

#### Part IV: The East Syrian Rite (Nicholas LaBanca)

The first time my wife and I visited a Syro-Malabar Catholic parish, we were a bit anxious. We were at least familiar with the traditions of the Byzantine Rite through my own family, but this first foray into the East Syrian Rite would be something completely different. Or so we thought. As we've learned in the previous three parts of this series on the Eastern Catholic Churches, there are many ways to be Catholic.

**All of these beautiful traditions, both liturgical and spiritual, make up the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.** Our experience of the **Holy Qurbana** (which literally means "sacrifice") at the cathedral we visited was both memorable and familiar. We noticed there were other Latin Catholics visiting as well and were able to follow the liturgy quite well despite it being bilingual. The "St. Thomas Christians" warmly welcomed us there, and we have gone back to visit since. However, as we saw in the last essay with the Alexandrian Rite, there is **more than one particular Church that can trace its origins back to St. Thomas the Apostle**. Today, we will dive into the traditions and history of not only the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, but the Chaldean Catholic Church as well. **Chaldean Catholics** especially have lived out that old adage of the Church that, *the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church*. As Fr. Fawaz Kako puts it: "**My faith has been given to me not by words, but by a testimony of blood. It is the most powerful testimony that anyone can give.**" Heeding the words of Pope St. John Paul II, Catholics of the Latin tradition will find here the opportunity to become "fully acquainted with this treasure" of the Catholic East.

**Apostolic Zeal:** As we mentioned above, both of these Churches trace their lineage back to St. Thomas the Apostle, with many (both Catholic and Orthodox alike) identifying themselves as "St. Thomas Christians". While many Syro-Malabar and Chaldean Catholics have made their home in North America, historically most originally hail from India, Iraq, and other Middle Eastern countries. Pope St. John Paul II also appreciated the beautiful traditions and faithfulness of these Churches, as he mentioned to the bishops of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church in India on their "**Ad Limina**" visit to Rome visit back in 2003: "*The Liturgy of the Syro-Malabar Church, for centuries a part of India's rich and varied culture, is the most vivid expression of your people's identity. The celebration of the Eucharistic Mystery in the Syro-Malabar Rite has played a vital part in molding the experience of faith in India.*" Regarding the Chaldean Catholics, St. John Paul conveyed his love and appreciation of the faithful to Patriarch Raphael I Bidawid in a 1993 letter: "*The entire Church, close to you who are in need, is grateful to you and proud of you for the faith with which you are witnessing to Christ's name. Your land preserves Christian memories of immense value... testify[ing] to an ancient flourishing Christianity that was generous in its apostolic zeal, famous for the depth of its doctrine and missionary commitment to distant countries.*" These "memories" that St. John Paul speaks of are very ancient. We will look to the Chaldean Catholic Church first. Tradition holds that **St. Thomas the Apostle** and his disciple St. Thaddeus (or Addai) of Edessa **founded the ancient Assyrian Church, around the lands that made up Mesopotamia**. During the fifth century, a schism occurred in direct opposition to the teachings promulgated at the third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431.

**The Assyrian Church and Nestorian Heresy:** The Assyrian Church rejected the Christological definitions declared at the council, which had deemed Nestorius' teachings on the nature of Christ's divinity heretical. This effectively cut the Assyrian Christians off from the rest of Christianity, and with this schism we see the beginning of the present-day Assyrian Church of the East. The Catholic Church still considers this church's orders and sacraments to be valid, and much has been done in the arena of ecumenism, but the Assyrian Church of the East still remains outside of communion with both Catholicism and Orthodoxy.

**History of the Chaldean Church:** Happily, this was not the case for all Assyrian Christians. In the sixteenth century some bishops and priests of the Assyrian Church sought reunion with Rome, and Rome with them. Their desire for reunion was in part instigated by the fact that patriarchal succession within the Assyrian Church was hereditary. Usually, the Assyrian Church appointed the nephew of the former patriarch as the new patriarch. This led to several patriarchs who were unfit for the episcopacy. The clergy that desired reunion with Rome asked the abbot of a monastery, named Yohannan Sulaka, to petition Rome for consecration as patriarch. He reluctantly accepted, and after receiving a letter of

