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Eastern Catholic Traditions: Syro-Malabar Perspective

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As the Syro-Malabar Bishop in Australia I am grateful to the organizers for inviting me to speak about the challenges and successes of the Syro-Malabar community emerging within the Church in Australia.

1) In the Australian 'diaspora', the Eastern Catholics, including the Syro-Malabarians are cultural and ecclesial minorities, struggling to maintain their identity, survival and relevance. The following basic principles and fundamental rights of the Churches based on the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the Codes of Canon Law would be helpful to moderate the ecclesial life of different Churches *sui iuris* and ensure peaceful co-existence and beneficial collaboration among them, on the basis of justice, truth and charity. They are: 1) Right to Existence, 2) Right to Equality, 3) Right to Legitimate Diversity in Unity, 4) Right to Autonomy, 5) Right to the Preservation and Observation of One's Own Rite, 6) Right to Growth and Development, 7) Right to Pastoral Care in One's Own Right and 8) Right to Evangelization (Cf. Fr. Paul Pallath, "The Fundamental Rights of the Churches in the Catholic Communion of Churches", *Justitia*, Vol. 3, No. 2, December 2012, PP.169-191).

I am very grateful to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference for its booklet *Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia* (2016). "The faithful (of the eparchies established in Australia) are *ipso facto* excluded entirely from the jurisdiction of the Latin Church bishops, and subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of their own eparch" (5.1). Unfortunately, may be due to lack of authentic ecclesial awareness, there are a few faithful of the Eastern churches, and several priests and even a few bishops in Australia who are unwilling to recognize such a canonical provision.

2) Unlike other Eastern Catholic communities, migration to Australia, the land of opportunities, of members of the Syro-Malabar Church, fruit of the Apostolate of St. Thomas the Apostle in India, (hence the community is also called St. Thomas Christians) in significant numbers is a recent phenomenon, especially from 2005. A vast majority of the Syro-Malabarians hails from the Indian state of Kerala. Kerala has in comparison with other states of India the highest number of educated and skilled population, without proportionate job opportunities. They came to seek better labour opportunities mainly in the health and IT sectors. Density of population in Australia is 2.91 per square kilometre, which makes Australia the 3rd least densely populated country in the world, after Namibia and Mongolia. Whereas, Density of population in Kerala is 860 per square Kilometre This is another reason for migration from Kerala. Now the Syro-Malabar Catholic population in Australia is around 50,000.

Some of the Syro-Malabar priests, mainly from the religious congregations, already working in the Australian Latin dioceses, helped, with the patronage of the local bishops, the Syro-Malabar communities in the formative period in Australia. On 23 December 2013 Pope Francis established the Eparchy of St. Thomas the Apostle of Melbourne for the Syro-Malabar faithful in Australia, with Bosco Puthur as its first Bishop. The inauguration of the Eparchy and taking charge of the Bishop took place on 25 March 2014. Ever since,

we are in the process of strengthening the communities especially with sacramental life, Sunday catechesis for children and youth, daily family prayer and monthly family prayer unites.

3) Father Placid J. Podipara CMI, one of the most respected authorities on the history and theology of the Syro-Malabar Church, has the following catchy formulation regarding her identity: "The Saint Thomas Christians are Indian in culture, Christian in religion and oriental in worship."(Cf. George Menachery (ed.) *The St. Thomas Christian Encyclopedia of India*, vol. 2,1973). They succeeded in blending well with the ecclesiastical world of the Eastern Churches and with the changing socio-cultural environment of their homeland.

When asked about his expectation of the Synod on the family, Cardinal George Pell said in 2016: "What do I expect? What I would like is a list of the best practice examples from all around the world of strategies and practices that help the church. For example, in the Syro Malabar church so much of their family life over the years is celebrated with prayers in the family". I consider this as a best compliment and a challenge to the Syro-Malabar community in Australia and all over the world. In general the Syro-Malabar families strive to bring up their children in an atmosphere of family prayer, to be respectful to elders and religious leaders, to excel in studies and art, to be amiable among peers, to be well-versed spiritually and culturally, to bring honour to parents, and to keep a pure reputation in preparation for marriage. (Cf. Jaisy Joseph, "Living In-Beyond the Margins", *Reenvisioning Christian Identity and Relationships*, p.28).

