



ORTHODOX SYRIAN  
SUNDAY SCHOOL  
ASSOCIATION

Diocese of UK, Europe and Africa

C A T E G O R Y I M A S T E R Y



We are the body of Christ  
GRADE 10





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ORTHODOX SYRIAN  
SUNDAY SCHOOL ASSOCIATION  
OF THE EAST



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**We are the Body of Christ**  
**Grade 10**

*Category*  
*Mastery*

2024

OSSAE : DIOCESE OF UK, EUROPE & AFRICA

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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON SERIES - 10

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The Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Church

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**First Edition : January 2024**

Printed in the United Kingdom  
**For Private Circulation only**

# FOREWORD



**MALANKARA ORTHODOX  
SYRIAN CHURCH**(INDIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH)

**DIOCESE OF UK·EUROPE·AFRICA·**  
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**No. E-015/AMS/2024**

**11 January 2024**

## FOREWORD

As we embrace the dawning of a new era in the Sunday School of our Diocese, it is with profound gratitude and joy that we introduce the newly launched textbooks. This milestone is not merely a culmination of efforts but a new beginning, charting a course for faith-filled learning.

Special recognition is due to the Director and the team of dedicated authors of the Diocese of Southwest America of our Church who have tirelessly woven this tapestry of knowledge and devotion. Their commitment to creating a curriculum that speaks to the heart of our tradition is truly commendable.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to His Grace Zachariah Mar Nicholovos and His Grace Thomas Mar Ivanios, our Metropolitans, whose blessings and guidance have been the bedrock of this endeavor. Their spiritual leadership has been a guiding light throughout this year-long journey of preparation and transition.

Our teachers, those steadfast beacons of knowledge, deserve a resounding acknowledgment for their adaptability and perseverance, ensuring a smooth transition to this new curriculum. Their dedication to the spiritual growth of our youth is a testament to their faith and love for the church.

In line with the Apostle Paul's exhortation in Titus 1:9 (NRSV), "He must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it," we recognize the pivotal role of sound teaching in nurturing faith. This verse echoes the mission of our Sunday School to steadfastly impart the truth of the Gospel, fostering a resilient and enlightened community of faith.

To the teachers and students embarking on this sacred educational journey, may you be filled with enthusiasm and wisdom. May your hearts and minds be fertile grounds for the seeds of divine knowledge to flourish.

The significance of the Sunday School in our community cannot be overstated. It is here that the foundations of faith are laid, where the stories and teachings of our church come to life, and where the future guardians of Orthodoxy begin their spiritual journey.

A special word of gratitude is extended to Fr. Anoop M. Abraham, Vice President of the Sunday School for the Diocese. His leadership, along with the director, curriculum coordinator, secretary & joint secretary, reviewers, trainers, and all team members, has been instrumental in bringing this vision to fruition.

As we conclude, let us move forward in the spirit of Orthodox tradition, with hope and prayer that these textbooks serve not only as vessels of knowledge but also as lanterns lighting the path towards spiritual maturity and devotion.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

**+ Metropolitan Abraham Stephanos**



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## **Glory to the Triune God!**

*I would like to express my deepest gratitude and sincere appreciation to all those who have contributed towards the development of this Orthodox Sunday school textbook for the new curriculum. It has been a long and challenging journey but with the help and support of many individuals and organizations, we have finally reached this milestone.*

*First and foremost, I would like to thank our Diocesan Metropolitan H G Abraham Mar Stephanos for His Grace's tireless effort to reform our Sunday School to meet the needs of our future generation by implementing the new curriculum and heartfelt gratitude to all the officials and key personalities of Northeast and Southwest American Diocesan Sunday Schools who are the backbone of this new curriculum and Talmido.*

*Great appreciation to all the curriculum development committee members of our diocese for their selfless efforts in editing a comprehensive and relevant textbook that caters to the spiritual needs of our Sunday School students. Your dedication, expertise, and commitment to the project were crucial in bringing this book to fruition. Special thanks to the clergy members of our diocese who generously shared their knowledge, wisdom, and experiences in shaping the lessons and activities in this book. Your input has helped to create a well-rounded curriculum that reflects the teachings and traditions of our Orthodox Faith.*

*I am also grateful to the head teachers and teachers who took the time to review and provide valuable feedback on the content and structure of the textbook. Your insights and suggestions have greatly enhanced the quality of the material and have made it more engaging and accessible to our young learners.*

*I would also like to acknowledge the role of Holy Episcopal Synod and OSSAE officials for their unwavering support and encouragement towards this new curriculum. It is with their guidance and vision that we were able to compile a textbook that aligns with the goals and objectives of our Holy Church and Diocesan Sunday School education.*

*Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the students who will be using this textbook. Your enthusiasm and eagerness to learn about our faith is what motivates us to continue improving and developing resources for your spiritual growth.*

*In conclusion, I would like to thank everyone who has been a part of this journey and has contributed in any way towards the creation of this Orthodox Sunday school textbook. May it serve as a valuable resource for many generations to come and may it inspire and nurture the faith of our young Orthodox students. Thank you all for your support and dedication.*

**Fr Anoop Abraham Malayil**  
**Vice-President OSSAE – UK Europe and Africa**

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# One Christ, One Church

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can defend our Faith in a loving way when engaging with non-Orthodox Christians.*
- *I understand how the Orthodox Church has the “fullness of the Faith” and can perceive how “seeds of truth” may be found outside the Orthodox Church.*
- *I can identify and understand how the Orthodox Church nurtures the “seeds of truth” to experience the fullness in Christ.*



We can categorise the Christian denominations into three large groups: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant (with the Orthodox groups further divided into Oriental Orthodox and Eastern (Byzantine) Orthodox). Although each group calls themselves Christian, there are differences in beliefs that separate each body. In the case of the Orthodox churches, this has resulted in a closed communion or the limitation of who can partake in the Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ. There are more than 45,000 Christian denominations in the world... and yet we, in the Orthodox Church profess in the Nicene Creed - there is only One God and only One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

How do we reconcile this reality of to-

day's world where so many claim to “authentically” follow Jesus Christ but do not identify as Orthodox? And, how are we to interact with friends and families who are not Orthodox?

## Revisiting the Prodigal Son

As we learnt in grades three and eight, the parable of the Prodigal Son (**St. Luke 15:11-32**) is a well known story that Christ used to teach His followers about repentance, humility, and asking for forgiveness. This simple parable also gives profound insight into the understanding of God and salvation that helps better understand other Christian denominations while distinguishing why the Orthodox Faith is unique and special.

As we know in the parable, the father

represents God whereas the prodigal son and the elder brother both represent humankind.



The prodigal son

What is constant throughout this parable is that the love of the Father is taught to us directly from Christ. The Father allowing the prodigal to take his inheritance and leave (St. Luke 15:12-13) represents God's blessing of free will to man and an acknowledgement that we can make poor choices. But, the key in the story is that the prodigal **"came to himself"** (repented, St. Luke 15:17). This shows that we are all made in God's image and likeness. That the Father **"fell on his neck and kissed him"** (St. Luke 15:20) shows the incredible depth of God's love for us, as the only way he

saw the son's return even though the son was **"a great way off"** (St. Luke 15:20). The father had the strong belief and hope that the son would return and ran to embrace his son and *"fell on his neck"* (v.20) even before a word of repentance (St. Luke 15:21) was said. Similarly, God is always eager to *run and embrace the repenting humankind* and this again emphasises God's love for His creation. God loves all creation and waits for us to return to Him with our own free-will.

### Reflect

Are some of us created for heaven and some for hell? Discuss the teaching of predestination which is rejected by the Church.

"Salvation" in the Orthodox Church, therefore, is our return to God and becoming one amongst the many in the home that we were born into as a son or daughter of our Lord, God the Father. All are created equal in God's eyes, and all have the opportunity to be "saved". Understanding this is key, as other denominations differ in their view of who and how people are saved which makes it a popular topic of conversation and comparison. Note that this does not mean we enter into discussions and interactions with pride, just as the parable teaches that there is no salvation without humility. Rather, by understanding our Faith we can begin to perceive both commonalities as well as differences between us

and the other Christian denominations.

## The One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church



Jesus Christ - the vine

The Orthodox Church is “pre-denominational.” Our faith is the same as the Apostles who were taught by Christ, and who in turn handed it down to the fathers. This is what we remember during the Fifth Thubden during Holy Qurbana, i.e., “*Let us remember all those who before them, and with them, and after them, have kept, entrusted, and delivered to us the one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith.*” The Holy Spirit preserved this faith uncorrupt and true from generations to generations and we have in-

herited the same faith, so that the faith of the Church remains the same just as it was in the first Century (**Romans 12:5,1 Corinthians 12:12–27, Ephesians 3:6, 4:15–16 and 5:23, Colossians 1:18 and 1:24**).

