

SYNODALITY: POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE SYRO- MALANKARA CHURCH

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Abstract

Malankara Syrian Catholic Church is one of the two Oriental Catholic Churches in India and much of the ideas of participatory governance proposed in the current ideal of synodality can be recovered from her own ancient traditions. Due to various factors in its historical and living context, the Church is still able to maintain a “family spirit” in much of its organizational make-up and has kept institutionalization to a minimum. Even before the call for synodality came up, as part of consolidating the juridical foundations of the Church various legal and practical measures which encourage a participatory outlook have been in place in this Church. All this, this article argues, has helped this small but vibrant community to keep alive the promise to be an oikumene of God, rather than a hierarchical machinery. The article goes on to identify some present-day challenges to this heritage, which are to be addressed through participatory listening and decision making.

Keywords: Church as Family; Low-level Institutionalization; Malankara Syrian Catholic; Oriental Tradition; Participatory Church

Communion, participation and mission are fundamental concepts in oriental ecclesiology,¹ and thus the present initiative by the Apostolic

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¹See for example how in a paper presenting the theme, the author that the Church is “a community gathered by the Triune God,” which called itself ecclesia “to underline responsible participation by all of its members” and as such is ‘catholic’ — “which embraces all things (*ta panta*), the whole humanity.” Petros Vassiliadis,

See to rediscover synodality is, for an Oriental Church, an invitation to return to the sources. This does not, in anyway, make the task easier or the process taken-for-granted. For, each of these communities have traversed their own historical paths, which have taken their individual and actual reality away from the theological ideal. The challenges may be even more acute and existential for a community that has to define its identity as bridge between Oriental Orthodox heritage and Catholic communion. That is exactly where the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church finds itself today. The present invitation to reflect upon the synodal nature of the Church, therefore, is remarkable for its prophetic timeliness.

Strengths and Possibilities

The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church is one of the youngest among the Eastern Catholic particular Churches and in the Syrian Christian heartland, its members come from those who have reunited to the Catholic communion from the Jacobite Syrian ecclesial lineage. The local communities are small in terms of number: parish communities of more than eighty families can be found only in a few strongholds and communities of more than thousand members are relatively few. Majority of these communities have undergone structural overhaul (including relocation, acquisition and building of new premises, etc.) in the last fifty years, which means that the present senior generation of faithful have actively contributed to their building up. When numerically and economically weak communities come together for such work, it invariably creates palpable sense of belonging. Only very few parishes have considerable landed property or big institutions attached to them. All this has helped, indirectly to keep the institutionalization to the minimum. In most parish communities, the pastors need to live in close contact with people and most of our communities can better be described as households than institutions.

The canonical system of the Eastern Churches also fits more to the household outlook. Both the idea of *oikonomia*² which enables the pastors to go beyond legality in their exercise of paternal care for the salvation of souls, and the principle of subsidiarity –encouraging

"Orthodox Perspectives on Mission," PDF retrievable at <http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/re2010series/18>. (page 27)

²See Thomas Kuzhinapurath, *Salvific Law: Salvific Character of CCEO* (Trivandrum: Carmel Publishing House, 2014), 169–171.

minimal governance³ – which permeates the legal system, make such an outlook even juridically possible. The individual Malankara canonical heritage is even more democratic. The Syrian Christian Association, where the elected representatives from the lay faithful outweigh the number of clerics, has a definitive say on the temporal administration of the Church and even in the election of candidates to episcopacy.⁴ Coming from this ethos, a traditional Malankara Catholic faithful feels a lot more empowered in the Church. In one of his pastoral letters, Servant of God Mar Ivanios explicitly brings in the image of the household concerning ecclesial governance. He compares the role of parish councils to the traditional system in joint families where the elder sons help the *paterfamilias* in taking care of the household.⁵

Another key factor is a theology which repeatedly emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit directly on the people. They are the people gifted with “special wisdom,” in comparison to whom the sinfulness and worthlessness of the minister is repeatedly affirmed in the liturgy.⁶ While the people are the holy priestly inheritance of the Lord, the priest is only a worthless servant to whom the ministry is entrusted through the gift of grace.⁷