But migration of the faithful of the Syro-Malabar church outside the boundaries of India challenges the community's identity on all three dimensions, i.e., Indian in culture, Christian in religion and Oriental in worship. First because we live in a multicultural Australian society, unlike the well-knit tradition based Indian culture. Second because we live in a predominantly secular atmosphere, unlike the general religious milieu of India. Finally, as many of our people live far away from the oriental worshipping facilities, the availability and convenience of neighbourhood Latin churches often becomes more attractive.

Indian in culture: Syro-Malabar Catholics usually felt at home in the Kerala, Indian culture and language. But the migration into a country with strong undercurrents of the western culture challenges the younger migrants, especially of the second generation about their cultural identity. Unlike the migrating generation, the second generation has not adequately imbibed the deep cultural roots of their ancestors and have only second hand information of the rich Indian heritage through their parents. The same is the situation of their proficiency in Malayalam language. Although the Australian society is now generally called multicultural and secular, its predominant cultural and linguistic influence is Anglo-Celtic. Hence youth of our community have to face several barriers, challenges and struggles, at the level of culture, faith-life and mode of worship.

4) In-Between Identity: In multicultural societies, there is this risk of living in two different cultures yet feeling like one belongs to neither. Adult immigrants can become part of this cultural in-between, but younger ones are more affected. In more homogeneous societies, ethnic identity can strongly dictate one's cultural identity, but in multicultural societies like Australia, ethnicity influences but doesn't determine cultural identity. The Syro-Malabar Church in this new context has to accommodate people in this wide range of cultural identities from more Indian to more Australian and everything in-between?

Migrant youth may live in a sense of rootlessness and disconnect themselves with their heritage and experience a profound confusion regarding the relevance of the Syro-Malabar Catholic faith in their search for meaning and truth in the new context. Church has to be a bridge builder, facilitating the youth to get out of isolating themselves from both.

Cultural tradition and Faith Tradition: Then, there is the problem with distinguishing the characteristics of the cultural tradition and faith tradition. The first sometimes is inconsistent with the cultural values of Australia, but the Faith Tradition should never conflict nor have reason to conflict. The problem seems to be when we conflate the two together.

-In-Both Identity: The Syro-Malabar youth in Australia should not live in the margin, belonging neither to the Indian nor to the Australian culture. I understand it as “multicultural” in a positive and inclusive sense. There is room to be an authentically Syro-Malabar Australian. Being in both worlds must be complemented by the self-affirming, transcending experience. It does not at all mean a hybrid identity. Marginality in the positive and inclusive sense is to exist at the ‘margin that connects both world” and yet to transcend and live *in-beyond*. Jesus (divine and human) is a great example of one who lived in the margin and *in-beyond*. We are challenged to create an authentic Syro-Malabar Indian-Australian identity?

In-both situation allows the cultures to fine tune the good values present in the other through creative encounter and fruitful dialogue. By living between two centres of power, things are negotiable and not set in stone. The combination of the negative in-between and the positive in-both allows for the possibility of *in-beyond*. This possibility, I believe is actually the migrant identity of *every* Christian - to be in this world, but not of it, to live in and beyond. It is the Christian double-consciousness. In this lies the future of the Eastern Churches in the diaspora, including that of the Syro-Malabar Church.

5) The Mission of the Syro-Malabar Church in Australia is to **Accompany** the Syro-Malabar communities in their **pilgrimage of faith** following Jesus Christ, by helping them to acquire **greater awareness of their Oriental Catholic Ecclesial Identity**, leading them by the power of the Spirit to Christ-like **maturity**, and equip them for their **evangelizing ministry** in the Church and in the multicultural and secular Australian society.