With various Christian denominations, come differing traditions, specifically around worship and daily Christian life. It is evident that the Orthodox Church emphasises a prayer filled life centred around participation in the mysteries (sacraments). When a faith is highly traditional—so traditional that her Tradition is seen as nothing less than the presence of God living and breathing in the life of the Church—it is sure to clash with the sensibilities of a modern, critical, and pluralistic culture such as our own. The Eucharist is the source of life. We can live our lives in Christ because of Christ's life. Our embrace of a theological attitude and commitment that is uniquely “orthodox,” rooted in the Scriptures, and transmitted down the years under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit is necessary for us to partake in the Eucharist as we are called to do. It also calls for the adoption of an ascetic lifestyle that entails acts of charity, confession of sins, fasting, personal prayer, and liturgical celebration—all of which are components of a life of repentance and a continuing pursuit of holiness. It also demands that we respect our unique “ecclesial identity” and submit to the ecclesiastical authority, which is most prominently represented by our bishops: canonically ordained and es-

tablished individuals who are enjoined by their deeds and teachings to uphold and transmit the truth of the Orthodox faith while upholding a bond of unity within the Body of Christ. A oneness that all Church members enjoy, one that is not based on dominance but rather on respect and love for one another. **1 Corinthians 11:27** says: **“Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.”**

St. Paul is explaining that partaking in the Eucharist is a sacred moment. Furthermore, the act of receiving Holy Communion is not an individual act but a corporal act taken by the entire Holy Church. Thus, it only makes sense that those who confess the same faith should partake in the Holy Body and Blood of Christ. Those who are outside of the communion of the Orthodox Church aren't unified with the Church in teaching, and as a result, it is better for them not to participate in the sacrament or else they will be taking it in an unworthy manner. It is also important to note that even those who are in communion with the Church can also partake in the Eucharist in an unworthy manner. When believers don't prepare themselves through confession and repentance, they **“eat and drink judgement to themselves” (1 Corinthians 11:29).**

## Reflect

If a friend or relative invited you to their non-Orthodox Church, how would you explain to them that you can go but not participate in Communion?

## Love God and Love Others

As Orthodox Christians, we are called to love all people. That includes those who have a different understanding of the faith. We are called to not be judgmental or critical, but rather engage in dialogue and share our faith with others and love everyone.



St. Justin Martyr

One great example we have from the early church is of St. Justin Martyr, who lived in the second century (around 114-165). Christianity was beginning to make its mark on the world, figuring out how to express the Truth of Jesus Christ in the Roman Empire that was unfamiliar with the salvation history of the Jews and the new revelation brought through the Messiah. Justin opened a school of Christian philosophy. St. Justin subsequently defended the truth of Christian teaching, persuasively confuting pagan sophistry and heretical distortions of Christianity. He also spoke out against the teachings of the Gnostic Marcian. The world of St. Justin Martyr was also hostile towards anyone who did not accept the established beliefs of the majority. Christians were misunderstood and St. Justin was imprisoned, subjected to torture and suffered martyrdom in 165 by the Roman authorities who saw the new religion as a threat to society and interpreted certain aspects of the Christian faith as backward.

St. Justin shared an idea about his faith in relation to the other religions of that time. He took what he knew about the Roman religion –pagan cult worship, philosophy, and mythology– and demonstrated how these sources revealed Seeds of the Truth that had now been fully revealed to Christians and to the world through Christ. While he certainly rejected many of the pagan ideas and practises, Justin believed that all of God’s creation was imbued with His reason, His patterns, and His Logos. There-

fore, he viewed non-Christians, –yes, even those who persecuted Christians– as bearers of the “seeds of the word (*logos spermatikos*),” as humans in which God had implanted his Truth who simply needed the right kind of cultivation to help those seeds grow. Although there are many different denominations (and religions), there are seeds of truth in everyone. It is our calling to help cultivate the Faith, to show them the truth of the Gospel, and ultimately “come and see” our faith in action.

### **Fullness of the Faith**

When interacting with other Christian denominations, it is useful to consider that the Orthodox Church is indeed the religion of the Apostles. The following is a common but very useful summary of how one should consider Orthodoxy: “The Orthodox Christian Church is the original church established by Jesus Christ. It is evangelical, but not Protestant. It is orthodox, but not Jewish. It is catholic, but not Roman. It isn’t non-denominational, it’s pre-denominational. It has believed, taught, preserved, defended and died for the Faith of the Apostles since the Day of Pentecost nearly 2,000 years ago.”

Another lens to consider when talking about the Orthodox Church is that we have the “fullness of the Faith”. The theology of the Church remains unchanged from when the Holy Spirit “spoke through the prophets and apostles” and revealed the Truth. With

this blessing comes a great responsibility. Nothing has been added to the Faith, and nothing has been taken away.

### Pause

Don't other religions believe in some of the same concepts Christ taught, such as "do good unto others..." or "thou shall not kill"?