presentation to the pope from Franciscan friars stationed in the Holy Land, Sulaka and his compatriots headed for Rome. In early 1553, Sulaka made a profession of faith in an audience with Pope Julius III. A couple of months later, on April 9, 1553, Pope Julius III consecrated Sulaka as bishop in St. Peter's Basilica. Sulaka subsequently received the title "Patriarch of the Chaldeans" and took the name Shimun VIII Yohannan Sulaka. Over the next few hundred years, there was a great deal of fighting in the area as a result of this action. In addition, the patriarchate of the Chaldean Catholics went under many changes and divisions itself. The matter wasn't settled until 1830, when Pope Pius VIII declared Metropolitan Yohannan VIII Hormizd the "Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans". The patriarch of the Chaldean Church still holds that title to this day. Today, there are approximately 310,000 Chaldean Catholics living mainly in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey and the U.S.

**History of the Syro-Malabar Church:** As for the history of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, we again start with St. Thomas the Apostle. Veneration of this saint seems to be a bit more amplified among Syro-Malabar Catholics, as he supposedly landed on the coast of the present day city of Kerala, India in 52 A.D. Much like the history of the Chaldean Catholic Church, these Christians in India also broke with Christians in Rome and Constantinople in the fifth century, and the Indian Christians came under the jurisdiction of the patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East. It wasn't until 1498, when Portuguese explorers encountered them, that the Catholic Church came into contact with these Christians again. The St. Thomas Christians and Roman Catholics alike were surprised to find that they both professed the Christian faith. Unfortunately, the Portuguese explorers didn't accept the validity of the St. Thomas Christian's traditions and liturgy. Over the next one hundred years, the Latin Church erected dioceses, primarily in Goa. This led to a rough transition for those who wanted to remain true to their traditions as St. Thomas Christians. Latin Catholics heavily Latinized the Holy Qurbana. Eventually, it barely had any resemblance to what it had been prior to the Portuguese landing there.

**Latinization and Reunion:** In 1599, following the death of the local Metropolitan, St. Thomas Christians and Latin Catholics convened for the Synod of Diamper, thus reuniting the St. Thomas Christians and Rome once again. Or at least, so it was thought. Much like how well-meaning Latin Catholics disturbed things in the Ethiopian Church, we see how the heavy Latinizations and disregard for authentic tradition led to even more schism and strife. More divisions, both internal and external as can be seen on this graphic, occurred over the next few centuries. During Pope Leo XIII's papacy in the late nineteenth century there was a real push for the renewal of the East Syrian Rite. By 1934, Pope Pius XI brought about a large scale liturgical reform which led to the purge of Latinizations from the Holy Qurbana. During this time, the East Syriac Rite created more eparchies both in India and throughout the world. Eventually, this led to the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church becoming the second largest of all the Eastern Catholic Churches. Today, Over three million Syro-Malabarese Catholics live in state of Kerala, in SW India.

**Liturgy and Traditions:** Before we take a look at the Chaldean and Syro-Malabar Churches today, let's turn our attention to the sacred liturgy and other traditions. One of the first things my wife and I noticed when we were at the Syro-Malabar Catholic cathedral was the red curtain before the sanctuary. Visitors may be perplexed by the placement of this curtain, but it actually has deep roots in the Jewish Temple tradition. The Jewish Temple was divided into zones, with the Holy of Holies separated by a veil which could only be accessed by the High Priest. With the inauguration of the New Covenant, Jesus Christ is now the High Priest (Hebrews 4:14). Through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, priests in parishes throughout the world are able to act *in persona Christi*—in the person of Christ. This liturgical curtain works in the same way the iconostasis of the Byzantine Rite and the altar rail of the Latin Rite do, bridging together heaven and earth. This is why traditionally across all rites of the Church, only ordained men could enter into the Holy of Holies. We will be able to look into this more when our focus turns to the Byzantine Rite.

**The Anaphora:** We also see a few different anaphorae used in the liturgy of the East Syrian Rite. In the West, we typically call this the "Eucharistic Prayer", but all Eastern Christians use the word "anaphora". The most common anaphora is the Liturgy of Mar Addai and Mar Mari. This is one of the oldest liturgies in use in the Catholic Church, and may date back as far as the third century in Edessa. Its current form,

however, resembles that which has been used since the seventh century. East Syrian Catholics typically use vernacular languages in the anaphora, but they use Aramaic—the language of Jesus Christ—as well. When attending the Holy Qurbana at a Chaldean Catholic parish, I can attest that it's quite the experience to hear the words of consecration spoken in the same language that our Lord would also have used.