In addition, the particular history of this church has also taught it not to look upon structural authority as the only source of inspiration. Many of its historical moments of emancipation, the Mavelikara Padiyola (1836) the Kandanad Padiyola (1906) and Arthatt Padiyola (1908) came from collaborative, literally synodal moments, where there was considerable participation also from the part of the laity. These three moments are particularly worth mentioning because in all those meetings, the collective will of the people and clergy was against the expressed opinion of the hierarchical leader, but then the leader agreed to comply with.⁸ Mar Ivanios, the initiator of the successful

³ Sunny Mathew, *The Principle of Subsidiarity in the Church and in Canon Law* (Marthandam, 2011), esp. 85–96.

⁴ See Paulose Mar Gregorios, *The Indian Orthodox Church: An Overview* (Delhi: Sophia Publications, 1982), 90. (Article 113 of the Constitution of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church).

⁵ Circular dated 01-06-1946. Prabheesh George ed., *Jagarookanaya Ajapalakan* (Collection of Pastoral Letters of Savant of God Mar Ivanios) (Trivandrum: Cause of Canonization of Mar Ivanios, 2012), 158–159.

⁶ The Syro Malankara Catholic Church, *The Order of the Holy Qurbano*, 5th Sedro.

⁷ *The Order of the Holy Qurbano*, 11th Sedro.

⁸ J. Cheeran, et al. ed., *Indian Orthodox Sabha Charithravum Samkaravum* (Kottayam: Kottaykkal Publishers, 2002), 409ff, 429ff.

Reunion movement of 1930, was a cleric who derived strength and inspiration from his leading laymen of his generation, both before and after the Reunion.⁹

Having thus great sources of inspiration does not really mean that we are having a perfectly synodal ecclesial experience. We have been able to keep the promise alive with a lot more yet to be realized.

The Existing Structures

It goes without saying that the SMCC takes care to put in place all the provisions in the CCEO to ensure a participatory leadership in the Church. Collaborative bodies of various deliberative capacities, such as the Major Archiepiscopal assembly (CCEO cc 140-145), the Eparchial assemblies (CCEO c. 235), the pastoral council (CCEO c. 272), the presbyteral council (CCEO c. 264), the financial council (CCEO c. 263), college of consultors (CCEO c. 271) etc., are established also by the particular Law of the Church (Code of Particular Laws of the SMCC, Can, 64; 95-96; 104-107; 114). The role of the parish council is also defined extensively as collaborating in spiritual, pastoral and economic growth of the parish and administering the temporal aspects of the community (CPCSMCC cc 142-233).

The point of interest is how these provisions have been planned out in reality. There have been two Ecclesial Assemblies, the first in 2011 and the second in 2018. The theme for the first one was the evangelical mission of the Church, and it resulted in the constitution of *suvishesha sangham* establishing in each local community a group dedicated to the work of re-evangelization and new evangelization. Extensive training programmes have been worked out for this group, really empowering them to come to the ecclesial mainstream as a powerful element in each local community. Those who complete the training are given ecclesial empowerment, with a special form of laying of hands.¹⁰ The Second Assembly was on the theme of helping families to live fully the grace of married life. A newly found apostolate for the pastoral accompaniment of young families is now in the nascent stages: but this ministry also is planning to use the wisdom of elder couples at various stages of the apostolate as a critical resource. Thus, one common factor in the outcome of both assemblies is the channelizing of the “special

⁹Jolly Philip, “Revisiting Mar Ivanios’ Vision of Communion, Participation and Mission in the light of the Synod on Synodality,” *Living Word* (July 2022): 56-60.

¹⁰*Acts of the First Syro-Malankara Catholic Assembly* (Trivandrum: Catholicate Centre, 2011), 366-369.

wisdom” of the people of God to the evangelical and pastoral work of the Church.

