



SYRO MALABAR EPARCHY OF GREAT BRITAIN

Pastoral Letter 20

21/11/2024

Spirituality: Living out the Faith Celebrated in the Liturgy.

Relying on God's grace and protection, I, Joseph Srampickal, Bishop of Syro-Malabar Eparchy of Great Britain, write to all Priests, Deacons, Religious and all the Faithful.

As we embark on a sacred journey from the 1st December 2024, to the 29th November 2025, I am pleased to announce a Year dedicated to celebrating and studying the profound spiritual patrimony of the Syro-Malabar Church. This year is an opportunity to delve deeply into our rich and unique spirituality, which is rooted in the common heritage of the Churches that follow the East Syriac tradition. This unique spirituality is articulated, among many others, by the exegetical and theological tradition of the East Syriac Fathers, the East Syriac liturgy, the traditions of the Mar Thoma Nasranis, and the spiritual vision of both the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches and the Code of Particular Law of the Syro-Malabar Church.

1. The Exegetical Tradition of the East Syriac Fathers

One of the defining features of the spirituality of the Syro-Malabar Church is its rich exegetical tradition, deeply rooted in the writings and interpretations of the East Syriac Fathers. These Church Fathers, including figures like Mar Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306 – 373), Mar Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428), and Mar Narsai (d. 502), are central to the spirituality of our Church. Their exegesis of the Holy Scriptures emphasised a Christological and ecclesiological reading that was closely aligned with the life and mission of the Church. In particular, the East Syriac Fathers developed a nuanced theological framework that focused on the mystery of the Incarnation and the central role of our Lord Isho Mishiha as the divine Logos, the incarnate Word. Further, the East Syriac exegetical tradition emphasises a symbolic and typological interpretation of Scripture, often focusing on the spiritual and mystical meanings of biblical texts. The Syriac Church Fathers function as a bridge between the Jewish Semitic world and Christianity, integrating Jewish Semitic thought, language, and traditions into early Christian theology.

The influence of the East Syriac exegetical tradition on the Syro-Malabar Church cannot be underestimated. It has shaped our understanding of Scripture, directed our liturgical practices, and provided a distinctive theological language that continues to enrich our spirituality. Further, the spirituality shaped by the East Syriac Fathers is characterised by a centrality on Trinity, a focus on Theosis as the ultimate goal of the Christian life—where Theosis refers to the participation of the human person in the life of God, also known as deification or divinisation—and a reverent address to Mary, the Mother of Christ, as the "blessed" or "fortunate one" (ܩܘܕܝܫܐ ܩܘܕܝܫܐ), reflecting its unique theological and devotional emphases.

2. The Significance of the East Syriac Liturgy

The East Syriac liturgy is the heartbeat of the Syro-Malabar Church. It is in and through the celebration of the Holy Qurbana, that we encounter Mishiha, gain him, be found in him, and

become one with Him. The East Syriac liturgy, with its ancient roots, is characterised by a sense of awe [(ܕܗܠܐ) = (*dhehla*)], mystery [(ܪܙܐ) = (*raza*)], and transcendence. Here, it is important to notice that the East Syriac liturgy beautifully highlights unique aspects of Christian mysteries, including the descent of Christ into Sheol (the world of the dead), the recovery of Paradise, Christ as the Heavenly Bridegroom, salvation as healing, the eyes of faith, the robe of glory, the imitation of Christ, and the spirituality of the heart.

Even amidst life under Western missionaries for almost three centuries, the Syro-Malabar Church has faithfully preserved the core elements of this liturgical tradition, with its emphasis on the community's participation in the sacramental life. The chants, prayers, hymns, and gestures of the liturgy are imbued with theological and spiritual meaning. This year, we are called to deepen our participation in the liturgical life of our Church by renewing our spiritual lives through regular confessions, attending the Holy Qurbana, and prayerfully reciting the Liturgy of the Hours in our families. These practices will help us understand the theological dimensions of our precious liturgical tradition and allow its spirituality to permeate our daily lives.

