

The Missionary Obligation of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church in America

I. Introduction

Let me start this presidential address by expressing our most profound joy and gratitude at the gracious presence with us, of one the best friends and supporters of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church in America, namely His Excellency the Most Rev. William Murphy. Your Excellency, in fact I miserably run out of words to express how deeply we, as a Church feel indebted to Your Excellency and to the Diocese of Rockville Center. We are an ecclesial entity that sincerely tries to live and witness to the fundamental values of the Gospel in this country through an ancient and vibrant ecclesial tradition that we have been fortunate to inherit. But at the same time we are constrained by a number of limitations in fulfilling our mission here – our numerical limitations, infra-structural limitations, institutional limitations, so on and so forth. But all these experiences of limitations are far surpassed by the confidence that you instill in us by the generous support that you extend to us as a benevolent neighbor and by the affection and love that you pour on us as a wonderful brother in Christ. Your Excellency, the Exarchate has in you a genuine supporter and promoter of our ecclesial mission here and I personally find a wonderful brother and friend in you, whom I can approach any time. We consider it to be a clear sign of God’s providence for our Church and a great privilege to have the center of our Exarchate in your gracious neighborhood. I would like to place on record your generous acts of Christian charity towards us and ecclesial solidarity with us - to name a few among them, permitting us to use one of your Church facilities as our pro-Cathedral, without which the Exarchate would not have been a reality so soon, fully sponsoring the theological studies of two of our seminarians. And I know that you want to do more for this Little Folk. This representative body of our Church in America thanks Your Excellency from the depth of our hearts. We are specially thankful to Your Excellency today for taking time out of your busy schedule to come here and to enrich us with a wonderful message. We look forward to more such association and collaboration with Your Excellency.

II. The Background

Six years have passed since the elevation of the Syro- Malankara Catholic Church to the status of a Major Archiepiscopal Church. Our ecclesial history hitherto testifies to the fact that ours is an ecclesial community that has been so lovingly and miraculously cared for and nourished by God. But the love and providence that we experience as an ecclesial community demand from our part a corresponding ecclesial response. We have to become ever more conscious of our ecclesial mission in this world and act upon it. Consequently, the 10th Episcopal Synod of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church decided to conduct the first Malankara Catholic Assembly in the month of September, 2011 in Trivandrum. The theme of the Assembly is ‘The Malankara Catholic Church, the Proclaimer of the Good News’. The Assembly is meant to reflect collectively on our most urgent ecclesial responsibilities as a missionary Church and to evolve concrete plans of action for the effective realization of that mission. It was also decided to

convene diocesan, exarchial and religious Assemblies, as a preparation for the Church Assembly and also with a view to revamping the missionary enterprises of each Diocese, Exarchate and Religious Community in the Malankara Church.

Consequently, we in America have set two days apart from our extremely busy schedule in order to reflect collectively and seriously on the specific missionary vocation of our Church in this great continent. The movement spearheaded by the greatest ecclesial visionary of the past century Servant of God Archbishop Mar Ivanios in 1930 was essentially a missionary movement. As we know, the humble movement started with just five people eight decades ago is today an autonomous Church in the universal Catholic communion, fully living all its ecclesial vitality and missionary potentiality, the clearest and latest manifestation of which is the erection of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Apostolic Exarchate in the United States of America. The missionary thrust of our Church, especially our mission *Ad Gentes*, has been so predominant and fruitful that today almost one fourth of the total Faithful of the Malankara Catholic Church has resulted from our direct preaching of the Gospel and one whole Diocese is the fruit of this mission. So mission is something that pertains to the very essence of our Christian and Malankara existence.

I would like to share with you at the beginning of this historical assembly of our Church in America, some stray thoughts of mine about how this fundamental mission thrust of the Malankara Catholic Church is to be applied in the diverse and complex American context. I should confess that my sharing definitely lacks the support from the wealth of experience that I needed to have to make this presentation, and also from scientific research, as this has never been the topic of my specialized study. I only wish to make some personal reflections hoping that they would lead to further study and serious reflection by our Church members here.

