

# **THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH AND CATECHESIS**

The catechetical heritage of the Syro-Malabar Church seems to be as old as this Church itself. But the scarcity of historical data poses a great problem with regard to catechesis among the St. Thomas Christians in ancient times. We have to depend on traditions and the post fifteenth century historical data to see the evolution of catechesis.

## **History of the Catechetical Developments in the Syro-Malabar Church**

We divide the history of catechesis into five periods corresponding to the different phases of the existence of the Church in Kerala. These periods are (1) the early apostolic Period, (2) the Indo-Chaldean period, (III) the Indo-European period, (IV) the modern period and (V) the contemporary period.

### **1. The Early Apostolic Period (AD 52- 4<sup>th</sup> Cent.)**

When we think about catechetical developments among the St. Thomas Christians in the early apostolic period, the following questions may come to our minds; did any catechetical system exist at all in the Church founded by the Apostle Thomas? What was the nature of catechesis in those days? Traditions force us to believe that St. Thomas might have preached the Gospel and initiated a simple form of worship which grew on the Indian soil. We are neither sure about the indigenous nature and development of the form of worship nor about the nature of the catechesis they followed. The general history of catechesis teaches that the ancient form of catechesis was different from that of our times. It was mainly directed to adults and was catechumenal or mystagogic. In the earliest known catechetical system, catechesis was given generally in the framework of liturgy. Tradition holds that the apostle had founded seven communities in Kerala. This shows that he was moving from place to place from one local Church to another. So there might have been someone to lead the community in his absence. It is not possible to guide a worshipping community without proper instruction. All these points lead us to

think that there might surely have existed some system of catechetical instruction in those early days of Christianity in Kerala. That the Syro-Malabar Christians kept their faith intact for nineteen centuries among the overwhelming non-Christian majority is the proof that there existed a handing over of faith. The scanty allusions to the faith instructions in the Christian community during the first fifteen centuries of Christianity in India seem to indicate the absence of a regular form of religious instruction. Therefore, as a conclusion we can say that in this period a regular form of the religious instructions may not have existed as today, but somehow or another they transmitted their faith in the past.

## **2. The Indo-Chaldean Period (4<sup>th</sup> Cent. -1498)**

While analysing the system of religious training among the St. Thomas Christians, we can see that they had a tradition of learning. They were interested in scholarly discussions and study. As early as A.D. 190, Pantenus of Alexandria, a philosopher, had been invited by the Malabar Christians to defend their theological discussions and dispute with the Brahmins. The Portuguese missionaries who landed in Malabar in the beginning of the sixteenth century could see a flourishing Christian community with its own ecclesial and liturgical traditions. Melchior Nunes Barretto, who was the rector of the Jesuit College at Cochin in the sixteenth century (1563), reports, in a letter written to his confreres in Europe, "I cannot tell you, my dear brethren, how much I am consoled in the Lord when I see and speak to these Christians who from the time, when St. Thomas had been in these parts, as it is believed, have kept faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that they had been deprived of instruction, sacraments and other means, they have always preserved the veneration, obedience and faith of the Holy Cross and the memory of the mysteries of the Catholic Faith". So we can say that it is an accepted fact that the St. Thomas Christians kept the faith intact. They might not have had a catechesis as a school or parish based systematic training, but they transmitted the faith from generation to generation and this may mainly have been through the public worship of the liturgy. The priests, who had considerable training under the *Malpans* (a senior priest who gave the necessary instruction to the aspirants to the priesthood), preached during the liturgy.

They used to preach two or three hours continuously, explaining the fundamentals and dogmas of the Church. The faithful liked these sermons very much. Hence they were even called lovers of sermons by the early Portuguese missionaries. A community that lives its faith is the best proof of a sound catechesis. So regarding the time of the Indo-Chaldean period we can come to the conclusion that religious instruction was not unknown to the St. Thomas Christians. They had their own way of faith formation in the community either through their own clergy in the parish church or by the village school teachers or by parents at home.

### **3. The Indo-European Period (1498- 1887)**

An organised ministry of catechesis developed in Kerala during the Indo-European period. European missionary activity began in Kerala when Vasco da Gamma came from Portugal and landed in the harbour of Calicut in Kerala on 21 May 1498. Strictly speaking it was only with the arrival of the Portuguese, that the conventional catechetical history of India had its beginning.

