

SYNODAL STRUCTURES IN THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON *PALLIYOGAM*

Pauly Maniyattu ♦

Paurastya Vidyapitham, Vadavathoor

Abstract

This article examines the various ecclesial structures of the Syro-Malabar Church which contribute to the synodality of the Church. The Syro-Malabar Church of the St Thomas Christians maintained the principle of synodality in the various aspects of the ecclesial life. Mar Thoma Margam, the very name given to the sum total of the ecclesial existence of St Thomas Christians, points to the synodal character of this ecclesial tradition. In the tradition of St Thomas Christians, the synodality of the bishop was realized to a great extent through the ministry of Archdeacon and Corepiscopa, who were priests with the extra orders of Archdeacon and Corepiscopa. Archdeacon as the '*Jathikku Karthaavyan*,' took care of the administration of the Church, for which he was helped by the *Pothuyogam*, the General Assembly of the Church. Another important element that contributed to the synodality of St Thomas Christians was the *Yogam* (assembly) of various levels: *Pothuyogam* (General Assembly), *Pradesikayogam* (Regional Assembly), and *Palliyogam* (Parish Assembly). *Palliyogam* had a great say in the day-to-day administration of the parish Church. However, it is unfortunate that

♦ **Pauly Maniyattu** is a priest belonging to the diocese of Idukki; PhD in Oriental Sciences with specialization of Liturgy, Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome (1995); MA Malayalam, Kerala University; MA Syriac, MG University, Kottayam; 1996-2006: Professor and Dean of Studies at St Ephrem's Theological College, Satna, MP; Visiting Professor: Jnana Deepa, Pune (1998-2020); Ruhailaya, Ujjain (1996-2006); Good Shepherd, Kunnoth; Sanathana, Thamarassery; Founding Editor of *Ephrem's Theological Journal*, Satna; 2008-: Professor of Liturgy and Syriac at St Thomas Apostolic Seminary, Vadavathoor, Kottayam; 2021- Vice President of Paurastya Vidyapitham; 2010-2018: Secretary, Syro-Malabar Synodal Commission for Liturgy; At present Member, Central Liturgical Committee of Syro-Malabar Church; Publications: 6 Books and more than 75 articles on liturgy and theology in various journals and books. Email: paulymani@gmail.com

today the ecclesiastical Yogams do not have the same power which they enjoyed in the past. In the modern times the synodality of the Church is manifested to a great extent through the Synod of Bishops of a Patriarchal or Major Archiepiscopal Church.

Keywords: Archdeacon; Mahayogam; Margam; Mar Thoma Margam; Palliyogam; Pothuyogam; St Thomas Christians, Synod of Bishops; Synod of Diamper; Synodality; Yogam

Introduction

The Syro-Malabar Church or the Church of St Thomas Christians has a great testimony of synodality. 'Mar Thoma Margam,' the very name given to the sum total of the ecclesial existence of St Thomas Christians, points to the synodal character of this ecclesial tradition.¹ For the Church of St Thomas Christians, synodality has been an essential aspect of her ecclesial existence. The St Thomas Christians considered the totality of their ecclesial existence as a '*Margam*' (way). In history the Christian life of St Thomas Christians was known as *Mar Thoma Margam*. The members of the Church are those who are on the *Margam*, the *Margam* or way of Jesus. Understanding the ecclesial life as the reality of a 'way' is very well connected to the understanding of the synodality of the Church. The synodality of a Church is the essential manner of her existence. Synodality of the Church means the entire people of God 'being on-the-way-together.'² Through the centuries the Church of St Thomas Christians learned "to be on-the-way (*margam*) – together." In this short study we shall examine how the Church of St Thomas Christians, which is known from the twentieth century onwards as the Syro-Malabar Church, maintained the principle of synodality in the various aspects of the ecclesial life of St Thomas Christians.

