



# Syro Malabar Community

in the Archdiocese of Vienna

Ordinariat for the Faithful of the Eastern Catholic Churches in Austria

Tivoligasse 20, A - 1120 Vienna

[www.iccvienna.org](http://www.iccvienna.org)

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## A Historical Perspective:

The origin and growth of the Syro Malabar Unit of the Indian Catholic Community in the Archdiocese of Vienna can be seen in a few stages of its existence and activities, as being an immigrant ecclesial Community under the authority and guidance of the Archdiocese of Vienna.

The earliest stage of its presence here was in the form of spontaneous initiatives of a few Indian immigrant Christians, who gathered together occasionally for their spiritual, social, cultural events and celebrations. The Rectorate of the Afro-Asian Communities (ARGE AAG) coordinated all the services needed for the immigrants of the African and Asian Countries in the Archdiocese of Vienna. Prof. Dr. Laurencio Fernando Noronha, an Indian priest from Goa, took personal interest to organize the immigrant Indians. He was given charge as being their Chaplain in the decade of 1970s. He also arranged Holy Mass for these immigrants and also attended to their spiritual needs. During this period, two Malayalee Priests, Fr. Augustine Thottakkara CMI and Fr. Antony Kolenchery MSFS, who came here to pursue their studies in the University of Vienna, helped the Malayalee Catholics for their liturgical and pastoral needs. They were members of the Syro Malabar Church. They coordinated Syro Malabar Holy Mass in Malayalam occasionally and cared for their spiritual, ethnic and cultural needs.

Towards the end of the decade of 1970s, there was a great flow of medical nurses and slowly of their families in Austria. Most of them settled down in the city of Vienna and got job in various government and private institutions here, mainly in medical and old age care centers. Most of these immigrants from Kerala were Syro Malabar Catholics. Towards the beginning of 1980s, the immigrant Indian Catholics expressed their desire to get a Malayalee Catholic Priest to be their Chaplain in order to attend to their liturgical and pastoral requirements. With the support of the Archdiocesan Authorities and of the ARGE AAG Rectorate, Dr. Noronha contacted the Congregation of Mary Immaculate (CMI) in Kerala, which sent Fr. Paul Parakkattel CMI to Vienna in 1982. He was given appointment as the Chaplain of the Indian Catholic Community by the Vienna Archdiocese on 1st April 1982. In that year the ARGE AAG Rectorate was officially installed for the purpose of attending to the needs of the immigrant communities of Afro-Asian countries in Vienna. Its central office, Chapel and other room facilities were at Türkenstrasse 3, 1090 Vienna. Msgr. Dr. Petrus Bsteh was the first Rector and Frau Brigitte Proksch was its General Secretary. With their prudent, generous and efficient leadership, the foreign language immigrant Communities in the Archdiocese of Vienna flourished tremendously. The ARGE AAG was part of a categorial Chaplaincy – of the Foreign Language Communities – of the Archdiocese of Vienna.

The next stage of growth of the Syro Malabar Community in Vienna begins with the official inauguration of the **Indian Catholic Community** with the priestly leadership of Fr. Paul Parakkattel CMI as being its first Chaplain on 3rd April 1982 by HE Bishop Alois Wagner at the Votive Kirche. The designation, “Indian Catholic Community”, was preferred as being a *Common Umbrella*, under which all the three Rite Communities (Ecclesiae sui juris), whose mother tongue is Malayalam, could remain harmoniously united, with equal rights and dignity, even though there was a massive difference of membership in each unit of the Rite Communities: Syro Malabar Community, Syro Malankara Community and Kerala Latin Community. Their common language of Malayalam was also a uniting factor as well as a wonderful sign of solidarity and communion as being one family of the Malayalee Catholic immigrants in the Archdiocese of Vienna. The leadership of the Rectorate and more precisely

of the Archdiocesan authorities appreciated and welcomed this glaring structure and designation of identity of the Indian immigrant Catholics in Vienna.

