

Lesson 10

SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH AND APOSTOLIC MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES

Lazar of Bethania was an intimate friend of Jesus. His sisters informed Jesus of his sickness. But Jesus went to Bethania only after two days. Before He went, He said to his disciples: Our friend Lazar is sleeping. I am going to wake him up. Then Thomas said to the other disciples: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (Jn. 11:11-16). Thomas declared this when the community of disciples were gripped with fear that they may be killed by the Jews. He expressed this courage even after the ascension of Jesus. It was this courage that helped the apostle Thomas to come over to distant India to proclaim the Gospel.

The Christian community formed by the proclamation of the Gospel by St. Thomas grew strong in Kerala. They are known



as 'St. Thomas Nazranis'. They are fully aware of the apostolic origin of the Church. This is the only Church known by the name of the founder apostle. Other apostolic Churches are known by the name of the place of their origin.

Missionary Character of Mar Thoma Christians

Mar Thoma Christians had their own style of evangelisation. They gave primary importance to keep up their Christian faith among the majority of non Christians and to bear witness to their faith. They never tried to impose their faith on others through violence or compulsion. They were respected as a community maintaining high moral standard. They had a good position in the community in which they lived. People of other religions also loved and respected Mar Thoma Christians.



Mar Thomas Nazranis were missionaries by their life based on faith. There is a tradition that missionaries from India went up to China. Still it is not wrong to say that the different religious faiths existing here from ancient times, the tolerant attitude of Indian culture, caste system etc. weakened the evangelical apostolic activities of Mar Thoma Christian.

The missionary activities in India became active and alive with the coming of the western missionaries in the 16th century. But, in the background of the later historical events, Syro-Malabar Church could not continue her missionary activities. In the Syro-Malabar Church, there has been a progressive growth in missionary vocations. Many from this Church came forward to be priests and religious. They served in Latin dioceses and Latin Congregations. Thus, Mar Thoma Christians here gave personnel and money to help the missionary attempts of the western Church.

70% of the members of the many religious communities and missionary organisations in India were from Syro-Malabar Church. They became witnesses to Jesus by their committed service in and outside India.

Syro-Malabar Church and Emigrations



Until the 16th century Mar Thoma Nazranis had the authority to conduct Church activities all over India. The Archdeacon who ruled the whole Church was known as the Archdeacon of India. But with the advent of the Western missionaries, they lost their governing power. Considering the constant request of Mar Thoma Nazranis, on 21st Dec, 1923, Pope Pius XI established Syro-Malabar Hierarchy (Special governing set-up). The area of activity of the Church was limited between Bharathappuzha in the North and river Pampa in the South. The hard-working Marthoma Christians sought new zones of life and activities and emigrated to different parts of Kerala and outside Kerala. The Syro-Malabar Church has the responsibility to give pastoral service to those who emigrated to different part of Kerala and other states by establishing parishes or dioceses there.

A person's life of faith is based on the faith tradition of his mother Church. He gets his spirituality for his faith life from the liturgy of the individual church. Hence each individual church has the responsibility to give pastoral service to its members wherever they may live. The church teaches this in the decree on 'Oriental Churches'. "We should pay attention to protect and develop each individual church in the world. Wherever necessary, parishes and one's own hierarchy must be established for the spiritual good of the faithful" (Oriental Churches. DE 4). The Second Vatican Council teaches that each individual church has the freedom and the right to proclaim the word of God based on its faith traditions and to establish self-

governing set up and grow. With this purpose Tellicherry diocese was established in 1953 for the Syro-Malabar members who emigrated to Malabar region. In 1955, the areas of jurisdiction of certain dioceses were broadened: the boundary of Changanacherry diocese upto Kanyakumari, Trissur diocese to coimbatore and Tellicherry diocese to Mysore and Mangalapuram.

There was no special set-up for the spiritual needs of the emigrants who went to different parts of India and other places, seeking job. They became members of the Latin dioceses where they lived. They practised the liturgy which they were not acquainted with. As a part of solving this problem, the diocese of Kalyan was established for the Mar Thoma Christians of Mumbai, Poona and Nasik on 30th April, 1988 and the diocese of Chicago in 2001 for the Mar Thoma Christians in America, outside India. On 6th March 2012 erected diocese of Faridabad. But even today in India itself, members of Syro-Malabar Church fail to get their own liturgical life. Hence, if necessary, pastoral service set up for Syro-Malabar dioceses are to be arranged in places like Bangalore, Chennai, etc in India and in many countries outside India.



Mission Dioceses of Syro-Malabar Church

The members of the Syro-Malabar Church desired to work among the non-Christians in different parts of India. The leaders of Syro-Malabar Church presented this desire to the Pope constantly. Consequently, Syro-Malabar Church got the Mission Dioceses of Chanda, Ujjain, Satna, Sagar, Jagadapur, Bijnor, Rajkot, Gorekpur, Thuckalay and Adilabad. Still, we need more mission dioceses for her missionary activity.

Activity-1. Find out the mission dioceses of Syro-Malabar Church and write them down. Discuss how we can help those dioceses.

Main Style of Mission Activities

Life witness is the first missionary activity of each Christian. In India, with people deeply rooted in various religious traditions, the life of love of the Christians is the most powerful means to proclaim Jesus.

Another means is dialogue among religions. Among the Christians and Hindus in India, a life of dialogue has already been there. Through dialogue, the Church understands the faith traditions of other religions and invites them to share the God-experience of Christian tradition. A missionary engaged in dialogue should be in good relations with the people around and be ready to help them, even their opponents, in their need. Christians, along with people of other religions should work for the social and economic welfare of the society. We must be able to share our faith and God-experience through this.

Fasting, penance and Ashram life have much importance in Indian and Syro-Malabar traditions. Hence the Church exhorts that the consecrated persons in Syro-Malabar Church must be evangelists capable of instilling zeal and piety in others. (The document on the working of Syro-Malabar Church 6: 2-5).

Activity-2. Prepare a write-up on any of the Syro-Malabar Mission dioceses and present it in class.

Our missionaries should try to form local worshipping communities, discussed with much importance in the Apostolic teaching of Pope Paul VI on 'Evangelisation Today'. These communities should come together to listen to the Word of God, to meditate on it, to receive the sacraments and to share in the banquet of love. (EN. 58)

The members of the Church adopt a missionary style suited to the culture of each locality. Thus, through various styles Syro-Malabar Church continues her missionary movement. Let us be proud of this missionary move and co-operate with it as far as we can.

Let us Read the Word of God and Meditate

1 Cor. 3: 5-9

A Word of God to Remember

“For, we are God’s servants, working together;
You are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:9)

Let us Pray

Our Lord and our God, strengthen us to witness to our faith like
St. Thomas, the apostle, who said, ‘let us go and die with Him’.

My Decision

I will have a lively participation in the Mission Sunday celebrations
of my parish through prayer, sacrifice and donations.

Let us think with the Church

As the local Churches are obliged to represent the universal Church,
they must properly understand that they are sent to the people around who
do not believe in Christ, living in the same area.

This local Church should be a sign showing Christ to others by
their individual and communitarian life of witness (AG. 20)

Let us find out the answers

1. Describe the missionary richness of Syro-Malabar Church.
2. Does an individual Church require mission diocese?
3. Which are the mission dioceses of Syro-Malabar Church?
4. What are the main missionary activities of the Church? Explain.
5. What is the importance of local liturgical communities?