It is with this understanding of "fullness" that we engage with other Christian denominations with love and humility but also without compromise.

Our church reaches out to the world in different ways. One of those ways is via ecumenical movements such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the National Council of Churches (NCC). These are just a few avenues that our Church is involved in to communicate and share the rich traditions and faith of our Malankara Church. Of course, they also carry the "*logos spermatikos*" in them. Co-existing with respect for them, we learn to live with a better understanding and appreciation of our Faith as well as perceive commonalities and differences of other Christian denominations.

### Reflection Questions

1. If a friend or relative invited you to their non-Orthodox Church, how would you explain to them that you can go but not participate in Communion?
2. Explain St. Justin Martyr's concept of "seeds of the word" and how he applied it when sharing his faith.
3. Thinking about our understanding of God from the Parable of the Prodigal Son, how would you defend our rejection of the teaching of predestination where some are created for heaven and some are created for hell?
4. Defend the teaching that the Orthodox Church still practices the "one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith" using the concept of "fullness of the Faith".

# A Genuine and Uncorrupted Faith

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can defend the decision our Church made at the Council of Chalcedon.*
- *I can justify the statement “there is unity in diversity” using the example of the Oriental Orthodox Church.*
- *I understand the importance of upholding the Orthodox Faith to our future generations.*



## What makes us Orthodox?

At the end of the Fifth Thubden during Holy Qurbana, we proclaim that our Faith was “*kept, entrusted, and delivered to us*” as the “*one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith*”.

On the surface, this is a very bold statement! However, this understanding of a Faith given to us and our responsibility to uphold and maintain what was given to us is the bedrock of the Orthodox Faith and that unites the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. The Holy Spirit, who speaks “*through the prophets and the apostles*” (as proclaimed in the Nicene Creed) makes this possible and not a collection of men working as part of a centralised organisa-

tion. We see that diversity in the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Divine guidance united the churches in far away places such as Kerala, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Syria, and Armenia in preserving the teachings and theology in respective Liturgical practises, prayers, hymns, and traditions despite centuries of physical and political separation and no central earthly authority. Our unity comes in and through Christ, and this unity transcends language, culture, and political differences.

The Faith was given to our forefathers and the preservation and “*handing down*” of this Faith could only be possible through Apostolic succession. Apostolic succession means uninterrupted continuity of today’s faith with the faith

and practises of the Apostles which they have inherited from Jesus Christ. Apostolic succession is therefore the hallmark of our accountability and it is indispensable, crucial, and essential for a living Church. If personal convictions, beliefs, or opinions do not fully align with Apostolic succession, one's faith becomes simply inadequate.

## Remember

Oriental Orthodox family includes the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria; the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch (includes the Malankara Syriac Orthodox Church), the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church; the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; and the Eritrean Orthodox Church.



Shared apostolic succession makes the Oriental Orthodox family to remain united to this very day in proclaiming the decisions of the three sacred, holy, and ecumenical councils of Nicea (325 A.D.), Constantinople (381 A.D.), and Ephesus (431 A.D.) as absolute. From these councils came the affirmation of the Person of Christ and why teachings such that St. Mary was “undoubtedly the God-bearer” and correctly holding the title of “Theotokos” was essential as anything different would change Christ from being fully man and fully God.

This is one of many reasons why we are

called to remember “*all those who before and with, and after*” those participants of those three Ecumenical Councils in the fifth Thubden during Holy Qurbana.

We not only remember specific Saints by name but also remember all those who preserved, defended, and upheld the Faith not through any individual merit but their cooperation with the Holy Spirit. They were persecuted, challenged, and often martyred for their actions but remembered today in our prayers as “*those who have kept the one, Apostolic, and uncorrupted Faith and entrusted and delivered it to us*”. Many of the saints who were “fathers, bishops, and teachers” are not named otherwise in the Thubden itself would be countless hours!

The ones who are named begin with the Apostle St. James who was the first bishop of Jerusalem and runs through history to our Saints of India, St. Gregorios of Parumala and St. Divanasios of Vattasseril. This is an important reminder to us that so many men and women willingly sacrificed so much for the love of Christ and His Church to bring us this special gift we have today, and it is indeed a calling to help defend and teach the faith for our generation and for those to come.

The importance of this Apostolic teaching was paramount for our Church fathers, bishops, and teachers of the Faith in 451A.D. at the Council of Chalcedon. Although there were additional political influences that exacerbated the situation, Oriental Orthodox Churches





St. Gregorios of Parumala and St. Dionysius Vattasseril

agreed to reject this council because its implied theological nuances indicated a change of Faith that had been passed down.