III. Our Mission is the Continuation of God's Mission

Human history is a mission-history. It starts with the creation. The creation may be understood as the sharing of God's infinite love. God's goodness and love overflows so abundantly that it manifests itself in creation. Of all created beings, the human person is the best expression of this love. God is constantly active in history in order to lead the human person to the peak of this love-experience. It is this love-experience that we call the experience of salvation. Thus human history and history of salvation are identical. God continually invites the creation to experience this love and to be enriched by it. The subhuman beings respond to this invitation, though automatically, just by being what they are and by acting according to their God-given nature, in their God-given environment. They thereby manifest God's love. But the human person has to do this through the responsible use of his/her freedom. Hence the possibility of sin, moving away from God's love.

In human history, whenever humanity so moved away from God's love, God intervened, mostly by sending His prophets to remind people of God's unconditional love and to invite them back to the experience of this love. The prophets were missionaries, people sent with a message and a mission from God for His people – the message of God's unconditional love. The most definitive missionary intervention of God in human history certainly was the incarnation of Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus was the greatest missionary of all times. His words, deeds and the whole life manifested in the most sublime way the heavenly Father's unconditional, forgiving love. As

Pope Benedict XVI says, Jesus is the love of God in its most radical form (see *Deus Caritas Est*, 12). The whole aim of incarnation was to enable humanity to experience this love in all its intensity.

The Church was born in this mission context. The Church is the continuation of this mission of Jesus Christ. That is why the second Vatican Council says, ‘the Church by its very nature is missionary’ (Mission Work, 2). Its very existence is a missionary existence. It exists in order to make available to humanity the experience of God’s boundless love; in order to give rise to communities that experience, share and witness to this love. The Church is at the service of the Kingdom of God. The Church exists in order to lead humanity to the dignity and freedom of the children of God. Therefore there is only one justification for our ecclesial existence, namely, the mission. As St. Paul says, "For if I preach the Gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (*1 Cor 9:16*). To be a member of the Church necessarily means someone specially called and sent by God. We are called to experience the unconditional love of God in and through our family and our ecclesial community and at the same time we are sent to share this love with our brothers and sisters so that this love becomes the central experience of their life. This activity is what is known as evangelization.

IV. Mission in the Malankara Catholic Church

As far as the Malankara Catholic Church is concerned, mission or the act of evangelization involves a twin task. The first one is what we traditionally call ‘the reunion attempts’, namely our obligation to bring back all our Christian brothers and sisters of the ancient Malankara tradition, wherever they are, into the experience of a unity that is universal, an experience which is the core of our Kingdom experience. In the American context a necessary preliminary to this aspect of our mission is to maintain and nourish the best relationships with our sister Churches in the Malankara tradition. This has to be done on all levels, namely, of the hierarchy, priests and the lay Faithful. The second aspect is our mission *Ad Gentes*, namely, inviting all our brothers and sisters into the beauty of the God experience that we were enabled to have in Jesus Christ.

i. Our Ecclesial Identity in America

How could we fulfill this fundamental ecclesial mission of our faith, especially in the American context? In order to understand our ecclesial mission here, first we must clearly be aware of our ecclesial identity here. Our ecclesial identity as Malankara Catholics in America enjoys the enrichment of the values of three fine traditions of the world. Our cultural identity is constituted of the perennial values of the ancient Indian culture. Our spiritual identity traces its origin to the original Eastern Antiochean God-experience of the Apostles. We are called to live and witness this identity in the free, multifaceted socio-cultural context of America through a beautiful and balanced conflux of the good of all these three traditions. It is only in and through this symbiosis can we hope to fulfill our mission duty here. When the ancient cultural values of our Indian heritage and the spiritual values of our Syrian Christian patrimony are allowed to take concrete expression in this amazingly open American society, we will be making our own ecclesial contribution in this country.

