

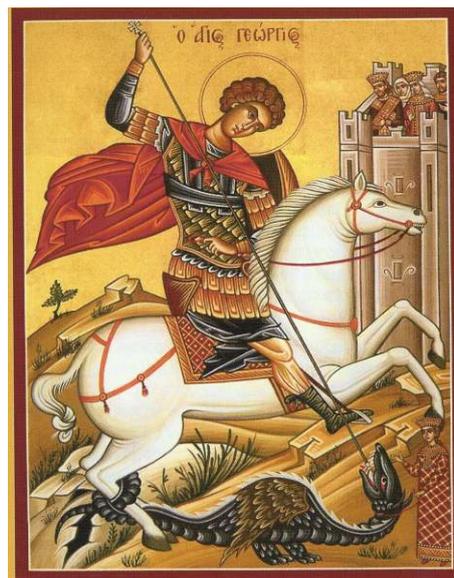
St. Thomas Didymus, the Apostle came to India in AD 52 and introduced Christianity to the gentiles of India. The Apostle converted four Brahmin families to Christianity and established 8 Churches in the name of St. Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ – some historians record it as 7 ½ Churches. The reasons for the interpretation as ½ Church could be that this was the last one built by the Apostle at Thiruvithamcode and due to the small size the apprehension might be that it was not completed. But it is also explained that the Thiruvithamcode Church was built on the land given to the Apostle by the Arachan (King) and hence it was called as Aracha pally which later became Arapally. Anyone who has visited the Thiruvithamcode St. Mary's Church can clearly see that the Church is a completed construction in granite stones and not a half church.

The Malankara Orthodox Christian Church traces its origin from AD 52 founded by St. Thomas and the Catholicos is reigning on the Apostolic throne of St. Thomas. Historians record that the Marthoman Christians or Malankara Nazranies (the followers of Jesus of Nazareth) were administered by the high Priest titled Arkadiacon – who had the right to wear a miter crown and had their own armed guards with the same position of a secular ruler who had the rights of any contemporary Hindu ruler.

After the Koonan Kurishu Oath in 1963 Arkadiacon Thomas Parampil was consecrated as Bishop Mar Thoma I, thus the role was changed and this line continued until Mar Thoma VIII in 1815 among the Malankara Orthodox Christians.

Western explorers of the 15th century, namely the Portuguese had multiple missions. They were obliged to establish colonies for exploiting

to the benefit of their national economy and for their King. On the religious arena for the Pope and the Holy Roman see, they had to propagate the spread of Catholicism. Pope Nicholas V enacted the Papal Bull *Romanus Pontifex* granting the patronage of the propagation of the Christian faith in Asia to the Portuguese and rewarded them with a trade monopoly for newly discovered areas. The Bull also permitted them to enslave the people of such lands! They went about both jobs with zeal. It was also a point of profit, because they would have the monopoly of trade revenues from the colonies.



The Portuguese visitors to the south west corner of India were surprised to meet the Malankara Nazranies, a group of Christians, well placed, self administering, and having very real power and respect in the contemporary community.

In 1652, Metropolitan Mar Ahatalla from Syria landed in Surat and then came to Mylapore where St. Thomas attained Martyrdom at the hands of a Pagan King in the apostle's quest to spread the Gospel beyond the Western Ghats. Mar Ahatalla was arrested by the Portuguese Jesuite priests at

Mylapore on 3rd August 1652. Two Malankara Christian Deacons – Chengannur Itty and Kuravilangadu Kizhakkedathu Kurien who were on pilgrimage to Mylapore to the tomb of St. Thomas came to know about the arrest and adventured to meet the Metropolitan under custody. Mar Ahatalla sent a letter through the Deacons to the Arkadiacon of Malankara about his arrest and the plans of the Jesuites to take him to Cochin and then to Goa. Mar Ahatalla asked the Malankara Nazranies to save him when he is transported through Cochin. In the same letter, Mar Ahatalla also appointed Arkadiacon Thomas Parampil as the head of the Malankara Church. The Malankara Nazranies heard of the arrival of the ship carrying Mar Ahatalla to Cochin and 25,000 strong Malankara Nazranies marched to the port demanding the immediate release of the Metropolitan from Syria. The Portuguese however rushed the prelate to Goa without acceding to the demand and later declared that Mar Ahatalla was accidentally drowned on the voyage.

The Orthodox Parish of Mavelikara Diocese observes the death anniversary of Mar Ahatalla on 15 January (Makaram 3) every year.

