup>See for the characteristics of the spirituality of St. Thomas Christians, Joseph Chalassery, "The Spiritual Heritage and Identity of the St. Thomas Christians," in *Tradition and Identity of the Syro-Malabar Church*, Peter Kannampuzha, ed., Kakkanad: LRC Publication no.30, 2019, 166-189.

<sup>41</sup>Chalassery, "The Spiritual Heritage and Identity," 177.

and practices in the family.<sup>42</sup> They have a habit of daily family prayer in the evening. All the members of the family under the leadership of the head of the family gather together in front of a sacred picture or *Mar Thoma Sreeba*, light candles, and recite prayers which end with the reading of the Bible and the kiss of peace. Chalassery summarises the spiritual life of St. Thomas Christians as: “the spirituality of St. Thomas Christians becomes experiential through the fruits of their life which are completely penetrated with the charity and the love of God. They experience, in the Church and in the family, a life in which the presence of God is concretely manifested.”<sup>43</sup>

### 3.3. Central Theological and Liturgical Notions

There are certain essential theological and liturgical notions behind the Law of Thomas. Even though these are based on the eastern as well as Indian cultures, they can be kept in every culture as landmarks of *Mar Thoma Margam*.

#### 3.3.1. Concept of Mystery

The concept of mystery is common to all eastern ecclesial traditions. On the background of the mystical religions<sup>44</sup> of India and the Jewish tradition, St. Thomas Christians also emphasize the concept of mystery in their theological and liturgical understanding. But unlike the mystical religions, for them, ‘mystery’ is not a concept that denotes unintelligible or secret cults, but is related to their entire Christian faith, liturgy and attitude. St Thomas Christians relate this concept with the mystery of the Trinity, the Divine Revelation through Jesus Christ, the Paschal mystery, and the Church. They use the Syriac term, “Raza” to express the concept of mystery. The solemn Qurbana of St. Thomas Christians itself called “Raza.”

The feasts, commemorations, prayers, and rituals in different seasons of the liturgical year of the Syro-Malabar Church, witness this concept of the divine origin and its unfolding very intensely.<sup>45</sup> “For them, what is being remembered in this celebration does not remain

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<sup>42</sup>Chalassery, “The Spiritual Heritage and Identity,” 178.

<sup>43</sup>Chalassery, “The Spiritual Heritage and Identity,” 188.

<sup>44</sup>Mystical religions have their own mystery cults and customs which exist on the foundation of victimization of the scapegoats. The mimetic theory of Rene Girard interprets the violence behind the mystery cults, sacrificial rituals, institutions, customs of religions, and the uniqueness of Judeo-Christian revelation of God. He presents his theory in his numerous books and articles. The whole bibliography of Girard is there in [http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/mimetic\\_theory\\_bibliography.html](http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/mimetic_theory_bibliography.html)., Cf. George Thomas Kuzhippallil, *A Dramatic Re-reading of the Concept of the Body of Christ in Indian Ecclesial Context*, Saarbrücken: Südwestdeutscher Verlag, 2009.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Sophy Rose, *The Church as Mystery (Raza) and Communion (shawtaputha) in the East Syriac Liturgical Year: An Ecclesiological Analysis*, Kottayam: OIRSI 207, 1998, 123.

as a past historical event without any impact over the faithful. Instead, the historical event of Christ, his Paschal Mystery- passion, death, burial and resurrection-is made really present and truly effective in the Celebration.”<sup>46</sup> This concept of mystery and the mystical relations with the divine realities are also evident in the different customs and practices of *Mar Thoma Margam*. St Thomas Christians keep the divine mystical order in the universe, in the society, in the family relationships, and the ecclesial realms.

### 2.3.2. Vision of a Life of Holiness

Related to the concept of mystery, St Thomas Christians view holiness and purity as great virtues in their personal and ecclesial life. Even though many purity rites and customs related to the birth, marriage, and death of a person in Indian culture are connected with taboos and prohibitions of mystical religions, St Thomas Christians view them more than as purity rites but in relation to the holiness of God. There was a practice among the St Thomas Christians that they washed their bodies and put on freshly washed clothes before going to the church. They believed that only those who were clean of body and clothes were worthy of entering the church. On their way to the church, they would not allow themselves to be touched by persons of lower castes. At the entrance of the church, they washed their feet in a well.<sup>47</sup>

To keep their holiness and purity in life, they had great concern for an ascetical life. They believe that through the baptism they are entering into a new covenant with God, who is the abode of holiness. They abandon their old life of sinfulness and receive the garment of glory which they try to keep in their whole life through the reception of sacraments and ascetical life. They have a rigorous practice of fasting. “Fasting was never counted as an act of private devotion or an obligation imposed by the ecclesiastical law but as part and parcel of one’s devotion to God. Over half of the year was set aside for fasting. The Church advocates mainly eight fast in the course of the liturgical year.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Jose Poovannikunnel, *Concept of Mystery (Raza) in the Syro-Malabar Qurbana: A Study on the Biblical and Theological Dimensions of the Liturgical Theology of the Eucharistic Celebration*, Kottayam: OIRSI 133, 1989, 92.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. A.M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century (up to 1542)*, vol. I, Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1989,196.