**Liturgical Calendar:** As far as the liturgical calendar goes, the Chaldean and Syro-Malabar Catholic Churches are very similar. They divide their liturgical year into nine seasons. There is no “Ordinary Time” or “Time after Epiphany and Pentecost” as there is in the West. Instead, we see familiar seasons such as Advent and the Great Fast (Lent), but also the Apostles’ Fast in June and the Season of Moses and Elijah in September and October. East Syrian Catholics give other feasts on the calendar much more importance than we see on the Latin calendar. For example, they recognize the feast of St. Thomas the Apostle on July 3 as a Holy Day of Obligation. There are, however, many other saints from the East Syrian tradition whom their entire Catholic Church can and should venerate.

**Syro-Malabar Saints:** There are several Syro-Malabar Catholics who have been canonized and beatified in recent years. First among these is St. Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception. She became the first native Indian saint to be canonized back in 2008 by Pope Benedict XVI. St. Alphonsa was a Franciscan nun who was born in 1910 to a wealthy family in Kerala, India. When she was thirteen, her feet were badly burned when she fell into a fiery pit of burning chaff, leaving her permanently disabled for the rest of her life. From there, she joined the Franciscan Clarist Congregation and entered the novitiate of the congregation at Bharananganam in 1930. Soon after however, she became ill for a period of five years, and while eventually she was cured through the intercession of another Syro-Malabar Catholic saint, Kuriakose Elias Chavara, she would soon suffer contract and suffer from pneumonia and other ailments throughout the rest of her life. She died on July 28, 1946, the same day that her feast day is commemorated.

**Chaldean Saints:** Looking to the Chaldean Catholic Church, many saints (such as Ss. Addai and Mari) that are especially venerated there lived before reunion was achieved. But there is one person from modern times that is particularly venerated. While he is not yet canonized, he is well on his way to sainthood. Servant of God Ragheed Ganni was a thirty-five year old Chaldean Catholic priest, living in Mosul, Iraq. After celebrating the Holy Qurbana on Trinity Sunday in 2007, Islamist fighters stopped Fr. Ganni and three of his subdeacons. The fighters asked why the church was still open. He simply answered, “How can I close the house of God?” The terrorists demanded that Fr. Ganni and his companions convert to Islam, and when they refused, the Islamist fighters killed them on the spot. The Vatican opened their cause for canonization last year, and Fr. Ganni’s feast is June 3<sup>rd</sup>, the day of his martyrdom.

**Persecution:** Sadly, this has not been an isolated incident. As Fr. Kako notes in an interview I had with him last year: “The problem is that there is a systematic persecution against Christians... or, to be honest with you, if you are not Muslim. They consider you to be a second-class citizen... ISIS did their fair share of atrocities and persecution, but that term ‘persecution’—it has always been there.” While the media does not publicize this persecution of Chaldean Catholics and other Christians often, it is still a reality going on today. According to Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans, there are 500,000 Christians living in Iraq today. Compare that to 1990 when there were over 300,000 Catholics living in the Archeparchy of Baghdad alone. “At one point Christians represented 20 percent of the Iraqi population, but the number firstly dropped to 10 percent and it now stands at 2 percent... Christians in Iraq are searching for freedom, and this is painful”.

**Breathing with Both Lungs:** The first thing we can do is pray for our brethren in the Middle East, so that they may be able to practice their faith in peace. We can also help through the various organizations associated with Chaldean Catholic Charities. What can also be done is visiting your fellow Catholic brothers and sisters. A simple Google search will bring up both Chaldean and Syro-Malabar Catholic parishes near your area. Fr. Kako pointed out to me that Eastern Catholics and Latin Catholics have “the same blood that runs through [our] veins”, like brothers do. We are brothers in Christ Jesus through our common baptism. So even though his “house” might look a little different from the “house” you typically worship in, there’s no real problem here as you are always welcome in the house of

151 your brother! The lesson is that just as we should not be strangers or distant from our own siblings, and  
152 just as we should always be praying for our relatives when they are in need, neither should we be  
153 strangers towards our Eastern Catholic brethren. If you've only breathed with one lung your whole life, it  
154 would certainly be worthwhile to start breathing with two!  
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