



SYNODALITY IN THE SYRO MALANKARA CATHOLIC CHURCH:

A HISTORICAL AND PASTORAL APPROACH

Sam Varghese

St. Mary's Malankara Major Seminary, Trivandrum

E-Mail: samvarghese35@gmail.com

Article Received: 20 May 2022

Article Reviewed: 05 June 2022

Abstract: Synodality represents the main road for the Church, called to renew herself under the action of the Spirit and by listening to the Word. Alone we can do so little; Together, we can do so much. Holy Father Pope Francis invites each of us to think, suggest, and work together to achieve or fulfill the Synodal nature of the Church. Synodality is not a new concept; instead, it's an invitation to re-discover the practice of the early Church.

Key Words: Synodality, Syro-Malankara Catholic Church, Pastoral Approach

1. Introduction

Synodality represents the main road for the Church, called to renew herself under the action of the Spirit and by listening to the Word. Alone we can do so little; Together, we can do so much. Holy Father Pope Francis invites each of us to think, suggest, and work together to achieve or fulfill the synodal nature of the Church. Synodality is not a new concept; instead, it's an invitation to re-discover the practice of the early Church.

Concepts like lay participation, collegiality, and the democratic system evolved in different ways in the eastern and western Church. "In the western churches, the nature and growth of the church had been controlled by many social and political factors and sometimes the church gave way to the interests of the emperors, and thereby lost its identity."¹The European feudal system also laid a solid foundation for priestly domination. ² During the Reformation, the western Church kept the laity out of everything; even active involvement of the lay in liturgical

worship was disregarded. On the other hand, in the Eastern Church, an administrative system has emerged with the participation of the laity. Their rights were duly recognized in church administration, liturgy and doctrinal matters. They have an ecclesial tradition in which the bishops gave spiritual leadership while the stewardship of temporal affairs was looked after by the committees, which included the laypeople.

2. Participation of People of God in the Malankara Church Before 16th century

From the very early period itself, the Malankara church followed a kind of synodal structure by actively engaging its laity in the day to day affairs of the Church. Due representation and prominences were given to the laity. For instance, during Chaldean Patriarch Timothy I (789-823),

¹Cherian C.C., *The People of God*, (Kottayam: Divyabodhanam Publications, 1986.), 75.

²Kanjiramukalil, S., *Ecclesial Identity of the Malankara Catholic Church*, (Kottayam: OIRSI and Bethany Publications, 2002), 108.



there is evidence of the Metropolitan's appointment elected by the people in the presence of suffragan bishops.³

Palli Yogams (Church Assemblies): *Palli Yogams* played an essential role in the ecclesial life of St. Thomas Christians. Since Christians were scattered in various places, their spiritual and temporal affairs were dealt with by the local autonomous assemblies called *Palli Yogams*.⁴ This *Yogam* consists of the representatives of the families⁵ and the clergy of a parish. These *yogams* are presided over by ministers⁶ or presbyters who had been elected by the local people and ordained bishops. The notion of the Church as a communion of fellowship was kept intact and alive through the *Yogam*. The members of the assembly enjoyed equality. It helped them to maintain communion and solidarity among the Christians.⁷

Functions of *Palli Yogams*

- The *Yogam* discusses the problems connected with life and activities of the parish.
- Arranging church festivals
- It selects men for ministry and recommends them to the bishop for ordination, otherwise known as *desakuri*, the official approval of the parish community.

- Sending representatives for the national church assemblies

- The assembly exercised excommunicating public delinquents, and they had to undergo the punishment imposed by the assembly.
- It functions as a court of justice and settles quarrels and moral lapses

Pothu Yogams: The delegates of all the churches handled Matters that concerned the whole Church. This sort of assembly is known as *pothu yogam* or general assemblies. The general assembly was presided over by Archdeacon.⁸ He is otherwise known as *Jathikkukarthavyan* (leader of the people).

3. Concept of Synodality in the life of Mar Ivanios

Mar Ivanios had the vision of 'walking together' in the ecclesiastical affair from his early days. For instance, we see the concept of synodality in the II Bethany Yogam speech of Mar Ivanios. When he is about to reunite with the Catholic Church, he gathered all the well-wishers and contributors of Bethany and said he would be leaving Bethany soon. So he entrusted them to decide on the

³Koodapuzha, X., "The Ecclesiology of the Thomas Chistians of India," in Vellilamthadam, T., (ed.)*Ecclesial Identity of the Thomas Christians*, (Kottayam: OIRSI, 1985), 73.