Synodality in the St Thomas Christian Tradition

In the history of St Thomas Christians, we can find synodality profoundly presented in the various levels of ecclesial life. The *Archdiaconate* and the *Yogams* were the important institutions which contributed to the synodality of the Church in the tradition of St Thomas Christians. In the modern times, especially with the attainment of the Major-archiepiscopal status, the Syro-Malabar

¹For a detailed study on the various aspects of the 'Mar Thoma Margam,' see Andrews Mekkattukunnel, ed., *Mar Thoma Margam: The Ecclesial Heritage of the St Thomas Christians* (Kottayam: OIRSI, 2012).

²Annemarie C. Mayer, "'For a Synodal Church': Equipping the Catholic Church on Her Way into the Third Millennium," *Louvain Studies* 43 (2020): 208.

Church has the Synod of Bishops as the most decisive element of the synodality of the Church. The present systems of the Major Archiepiscopal Assembly, Eparchial Curia, Eparchial Assembly, Pastoral Council, Presbyteral Council, Parish *Yogam* and Parish Council are the means for maintaining synodality of the Syro-Malabar Church. In this study we shall analyse the traditional institutions of Archdiaconate and the *Palliyogam* and also the contemporary institution of the Synod of Bishops.

Archdeacon of All India

In the tradition of St Thomas Christians, the synodality of the bishop was realized to a great extent through the ministry of Archdeacon and Corepiscopa, who were priests with the extra orders of Archdeacon and Corepiscopa.³ Both in the East and West, the Archdeacon and Corepiscopa shared in the administrative power of the bishop. Archdeacon's role was prominent also in the Latin tradition. The ministry of Archdeacon and Corepiscopa contributed to the synodal functioning of the ministry of the bishop. The bishops of St Thomas Christians had both spiritual and temporal powers which were effectively exercised by the indigenous archdeacons. The whole jurisdiction was practically in the hands of the Archdeacon.⁴ According to A.M. Mundadan, the Archdeacon of St Thomas Christians was vested with greater authority than the East Syrian Archdeacon, owing to the fact that the East Syrian Metropolitans who were at the head of the hierarchy were persons in a new land quite different from theirs in language, customs, religious beliefs, socio-political set-up and so on. "For governing the Church, he had to depend almost fully on his assistant, the indigenous Archdeacon. This circumstance gave the Archdeacon a free hand in the government of this Church and enabled him to exercise the whole jurisdiction."⁵ The Archdeacon of St Thomas Christians was known as the archdeacon of All India. In the St Thomas Christian tradition, the archdeacon was called *jathikku kartthavyan*, the administrator of

³The Archdeacon and Corepiscopa were priests who assisted the bishop. Besides being the secretary of the bishop, the Archdeacon shared some of the administrative powers of the bishop. The Corepiscopa assisted the bishop, doing some of the ministries of the bishop in the village areas.

⁴Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India: A Historico-Juridical Study* (Rome, 1972), 83.

⁵A.M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India, Vol. I: From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 2019), 181.

the community. In the administration of the Church, the archdeacon was helped by the *Pothuyogam*, the General Assembly of the Church.

The existence of an archdeacon to assist the Metropolitan is evident from the fact that Patriarch Timothy I (780–823) wrote a letter to the Archdeacon (Arkn), the head of the Faithful in India. This letter contained the right norms to be followed in the ordination of priests, bishops, metropolitans and Patriarch.⁶ Here the expression “the Head of the Faithful in India,” denotes the expression prevalent among the St Thomas Christians, that is, *Jathikku Karthavyan*. A *padiyola* (document written on palm leaves), now in the possession of the Pothanikat family at Kothamangalam, says that in the year of 1509 Archdeacon Ittikuriath effected a compromise between two parties contending for the ownership of two churches of Kothamangalam. This *padiyola* styles the Archdeacon as the ‘*Jathikku Karthavyan*,’ which means the head of the caste, that is, the head of the St Thomas Christians.⁷