ii. The Task of Strengthening our Faith

The first and most important step in our missionary task in America is to strengthen our own faith, to deepen our own God experience in Jesus Christ. This has to be done on three levels, that is, on the personal level, on the level of our families and in our ecclesial communities. This could be understood as a re-evangelization of ourselves. In other words, our primary focus has to be on deepening our spiritual and ecclesial life personally, in families and in our parish communities.

a. A personal Conversion

The first level concerns a personal conversion, a radical prioritization of our life style and our value system in favor of the Gospel values. We should allow our personal life to be permeated, captured by the love of God and the values of the Gospel. This takes the form of a firm conviction and consequently we will be able to relativize everything in our life except God. In the sublimely free and at the same time, over-secularized, consumerist society in which we live, this is very crucial. While personalizing and interiorizing the Christian value of true freedom that is available in this society, while being positively open to all the cultures and traditions around us, we must at the same time be aware that there are so many things in this culture that constantly tempt us to be immersed in the worldly and to be oblivious of the other-worldly. Keeping a safe distance from these dangers and allowing ourselves to be guided by the Gospel values is basic to this experience of conversion. Our personal presence in this society must testify to a life enhanced by the Gospel values. Unless we undergo this personal conversion, we are not capable of fulfilling our missionary vocation.

b. Malankara Families

Secondly, our faith has to be strengthened in our families. Family is a basic context of God experience and the prime agent of evangelization. It is the God Experience that we acquire in and through our family, family relations and the faith commitment of the family that sustains us all through our life. As we know, family is a fundamental value in the cultures that we have inherited. The moment the family relations become weak, faith in the family members will suffer. Our culture is known for its readiness to suffer to any extent in order to keep the family bond intact and to maintain its warmth. In the onslaught of modernism and self-centered technological development, we must be on our guard that the relation within the family and the family's relation to God are not affected. In a culture that resists any sort of suffering, we must teach our children the value of sacrifice for the sake of love, for the sake of the family.

So also, we have to make a very concerted effort to instill in our families, in each family member the fine values of our culture which sustained our fore-fathers and each one of us in our life's journey so far. Without closing ourselves to the good of the culture in which we live, we must at the same time try to cultivate some of our specifically Indian, Malankara values in our families and consciously pass them on to our children. Our culture is known for its fundamental religiosity and spiritual orientation. Our culture promotes a basic prayerfulness in the family which is to be sustained through regular family prayers. We are taught to respect the elders, to be hospitable to all, including strangers, to consider our guests in the place of God. Our fore-fathers instructed us to be generous, to be ready to share what we have with others, to be genuinely

concerned about others, etc.. As Malankara Catholics in America it is our specific mission to witness to these values through our life and thereby enrich the culture in which we live. Parents must make it a point to teach our children Malayalam, as language is the home of any culture.

Special emphasis must be laid on the importance of family prayers. Our own experience tells us how important regular family prayer is for the sustenance of the family. In our hectic life style, often prompted by the stress and schedule of work and other demands of everyday living, it is possible that prayer in the family is sidelined. The fact is that in the modern hyperactive society, there is nothing that helps to keep the family together except our regular practice of praying together in the family. It is the time when all the joys and struggles of the day are offered to God for Him to sanctify them, it is the time when all problems and misunderstandings among the family members are sorted out and the family bond is renewed. This practice of our culture must continue to strengthen our families in America.

A word must be said in this context about the value of large families. Most of us who came from India, belonged to large families. And we are the living testimonies of the positive values of being part of a large family. We learned the basic lessons of love, sharing, sacrifice, co-operation, etc. in and through our sharing life with so many of our brothers and sisters living, suffering and growing under the same roof. When we turn back on those experiences today, we realize how deeply this togetherness enriched our own personalities and how far those experiences helped us to broaden the horizon of our hearts. We should not deprive our children of a great benefit that we were permitted to enjoy, thanks to the faith and large-heartedness of our parents. God joined man and woman through the sacrament of matrimony in order to give rise to families, in order to give birth to children. Children must be received as the biggest gift of God to humanity. Large families must be considered at least by Christian couples as a great value. We should not be blindfolded by the egoistic concept and objectives of nuclear families. Most of the so called Christian countries in the West are in the real danger of losing their identity. We must be aware of the alarming fact that Christians are fast becoming a thin minority in the world.

