

COUNTRY REPORTS

FABC 50 GENERAL CONFERENCE

Compiled by the FABC Central Secretariat

CONTENTS

- I. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh (CBCB)**
- II. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI)**
- III. The Syro-Malabar Church**
- IV. The Syro-Malankara Catholic Major Archiepiscopal Church**

I. CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF BANGLADESH (CBCB)

GENERAL STATISTICS:

Bangladesh earned its independence from West Pakistan in 1971. It has a total population of about 162 million. Christians of Bangladesh are only 0.4%, in the midst of a predominantly Muslim majority (88%), along with Hindus of about 9% and Buddhists about 2%, and others followers of traditional religions (about 0.6%). Among the Christians, Catholics are about 70%, and the other 30% belonging to Protestant churches and other Christian denominations. Among the total Catholic population, which is about 400,000, the biggest ethnic group is called Bengali Catholics who belong to 98% of the national population. However, Catholics coming from more than 34 tribal ethnic groups count about 60% of the total Catholic Population in Bangladesh.

CATHOLICISM IN BANGLADESH:

The history of the Catholic Church in Bangladesh goes back to 500 years. The year 2018 marks five hundred years of the arrival of the merchants and traders who were Christians coming from Portugal to Diang, Chittagong in 1518. This area of the Church was transferred to that of Cochin Diocese in 1958, the year when first two Jesuit Missionary priests, Fr. Francesco Fernandes and Fr. Domingo D'Souza landed in Diang. In the year 1600 two churches were built, one in Chandecan (Iswaripur, Jessore) and the second in Chittagong at Bandel. Fr. Francesco Fernandes SJ is considered the first martyr in Bengal. After being tortured in a cave, he died on November 14, 1602.

The Church in Bangladesh has been under different Ecclesiastical Jurisdictions starting from the Diocese of Goa from the beginning, Cochin Diocese (1598), Mylapur Diocese (1606), Vicariate apostolic of Bengal under Propagation of the Faith (1834), Vicariate of Eastern Bengal (1845).

At present, the Catholic Church in Bangladesh has eight dioceses. Dhaka Archdiocese was erected in 1886 and later in 1950 was made a metropolitan Archdiocese. The erection of other dioceses followed: Diocese of Chittagong in 1927 which was made a Metropolitan Archdiocese in 2017, Diocese of Dinajpur in 1927,

Diocese of Khulan in 1952, Diocese of Mymensingh in 1987, Diocese of Rajshahi in 1990, Diocese of Sylhet in 2011, Diocese of Barisal in 2016.

CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF BANGLADESH (CBCB):

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh (CBCB) which came into being in 1971 immediately after the Independence of Bangladesh. The Conference now consists of two archdioceses and six dioceses. Since the Independence, in response to its life and mission, the Catholic Bishops, in collegiality with each other, inspired by the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, committed itself in bringing renewal in the local Church with ongoing reflection and action, developing organizational and infra-structural services, setting up pastoral priorities, providing pastoral directives for the mission of the Church in Bangladesh. The Conference meets regularly about three to four times a year, on average for 2 days.

At the level of the Conference there are fourteen Episcopal Commissions and Organizations in order to constantly assist the Church at the Diocesan and national reflection, doing action together, providing inspiration and implementing the decisions of the Conference in the fields: liturgy, Catechetics, Family Life, Education, Health Care, Justice and Peace, Inter-religious Dialogue and Christian Unity, Social Communications, Youth, Laity, Seminary, Clergy and Religious, Evangelization and Caritas Bangladesh. All eight dioceses have Diocesan Commissions which are concomitant parts of the national commissions.

CLERGY AND MEN AND WOMEN OF CONSECRATED LIFE:

Although the Catholic Church is a very small minority in Bangladesh, God has blessed her with many vocations to priesthood and consecrated life. Statistically the Church has 7 active Archbishops and Bishops who are all Bangladeshis. There are 391 priests out of which 228 Diocesan priests, 163 religious priests (52 foreigners); 114 Religious Brothers (15 foreigners) and 1100 religious sisters (76 foreigners). The diocesan priests of Bangladesh are associated under Bangladesh Diocesan Priests Fraternity (BDPF), local name for Apostolic Union of Clergy which is responsible for promoting fraternity, on-going theological, pastoral and spiritual formation.

At present a total of 35 Religious Congregations of men and women Apostolic Societies are working in Bangladesh, some of them have been well known and long-time missionary Congregations. One of the Holy Cross members, Brother Flaviano Doria Lapante, CSC (1907-1997) and “Apostle to Fishermen” is also declared as Servant of God, whose cause being in the process of Beatification. The religious Congregations are confederated together as Bangladesh Conference of Religious (BCR) which arranges programs for their on-going reflection and formation. The Priests, religious men and the lay faithful are actively involved in implementing the vision and mission of the Church through many activities. They are engaged in the following main apostolate:

PARISH AND PASTORAL MINISTRY:

There are about 125 parishes and 50 sub-parishes in the eight dioceses in Bangladesh. In the parish ministries that are ordinarily done are: liturgical and prayer life, catechesis, family welfare, faith formation and training for different ministries, justice, peace and reconciliation, dialogue and ecumenism, Christian leadership, work of evangelization, promotion of priestly and religious vocation, animation of Small Christian Communities (SCC), parish planning, governance and administration, socio-economic developments, health care animation of lay association, movements and organizations, Christian festivals and celebrations, charitable and merciful activities to those who need special love and care. All these activities are targeted to Christian individuals, children, youth couples, parents, disabled, village and parish communities.

EDUCATION:

The Church runs many educational institutions, for children and youth of all religions and cultures. They are gathered for general education and learning, but also to inculcate value and moral education. The Catholic Church owns 600 primary and Kindergarten schools, 31 junior schools, 49 High Schools out of which 10 are raised as college having grade 11-12 levels, 2 colleges including a teachers training college and 1 university. About 135 boarding houses and hostels are there where boys and girls come to receive education from nearby institutions.

The Catholic Church owns some of the best education Institutions of the country. These include Notre Dame University, Notre Dame College, Holy Cross Girls College, St. Joseph's College, St. Gregory's High School and College, St. Francis Xavier's Green Herald International School. All these University, Colleges, Schools have a good reputation for their standard of education and conducive environment for education and formation. Here Churches' life is identified with her quality service in the field of education. Educated and rich people want their children to be admitted into the Missionary schools. Therefore, there is a lot of pressure during admission.

HEALTH CARE:

The 75 clinics, dispensaries and hospitals run by the Catholic Church are mainly for general treatment, accessible mainly to the less advantaged and marginalized peoples. These are considered as the only means of medical treatment in the remote areas. The Catholic Medial institutes give service to the poor who can't reach the government hospitals. The situation of government health care is one of the most corrupt sectors in Bangladesh.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

Ever since the independence, the Catholic Church in Bangladesh dedicated herself for the protection and care of the vulnerable women, most of whom devastated by the war crimes; many of whom were raped and abandoned, lost husband and family. The Church trained them for handicraft works so that they can take care of themselves and their families. Such activities had been spread out throughout the country and have got great recognition, nationally and internationally. Thus, the Church continues to empower women in rural areas and especially among the tribal people who are deprived in many ways and are not recognized. Thanks to Caritas and other similar missionary activities thousands of the families have been able to raise their standard of living and thus move towards a better way of life.

WORKS OF CHARITY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

Caritas Bangladesh is one of the biggest local NGOs and is doing the work as the 'social arm' of the local Church following the Social Teaching of the Church. In recent days Caritas Bangladesh has

taken up a huge project to take care of about three hundred thousand Rohingya refugees and has provided an exemplary role among the NGOs. Caritas Bangladesh is very well known and admired for its selfless, committed and dedicated services among the poor irrespective of culture and religions. There are also lay sodalities which do charitable works among the poor.

COOPERATIVE AND CREDIT UNIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:

This is one of the biggest contributions of the Catholic Church to the nation initiated originally by foreign missionaries and now totally governed and managed by lay people who have made the Christian community achieve economic solvency. These cooperative and credit unions are present in almost all parishes in all the dioceses. The lay participation in the development in the Christian community in economic sphere, social and political leadership is praiseworthy. However, formation of them in Christian values and in social teachings of the Church and also belongingness in the Church community have been an important challenge both for the lay faithful as well as for the clergy.

PEOPLE IN NEED OF SPECIAL LOVE AND CARE:

The local Church has a loving concern for the people needing special care. She has, therefore, several orphanages, rehabilitation centers for drug addicts, abandoned children, HIV/AIDS, homeless and displaced children and people, and elderly people. The Catholic Church has special programs for the disabled in all the dioceses inspired by the love and care envisioned by Jean Vanier (founder of L'Arche and Faith and Light Movement).

THE RELIGIOUS ATMOSPHERE IN BANGLADESH:

The constitution of Bangladesh has enshrined freedom of thought, conscience, speech (Article 39 § 1 & e and a & b) and freedom of religions. The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, cast, sex or place of birth. (Const. Art. 28) Regarding the subject of law, public order and morality, the Constitution affirms that: (a) every citizen has the right to profess, practice or propagate any religion; (b) every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions (Art. 41).

However, Islam is the state religion of Bangladesh by article 2A but this article came into direct conflict with the article 12 of part-(II) of 2nd stanza which states that "The state should not grant political status in favour of any religion" as secularism has been defined as one of the four fundamental principles of Bangladesh. Article (2A) of the constitution also states that "the state shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions" while giving a special status to Islam which have led to a huge Controversy regarding the country's foundation. The supreme court of Bangladesh on 28 March 2016 upheld the status of Islam as the State religion.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT:

Although Christianity is a very small minority, the positive impact of the Church is far more than its number. The Christian Community is considered as peace loving people with high sense of moral and spiritual values, very visible in their life witness in the society. The people of Bangladesh and its government have this positive attitude towards the Christians.

The people as well as the Government of Bangladesh recognize sincerely the contributions and sacrificed that the Christian community has made especially during the time of liberation in 1971 and in rebuilding the country afterwards. The Church's role in the fields of education, health social development, charitable works, socio-economic growth of the grass root people are widely acknowledged. The Christian community runs some of the best educational institutions in the country which have produced very competent, qualified and well-valued citizens, many of whom now give leadership in the country and in the government offices.

Every year, during the time of Christmas, the President of the country and the Prime Minister of the government arrange Christmas Reception for the Christian Community. In making some policies and law for the country which may affect the Christian Community, the Government consults some representatives of the Church and seek their opinions on the matters.

