

Prot. No. 636/2011

## Pastoral Letter

### Mission Year - *Sabhadinam*

**GEORGE ALENCHERRY, the Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church, to the Archbishops, Bishops, Priests, Men and Women Religious and Lay Faithful of the Syro-Malabar Church, blessings and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus,

On 3 July, we commemorate the *Dukrana* of St. Thomas, our Father in faith. *Dukrana* is the commemoration of the martyrdom of St. Thomas who, through his words “My Lord, My God proclaimed his faith in Jesus and in the salvation he brought to us. Through his martyrdom, St. Thomas laid the foundation for the Church in India. Therefore we celebrate *Dukrana* as the *Sabhadinam* of the Syro-Malabar Church. The Church by her very nature is missionary, sent to impart the message of life. As an individual Church, the Syro-Malabar Church also has the same nature and mission.

Whenever Pope Benedict XVI meets the Bishops of our Church, his first words are often regarding the missionary zeal of the Syro-Malabar Church. The Syro-Malabar Church is very much ahead of many Oriental Churches in the missionary zeal. The Eparchy of Thuckalay which was established for those who came to faith by the missionary work launched by the Archdiocese of Changanacherry is a fine example of the missionary enterprise of the Syro-Malabar Church. In modern times, it was with the decree of Pope John XXIII of happy memory in 1962 that the missionary activities of the Syro-Malabar Church got extended to North India. Chanda was the first mission territory that the Holy See entrusted the Syro-Malabar Church. It was the CMI congregation, the first local religious congregation of our Church that took up this mission. In 2012 fifty years will be completed since the beginning of the undivided Chanda mission. During the Synodal discussion as to the mode of celebrating this golden jubilee, the Bishops felt that it should be viewed not merely as the celebration of the golden jubilee of an individual mission eparchy, but as an occasion to make a profound reflection of the missionary vocation of the Syro-Malabar Church and to embrace that vocation with rejuvenated enthusiasm. Accordingly, as is known to you by now, it has been decided to celebrate the golden jubilee of Chanda mission as the ‘Mission Year’ of the whole Syro-Malabar Church (decree-Prot. No: 40/2011) from 15<sup>th</sup> August 2011 to 15<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

In the context of the Mission Year, I would like to share with you some significant thoughts on the vocation and mission of the Syro-Malabar Church. It is a great providence of God that we could receive the light of faith through the ministry of St. Thomas the Apostle during the same period when the Church had its beginning in Rome and Antioch. It is the firm resolve of St. Thomas “to go and die with him” that led him to India. It is the same missionary zeal of our Father in faith that should guide us in the present age.

The growth of our Church faced several adversities due to foreign domination. The divisions among the St. Thomas Christians and the confinement of her territory to Kerala have affected her growth and missionary activity adversely. It was mainly due to these reasons that our Church could not contribute much in the mission field till the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The founding of the CMI congregation in 1831 was a milestone in the missionary endeavors of the Syro-Malabar Church. It is quite significant that the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the ecclesial autonomy that the Syro-Malabar Church got on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1887 and the centenary of the establishment of the eparchy of Kottayam coincide with the celebration of the mission year. With the establishment of the Syro-Malabar Hierarchy in 1923, the growth and progress of our Church became rapid. How significant is the spread of the Syro-Malabar Church into Malabar, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka can be assessed from the presence of Nine Syro-Malabar Eparchies in these regions, such as the Archeparchy of Tellicherry, Eparchies of Mananthavady, Thamarassery, Palghat, Thuckalay, Belthangady, Bhadravathy, Mandya, and Ramanathapuram.

After the establishment of the Chanda Mission, mission eparchies such as Sagar (1968), Ujjain (1968), Satna (1968), Jagdalpur (1977), Bijnor (1977), Rajkot (1977), Gorakhpur (1984) and Adilabad (1999) flourished in missionary activity under the leadership of religious congregations such as CMI, Vincentian, and CST, and the apostolic society of MST. The establishment of the eparchies of Kalyan (1988) and Chicago (2001) for the migrants of the Syro-Malabar Church also points to the consistent growth of the Syro-Malabar Church.

The contributions of the religious congregations that arose in the Syro-Malabar Church and of missionary societies such as the St. Thomas Missionary Society strengthened the missionary activities of our Church. The history of our Church today reveals how sincerely the Syro-Malabar Church accepted the saying of the Pope Leo XIII, "Oh, India your redemption lies in your own children." How great is the ministry of the lay movements such as the *Cherupushpa Mission League* in motivating mission work in India and abroad! Today the Syro-Malabar Church has become the fountain of missionary vocations for the Church in India and the Universal Church.

It is not only through the Syro-Malabar Church that the sons and daughters of our Church render mission work. Many of her children toil tirelessly in the Latin and Malankara Churches in India for evangelization. Besides, the members of our Church are fully active in the mission fields of Asia, Europe, South and North Americas, Africa, and Australia. The celebration of the Mission Year is an occasion prepared by God Himself so that we may thank Him for these gifts.

Mission work is not set apart for some priests and religious alone. Every Christian who is united to the Church through the sacrament of baptism is a missionary just like the disciples of Jesus (Jn 3:16, Mk 3:14-16, Mk 16:15, Mt 28:19, Lk 26: 46-49, Jn 20:21, Acts 1:8). That is why it is said that the Church is missionary by its very nature (LG 17, AG 2, 9, 23). The Church is called to be sent out. A disciple of Christ who does not carry out his missionary duty is like a fig tree that does not bear fruits. Let us bear in mind that it is only those who build up the Church who are real Christians.

