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ST. THOMAS CHRISTIANS AND POPULAR DEVOTIONS

St. Thomas Christians

St. Thomas Christians are the most ancient Christians of India. They hail the Apostle St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, as the one who won their forefathers for Jesus Christ.¹ Besides several western Christian writers,² we have the testimony of several Indian statesmen confirming the early origin of Christianity in India and its indigenous growth.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan writes with authority that "Christianity has flourished in India from the very beginning of Christian era. The Syrian Christians of Malabar believe that their form of Christianity is apostolic, derived from the Apostle Thomas. They contend that their version of the Christian faith is distinctive and independent of the forms established by St. Peter and St. Paul in the west. What is obvious is that there have been Christians in the west coast of India from very early times. They were treated with great respect by the Hindus, whose princes built for them churches."³

Jawaharlal Nehru, the architect of modern India, too has something to narrate in the same line. He writes: "You may be surprised to learn that Christianity came to India long before it went to England or western Europe, and when even in Rome it was a despised and proscribed sect. Within 100 years or so of the death of Jesus, Christian missionaries came to South India by sea. They were received courteously and permitted to preach their new faith. They converted a large number

1. Cf. P.J. PODIPARA, *The Thomas Christians*, London-Bombay 1970.

2. Cf. J. WICKI, *Documenta Indica*, 1-7, Romae 1948-1962.

3. *East and West in Religion*, 1958, quoted in A.M. NIDHIRY, *Father Nidhiry, "A History of his Times"*, Kuravilangad 1971, p. 21.

of people, and their descendants have lived there, with varying fortunes, to this day. Most of them belong to old Christian sects which ceased to exist in Europe."⁴

The most condensed and comprehensive record about this Christianity comes from the former President of India, Mr. Giani Zail Singh. He was speaking on October 26, 1983, inaugurating the Paurastya Vidyapitham at Kottayam: "Christianity in India dates back to the days of St. Thomas, one of the original disciples of Lord Jesus. Since then, it has flourished here and added a new dimension to India's rich cultural heritage. With deep root in the soil, Indian Christianity has developed an independent personality of its own - Christian in religion, Oriental in worship and Indian in culture. This local character has been sustained, and enriched over the last many centuries."⁵

All sources, civil and ecclesiastical, secular and religious, agree in proposing St. Thomas Christians and their style of Christian life as the most authentic and indigenous form of Christian witnessing in India.

Mar Thomma Margam

The St. Thomas Christians designate their particular life-style, the *Mar Thomma Mārgam*.⁶ *Mārgam*, the Sanskrit word (used also in several other Indian languages) signifies the "way of life" or "life-style," especially of a religious nature. By *Mar Thomma Mārgam* they mean the special Christian life-style, introduced in India by *Mar Thomma*, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus.

In the 16th century, during the encounter between the St. Thomas Christians of India and the Portuguese colonizers, we come across several disputes on the nature and authenticity of what the Portuguese called the "Law of Thomas" and the "Law of Peter." One of the ten points which the Archdeacon, the then ecclesiastical administrator of the Thomas Christians, was forced by Dom Meneses, the Portuguese Archbishop of Goa, to subscribe to before the Synod of Diamper (1599)

4. *Glimpses of World History* 1934, quoted in NIDHIRY, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

5. Quoted in V. PATHIKULANGARA, "Further Documentation on Latin-Oriental Relations and the Mission of the Church in India"?, Kottayam 1985, p. 37.

6. V. PATHIKULANGARA, *Mar Thomma Mārgam*, Denha Services 26, Kottayam 1989.

was, "to confess the *Law of Thomas* to be the same as that of *Peter*."⁷ The phrase *Law of Thomas* is, in fact, a western Portuguese version of the more profound Indian name, the *Mar Thomma Mārgam*. When the Portuguese missionaries tried to equate both these Christian life-styles, the St. Thomas Christians never wanted that. They were convinced of the differences between them, but not as opposed to each other. It is this special Christian life-style of the St. Thomas Christians that has added "a new dimension to India's rich cultural heritage."⁸ Pope John Paul II qualifies this *Mar Thomma Mārgam* as "Eastern and authentically Indian... which for centuries has been a marvel of Christian witness in fidelity to its primitive (early) faith and to its legitimate tradition."⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru too describes it in his *Autobiography* as an indigenous Christianity having few outside influences, and once extended all over India.¹⁰

Faith and Devotional Practices

According to authentic Christian understanding, faith and devotional practices go hand in hand. *Lex orandi lex credendi*, (the law of worship is the law of faith) is the ever repeated axiom in Christianity.¹¹ This formula, on the one hand, declares that the worship in the Church is the expression of her faith and means of strengthening the faithful in matters of faith, already made explicit, and on the other hand, reveals its importance in enlightening and making easy the process of establishing certain dogmatic facts.¹² In short, the worship or devotional practice in Christianity is to be considered the mirror on which the authentic faith is reflected.

