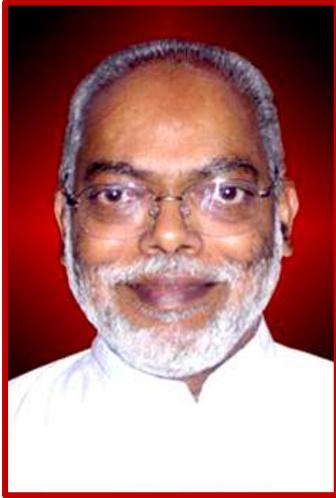


THE LITURGICAL YEAR OF THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH



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The Mystery of Salvation, accomplished by the Father in Jesus Christ with the work of the Holy Spirit, is wholly and fully re-enacted in every Eucharistic Sacrifice celebrated in the community of the faithful. Every community when it takes part in this most sublime and divine action has to realise its own salvation through the salvific acts of Christ. But psychologically we are

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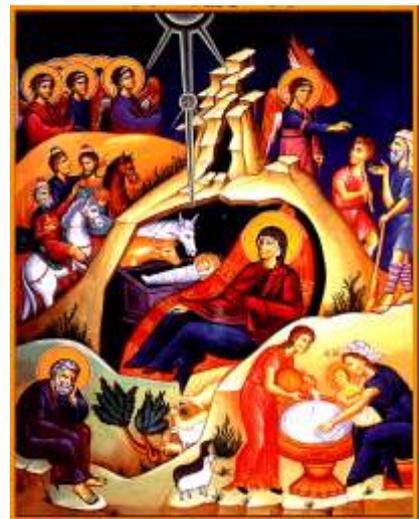
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not capable to grasp and realise the fullness of the grace of the

Mystery of Christ in one action. Hence each community has made some arrangement to concentrate on one at a time and thus gradually to celebrate and realise the whole Mystery of Salvation in the cycle of a year. The following pages discuss how the Thomas Christians of the Syro-Malabar Church as a particular community realise in itself the Mystery of Salvation through the liturgical cycle of the year. The liturgical year of the Syro-Malabar Church is divided into 9 seasons having 7 weeks each in principle, but with necessary adjustments. It is definitely a different system from that of the Latin Church, but very much close to the other Oriental Churches, especially that of the Malankara, Jacobite, Orthodox and Nestorian Churches, her neighbours and co-heirs of the ancient Thomas Christian heritage.

1. ܩܘܪܒܢܐ Weeks of Annunciation

The Syro-Malabar liturgical year begins with the proclamation and celebration of the historical encounter between God and man in the person of Jesus Christ, the human appearance of the Divine Person. The Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Icon of Father's Person and the Splendour of His Glory, One in essence with Him and the Holy Spirit, emptied Himself and took the form of a servant, became a perfect man and was born of Virgin Mary, for us men and for our salvation, taking to Himself all the weaknesses of our humanity



except sin. The Syriac word *Subara*, ‘Annunciation’, with which the Church qualify the first five or six weeks of her liturgical year, is, in fact, an announcement and proclamation with celebration with this supreme glad news of divine condescension to the human frailty in order to raise it up to the divine sublimity. For the whole East Syriac tradition and thus also to the Syro-Malabar Church, the whole period of Annunciation is a big Christmas! December 25th is only the climax of this celebration.

According to the true vision of Christian faith, there is no sense in expecting and preparing for the coming of the Redeemer. He has already come two thousand years ago. Today we can only celebrate that historical event in the Church through effective and fruitful signs and symbols and appropriate its salvific fruits in our own life. It is this true vision of Christian faith that the Eastern traditions, especially the East Syriac one, proclaims to the world during the celebration of *Subara*, the weeks of Annunciation.