3. The Role of the Lives of the East Syriac Church Fathers

The East Syriac Church Fathers, such as Mar Ephrem, known as the “Harp of the Holy Spirit,” have left a profound mark on our liturgical, theological and spiritual tradition. His hymns and writings, full of poetic beauty and theological depth, continue to inspire us today. The East Syriac Fathers were not only theologians but also spiritual guides who emphasised the importance of a personal relationship with Isho Mishiha through deep ascetical life, which is lived out through fasting, prayer and repentance. A clear example of the East Syriac Churches' ascetical life is seen in the life of Mar Isaac of Nineveh, whom Pope Francis included in the Roman Martyrology on the 9th November 2024; Mar Isaac lived an ascetical life marked by deep solitude, prayer, and fasting, emphasising inner purity and the transformative power of God's mercy.

This year dedicated to the theme of Mar Thoma Nasrani spirituality offers us a chance to revisit the works and teachings of the East Syriac Fathers, to read them for our spiritual reading, and to draw from their wisdom as we seek to live out our faith in the modern world, especially in the country where we live, where almost everything is characterised by secular ideologies. Our East Syriac Fathers' emphasis on humility, repentance, and a life of holiness remains relevant and essential for our spiritual growth.

4. The Influence of Local Traditions among the Mar Thoma Nasranis

The spirituality of the Syro-Malabar Church is identified not only by its East Syriac heritage but also by the rich local traditions of the Mar Thoma Nasranis. These include unique Lenten observances; fasting and abstinence on 225 days a year; pilgrimages to the shrines of Marth Mariyam and Saints, especially to the tomb of Mar Thoma Sleeha at Mylapore in Tamil Nadu, India; Church architecture; liturgical music; and art forms, such as *Margamkali* and *Parichamuttukali*. Our spirituality is a distinctive synthesis of East Syriac Christian thought and local Mar Thoma Nasranis' faith experience.

Fasting and Lenten observances, for example, are marked by a spirit of penance and self-discipline, reflecting a spirituality that values sacrifice and self-offering. Mar Thoma Nasranis' traditional Church architecture, with its simplicity and symbolic elements, emphasises the sense of sacred space and divine presence. Our East Syriac liturgical music and chants, with their unique melodies, invite us to a deeper participation in the divine mysteries.

5. The spiritual and theological insights underpinning the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (CCEO) and the Syro-Malabar Particular Law

The theological and spiritual life of the Syro-Malabar Church is also influenced by its adherence to the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches and the Code of Particular Law of the Syro-Malabar Church. These laws provide a framework for the governance and discipline of the Church, ensuring that the spiritual and liturgical traditions are faithfully preserved and lived out.

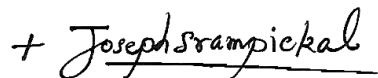
While the CCEO emphasises the ecclesial identity of the Eastern Catholic Churches in general, the Particular Law of the Syro-Malabar Church highlights the liturgical, spiritual, theological and cultural heritage of our Church. For the Syro-Malabar Church, our Particular Law has meant a commitment to maintaining the East Syriac liturgical, theological and spiritual patrimony while engaging with contemporary challenges. Further, it also ensures that the unique traditions of our Church are respected and integrated into our ecclesial and spiritual life, allowing our East Syriac spirituality to be one of the indispensable ways of living out the Catholic faith.

As we begin this Year dedicated to celebrating the spirituality of the Syro-Malabar Church, I invite all of you to pray over, meditate on, study in depth, and live out the spirituality of our esteemed Eastern Catholic Church. By doing so, we honour the dedication of our ancestors, who preserved these admirable traditions, and allow them to inspire both us and the younger generation, who face a different cultural context today.

May a Mar Thoma Nasrani spiritual atmosphere guide us into a time of renewal and to be synodal, which will empower us in our mission to proclaim Isho and His Gospel through both words and deeds. As we grow in our love for Isho Mishihā and for one another, may our lives bear witness as pilgrims of hope so that we might enrich all other Churches within the Catholic Communion.

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, Love of God the Father and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Yours in our Lord and our God,

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Joseph Srampickal
Bishop, Catholic Syro-Malabar Eparchy of Great Britain

NB: This Pastoral letter must be read in all Syro-Malabar Parishes/Missions/Proposed Missions during the celebration of the Holy *Qurbana* on 24th November 2024 (or the nearest Sunday when Holy *Qurbana* is celebrated, if there is no Holy *Qurbana* celebrated on the 24th of November 2024).