The Portuguese missionaries very well recognized the significant role played by the Archdeacon in the Church of St Thomas Christians. The letters of the Jesuit missionaries to their superiors reveal their esteem for the Archdeacon. “He is well versed in the Scriptures. He is prudent and very enterprising...He is a person, who can be counted for some greater responsibility, taking into account his great virtue and prudence.”⁸ Dionysio’s reports name the Archdeacon the Vicar General and Provisor of the Archbishop and so on. Fr Ros, SJ also calls him the Vicar General.⁹ The Annual Report of 1591 states that “The Archdeacon is considered the ‘*ex officio*’ teacher of all. The Archdeacon is the highest and the only dignity after the Archbishop among them.”¹⁰ There are many reports that present the Archdeacon as one having care of all Christians together with the Archbishop. In preserving the purity of faith and traditions and in communicating

⁶Ibn at-Taiyib, Fiqh an-Nasrania “Das Recht der Christenheit,” Teil II, überstezt von Hoenerbach W und Spies O, CSCO 168 (Louvain, 1957), 121.

⁷Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 81–82.

⁸The Annual Report of the Jesuits in 1577 cited in Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 81–86.

⁹ARSI, Goa-Mal, Vol. 47, f. 357v cited in Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 107.

¹⁰ARSI, Goa-Mal., Vol. 47, f. 357v: Annual Letter of 1591. Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 88.

them to the faithful, the Archdeacon of all-India had a responsible part in the Church of St Thomas Christians.¹¹

The Archdeacon was recognized as the administrator of the See during its vacancy. The Archbishop and the Archdeacon were together planning reforms in liturgy and discipline of the Church.¹² Besides the administration of the temporal goods, we find also some of the special liturgical services accomplished by the Archdeacon. The Archdeacon used to grant dispensation from matrimonial impediments.¹³ According to the Chaldean Canon Law, the presence of the Archdeacon is considered necessary in ecclesiastical synods and conventions.¹⁴ The Synod of Angamaly convoked by Mar Abraham and Archdeacon George of Christ in 1583 passed 28 decrees.¹⁵ The Archdeacon of St Thomas Christians enjoyed judicial powers too. With regard to St Thomas Christians, all their litigations, both ecclesiastical and civil, were heard by the Metropolitan and the Archdeacon.¹⁶ The statutes promulgated by Bishop Ros in 1606 speak about the judicial power of the Archdeacon: "About the Vicar General who judges all the cases of the diocese: The bishop alone cannot hear and decide all the cases. Therefore, every diocese is provided with a person to hear and decide all the cases of the diocese. In this diocese this person is the Archdeacon."¹⁷

The Holy See recognized the honourable and responsible position of the Archdeacon of India. Within the period of five years, Pope Gregory XIII addressed five Apostolic Briefs to Archdeacon George. All of them were to praise him and grant him new privileges and honours.¹⁸

We do not find the power of Archdeacon exercised in the Syro-Malabar Church today, though the liturgical function of the

¹¹Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 191.

¹²Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 108.

¹³Cfr. ARSI, *Goa-Mal.*, Vol. 17, f.2v: Ros to Fr Laurence on 2-12-1611. Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 201.

¹⁴Abdiso, *Collectio...*, tract. VIII, cap. XIX, can. 4; Canon 19 of Isoyahb; *Liber Patrum*, ed. Rec., 30; Canon 67 of Mar Maruta. Cited in Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 192.

¹⁵Jonas Thaliath, *The Synod of Diamper* (Roma: Orientalia Christiana Analecta 152, 1958), 15.

¹⁶Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 195.

¹⁷*Codex Vat.*, Borgiano Indiano, 18 ff. 121-122.

¹⁸Kollaparambil, *The Archdeacon of All-India*, 91-92.

Archdeacon is still retained in the Holy Qurbana and the liturgy of the Holy Orders. Archdiaconate is indeed one of the most important elements to be restored for the synodal functioning in the Syro-Malabar Church.

