

ROLE OF CHAVARA IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SYRO-MALABAR HIERARCHY

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Abstract: One of the boldest steps that St Chavara took in his ecclesial life was to make a request to Rome for the appointment of an indigenous bishop, even as the Church that he belonged to was headed by a foreign bishop. The author explores the early struggle of the Syro Malabar Church becoming conscious of her identity and the significant contributions of St Chavara towards the formation of the Syro Malabar hierarchy.

Keywords: Hierarchy, Holy See, Syro Malabar, Bishop Roccas, liturgy, Church, Padroado, Chavara, Carmelites

1. Introduction

Pius IX (1792-1878, original name being Giovanni Maria Mastai-Ferretti) was the Pope (1846- 1878) while Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara was giving leadership to keep the Syro-Malabar Church in communion with the Apostolic See and to shape the CMI Congregation. We have two letters that Chavara had written to the Pope directly and several other letters to the Prefect of the Congregation for Propagation of Faith. The relevant portions of these letters and the reply he received from Pope Pius IX are reproduced here for a proper understanding of the role Chavara played in advancing the structural and liturgical evolution of the Syro-Malabar Church.

2. Extracts from the Correspondence of Chavara with the Holy See

2.1. The Letters of Pope Pius IX Regarding Bishop Roccas

The following letter is a reply Chavara received to his inquiry about the authority of Bishop Thomas Roccas who came to Malabar as the authorized bishop for the St Thomas Christians. Chavara had sent the letter in May 1861 and the reply came with the date 5 September 1861.

We are immensely happy that you have consulted the Apostolic See, the Mother and teacher of all faithful, the great Church of Rome to remove the serious disputes among you on this vital issue. Now my dear sons, you must know that as we, on 20 November 1860, had given a definite directive in writing to this Patriarch that on no account he should interfere with the affairs of the churches of Malabar. Bishop Roccas has come there on the order of the Patriarch, acting only on his own volition. Hence, my dear children please understand that Bishop Roccas has no ecclesiastical authority, that he was unlawfully appointed and that he has fallen under several ecclesial censures. And it is our brother, Bishop Mar Bernardino, the Archbishop of Porsella and the representative of the Holy and Apostolic See, who is the Ordinary for the churches of Malabar; and it is lawful for you to submit to him. Therefore, we inform you that we have ordered Patriarch Joseph to recall Bishop Roccas immediately from Malabar... From the Church of St. Peter in Rome on 5 September 1861 in the sixteenth year of our pontificate.

2.2. On Appointing a Separate Bishop for the Syrians

The following is a letter written to Alexander Cardinal Barnabo, Prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith. The original was in Latin. Even though we do not have the original of this letter, its authenticity is well established by external evidences. The letter must have been sent through the missionary Fr Leopold Beccaro, who accompanied the Archbishop Leonard Mellano on his visit to Rome in 1869.

There is no dissension or difference of opinion regarding the matters of the Church among the faithful here. All are now fully aware of the cunning machinations and the greed of the Chaldean Syrians who have come to us to Malabar, especially of the Bishop Thomas Roccas. Although they are now living in peace, we can say from our former experience that this 'calm' will not continue for long. Though at present they are at peace, it is possible that in the minds of those who wish to lead a life of laxity quarrelsome thoughts may rise at any time.

We are Mar Thoma Christians who have received our faith from St Thomas. For the past many years we had no bishop of our own. But those who have received their faith in very recent times have a bishop of their own. Provoked by such envious thoughts, when they get an opportunity they will go to Babel, saying "let us resort to Babel for getting a bishop of our own Rite." They will at last

petition to them in writing and those greedy people will accept such a request.

Hence, Your Eminence, I am placing before you a suggestion which I consider good. *It is good to have two bishops here: one for the Latin Church and other for the Syrian Church.* Then their longing to have a bishop of their own will cease. Then, gradually their relationship with Babylon will end.

This would be very opportune and useful. There are also many non-Catholics in our midst who are our own kith and kin, now known as Jacobites. The above solution will help them renounce schism and return to the unity of the Catholic fold (Letter II/4, p.12).

The letter has, no doubt materially influenced the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith to grant an indigenous bishop for the Syrians later. But it also raised a severe storm in Varapuzha and caused great displeasure in Archbishop Leonard towards Fr. Chavara.

2.3. On Liturgy

The following extract is from a letter written by Chavara to Alexander Cardinal Bernabo for the restoration of liturgical services in the Holy Week (Letter II/4, p.12).

At present we do not have any special services for Holy Saturday in the liturgy of our Holy Week. Hence, we are sending herewith the liturgy for Holy Saturday, translated from the Roman Liturgy into Syriac, to the Holy See for approval. (In another letter he wrote: "Our churches remain closed on that day like the Jewish synagogues. II/3, p.11). We humbly request you to approve this for our use, as all the ceremonies already in use in our churches from Ash Wednesday to Maundy Thursday are according to the Latin rite.