The Catholic Church together with other Christian Communities approach the Government authorities many times with their issues and grievances and the government pay due attention to

them. Some of the problems presented have been: separation between the state and the Church, exemption as Church from law for bringing foreign donation for church activities, providing missionary visa to the Church workers coming from abroad, exception on some rules and regulations on education for the church institutions, violence and injustices against minority Christians and ethnic groups, facilitating permission for starting Theotonius Amal Ganguly Teachers Training College, other colleges and Notre Dame University, appointing priests and Religious as Heads of Christian Educational institutions, some cases of positive interventions from the higher authorities in order to get justice and fair treatment.

During any possible threats to Christian Community that may come from the militant, fundamentalist and terrorist groups, the Government has provided security for people, religious places and property. Very friendly and spiritual relationship with the Holy See and the Government of Bangladesh continues uninterrupted. The visit of Pope John Paul II in 1986 and the latest visit of Pope Francis in 2017 are two milestones of cordial, human and spiritual relationship. Voices of the Pope on international issues are heart with special importance and convictions and his fatherly concern has been expressed for example, during the incidents of injustices to garment factory workers, victims of different natural and man-made calamity, refugees from Myanmar, vulnerable situation of Bangladesh because of the climate changes, etc. The recent appointment of a Cardinal from Bangladesh (His Eminence Patrick D'Rozario) has been considered as an honour and recognition of the nation by the Holy Father.

RELATION WITH OTHER RELIGIONS:

The relation with other religions has to be seen in the perspective of the Cultural and religious background. The long Bengali Cultural Identity is the foundation of religious harmony, relationships and dialogue. The Christians of Bangladesh are part and parcel of the identity and traditions.

Although respect for other religions, existence of Cultural identity and affinity, spiritual communion are promoted and celebrated, inter-religious harmony and relationships are at times threatened by some terrorists, religious fanatics and fundamentalists and militant and extremist groups and by their insurgent activities. These violent activities against the people of minority religions are

really bringing a new situation in the existing harmony, there is a trend of majority affirming their dominance over the minority guided by selfish motives. This attitude is manifested in religion, in social power structures and in relation with ethnic groups. In social encounter with the followers of the majority religion, the other minority religions feel threatened in their religious freedom, denied of their social, political and economic rights and justice, uproot the ethnic minorities from the homes and lands. In these situations the Christian community being minority and embracing many minority ethnic groups in its fold, is afraid and live in fearful situation. The minority and minor ethnic groups are discriminated in many ways. Ever since the independence, the Hindus and the minority are on the verge of leaving the country. Many of those do not feel secure to live in this country as there have been continuous attacks on them every now and then. The overwhelming Muslim majority boast of their religion as to be the best and try to either convert or corner the people of other people, whereas preaching Christianity to Muslims may cause religious riots.

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND ECUMENISM:

The local Church takes its pride in initiating inter-religious dialogue in Bangladesh. Dialogue with people of other religions at the level of daily life situation, in collaboration and cooperation in actions, ongoing faith reflection and sharing and encounters in spiritual programs are quiet normal in parish and other levels. The Episcopal Commission organizes Training program every year for the participants of all Dioceses and helps all the Dioceses to have many programs in their respective Dioceses. Every Diocese under takes lots of programs like: Seminar, conference and workshop with different levels of people at the Diocese and regional levels, in many Catholic schools teaching on Inter-Religious unity and harmony are imparted, during youth formation program this theme is always included. We also encourage our Churches to send greetings to the people of other Religions during their feast, to invite people of other Religions during Christmas, Easter and other feast. All our efforts are highly appreciated.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BANGLADESH:

The Catholic Church also experiences some limitations and weakness which are taken as challenges and opening to new opportunities:

Basic faith formation and deepening of it, is an absolute need for all, especially for those who have recently embraced Christian faith.

Formation in proper understanding and concept of the Church is very important for priests, religious and the laity for their life as well as for their mission of building communion.

Evangelization of individual life, family, local village community and parish community, used of media with the Gospel values are the continuous mission of the Church. Formation of Christian lay leaders in the spirit of the Gospel values is the urgent need for the lay faithful.

On-going efforts are needed to orientate our pastoral activities with focus on family, basic community and spirituality of communion.

More emphasis is to be given and engagements on being Church of the poor and for the poor. A preferential option for the poor by the Small Christian and Parish Communities and the diocese in new opportunities for the Church as well are the demands of the time.

In pastoral approach everyone, particularly the priests, should be imbued with values of love, mercy and compassion, understanding and reconciliation, and discernment and accompaniment of the people.

More participation of lay men and women in the decision-making governance and administration of the Church at different levels is to be ensured.

Care of creation, our common home should enter into the normal practices of being Christians as individuals and as community.

More and more our Institutions should place utmost importance to human, ethical and spiritual values as a way of living, acting and witnessing.

NEW PATH FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BANGLADESH:

Looking at the history we recognize three epochs of inner development in the Catholic Church in Bangladesh: (a) Infant stage: a situation of Receiving Church, (b) Church Come of Age: a situation of church becoming itself, (c) Adult Stage: a situation of Giving Church.

In the contest of the Adult Stage, from 1985, the Bishops of Bangladesh started their journey of “synodus”, “Walking Together” by adopting a pastoral Plan for the entire Church in Bangladesh. In the pastoral Plan our vision and priorities are : a) Healing of the injustices in our option for the poor; b) Communion with people of other Religion and Communities; c) Communion among Priests, Religious and lay faithful within the Church; d) Inculturation and Evangelization; e) Formation to spiritual and missionary Discipleship and f) Care for Creation. The Pastoral priorities are focused on: Family, Basic Communities and Spirituality of Communion. These priorities and focuses are taken at the level of the dioceses as well as at the level of the Bishops’ Conference.

The Catholic Church in Bangladesh considers itself as a “Church of the poor and Church for the poor”. The people experience themselves as “Anawim Yahweh”, the poor, little ones and “little flock” who are loved and cared by God the Father, revealing his divine plan to care for the poor.

DIALOGUE WITH THE POOR:

The Catholic Church in Bangladesh experiences that common programs or projects in favour of the poor who need special love and care can be one of the best means of inter-religious dialogue. Works of mercy done by different organizations and associations experience such relationship and harmony among the followers of different religions. Here is an opportunity the Catholic Church should, reflectively and planed way, move further to strengthen the inter-religious dialogue and ecumenism among the Christians.

DIALOGUE OF LIFE:

This is a relationship of the Christians living with the people of other faiths based on everyday life: living together with the neighborhood families, visiting, sharing the joyful and sorrowful

events of life and families; extending assistance in needs, friendship built around academic, professional and social life. This living and sharing removes a lot of prejudices and promotes human relations and values.

DIALOGUE OF CELEBRATIONS AND FESTIVALS:

The relationship with the people of other faiths finds visible manifestations in family and social celebrations and religious festivals. The common celebrations and festivals either of Christians or that of other religions are open to and participated by all. This is seen at different levels: family, society, institution level. The more we will be able to come together to help and support each other to live and celebrate the faith the more we will be able to get free of our prejudice and intolerance and ultimately celebrate life of magnificent colors.

DIALOGUE OF ACTION:

The Catholic Church in Bangladesh needs to continue its mission in serving the people in collaboration with the vast majorities in the activities in the field of education, health care, endeavors on human development, social and charitable activities as well as in inter-religious programs. In this dialogue of action real evangelization will take place through the shared vision, values and virtues which are very human and Christian.

DIALOGUE OF REFLECTION AND DISCOURSE:

The Catholic Church in Bangladesh will continue to organize and participate in the Inter-religious dialogue meetings, seminars and other programs. These gatherings needs to aim at discussing certain issues or to celebrate certain occasions where formal talks are to be presented in the light of one's faith as Muslims, Hindu, Buddhist or Christian. Moreover, in the education syllabus for the school students, general information about other religions are to be given. Through the media, the Church needs to get involved in continuous conversation with the men and women of the society and present Christian views and values.

PRIORITIES OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BANGLADESH:

Since 1985, the Catholic Church in Bangladesh has started to organize an integral pastoral plan for the Church in Bangladesh.

Accordingly, the Catholic Church in Bangladesh has been organizing a pastoral workshop in every decade to evaluate the progress and to discern the steps for the future, the latest being in August 2018. The theme of the Pastoral Workshop was: **Communion- the witnessing of the Church in Bangladesh**. Looking back to the previous pastoral workshops and observing and discerning the signs of the times of the present situation of the Church, and articulating the pastoral needs an important aspect for the future the church in Bangladesh has selected 10 pastoral priorities for the next 10 years to be implemented through various plan of action by all the dioceses and its institutions. The following are those priorities.

1. Evangelization: Life witness of Christian teachings and values

Being the “little flock of God”, Catholic Church in Bangladesh needs to continue to like Salt and Light in witnessing through living the faith in Christ and teaching its values through activities in serving the vast majority.

2. Family: House Church- Formation of Christian Faith and living a life of faith

As Christian faith has been continuing through generations of families, it is important that the faith is deeply rooted in the family traditions and there is a strong bond among its members so that the legacy may continue and parents teach their children to love and serve the Lord who is steadfast in His love and care.

3. Education, Catechesis, Social teachings of the Church and integral formation

As the majority of Christians have hardly any other means outside the Church to learn about the Faith and the teachings of the Church, the Church in Bangladesh, aware of its huge responsibility to educate the faithful through its prayer, liturgy, spiritual exercises as well as educational activities.

4. Pastoral Care for Children, adolescent and the youth: Vocation and Choosing the various ways of profession, and leadership

In today’s world the children are in many cases in vulnerable situations and the youth need a proper guidance to choose their right

path of life. The Church in Bangladesh is committed to ensure the proper care of the children and carry them through their adolescent and adulthood in helping them to introducing to the way of life that they are meant to be so that they may flourish in the best way possible and one day be able to harness the society and serve in the Church as ministers or leaders.

5. To create a Culture of dialogue and communion: with the poor, migrants, with the cultures of different ethnicities and religions

Having a long tradition of peaceful co-existence of all the religion of Bangladesh, yet occasional hate crimes against the minorities and the marginals due to rise of fundamentalism to some extent, the Church feels the urge to create a culture of dialogue and communion among the diversities of faith and ethnicities and protecting the poor, neglected and the abandoned.

6. Human Rights, Justice, Peace and Communion

Being a country that lacks in many ways to implement the proper rule of the law and safeguard the rights of the people especially that of the poor and the week, Bangladesh is in great need to develop the sectors of Human Rights, Justice and the establishment of Peace. The Church is obliged with its prophetic ministry to teach and influence the minds and heart of the people regarding the dignity of every human person which is inalienable and irreplaceable.