Yogams

Another important element that contributed to the synodality of St Thomas Christians was the *Yogam* (assembly).¹⁹ There were *yogams* at various levels like *Pothuyogam* (General Assembly), *Pradesikayogam* (Regional Assembly), and *Palliyogam* (Parish Assembly).²⁰

Yogam is roughly an indigenous institution combining the pastoral council and the eparchial convocation, but both at the eparchial and at the parish levels the laity share in decision-making not only in the administration of temporal goods but in the selection of the clergy, in enjoining penal sanctions for violations of discipline, etc.²¹

Yogams were the most efficient means for facilitating better participation of lay faithful in the administration of the Church.²² According to A.M. Mundadan, "all major questions of administration of temporal properties of the church, the celebration of feasts and many other matters of common interest had to be settled in the *yogam*."²³

The General *Yogam* was the assembly of the priests and representatives of the Christian faithful of all the parishes of the Church of St Thomas Christians, convoked and presided over by the Archdeacon of All India. Matters pertaining to the whole community were not decided by the Metropolitan nor by the archdeacon, but only by the General Assembly.²⁴

¹⁹Taking the system of *yogams* among the St Thomas Christians as a model, the CCEO has devised such assemblies on three levels for all the Oriental Churches. 1. On the Church *sui iuris* level (CCEO 140-145, 172) 2. On the Eparchial level (CCEO 235-242) 3. On the basic level of the parish (CCEO 295). Jacob Kollaparambil, "The Institute of *Yogam* in the Oriental Churches," in *Canonical Studies*, Canon Law Society of India, Bombay, 1996, 61.

²⁰Mathew Changankary, *Finance Officer in the Syro-Malabar Church* (Kottayam: OIRSI, 2017), 27; Varghese Palathinkal, "Palliyogam: A Laudable Heritage of the Syro-Malabar Major Archiepiscopal Church," *Iustitia* 9, 2 (December 2018): 346.

²¹*Nuntia* III, pp. 160-161. Cited in George Nedungatt, "Synodality in the Eastern Catholic Churches according to the New Code," *Concilium* (1992.5): 80, footnote 22.

²²Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 346.

²³Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. I, 161. Footnote 33.

²⁴Paul Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India* (Kottayam: OIRSI, 2010), 29. According to V. Palathinkal, the General Assembly was presided over by the Metropolitan of All India. V. Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 346.

Priests and lay representatives of parishes of a given region constituted the Regional Assembly. The Regional Assemblies consisting of priests and lay representatives from at least four parishes had judicial power. They counselled together, deliberated, took decision or reached a consensus.²⁵

The main responsibilities of *yogam* were: 1) Acquisition, administration and alienation of property; 2) Support of priests and bishops; 3) Maintenance of deacons; 4) Selection of candidates to priesthood and issue of testimonial letter or non-objection certificate (*desakury*); 5) Vigilance over the ecclesial, spiritual and temporal affairs of the church; 6) Imposition of penalties on the delinquents; Remission of penalties after a due penance; 7) Fixing a share for the central administration of the Church; 8) Approval of the parish *yogam* on grave matters.²⁶

Palliyogam

Palliyogam is a unique heritage and contribution of the St Thomas Christians to the universal Church.²⁷ *Palliyogam* or parish assembly was considered the basic unit of ecclesial communion. The *Palliyogam* or the parish assembly consisted of the priests and heads of the families of the parish.²⁸ *Palliyogam* as it existed in the tradition of St Thomas Christians had a very significant role to play with regard to the synodality of the Church. *Palliyogam* had a great say in the day-to-day administration of the parish Church. The parish administration was thoroughly democratic. *Palliyogam* assured the direct participation of the people of God in the mission and governance of the Church. The laity, clergy, and religious were directly involved in the administration of the parish, each according to one's own condition, function and role.²⁹

Palliyogam takes its historical origin from two castes³⁰ (sects) among the Hindus, *urar* and *uranmakar*.³¹ The members of *urar* and *uranmakar*

²⁵Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 346.

²⁶Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 346-347; Changankary, *Finance Officer in the Syro-Malabar Church*, 33. Cf. Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church* (Kottayam: OIRSI, 1987), 42; Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India* (Kottayam: OIRSI, 1998), 41-44, 71-75.

²⁷Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 346.

²⁸Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 346.

²⁹Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 346.