Besides, in our missal printed in 1844 in Rome, only the Gospel at the commencement of the Mass is included; the reading from the Gospel of St. John, opening with "In the beginning was the Word..." is not there. In all other Syrian rites and even Chaldean rite the custom of reading this prevails (Letter II/4, p.12). (In the Letter II/3 we also find: "We request you to permit us to resume this custom as early as possible.")

A few observations would be made on these extracts after a short survey of the historical situation in which the Syro-Malabar Church was found at the time of the founding of the CMI Congregation.

3. A Conquered Church

3.1. Jesuits on the Scene

The organized missionary activities of the Latin Church in India began together with the Portuguese colonial expansion with the arrival of Vasco de Gama in the harbour of Calicut on 1 May 1498. Pope Paul III promulgated the decree of erecting Goa as a Diocese on 3 November 1534. The territory of Goa stretched from the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa to China and Japan. Since the Holy See had neither the organization nor the resources to conduct missionary activities, it conferred *jus patronatus* (right for protection) upon the king of Portugal.

In 1558 the Diocese of Goa was elevated to the metropolitan status and then the Portuguese devised a plan of action to bring St Thomas Christians under their rule. For this purpose the autonomous metropolitan status of the See of St Thomas Christians at Angamaly had to be suppressed and it had to be made a simple subordinate diocese of the Archdiocese of Goa. To achieve this end Menezes, the Archbishop of Goa, convoked the pseudo-synod of Diamper in the Archdiocese of Angamaly during 20-26 June 1599. Six months after this synod, that is, on 20 December 1599, Pope Clement suppressed the Metropolitan status of the Archdiocese of Angamaly and made it an auxiliary of the Archdiocese of Goa.

The Latin jurisdiction over St Thomas Christians really began on 20 December 1599 when Pope Clement VIII appointed Fr. Francis Rose SJ as successor to metropolitan Mar Abraham in the See of Angamaly. He received Episcopal ordination at Goa and took possession of his Diocese in 1601. He supported the move to transfer the See from Angamaly to its former seat at Crangannore, a place St Thomas Christians abandoned for fear of the Portuguese and the bishop of Cochin who was cherishing a plan of getting it under his jurisdiction. The three Latin Jesuit bishops who ruled the St Thomas Christians from Crangannore under Portuguese Padroado were Francis Rose (1599-1624), Stephen Britto (1624-1641), and Francis Garcia (1641-1659).

In the tenor of the decrees of the synod of Diamper, Bishop Francis Garcia attempted to exclude the Archdeacon Thomas Parampil completely from Church administration. However, the Archdeacon was fully determined to defend his rights and privileges. The fight between the Archbishop and the Archdeacon led to the revolt of the St

Thomas Christians in 1653, known as Coonan Cross Oath in the church of our Lady of Life at Mattancherry.¹

The oath in substance was that they would no longer obey Archbishop Garcia or any other prelate from the Society of Jesus, because they seemed to be acting as agents of Portuguese Padroado and working for the abolition of the relationship St Thomas Christians had with the Chaldean Patriarch and for the substitution of Latin rite in the place of Eastern rite in Syriac. However, a small number of St Thomas Christians remained under the authority of Archbishop Garcia who died on 8 December 1659. Anyhow, the Archdiocese of Cranganore was not suppressed and the Padroado jurisdiction continued.

3.2. Entry of Carmelites

In order to heal the wounds created in the heart of the Malabar Church, Pope Alexander VII (1655-1667) sent two groups of Carmelite missionaries under the jurisdiction of Propaganda Fide. In the context of controversial methods which the kings of Portugal and Spain adopted in missionary activities and the controversies between the religious congregations and the diocesan clergy Pope Gregory XV erected a central ecclesiastical organ for evangelization with the name Congregation for the Propagation of Faith on 22 June 1622.

Pope Callistus III (1455-1458), by his decree, had given specific powers to Portuguese Patronage (Padroado), which included the right to appoint ministers and bishops to the dioceses they established with the approval of the Pope. Thus, until 1 September 1886 there were only three Latin dioceses in India, namely, the Archdiocese of Goa, and the two auxiliary dioceses of the Portuguese in Cochin and Mylapore.