7. Health care and Pastoral nurturing: Marginal people, drug addicted, elderly and people of special needs

As the health sector of Bangladesh is gradually becoming more and more expensive and out of the reach of the majority of the people, and as many families reach at the brink of the financial crisis, the church in Bangladesh dedicates itself with a renewed commitment in serving the sick and elderly as well as the significant number of people, especially the youth being addicted to drugs with its mission of healing.

8. Self-dependent Church: Employment and Socio-economic development

Ever since the church got root in the soil of Bengal, it has always been at the service of the poor. The Good News is preached to the poor and it is not only the preaching of the scripture but also

working for their socio-economic development aiming at the establishment of their dignity in the society. In this endeavor the Church had long been relying on foreign aid. Gradually the church is being aware of its own responsibility to take care of its own sheep, is on the verge of taking various initiative to improve their livelihood to a dignified standard with its own resources.

9. Effective use of technology and media in every sphere:

As the modern generation is becoming more and keener towards social media and technology, and the virtual world has become so important a means during this Covid pandemic, the proper channeling of the youth to this media and ensuring its effective use is seen as a great moral responsibility of the Church. In addition the church also learns its positive aspect in reaching its faithful in the time of social distancing.

10. Responsible citizenship: building of awareness and participation in the civil activities.

As the Church in Bangladesh has been trading towards its maturity in its journey of five centuries through the transitions of many dynasties and regimes and many political and cultural transitions, the Church now feels that it is time for its faithful to actively take part in the formation and leadership of the country. In this regard, the church forms the faithful to be responsible citizens and to venture in the civil and political activities in order to ignite the social and political structure with the Christian values.

CONCLUSION:

As the Independent Bangladesh as well as the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh celebrates its golden Jubilee with great joy and as the country looks forward to the immense opportunities of development in the next few years and decade, the church in Bangladesh is confident and optimistic to bring a great change and development in becoming more and more a truly local church, deeply rooted and strong in faith and is able to take care of its flock and even to serve the state and contribute in the Universal Church with the spirit of brotherhood, a Synodal Church.

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II. CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF INDIA (CCBI)

INTRODUCTION:

At the behest of His Eminence Charles Cardinal Bo, SDB, President of the FABC, and His Eminence Oswald Cardinal Gracias, Convenor of the General Conference of the FABC 50 Jubilee celebrations, via their letter of May 21, 2021, the 'Conference of Catholic Bishops of India' (hereinafter 'CCBI') was requested to prepare a Report on the local situation of the Church in India. Hence, the Secretary General of the CCBI, His Grace Archbishop Anil J. T. Couto, requested the regional secretaries of the CCBI to send in reports of their work in the regions, which are now collated in this 'consolidated report'.

This 'consolidated report' has its limitations since, first, though Indian Christians are only 2.3% of the total population,¹ Christian communities are spread all over the country. Second, the Church in India is marked by great diversity in its regional, social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic makeup; thus, generalizations run the risk of not revealing specificities. Third, within each CCBI regional entity, there is much diversity; and hence one can only provide commonalities rather than specific characteristics. Aware of these limitations, this report briefly tries to summarize what has been collected from twelve (out of fourteen) CCBI regional reports of the Church in India.²

0. A BRIEF HISTORICAL PROLOGUE - The Catholic Church in India is as old Christianity itself. It is widely believed that the Apostle Thomas preached, was martyred and buried in south India, with the so-called 'Thomas Christians' of two *sui iuris* churches with distinct liturgical rites—Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara—tracing their origins to Thomas and his disciples. Apart from this, Christianity also arrived and took root upon Indian soil through a second wave of

¹ See the Census of India figures of 2011 at: https://censusindia.gov.in/census_and_you/religion.aspx

² The twelve CCBI regions whose reports are incorporated herein are: Agra, Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Northern regions, North East, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Telugu and Western Region. The reports of two regions—Bihar and Karnataka—were not received till the date of preparation of this report.

missionary work from the latter half of the fifteenth century onwards by the Portuguese, French, Dutch and British missionaries. These missionaries preached the Good News in various parts of India, especially the coastal areas, giving birth to so-called 'Latin rite Christianity'. The third big wave of missionary work can be traced from the nineteenth century onwards with large sections of tribals mainly from central and northeast India accepting Christ and striving to live by his gospel. These three broad waves of the spread of the gospel gave Indian Christianity its distinctive colour, which blended with the local cultures, affecting them in many ways and being affected by them, too.¹

1. THE OVERALL SITUATION - One can get an overall view of the present-day reality of the Church in India and of Indian Christians by noting certain commonalities in the following spheres: social, political, economic, educational, religious and ecological.

THE SOCIAL SITUATION: Apart from the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara churches, since Christianity came to India with the colonial powers, it is often accused of being an 'alien religion' upon Indian soil. This prejudice gets reinforced since large parts of India were under British rule till Independence in 1947, and also since Christians run many English-medium educational institutions. These accusations are often used by fundamentalist and fanatic groups to treat Christians as 'foreigners' and 'second-class citizens' and harass them.

Christians are a numerical minority in almost all the twenty-nine states and seven union territories of India, which makes them insignificant and with little power in the social sphere.¹ While some groups with vested interest allege that the Christian population is growing swiftly due to so-called 'forced conversions' and other means, the population of Christians is actually on the decline, as seen for instance in the Christian population of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. This is due to the prevalence of nuclear families, increasing migration and rising costs of living, which make couples choose to have smaller families.

There is a general sense of social equality among Christians in India, although there are striking differences in culture, language, traditions, etc. On the one hand, the sense of equality, sharing and cooperation is very visible among the Christian tribals of central and

northeast India, who have easily accepted and lived according to prime Christian values of love, fellowship, service, sharing and caring. However, on the other hand, the cancer of caste, too, affects church life and fragments the Christian community with allegations that positions of governance in the Church are sometimes caste-based.

THE POLITICAL SCENARIO: Though politically constituted as a parliamentary democracy and still functioning as such for the past seventy-five years, the electoral gains of a fundamentalist, right-wing political party are slowly transforming India into a Hindu *Rashtra* (theocratic Hindu nation). This so-called *Hindutva* (militant, radicalized Hinduism) wave is leading to the persecution of Christians, especially in the northern states where they are a minority, and mostly live in the rural areas where such atrocities either go unnoticed or unreported.

The present central government in India is totalitarian in its thrust, its plans and policies being anti-minority, targeting the Muslims—who account for 14.2% of the total population—and the Christians. Moreover, since the Christian community is numerically insignificant, not only does it not have any political influence, nationwide, but it also becomes a soft target for attacks by fanatic forces. Today, powerful political parties have bought up the media, too, which propagate a lot of lies and falsehood. This has led to Christians in certain parts of India to retreat from the political space and develop a ‘minority complex’. On the positive side, there is resistance to this totalitarian regime with regional parties stressing their local, cultural identities in states like West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where the Church enjoys more freedom.

THE ECONOMIC SCENE: Except for some pockets in southern and western India, Indian Christians are poor and many have to struggle to make both ends meet. The pandemic has worsened this situation considerably. There are very few Christians who own businesses, the large majority either have paid jobs in the services’ sector or earn wages by hard labour. In the tribal areas of central India, Christians have been blessed with rich natural resources like coal, mica, etc. However, the ‘resource curse’ is widespread mainly in central India with the ruling elite and corporates earning huge sums of money at the expense of the rural poor who, due to mining and deforestation,

either face internal displacement or total impoverishment. Ecological degradation goes hand-in-glove with economic exploitation and so Christians continue to remain poor and often large sections, malnourished, too. There is also great unemployment among the youth, which has increased during the period of the pandemic.

THE EDUCATIONAL ARENA: The Church in India is known for its institutions both in the urban and rural areas. Hence, though there is backwardness in the social and economic fronts, many Christians have been able to receive basic education and many have also received higher and professional education through Christian colleges and universities. The presence of nonformal education, especially in the rural areas, as well as boarding-schools and hostels for children and youth, has enabled many Christian families to educate their children to a large extent.

Education has empowered the Christian community and enabled people to get better jobs and improve their standard of living. Education has also led many Christians to move out of rural areas to settle down in the towns and cities, seeking better prospects in life. On the negative side, the gradual introduction of a homogenous 'New Educational Policy' does not augur well for the future, since the government is trying to gain control over 'minority schools' so as to revoke their rights and also impose their own agenda with regard to appointments, admission procedures, syllabus and so on.

THE RELIGIOUS REALM: India is supposed to be a social, secular, democratic republic with its Constitution guaranteeing freedom of religion to all its citizens. The Church in India has been enjoying this freedom and contributing to the welfare of its people in many ways. However, the ironical 'Freedom of Religion' Bill – or anti-conversion laws – applicable in many states seriously hinder Christians to practise and propagate their religion freely. The harassment and persecutions – both overt and covert – create fear in the minds of believers. In certain cases, violence has been severe and Christians have suffered immensely, especially in the tribal states of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Bihar.

While there are conflicts and confrontations in the tribal, rural areas, religious practice of Christians appears comparatively 'safe' in most urban areas and in states where Christians have sizable numbers, and attacks in the towns and cities will be easily noticed

and condemned. Besides the threats from outside the Church, there is also tension among Christians, since many lay faithful are leaving the Church to join Pentecostal and Evangelical churches where healing sessions, speaking in tongues, reading and interpretation of the Bible is stressed rather than celebration of the Mass, which allows for only minimal people's participation.

ECOLOGICAL CRISES: The country is reeling under huge ecological crises due to deforestation, mining, soil erosion, depletion of the ozone layer and pollution of water bodies sometimes due to burning of corpses in holy rivers. These ecological crises are severely felt by Christian tribal districts of northern, north-eastern and central India rich in *jal*, jungle, *jameen* (water, forests and land), while the fishing community of Latin-rite Christians in the coastal areas of southern India and the farming community living in Western Ghats are bearing the brunt of ecological imbalances and continued exploitation of the earth's resources. Regular floods and cyclones, and now, the pandemic, have played havoc with the lives and livelihoods of many people.

As a result of the ecological crises, small scale farmers, agricultural labourers, fisherfolk, estate workers, etc., have been badly affected. New laws are being passed which are anti-people and anti-poor, and which, in the name of 'development,' actually lead to internal displacement, marginalization and impoverishment. Christians have raised a prophetic voice against the nuclear plant at Kudankulam, the methane and hydro-carbon project in Tanjore and the harbour at Colachel, which not only affect the earth, but also pose grave threat to the local people.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE OVERALL SITUATION - There are various factors and forces that have created the abovementioned situation for the Church and Christians in India, in particular. It would help to group together factors under the abovementioned heads to see how and why the Church functions under the present concrete contexts and circumstances.