³⁰R.D. Immanuel, *The Influence of Hinduism on Indian Christians* (Jabalpur: Leonard Theological College, 1959), 20-44.

³¹Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 345.

managed the affairs of the (Hindu) temple, without remuneration or profit for themselves. The position of the priests (*santhikar*) in relation to the administration of the temple was notably inferior to that of a *yogam*. On the one hand, there is no evidence to prove that the system of *yogam* originated from the East Syrian Church. On the other hand, however, in the Hindu temples of Malabar the assemblies (*yogam*) were permanent bodies and they enjoyed legislative, judicial and administrative prerogatives.³² It is therefore quite probable that the origin and development of the Malabar Church *yogam* owes its inspiration to the Hindu culture. The involvement of the lay people in the ordinary administration of the Church was the unique characteristic of the Malabar Church. It might have been inspired by the early Christian converts from the Hindu religion.³³

Since *palli* stands for a place of worship of the Christians, that is, a church, consequently, *palliyogam* means a meeting of the church community. More precisely, the *palliyogam* is the gathering of the people to discuss the administration of a church community.³⁴ Paulinus Bartholomeo, a Carmelite missionary in India, called the *palliyogam* “a republican system of government.” He wrote: “All the Christians combine or unite themselves into a kind of Christian civil republic (state), and when there is a problem in one parish, others come together to defend it. The parish priest and the elders judge and decide everything.”³⁵ The priests and the heads of the families, who were males, constituted the *palliyogam*. The oldest priest (presbyter) of the parish presided over it.³⁶ Carmelite missionary, Father Boniface of Infant Jesus OCD, writes about the *yogam* of St Thomas Christians in a report given to the Propaganda Fide in 1750:

In all their Churches, the Christians (of St Thomas) deliberate on ecclesiastical matters in the *yogam*, which is composed of the clergy and the people, so that not only on financial administration for pious purposes, construction and repair of churches, etc. but also on promoting to the Sacred Orders, or absolving from censures. The people and the clergy take counsel together, and the bishop does not promote the candidates to orders, nor absolve any one from the censures incurred, unless the

³²See Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 147.

³³Changankary, *Finance Officer in the Syro-Malabar Church*, 32.

³⁴Changankary, *Finance Officer in the Syro-Malabar Church*, 32.

³⁵P. Bartholomeo, *Viaggio alle Indie Orientali* (Rome, 1796), 136–139, quoted in Xavier Koodapuzha, *Oriental Churches: Theological Dimensions* (Kottayam: OIRSI, 1988), 74–75; Changankary, *Finance Officer in the Syro-Malabar Church*, 32.

³⁶See Podipara, *The Hierarchy of the Syro-Malabar Church* (Alleppey: Prakasham Publications, 1976), 96; Thazhath, *The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 42.

petitioner brings a request of the people who assembled in the church and having heard the petitioner makes the said request to the prelate.³⁷

Important functions of the parishes were accomplished in consultation with the *palliyogam*: "In origin, development and functioning, the assembly conserved several features of the 'Ecclesia' of the early Church. Often the word 'church' denote[s] in several accounts, the local community."³⁸

Among the St Thomas Christians in Malabar, the authority of the bishop and of the archdeacon was highly respected in the *palliyogam*. The position of the priests was one of precedence and honour. But after the Synod of Diamper (1599) only priests began to exercise authority over the *palliyogam*. The archdeacon no longer had this authority.³⁹ Kurian Vanchipurackal maintains that the decentralized systems of *palliyogam* contributed to fostering a sense of autonomy and responsibility.⁴⁰ In the *palliyogam*, the co-operation of the laity and their exercise of vigilance helped to protect parish property against misappropriations. In short, the active involvements of the *palliyogam* in the life of the Church promoted a sense of responsibility of the laity for the church affairs, especially with regard to temporal matters.⁴¹

Regarding the origin of the *pradesika yogam* (regional assembly), one can consult a document composed in 1787 by Paremakal, the author of *The Varthamanapusthakam*⁴² (travelogue). Throughout the history of the Malabar Church, the *pradesika yogam* was charged with the administration of justice.⁴³ Solely the *pradesika yogam* was competent to judge serious cases and to handle the cases involving priests. The *pradesika yogam* consisted of priests and representatives of the faithful of a given region of the Malabar Church. As Paremakal pointed out, the practice that existed in Malabar regarding the administration of

³⁷J. Kollaparambil, "The Institute of *Yogam* in the Oriental Churches," 57. Cf. Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 347-348.