It is primarily by making one's life a witness to the Gospel that Christians should become missionary. Our life should be like a lamp placed on a lamp-stand. Authentic proclamation of the Gospel means witnessing to Christ in the given situations of life according to one's own state of life. Every family has to become a field of powerful missionary advance. Each family is a domestic church. Parents have the obligation to nurture their children with values of faith, ecclesial traditions, and love for the Church. When they fulfill this obligation, there will be an orientation towards mission work and an environment conducive for missionary vocations in the families.

The present era is an era when the mission work encounters various challenges. The most crucial challenge is the decreasing number of missionary vocations. The degeneration of faith in families, lack of prayer-life, paucity of children, negative criticisms regarding priests and religious, and the tendency to step back fearing obstacles faced by the missionaries, etc., are the factors that cause this situation. The future of mission work depends on how effectively we can deal with all these concerns.

We should be able to receive and encourage with great respect and pride the missionaries who labour in the mission fields as the representatives of the Church. When missionaries come for their holidays, we should try to create occasions to welcome and honour them in our parishes, institutions and families and to share their mission experiences with us. The encouragement that we give them will inspire the new generation to follow the path of the missionaries. The Syro-Malabar Eparchies in Kerala, as the Mother Church, have to help the missions with personnel and finances. Individuals, families, parishes, and institutions in our Church should come forward to adopt mission areas outside Kerala and to encourage them with prayer, sacrifices and financial contributions. It is good to conduct mission visits from parishes and institutions to regions where our missionaries work. Having a direct experience of the mission work and knowing their needs and necessities would certainly be an incentive to encourage the missionaries. So also inviting people from the mission areas to our own houses and parishes will provide them with an opportunity to have some direct contact with the faith-experience of the Mother Church and to deepen their own faith.

Let me also brief you with some of the programmes of the Mission Year. The inauguration of the 'Mission Year' is to be conducted in the respective eparchies on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2011, with a solemn celebration of the Holy *Qurbana* in the cathedrals presided over by the bishops. On that occasion a 'Mission Year lamp' is to be lighted in every cathedral. The eparchial authorities could give the necessary directives for a meaningful inauguration of the 'Mission Year' in parishes and institutions.

On 21<sup>st</sup> August 2011 all the bishops of the Syro-Malabar Church will concelebrate the Holy *Qurbana* at St. Thomas pilgrims' centre at Azheekodu in Kodungalloor – a place blessed with the arrival of St. Thomas the apostle, our Father in faith. The eparchy of Irinjalakuda will make all the arrangements for this event. It is good and appropriate that some representatives are sent from all the eparchies to participate in that event.

The Major Archiepiscopal Commission for Evangelization and Pastoral Care of Migrants has been entrusted with the responsibility of envisaging and implementing programs in connection with the 'Mission Year'. A central committee, consisting of the three bishops of the Commission, two bishops elected by the Synod, and the representatives of all the eparchies and religious communities, takes charge to make plans and to execute them in the 'Mission Year'. Only when all of us accept and implement the programmes and proposals of this committee, we can make the 'Mission Year' a success. Efforts should be made to organize at the parish and eparchial levels get-togethers of missionaries, sharing of their experiences, study classes on mission work, mission retreats, seminars, mission quiz, discussions, essay competitions, fund-raising programmes for supporting mission works, etc., as part of the Mission Year celebrations. All these programmes should ultimately aim at the spiritual renewal of the Church, re-awakening her missionary character.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Jesus is the greatest missionary. He was a missionary sent to make us know the love of the Father and to invite us to that love (Jn 3:16). Jesus called his apostles to co-operate in his mission and to continue it (Mk 3: 14-16). The most fundamental responsibility that Jesus entrusted his apostles was to proclaim the Good News (Mk 16:15) and to constitute the Church with those who would believe in the gospel (Mt 28:19, Lk 26: 46-49, Jn 20:21, Acts 1:8). Mission work is our effort to continue this responsibility in our own times and circumstances. It has to spring from our loyalty and gratitude to our faith. Let us thank God in this 'Mission Year' by recalling all the missionary activities that the Syro-Malabar Church has been doing in various mission fields. May this 'Mission Year' be a cause for the commencement of a new Pentecost in our Church! Let us rededicate ourselves to encourage and support all missionary activities through our prayer, life witness and funds. At the same time, I earnestly solicit the generous cooperation of every member of the Syro-Malabar Church in our attempt on the occasion of *Sabhadinam* to raise the funds needed for the various ministries of the Church. I extend to all of you the greetings of *Dukrana*. Let all of us be filled with the missionary spirit of St. Thomas through the celebration of the Mission Year. Invoking the intercession of Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Thomas, the Apostle and St. Alphonsa, I bless all of you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Given on 10 June 2011, from the office of the Major Archbishop at Mount St. Thomas, Kakkannad.

+George Alencherry  
Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church

---

N.B: *This pastoral letter is to be read out during the Holy Mass on July 3 in all churches and chapels of the Syro-Malabar Church where there is Sunday Mass for the public.*