It was so in Christian traditions from the very beginning. The western Christianity, however, has lost this sense during the middle

7. P.J. PODIPARA, *A History of the Malabar Church*, Kottayam 1968, p. 55.

8. Cf. Zail Singh's Speech, quoted above.

9. JOHN PAUL II, *Il rinnovamento liturgico nelle Chiese Orientali secondo lo spirito del Concilio Vaticano II*, "L' Osservatore Romano", 30 agosto 1980, p. 2.

10. Quoted in MAR ABRAHAM MATTAM, *The Indian Church of St. Thomas Christians and Her Missionary Enterprises before the Sixteenth Century*, Kottayam 1985, p. 34.

11. Cf. V. PATHIKULANGARA, *Resurrection, Life and Renewal*, Bangalore Kottayam 1982, pp. 1-2.

12. Cf. C. VAGAGGINI, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy*, Collegeville 1976, p. 531.

ages, and especially during the post-Tridentine liturgical situation.¹³ There happened a separation between the *lex orandi* (law of worship) and the *lex credendi* (law of faith).¹⁴ The natural expression of the Church, namely, the official liturgy, began to become more and more clerical and be separated from the life of the common faithful. This created a situation where *non-liturgical devotions* or *popular devotions*, divorced from the liturgy of the Church, proliferated.¹⁵

But the Eastern Churches did not succumb to such disintegration. Popular devotion for them is the *Liturgy*, the expression of the total commitment of the local community.¹⁶ Liturgy for them is the celebration of their own Christian existence. This celebration takes varied forms; but everywhere and in every form the *Christ-event*, accomplishment of human salvation in historical Jesus, remains the centre and climax. All churches or ecclesial traditions have a comprehensive celebration of the Christ-event and its impact on humanity and the universe, which the St. Thomas Christians call *Raza*, "the Mystery" or *Qurbana*, "the Offering". In the western tradition, they call it the Mass or the Eucharist. The celebrations of faith at critical moments of one's life are called *Sacraments*; and the same at other important occasions are known the *Sacramentals*. The Christian tradition prefers to celebrate its faith also according to the rhythm of the year, seasons, weeks, days and hours. Thus there is the celebration of the *liturgical year* and the *liturgy of the Hours*. Christian devotional practices, whether public or private, ought to be some how related to the above mentioned basic celebrations of faith.¹⁷

As it is already made clear, there happened a disintegration in the balance between ecclesial (basic) and popular (complimentary) devotions in the western or Latin tradition. After all liturgical movements and renewals, this tradition hasn't succeeded to regain this authentic equilibrium. The Eastern or Oriental traditions, on the other hand, could resist, to a great extent, the disintegrating forces. Thus they continue to keep

13. Cf. R. TAFT, *The continuity of Tradition in a World of Liturgical Change: The Eastern Liturgical Experience*, art. in "Seminarium", 15/2 (1975) 445-457.

14. Cf. A. SCHMEMANN, *Church, World, Mission*, "reflections on Orthodoxy in the West", Crestwood 1979, pp. 129-146.

15. Cf. R. TAFT, *op. cit.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, The Constitution on Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II, nn. 12-13.

that original balance between ecclesial (basic) and popular (complimentary) devotions.¹⁸

St. Thomas Christians belong to the group of Eastern traditions. Their popular devotions, therefore, are intimately related to their ecclesial or liturgical celebrations. They may be called as Sacramentals. The most important among such devotions can be grouped as follows: 1. Veneration of the Cross and Gospels, 2. Feasts and Fasts, 3. Family Prayers, 4. Pilgrimages, 5. Birth-rites, 6. Death-rites, 7. Other celebrations.