We maintain to this day that the defence of the true Faith by St. Dioscorus of Alexandria and other leaders at the Council of Chalcedon was indeed faithful to all the teachings of his predecessors St. Athanasius and St. Cyril of Alexandria.

### **Oriental Rejection of Chalcedon**

The first centuries of Christendom was not without controversy, heresies, and divisions. However, there existed a unity between what is today the denominations that make up the Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman

Catholic Churches. The thousands of Protestant denominations came to being after the Reformation in 1517 A.D. and subsequent separation from the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore it is difficult to identify which holds a shadow of Apostolic succession still today and acknowledge the first Ecumenical Councils. As discussed earlier, through Apostolic succession the ancient Church was initially a unified body that spanned across several countries.

Things changed in the 5th century creating one of the major schisms in Christendom. The divide was regarding the human and divine nature of Christ discussed in the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. The Chalcedon council added that Christ is “one person in two natures”



St. Athanasius and St. Cyril of Alexandria

- one divine and one human thereby diverging from the teaching of our early church fathers. St. Dioscorus of Alexandria maintained that one Christ came to being *from two natures, divine and human*. He explicitly rejected the Chalcedonian formula of 'in two natures' as it contradicted the faith of Nicea and indicated that the two natures of Christ continued to exist separately after the incarnation. If the divine nature is not fully united with the human nature through an inward and real union, salvation of

humans could not be guaranteed.

The Church Fathers would not stand for such changes to our ancient faith and doctrine protected by the umbrella of the ancient church's Apostolic succession. In the face of exile, St. Dioscorus stood his ground by not attending the remaining meetings at Chalcedon. He affirmed his unity with the one catholic and apostolic faith, and protested the Council of Chalcedon citing the holy fathers Athanasius, Gregory, and Cyril, who all strongly discouraged the heresy of 'in two natures'

of Chalcedon. Many Church Fathers from Alexandria and Antioch as well as Jerusalem also objected to the position taken by those in authority at this Council, and it was worsened by further ambiguities in the definition of the faith and the Tome of Leo. This led to the disapproval and rejection of the decisions and definitions of Chalcedon by the Coptics, Syrians, Armenians, and Ethiopians and the subsequent exile of the Orientals by the others that broadly made up of what is today the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and older Protestant Churches.

### Remember

Tome of Leo was a document of faith proposed by Leo, the bishop and Pope of the Roman Church.



Decades later, St. Severus of Antioch upheld that the decision made to reject Chalcedon was correct. Today, there is academic consensus that the disagreement was not theological, as evidenced in statements published by the Orthodox Joint Commission of the late 20th century. Councils held between what is now the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches eventually agreed to the position taken by St. Dioscorus and our Oriental Church Fathers that Christ was fully man and fully God. But the damage had been done and even today the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches are not in full communion with each other.



St. Severus of Antioch defended the decision by our Church Fathers to reject Chalcedon by eloquently using the teachings of the preceding Fathers, St. Cyril in particular. This is why he is remembered in the Fifth Thubden as the “pillar and teacher of the Universal Holy Church of God” and one who “preached all the time that St. Mary was undoubtedly the God-bearer.” St. Severus’ objection to Chalcedon was that the Council did not affirm the unity of Christ adequately, and that it therefore violated the faith of the Church. St. Severus of Antioch stood in disagreement with Chalcedon’s rulings, he confessed that Christ’s divinity and humanity are united “in one incarnate nature” - the two being united without change, confusion, division or mixture. The Ma’nitho of St Severus, emphasises the importance of doctrinal uniformity, because it protects the Church from distortions of the Truth i.e. a defective vision of God which prevents us from properly worshipping and

experiencing God as intended by Christ through Apostolic succession.

Fr. V. C. Samuel observes in his book, *The Council of Chalcedon Re-Examined*: “The ‘two natures after the union’ implies, argues Severus again and again, that the human child was formed in the womb by himself first, and that God the Word assumed him later. According to this

*view, the man remained man and God remained God the Son in a state of conjoint existence, without being united in any real sense, in Jesus Christ. Severus and other non-Chalcedonian leaders maintain that this was the position affirmed by the men of the Antiochene school and declared heretical by the council of Ephesus in 431.”*

### **Ma'nitho of St Severus**

*The Only Begotten Son,  
Word of the Father,  
Immortal in His nature  
And who by His grace  
Descended for all mankind  
To bring life and salvation  
For our fallen human race;  
Who did become incarnate  
Of the pure Virgin,  
The holy and glorious Theotokos;  
He became man without change  
And was crucified for us,  
Christ, who is our Lord and God;*

Note how our Church Fathers always defended against heresy by clarifying what was given to them. There was never an individual elaboration or new teaching that was claimed to be inspired by the Divine, but rather teaching in more depth the true meaning of what was taught by Christ to the Apostles. There was without doubt political influences as well that led to the schism (no-

tably from the Church of Rome and the Tome of Leo), but theologically the summary of our rejection of the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon was this argument that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was nothing but “fully man and fully God”.