³⁸K. Vanchipurackal, "Laity in the Syro-Malabar Church," *Christian Orient* 5 (1984): 31.

³⁹Changankary, *Finance Officer in the Syro-Malabar Church*, 33.

⁴⁰Vanchipurackal, "Laity in the Syro-Malabar Church," 31.

⁴¹Changankary, *Finance Officer in the Syro-Malabar Church*, 33-34.

⁴²T. Paremakal, *The Varthamanapusthakam: An Account of the History of the Malabar Church between the Years 1773 and 1786 with Special Emphasis on the Events Connected with the Journey from Malabar to Rome via Lisbon and Back Undertaken by Malpan Mar Joseph Cariattil and Cathanar Thomman Paremakal*, trans. with an introduction and notes by P. Podipara (Rome, Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1971).

⁴³See Paremakal, *The Varthamanapusthakam*, 39-40. Cfr. Podipara, *The Thomas Christians* (London-Bombay: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970), 175.

justice required that before inflicting any punishment, the crime had to be proved before the representatives of four churches (*pradesika yogam*).⁴⁴

The *mahayogam* (general assembly) of the Malabar Church was a decision-making body which consisted of the representatives of the Christian faithful of all parishes presided over by the archdeacon. The *mahayogam* discussed and decided important matters that affected the whole Church of St Thomas Christians.⁴⁵ As the members of the *mahayogam* enjoyed equality, it was an effective means for maintaining communion and solidarity in the community.⁴⁶

As an example of the decisions of the *mahayogam*, one can invoke sending a delegation to Rome, in 1778, under the leadership of Joseph Cariattil to handle the reunion of Mar Thomas VI (the Jacobite Metropolitan) with the Catholic Church.⁴⁷ The same *mahayogam* sent along with the delegation, two candidates to study at the Propaganda College in Rome. The Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith at first refused to admit the candidates on the ground that they were not sent by the bishop. Later, however, the Prefect gave consent to admit them.⁴⁸

The custom of convoking the *mahayogam* is still alive today in the non-Catholic churches of the St Thomas Christian tradition.⁴⁹ "While the bishop was responsible for the worship, the *yogam* or assembly with the Archdeacon was responsible for the leadership of the local community."⁵⁰

It was as an expression of the communion of the people of God in the parish, to facilitate the administration of the parish through consultation, discussions and decision making on all matters affecting the life of the

⁴⁴See Paremakal, *The Varthamanapusthakam*, 41. See also Pallath, *The Catholic Church in India*, 20.

⁴⁵ Before the "Coonan Cross Oath" (1653) two *mahayogam* took place, in Athirampuzha and Angamaly. See Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 71; Paremakal, *The Varthamanapusthakam*, 33-34.

⁴⁶ See Koodapuzha, *Christianity in India*, 72. The introduction to *The Varthamanapusthakam* states, however, that the bishops from East Syrian Church were overshadowed by archdeacons who were very influential among the people. This may be the reason why the archdeacon presided over the *mahayogam*. See Paremakal, *The Varthamanapusthakam*, 3-4.

⁴⁷For more on the decisions of the *mahayogam* and the members of the delegation, see Paremakal, *The Varthamanapusthakam*, 65.

⁴⁸See Paremakal, *The Varthamanapusthakam*, 138.

⁴⁹See Podipara, *The Thomas Christians*, 97.