⁴*PalliYogams* seems to be originated based on the ancient village assembly which was prevalent among Dravidians. The Dravidians of *sanghakalam*(1-5 cen. AD) used to gather together to discuss matters of common interest and take decisions on them. This assembly was an authoritative body at the village level. The families are obliged to abide by the decisions of the assembly. In the same way *palliyogams* was responsible for the welfare of the Christian community and it seems to be influenced also by the Jewish synagogue organization pattern.

⁵ In the early phase the head of each caste or class were allowed to attend the assemblies. Later, the head of each family was given the chance, including women. But in the course of time all adult men of the family were allowed and participation of women was discarded.

⁶Each assembly had at least one minister as its president. He was known as '*cassanari*' or '*kathanar*' which means a man of *karthan*(Lord). Cherian C.C., *The People of God*,81.

⁷Koodapuzha, X., "The Ecclesiology of the Thomas Chistians of India," in Vellilamthadam, T., (ed.)*Ecclesial Identity of the Thomas Christians*, 79.

⁸ Podipara, P., *The Hierarchy of the Syro-Malabar Church*, (Alleppey: Prakasam Publication, 1976.), 106.



temporal goods of Bethany. He says, “Whatever you decide, I am ready to act on your decision in this matter. Even if the property is acquired in my name, I am willing to write a contract or other document

to someone of your choice.”⁹ The inclusive attitude of Mar Ivanios is seen here. Being a bishop and the sole authority of Bethany, he could have decided on his discretion. But he never does so. Instead, he gathered and listened to the opinion of the others. He wished the participation of all in the execution of Bethany.

Upadesi System: The vision of the participation of lay catechists in the Catholic Church was envisaged in the second Vatican council. It teaches, “In our time when there are so few clerics to preach the Gospel to such great numbers and to exercise the pastoral ministry, the position of catechists is of great importance.” But a few decades before this teaching and vision of Vatican II was implemented in the mission fields of Malankara Catholic Church by instituting the system of *upadesis*. So he initiated many educated lay faithful, including women, into missionary activities in view of the evangelization of India.

Synodality in Syro Malankara Catholic Church: The mission of the Church is one, and all the members of the Church are equally obliged to accomplish that mission. Malankara Catholic Church, by its very nature, has a synodal character. From parish level to eparchial level, Malankara church enjoys the participation of bishops, priests, religious and laity in the daily affairs of the Church.

This participation is accomplished through different organizations which are meant for the laities and the pastors. Therefore, Pastors and laity are responsible for accomplishing the one mission concerning the Church herself and with respect to the world.

Synodality in Parish Level: Parish committee (itavaka committee): The particular code of Syro Malankara Catholic Church (CPCSMCC) defines the parish committee as the representative body elected by the parish general Body ¹⁰ (*itavaka pothuyogam*). A parish committee is through which a representative body of the people of God in the parish, in communion with one another and with their parish priest, meets to deliberate and resolve in common agreements on spiritual, pastoral, and temporal matters according to the norms of a particular law and eparchial statutes.

The parish committee must have members from the entire portion of the people of God, namely clerics, religious, and laity. The legislation is an expression of the conciliar theology. The committee is to reflect the participation of people from diverse states of life to ensure their specific way of serving the mission of the entire parish. According to CPCSMCC, representatives from the MCYM, the MCA, *Pithrvedi*, *Matrvedi*, Catechism Teachers, Prayer Groups are also members of itavaka committee.¹¹ It shows the wide range of participation of the people of God from different strata of life. The parish committee is a body to inspire a spirit of loving communion between the parish priest and the parishioners and not a body to provoke a spirit of confrontation. Therefore, there should not be a domineering spirit on either side. Priests have to

⁹ Thomas Mar Anthonios, “Bethany YogamPrasangam” in *Vishwasadhorani*, (Trivandrum: Catholicate Centre, 2010), 129-130.

¹⁰CPCSMCC, can. 159.