1. Veneration of the Cross and the Gospels

Most of the historians, foreign travellers and European missionaries have described the St. Thomas Christians of India as a community having exceptional veneration to the Holy Cross and the "Gospel Lectionary".¹⁹ They had their own version of the Cross, the *St. Thomas Cross* and the Bible, the *Pschitta*. They used to adorn the Cross and the Gospel Lectionary with precious metals like gold, silver, and so on, since they were considered the symbols of Christ's victory and naturally of their own victory.²⁰

St. Thomas Cross

Ancient documents testify that this typical cross was venerated in all the churches and chapels of the St. Thomas Christians. The Portuguese historian Antonio de Gouvea writes in 1606: "The old churches were all built in pagodah-fashion, but all, full of crosses like those of St. Thomas miracle cross (at Mailapur), . . . Hence one can see how much older than Portuguese time is the veneration, love and shape of the cross. For the ancient Christian churches built before, long before the coming of the Portuguese, were all ornamented with them, both painted and graven".²¹ It was given the most honorable place also in their houses and institutions. The original model of it is seen in the chapel of *Periyamala* (St. Thomas Mount), Madras. It is a special type of Cross carved on granite stone.²²

18. We do not intend in any way to ignore the anomalous or in-between situation of few Eastern traditions, of which in the fore-front is the Syro-Malabar Church.

19. Cf. VINCENZO MARIA, *Viaggio all' Indie Oriental*, Roma 1672, Ch. 4.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Antonio de GOÚVEA, *Journada de Arcebispo de Goa*, Goa 1606, p. 204.

22. Cf. V. PATHIKULANGARA, *Church and Celebration*, Kottayam 1986, pp. 17-21.

According to an ancient local tradition, St. Thomas the Apostle fell dead a martyr on this particular granite stone. The faithful kept it sacred and at a later stage the cross, symbol of their faith, was engraved on it. Modern scholars fix the date of engraving somewhere around 650 A.D.²³

In the 16th century, as the western missionaries were digging the ground to reconstruct the chapel on St. Thomas Mount, they happened to come across this special Cross. It was on March 23, 1547.²⁴ When the construction was over, they fixed it to the rear wall of the main altar. It remains there to the present day.

On the 18th of December 1558 during the Gospel reading at the Holy Mass, this Cross sweated blood and water.²⁵ According to the testimony of the missionaries, the miracle was repeated for several years on the same date and in the same manner. They informed the Pope of this miracle and obtained permission from him to celebrate *December 18th* as the feast of Mylapore Cross's apparition.

St. Thomas Cross is the dynamic symbol of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the Indian context. It proclaims the theological, Christological, pneumatological and ecclesiological dimensions and specifications of Christian faith.

It is an empty cross, namely, a Cross without the dying figure of Jesus Christ. In imitation of the empty tomb, this empty Cross symbolizes the resurrection of Jesus.

The four tips of this Cross are designed like blooming buds. Bud is a symbol of new life. New life is restored to man in Jesus' resurrection. Thus the shape of this Cross itself proclaims the resurrection of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit that descends upon the St. Thomas Cross is yet another symbol of resurrection. As St. Paul teaches, Holy Spirit transforms Jesus' flesh-body into Spirit-body and thus purifies the dead Jesus Christ (Rom 8: 11)

23. J. VAZHUTHANAPALLY, *Archaeology of Mar Sliba*, Kottayam 1990, pp. 12-13.

24. A.M. MUNDADAN, *History of Christianity in India*, I, Bangalore 1989, p. 422.

25. ID., p. 423.

According to several scholars, this particular Cross is erected upon lotus. Although, it is not proved beyond doubt, a Chinese Cross, erected on a lotus flower, coming from the same era, is a very good substantiation for the assumption of the scholars. Lotus, being the symbol of Buddhism, had turned out to be India's own symbol because of the influence of Buddhism in India, during and immediately after the reign of the great Emperor Asoka. Thus the Cross erected on lotus, is a living symbol of faith in the risen Lord, established in India.

The lotus in the St. Thomas Cross remains over three steps. The symbolism of steps or ladders is evolved in Christianity in connection with biblical and liturgical traditions. The three steps signify either heaven or calvary. In the case of this Cross, the stress is on calvary and thus they signify the death of Jesus.

Thus St. Thomas Cross remains a unique symbol that proclaims the acceptance of Jesus Christ, who accomplished human salvation through his death and resurrection, in the Indian subcontinent.

Ancient models of St. Thomas Cross are found in the Jacobite churches at Kottayam and Kadamattam and adjacent to the Syro-Malabar churches of Muttuchira, Alengad, Kothanellur and so on, all in Kerala.²⁶

Devotion to this particular Cross is widespread among the St. Thomas Christians. There are several Churches named after the Cross. There are also famous pilgrim centres like Malayattoor where this devotion is fully displayed.