Another positive factor is the representation of all sectors within the collaborative bodies. Integration of different social sectors into ecclesial mainstream is one fundamental insight we have received as heredity from Mar Ivanios. The SMCC started its first missions in the South in 1931 and by 1953 the first candidate to priesthood from those areas was ready for ordination and he became a bishop later. The missions were built on the collaborative work of trained laymen (*upadeshis*) from the same area.¹¹ Today a majority of our young priests and sisters from the mission area are children and grandchildren of those *upadeshis*.

With regard to women also, care is taken to give them voice. One third of lay representation in such bodies is reserved to them by the CPCSMCC (Canon 161). In the recently concluded election to pastoral council in Trivandrum Archdiocese, measures were taken to ensure that nearly half of the electors at the district level are women.¹²

The law itself permits the pastor to nominate members to parish council if people from a particular sector or apostolate are missing in the normal election (CPCSMCC can 163).

The Pastoral Outlook

The general pastoral culture developed in the Church essentially remained always dialogical – the family-type organization being one of the main contributing factors. Juridical arrangements cannot be cited here, but the actuality of the Church is promising. For example, in most parishes the youth form the practical core team of the Pastor even if the parish council or *suvishesha samgham* might be ‘dominated’ by seniors. Juridical structures function in an open exchange with these practical arrangements and the low level of institutionalization makes it possible.

Throughout its short history as a particular hierarchy, the SMCC has those glorious moments when small communities of the people of God took inspiring initiatives, ahead of the hierarchy, to provide some significant new orientations. The organizations of Malankara

¹¹ Prabheesh George, “System of *Upadesis*: A Unique Mission Model in the Malankara Syrian Catholic Church,” Article submitted for publication in Basileos Card. Cleemis ed., *Call, Commitment and Communion* (forthcoming).

¹² This was done by asking each parish to send an elected lady along with the serving Trustee and Secretary as electors at the district level. Circular Prot. N. MX. ACC 23/444.

Catholic Communities in the diaspora actually started as a movement from the people both in Indian regions outside Kerala and in the Gulf region and gained immediate structural support from the hierarchy. The annual *padayatra* to the tomb of Servant of God Mar Ivanios started again as a popular devotion by the Malankara Catholic Youth Movement and then became one of the defining moments of ecclesial *koinonia*. Many more examples can be cited to show how there is still an essential relationship of mutual trust between *eccleisa docens* and *ecclesia discens*.

General pastoral praxis in the SMCC is conciliatory and positive. For example, at no stage of its history the Church has alienated persons going through marital difficulties. Each case of separation and divorce is accompanied individually. Separated or divorced men and women lead active community life. Even remarried people are welcome to participate in all regular community activities except the sacraments or special ministries. The only complaint we hear is about the occasional delay in juridical processes. We never had the need to address the issue of sexual minorities in an institutional way. Something one can joyfully share is the story of one of the *Sultanas* of Delhi's transgender community being a regular participant in one of our parish communities, with the expressed encouragement of the late bishop Mar Barnabas.¹³

The SMCC has always engaged other faith communities in sincere and respectful dialogue. The need of inculturation was one of the prime inspirations of reforms initiated by Mar Ivanios in the Jacobite community.¹⁴ After the flourish of missions in the South, the Church also pastorally administers families in interfaith situations—where listening to people of other faiths is an existential necessity as well. Cardinal Baselios Cleemis, the present Head and Father of the SMCC, perceives the mission of the Church as one “of a united Church which serves to further the unity” between Churches, between Christians and non-Christians and between various communities of humanity at large.¹⁵

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRvwKHJJzyg> In this video, Celin describes her experiences with the Malankara Catholic community in Delhi.

¹⁴ Thomas Mar Anthonios OIC, ed., *Viswasadhorani* (Collection of notable speeches of Servant of God Mar Ivanios) (Trivandrum: Cause of Canonization of Mar Ivanios, 2010), 72.

¹⁵ *Daiva Mahathvavum Manushya Nanmayum* (Selected Interviews) (Trivandrum: Carmel Publishing House, 2014), 234; 147–159.