As a result of Chalcedon, there is schism between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox

Churches even today. Both groups of churches are receptive to discussion, and we can pray that through the power of the Holy Spirit we may be united again.

## Unity in Diversity

Both Eastern (Chalcedonian) and Oriental (Non-Chalcedonian) churches regard themselves as orthodox, as “*right-believing*,” or (more accurately) as “*right-worshipping*.” But they have differed on their position with regard to the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) and the definition on Christological dogma (i.e., who Christ is) made at that council. Thus their long and often painful division goes back over 1500 years.

### Partner Talk

Elaborate on the most important decisions made at the Council of Chalcedon with respect to the Oriental Orthodox Church



In recent decades relations have begun to improve, yet developments have been both encouraging and frustrating. Encouraging because theological dialogue between the leaders and scholars of both Orthodox families, first informal in the 1960s, then formal in the 1980s and 1990s, led to the conclusion that the Christological issues that initially prompted the division of these churches have been resolved, so that continued division can no longer be justified on

dogmatic grounds. There has been positive dialogue and unity between the Churches, such as a Joint Commission subcommittees on liturgical and pastoral issues that met in Damascus in February 1998 and agreed - among other things - “that the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches basically maintain the old liturgical traditions in their local liturgical types, which co-existed in the undivided Church”; and they also declared that liturgical issues have to be theologically clarified to indicate that they are in agreement with common Christological Statements.

But, opposition to the work of the Joint Commission has slowed down progress towards unity. The arguments against unity are not based on the understanding of the Person of Christ but more of historical and political nature.

## Summary

Whether it be the early church in Jerusalem founded by St. James, or the church in Egypt by St. Mark, or St. Thomas who established the church in India, we see there is great diversity in the Orthodox Christian experience. Despite the geographic and cultural variations, there is a beautiful unity in the body of believers who share a common faith rooted in Apostolic succession fulfilling God’s will to reach all mankind. Although we may not speak the same language, or have the same cultural traditions, our common faith lineage allows us to commune and worship together

and deserves to be celebrated. The Oriental Orthodox family of Churches are in communion with each other.

St. Severus of Antioch asks in his Cathedral Homily: *“Do we have a shortage of remedy from the Holy Book to heal their malady? Did the Holy Spirit say these things for another motif? There is a matching remedy for all illnesses in the Holy Book”.*

This agrees with the Pauline instruction: **“For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.” (Romans 15:4)** Apostolic succession preserves alignment, unity, and sanctity of an uncorrupt faith from the first days of the Holy Church, and as

faithful it is our responsibility to safeguard those original teachings and practises of the Church.

We uphold and defend the Faith which Jesus Christ directly taught to the Apostles, and we believe this Faith has been handed from generation to generation until today (**1 Corinthians 15:3**). We see ourselves as heir and guardian to a great inheritance received from the past, and it is more than duty but our privilege and honour to share, without change, the faith to future generations.

### Partner Talk

Defend the statement “there is unity in diversity.”



### Reflection Questions

1. Select a Saint mentioned in the fifth Thubden and assess why their contribution to defending the Faith made an impact in the history of our Church and to our understanding today.
2. How would you defend our Church’s decision at the Council of Chalcedon to your friend who is Eastern (Byzantine) Orthodox?
3. How would you defend the phrase “unity in diversity” in the context of the life of the Church? Why is this so important?

# Malankara Orthodox Church History

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can explain why there are so many Christian denominations in India who claim Apostolic succession.*
- *I can defend how the Orthodox Church through the centuries in India upheld the genuine Faith without corruption or change.*
- *I can assess how we can keep the Faith entrusted to us and pass it on to future generations.*



## Introduction

We are members of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, also commonly known as the Indian Orthodox Church. We are an autocephalous Oriental Orthodox church headquartered in Devalokam near Kottayam in Kerala, India.

Christianity in India has a long history that dates back to the arrival of the Apostle Thomas in the 1st century AD. According to tradition, the Apostle Thomas arrived in the southern state of Kerala and established Christian communities there. The region is known as the "Cradle of Christianity in India." Over the centuries, Christianity spread to different parts of India through vari-

ous means, including missionary activities, trade routes, and colonisation. European powers, such as the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British, played a significant role in introducing and promoting Christianity in different parts of the country. Today, Christianity is the third-largest religion in India, after Hinduism and Islam, with a population of approximately 28 million Christians.