¹It seems that Pope Francis was well aware of the historical developments in the Syro-Malabar Church, especially during the period of the Jesuit bishops when he referred to 'Malabar rites' in his interview with Fr Antonio Spadaro, SJ, editor-in-chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, during the course of three meetings in August 2013. The reference came when the Pope was asked: "What element of Ignatian spirituality helps you to live your ministry?" His reply was: "Discernment is one of the things that worked inside Ignatius." He continued: "There have been periods in the Society in which Jesuits lived in an environment of closed and rigid thought, more instructive-ascetic than mystical...The mystical dimension of discernment never defines its edge... Let us think of the tensions of past history, in the previous centuries, about the Chinese rites controversy, the *Malabar rites* and the Reductions in Paraguay."

Besides, there was the Metropolitan See of Crangannore of the Syrians, which the Portuguese captured through a latinization process. Since the right to establish dioceses was given to Padroado authorities, the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith could only erect some Vicariates Apostolic from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards.

The Carmelite team headed by Fr Joseph of St Mary Sebastiani, a discalced Carmelite (OCD) reached Malabar in February 1657 and tried to bring the Archdeacon and his followers to the obedience of their legitimate Pastor Archbishop Garcia. Thanks to his efforts, many churches, priests and Christian faithful abandoned the Archdeacon and returned to the Mother Church. However, they were unwilling to accept the Archbishop Garcia of Crangannore. Sebastiani left for Rome and gave a comprehensive report to the Roman authorities. Pope Alexander VII appointed Sebastiani titular bishop of Hierapolis and secretly ordained him bishop in the private chapel of the Pope with the intention to send him to St. Thomas Christians as a non-Jesuit and non-Portuguese bishop. The ordination was in secret, lest the King of Portugal might take offence, for it was contrary to the prescriptions of *jus partonatus*, according to which the Pope could not appoint any bishop in Portuguese territory unless presented by the king of Portugal. This appointment was done while Archbishop Garcia was ruling the diocese of Crangannore.

When Sebastiani reached Malabar in May 1661, Francis Garcia was dead way back on 3 December 1659. The Syrian Church as a whole was happy with the new arrangement and, thus, the Carmelites had a natural entry into the affairs of the Malabar Church. While ordaining Sebastini as bishop, the Pope also granted him the faculty to appoint one or two native priests as bishops of Malabar. But the instructions given to him by the Propaganda Fide clearly asked him to teach priest-candidates Latin and to stabilize them in the Latin rite and in that way to divert them imperceptibly from their rite and introduce them into Latin Rite. When Sebastini had to leave the country at the order of the Dutch who captured Cochin, he, in accordance with the faculty given by the Pope, consecrated Alexander Parampil on 1 February 1663 and embarked for Rome on 20 January 1664. This short spell of one and half year's administration over the Malabar Christians naturally enkindled a desire among the Carmelite missionaries to perpetuate their rule over the Malabar Church.

3.3. Syrian Church under the Vicars Apostolic of Malabar

Though Mar Alexander Parampil governed the Church sufficiently well and the Christian faithful were fully satisfied, the Carmelites were not pleased with the indigenous bishop in Malabar. They were looking for an opportunity to ask for European bishops to govern the Malabar Church. The presence of the Dutch in Kerala became very favourable for the Carmelite Order. Because of the opposition from the Dutch, the Portuguese Padroado bishops of Crangannore and Cochin could not enter their dioceses. However, the Dutch Government allowed the Holy See on 1 April 1698 to send one bishop and twelve priests of Carmelite Order (Italians, Germans or Belgians) to reside in the territory controlled by the Dutch, but not in the town of Cochin. Thereupon Pope Innocent XII appointed Fr Angelus Francis of St Therese OCD, who had been in Malabar for twenty four years, the Vicar Apostolic of Malabar until the Archbishop of Crangannore and the bishop of Cochin had personally occupied their respective dioceses. However, since the Padroado bishops available at Cochin refused to ordain Fr Angelus Francis as bishop, a Chaldean Catholic bishop sent by the Patriarch, conferred the Episcopal ordination on him on 22 May 1701. After the death of Angelus Francis in 1712 the Carmelite prelates of the Vicariate Apostolic of Malabar were of different nationalities, namely, Bishop Baptist Meltedi (1714-1750, Italian), Florence of Jesus (1750-1773, Polish), Francis Sales (1775-1779, Bavaria, resigned), and Aloysius Mary (1784-1802, Italian).

While Bishop Aloysius Mary of Jesus was the Vicar Apostolic of Malabar, Fr Joseph Cariyatti was nominated the Archbishop of Crangannore in 1781 and, consequently, all the St. Thomas Christians came under the Padroado jurisdiction. After the death of Mar Joseph Cariyatti, Fr Thomas Paremackal, his companion in his journey to Lisbon, was nominated the administrator of the vacant Padroado Archdiocese of Crangannore in 1786. He died on 20 March 1799. During this short period, there were only Latin Christians under the Vicar Apostolic Aloysius Mary of Jesus, the Carmelite bishop in Malabar under the Propaganda jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of Varapuzha.