Challenges

We started this exposition by referring to some strengths of the community, either inherited from the tradition, or coming from the particular historical context. By the grace of God these resources are still active and available within the ecclesial life of the SMCC but it is important to point out that these resources by themselves do not make the Church any better in terms of participation and communion. Four areas which need constant attention can be identified.

1. Having good resources does not always produce great results. It is true that the SMCC possesses canonical, theological and cultural resources that continue to help the Church to create a more participatory atmosphere in ecclesial living. But a closer look will certainly tell us that many individual elements among these resources are not productively connected to the contemporary reality of the Church. The events of truly synodal nature in the past like the ecclesial assembly in Kandanadu (1916), for example, can only be mentioned as inspirations now; in the present reality, lay participation is almost entirely limited to canonical bodies of consultative nature. The acceptance of Catholic ecclesiastical discipline was bound to bring in some changes in the way the local communities lived. The initial legislative literature after the establishment of Malankara Catholic hierarchy often reveals this tension: for example, in 1946 Mar Ivanios writes to his faithful reminding them that some practices within the Jacobite tradition are “contrary to the system established by Christ.” The concrete example mentioned in this context is the control exercised by the parish council over the parish priest and the Managing Committee over the bishops in the Indian Jacobite community.¹⁶ He makes it clear that while committees of lay faithful are to be established to help the parish priest in every community, the role of the priest is to govern them and not to be governed by them. Such identification to the “Catholic system” may have been the practical need of that particular point of history but today, more progressive assimilation of the original values is certainly required.

2. The ‘family model’ can and sometimes does digress to values of patriarchy. The traditional Christian language about being a family comes loaded with values of patriarchy. Such values are further reinforced by cultural elements imbibed from the local culture in Kerala. Among many dangers that come up with this package are tendencies to hush up irregularities as much as possible for the good-

¹⁶Circular dated 1-6-1946; Prabheesh Gerooge ed., *Jagarookanaya Ajapalakan* 160.

name of the household, to justify unjust instances of governance in the name of a superior common purpose, to remain complacent with systematic sidelining of weaker sections in the name of a falsely conceived order and decorum, to ignore the need for open dialogue and change on account of a misplaced trust of what is apparently working, and a tendency to rely too much on a glorified image of the communal identity. 'Oikumene' is just like any other metaphor, and it connects constructively only to a few limited aspects of the real life of any social unit. Once you stretch a metaphor, you invariably get all the wrong meanings.

3. One tendency related to the 'family feeling' needs to be mentioned apart is the neglect of formal structures. I have mentioned that, on the positive side, the family dynamics sometimes allows the parish priests and young volunteers to work around formal bodies dominated by the seniors on matters of common good. But the same tendency can be detrimental to the growth of participatory structures. Formal forums of dialogue and bodies of collaboration cannot be replaced by practical and voluntary expressions of camaraderie. Working around the formal structures frequently will lead to lack of accountability and transparency and in the long run, will weaken some essential aspects of the institution. To mention a specific example, from the time of Mar Ivanios, the religious have been considered part of the 'family'¹⁷ within the eparchies and the relationship between the hierarchy and the religious has mostly remained hearty; but the co-operation depends mostly on the pastoral charism of the bishop. There is no formal structure that ensures a constant exchange of views between various groups of religious and the hierarchy. Even in other cases where formal bodies of dialogue are canonically established, their functioning is at times reduced to a mere formality. Failure to address issues like sexual identity and homosexuality in an institutional way may soon become problematic.