As the vast majority of them during that time were the members of the Syro Malabar Church, the Rectorate allowed and promoted wholeheartedly their Faith and parental liturgical tradition and culture. That was the beginning of the Syro Malabar Liturgical Community in Vienna in 1982 and to mark this identity the Syro Malabar Cross was accepted as being the official emblem of the Indian Catholic Community. Occasionally the Chaplains celebrated Holy Mass in Malayalam for the members of Kerala Latin Rite and arranged Holy Mass for the immigrants of the Syro Malankara Church. For everything else, they all joined together as being one Family of the Malayalee Catholic Community in the Archdiocese of Vienna.

Besides the Holy Mass, yearly Retreats, spiritual renewal events, pilgrimages, pastoral guidance programme, Community festivals and socio-cultural events were organized. The most remarkable liturgical events were the celebrations of the First Communion and Confirmation in the Centers of the Indian Community. All those liturgical events, only with rare exception, were organized in Syro Malabar Rite and in accordance with its particular Faith and Tradition. In the statutes of the ARGE AAG, the purpose of its existence was clearly stated by Cardinal Franz König in 1985 (4.3.2): "Proclamation of Faith, Celebration of the Eucharist and Sacraments in the parental Rite and according to one's own ecclesial tradition." For this purpose, the Rectorate arranged Malayalee Catholic priests of the Syro Malabar origin from India, who became Chaplains and served the Indian Catholic Community, which has already become a flourishing Syro Malabar liturgical community in Vienna. The Chaplains who served the Indian Catholic Community and who attended to all the liturgical and pastoral needs of the Syro Malabar immigrants in Vienna were: Fr. Paul Parakattel CMI (1982-1987), Fr. Chandy Kalappurayil VC (1987- 1993), Fr. John Nirappel VC (1993-1999), Fr. George Kochukarottu (1999-2001) and Fr. Thomas Thandappilly CST (from 2001 onwards).

From 1982 to 2001, the Rector of the ARGE AAG was the Priest-in-charge of the immigrant Afro-Asian Communities. He also signed and issued all the ecclesial documents needed for the members of these immigrant Communities and was assisted by the Chaplains of the respective (liturgical) language Communities, who celebrated the liturgy in their mother tongue and prepared the required documents for them.

The liturgical celebrations of the Afro-Asian Communities could be arranged in any available Parish or Chapel of the Archdiocese of Vienna. The Sunday liturgy in Syro Malabar Rite was celebrated by the Chaplain of the Indian Catholic Community regularly in the Chapel of the ARGE AAG at Türkenstrasse 3, or in the Chapels of Hospitals and Old Age Homes in different districts of Vienna. Rooms and Halls were also made available for the Indian Catholic Community at ARGE AAG Religion and Culture Center at Schwarzschanierstrasse 4-5.

The next stage of growth of the Syro Malabar Community begins in 2001, when P. Thomas Thandappilly CST, who made his doctoral studies on the Family Life of the Indian Catholics in Vienna, was appointed the Chaplain of the Indian Catholic Community. It was with the special care and interest of the Archbishop of Vienna, HE Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, that the immigrant Communities of the ARGE AAG were given more independent and extensive roles of leadership and facilities for their life and activities in Vienna. It was his vision and dream to facilitate these foreign language and ecclesial Communities to have permanent centers for their liturgical and pastoral services and above all to appoint Chaplains who can be also Priests in charge of the local Austrian Parishes. That would give them a tremendous feeling of cordiality and a sense of solidarity and integration into the local Austrian Catholic Communities. This vision was fulfilled for the Indian Catholic Community, when its Chaplain P. Thomas Thandappilly CST was also given charge of being the Parish Priest (Pfarrmoderator) of Maria Lourdes, where the Indian Catholic Community could find its main Community center for all its liturgical, catechetical and pastoral needs. Today the Syro Malabar

Community in Vienna is one of the best accepted and integrated immigrant Communities in the Parish Maria Lourdes, as it is acknowledged by the local Austrians.