The St. Thomas Christians carry in procession on important occasions and festivals the Cross and Gospel Lectionary. Very often such processions go round the cross erected in the church yard. They used to erect shrines in honour of the Cross on way-sides and prominent places, so that the victorious Cross may stand out as a witness to their Christian commitment. They used to pour oil, light candles, set flowers and burn incense before this Cross in order to show their unique respect for it.

According to the testimony of western missionaries the most precious treasures of St. Thomas Christians are the Cross and the Gospel

26. Cf. J. VAZHUTHANAPALLY, *op. cit.*

Lectionary. They keep them on the altar and take them out of the sanctuary on rare occasions in procession. During such occasions the faithful used to kiss them with high respect.²⁷

2. Feasts and Fasts

Feasts : St. Thomas Christians used to celebrate the feasts of their liturgical cycle most becomingly. Important moments in the life of Jesus or related to the Christ-event and human salvation, such as Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost, Transfiguration, Exaltation of the Cross and so on rank always first among the celebrations. Then come the feasts of Blessed Virgin Mary, their own Apostle St. Thomas, etc. The feast of the patron saint of every local community is also very solemnly celebrated. *Dukrana*, the death anniversary of St. Thomas the Apostle on July 3 is celebrated in several places exactly as the death-anniversary of the father of the family.

We can always distinguish between the internal and external aspects in feast celebrations. With regard to the internal aspect, since it directly relates the faithful to Christ-event, the St. Thomas Christians are always sensitive to make use of the authentic signs and symbols which definitely lead them to the source. As for the external aspect, they are always keen in making use of the signs and symbols in their life-situation.²⁸ Thus the externals such as flag-hoisting, decorations, processions are all conducted according to the local cultural systems, while the internals, i.e., liturgical celebrations, are performed exactly according to the basic ecclesial system. I would like to clarify it through an example.

Epiphany (Denha) for the St. Thomas Christians is the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus in River Jordan. Biblically, it is the manifestation of the Holy Trinity through the humanity of Jesus. Practically, it is the presentation of Jesus as the light and life of the world.

The liturgical celebrations on this feast day are exactly the same for the whole St. Thomas Christian Church. But as to the external

27. Cf. VINCENZO MARIA, *op. cit.*

28. Cf. P.J. PODIPARA, *The Social and Socio-Ecclesiastical Customs of the Syrian Christians of India*, ECQ 7 (1947) 222-236; ID., *Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion, Oriental in Worship*, Ostkst. 8 (1959) 82-104; ID., *The Thomas Christians and Adeptation*, ECR 3/2 (1970) 171-177.

forms of this celebration there is remarkable difference between the northern region of Kerala and the southern region. In the northern region, this feast is known as *Pindipperunal*, while the southerners call it *Rakkulipperunal*.²⁹

The popular celebrations of *Pindipperunal* include the erecting of a plantain trunk (*Pindi*), specially decorated, in front of every St. Thomas Christian house with many torches attached to it. In the previous night of Epiphany celebration, the family members go round it in procession, singing a Syriac hymn, which means, "God is light" (*El-Paija*). This appears to be an attempt to honour becomingly Jesus, "the light of the world and life of all."

The popular celebration in the south stresses another aspect of the same feast, namely, the Baptism of Jesus in Jordan. In imitation of Jesus' Baptism the ancient St. Thomas Christians used to perform a *ritual bath* in the nearby ponds or rivers, singing psalms and other religious hymns on the previous night (*Ravu*) of the feast of Epiphany. Thus the feast began to be known as *Rakkulipperunal* (feast with a night bath).

There are several such local modulations and specifications for all important feasts. It is impossible to elaborate them all in this article.

Fasts: St. Thomas Christians are found to have great love for fasting by almost all European missionaries who came to India in the 16th century and afterwards. Msgr. Roz S.J., the first Latin bishop of the St. Thomas Christians wrote in 1604: "... that they (St. Thomas Christians) left Cranganore on account of the many molestation of some, also religious (Portuguese missionaries), who did not understand anything at all that was not of the Latin Rite, and declared everything else at once as heresy and superstition, forcing them to eat fish and drink wine in Lent (Fasting days before Easter) against their Rite, though this fasting is more in conformity with the holy Canons and the fasting of the original Church."³⁰ The St. Thomas Christians, as their Hindu

29. Cf. V. PATHIKULANGARA, *Chaldeo-Indian Liturgy I, Introduction*, Kottayam 1982, pp. 61-64; ID., *Mar Thoma Margam*, Kottayam 1989, pp. 63-67.