3.4. Suppression of Padroado Jurisdiction

The Propaganda Fide for a long time wanted to get rid of the Padroado arrangement and as a first step suppressed in 1773 the Society of Jesus which was supplying the personnel, both priests and

bishops, to the crown of Portugal. The Propaganda, however, was drawing Carmelites of different nationalities as Vicars Apostolic for the Vicariate of Malabar. The Padroado jurisdiction itself was suppressed first on 28 April 1838 and, then, it was re-established on 30 May 1860 on the basis of a concordat between the Holy See and the king of Portugal. After the execution of the provisions of the concordat there were 104 Catholic Syrian Christian parishes in the Vicariate of Varapuzha and 37 in the Archdiocese of Crangannore and 16 parishes under both jurisdictions. This anomalous situation continued until the establishment of a Latin hierarchy in India on 23 June 1886 by Pope Leo XIII, after definitively suppressing the Archdiocese of Crangannore. Thus, all the Catholic St. Thomas Christians were obliged to become members of Archdiocese of Varapuzha under Archbishop Leonard Mellano (1868-1887).

4. The Role of St. Chavara in the Growth of Syro-Malabar Church

After the suppression of the Padroado jurisdiction in 1838, the Carmelite bishops, Vicars of Malabar settled at Varapuzha, whereas the Archdiocese of Crangannore was put under the immediate jurisdiction of the archbishop of Goa. The archbishop at times nominated administrators only to maintain the status quo and some of the administrators did not even come to the Archdiocese of Crangannore. The conflict of jurisdiction suffocated and confused the faithful.

The founding fathers of CMI Congregation and their followers always stood with the Vicars Apostolic of Varapuzha, for they were sure that their relation with the Apostolic See would be more genuine and straightforward under the guidance of the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith in Rome. Another reason was the religious training they received under the Carmelite missionaries. The Christian faithful in the Archdiocese of Crangannore had some reservations against the Carmelite missionaries and, consequently, the CMI congregation also has a share in the blame for the unwelcoming steps the missionaries might have taken while they were in authority.

Further, we shall examine the initial steps Chavara took to get the Syro-Malabar hierarchy established. A few documents which have some immediate value for the purpose of this article are cited above. We have also seen the immediate and centuries-old background of the Malabar Church at the time of Fathers Thomas Palackal, Thomas Porukara and Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the three founding fathers of the CMI Congregation.

The agencies that had a hold on the Malabar Church were the Chaldean Patriarch, the Padroado authorities and the Carmelites missionaries under the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith. At the time of Chavara, after the four-century long rule of two ecclesial agencies of the Latin Church, the indigenous Church of St Thomas Christians in Malabar had been very much Latinized. What was possible for the amelioration of the situation was joining hands with the Apostolic See of Peter in Rome and it was the Carmelite Vicars Apostolic who maintained live and genuine contact with the See of Peter. The first fallout of this association was the severing of the subordination of the Malabar Church to the Chaldean Patriarchate of Persia.

The St. Thomas Christians were under the patronage of the Chaldean Patriarch until the sixteenth century and it was the Roman See, with its universal apostolic authority, that made the Malabar Church free from the authority of Chaldean Patriarch. Pope Leo XIII on 20 May 1887, through his apostolic letter "*Quod jampridem*," separated the Eastern Catholics from the Archdiocese Varapuzha of the Latin Christians and established the two vicariates of Trichur and Kottayam abolishing the authority of the Patriarch on Malabar Christians. The newly constituted ecclesial unit was christened the Syro-Malabar Church.

Only during a short period of about two decades the Malabar Church was united under the Administrator Fr Thomas Paremackal at Crangannore. At that time, Bishop Aloysius Mary of Jesus, the Vicar Apostolic of Malabar, was in charge only of the Latin Christians. This situation did not last long. After the death of the Administrator at Crangannore the Vicars Apostolic of Malabar became all powerful and had a better control over the faithful and parishes. The parishes that remained under the Padroado jurisdiction were left without proper pastoral care from Crangannore. By inscrutable destiny the founding fathers of the CMI Congregation became diocesan priests in the Vicariate of Varapuzha and were able to guide the growth of the Church in a masterly way so that toady the Church of St Thomas Christians has become, so to say, the star of the East.

5. Conclusion

As to the role Fr Chavara played in the ecclesiastical development of his time we may say that even at his advanced age Chavara took all the steps possible for him to restore and perfect the liturgical worship, educate the faithful and establish the Syro-Malabar hierarchy, even

courting displeasure of Archbishop Leonard Mellano of Varapuzha, as the letters we have cited above testify. We are hopeful that an objective study of the history of the present Syro-Malabar Church will certainly bring out the crucial role Saint Chavara played in the all-round development of the Church in Malabar.