From 2001 onwards, the Chaplain of the Indian Catholic Community/Syro Malabar Liturgical Community was allowed to exercise his priestly leadership with great freedom and personal initiatives, with the great support and guidance of the Rector, Dr. Johannes Gönner and of the General Secretary of the ARGE AAG, Dr. Alexander Kraljic. They gave their maximum support and motivation for fulfilling the required services of the Indian immigrant Community. When Bishop Dr. Franz Scharl took charge of being the Bishopsvicar of the Foreign Language Communities, the Indian Catholic Community could receive from him tremendous support, guidance and motivation at every level of its life and activity. Meanwhile the three Rite Communities within the Common umbrella of the Indian Catholic Community were recognized and registered as being three *Ecclesiae sui juris* Communities of the ARGE AAG of the Archdiocese of Vienna.

It is with the generous support of Cardinal Schönborn, of the Bishopsvicar Dr. Franz Scharl, of Dr. Johannes Gönner and Dr. Alexander Kraljic, that the Chaplain, P. Thomas Thandappilly CST started various services and activities for the Indian Catholic Community/Syro Malabar Liturgical Community. He also arranged occasionally Holy Mass and other liturgical services also for the members of Kerala Latin Community and for those of the Syro Malankara Community in their own Rite and tradition.

The most remarkable initiative of the Syro Malabar liturgical Community was the beginning of the organized catechetical training of the children and the youth of the Indian immigrant Catholics in 2001, based on the texts of the Syro Malabar Church and of its catechetical directives from the 1<sup>st</sup> standard to the 12<sup>th</sup> standard as per the school year. Texts for that purpose were brought from Kerala and made available for each student. A team of about 20 Catechism Teachers came forward to take the classes every Sunday before the Malayalam Holy Mass in the main and filial centers. The tremendous motivation given by Cardinal Schönborn for the catechetical training of the future generations of this community was a real boost and positive energy for the parents and children. The Chaplain organized orientation classes for children, youth and elderly members of the Malayalee Community occasionally and visited every Family for special offertory prayers and family blessings.

Besides, the Chaplain got permission from the Syro Malabar Bishops Conference to conduct Marriage Preparation Course for the Youth of the Indian Catholic Community in Europe. About 600 Youth could attend the preparation course for their sacramental marriage, which the Chaplain offered three times in a year and whenever it was requested for by the Youth in European Malayalee Communities. For a better and organized pastoral leadership and participation of members in the life of the Community, a Community Council of 14 elected representatives (Gemeinderat) and a Laity Representative Forum of 52 selected representatives (as the tradition of the Thomas Christians of Kerala or the Nazranis) were introduced in the course of these years from 2001 to 2019.

The manifold services and activities of the Syro Malabar (Indian Catholic) Community include liturgical Choir for Kids, for the Youth and for the Elderly Persons, MCC Youth Forum, Mothers Forum, Fathers Forum, Family Care Programme for different age groups of Couples, Family Units, Prayer Units, Night Vigil Adoration groups, different Sub-committees for liturgical, pastoral and cultural services, the ICC Homepage and the School (Kairaly Niketan) for learning the language of Malayalam and Indian classical dance-forms.

The services of the Assistant Chaplains from 2001 to 2019 in the persons of Fr. Saju IMS, Fr. Thomas Vadathumukalel TOR, Fr. Joy Plathottathil SVD and Fr. Wilson Mecheril MCBS must be recorded here with remarkable satisfaction and gratitude, as each of them contributed the maximum of their available time and energy for the welfare of the Syro Malabar liturgical Community in Vienna. From 1982 to 2019 all the serving priests as being Chaplains and Assistant Chaplains were priests who belonged to the Syro Malabar Church. Therefore, the Syro Malabar unit of the Indian Catholic Community could flourish wonderfully well. All the episcopal dignitaries who came from India to visit

Syro Malabar Community in Vienna, have expressed their cordial words of appreciation for the harmony, unity, liturgical zeal and well organized structure of the ecclesial life of this immigrant Community in Vienna, which also invest tremendous time, resources and energy for the liturgical and catechetical experiences and formation of its future generations and for the sacramental unity and stability of the Malayalee Families in Europe.

