

Tradition, Faith Strengthen Oriental Catholics, Asian Bishops Told

By T S Thomas and Jose Kavi

Negombo, Sri Lanka: Strong religious traditions and faith are the bedrock of the Syro-Malabar Church, one of the Oriental Catholic communities in Asia

“Traditional Syro-Malabar families have some unique characteristics, such as solid faith in the sacred and strong marital bond, special social manners and family customs,” observed Archbishop Andrews Thazhath of Trichur at the plenary assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC).

Archbishop Thazhath and four other prelates from the Syro-Malabar Church were among the nearly 145 participants of the assembly held November 28-December 4 at Negombo, near Colombo.

The archbishop highlighted his Church’s ancient tradition and modern strengths while responding to the working report on the plenary theme, “The Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy.”

He explained the reasons for this strong faith as “family prayer, some unique family liturgy and a system of faith formation through catechetical activities and role of grandparents in families.”

The archbishop also observed that strong religious traditions such as “kudumba yogam’ (family meeting), “Sradham” (commemoration of the dead), observance of fast five times a year are peculiar to his Church, based in Kerala, southern India.

The foundation of the Malabar Christians’ faith goes back to Saint Thomas the Apostle, who preached on India’s southern region, starting from Kerala.

“Openness to adopt good elements from other cultures, ability to mix easily with others, high regard for priests, consecrated people and the elderly, zeal for social action” are hallmarks of the community, he added.

The archbishop noted that laity movements and traditional religious customs help the Church in its faith formation.

He also acknowledged the Syro Malabar Church as a migrant community.

“There are many migrant communities of Syro-Malabarians in various parts of India as well as in several foreign countries, especially Europe, Australia and the (Persian) Gulf region,” Archbishop Thazhath said.

The Church’s official website estimates as many as 522,238 of its members living overseas are not attached to any Syro-Malabar diocese. Indian cities outside Kerala have 245,395 Syro-Malabar Catholics, it claims.

“Since there are no sufficient structures and possibilities, the pastoral care of the Syro-Malabar Migrants in the (Persian) Gulf countries and their faith formation are largely depend on its lay movements and traditions,” Archbishop Thazhath said.

He acknowledged the roles lay movements such as the Legion of Mary, Couples for Christ and Jesus Youth that play a crucial role in keeping the faith alive.

Later speaking to FABC Media team on December 1, Archbishop Thazhath observed that Syro Malabar Catholics now fill up many churches in Europe, US and Canada amid decreasing attendance by locals.

The recent Syro Malabar Synod in Trichur, Kerala, had acknowledged the role played by the laity and family as domestic church in the service of the mission of mercy.

Archbishop Thazhath noted that many Catholic families engage in acts of mercy such as tending to orphans, sick and elderly in their homes.

“Some give free services to the homes for the poor, disabled and mentally challenged, while others provide food in the street and cloths in slums,” he added.

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[T S Thomas and Jose Kavi of Matters India (www.mattersindia.com) prepared this report for FABC Office of Social Communicaiton.]