



**The Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle (MST)**  
Rev. Dr. James Athikalam, Director General

### **1. The Syro-Malabar Church**

The Syro-Malabar Church of Kerala in South India is an Apostolic Church founded by St. Thomas, the apostle of India. According to our living, unbroken Christian tradition of the last two millennia, St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, came to India between AD 42 and 52. The Jewish colony in South India had had commercial links with the Middle East and it facilitated St. Thomas' arrival in India. For the next few decades he preached the good news and established Christian communities in various places in South India. He was finally martyred at Mylapore in AD 72 by those who opposed his missionary activity. His tomb has been a pilgrimage center ever since. The late Pope John Paul II visited the apostle's tomb when he came to India. "The Syro-Malabar Church is one of the most flourishing and promising Catholic Churches today. This is the second largest Eastern Catholic Church in the world, with a population of around 3.7 million. At present it is the major community of the ancient Thomas Christians in India."<sup>1</sup>

### **2. Origin of MST**

The Syro-Malabar Church, and especially the diocese of Palai, has been blessed with plenty of vocations to the priesthood and religious life since the middle of the twentieth century with the greater possibility of education. Seeing the rich vocations of his diocese and in other dioceses in Kerala, the late Bishop Sebastian Vayalil seriously thought about beginning a missionary front for the Syro-Malabar Church. He shared his desire and vision with other Syro-Malabar bishops and they whole-heartedly encouraged and supported his idea. "The Syro-Malabar bishops in their conference discussed this matter and seeing that Palai supplied the greatest number of vocations, asked me to take up the lead in starting the Society."<sup>2</sup> This is how Bishop Vayalil speaks of the origin of MST.

On February 22, 1968, the Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle was officially established and inaugurated at Melampara, Bharananganam, Kerala, India, by His Eminence Cardinal Fustenburg, the Prefect of the Congregation for Oriental Churches, in the presence of many bishops of the Kerala Church. He also laid the foundation stone for its central house and formation house at Melampara, Bharananganam, in the eparchy of Palai. According to the first Constitutions, MST was founded as "a Society of Common Life after the Manner of Religious Life (*Motu Proprio Postquam Apostolicis Litteris* cc. 224-231)" and it was of eparchial right until 1997. "Founded as an organized missionary effort of the 'diocesan clergy of the Syro-Malabar Church' the members of MST do not consider the imitation of the life of a religious institute as their vocation."<sup>3</sup> Several priests from

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<sup>1</sup> C. <http://berchmans.tripod.com/malabar.html>

<sup>2</sup> Cf. "Welcome speech of the founder on the occasion of the erection of the Society," in D2 in *Constitutions and Directives*, The Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle, Deepti Bhavan, Melampara, 1997, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Constitutions and Directives*, The Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle, Deepti Bhavan, Melampara, 1997, vii.

Palai and Changanacherry dioceses joined the new Missionary Society and Rev. Fr. John Perumattam was made the first Director General of the Society.

### **3. The first mission territory for MST**

Soon after the erection of the missionary institute, Rome entrusted a mission territory to the new missionary front and its first Director General was appointed the Exarch of Ujjain, a mission region carved out of the diocese of Indore. Then Rev. Fr. Joseph Maliparampil, the founder of CML and a great promoter of missionary vocations, was made the next Director General of the Society. The new Exarch Msgr. John Perumattam took a few pioneer members of MST and went to the new mission land of Ujjain. All the pioneer missionaries had a great desire to preach Christ to the non-Christians in their new mission area. Each of them had the missionary dream to see the birth of Christian communities sharing the spiritual experience of the Syro-Malabar Christians. Bringing as many people as possible to faith in Jesus Christ was their missionary goal. But it was a greater challenge to achieve that goal than they had ever thought.

### **4. Missionary apostolate in various regions**

The pioneer members were happy and gratified to see the growing number of seminarians preparing themselves for mission work in Ujjain and elsewhere living the traditions of the Syro-Malabar Church. The first priestly ordination in MST took place in 1972 when the Indian Church together with the universal Church celebrated the 19th centennial of the martyrdom of St. Thomas. As more members were ordained priests, MST turned to new mission territories.

Mandya in Karnataka coming under the diocese of Mananthavady was the second mission territory accepted by MST as its mission region. In this new territory the MST missionaries adopted a different missionary method. They did not want the traditional way of establishing schools as a missionary means. Instead, they concentrated on village-oriented social and developmental projects. As the missionaries of that time shared this common vision, this plan worked well in the initial years.