SOCIAL FACTORS: The early Christian missionaries, especially those who came along with the colonial powers, were genuinely concerned about the general welfare of those whom they evangelized. There was a clear intention to respond to people in a holistic way. Hence, besides catechizing people in the essentials of faith, morals,

scripture and spirituality, they also built schools, gave legal advice, started development projects and created awareness about state laws and people's rights. This gives the impression that most Christians have accepted Christianity to better their lot in life or to gain upward social mobility, shedding their caste and class labels. While this might be true in some cases, there is no doubt that the early missionaries did attract believers by their humble, simple, committed, Christ-like lives. Many communities, too, found Jesus and the Christian 'Way' as inspirational for better, holistic living.

POLITICAL: By and large, Christians in India are absent or shy away from the political scene, often regarded as 'dirty politics' though traces of 'church politics' and 'caste politics' exist within the Church. The result? First and foremost, most Christians are either not aware or not made aware by elders and educators of the many possibilities that could arise due to discerned political involvement. Hence, there are very few Christians holding positions of power and influence in the political sphere. Secondly, apart from certain regions where education is widespread, the people's reading of political situations is shallow. Hence, there is no clear understanding of what is happening in the country and Christians fall prey to false propaganda and manipulation by political parties and the media, especially during the time of elections.

ECONOMIC: While, on the one hand, most Christians are lower middle class and poor and belong to the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe category, on the other hand, they are seen by the general public as belonging to a fairly well-to-do community due to Christian ownership of large institutions, which attract attention. Thus, first, government agencies want Christians to seek help from their own people and resources (usually believed to be foreign funds) and not depend on the state for any assistance by way of 'minority rights' and concessions. Secondly, the processes of globalisation and neoliberalism, too, have not brought benefits to those belonging to the poorer classes. So-called 'development' has come at a price: having evolved as a complementary force to ethnocide, internal displacement and the culture of silence.

EDUCATION: Though the Church in India has been playing a 'major' role in the field of education despite being a numerical 'minority', yet, it is compelled to follow state-regulated syllabus that

largely only ensures that students get information, knowledge, degrees, etc. But this education does not make students curious to learn new things or to critique unjust societal structures, denial of legitimate rights, exploitation of the poor, etc. Thus, while many boast of getting a good Christian or 'convent education' they do not stand up for people's rights and protest against societal wrongs. There are, of course, exceptions to this trend.

RELIGIOUS: India is often regarded as a deeply 'religious' country; yet, believers often show blind and uncritical obedience to religious leaders and laws. Thus, Indians today are divided on the basis of religion. A 'we' versus 'them' polarity is being built up with Christians (and, Muslims, too), being portrayed as the dangerous 'other'. When polarities gain wide acceptance in public, any violence against 'them' or the 'other' is justified. While there is hostility from outside the Church, there are also internal problems with abuses by the clergy, lethargy in mission outreach, scandals regarding finances, sexual harassment and so on.

To sum up the above, on the one hand, one can say that there are alliances among the upper castes/classes – i.e., the ruling powers, the corporates and religious elites, with great support from the media—who ensure that the economically poor, politically powerless, socially backward and religious minorities do not improve their living conditions, while they continue to enjoy a lion's share of the benefits provided by the state. However, on the other hand, the Christians continue to live the gospel values and give witness by their lives and work.

3. THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE: to the above-mentioned realities has been largely positive in the sense that it continues with its mission despite difficulties and even conflicts, at times. Apart from regular pastoral and mission work, the Church continues to be active in its three traditional apostolates: education, health care and social-developmental ministries. While there are many successes in these apostolates, there have also been some limitations, which we shall mention. However, it would be appropriate to first focus on the Church's response to the Covid-19 pandemic during the past year and a half.

THE INDIAN CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC: has been exemplary and inspiring to other communities. Almost all the

dioceses reached out to those in need in various ways. Traditional and charitable services have always been an important part of the Indian Church's ministry. So, it is not surprising that, as soon as the pandemic struck and the poor were affected, the Church in India decided to: (a) go forth, (b) open its doors, and (c) lend a helping hand.

Throughout the country, the Church organized relief work like the distribution of dry rations and essential items like masks, sanitizers, medicines and even gave cooked food and money. The pandemic saw many daily wage workers and youth losing their jobs and travelling back to their villages without any money. Many poor families, too, decided to leave the cities and return to their villages, sometimes on foot. The Church reached out to these groups of the poor in various ways. This was done not only by Christian institutions but also by Catholic families who felt that it was their duty to respond with a spirit of solidarity and service. Despite dangers to their own health and lives, many Catholic nurses and doctors volunteered to serve at the Covid detection centres or even Covid treatment centres, earning the respect of many others.

Besides individuals, parishes and dioceses reaching out to help the needy, many Christian NGOs gave witness to Jesus' message of the love of God flowing out into love of the neighbour. Since the whole country was in a state of lockdown, some Christian institutions opened their doors to set up temporary Covid care centres for the affected.

THE EDUCATIONAL APOSTOLATE: has been, and continues to be, the forte of the Church in India. Indeed, if at all the Church and Christianity is known all across the nation, it is mainly because of schools, colleges and universities that, over the years, have produced many prominent citizens in various fields of activity. The rural schools are sometimes in very remote and even unapproachable areas with boardings and hostels attached to them. The providing of free education for girls and scholarships for deserving students to study subjects of their choice makes the ministry very effective. Aware that knowledge about the various government schemes is not available to many people, the Church in West Bengal, for instance, has been making students aware of government scholarships for university and postgraduate studies. Hence, the outreach of the educational

apostolate is commendable and large masses of students have received both, formal and informal, regular and technical education on a large scale.

Since education goes a long way in moulding people's minds, the Christian community has tried to educate the faithful about their civil rights and duties. In Kerala, the Church also supports the faithful for responsible participation in the democratic processes. People have been given directives on the selection of candidates and awareness has also been created on the real spirit of the Indian Constitution, the value of democracy and the goal of elections. In Jharkhand, a programme called 'Nurturing the Tribal Soul' is creating awareness among the tribals of their own strengths and weaknesses, thereby empowering them to stand up for their rights.

Limitations in the Field of Education: While giving credit to those engaged in the educational apostolate, a question arises whether Christian schools are able to quickly adapt to new methods of teaching and to the demands of cyberspace and virtual teaching. Moreover, though aware of the need to train students for jobs in government and administrative services, the Church has not been very successful in developing political leadership among its students. Thus, by and large, those educated in Catholic institutions continue to be part of the voiceless majority, though there are exceptions to this.

THE HEALTH CARE MINISTRY: is carried on in all the regions in India. This ministry is stretched to the full during this time of the pandemic. But, even earlier, it has been reaching out to all the sick and the suffering in various ways through hospitals in the cities, dispensaries in the villages and mobile clinics in remotest parts of the country. All health ministries, either administered by religious congregations or dioceses, have the 'option for the poor' as their focus. The medical and pharmaceutical industry in India is controlled by multinational companies and wealthy Indian corporates who run big hospitals—often multi-speciality ones—whose rates are way beyond the means of the lower middle class and the poor. Christian medical care provided at minimal or no cost helps many of these poor families.

Limitations in the Field of Health Care: Since much of the health care ministry is carried out through donations from agencies, and

since medical assistance is given at very nominal rates, the resources of the Church of India – economic and personnel – are stretched out thin. In the absence of fully trained doctors, religious ‘sister-nurses’ have been giving medical aid. However, in states like Assam, dispensaries run by sisters have been forced to close down due to the legal issues of sister-nurses treating patients.

THE SOCIAL APOSTOLATE: is very important in the Church of India’s ministerial outreach. Most of the dioceses are involved in this ministry through ‘social service wings’ or ‘social cells’ or ‘social commissions’ that address issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. This is carried out at three levels: (a) charity-oriented, (b) creation of awareness, and, (c) rights-based interventions.

First, there are traditional societies like the St. Vincent de Paul Society that help the poor and needy through charitable works of distributing clothes, providing food and meeting some of their other expenses. Second, social wings of some dioceses work to socially uplift the faithful by creating awareness of their context, conducting leadership programmes to empower the youth, and organizing career guidance and vocational training. Finally, the Church has, at times, taken a prophetic stand against certain issues dealing with human rights, namely, protesting against the abuse of nature, standing for people’s rights, especially of the poorer groups like Dalits (former untouchables), Adivasis (tribals), etc. In 2016, the Policy of Dalit Empowerment in the Catholic Church in India was published. The need to stand for the rights of Dalit Christians in their fight for parity with other Dalit communities on reservation is an immediate necessity.

Limitations of the Social Apostolate: While a charity-based approach is needed to reach out to the needy who are in no way able to help themselves, the danger of such an approach is when the Church considers herself to be a generous benefactor with an ‘I-it’ relationship with the poor. Here, the faithful are often kept at the receiving end, passive ‘recipients of grace’ while the clergy are the grantors and donors of grace. The rights-based approach has met with some success in regions where Christians are numerically significant as in the southern states. However, in areas where Christians are both numerically small and socially insignificant, such an approach is not possible and can lead to the community being

targeted by powerful forces. The 'minority' versus 'backward' conflict also arises in the state of Kerala where, the Latin Christian community being a 'backward-minority' fails to enjoy the benefits of minority rights since they have to compete with the forward Christian communities who apply to get them.

PASTORAL AND FAITH-FORMATION MINISTRY: continues within, and apart from, the abovementioned three areas of Christian involvement: educational, health care and social work. For instance, plenty of catechism and faith-formation takes place within the school system through Sunday school catechesis, daily instruction, prayer, Mass, etc. Before the pandemic, bishops, priests, religious and catechists prudently and diligently got involved in pastoral ministries catering to various groups of lay faithful. During the pandemic, such ministrations have continued through judicious use of the electronic and social media to reach out the people and provide them pastoral care and spiritual nourishment through the Word of God, Prayer Services, etc. Online annual retreats, monthly recollections and other meetings are also being organized online to ensure that faith-formation continues within the limitations imposed by the pandemic.

Limitations in Pastoral Outreach and Faith-Formation: The Church at times has been satisfied with providing the spiritual food of communion, without being in solidarity with the poor or catering to their integral well-being. It has, at times, adopted a piecemeal approach to problems without seeing the connections among forces at work. Moreover, it has tried to respond to all situations with the use of its own resources. If it had cooperated or networked with other secular agents of mission, it could have perhaps done better.

4. CHALLENGES FACED BY THE CHURCH IN INDIA: Despite the above-mentioned responses that the Church in India has rightly made towards the issues and concerns it faces, there are many challenges that it continues to face. We can divide these into internal and external challenges, pointing out a few resources that will help the Church to face these challenges with faith.