The summary disposal of Mar Ahatalla shocked the Marthoman Christians and wounded their feelings. A mass uprising against the Portuguese and Papal yoke fueled up which initiated the first struggle against foreign supremacy or the independence struggle against the colonial invaders. They gathered in thousands at Mattanchery around a granite Cross on 3rd January 1653 and took an oath in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost that they will have no more love for, nor the union and communion with the Frankies or submit to the ecclesiastical authority of Rome and to obey none other than Arkadiacon Thomas as their leader. All

gathered could not touch the cross to take the Oath and they tied ropes to the Cross in several directions and held it tightly denouncing the 54 year old yoke of Roman supremacy imposed under the Udeyemperur Synod of 1599. Later this revolt and oath came to be known as the Mattanchery Koonan Kurishu Sathyam (Oath at the Leaning Cross).

The aggrieved Nazranies assembled at Alangad near Angamaly on 22 May 1653 and raised their leader Arkadiakon Thomas Parampil as the head of the Church with the title of Mar Thoma I with the strength of Mar Ahatalla Bava's letter. It is recorded that 12 priests consecrated him by putting their hands together. A committee of four priests namely, Kadavil Alexander Kathanar of Kadamattom, Abraham Thomas Kathanar of Kallissery also known as Anjilimoottil Itty Thomman Kathanar, George Kathanar of Vengur and Palliveettil Alexander Kathanar of Kuravilangad were appointed to assist Mar Thoma I Bava.

The Catholicate in India was a growth and development through centuries within the Malankara Church. The developments in other Churches like Persia, Antioch, Rome and external interferences has influenced the growth of the Catholicate in different stages. The Catholicate should always be considered as a symbol of apostolic origin, authority and heritage as well as nationality and independence of the Malankara Orthodox Church. Throughout centuries the Metropolitan heads of the Marthomman Christians were known as the apostolic successors of St. Thomas, the founder of the Indian Church. The Vatican Syriac codex 22 written in 1301 at Kodungalloor refers to the Metropolitan of the Church as "The Metropolitan Bishop of the See of St. Thomas, and of the whole Church of Christians in India". The Church always asserted that St. Thomas had his apostolic throne in India as St. Peter had it in Rome or Antioch. When the Catholicate was established in 1912 with the Catholicos as the Supreme Head of the Malankara Church with the title "The successor of the apostolic throne of St. Thomas".

The Leadership of the Malankara Church realized that it is a necessity to preserve the historical sites which

were the milestones of growth of the Malankara Orthodox Church as a Proof of the Marthomman Orthodox heritage.

His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Didymus I, the 90th Catholicos of the East appointed a council presided by the Supreme Head of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Paulose II, the 91st Catholicos of the East and 21st Malankara Metropolitan to renovate the Koonan Kurishu Pally and establish a Pilgrim and Heritage Center at Mattanchery.



Administration Block nearing completion

A master plan was finalized by the Mattanchery Koonan Kurishu Pally Council to complete the project in several phases and work is in progress. This is the most prestigious project for any Malankara Orthodox Syrian Christian in the recent times as it is for preserving his heritage and it coincides with the Catholicate Centenary celebrations.

The Mattanchery Koonan Kurishu Pally is an A grade Church directly under His Holiness and the project aims to declare it as a Pilgrim and Heritage Center for the Malankara Orthodox Church.

The project is comprising of an Administrative Block including the Parsonage for the Clergy and offices which is almost complete, renovation of the old Church without changing the original structure and building up a Heritage Center consisting of a Museum, library and research center



The Church main structure is maintained while renovating exterior

which will provide the history of Malankara Marthomman Nazranies since AD 52 for the coming generations. Kurishu Pally has added importance as it preserves the Holy Relics of St. George. The plan is also to house the relics of St. Gregorios of Parumala and Vattasseril St. Dionysius, the declared Saints of the Malankara Orthodox Church at this Pilgrim center.



Church Renovation in Progress

The Church is being renovated in the 15th century architecture with eco friendly green construction principles. Very less cement and no steel is used. Burned bricks are not used to reduce CO₂ emission. Importance is given for natural lighting and air circulation to save energy.

The Koonan Kurishu Oath is heading to its 360th anniversary and the aim of the council is to submit the renovated Koonan Kurishu Pally and Pilgrim Centre to the Malankara Church as the anniversary gift. Plans are in place to celebrate the 360th anniversary with great pomp and to educate the masses on the rich Malankara Orthodox heritage.



Artist's view of renovated St. George Orthodox Koonan Kurishu Pally