Sangli was the third region added to the mission fields of MST. It consisted of five civil districts of Maharashtra state under the eparchy of Kalyan. With great earnestness and missionary zeal, MST missionaries took up their third mission region and established themselves as active missionaries in all five districts of the Sangli mission. The presence of some Christians in many parts of this mission region was a support for the missionaries working there.

By passing a resolution, the Eighth General Assembly decided to extend the mission regions of MST to make them co-extensive with the Syro-Malabar eparchies outside Kerala.<sup>4</sup> The General Council then reconstituted the three mission regions that would comprise the whole of India. St. Paul's Region with Ujjain as its centre comprises the whole of north India. St. Alphonsa Region comprises of the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat while St. Thomas Region includes the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

### **5. Jubilee year and evaluation**

In 1993 MST celebrated its silver jubilee year and on that occasion an evaluation of the MST's existence and apostolate was made through a committee which handed over its findings and recommendations to the Society Superiors. The fifth General Assembly of MST in 1993 discussed the life of its members and their missionary apostolate and took note of the changes that had occurred in the Mother Church. The General Assembly exhorted all its members to renew their

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Report of the Eighth General Assembly 2008*, Deepti Bhavan, Melampara, 2008, 52.

missionary commitment and to proclaim the good news of Jesus with greater enthusiasm and deeper commitment.

On the occasion of the silver jubilee of MST, the Syro-Malabar bishops reiterated that MST was “the common concern of the Syro-Malabar Church of apostolic tradition, a society, founded, taking into account the exigencies of the missionary call of the Kerala Church.”<sup>5</sup>

## **6. Revision of the Constitutions**

As the Mother Church had become a Major Archiepiscopal Church, there was the need of revising the Constitutions of MST accordingly. Hence the fifth General Assembly of MST decided to change MST “into a Society of Apostolic Life (c. 572) of Major Archiepiscopal right.”<sup>6</sup> “The process of the revision of the Constitutions, accordingly, was started immediately and the General Assembly held in 1996 after serious study and prayerful reflection of the matter unanimously approved the revised Constitutions.”<sup>7</sup> A copy of the revised Constitutions was sent to the Oriental Congregation.

Achille Cardinal Sylvestrini, Prefect of the Congregation for Oriental Churches, wrote to the Director General of MST: “It is my pleasure to assure you that this Congregation has duly examined the text submitted for our observations and suggestions. ... As regards the legislative texts, you will be gratified to know that both the Constitutions and Directives have been found satisfactory and do not require amendment. ... The role of the Missionary Society at the heart of the Syro-Malabar Church is to be ever more clearly perceived, deepened and fulfilled in the day-to-day circumstances of life of dedicated purpose, in the following of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, on the model and under the inspiration of the heavenly Patron St. Thomas the Apostle.”<sup>8</sup>

Then a request was made to the Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church through the local hierarch to approve the Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle (MST) as a Society of Apostolic Life of Major Archiepiscopal Right. Accordingly, Mar Varkey Vithayathil, Apostolic Administrator of that time (now Major Archbishop and Cardinal), accepted and approved “the modification of the character of the Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle from a Society of Common Life after the manner of Religious Life of eparchial right to a Society of Apostolic Life of Major Archiepiscopal right in accordance with the norms of CCEO c. 572 with all the rights, duties and privileges attached to such status in the common law and the particular law of the Syro-Malabar Church which will be eventually formulated and promulgated.”<sup>9</sup>

The decree accepting the revised Constitution of MST says, “The Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle (MST) was founded in 1968 in the eparchy of Palai by Mar Sebastian Vayalil, the late eparch of Palai, in concurrence with the then bishops of the Syro-Malabar Church and in consultation with the Holy See. Having been conceived exclusively as a missionary society, MST has ever been engaged in the missionary apostolate both in India and outside remaining faithful to the liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary heritage of the Syro-Malabar Church. During the past decades along with the growth in numerical strength MST has become increasingly conscious of its missionary nature and ecclesial belongingness, namely, as a Missionary Society of the Syro-Malabar Church. Founded as an organized missionary effort of ‘the diocesan clergy of the Syro-

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. “Joint Pastoral Letter of Syro-Malabar Bishops,” dated 2-2-1992, in D2.b in *Constitutions and Directives*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Constitutions and Directives*, viii.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Constitutions and Directives*, viii.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Achille Cardinal Sylvestrini, Prefect of the Congregation for Oriental Churches, Prot. N. 173/84, 22nd March, 1997, *Constitutions and Directives*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Constitutions and Directives*, ix.