⁵⁰Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 349.

people. It assisted and collaborated with the parish priest in the exercise of his pastoral ministry. This ministry included spiritual, educational, cultural and financial matters of the parish.⁵¹

Challenges of the Restoration of *Yogams*

The traditional institution of the *yogam* of the St Thomas Christians has inspired the administrative system of the Catholic Church. Taking the system of *yogams* among the St Thomas Christians as a model, the CCEO has devised such assemblies on three levels for all the Oriental Churches. 1. On the Church *sui iuris* level (CCEO 140-145, 172), 2. On the Eparchial level (CCEO 235-242), and 3. On the basic level of the parish (CCEO 295).⁵² It is true that the historical institution of *yogam* very well manifested the synodal perspective of the Church. Today the model of *yogams* can be of great help in making our Churches more and more synodal. However, we should be cautious of the possible deviations that may occur in the *yogams*. We may not find the *yogams* always maintaining the democratic principles. *Yogam* was not always strictly a democratic system but oligarchic, rule by a few. This few may be elders (gerontocracy), or rich people (plutocracy) or the nobles (aristocracy).⁵³ The political divisions of the members of the *yogam* can negatively affect the decisions of the *yogam*. The lack of the awareness of the true nature of the Church can cause defective functioning of the *yogam*. Today the Syrian Orthodox and Orthodox Syrian Churches in India have the *yogams* very similar to the *yogams* in the St Thomas Christian tradition. But we can find sometimes deviations and disorientations in the functioning of their *yogams*. If the members are not fully inspired by the Word of God and by the authentic teaching of the Church, they may not be faithful to the authentic synodal functioning of the *yogam*.

Synod of the Bishops

Bishop, the head of the local Church, exercises his ministry keeping the synodal dimension. Bishop while exercising his ministry is obliged to keep synodality in his relationship with other bishops, priests, deacons and other clerics of his eparchy, and with the religious and lay faithful.

The history of the Church bears witness to the fact that the bishops administered their dioceses collegially. The apostles, the fathers of the

⁵¹Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 349.

⁵²Jacob Kollaparambil, "The Institution of *Yogam* in the Oriental Churches," 61.

⁵³Palathinkal, "Palliyogam," 347.

Church and their successors acted collegially as the various provincial, regional, ecumenical synods of the first millennium give evidence. The Second Vatican Council clearly states that the bishops acted collegially from very ancient times and points out some examples of collegial action, such as holding of different kinds of councils, plurality of bishops in episcopal consecration (LG 22a), etc.⁵⁴ The fourth canon of Nicaea clearly recognized and officially approved the synodal structure of the Church. According to the canon, the appointment and consecration of a bishop is the collegial or synodal action of all the bishops of the province. If all bishops of the province cannot be present because of some pressing necessity, at least three can come together and perform the election, but the written consent of the absent bishops is necessary.⁵⁵

The Synod of Bishops of a Patriarchal or Major Archiepiscopal Church, canonically convoked, is the supreme authority of a Church and the Patriarch or the Major Archbishop is always its president.⁵⁶ The 'sacred canons' of the first millennium considered the Synod of Bishops of an autonomous Church superior to the Patriarchs, in such a way that, if necessary, they could proceed to their deposition.⁵⁷ Since the Syro-Malabar Church is a Major-Archiepiscopal Church, the Synod of Bishops is the legislature, superior tribunal and the electoral college of this Church (CCEO 110, 149, 1062). The laws enacted in the Synod, if they are liturgical, have force of law everywhere in the world; if, however, they are disciplinary laws or concern other decisions of the Synod, they have force inside the territorial boundaries of the Patriarchal [Major-Archiepiscopal] Church (CCEO 115§2).

The main objectives of the Synod of Bishops in the Major Archiepiscopal Church are the following: The Synod of Bishops has to help the Major Archbishop in the pastoral ministry of the *sui iuris* Church and to foster collegiality among the members. It has to preserve and promote the patrimony of the *sui iuris* Church adapting it to the life situation of the people of God (CCEO 39). The major

⁵⁴Cf. J. Hajjar, "La collegialità episcopale nella tradizione orientale," in G. Barauna, *La Chiesa del Vaticano II* (Firenze, 1965), 810-831; P. Gouyon, "Collegiality in the Early Church Tradition," in Y. Congar, H. Küng & D. O'Hanlon, ed., *Council Speeches of Vatican II* (London-New York, 1976), 39-41. Cf. Paul Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1994), 62.