4 A. THE INTERNAL CHALLENGES: From the initial fervour of the pioneer-missionaries who had to build up 'mission centres' from scratch, so to say, by going forth to the peripheries, there is a certain laxity in evangelization work at the grassroot level. This is partly due to the fact that great institutionalization has led to lethargy among the

clergy and loss of interest among the faithful due to tepidity in matters of faith. It's said that the: 'Church will not suffer for want of priests, but certainly from unwanted priests". Clericalism and other disorders within the church like the inordinate desire to have personal possessions, mismanagement of church institutions, silencing of women, sex scandals and so on, have diminished the Church's moral authority. Clericalism is sometimes seen soon after ordination when young priests see their priesthood as a source of entitlement and demand to be treated superior to others.

Although in theory we claim that the Church is one, most religious and dioceses run their institutions with individualistic mindsets and in isolation from others; hence, there is lack of a common thrust and vision in many of the Church's ministries. Short-term and long-term pastoral plans seem lacking in many dioceses. Lack of coordination among groups working for the Church and lack of charismatic power has led to 'straying sheep' who lose interest in Catholic faith-life. The Protestants and evangelical groups take advantage of this and benefit from 'sheep stealing'. Hence, there is need for reform and a rekindling of pastoral, priestly and prophetic energy to spread the Good News anew.

4 B. THE EXTERNAL CHALLENGES: At present, the prolonged effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are creating situations which are difficult to manage. The pandemic's effects are being felt in every sphere of family, community and parish life. Loss of jobs, lack of money, inability to cope with a virtual world – especially in rural areas where the poor do not have the requisite skills – are leading to situations of diminished hope.

Two factors are mainly responsible for this: (a) the pandemic's compulsory lockdowns have resulted in income from church collections and students' fees drying up. It is becoming increasingly difficult to pay teachers and other church employees their salaries and to maintain church institutions; (b) the new stringent rules and regulations for obtaining financial aid from overseas through the 'Foreign Contributions Regulations' Act (FCRA) is making it extremely difficult to make both ends meet. The lack of funds obviously leads to employing church personnel who are not so qualified and will settle for less salaries. So, the Church has to manage

with poorly trained personnel who do not have a great capacity to lead others.

Together with new FCRA regulations, the present dispensation has also introduced Bills and Acts in parliament which threaten our work. Bills on education, social work, ecology, etc., hinder Christian ministry in many ways. Another challenge already mentioned earlier is the rise of Right-wing Hindutva with help from political and financial powers and the media. Covert and overt persecutions and subversion of rights is quite rampant. All this affects the poor adversely; most of these are Christians who struggle to practise their faith in remote villages despite all difficulties and dangers.

Managing personnel, financial and institutional resources effectively in a 'global village' is no easy task. Formerly, there was a great rush to receive a so-called 'convent education' in Christian institutions. But, at present, the Christian education apostolate seems to have lost much of its former appeal. Since everything is online, the huge structures and institutions are becoming irrelevant and obsolete. Private entrepreneurs and corporates provide much better educational facilities and infrastructures. Our witnessing value is also at stake because of administrative failures and personal pitfalls. Questions are being raised: Do our institutions bear witness to Jesus' teachings, Christian life and Gospel values?

Many parishes have slipped into a dormant state with practically no activity except in those places that have modern facilities for online activities of catechism and other faith formation programmes. Practically no family visits and hardly any administration of sacraments has left believers wondering 'when' and 'how' things will return to a so-called 'normal'.

STRENGTHS OF THE CHURCH: Lest the above discussion paints a very bleak picture of the Church in India, it must be said that many Christians—ordained ministers, religious sisters, lay faithful and catechists—continue to give themselves with heroic commitment, joy and gratitude. In many pockets in India, there is great unity in the Church and genuine will to seek and do God's will, often in the face of trials and tribulations. For instance, the Catholics of the North East are proud of their faith and practise it without inhibition while

women, too, contribute much to the building and maintaining of faith and upkeep of village communities.

5. NEW PATHS AND ROADS LESS TRAVELLED: Although the ordained ministers, religious men and women, and the lay faithful of the Church in India have been journeying together quite fruitfully, there is certainly a deep felt need that it must seek news ways of 'being' and 'doing'. The pandemic has made the Church even more conscious of the need to rebuild itself and society anew, seeking the collaboration of every person of goodwill in a country where Christianity is such a small 'minority'. The fast-changing 'signs of the times' and the 'signs of places' ought to guide our direction, the starting point being each person. Without internal, personal conversion, all attempts at renewing external structures will be futile.

THE LOCAL LEVEL: PERSONAL, PEOPLE-CENTRED AND PARTICIPATIVE:

Before anything else, Christianity is a religion that demands a *personal relationship with Jesus*. Ministries and missions without Jesus as the centre and the model are bound to fail and fade away. Hence, there is need to get back to the basics, to make 'radical' –from the Latin '*radix*', root –options with a re-reading of the gospels to more clearly see the face of Jesus. There is need to chart new paths that demand basic 'shifts' at the personal and parish levels, as follows:

- From adopting a 'doing model' → to moving towards a 'being model' where everyone becomes aware of one's relationship with Jesus, gives witness to the face and the person of Jesus: his love, service, sacrifice and values of peace, equality, justice, and so on.
- From focus on church/parish activities → to fostering SCCs [Small Christian communities] and BHCs [Basic Human Communities] in a big way.
- From being a 'priest-centred' clerical church → to being a people-oriented, participatory church, where all people feel their belongingness to the Church and each feels the need to be an evangelizer at home, in the neighbourhood and at the workplace.
- From strengthening institutions and so-called 'centres' → to empowering people, training the lay faithful and engaging with

peripheries. For instance, popularize slogans like “from school children to parents” and “from home-church to common-home.”

- From a cultic mode confined to church activities → to a prophetic mode with focus on families and other social activities. During the pandemic, the church has had no other alternative than celebrating online Masses. There is need for creative evangelization.

- The model of ‘mission to’ has to be replaced with ‘mission with.’ The ecclesiastical hierarchy must realize that ‘we can’t make it alone.’ We need the others for our survival.

Today, people learn more by the witness given through the lives of committed Christians rather than by hearing the talks of those that govern them. Thus, the need of the hour for the Church, especially the ordained ministers, is to more fully mediate and radiate the presence of Christ, and for the Church to move in the following direction:

1. A Church which is concerned about the poor;
2. A Church which is generous in giving, serving and sacrificing;
3. A Church which is not only more practical/efficient but, above all, more effective;
4. A Church which is merciful and compassionate towards all;
5. A Church which considers all people as *fratelli* and *sorelle* (all as brothers and sisters).

Some regions like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand feel that a revival of the role of catechists is a welcome move. With his latest initiative of instituting the ministry of Catechist (*Antiquum Ministerium*), Pope Francis is providing an impetus to revive and rediscover the effective ministry of catechist, which can be expanded further. This will also help in moving the Church towards a synodal way of proceeding.

The pandemic has made it impossible to continue seeing the church-building as a ‘centre’ for congregational worship. We are now compelled to adopt the BCC/SCC model of church as more practical and effective. Hence, beginning with neighbourhood groups in parishes, communities must become larger by going out in ecumenical and interfaith outreach. Ecumenical and interreligious endeavours can more easily be carried out during the times of festivals and when crises arise as currently with the Covid pandemic.

In times of crises, there is need to specifically focus on work with those most affected: the poor, migrants, refugees, daily wage earners, jobless, etc.

THE NATIONAL LEVEL: There is need for greater collaboration among members of the CCBI and the CBCI in matters of policies and plans. Since the whole world is moving towards functioning in a virtual world, the Church too must move with the times and find ways and means of reaching out to larger audiences online. Competence in the field of communications and media is extremely important. There are also national issues which concern all Indians, especially Christians—for example, Reservation for Christians of Dalit origin, the New Education Policy (NEP), Ecological Impact Assessment (EIA), etc.—for which the Church could take greater interest and get more fully involved. Networking with other nongovernmental (NGOs) and other agencies will help in this regard. With regard to internal matters, the role of women and youth in the Church, too, must be greatly enhanced so that their gifts and charisms may find full expression in church life.

AT THE ASIAN LEVEL: Being a ‘minority’ for most part within the big majority Hindu and Muslim populations, the Church must enter into dialogue with believers of other religions. It is important that the Church retain its Asian character, including Asian values. The Church can also take the lead in strengthening the unity and collaboration among Asian countries, holding on to democratic and Christian values and respect for religious traditions. Though the Church is a small minority in Asia, she can act as ‘leaven in the dough’ and ‘salt of the earth’. Asian culture and traditions should animate the reading of scripture and the liturgy. Finally, the Church must always be the public, compassionate face of Jesus in reaching out to the ‘least’ of Jesus’ brethren: the poor, migrants, refugees, persecuted, homeless and the peripheral people.

CONCLUSION: Journeying with the Indian Jesus and the Asian Peoples

The Church in India is characterized by great diversity, which can be a rich resource and a witness to living the Christian values of unity, equality, harmony, cooperation, justice, peace, caring and sharing. Though it is a numerical minority that faces many internal and external challenges and difficulties, yet, it has been giving witness to

the crucified-risen Christ and also continues being a servant of God's kingdom. With the assistance of God's Spirit, it will surely mature and grow as the Mystical Body of Christ in India.

'Journeying Together' with the whole Church in preparation for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023, we can see the Church in India as part of this journey with the Indian Jesus who continues to be incarnated, and in solidarity with his Indian brothers and sisters. There is need to grow more and more in the image and likeness of this Jesus by deepening our relationship with him so as to experience new life in him. May we continue journeying together with the Holy Spirit and with all the peoples of Asia.



III. THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH

INTRODUCTION:

The Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) has played a great role during the past 50 years of its existence by helping all Catholic Christians in Asia to 'journey together as peoples of Asia'. Its contributions in the past are commendable and must be appreciated, especially in promoting mutual support, helping the poor and the suffering, the martyr Churches, valuing Asian Culture in living the Christian faith in Asia and its possibilities in the process of evangelizing Asia and other continents. We appreciate the openness of FABC to invite each Country/Conference to prepare a report on the local situation of that Particular Church in preparation for the FABC 50 General Conference.

"The Syro-Malabar Church, born into the faith from the preaching of the Apostle Thomas, is one of the ecclesial families in which the rich variety of the Christian East is articulated."¹ The Syro-Malabar Church is an Oriental Catholic Major Archiepiscopal

Church based in Kerala, India¹ and it is the third largest *sui iuris* Church in the Catholic Communion, with a population of about 4.63 million faithful worldwide. The Father and Head of this Church now is the Major Archbishop Cardinal George Alencherry. The Syro-Malabar Synod of Bishops canonically convoked and presided over by the Major Archbishop constitutes the supreme authority of the Church.