A different way of thinking and connected practices was forced upon the Syro-Malabar Church during the western colonial period and is still haunting her in all levels of her Christian life. The concept of Advent, Christmastide, and so on to divide the integral vision of *Subara* and the like are the fruits of this colonial enforcement. Vatican II has already demanded a conscious change of this situation in 1964, paving way to the return and restoration of the above-mentioned authentic and perfect vision of Christian faith. Negligence in this case even after five decades can no more be tolerated.

In the context of the Divine Condescension to human history, the believers are encouraged to meditate upon all the salvific events which led to the incarnation of God, namely, creation,

life in Paradise, human fall, helpless situation of humans, promise of salvation, preparation through countless divine interventions, election and rejection and the immediate preparation through the Forerunner, during the time before Jesus' Nativity. The events after His birth up to the baptism in Jordan such as the visit of the Magi, presentation to the Temple and visit to the temple at twelve are pondered on the days after Christmas.

The weeks of Annunciation, especially the first part up to Nativity, is also an occasion to turn deeper to oneself, a real self-examination. How far we could creatively respond to this self-emptying love of God? It is in this context, the Church developed the 25-day fasting, which is also an observance very much in common with our fellowmen in other religions of India in connection with important religious celebrations. We are, in fact, called to purify ourselves from all grossness of our humanity so that we may become capable to rise up to the divinity of God-man Jesus.



This period is also a time to remember and honour the Blessed Virgin Mary in a special way. We know for sure that the divine plan of human salvation is realised only through her *fiat*, her consent. Thus the early images or icons of Mary are all with child Jesus. The whole importance of Mary, and hence her veneration in the Church, depends on her relation to Jesus, the most special being His mother. The Syro-Malabar tradition, therefore, honours her in very special way during the weeks of Annunciation which celebrates Jesus' Nativity. Her celebration is also underlined

with two very solemn festivals of her: Immaculate Conception on December 8th and Congratulation to Mary as Mother of Jesus on the last Friday of this season. The Latin tradition, according to its liturgical style, shows such special respect to Virgin Mary through May and October monthly devotions. Monthly devotion is totally strange to the Syro-Malabar liturgical spirituality.

2. **دېنھا** Weeks of Denha

The weeks centred on the great solemnity of *Denha*, Epiphany, Jesus' Baptism in Jordan, provides the faithful an occasion for meditating deeper on the Trinitarian economy of



human salvation. Baptism in Jordan was the first historical event when the Holy Trinity is revealed to humans in the humanity of Jesus Christ. Every human being is destined to be transfigured to the person of Jesus Christ and thus to the Holy Trinity according to Christian faith. The Son, sent by the Father, accomplished the human salvation, and it becomes realised in every human being (and through the humans the whole creation) by the work of the Holy Spirit. This fundamental article of faith is what we meditate and celebrate during the weeks of *Denha*, Epiphany. Through the solemn celebration of Jesus' baptism, we are also introduced to His public life. We the believers are, therefore, invited to renew our baptismal commitment, lead an authentic Christian life and

grow mature to the personality of Jesus by celebrating His memorial, participating His Risen Body and being sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

According to Syriac sources, the weeks of *Denha* begins on the Sunday nearest to January 6, the solemnity of *Denha*, Epiphany and runs to the beginning of Great Fast. The Fridays of this period are set apart to celebrate the reflection of Divine Epiphany in humans in the Church. On the first Friday the Church celebrates Mar John the Baptist who in person bore witness to the first Trinitarian manifestation in Jordan. The second is dedicated for the Apostles Peter and Paul, representing the whole apostolic community on which the Church is built up. On the third is celebrated the four Evangelists who gave a documentary form to this Epiphany. Then comes Mar Esthappanos, the protomartyr, who shed his blood and offered his life for this Divine manifestation. The fathers and doctors of the Church who authentically interpreted and taught it, bearing witness to it in their own lives, are celebrated on the following Fridays. The Friday just before the last is set apart for celebrating the Patron Saint of the Church, who is a constant inspiration to the believing community for following Jesus Christ. And on the last Friday we celebrate all our dear departed ones who are in deed the forerunners for bearing witness to the Trinitarian manifestation and economy of salvation.