30. G. SCHURHAMMER, *The Malabar Church and Rome*, Trichinopoly 1934, p. 22.

brethren around them appear to have considered fasting and renunciation as the greatest means to come nearer to God.

The fastings were all according to the rhythm of the liturgical cycle, namely, the historic Christ-event and human salvation. The following are the main fasting days:

1. *Twenty five-day fast* in preparation for the Nativity celebration of Jesus Christ.
2. *Fifty-day fast* in preparation for Resurrection or Easter celebration.
3. *Eight-day fast* in preparation for the Nativity of Blessed Virgin Mary.
4. *Fifteen-day fast* in preparation for the Assumption of Mary.
5. *Three-day fast* observed eighteen days before commencing fifty-day fast in thanksgiving for the miraculous rescue of God's people from a devastating epidemic.
6. *Friday-fast* in remembrance of Jesus' death on the cross and the life of the Church.
7. *Wednesday fast* in honour of Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The St. Thomas Christians are very particular on three important things in observing fast becomingly: *Prayer, Renunciation* and *Almsgiving*. During the fasting days all used to pray more. This is done either through liturgical celebrations or through private or common devotional activities. They also renounce consciously something or some act, most dear to them. Almsgiving or giving something of their own away to others also is considered essential for fasting. It is done either by giving material things to the needy or by helping others physically or intellectually or spiritually. Both the *vertical* and the *horizontal* aspects of their Christian commitment were thus beautifully expressed also in their fasting.

3. Family Prayer

Family Prayer is one of the most impressive devotional practices of St. Thomas Christians. All the family members used to come together

in the evening, if possible at a fixed time, and conduct the regular prayers. The father of the family or the one designated by him leads it. The *Liturgy of the Hours* was part of this family prayer. In course of time that was substituted with rosary devotion. The *Liturgy of the Hours* is again gaining importance; and it must be so. Bible reading is also part of the family prayer.

4. Pilgrimages

The pilgrim-character is in-born to Christian commitment. A Christian lives in between the *already and not-yet*. He has to fix his eyes always on the *not-yet* when he stands firm on the *already*. The eschatological dimension is basic to Christianity. The second Vatican Council has beautifully explained the Church as a pilgrim community, always on march under the leadership of the risen Jesus towards the fulfilment in heavenly Jerusalem.

The pilgrim nature of their Christian existence is proclaimed by the St. Thomas Christians every day during their liturgical celebrations when they all stand under the leadership of the celebrant turned to the East or the Sanctuary or the eschatological sign of the glorified Cross. The same they proclaim during the processions both within the Eucharistic celebration and without in relation to festival celebrations.

They also conduct pilgrimages to important shrines or hillocks like Malayattoor in order to bear witness to the basic dimension of their Christian faith – the pilgrim nature. Such pilgrimages are often conducted after long periods of fasting and renunciation. Special prayers and almsgiving are considered to be part of this preparation. Most of the pilgrims, at least partially, go on feet in great austerity to fulfil the *vota* or promise made to God. There are several such pilgrim centres among the St. Thomas Christians.

There is all possibility that a kind of commercialism creeps into the management of pilgrim centres. In fact, it does in modern times; the authorities are to be always vigilant to correct all such mal-practices.

The ancient St. Thomas Christians used to make long and tedious pilgrimage to the tomb of their Apostle St. Thomas in Mylapore, Madras. Today also many go on pilgrimage to Mylapore, but mostly in vehicles or by rail.

5. Birth-Rites

A new-born child is fed with *powdered gold, honey or ghee mixed with a herb called veyambu*. This is considered something essential to add to the physical shape and beauty. *Jātakarma*, the star determining, *Nāmakaraṇa*, the name giving, *Annaprasna*, the rice-giving, etc. were all observed by the St. Thomas Christians; but in a Christian way by the presence, prayers and blessing of priests.

They preferred biblical names but with local modifications.³¹ Thus *Thomma* became Thommi, Thomman, Thommachan, etc; *Mariam* became Mariamma, Mariakutty, Kochumariam, etc. The paternal grandfather's or grandmother's name is given to the first child and the second child is named after the maternal line. According to Father Alvaro Penteadó, a Portuguese missionary, sometime before baptism, the priest comes home, blesses some legumes and puts some in the mouth of the child, giving it the *name*.³²

Antonio de Monserrate describes the rice-giving ceremony as follows: "At the end of six months (after the birth of the child) they are wont to give the child rice, for which they invite their friends and relatives, and the priest comes to bless the eating and takes a little from the rice mixed with black dilute sugar (jaggery) and puts it to the mouth of the child; he does not touch the rice with the hand but with a cross of gold or of gold-plated silver, placed inside a circle. After this has been done by the priest, the relatives and friends approach and repeat the action and then all go to eat the best possible (meals)".³³

Children's ornaments were very often made of leopard-claws and mangoose teeth set in gold, but always with the addition of the Christian symbol, the cross.