As an individual Church, the Syro-Malabar Church has its own tradition and theological identity. Though the Syro-Malabar Church is a worldwide Catholic Church, this report focuses only on the ecclesial realities in India as requested by FABC to send report of each country.

1. PRESENT SITUATION

We would like to put forward a few important realities and the challenges of the times that we face today without elaborating them.

1. Covid-19 Pandemic and sufferings of the people
2. Indifferentism among the believers
3. Diminishing church attendance and indifference of the youth towards liturgical celebrations
4. Decrease in the number of vocations to religious life
5. Migration of youth to other countries especially to those in the Gulf region and in Europe and America.
6. Religious fundamentalism and the safety of the minorities
7. Rise of unhealthy nationalism
8. Challenges from extremist groups like Islamic extremists, RSS extremists, communist extremists, etc.
9. Use of drugs and other harmful substances: An increasing number of people, especially the youth get addicted to drugs and other harmful substances which not only damages their health but also leads to the breakdown of families.
10. Nutritious food is becoming more expensive
11. Safety of the persons living in the coastal areas
12. Need of women friendly work environment
13. Responsibility to protect women from sexual violence

14. Farmers are becoming victims of multi-national companies (the anti-farmer and pro-rich policies of the government of India)
15. The indifference of the media towards the problems of the farmers and other common people.
16. Waste management and hygiene
17. Entry of multi-national companies into health care and the need of the intervention of the Church.
18. Silent revolution of religious atheism
19. Fast spreading new-age spiritualities

2. ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION

Globalization has accelerated a higher rate of income disparity. Christ's message of standing for the marginalized and the little ones of the society is very much relevant in this period. A 'going out church spirit' is the need of the hour.

The poor communities along the coastal areas and farmers who have climate-dependent occupations will be displaced and the poverty deaths are also on the rise. Globalization of indifference is a phenomenon against which Church has a proactive role to play.

The growth of technology and artificial intelligence has bypassed human capacity of consciousness. But at the same time it is something hopeful that in this period, especially in the Covid 19 situation, the communities are trying hard to fight with the pandemic and trying to do whatever is possible. Though the coming together of people is restricted, the communities are doing much work.

The Church is trying its level best to address the real issues in very effective ways. The Church through its various commissions and offices is actively involved in the betterment of the society. Though the pastoral institutes have some constraints to bring together the people, the pastoral work is going ahead in all possible ways to extend a helping hand to those who are in need.

Migrant workers and unorganized indigenous workers are completely at a loss to make their living. The Syro-Malabar Church is trying its level best to respond to the situation in concrete ways without being confined to and clinging to its own security. We are trying our level best to respond to the call of Pope Francis 'to go out

of comfort zones, out of hierarchical power, out of clericalism, and out of status quo’.

Youth have deep thirst for spiritual values. It is remarkable that the Youth in our Church are very active and are involved in many ways in the present Covid situation. We have learnt from our experience that if motivated well, the youth can do wonders, and we have living examples for them during the previous floods, Covid pandemic etc. We have great appreciation for the youth action in the Church.

The Syro-Malabar Church is well known for the active involvement of the laity in the Church. The Parish Councils, *Pothuyogams* etc. in the parishes are functioning in such a way as to give maximum encouragement to involve in parish activities. The Pastoral Councils in the Eparchies are also a very good opportunity to listen to the people and their views.

Missionary family is something which is to be encouraged. Taking a small break from the hurried life and engaging in mission in a distant area would be an enriching experience for the family. Moreover, holding outreach programs for the youth would certainly instil a missionary spirit in our children.

Though there is some improvement in terms of gender equality, Church has a great role to place both men and women equally. Couples living ideal Christian life may be engaged to accompany the newly married couple, they may be considered as co-shepherds in the family apostolate ministries.

In our Church a considerable number of families live scattered. Children and adolescents do not get to live with both the parents. Single parents may be supported by the Church as to bring up their children in faith and moral values, and for this the Church may seek the help from some ideal married couples at parish level. In Kerala there are many youths who are unable to find partners for marriage due to lack of educational qualification, financial deficiency, etc.

3. THE RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH

The Syro-Malabar Church has contributed for the overall development of the society in India in general. Two areas to be particularly mentioned are health care and education.

3.1. HEALTH CARE OF THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH

The Syro-Malabar Church is responding to the critical emergency of the nation under massive waves of Covid-19 cases and deaths. It has extended healthcare facilities in the country's battle against the Covid-19 pandemic, irrespective of caste or creed. A good number of religious, particularly nuns work at these facilities. Hospitals run by the Church have played a significant role in this regard. The Church has also coordinated financial aid to buy ventilators and other medical equipment to save the lives of the people. Different dioceses have undertaken other helpful programmes such as telephone helpline to reach out to the victims and their relatives, providing information on the management of the disease at home and the availability of beds and oxygen, and free meal programme for patients etc. Moreover, the Christian healthcare institutions have been focusing largely on rural areas, battling diseases such as tuberculosis, leprosy, AIDS and helping people with disabilities.

3.2. THE EDUCATION MINISTRY OF THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH

The education mission of the Syro-Malabar Church has its strong presence in India. Value education is one of the distinguishing features of our educational institutions. Church takes particular interest in identifying the talents of the students, especially in poor areas and of weaker sections and allocates more resources of the Church for their education. The Church also provides job oriented training programmes to the youth for employment opportunities in the informal sector as well as self-employment. Church tries its level best to find the space for the educational needs of the poor and the weaker sections of the society. It always remains a challenge for the Church to continue its education mission without sacrificing the basic Christian principles on education.

Apart from these realms of health care and education ministry, other areas where the Syro-Malabar Church has paid special attention in the Indian society are the following.

3.3. OPENNESS TO THE CULTURE AND CONTEXT OF INDIA

The Second Vatican Council encourages each local Church to plant the seed of faith in the rich soil of the customs, wisdom, arts and philosophy of its particular people (*Ad Gentes* 22). Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* notes that it is the duty of the Christians in India to draw elements compatible with Christian faith from the rich heritage of India in order to enrich Christian thought (*Fides et Ratio* 71-72).

The St. Thomas Christians in India witnessed to Christ and at the same time, preserved the socio-cultural practices. They adopted and Christianized the socio-cultural customs of the Hindus. Though they accepted Christ and His gospel, they maintained some customs and traditions of the Hindu brethren. They were “Christians in faith, Indian in culture and Oriental in worship”.¹

3.4. COMMITMENT TO THE CAUSE OF THE POOR AND THE WORKS OF LIBERATION

Christianity is not a set of doctrines and teachings. It is a way of life, a life dedicated to the values of God’s Kingdom. The greatest law of Christianity is love, love for the service of others, even at the cost of one’s life. Therefore commitment to the cause of the poor and the works of liberation of the oppressed and the downtrodden must be a matter of prime importance in the missionary and pastoral work of the Syro-Malabar Church.

The care homes, homes for the aged and the incurable, the palliative care centres, rehabilitation centres, homes for the differently abled and the mentally challenged, adoption centres etc. run by the Syro-Malabar Church clearly prove the concern of the Church towards the last, the least and the lost people of the society.

3.5. OPENNESS TO OTHER RELIGIONS

The St. Thomas Christians lived among the followers of other religions in tolerance and mutual recognition. They had harmonious and peaceful relationships with the members of other religions. They were friendly and co-operative with other religious communities in India. This tolerance and mutual recognition however did not mean relativizing or reducing the Christian faith. The Syro-Malabar Church continues the same tradition in its missionary and pastoral work. The Church is very cautious and takes necessary steps to promote inter-

religious harmony in the society. It also advocates and con-ordinates inter-religious dialogue at different levels.

3.6. PASTORAL MINISTRY THAT PROMOTES LAY LEADERSHIP

Syro-Malabar Church has taken new initiatives to promote lay leadership in the Church including the social, economic and political spheres. The activities of *Catholic Congress Global* have to be particularly mentioned. *Catholic Congress Globalis* an organization of the laity in the Syro-Malabar Church. It stands for the overall progress of the Syro-Malabar Catholic community and for the protection of civil and fundamental rights in respect to the religious, social, cultural, educational and economic aspects.

The activities of *Mathruvedi*, an organization for mothers in the Syro-Malabar Church, to empower women are to be particularly mentioned. The organization aims at the revival of families through mothers and help raising up the community in a life deeply rooted in Christian faith.

Syro Malabar Youth Movement (SMYM), which is the official youth movement of the Syro Malabar Church, works for the co-ordination and the organization of the youth in the Church. Syro Malabar Church has more than 1.6 million Catholic youth scattered all over the world. SMYM has started out with various programmes and activities for the holistic development of youth aligning its members with the religious and social causes of the Church. Some of the programmes designed by the SMYM are as follows: Nurturing families living in the railway colonies and slums in different parts of India, leadership formation and trainings for future leaders of the Church, helping the youth with continuous guidance and support on faith formation, active promotion of the life, values and Church teachings using the social media, support and guidance for the professional development of the youth, campus programmes against substance abuse and formation of de-addiction clubs on campuses etc.

4. NEW WAY OF BEING THE CHURCH

While explaining the new way of being the Church we would like to consider the following aspects.

1. There is no alternative for direct evangelization. Indirect evangelization may seem to be secure and prudent. It will certainly preserve us from persecution and martyrdom. But we have to think seriously and respond sincerely to the question: Can a Church that is afraid of persecution and martyrdom be the Church of Christ?

In our Church some dioceses have started the direct evangelization ministry which includes direct preaching ministry. Eparchy of Adilabad is a good example for the ministry of direct evangelization.

2. India being the cradle of different religions, the role of the Church to promote religious harmony is to be re-ensured and plans are to be made for further developments. Right from its inception, Syro-Malabar Church takes dialogue as the mode of being for the Church in India. Perhaps, it is high time we also ask ourselves about the ends of dialogue. Has dialogue been an effective tool in our missionary outreach? Is dialogue the only way for proclamation? An open and critical study of the concept, practice, and outcome of dialogue is necessary.

3. We believe that Syro-Malabar Church, being a fast growing Church has a duty towards the Church in the West. Many priests and religious from our Church are rendering pastoral service in Europe and America. We shall find ways and means to connect with them to encourage and support them in their apostolic work and seek their contributions to make the Church in India fulfil her missionary calling. The West has an unending appetite for the Eastern spirituality and worldviews and many of them find spiritual solace in eastern religions. Syro-Malabar Church being an Eastern Church, shall look for ways to promote Eastern spirituality and theology in order to share it with the western seekers within the Catholic faith.

4. Syro-Malabar Church has to continue its efforts of the Ecumenical dialogue and the possibilities of Ecumenism, since India has the presence of more non-Catholic, but Apostolic and traditional Churches.