4. A fourth major challenge is created by the liturgical and theological tradition itself. While the tradition is clearly aware of the inherent rights and privileges of the baptized as members of the People of God, it also highlights the mediatory role of ministerial priesthood. The apostolic power of the bishops and the exalted role of priests as ministers of sacred mysteries are constantly meditated upon in the

¹⁷Margaret Gibbons dedicates a whole chapter of her biography of Mar Ivanios to show how the 'family model' failed in coordinating the religious. Archbishop Mar Ivanios (Kottayam: Bethany Publications, 2002), 114-118.

sacred liturgy as well. The problem is not with the tradition itself, for such ideas do have their proper function within the integral idea about the people of God, where Christ is mystically present along with his angels and saints.¹⁸ Isolated from this fundamental framework, the elevated appraisal of the role of ministers, especially in the ambience of liturgy, will produce arrogant and ego-centric priests who will identify the institutional structure as the Church, and will consider the community of the baptized as low-level beneficiaries of their services. As for the SMCC, it is imperative that we concentrate more on building a theology of priesthood and ministry that is in total coherence with foundational concept of the Church as mystical body of Christ and the priesthood of all the baptized.

The Synodal Process in the SMCC

During the basic community level discussions on synodality, the following issues were identified and discussed:¹⁹

Clericalism is on the increase at all levels of leadership: bishops are becoming increasingly distant and official in dealing with their priests; some priests behave in an aggressively authoritarian way and some others take an indifferent outlook to everything outside their liturgical duties. Pastoral work is increasingly identified with liturgy; some pastors turn away not only from ecumenical and missionary initiatives but also from active involvement in works of charity.

Familial warmth and belongingness which characterized most of our local communities are becoming less and less palpable. There is less enthusiasm in sacramental life, catechesis and participation in apostolates. Young people are especially struggling to identify themselves with the community. Individualism and lack of fraternal sharing is affecting various aspects of ecclesial life – priests and nuns

¹⁸Within the liturgy, the role of the minister is eulogized with its special relation to the Sacrament of the Eucharist. This theme is deeply traditional from the time of John Chrysostom's *On the Priesthood* at least. John Meyendorff is totally correct when he argues that "the ministries, the structures – the entire "Church order" – are a given reality inasmuch as they are functional to the Eucharist. The charismata required by the Eucharist cannot as such be limited. However, as soon as "order" becomes an end in itself, it blasphemously creates a new obstacle to the *koinonia*." Meyendorff, "Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind," in Petros, "Orthodox Perspectives on Mission." 98.

¹⁹Unpublished Summary Report submitted by the Chancellor of Trivandrum Archieparchy at the end of Synodal process in the Syro-Malankara Church. I am presenting a thematically rearranged summary of points presented in a 12 page report.

becoming 'islands' and young people refusing to commit to any state of life.

New approaches are needed in leadership, because the social situation is getting more and more complex. New forms of addiction (electronic media addiction and new forms of substance abuse), newly emerging alternatives for marital commitment, consumeristic excess with stress and competition attached to it, new forms of elitism, inflow of immigrants and increasing percentage of expatriates, etc. contribute to this complexity. Those in leadership need to listen and learn from various quarters in order to deal with these challenges.

The leadership and community organization should become more transparent and accountable. Lay people need to be trusted with more responsible positions within the community. We need to build up a culture of patient listening and trust. Decision making is becoming more and more unilateral. Favouritism and nepotism are creeping into ecclesial organization at various levels—especially in promoting people to leadership roles and providing job opportunities.

Formative programmes are required to ensure better leadership and wider participation. Adult catechetical programmes—especially addressing indifference and ideological aberrations among the youth—are very much needed. Youth should be more effectively invited and initiated into liturgical and sacramental life. Theological training of the laity will be key in promoting their participation in ecclesial leadership. Theological formation in the seminaries should include more themes that promote a participatory and missionary vision of the Church.

The Church should engage itself more vigorously in missionary activities. The Church must redraw the old maps and clichéd axioms in her missionary approach. Promotion of lay leaders to the mission regions is considered an ideal strategy for the growth of missions. Priests and the religious should be re-motivated for taking more seriously the missionary aspect of their call. Seminary education should include initiation into new ways of communication with a view to bringing good news to the young generation.

While the Church has collectively resolved to address these issues at the earliest, a common plan has not yet been proposed. However, notwithstanding the issues, the general mood in the Church remains optimistic.