¹¹CPCSMCC, can. 162.



acknowledge the rights and duties of the laity, and the laypeople should offer their pastors a sincere and selfless collaboration in a spirit of filial respect and real concern for the building up of the community.

The parish priest has the power to convene the council and to take the decision at the end of the consultation. On the other hand, unfortunately, some parish priests, especially those unaware of the genuine meaning of shared responsibility and the whole progress of the consultative process in the post-conciliar Church, tend not to share the power in the process of decision making. As a result, an atmosphere of mistrust and rivalry is created that seriously affects the entire parish's goodwill and growth.

The main functions of the parish committee can be summed up as:

- To co-ordinate and animate the entire Christian life of the community in co-responsibility with the pastor and keeping in mind the priorities of the eparchy.
- To foster a growing sense of community in the parish
- To identify the various needs of the parish and to draw up and carry out suitable plans for the overall growth of the parish as a community of faith, love and witness.
- To foster collaboration among all the parishioners and parish associations in the building up of the parish.
- To animate and co-ordinate the activities of the various groups of association in the parish with a view of promoting healthy interaction among them

¹²CPCSMCC, can. 393.

¹³CPCSMCC, can. 406.

4. Different Kinds of Association in SMCC

There are certain associations in the Syro Malankara Catholic Church that are meant to promote the Christian vocation in the world and engage in charitable and pious activities.¹² Each association of Christian faithful of Syro Malankara Catholic Church is erected by a competent ecclesiastical authority as a Juridic person. The Malankara Catholic Children's League (MCCL), the Malankara Catholic Youth Movement (MCYM), the Malankara Catholic Association (MCA), the Malankara catholic *Pitruvedi*(MCP) and the Malankara catholic *Matruvei* (MCM) are recognized as association proper to Malankara Catholic Church.¹³

By the law itself, all the catechism children in the Syro Malankara Catholic Church are members of MCCL. Through MCCL and Sunday school programs, children are equipped and formed in Christian life. The early catechetical formation makes a substantial effect on one's own life. Their voices should be listened to by the ecclesial authorities and the parents.

The Malankara catholic youth movement is not merely a social forum; rather, it constitutes the very young Malankara Catholic Church who tries to fulfil its mission in the given situation. MCYM cultivates an interest in church worship and practices and enables one to lead an exemplary sacramental life. It empowers the youth to respond boldly against social evils and to work for the building of a new society through creative action based on Christian teachings.¹⁴ Being the sprouting buds, they should be actively made participate in the mission of the Church, and their opinions should be sought. But now, there is a

¹⁴ *Bharanakatana*, MCYM., (Major Archdiocese Trivandrum, 2004) 9.



tendency in the Church to set apart and considering the youth as immature and unsophisticated, especially in the process of decision making. Such kind of tendencies is against the essence of synodality.

MCA, MCP, MCM are other forums of the Syro Malankara catholic church for the faithful who are above the age of 35 years. These associations are constituted with a clear and definitive ecclesial vision for promoting the Malankara Catholic Church in its various apostolates. The catechesis given to these groups by various means such as seminars, meetings, gospel conventions, family prayer meetings and liturgical prayer meetings are examples of their active participation in the Church.

DIOCESAN LEVEL

Pastoral Councils: Pastoral council in the diocesan level is constituted to assist and promote all that relates to the pastoral work of the eparchy and to offer practical suggestions so that the life and activities so the life of the faithful may be brought in conformity with the mind of the Church. Thirty-five percent of the total number of pastoral council members shall be women.¹⁵ But particular law does not stipulate how the election of the laity into the diocesan pastoral councils should be conducted.

Presbyteral Council and Eparchial Consulters: the Presbyteral council is a body of the priests representing the presbyterate of the eparchy, which assists the eparchial bishop by its advice in those things that regard to the pastoral and other common good of the eparchy.¹⁶ Eparchial consulters are appointed by the eparchial bishop, which helps the bishop in administration.

¹⁵CPCSMCC, can. 114.

¹⁶CCEO can. 264.

