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The Encounter of the Sixteenth Century St Thomas Christians with the Latin Missionaries and its Consequences

It was in the sixteenth century that the Institution Narrative was introduced in the Anaphora of Addai and Mari in the St Thomas Christian Church (for short STCC). It was done by Mar Joseph, the bishop of the STCC, as a result of pressure exerted by the Latin missionaries. In order to understand this insertion more deeply, it is necessary to have an overlook into the whole scenario, namely the Latinisation process in the STCC. The account of the missionaries will make it clear why the bishops of the STCC were forced to introduce the Institution Narrative, approved later by the Synod of Diamper (for short SD). Therefore, we will highlight some of the observations of the missionaries, present mostly in their letters sent to the West. In this study we focus on the sixteenth century forces which influenced or forced the STCC to bring about drastic changes in their liturgical and disciplinary norms, theology and customs.

After a brief presentation of the STCC, we will deal with a few areas in which radical changes took place as a result of the intervention of the Latin missionaries. These areas are faith, hierarchy and sacraments. At the end we make an overview of the reaction of the SD to the “defects” present in these areas.

Initially the St Thomas Christians (for short STCs) welcomed the Latin missionaries wholeheartedly. After the initial exposure, the missionaries, observing that there were unacceptable differences in the customs of the STCs, tried to introduce gradually the Latin customs in the Church life of the STCs. At that stage the STCs began to show resistance.

The missionaries accused STCs of being Nestorian heretics. This accusation is present in many of the reports sent from Malabar to Europe. Today the studies have shown that Nestorius was not Nestorian as Nestorianism has been formulated and condemned at the Council of Ephesus.

From the fourth century STCs hierarchically depended on the Church of the East. The bishops were elected in the synods of that Church, ordained by the patriarch and sent to India. This hierarchical dependence was under heavy attack in the sixteenth century by the missionaries. On many occasions they tried to sever this dependence and to replace the East Syrian bishops with Latin bishops. Finally they succeeded in doing it in the SD. While dealing with the topic of the hierarchy we will also highlight certain specific features of administration in the STCC, especially the role of the bishop, archdeacon, and other clergy.

Another area where the greatest mutation took place was the sacramental theology and the rite of their celebration. The missionaries reported that many of the seven sacraments were inexistent in the STCC, and those which existed there were defectively celebrated. Because of their insistence, the confirmation began to be administered separate from baptism, annual auricular confession was made obligatory, and extreme unction was introduced: all these using the ritual of the Latin Church. The introduction of these sacraments and the changes made in the other ones were approved finally in the SD.

The SD comes as a final approbation of the process of a long Latinisation process which lasted almost a century. In the SD the Nestorian elements contained in the doctrinal formulations of the STCs were removed, the hierarchical dependence on the Church of the East was severed and celebration of the sacraments was made similar to those of the Latin Church. It was in this process that the Institution Narrative was inserted into the Addai-Mari Anaphora.