c) Our Parish Communities

Thirdly our ecclesial communities, namely our parishes have to be strengthened if our mission has to be meaningful here. As Christians the most sublime context of faith and God experience is the Church. It is as if we live our faith in its integrity only in the community of believers. Therefore a strong sense of belonging to the Church through our parish communities and the constant celebration of our faith within the parish communities are crucial to our fundamental Christian mission. In fact this sense of belonging to the Church is a value that we have inherited as Malankara Catholics. Our Church is what it is today primarily due to the fact that thousands of our fore-fathers took pride in belonging to the Church, in suffering for the Church and made the Church their home. We have to strengthen our communities spiritually, liturgically and with sufficient infrastructural facilities. A parish community that lives and celebrates the faith meaningfully in a unity of heart and mind of all its members is the most powerful means of evangelization and the most conspicuous expression of the Kingdom of God. As it is said about the early Christian community, “And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Act. 2:47).

In the American context, our parish communities are not only places for celebrating liturgies. Primarily they are so. But, they also have to be places, where the deepest aspirations of all our people as an ecclesial community, sharing the same cultural complexities, find meaningful expressions and answers. They have to be venues of serious faith and value formation of our people, of both the elder and younger generations. The parish community must turn out to be a second home to our believers. Therefore the task of the parish priest and of those giving leadership in these communities is of much more crucial importance than for e.g. that of a parish in India.

Ensuring that every one of our Faithful has the possibility to live and celebrate his/her faith within the context of a parish community is our responsibility as a Church. In our context, this would mean that we make every effort to identify all our people living in America and bring all of them into the active ecclesial life of our community. Consequently we have to begin new communities wherever it is needed and is possible and arrange for the pastoral care of our people according to our ecclesial traditions. Efforts must be made to motivate and convince our people of the inevitability and obligation of being part of a Malankara Catholic community in order to live the faith meaningfully that we have inherited as a Church. This effort is our collective responsibility as a Church, not just of the Bishop or of the priests alone.

V. Our Specific Challenges

In carrying out our mission objective in America we are confronted with certain hurdles that are specific to us as Malankara Catholics in America. These hurdles have to be carefully overcome if our existence and mission as a Church have to be meaningful here.

i) Generation Gap

First of all our Church here, our parish communities consist of people with two different mind sets and wealth of experience. The first group of people were born and brought up in India and they had a good part of their formative experiences in India. As they migrated to America, their fundamental life attitudes were already formed and set. They reflect one type of life orientation and ecclesial integration. Their aspirations and needs have to be taken seriously. This is one of our mission priorities. These first generation Faithful are those who suffered the most for founding and building up our Church here. In the midst of all their initial struggles of making themselves feel at home in a totally new land, they showed the readiness to sacrifice their time, energy and money for establishing our ecclesial communities here. In these communities they experienced the values and warmth of a culture which formed them and which they were, as it were, missing now. It is the natural right of these people and our ecclesial responsibility to ensure that our parish communities continue to be such a home for them.

On the other hand there is another fast growing group of our Faithful, namely the second and third generation Malankarites whose life perspective, ecclesial understanding, etc. are substantially different from those of their parents and grandparents. This group deserves our special attention. Our missionary and pastoral challenge emerges precisely from the fact that there is bound to be conflict of interests and perspectives between these two groups. How could

we strike a healthy balance between these two in our pastoral perception, preferences and projects?

ii) Pastoral Care of our Children and the Youth

The missionary context of our Church in America demands from us that we take the reality of our children and youth with utmost seriousness and concern, as the future of our Church in America depends largely on their spiritual profundity, ecclesial belongingness and involvement. Therefore we have to lay special emphasis on their proper ecclesial integration and spiritual growth. Our Church in America cannot afford to lose any of them. Unfortunately, we have failed to keep many of our first generation youth close to the Church. This cannot continue to happen. May be, we need to adopt a different pastoral approach in dealing with our youth and children.