Francis Xavier remains the greatest of all of European missionaries to come to India and he reached Goa on 16 May 1542 and started his missionary activity in Kerala in 1544. From history we know that Francis Xavier had close contacts with the St. Thomas Christians and his missionary activities had their influence on them. He visited many villages like Puvar, Kollanked, Vallavilai, etc. all these places are in Kerala. In his letter to St. Ignatius he extols the great devotion of the Goan Christians to St. Thomas, their apostle. He requests St. Ignatius to obtain from the Holy Father the grant of a plenary indulgence for these Christians on the occasion of the feast of the Apostle Thomas. According to the Goan philologist, H.O. Mescarenhas the Christians about whom Francis Xavier speaks in his letters to Ignatius were the descendants of the St. Thomas Christians.

Francis Xavier had initiated the systematic effort of catechizing the people. He had his own faith formation methodology. Going around the streets ringing a small bell, he used to invite all to attend his instructions in the nearby chapel where he taught them basic prayers and the fundamentals of the Christian faith. "One of the greatest

contributions of Francis Xavier to the Church in India is the institution of lay catechists envisaged as collaborators in the missionary endeavour". He introduced for the first time text books in the ministry of catechesis. Thus Francis Xavier gave a new orientation to the catechetical ministry of the Church in India and thereby inaugurated a new phase in the history of catechesis in India. In this period we see a shift from family centred catechesis to catechisms.

### **Catechetical Renewal of the Synod of Diamper**

The Synod of Diamper was convoked by the Goan Archbishop Alexis Dom Mensis from 20-26 June 1599 for the Thomas Christians. It was a turning point in the catechetical ministry of the Thomas Christians. All the clergy who attended the Synod were given a copy of a catechism in *Malayalam*, the local language. The priests were reminded of their duty of teaching catechism to their parishioners. Both the method of teaching and the content to be taught were indicated in the decree of the Synod. Regular catechesis was decreed for every Sunday. The faithful were to be taught before the Sunday Mass, their interests and knowledge in religious matters were to be checked when they came for confession. The parents were asked to teach their children the elementary prayers at home in the evening. Every parish church had to possess a copy of the catechism in Malayalam. The *Malpans* and the village school teachers were also exhorted to continue teaching catechism. The decrees of the Synod were put into practice by the first Latin Bishop of the Thomas Christians, Archbishop Roz. One of the outcomes of the Synod of Diamper was the shift from the informal way of handing down the faith to formal and systematic one. But it caused for another effect, the importance of the liturgy centred catechesis was shifted to instruction oriented one.

By the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Carmelite missionaries had taken up missionary activities in Malabar. They were officially entrusted with the pastoral care of the St. Thomas Christians and there was a renewed effort at promoting catechesis at that time. Catechisms either in the form of manuscripts or in the printed form began to dominate the catechetical field. They introduced Malayalam catechism. The Carmelite

missionaries of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were greatly interested in the catechetical apostolate. They had opened many catechumanates in different parishes and were diligent in catechizing the people. They had also introduced many western devotional practices such as *tridums*, *novenas*, *devotional months*, etc. Devotions based on the Passion of the Lord increased during these days.

#### **4. Modern Period (1887- 1992)**

The systematic development in the field of catechesis among the Thomas Christians began with the erection of the two Syro-Malabar *vicariates apostolic*, Trichur and Kottayam. Later, the indigenous leadership gave an added impetus to the growth of the Church through the ministry of catechesis. An important development during this period was the introduction of catechesis in the schools. In fact, the St. Thomas Christians came very late to the field of education. The first two apostolic vicars and their Indian successors were pioneers in promoting English education among the Catholics of Kerala. They encouraged their flock to open schools attached to every parish. In these schools the catechesis was given by teachers, most of whom, obviously, were lay people. The Catechism gained a definite place together with other subjects. The children were given instructions in religion according to their age groups as they were already divided in the secular regular classes. This new organizational set up demanded an appropriate content and an apt teaching method. From this time onwards the Church began to think seriously about the formation of catechists in Kerala. During this period the system of Sunday schools was also introduced in all the parishes of Kerala. This was an organized effort at the catechesis of children. The Bishops of Kerala were keen on instructing the people about the importance of faith formation at home, in the schools and in the parish. Prior to Vatican II, each diocese had its own text and syllabus for the Sunday school catechesis of children. During this period almost all the dioceses in Kerala started a separate catechetical department with a director for coordinating various catechetical activities