Moreover, this celebration of our dear departed ones is a most becoming help to enter the period of Great Fast, where we keep up an intense memory of them.

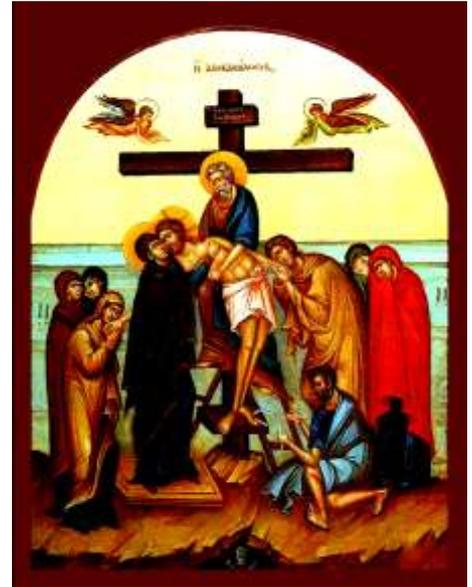
Since the Syro-Malabar Church is proclaiming and celebrating the



most Holy Trinity in a special way in the whole liturgical period of *Denha*, it is rather meaningless and against the mind of Second Vatican Council to hold Trinity Sunday after Pente-cost, merely imitating the Latin tradition. It was, in fact, a colonial enforcement during the European missionary period without considering the liturgical genius of this Church.

3. اتي هتاه زك Weeks of Great Fast

During these weeks the faithful reflect on and meditate over the public life of Jesus and especially on its culmination in his passion, death and burial. It is a God-given time for turning to one's own life more deeply and to become convinced of the abundant blessings of the loving God – the creation, the providential caring, the human fall, the helplessness of man to save himself, the promise of salvation, the redemption through His Son Jesus, the invaluable Gift of the Holy Spirit and the inheritance of the heavenly Kingdom. This must naturally lead the faithful to *metanoia*, a total conversion and a full return to the loving Father in His Son the redeeming Jesus Christ and its proclamation in the Church through the Mystery (Sacrament) of Reconciliation. Thus all the faithful make themselves ready to rise up with Lord Jesus to a totally new life of peace, tranquillity, satisfaction, joy, and so on. For this, everybody should fully become oriented towards God and fellow beings during the Great Fast. In short, prayer (personal

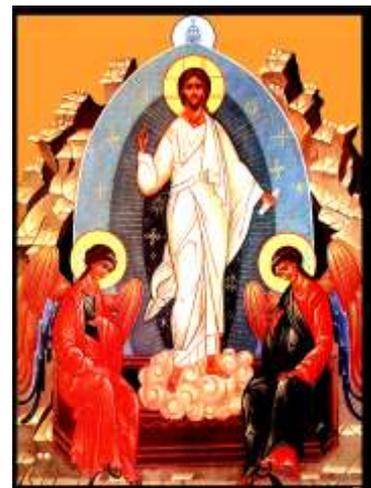


intimacy with Jesus – *upawasa*), renunciation (getting rid of everything that is not pleasing to Jesus – *tapas*) and almsgiving (helping the neighbour in all possible ways – *danadharmā*) should become the action plan of Christian life.

As it is mentioned earlier, the faithful enter the weeks of Great Fast, celebrating the memory of all the Faithful Departed on the last Friday of Denha. According to the ecclesial and liturgical vision of this tradition, the weeks of Great Fast is also an occasion to keep up the memory of the beloved Departed through special prayers, renunciation, almsgiving, and so on and thus prepare oneself for a good death and resurrection in Jesus Christ. The Latin tradition, of course, according to their liturgical heritage, does it through the November devotion.

