

ST THOMAS CHRISTIANS¹

The converts of the Apostle St Thomas are believed to have received the Syrian rite and liturgy from the Apostle himself. Historians will search in vain for any trace of Latin rite in Malabar before the thirteenth century, apart from occasional visitors from other countries. It is not surprising therefore that in all early writings the term "St Thomas Christians" is used to denote Syrian Christians. This latter term is however a misnomer, for many a foreigner unaware of the circumstances in Malabar might think that the Christians of Malabar are immigrants from Syria. Though Irish Franciscan missionaries began to evangelise in Malabar in the thirteenth century, the St Thomas Christians continued to follow the Syrian rite and they were governed by Syrian Bishops from the Patriarchate of Seleucia Ctesiphon.

With the arrival of the Portuguese in the beginning of the sixteenth century, a change set in. The St Thomas Christians were slowly made to pass from the jurisdiction of Syrian Catholic Bishops to that of Portuguese Bishops. The Synod of Diamper was convoked in 1599 by Archbishop Menezes of Goa to bring the St Thomas Christians under the Portuguese, on the grounds of bringing over the Nestorians of Malabar to the Catholic Faith. On these grounds, that the Syrian Christians were tainted by Nestorianism, a policy of Latinisation was begun which in fact was the cause of the great schism of 1653 involving the separation of nearly a third of the Catholic population from communion with the true church.

The Malabar Christians used the Nestorian form of Syriac and that seems to be the chief reason why some western scholars called them Nestorians. The Malabar tradition is definitely at variance with western scholarship in this matter and yet even in these days some western scholars continue to brand our forefathers as Nestorians. Such scholars do no good to the dissemination of truth while they do a lot of harm to the cause of reunion in Malabar. For the dissidents cite the western scholars and argue that to go back to Catholic communion is to depart from the faith of their fathers; whereas the truth is that till the great schism of 1653 Malabar Christians *en bloc* were in

¹ [In our issue for April 1953 we published an article on the Christians of South India, in the concluding paragraph of which some rather critical remarks appeared about the St Thomas Christians. We learn that these remarks are without foundation and that they have caused pain to numbers of readers over there. We accordingly express our deep regret at having published such statements (even if largely through inadvertence) and at having caused any distress. Here we publish an article which may help to give a more balanced view of the subject.—ED.]

communion with the Holy See. In manuscript copies of the Missal in use, there may have been Nestorian interpolations which the amanuenses unwittingly copied ; but if there were, it is curious that there is not even a single copy of such a Missal extant. The fact that the Malabar clergy and people readily submitted to the Latin Bishops at the Synod of Diampur, the fact that the clergy of Malabar said Mass together with the Portuguese missionaries from the very inception of the Synod and that for fifty years the St Thomas Christians remained loyal to the Portuguese bishops are sufficient evidence that the St Thomas Christians were Roman Catholics all through history.

It was the policy of latinisation that offended the Malabar clergy and people, who were unaccustomed to Latin liturgical customs and Latin language. The Portuguese lured a few Syrians to the Latin rite, but the great majority of the St Thomas Christians continued to follow the Syrian rite. In the Briefs of the Roman Pontiffs, the Syrian Christians of Malabar were repeatedly called St Thomas Christians. The Brief *Romani Pontifices*, erecting the Syro-Malabar Hierarchy and dated 21 December 1923, is a luminous example.

As in all places, people of different outlook will have differences of opinion, but it is a travesty of the truth to say that Syrian Christians look down upon Latin Christians. Even if the Syrian Christians were so unchristian as to be inclined that way, it is not possible in practice to do so. First because some of the Latin Christians are latinised Syrians, and moreover the Latin Community has the backing of the whole Latin Rite all over the world. Furthermore, in Malabar the Latin Christians have a large number of Catholic institutions which are on a par with our own institutions. Of course, some Syrian Christian families claim that their forefathers were high-caste Hindus. But this sense of class-distinction is not the monopoly of the Syrian Christians. Though inter-marriages between Syrian and Latin Christians are rare, there are certain groups of Latin Christians between which marriages are even more rare. The readiness with which large numbers of Syrian Christian young men pass over to the Latin rite to work in the Latin dioceses of India is clear proof of their broad-mindedness. The emigrants and missionaries from our community fall under Latin jurisdiction and in some cases *de facto* into the Latin rite when they go out of Malabar, and so they only swell the ranks of the Latin community. On the other hand, Latin Christians can always fall back upon the fame of the Latin rite in the universal Church even if they fail to command fame locally. The state of the St Thomas Christians of the Catholic communion can be briefly given in the words of the "Servizio Informazioni della Chiesa Orientale" dated 30 April 1953 (slightly summarised) :

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“The Syro-Malabarese are the Catholics of Central Malabar who are generally called St Thomas Christians. According to a living tradition of the place, the church is apostolic and is founded by the Apostle, St Thomas. Ecclesiastically, Malabar has three religious communities : Syro-Malabarese, Latin Christians and Syro-Malankarese. These latter form an ecclesiastical unit with a hierarchy of its own founded in 1931 when two Jacobite Bishops with a number of priests and laymen were reunited with Rome.

“The Hierarchy of the Syro-Malabarese consists of the Archbishop of Ernakulam and his suffragan Bishops at Trichur, Changanacherry, Kottayam and Palai. This province extends all over central Malabar and coincides with the Syro-Malankara diocese of Tiruvalla, suffragan to the Metropolitan See of Trivandrum. This Archdiocese of the Syro-Malankara rite coincides with the whole of south Malabar.

“The territory of the Syro-Malabarese is also the territory of four Latin dioceses. Thus in Central Malabar there are three rites and in some places jurisdiction of four to five Bishops”.

Owing to the density of population in Central Malabar, more than 50,000 Syrian Catholics have immigrated into the Latin Diocese of Calicut. Since the Latin priests are too few to look after the immigrants, Syrian priests, regular and secular, are working under the Latin Bishop of Calicut to look after the Syrian immigrants. The report ends with these momentous words : “The Oriental church of the Syro-Malabarese seems to be at the present moment the most flourishing in India in its Catholic and missionary enterprises”.

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