6. Death-Rites

There are several special rituals among the St. Thomas Christians in connection with death, burial and some functions following it. *Nālothu* (immediately after burial), *pulakuli* (after determined days of austere defilement), *Chātham* (death-anniversary), etc. are a few of such devo-

31. Cf. P. J. PODIPARA, *Nammude Ritu* (Our Rite), Mannanam 1951, p. 35.

32. Mentioned in A.M. MUNDADAN, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

33. Quoted in *ibid.*

tional celebrations. Most of these are the same as those of their Hindu brethren.³⁴

When somebody dies, no food would be prepared or eaten in that house, till after the burial. After burial, the priest would bless a tender coconut, drink a little of its water, and then share it with the nearest relatives as a sign of participation in their sorrow. Then follows a purely vegetarian meal, presided over by priests. They call this ceremony the *Nālothu*. The priests conduct special prayers on this occasion and renew the blessing of the house. The devotees are given the cross to be kissed and ordinary cumin seed to be tasted.

Pulakuli, namely, the conclusion of austere defilement varies from region to region. Normally that comes between seven to seventeen days. In some cases, it is extended even to the forty-first day. Besides the special liturgical celebrations in the Church and prayer at the tomb, there are also special prayers at home by the priests and a vegetarian meal following them. The prayers and rituals at home are similar to those of *Nālothu* celebration.

Chātham is the celebration almost in the same pattern as *Pulakuli* on the death-anniversary day. The meal in connection may be also non-vegetarian. During such occasions the faithful and relatives may also offer some money in suffrage of the departed. The *Chātham* of the father of the family is observed every year, but less solemnly, by the children in several places.

7. Other Celebrations

In connection with *marriage*, the St. Thomas Christians have several popular celebrations, varying from place to place and community to community. The preparation of the bridal chamber, conducting the couple to the chamber and the devotional singing in this connection, existing in one of the communities is worth special mention.³⁵

The *passover meal* that is eaten in every St. Thomas Christian family on Maundy Thursday night is something unique in the whole of Christendom. For that, a special kind of bread and sweet drink are prepared in every house. After special prayers, the father of the family breaks the

34. Cf. J. AERTHAYIL, *The Spiritual Heritage of the St. Thomas Christians*, Bangalore 1982, pp. 49-51.

35. Cf. ID., pp. 46-49.

bread and distributes it to everyone. All eat it standing and drink the sweet liquid. It appears to be a popular but beautiful combination of the Jewish passover meal and the Christian Eucharist.

Some of the St. Thomas Christians may sometimes make some *Vrtas* or *Nerchas* (promises) in relation to favours obtained or to be obtained from God. Some of them have already taken the form of solemn devotional practices. The *Nercha* of the twelve Apostles is one among such practices. For that there is proper liturgical celebration in the church and then a popular form of washing the feet of twelve children either in the church or at home together with sumptuous meals served to those children and the celebrating priest. Very often relatives and friends are also invited on such occasions.

There is also a *Nercha* of the Holy Family which they call *Muthiyuttu* (giving meals to an old lady). For this, they give sumptuous meals and in some areas also good dresses to a poor father, mother and child.

Sitting in Bhajana is another popular devotion among the women folk, for obtaining the favour of children. Such devotees spend the whole day in prayer and fasting in the churches or shrines, beginning with the morning Eucharistic celebration. When there are a considerable number of devotees at some time, priests may also give exhortations. During such occasions the neighbours used to provide for the daily necessities of those devotees. This practice is very common during the *eight-day fast* in preparation for the Nativity celebration of Blessed Virgin Mary.³⁶

Conclusion

The authentic popular devotions among the St. Thomas Christians are all in one way or other derived from their liturgical and ecclesial set-up. But during the colonial and imperial period after the 16th century they were forced to subscribe to several European popular devotions such as the monthly devotions, novenas, etc. Most of them are not in tune with their liturgical genius and hence torpedo their authentic spiritual equilibrium. The European Christianity has discontinued several of them as they are not in agreement with the directions given by Vatican II documents. But many St. Thomas Christians haven't yet succeeded in rectifying the situation.

36. Cf. ID., pp. 170-174.