The establishment of the “Pastoral Orientation Centre” (POC) in 1968 at Palarivattom (Cochin) is a landmark in the history of catechesis in Kerala. It was a joint venture of the Kerala Catholic Bishops Council. Following the model of NCLC at the national level, the POC coordinated catechetical activities in Kerala. In 1967 an inter diocesan-committee was formed for catechetical renewal in Kerala. Under the initiative of this committee a catechetical seminar was organised from 25-28 October 1967 at Aluva. Fr. Hofinger was the main speaker and 130 priests from all 16 dioceses participated. The POC organized the first regional catechetical seminar in 1969. In 1978, an Episcopal commission of three bishops, representing the three rites was formed under the KCBC. This commission coordinated the catechetical activities in Kerala till 1999.

## **5. Contemporary Period (1992 - )**

With regard to the catechetical ministry of the Eastern Churches the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* states, “Each Church *Sui Iuris* and particularly their bishops have the serious duty of providing catechesis, by which faith matures and the disciple of Christ is formed through a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the teachings of Christ and through an increasingly stronger commitment to the person of Christ” (CCEO 617). The same Code again points out that “ The Synod of Bishops of the Patriarchal Church or Council of Hierarchs is competent to issue norms on catechetical formation arranged in a catechetical directory, within the territorial boundaries of their own Church; they are to observe those things prescribed by the supreme authority of the Church” (CCEO 621§ 1).

In the meeting held in January 1999, the KCBC, having taken into account the mind of the universal Church and following the provisions in the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* (CCEO 621 § 1, 621 § 3), decided to entrust the responsibility of catechesis to the catechetical commission of each Individual Church. The Synod of Bishops of the Syro-Malabar Church, held in November 1999 formed a catechetical commission with three Bishops as its members and one priest as its secretary. An expert committee of priests, religious and lay people is assisting its function. In 2003 the

Synodal Commission for Catechesis published a catechetical directory “*Call And Response*”. Today the catechetical commission of the Syro-Malabar Church is responsible for the co-ordination and animation of catechetical ministry in the Syro-Malabar Church. The Syro–Malabar Church has constructed its catechetical centre near the Major Archiepiscopal Curia, in Cochin. This centre at present coordinates the catechetical activities of the Syro-Malabar Church. The text book for Sunday catechesis has already been published.

The catechetical system of the Syro-Malabar Church is organized in four levels: Synodal, Eparchial, Forane/ regional, and Parochial. At the Synodal level the organization system has three main factors: 1 Synodal commission for Catechesis 2. the Syro-Malabar Catechetical Committee which serves as an advisory body to synodal commission and 3. the catechetical centre which functions as the catechetical office for the whole Syro-Malabar Church. Actually it is at eparchial level that the catechetical ministry is in its real action. At the eparchial level also it is organized under a department headed by a director and a council which assists the director to co-ordinate the catechetical activities of the eparchy. Within the eparchy, catechetical activities can be further organized under the forane /regional levels as per the need and size of the eparchy. At the parish level, catechetical activities are organized under the directorship of the parish priest. In order to assist the parish priest in the co-ordination and animation of the catechetical activities, every parish should have a team of zealous and competent catechists. In the same way, every parish should have also a Headmaster or Headmistress in order to facilitate the catechetical activities of the parish. The parish priest and all catechists together form the staff council of the parish.

At the parish level, catechesis through Sunday schools is well organized in all the dioceses of the Syro-Malabar Church. Classes are divided from 1 to 12, and in some of the dioceses there is a senior section for youth catechesis. This programme is compulsory for all the children in the parish. A director, a headmaster, some animators and a team of teachers can be found in every Sunday school. The duration of the Sunday classes in each

diocese varies. But almost all the dioceses in the Church have an average one and a half hour of classes every Sunday. The Sunday school year is divided into three semesters, at the end of which exams are conducted. Questions for the same are prepared by diocesan centres. There is a special examination conducted for those completing standard ten and certificate books are distributed.