5. The Catholic view on migration, as clarified in *Fratelli Tutti*, is that a country of origin is supposed to provide adequate conditions of living and flourishing so that its people don't migrate, and that migrants must be welcomed until their countries of origin can

provide them with possibilities of decent living. This means that the end of migration is not endless migration, but settlement. The reality of migration must alert us not only about the right to migrate but also about development that leads to settlement.

6. Greater collaboration and coordination of the Church would necessitate greater use of digital networks and resources. Church shall strengthen its presence in the cyberspace through dynamic websites, social media and mobile applications. This requires a large team of experts in media and for this cooperation of the laity must be enlisted and encouraged. Production and sharing of pastoral and missionary digital resources is an important priority.

7. Webinars and online conferences offer possibilities for greater collaboration and sharing of resources among theological colleges and faculties in the Church. More interaction among seminarians studying in various seminaries should be made possible. It is highly desirable to set up an online digital library of theological resources for all the seminaries in India.

8. Online communication and social media has once again made Catholic apologetics necessary. There are many ideologies promoted by various groups that pose a real challenge to Catholic faith. There is an organized propaganda against Catholic Church and Catholic values by non-Catholic and non-Christian persons and groups, some of them being fanatics and fundamentalist groups. Many Catholics, especially youth, are confused and / or are lured into other groups, sects and ideologies. A systematic Catholic apologetics, based on the principle of open dialogue is highly necessary and the Church needs to set up expert teams for the same. Asia needs a missionary apologetics that will show the beauty of the Catholic faith to all non-Christian brethren in India who have a right to know Jesus Christ and his Gospel. Apologetics should also become part of seminary formation as well as the media strategy of the Church in India.

9. The Church has to envisage new ways of promoting lay leadership starting from the parish communities. For this purpose, the priests and seminarians need special training for the animation of lay leaders. As Pope Francis said: "We must recognize that if part of our baptized people lack a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a

bureaucratic way of dealing with problems, be they simple or complex, in the lives of our people. In many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelization" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 63).

CONCLUSION:

To conclude, the Catholic Church, especially with the Second Vatican council, has made a new era of dialogue. In an era of multicultural and multi-religious contexts a hegemonic claim of one religion over the others is impractical; it will have the risk of producing clashes, violence and other disorders. But at the same time, we have to be attentive to what Pope Benedict XVI on December 9, 2008 said to Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the Pontifical Council for Culture that "it must avoid falling into relativism and syncretism" and be animated by sincere respect for other.

Without fear of damaging interreligious dialogue we have to proclaim that Jesus is the incarnated eternal son of God. Jesus of Nazareth is forever the son of God. It has to be underscored that the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of humankind represent the absoluteness of the Christian religion, which is not the work of men but God, it is the religion willed by God for all men. However, proper attention should be given to the *Nostra Aetate* No.2: "the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions. She considers them with sincere respect...". As Saint Pope John Paul II teaches, "He is the only saviour of all, the one who alone is able to reveal God and lead to God" (*Redemptoris Missio* no. 5). Nevertheless, the Church is obliged to announce that the Christ is The Way, The Truth and The Life (Jn. 14:6) in whom there is fullness of life.

As members of the Syro-Malabar Church we believe that our presence in India should lead us to the basic proclamation and affirmation of faith as St. Thomas, the apostle of India, has proclaimed "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20: 28). But this affirmation of faith necessarily includes our mission of love and service to the people of India. Because the uniqueness of Jesus consists in the fact that he is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. The mystery of incarnation is the greatest example and expression of God's love and

reunion with Rome safeguarding their autonomy and patrimony. Failing to re-establish communion with Rome, they happened to come in communion with the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch.

After years of strenuous effort a good part of the *Puthenkur* community led by Archbishop Geevarghese Mar Ivanios reunited to the Catholic Church. The reunion of Servant of God Archbishop Geevargese Mar Ivanios in 1930 with the Catholic Church was a historical event in the Universal Church. In God's providence, the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church engaged in her twofold mission of communion of the Malankara Churches and evangelization.

1. SITUATION

The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church is a vibrant community with a living faith expressed through a unique liturgy and spirituality. Having the resource of zealous bishops, priests, religious and laity, our Church gives emphasis on ecclesial life nourished by the Word of God and the Sacraments, especially the Holy *Qurbono* (Holy Mass). The active participation of the faithful in the liturgical life of the Church is a salient feature of our Church.

1.1. LIFE IN FAMILIES

The family is the basic unit of our ecclesial life. The family life is strengthened by the family prayers, especially in the morning and evening, which consists of chanting of hymns, reading the Word of God, recital of the canonical prayers adapted to families, the spontaneous prayers and devotional intercessory prayers to the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saints.

The parents take a keen interest in the faith-formation of their children. The youth are brought up in Malankara ecclesial tradition. They are prepared for the different states of life in accordance with the discernment of their call by God. Parents encourage children to the state of religious life and priesthood. The parents, when they are senior citizens, are taken care of by one of their children, usually the youngest child.

From last year onwards the life situation of the individuals are altered because of the Pandemic Covid-19. Many of our families suffer the mental agony due to financial constraints and health issues.

1.2. LIFE IN PARISHES

The Parish is the primary ecclesial unit. The parish priest links the family with the parish and parish with the rest of the Church. The priest, the chief collaborator with the Bishop, undertakes the pastoral care of the parish. The parish life is built on the foundation of the centrality of the Word of God and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The celebration of the Holy Eucharist where the Word of God and the Bread of life are broken and shared to commune with God and with the People of God among themselves is the axis of the parish life.

A parish is divided into different geographical zones called *Vayana* or *Prarthanakoottayma* which is equivalent to the Basic Christian Community (BCC) which has now become popular worldwide. It promotes communion among the members of the parish and fosters cooperation among them. A group of families are united in one *vayana* or *prarthanakoottayma* and they gather together once in a week in one of the houses and pray together, starting with the reading the Word of God.

The parish priest takes special care to administer the sacraments on time and at the request of the people. In every parish, we have the celebration of Holy Mass regularly on Sundays, together with the faith-formation of children and youth. The elderly people are taken care of by the parish community. The faith formation of the Children is given utmost importance in every parish. Children receive Catechism from the age of three (pre-school) to the age of eighteen (Higher Secondary), under the direction of the parish priest. The lay people who are competent work as catechism teachers. In addition to them, Religious Sisters also teach Catechism. The Malankara Catholic Children's League (MCCL), an association of children in the Syro-Malankara Church, fosters the spiritual, liturgical, human, cultural, and social formation and leadership in Children to equip them as mature Christian Faithful and members of the civil society.

The Youth ministry is very vibrant in our parishes. Youngsters are given personal as well as community formation under the banner of the Malankara Catholic Youth Movement (MCIYM). It has its own activities at parish level, namely, weekly gatherings and prayers, classes, discussions, charity works and other pious activities.

Malankara Catholic Association (MCA) is the organization of the Laity in our Church. All the faithful from the age of 30 years are members of this association and through this association they are actively involved in the life and mission of the Church. It also provides a forum to our laity to actively involve in the social and political issues of the land. There are also associations for mothers namely, *Mathruvedi (MCMF- Malankara Catholic Mothers' Forum)*, and for fathers namely, *Pithrusamajam* in every parish. We also promote Holy Childhood, Vincent de Paul Society, Legion of Mary and other pious association in our parishes.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE PRESENT SITUATION

2.1. PANDEMIC COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT

The heave of covid-19 affected very badly the Church in various aspects.

- * The alienation from the parish life is so affected the life of the faithful. We have to abide with the Covid-19 protocol restriction given by the civil authorities from time to time. There is a quick shift of liturgical services from in person worship to online worship.
- * Recurring Lock Down in different states has shattered the health and financial situation of the faithful. Even though the Churches were temporarily closed, it did not close the faith, hope and charity. The church stands out in providing a lifeline to the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of the population affected by the pandemic. It engages in a vast relief effort, supporting the most vulnerable with local resources and providing food to hungry people who lost their livelihoods due to the lockdown.

2.2. COMMUNAL DISHARMONY

Generally speaking India has been a country of exceptional religious harmony even if there were rare occurrences of communal riots. But in recent times, there has been a rise in the communal disturbances. A communal surcharged ambience is often the result of a political tug-of-war between secular and communal parties for the votes of majority and minority community. There are examples of religious conflicts, ethnic clashes, caste based violence in recent past. All these factors adversely affect the evangelisation. People of other religions view missionaries suspiciously.

3. CHURCH'S RESPONSES

The following aspects will clarify the approach taken by the Church to face the realities and challenges.

3.1. FAMILY APOSTOLATE

Family Apostolate is given prime importance in our Church. The young people are prepared for marriage and family life through regular marriage preparation courses. The married couple is given post-nuptial pastoral care. We arrange such programmes at parish, district and eparchial levels to help our couples to live Christian values in this modern world. The elderly people are taken care of by the parish. In this regard, the parish priest takes special interest to visit them, if they are sick, and mobilize the parish community to give them a sense of communion and solidarity.

3.2. PARISH PRIEST AND VARIOUS MINISTRIES IN THE PARISH LEVEL

Almost in all the parishes, the priest is assisted by Religious missionary/ies, parish council, etc. The spiritual formation, faith-formation and liturgical formation are important activities in every parish, along with the charity works. Parish priest maintains a direct contact with the families. This is a unique feature of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. The average number of the families in a parish is 150. This approach was a great solace for the faithful, especially during the time of the pandemic Covid-19. The evaluation of material, spiritual and social development is made twice a year by the parish priest and the parish councils.

3.3. ECUMENICAL ACTIVITIES

The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church, being a bridge between universal church and the Malankara Churches in India, keeps the work of Christian unity very dear to her heart. It is her duty to bring her brethren of St. Thomas Tradition back to the communion of Universal Church. The activities at parish, district and eparchial levels always keep room for having dialogue with non-Catholic groups of Malankara tradition. Ecumenical prayers, gatherings and celebrations create better understanding between both groups. We always promote healthy interactions between members of Malankara Orthodox Church and Malankara Marthoma Church. We receive the faithful of non-Catholic Malankara Churches, if they voluntarily come to have communion with the Catholic Church.

The hierarchs of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church always maintain good relations with other Sister Churches of Catholic communion. It is promoted through mutual visits, help and dialogue. There is a Synodal commission for Ecumenism headed by one of the Bishops of the Holy Episcopal Synod of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. Each Eparchy has a commission for Ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue.