Malabar Church,' the members of MST do not consider the imitation of the life of a religious institute as their vocation."<sup>10</sup>

The revised MST Constitution begins with the following words: "The Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle (MST) is named after its heavenly patron St Thomas, the Apostle of India, our Father in faith, who evinced singular courage to go and die with Jesus (Jn 11: 16), who was instrumental for the self-revelation of the Lord as the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn 14: 5-6) and who manifested faith in Jesus: *My Lord and My God* (Jn 20: 28)."<sup>11</sup>

## 7. Primary charism of MST

C 2 of the MST Constitution speaks about the primary charism of MST; the eighth General Assembly (GA) of MST in May 2008 made an amendment to that article making it clearer. After the introductory statement of C 2, the GA made two points as a and b. The amended article C 2<sup>12</sup> reads as follows: " The MST is a Missionary institute of the Syro-Malabar Church. The purpose of the Society is mission *ad gentes*, in India and outside. By mission *ad gentes* is understood:

a. 'the special undertakings in which the preachers of the Gospel, sent by the Church, and going into the whole world, carry out the work of preaching the Gospel and implanting the Church among people who do not yet believe in Christ' (AG 6).

'The mission *ad gentes* has this objective: to found Christian communities and develop Churches to their full maturity. This is a central and determining goal of missionary activity, so much so that the mission is not completed until it succeeds in building a new particular Church which functions normally in its local setting' (RM 48).

True to its purpose, the Society may help to establish 'Churches which would be adequately organized and would possess their own proper strength and maturity' (AG 6).

b. 'For the Church evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new' (EN 18).

The Church's evangelizing mission includes proclamation, witnessing, building up of the Church, works of charity, dialogue with non-Christians, inculturation, preferential option for the poor, the marginalized and other subaltern groups, apostolate among the migrants ... human promotion, actions on behalf of justice, peace and integrity of creation' (Mission Policy of the Syro-Malabar Church, 2006, 1.7)."<sup>13</sup>

The GA defended the amendment of C 2 as given above because the expansion of C 2 implies "that the MST is moving with the Church in tune with the current missiological thinking. This enhanced vision is a challenge and invitation to all the members of MST to reflect on the broader dimensions of missionary commitment and gives a solid basis for missionary formation."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mar Varkey Vithayathil CSsR, "Decree No. 700/97," *Constitutions and Directives*, The Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle, Deepti Bhavan, Melampara, 1997, vii.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Constitutions and Directives*, The Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle, Deepti Bhavan, Melampara, 1997, C.1, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Constitutions and Directives*, C2.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Report of the Eighth General Assembly 2008*, Deepti Bhavan, Melampara, 2008, 48-49.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Report of the Eighth General Assembly 2008*, 50.

## **8. Pastoral care of migrants**

Although MST was established exclusively with the goal of mission *ad gentes*, its revised Constitution included pastoral care of the migrant Syro-Malabar Christians as part of its mission. Thus our priests were sent to the eparchy of Kalyan which was established for migrant Syro-Malabar Christians in Mumbai. Actually it was our MST missionaries who worked in the region before the erection of this eparchy and it was their apostolate that eventually led to the establishment of the eparchy of Kalyan.

From the beginning of MST, some of our priests were sent for pastoral work in some eparchies in Kerala at the special requests of some bishops. The Society took up this ministry as a means to create missionary awareness in the Mother Church and to promote vocations to the priesthood.

## **9. Worldwide ministry**

The worldwide apostolate of MST priests has been part of the growth of the Society. Our priests have been sent to Western countries such as Germany, USA, Italy, Sweden, Australia, Africa, Papua New Guinea, Canada and most recently to Brazil to render our help to our sister Church in those countries. Our priests working in some of such countries also contribute financially to the various missionary activities of the Society. Although the Society does not view this apostolate as part of its primary charism and ministry, it permits it with a generous and charitable mind towards other *sui iuris* Churches as part of 'new evangelization' promoted by Pope John Paul II.

## **10. Conclusion**

MST is now in its 41st year of apostolate and has 312 priest-members. MST priests are working on the five continents of the world. Although MST's primary charism is mission *ad gentes*, its members are engaged in the care of migrant Christians as well as ministry in other *sui iuris* churches besides the main apostolate of evangelization. The Missionary Society has its own formation houses including a Philosophate and a Theologate. A good number of young men are seeking admission into MST minor seminary aspiring to become MST priests. With the fearlessness and enthusiasm of our heavenly patron St. Thomas the Apostle, the MST priests fulfill their missionary and pastoral ministries with a sense of deep commitment.