4. **أسبوعيات القيامة** **Weeks of Resurrection**

The Church celebrates the Resurrection of our Lord during these seven weeks: Jesus' victory over death, sin, suffering and Satan. The empty TOMB, the empty CROSS, the blooming or living or flourishing or flowering or fruit bearing TREE, and so on are speaking icons or images in the Church of this unique victory of Jesus. The devotees are incorporated to Jesus' Risen Body in holy baptism and nourished through the same Body in the life-giving Eucharistic celebration until they grow to the full maturity and inherit the everlasting Kingdom. The most vivid expression and



celebration of this reality is the Qurbana, the Eucharistic celebration and it, besides transfiguring the faithful to the Risen body of Jesus, fills them with the effects of Resurrection, namely, the new life, renewal, peace, tranquillity, satisfaction and joy. The Holy Spirit who transformed the material body of our Lord to 'Spirit-Body' is also working constantly in every faithful who receives Jesus' Body in the Holy Eucharist, transforming them also to 'spirit-body'(Rom 8:11). We pray in our Qurbana celebration: "Let us receive the Holy Qurbana and be sanctified by the Holy Spirit". The blooming or flowering or glorious CROSS shines forth in the Church and in the world as the sign of cosmic transfiguration brought about in the Resurrection of Jesus.

5. **زعلبببب Weeks of the Apostles**

The descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles marks the beginning of this particular liturgical period. During its seven weeks the Church meditates deeply on the work of the Holy Spirit in humanity, sanctifying, transforming and elevating it to the heights of divinity. The Tree of the Church, the true wine stock, planted and inaugurated on the Pentecostal day, sprouts, sends its roots deep in the soil and spreads its branches far and wide through the authentic witnessing of the Apostles, martyrs and saints. The holy Church is built on the Apostles, our Lord Himself being the Cornerstone. The Church is, in fact, the continuation of our Lord Jesus in the world today and the sign of the heavenly Kingdom.



The work of the Holy Spirit in humans and through them in the whole world, the role of the Apostles in the Church, the actual life of the early Church, her unity, diversity and universality, the missionary call of the members of the Church, their responsibility to bear witness to the personality of Jesus and His salvific action all through their life and the like are the most important realities to be reflected upon and absorbed into our Christian personality during these weeks. *Dukrana*, the remembrance of the martyrdom of our Father in Faith, *Mar Toma Sliha*, is most solemnly celebrated on the third of July.

6. ܩܝܬܐ Weeks of Summer

The maturity and fruitfulness of the Church are specially meditated on during the weeks of summer. The Syriac word *Qaita* means “summer”. Summer is the time when grains and fruits mature and ripen. Thus it is a time of plentiful harvest for the Church. The fruits of the Church are those of holiness and martyrdom. The Church, having grown, developed and spread to the nooks and corners of the world, shines forth as the image of the heavenly kingdom, giving birth to innumerable saints and martyrs. Just as the Apostles, martyrs and saints, filled with the Power from above, the Holy Spirit, dared even to the unknown lands and cultures for bearing witness to Jesus Christ, their Lord and Master, today all Christians, filled with the same Spirit, must bear witness to their Lord all through their life and in all circumstances that they fill the Church with the fruits of sanctity and martyrdom.

On the first Sunday of this liturgical period we celebrate the twelve Apostles and *Nusardeil*. *Nusardeil* is a Persian word which means “God-given New Year Day”. Thus this particular liturgical day appears to be one uniting together the heaven and earth in the Person of Jesus, *Amman-hu-El* = “God with us” and the Church, His continuation on earth which is founded on the twelve Apostles.

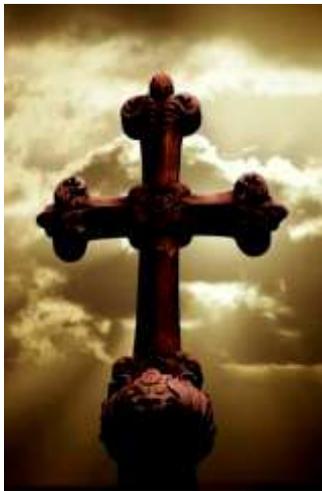


The great feast of Transfiguration (August 6) and Assumption (August 15) which are celebrated during this liturgical period are typical Icons of its spirit.