<sup>48</sup>Jose Puthiaparambil, “Spiritual Heritage and Ascetic Practices in the Life of St. Thomas Christians,” in Mekkattukunnel, ed., *Mar Thoma Margam*, 3-13.

### 3.3.3. Life of Communion and Fellowship

Based on the Trinitarian communion, Syro-Malabar Christians also keep the strongest sense of communion in their ecclesial and social life. For them, the Church and individuals are called to create and maintain a life of communion in all areas of their life and activities. As three Persons in the Trinity without losing their identity keep their oneness and communion, the Church and the individual must also keep unity without lessening their identity. Their liturgical assembly is the best example of heavenly and earthly communion.<sup>49</sup> They believe in the communion of saints. The concept of communion is also clear in their hierarchical communion with other Catholic Churches. The profound family relationship and the participation in ecclesial organizations, concern for the poor and needy are also signs of their fellowship.

### 3.3.4. Christians as Pilgrim People on the “Way”

Since *Mar Thoma Margam* is the “way” of life of St. Thomas Christians, the very concept of the “Way” and the vision of the Church as a pilgrim people of God is also very much explicit among them. The concept of “way” or “Margam” has a Jewish and Indian background.<sup>50</sup> The Sanskrit word, “Margam” as the way of life was often used by the Hindu and Buddhist monks. St Ephrem also developed excellently the themes, way and voyage that are very much familiar among St Thomas Christians. These concepts of the way and pilgrimage suggest the vision that we do not have a permanent city here on earth (Heb.13:14). All human beings are moving towards heaven, where we find our real residence. This notion is very clear in the liturgy of St Thomas Christians.

Their celebration of the Eucharist, facing the East is the best example of the pilgrim nature of the Church. Summarising the theology of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana, Pauli Maniatt says, “Eucharist is the anticipation of the heavenly life (SC 8). The entire celebration is oriented towards eschatological fulfilment. On the one hand, Eucharist is the waiting for the heavenly life, on the other, it is already an entry into the heavenly life.”<sup>51</sup> The pilgrimages, which the St Thomas Christians are making to the tomb of St Thomas, and the solemn processions related to their parish feasts are also signs of their belief that the Christian life is a pilgrimage towards heaven. The

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<sup>49</sup>Cf. Powathil, *Church as the Mystery of Communion* 188.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. Andrews Mekkattukunnel, “Mar Thoma Margam: The Ecclesial Heritage of the St. Thomas Christians,” in Mekkattukunnel, ed., *Mar Thoma Margam*, 3-10.

<sup>51</sup>Pauli Maniyattu, “Theology of Syro-Malabar Qurbana,” in Andrews Mekkattukunnel, ed., *Mar Thoma Margam*, 35-56, 49.

rituals and prayers at the time of the burial of a priest or a layman also express clearly the vanity of the earthly things and their expectation for heavenly bliss.<sup>52</sup>

### 3.4. Essentials in Ecclesiastical and Social Life

Another important area of *Mar Thoma Margam* is in the ecclesiastical and social life of the St Thomas Christians. As we have seen before, since they possess a high status in society, many of their social customs, practices, and privileges are related or similar to those of the high caste people in Malabar. However, such customs and practices in their ecclesiastical and social life have meaning and relevance in any culture. We can trace certain principles regarding them.

#### 3.4.1. Ecclesiastical Organization

The ecclesiastical organization of the St Thomas Christians was not concentrated on a single person as a bishop or a priest but a collegial or participatory administration at all levels.<sup>53</sup> The Archdeacon, *Jathikukarthavyan*<sup>54</sup> who was the “ex-officio teacher” of St Thomas Christians, preserved, protected, and promoted the individuality, identity, and heritage of the Church and safeguarded its autonomy, prestige, and independence until the missionary period.<sup>55</sup>

As a unique ecclesiastical organizational system of St Thomas Christians, *Yogams* must be kept also in all migrant communities. Earlier there were three kinds of *Yogams*, namely, *Palliyogam* (parish Assembly) at the parish level, *Desayogam* (Regional Assembly) at the regional level, and *Mahayogam* (General Assembly) at the national or general level concerning the whole Church. Now there are *Palliyogam*, *Pradinidhiyogam* (parish council), the pastoral council at the diocesan level, and the Major-Archiepiscopal Assembly at the universal level. *Palliyogam* was the responsible body to take decisions at the parish level on matters connected with finance, construction of churches,

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<sup>52</sup>Thomas Neendoor, “Abide in Peace: Eschatological Expectations in the Texts of Funeral Services of Priests in the Chaldean and Malabar Churches,” in Mekkattukunnel ed., *Mar Thoma Margam*, 155-165.