Our Church is known as the "Malankara" Church after an old name for the region that today is roughly equivalent to the state of Kerala. In the ancient world, this area was a major port of trade for spices, well known in Europe and in the Middle East. The presence of Jewish settlements in South India even





before the Christian era is a testimony to the presence of an active trade relation. Jewish settlements would be an obvious choice for any Christian to begin ministry in a strange and foreign land.

Although it is less than 3% of India's total geographical size as well as population, Kerala today has dozens of Christian denominations. As a growing Church outside of India, what lessons can we learn from our ancient history to keep the faith that was “entrusted” to us by Jesus Christ and through the Apostle St. Thomas?

## The Apostle to India

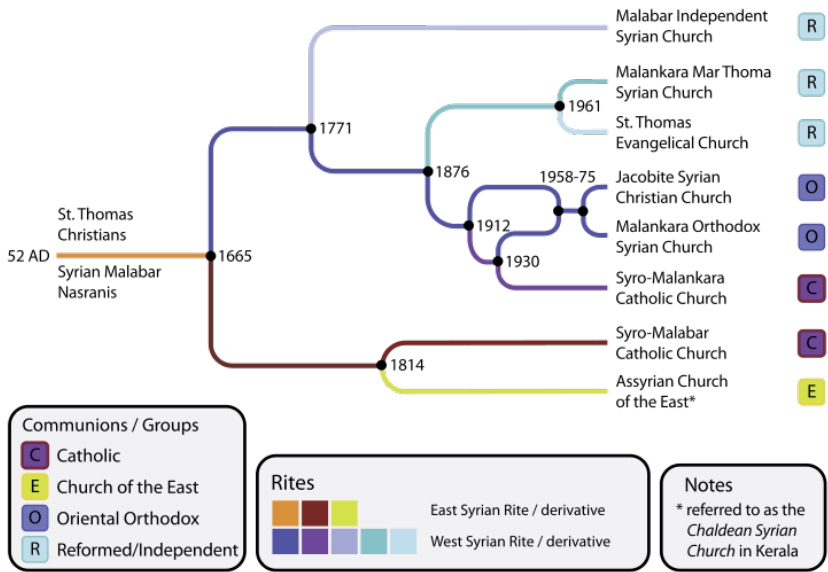
St. Thomas arrived in India in 52 A.D. in response to the Great Commission (**St. Matthew 28:16-20**) from our Lord Jesus Christ to “**make disciples of all the na-**

**tions, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”.**

After reaching India and preaching the Gospel, he continued to travel to China and returned to Tamil Nadu where he was martyred in 72 A.D. in Mylapore near Chennai (the capital of Tamil Nadu). This illustration of the world commonly understood by those living in Jerusalem during the days of the New Testament is a visualisation of how St. Thomas literally travelled to the ends of the world to preach the Word of God!

St. Thomas' arrival in India is documented in both Church records as well as other historical evidence. At the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea, records show that a Bishop named John attended representing Persia and India. St.





### Major Christian denominations in India

Ephrem attests to the missionary work of St. Thomas in India, and has composed hymns on St. Thomas and his mission in India, martyrdom and the removal of bones to Edessa etc, in the 4th century. Origen of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea both mention St. Thomas' ministry in India.

Ultimately, the most conclusive evidence to prove St. Thomas' presence in India is our Church. We believe our Church has a direct ancient connection to St. Thomas, and despite many untold trials and tribulations over the following centuries, we believe the Faith we follow today is the same as that of the

early church. When we identify as "St. Thomas Christians" we are acknowledging and honouring the Truth brought to our land from one of the chosen twelve Apostles of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The illustration above summarises the major Christian denominations in India.

### Think

What evidence exists that St. Thomas spread the gospel in India?

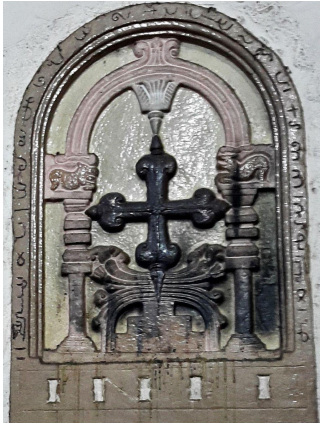


Our history can be best understood

as five phases after the arrival of St. Thomas:

1. East Syrian Years
2. Roman Catholic Influence
3. West Syrian Connection
4. British Era
5. Factionalism

## East Syrian Years



Sea trade routes existed between the Near East and the Malankara coast. Syrian and Persian merchants had contact with South India in the early centuries of the Christian era. South India had trade connections with the Mediterranean and West Asian world since ancient times. This enabled the Church in those areas, particularly Persia, to have knowledge of the existence of a Christian community in India. Many Christians, when they were persecuted in the Persian Empire, fled to the South-western coast of India

and found a ready and warm welcome there.