7. **دې لېتېه دې لېتېه** Weeks of Elias and Cross

The great solemnity of the Glorious Cross that we celebrate on September 14th is the basic theme meditated on and absorbed in all through this liturgical period of *Elijah-Sliba*. This feast emerged as the second Easter, especially in Eastern Traditions, in the second half of the liturgical year, parallel to the Easter in the first half. During this period the faithful try their best to have an experience of the heavenly bliss here on earth itself, a foretaste of the intimate union with the Divine Person. Jesus’ transfiguration on mount Tabor was in fact such an experience to the selected three. It was so fascinating and absorbing that Saint Peter exclaimed: “Master, it is well that we are here” (*Mk* 9:5). The Glorious Cross, we know, is transfigured Jesus.

Today we are given such an experience in the Church in Qurbana celebration. When we really have the Tabor experience in our *Qurbana* celebration, we will simply love celebrating it as solemn as possible and remain immersed in it as long as possible; the Eucharistic communion really becomes the participation in the heavenly banquet, becoming one with our Bridegroom Jesus in His Risen Body. During this liturgical



season the believers try earnestly to transfigure themselves to Jesus, to dream and foresee their real encounter with Jesus at the end of time and prepare fully for that exceptional and unique meeting with their Lord and God.

The glorious Cross is the living sign of Jesus' victory over death, sin and suffering. It is the Tree of Life, Stem of Jesse (Jesus), Staff of Comfort (Holy Spirit), Ark of Noah (Church), the sign of Jesus' life, death and Resurrection, and that of Christian perfection. Thus the Cross is the sum total of authentic Christian living.

8. **ܐܘܩܬܐ ܕܡܪ ܡܘܨܝ** Weeks of Mar Moses

This liturgical period is, indeed, a God-given occasion for meditating on the end of time and the last judgement. The believers are called to foresee their real encounter with their

Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, Lord and God, make an examination of their real life here on earth, repent on all the failures, do necessary reparation, turn completely to the Lord and commit themselves unconditionally to Him. They are definitely prompted to raise themselves fully to the level of the Divine. The liturgical celebrations in the Church, especially the Holy *Qurbana*, are such occasions for giving them the Divine encounter and experience.

This is a liturgical period whose duration is in fact uncertain. It depends upon the arrangement of the whole liturgical year every time, and thus always open to variation. There may be one or two or three weeks for this period depending on the arrangement of other periods. Hence, fathers and commentators say that this particular nature is typical of the end of time and last judgement, which are always uncertain.

9. ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܢܐ Weeks of the Dedication of the Church

The last four weeks of the Syro-Malabar liturgical year are precisely arranged to have an in-depth heavenly experience for the faithful. Christ the Bride-groom leads His bride the Church to the heavenly bride chamber and offers her to the Father giving her the fullness of heavenly bliss. The church being the sign of heavenly Kingdom here on earth, every time the believer enters it, he/she is invited to such a heavenly experience and sing praises to the Lord in the company of the celestial choirs. The faithful reach to the climax of such experience during the *Qurbana* celebration, the full and integral expression of their faith and life. The Holy Communion becomes the real participation in the heavenly banquet. They are also encouraged

and helped to have an internal vision of the Lord, converse with Him and be truly transfigured to His personality. With such heavenly transformation, their earthly life becomes a standing invitation to their fellowmen and the whole creation for a transfiguration to the Creator.

Conclusion

The history of salvation is very fruitfully celebrated in the Syro-Malabar Church according to this distribution of it in the cycle of a year. Vatican II has asked all Churches to order or re-order their spiritual life according to the flow of their liturgical year.