⁵⁵Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 88.

⁵⁶Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 143.

⁵⁷Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 88.

powers of the Synod of Bishops in the Patriarchal and Major Archiepiscopal Churches are summarized in Canon 110 of CCEO.

1. The Synod of Bishops of the patriarchal Church is exclusively competent to make laws for the entire patriarchal Church which obtain force according to the norm of Can. 150 §§ 2 and 3 (Can. 110 §1).

2. The Synod of Bishops of the patriarchal Church is the tribunal in the patriarchal Church according to the norm of can. 1062 (Can. 110 §2).

3. The Synod of Bishops of the Patriarchal Church conducts the election of the patriarch, bishops and candidates for offices mentioned in can.149 (Can. 110 §3).

The Synod of Bishops of the patriarchal Church is not competent for administrative actions unless the patriarch determines otherwise for certain actions or common law reserves some actions to the synod, with due regard for the canons which require the consent of the Synod of Bishops (Can. 110§4).

The ‘synodal character’ of the Synod of Bishops is intrinsically bound with the principle of collegiality. In fact, it is the collegiality of the bishops which entitles the synod for the exercise of such great power as stated in the Canon 110 of CCEO. As Paul Pallath rightly observes, “the synod of a *sui iuris* Church has a theological foundation because its power derives from episcopal consecration and it exists by its own right. Because of the divine sacramental foundation, the exercise of collegiality cannot be prohibited, but is simply regulated by ecclesiastical laws.”⁵⁸

Since one of the major objectives of the Synod of Bishops is to preserve and promote the patrimony of the *sui iuris* Church, the Major Archbishop and the Synod of the Syro-Malabar Church have the obligation to preserve and foster the patrimony of the Church.⁵⁹ According to the synodal structure of the Church, the administration of an autonomous Church is shared by the Synod of Bishops. The head of the Church, like the Patriarch or Major Archbishop, shares his power with all the bishops of the Synod. He is the head of the Synod

⁵⁸Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 80.

⁵⁹Mathew Vattakuzhy, “The Synodal Functioning in the Syro-Malabar Church,” in Jose Porunnedom, ed., *Acts of the Synod of Bishops of the Syro-Malabar Church Held in the Vatican from 8 to 16 January 1996* (Kakkanad: Mount St Thomas, 1996), 44.

of Bishops of a *sui iuris* Church, collegially coordinating the activities of all the bishops of that Church.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The Churches of the East have been faithful to the synodal character throughout the centuries. As George Nedungatt has rightly observed, in the East, synodality has achieved a synthesis of the monarchic and the democratic principles in an equilibrium that avoids the defects and weaknesses that both have in their extremes or isolation. In this sense Eastern synodality is a happy church marriage between monarchy and democracy.⁶¹

The Church of St Thomas Christians witnessed to a remarkable manner of synodality expressed especially through the institutions like archdiaconate and *yogams*. Both institutions promoted sharing of power in the ecclesiastical administration. The Catholic Church shall indeed be inspired by the great testimony of the Church of St Thomas Christians with regard to the synodal way of ecclesial life. It is evident from the fact that the *yogams* of St Thomas Christians have served as a model for CCEO while devising similar assemblies for all the Oriental Churches. However, for the Syro-Malabar Church, the new system of assemblies envisaged by CCEO is far away from the synodal structures which had existed in the tradition of St Thomas Christians. In CCEO the *yogams* at the eparchial level and the Church *sui iuris* level are made consultative only. This is not according to the immemorial tradition of the Church of St Thomas Christians. An authentic restoration of the *yogams* at all the three levels can indeed contribute to a true synodal functioning in the Syro-Malabar Church.

⁶⁰Pallath, *Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 194.

⁶¹Nedungatt, "Synodality in the Eastern Catholic Churches," 65.