A recent survey study on the Malayalee Catholics in the Archdiocese of Vienna gives the nature of the Catholic spirit and life of the Indian immigrant Catholics, particularly of the Syro Malabar Malayalee Catholics in Vienna: 100% of the women of this Community are practicing Catholics, who attend regularly Sunday Holy Mass; that is done by 95% of men; 98% of the Children and Youth below 18 years of age; 93% of the elderly Youth; they attend liturgical services in the local Parishes, in other Churches or in their own Rite and language centers. This is a wonderful witnessing of the Catholic Faith and Catholic Church not only in Vienna but also in Europe, as it was mentioned several times in the public media.

The Syro Malabar Community is very fortunate from 1<sup>st</sup> November 2016 to get all possible pastoral, liturgical guidances through the facilities of the Apostolic Visitation of the Syro Malabar Communities in Europe and to receive personal consultative advices from Mar Stephen Chirappnath, the Apostolic Visitor. We are very glad to welcome him here at any time and to get his advice and suggestions for the welfare of the SM Community. However, the episcopal Authority of the Syro Malabar Community in the Archdiocese of Vienna is the Archbishop of Vienna, presently HE Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, whose role of leadership is given clearly in his own words: “ Ich möchte daran erinnern, dass mich der Heilige Vater Papst Franziskus gemäß dem Dekret der Ostkirchenkongregation bevollmächtigte, mit allen Rechten, Entscheidungsbefugnissen, und Vollmachten, die Verantwortung für die Gläubigen und Priester der Syro-Malabarischen Kirche als Hierarch im eigentlichen Sinn, als eigener Bischof, auszuüben. Deswegen sind alle Angelegenheiten, die das Leben der Syro-Malabarischen Kirche in Österreich betreffen, mit mir als den von Rom ernannten Ordinarius bzw. mit meinem Generalvikar, Lic. Yuriy Kolasa, zu besprechen sind.“

Thus Syro Malabar Liturgical Community was incorporated into the Ordinariate for the Eastern Catholic Churches in Austria under the Administrative leadership of the Archbishop of Vienna on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2018. That was publically announced at the main center of the Syro Malabar Community at Maria Lourdes, Meidling on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2019. We are fortunate to have the guidance of the Vicar General for the Oriental Communities in Vienna Mag. Yuriy Kolasa and also of the support of the Rector and General Secretary of the ARGE AAG.

To conclude, the Syro Malabar Community in Vienna was installed as being a liturgical and foreign language Community in 1982 under the Archbishop of Vienna and it has completed 37 years of its active liturgical existence and now it has entered into its 38<sup>th</sup> year on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2019. It has never been “only a language Community”, or “a socio-religious Organization” but a fully organized and structured liturgical Community, which followed the Faith and Tradition of the Syro Malabar *sui juris* Church for all these years. The Archdiocese of Vienna never tried to assimilate this liturgical Community into the Latin tradition and culture, but helped to keep its own identity while attempting to get integrated in the social and linguistic Culture of Austria. That was essentially needed, because 70% of the present members of the Syro Malabar Community in Vienna are members, who were born and brought up in Austria and their first language of communication is Austrian German. For this generation, the Syro Malabar Community has started the Holy Mass of Syro Malabar Rite in German Language. For the 30% of the Malayalee Catholics who were born and brought up in Kerala, there is regular Sunday Liturgy in Malayalam. All this is possible only with the generous support, care and motivation of the leadership of the Archdiocese of Vienna, particularly of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn. Every member of this Syro Malabar Malayalee Community in Vienna is grateful tremendously to every one of the administrative body of the Archdiocese of Vienna. Praise the Lord! May God bless you all.....

P. Thomas Thandappilly CST, SMC Chaplain. P. Wilson Mecheril MCBS, SMC Assistant Chaplain