<sup>53</sup>Cf. Joseph Kallarangatt, “Ecclesiological Perspective of St. Thomas Christians,” in Mekkattukunnel, ed., *Mar Thoma Margam*, 139-154, 146-147.

<sup>54</sup>For further details regarding the office of the Archdeacon, see Kollaparampil, *The Archdeacon of All India; Thazhath, The Juridical Sources of The Syro-Malabar Church*, 37-39.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. B. Vadakkekara, *Origin of India's St Thomas Christians: A Historiographical Critique*, Delhi: 1995, revised edition, *Origin of Christianity in India: A Historiographical Critique*, Delhi, 2007, 44; Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, Changanachery: HIRS 94, 2019, 39.

support of priests, administration of temporalities of churches, determination of policies regarding the life and activities of the community, presentation of the recommendation letter to the Bishop for those to be ordained from the parish, electing representatives to regional and General assemblies, assisting the poor, conducting *nerchas* (agape) on solemn feast days.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.4.2. The Prominent Role of the Laity

The role of the laity was very significant and active in the ecclesial administration of St Thomas Christians. The ordinary faithful is not mere subjects of the hierarchical authorities, but they were involved actively both in Christian life and in the administrative affairs of the Church. There are open discussions and each member could express their opinions fearlessly in *Yogam*. The *Palliyogam* was a kind of decentralized system that gave a sense of autonomy and responsibility to the parish assemblies.<sup>57</sup> They also engage in different activities of the church in any land. As we have discussed before, the St. Thomas Christians had a good profile in their occupations as agriculturists, merchants, and military personals of the local rulers, and influence in the society earlier, the migrants Christians are also active in different professions, businesses, international affairs, and politics in their own countries. As with their forefathers, the human and Christian values and moral uprightness and integrity are well appreciated in the ancient society, qualities of the members of Syro-Malabar communities can also witness their uniqueness.

## 4. Adaptable Elements in *Mar Thoma Margam*

As we have analysed the *Mar Thoma Margam*, we find that many customs and rituals are related to the local traditions which prevailed in ancient times and Indian culture. Since there is organic growth in the culture of a community, certain customs become meaningless or irrelevant when time passes. Similarly, concerning *Mar Thoma Margam*, certain elements can be changed or transformed according to the place and time.

### 4.1. Customs and Practices Related to Local Cultures

Those traditions related to the life of a person, like food, dress, ornaments, and customs related to birth, marriage, and death are subjected to the culture and development of a society. The tradition of the community cannot impose matters regarding such things but can

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<sup>56</sup>Cf. James Thalachelloor & Mathew Madathikunnel "Palliyogam among the St Thomas Christians," in Andrews Mekkattukunnel, ed., *Mar Thoma Margam*, 157-165.

<sup>57</sup>Thalachelloor & Madathikunnel, "Palliyogam among the St Thomas Christians," 158.

only propose the original meaning and benefits of such customs to its members. For example, the customs related to birth, like the mother entering the church after 40 days, *Namakarana*<sup>58</sup> ritual, the rite of *Annaprasadam*,<sup>59</sup> marriage like *Antham Charth* (the ceremonial Hairdressing) of the bridegroom, *Mylandhi idal* (anointing the feet of the bride),<sup>60</sup> *Natavili* or *Kurava* (shouting) or practices related to death like *pulakuli*, *sradham*, etc., could be seen as adaptable elements of *Mar Thoma Margam*.

#### 4.2. Customs and Practices Related to Church Feasts

We can also include those customs and practices related to the church feasts and processions in the adaptable elements. The use of many paraphernalia like *Muthukuda*, Musical Instruments, *Panchavadyam*, *Chenda*, etc., by the migrant communities during the processions may create intolerance and aggressivity among the people of other cultures.

#### Conclusion

Thus, the sum total of the ecclesial heritage and identity of Syro-Malabar Christians, *Mar Thoma Margam* is very significant in all migrant communities too. But introducing the customs and practices without knowing, evaluating, and adapting the meanings and contents of it among communities outside Indian culture and the eastern ecclesial milieu can create confusion and lethargy among the members. There should be many valuable studies and catechetical formations about the *Mar Thoma Margam* among such communities. Such initiatives can motivate the new generations of Syro-Malabar migrant communities to be proud of their Christian faith and ecclesial heritage.

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<sup>58</sup>It is a ritual for giving a Name to the Child. Cf. Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of The Syro-Malabar Church*, 52.

<sup>59</sup>It is a rite of feeding the child in line with Hindu culture. Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of The Syro-Malabar Church*, 52.

<sup>60</sup>Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of The Syro-Malabar Church*, 55.