We are privileged to have a wonderful young section in our Church here. The strength of this group is their authenticity, sincerity, love of God and respect for human values and the excellent educational standards that they are privileged to acquire. As a Church, we have to understand the specific cultural milieu in which our young people live and grow and respond creatively to their needs. This requires that we become pastorally equipped for the same. We have to promote vocations to priesthood and religious life from among them. At the same time lay missionaries have to emerge from among them who understand their mentality, aspirations and struggles and who can give them the guidance and orientation they need. Our liturgical celebrations, parish activities and common functions must be conducted in such a way that our children and young people can take active and meaningful part in them. They should never feel an outsider. Accordingly meaningfully adapted English rendering of the liturgical texts of all our sacraments, feast days and common prayers must be made available to them. A relevant program of catechetical training has to be designed and effectively executed.

iii) Conflict of Values

Another challenge emerges from the conflict of values. Fusing together the values of three distinct cultures is no easy task. Values of different cultures could look contradictory. One could even at times be at a loss as to what is right and what is wrong. So it is very important to fix the values that have a perennial nature and which are fundamentally akin to the Gospel truths. This has to be done with utmost care and sensitiveness. Apparent values and anti-Christian values have to be rejected. The good of the perennial values of the Indian and Malankara traditions has to be sufficiently highlighted. This is very important in our task of assisting the value formation of our children and our youth. For example, against the powerful sway of the modern egocentric culture, we should try to instill in our children and young people a spirit of sharing what we have with our needy brothers and sisters and also for the works of the Church, a value which is fundamentally Christian and which is so predominant in our Malankara and Indian traditions. It would not be out of place to ask in this context, 'Are our second and third generation Faithful as generous as our first generation when it comes to donations to support the needs of our Church?' The Malankara Catholic Church in America depends totally on the donations from its Faithful for its sustenance and the developmental activities.

All these are attempts at re-evangelizing ourselves in order to strengthen the missionary potential of our Church in America. But apart from these attempts, we must at the same time, explore possibilities of actual mission involvement. As an Ecclesial community with a specific identity, we need to be open to new missionary openings. For example, a Malankara Catholic Spanish mission could be one of our future possibilities, as a large number of our Spanish speaking brothers and sisters are sadly ending up in extreme pentacostal groups. For this we need to start training sufficient personnel. As an inalienable dimension of our mission we need to venture into various fields of authentic Christian witnessing such as the social, educational, health care apostolates for concrete acts of Christian charity. In the American context, this can be hoped to realize with the help, expertise and experience of our own people here. All these are part of our ecclesial dream.

Conclusion

I wish to thank you for your patient listening. I thank you in a special way for having taken the time and trouble to be part of this important ecclesial experience. May the time that we spend here enrich each of us deeply so that we may go back with renewed spirits and convictions to our respective mission fields. May this assembly be a true experience of the first Pentacost for us, as our dear Vicar General Msgr. Peter Kochery rightly mentioned in his welcome speech. May God bless this Assembly, each one of us and our Church in America abundantly. May we closely experience here the presence of Mother Mary, who closely accompanied and strengthened the Apostles in their mission deliberations and commissioning.

Let us try to spend these two days here in all the seriousness that they deserve. Our Church in America and our mother Church look forward to these two days. Our disposition, our prayers, our reflections, our sharing, our interventions and interactions and our deliberations should have a serious effect on the shape of our Church here tomorrow. We have only one concern here, namely the good of our Church and our missionary efficacy. Everything that we do here should have this one goal in mind. We do this in the best spirit of Christian charity and understanding. I am sure, no personal interest will interfere with this objective of the Assembly. May the Holy Spirit fill each one of us with His light and wisdom. Thank you.