District Level: Each ecclesiastical district of SMCC has a pastoral council which consists of parish priests, superiors of religious houses, members of eparchial pastoral councils from the eccl. District, trustee (*kaikaran*) and secretary from each parish, a lay woman participant from each parish, elected lay faithful who are conferred with eccl. Titles and one representative from each association and apostolate from the ecclesiastical district. The council's functions are¹⁷:

- To cooperate in the building up of the Church
- To co-ordinate the apostolic activities and ecclesiastical discipline
- Implementing the instructions given in the pastoral letters
- To Discuss and propose a solution to the religious problems
- To Study the urgent need and suggests prudent ways of handling them
- To evaluate and offer timely solutions to ecclesiastical challenges

5. OTHER SYSTEMS WHICH INCLUDE LAY PARTICIPATION

SMCC ensures various other provisions also for laities in the administrative section. Each eparchy can have eparchial commissions and departments for various apostolates. They are under the guidance of the eparchial bishop. Lay faithful or religious can be appointed as secretary to the priest who is the director of a commission.¹⁸

In Finance Council: finance council is constituted with two lay Christians from the pastoral council, two presbyteral

¹⁷CPCSMCC, cans. 120,121,122.

¹⁸CPCSMCC, can. 111.



council members and three other members other than the finance officer, freely appointed by the eparchial bishop.¹⁹

In liturgy: recently, the provision for reading the epistle amidst the Holy Qurbano is granted for the woman faithful, which was reserved only to the men earlier.

Syro Malankara Catholic Assembly: to ensure the diverse participation of people of God in the mission and life of the church, SMCC constitutes an assembly following the norm of CCEO. It discusses various topics and collects suggestions from each parish, and tries to put them into practice if it is necessary.

Suvishesha Sangam: through baptism, each faithful participates in the mission of the Church. Each person is obliged and possesses the right to proclaim the gospel message. *Suvishesha Sangam* is a movement in SMCC which enhance the spiritual awakening of the Church by the active participation of the laity. By using their different charisms, evangelization in the Church is being done. They visit the houses and conduct prayers, and more than that, they live the Gospel values and witness Christ before the world.

Laity in SMCC missions: The role and contributions of the laity in the mission places of our Church are highly notable and appreciable. The pastors could access the places where priests and religious cannot reach. Those who are working in the mission of SMCC are independent pastors. They are given our catechetical courses. They guide the communities according to our church teachings with the help of our priests and sisters.

Safe Environment Committee: As per the new civil law, there should be a safe environment committee in each

diocese under the presidency of the eparchial bishop in collaboration with the civil system. It says that the presbyteries, Churches, educational institutions, religious institutions, houses of special care, and Catholic organizations should be places where all feel comfortable. The primary purposes of this committee are;

- Provide a secure and safe environment for minors and vulnerable adults in the faith communities within our dioceses/eparchies.
- Emphasize the need for reporting any incident of sexual assault or harassment to the Church authorities as well as to the civil authorities;
- Address the spiritual, physical, and emotional causes of the victims, their families, and the affected community
- Address the possibility of false accusations against clergy, employees, and volunteers.

The Major Archi-eparchial Synod of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church also provides much importance and attention to the safe environment committee. Among its five members, three seats are reserved for the laity. It is based on the basic Christian values and morals issued by the CBCI and the provisions of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, of India.

6. Conclusion

Concerning lay participation, the Syro Malankara Catholic Church is practicing a blend of the traditional approach of St. Thomas Christians and the western approach of synodality. The present parish councils and pastoral councils have a democratic setup but we need to think that in practicality how much it enjoys full administrative freedom. Are they merely advisory bodies?

¹⁹CPCSMCC, can. 106.



The lay participation that the ancient Syrian Christians enjoyed and practiced is not reflected in the present system. The ancient privileges and authority of the laity to give approval of the candidates to priesthood and elevation of bishop²⁰ etc... are denied in the present administrative system. Laity should be incorporated, and due representation has to be given to them in the practical fields such as evangelization, economic affairs and social development activities.

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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²⁰We often witness elections that are politicized among other Christian denominations. Campaigning is dangerous. In the early days of the Catholic Church, the apostles and their successors elected and consecrated bishops by getting consensus among the people. Obviously people were not choosing, they were generally expressing their consent technically called as 'oxios' which means

worthy. (Thomas Mar Koorilos, "Sabhaniyamangal," (ed.) Kakkannattu A. *Atmabodhanam* (Trivandrum: Suvishesha Sangam, 2020), 779.