3.4. EDUCATIONAL MINISTRY

It is one of the areas where the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church has been making substantial contribution to the Nation. Through education, we believe, a social transformation is easy and effective. Therefore, in each and every place where we have parishes, we try to run at least one institution to give better education to our people. At present we run schools both primary and secondary Schools, special schools for the physically challenged and differently abled, arts colleges, professional colleges, technical institutes, etc. In this regard, our Church provides infrastructure to provide better education in the remote village areas. For the same purpose, we provide scholarships to poor and needy children. A certain percentage of seats in our educational institutions are reserved to the children from our poor families. At the same time our ministry in the educational field reaches out beyond the barriers of caste and creed. In all our schools and colleges more than 75% of the students are non-Christians, either Hindus or Muslims. Therefore, our institutions are greatly accepted by the people of the locality. The meritorious service of our priests and religious are still in demand in our nation.

3.5. SOCIAL MINISTRY

The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church, in her life and mission, reflects always a social commitment to the Indian Society. She is committed to preach the Good News to the under-privileged and the socially and economically challenged. In this regard we concentrate on the children, women and old people. All our parishes function as centers of social development and change. The parish priest takes active leadership in this social ministry of the Church. All our feasts and celebrations are imbued with the spirit of charity to the poor and the needy. Every year the parish units try to provide educational aids, such as study-materials and scholarships, to the children belonging to poor families. At the time of National festivals and Christian Feasts,

food kits are distributed to poor and needy. At the same time, we motivate our people to actively involve in the developmental activities of the region through dialogue, voluntary services and leadership.

Each Eparchy has a registered social service society, which is also recognized as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). They undertake specific social development activities as directed by the Synodal Commission for Social Service. They also help the Government to carry out its integrated development programmes aimed at the upliftment of the weaker sections of the society. They are always open to the people who deserve our special concern.

At the Eparchial level each bishop keeps a charity endowment other than the common social apostolate, into which our people and well-wishers contribute. This charity fund is personally monitored by the Eparchial Bishop and disbursed by him. Providing medical aid and educational aid, constructing houses for the poor, helping poor families to conduct the marriages of their sons or daughters, helping the unemployed youngsters to find job opportunities, etc. are some of the important activities for which the bishop uses this fund.

There are many centres where we take care of orphans, physically handicapped, differently abled, widows and children, HIV infected patients and other patients of incurable diseases and old people. In these institutes the service of priests and religious is always appreciated by the public.

3.5.1. Charity Initiatives of Major Archbishop-Catholicos His Beatitude Baselios Cardinal Cleemis

In connection with the Feast Day of His Beatitude Baselios Cardinal Cleemis Major Archbishop-Catholicos, the Charity Fund received in connection with his Heavenly Patron's day from 2008 onwards was used for starting a Charitable Institution or a Charity Project.

In 2012, the Charity Fund of His Beatitude was used for starting a Dialysis Unit at St. John's Hospital, Pirappencode. Here the treatment and Dialysis are given to poor patients free of cost.

In 2013 there built 50 Houses for the people from Hindu and Muslim families.

In 2014, We could make a home – ‘*Santhwanam*’ for the patients and their bystanders in Trivandrum.

In 2015, A Palliative care home was built for the poor cancer patients.

In 2016, A Home for the Retired Priests was built at Pirappencode.

In 2017, Financial support was given, using the Charity Fund, to the missions at the Eparchy of Gurgaon and Exarchate of Pune.

In 2018, The Charity Fund was used help the victims of Okhi disaster in the coastal regions of Trivandrum.

2019 – help for the victims of flood in Kerala

2020, A shelter for the poor widows, *Ammaveedu*, Anchal.

2021 Support for the missions in the Diocese of Marthandam

2022- Support for the mission activities in Bilaspur District belong to the Gurgaon Diocese

3.5.2. Charitable Institutes

The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church runs institutes where the love of God is expressed through the works of charity. In this regard she places her concern on the abandoned groups of the society. We take care of orphan children. We arrange accommodation to poor children for their better education. We run hospitals for patients who need care and support. We have a Medical College in the Archieparchy of Tiruvalla. We have hospitals for TB patients, Leprosy patients, HIV positive patients, and mentally challenged patients. Our health care centres also provide free medical treatments for the needy. It also tries to provide health care service to remote villages also. We have houses for destitute, old age people, etc. Through all these institutes we serve the Indian society without any discrimination on the basis of caste, creed and culture. There are special schools where we give training to children of physically challenged and differently abled. We have many houses for giving education to boys and girls. Through such houses we provide better infrastructure for the education of children

hailing from poor families. Our rehabilitation centers give ample opportunities to our people to get trained in some of the fields where they can earn their livelihood. The service of priests and religious in this field is always amazing and unparalleled in the society.

4. CHALLENGES

- The Syro-Malankara Catholic faithful from Kerala have migrated to different parts of India and other countries of the world in search of employment and of better prospects for life. There was considerable increase in the number of these migrants in last two decades. A large number of our faithful are employed in the Gulf countries. Hence the pastoral care of the Malankara Catholics living outside the proper territory of this Church is a great concern of our Church.

- The ecclesial life in outside Kerala, by and large, ideal and fervent. Being away from the main stream of the Church and taken out of the native circumstances, our faithful feel alienated from their Church life, especially the liturgical celebration. They spontaneously come together to share their ecclesial identity and live their liturgical and ecclesial life.

- Now we have the second and third generations of our faithful in the regions outside the proper territory of Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. The families feel greatly challenged by the globalized cosmopolitan culture.

- The gap between the elders and youngsters in matters of culture and in the use of language also affects their family life and the religious life as well. In this regard, we take up the responsibility of making the faith life in the Syro-Malankara Catholic tradition meaningful to both the elders and youngsters in the metropolitan cities.

- At the same time, it is our experience that our youngsters are very enthusiastic in the activities of the parish communities. Now we are trying to adapt our liturgy to the culture and language that are familiar to the new generations in outside proper territory.

- Modern trends of globalization and nuclear family system have their influence in our socio-ecclesial life. The joint-family system is giving way to nuclear families, with less number of children. This

has its echo in the ecclesial life as well. Its influence is also noticed in the number and quality of the candidates to religious and priestly life.

- Reduced number of vocation to women religious life: Over the years, there has been a gradual decline in the intake of novices in convents. It has been noted the number of girls coming forward to lead a religious life has dropped by more than 50 per cent.

5. NEW PATHS

RELATION WITH THE STATE

The hierarchs of our Church always keep a good relation with the leaders of both ruling and opposition parties. We always try to keep in touch with the leaders of politics to seek possible ways to uphold divine and human values in the activities of the government. We always have regular contact with the government and civil society. The leaders of all parties visit the Father and Head of our Church, Major Archbishop-Catholicos Baselios Cardinal Cleemis to have consultation on important matters. They discuss with our bishops before implementing any new policies of the State. His Beatitude Baselios Cardinal Cleemis is a permanent member of the **National Integration Council of India**, which is headed by the Prime Minister of India.

On common celebrations, we exchange greetings to our leaders and on the feast days of our hierarchs, the leaders of ruling and opposition parties visit our Bishop's houses to greet our bishops. We also encourage our people to actively involve in the mainstream of the socio-political leadership. In the recent elections to local self government bodies, conducted in Kerala around 100 members of our Church were elected from the public to various positions in all around Kerala.

CONCLUSION:

The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church, raised to the status of a Major Archiepiscopal Church, for the last seventeen years, has been mostly engaged in setting up the canonical and ecclesial structures consonant with its new status to foster divine life. The empowerment of the clergy, religious and laity is our aim and we could achieve it to a great extent. The Holy Episcopal Synod takes initiatives to foster the various apostolates of the Church with participation of the clergy,

religious and the laity will help the active participation of all in the life of the Church. The movement for communion of the Malankara Churches with the Catholic Church and evangelization have imparted a new vigour in our Church. The life of our Church in the last one decade is also marked by the founding of various charitable and social institutions that serve the poor and the needy irrespective of caste, creed or religion. We have mobilized various projects for the support of the Covid-19 patients as well as to the poor, who were affected due to the lock down in India, found result. Thus, contributing a lot for a better environment in India/ASIA.

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158. Meeting of the Presidents of Doctrinal Commissions under the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF), 15 – 18 January 2019, Baan Phu Waan Pastoral Centre, Bangkok, Thailand by FABC Office of Theological Concerns and Central Secretariat, March 2019
159. Responses to Doubts, Questions and Criticisms with regard to Chapter Eight of *Amoris Laetitia*, Fr. Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR, Pontifical Alphonsian Academy, Rome, June 2019
160. Catholic Schools in Asia: A Shared Mission among Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful in the Light of Recent Papal Documents, 24 – 28 September 2018, Redemptorist Centre, Pattaya,

- Thailand, FABC Office of Consecrated Life (OCL) and Office of Education and Faith Formation (OEFF), edited by Pablito A. Baybado Jr., Executive Secretary, OEFF, September 2019
161. Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Thailand and Japan, 19 – 26 November 2019, organized by Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Thailand and Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan, edited by FABC Central Secretariat, December 2019
 162. Awakening Climate Change Concern in Seminaries: For Bishops & Seminary Formators of Priests in Asia, 4 – 8 November 2018, Salesian Center Of Spirituality, Hua Hin, Thailand, FABC Office of Clergy (OC) and Office of Human Development (OHD), submitted by Fr. Philip Lazatin, SDB, Executive Secretary, OC, April 2020
 163. FABC 2020, Preparatory Workshop for General Conference Workshop Report, 1 – 3 February 2020, Mindol Metta Karuna (JRS), Siem Reap, Cambodia, FABC Office of Human Development / Climate Change Desk, submitted by Fr. Joseph Gonsalves, Executive Secretary, OHD, September 2020
 164. Migrants, Refugees, the Displaced and Human Trafficking and Renewable Energy Options in the Asian Context, FABC Office of Human Development (OHD) in Collaboration with the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Bangladesh (CBCB) & the Asia-Pacific Justice and Peace Workers Network (APIPWN). Hotel Beach Way, Cox’s Bazaar, Chattogram, Bangladesh, 11 – 17 February 2019, submitted by Ms. Deepika Singh, Project Coordinator of OHD, December 2020
 165. FABC 50 General Conference Guide Document 29 November 2020, *Theme: FABC 50: Journeying together as peoples of Asia “...and they went a different way.” (Mt 2:12)*, edited by the FABC 50 General Conference Core Group, July 2021
 166. Responses to the Guide Document for the FABC 50 General Conference, 29 November 2020, *Theme: FABC 50: Journeying together as peoples of Asia “...and they went a different way.” (Mt 2:12)*, submitted by the Episcopal Conferences / Countries of the FABC, Central, East and South Asia, August 2021

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168. The Body of Christ in the Pandemic: Theological Reflections from Asian Perspectives, submitted by FABC-Office of Theological Concerns (OTC), edited by Estela Padilla, Executive Secretary, OTC, August 2022
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