A group of around 400 Syrians from Edessa is said to have arrived in 345, led by a merchant known as Thomas of Cana and accompanied by Mar Joseph, a Syrian bishop (Kottapparambil). Another wave of Syrian immigrants arrived in Malankara in the ninth century.

The community of Christians during this phase in India was small and struggled to maintain the Church hierarchy. However, it is starting from this period that our Church established a long relationship with the Syriac Churches of the East. Our identity with the Syriac Churches was so strong that we would identify as “Suriyani Christyanis” (Syrian Christians).

Beginning in the fifth century, the Syriac community in the Near East came to be divided between the Assyrian Church of the East, which accepted the doctrines of the theologian Nestorius, and the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, which regarded Nestorianism as a heresy. Although the influence of Syriac Christianity in India is uncontested, it is difficult to know which tradition was more influential and during which periods. Many scholars have asserted the jurisdiction of the Assyrian Church of the East in Malankara from an early period; others have argued for a continuous Orthodox tradition until 1490, when it is well documented that the church began receiving Nestorian bishops from Persia.

The Persian connection of the Indian churches has to be seen in the context of

the internal dissensions and state persecution of Christians in Persia from the 5th century. A Synod of the Persian Church (410 AD) affirmed the faith of Nicea and acknowledged the Metropolitan of Selucia-Ctesiphon as the Catholicos of the East. Not long after, the christological controversies of Chalcedon, fuelled by the strains between the Persian and Byzantine empires, swayed the Persian church to declare itself Nestorian and its head to assume the title of Patriarch of the East (Babylon). From their base in the then flourishing theological school of Nisibis, Nestorian missionaries began moving to India, Central Asia, China and Ethiopia to teach their doctrines-probably associating the churches in these countries with the work of St. Thomas the Apostle, whom the Persians must have venerated as the founder of their own church.

By the 7th Century, specific references of the Indian church began to appear in Persian records. The Metropolitan of India and the Metropolitan of China are mentioned in the consecration records of Patriarchs of the East. At one stage, however, the Indian church was claimed to be under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan of Fars, but this issue was settled by Patriarch Sliba Zoha (714-728 AD) who recognised the traditional dignity of the autonomous Metropolitan of India.

There were other developments in the Persian Church of potential import to the Indian Church. A renaissance of the pre-Chalcedon faith began led by

St. Jacob Baradaeus, emphasising the West Syrian Christological tradition of the one united nature, influencing the church in Persia as well. Taking advantage of the relatively favourable political climate following the Arab conquest of Syria and other parts of West Asia, a **maphrianate** (the Maphrian is a position in the Syriac Orthodox Church's ecclesiastical hierarchy, once known as the Grand Metropolitan of the East and also known as the Catholicos - and his office is called the Maphriante) of the anti-Chalcedonians was established and Mar Marutha, a native Persian, became the first Jacobite Maphriana (Catholicos) of the East. The jurisdiction of this Catholicos at Tigris extended to 18 episcopal dioceses in lower Mesopotamia and further east, but significantly, not to India.

On the growth of the church in India during the first 15 centuries, the balance of historical evidence and the thrust of local tradition point to its basic autonomy sustained by the core of its own faith and culture. It received the trust and courtesy of missionaries, bishops, and migrants as they came from whichever eastern Church - Tigris or Babylon, Antioch or Alexandria, but not from the more distant Constantinople or Rome. There were times in this long period when the Christians in India had been without a bishop and were led by an Archdeacon. On such occasions requests were sent, sometimes with success, to one another of the Eastern prelates to help restore the episcopate in India. Meanwhile the church in Persia

and much of the West declined, by internal causes and the impact of Islam, affecting both the "Nestorian" Patriarchate of the East (Babylon) and the Jacobite Catholicate of the East (Tigris).

## Roman Catholic Influence

The Church in India maintained its local autonomous character. Following the arrival of Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese General, in Calicut, Kerala, India, in 1498, the Europeans came to South India more frequently and by the 16th Century the Portuguese established themselves marking the beginning of European colonisation. Although there were established Christian communities in India, the Portuguese brought with them missionaries to carry on evangelistic work in order to establish churches in communion with Rome under the Portuguese patronage. Indian and European Christians seem to have enjoyed cordial relations at first, but by the end of the sixteenth century the situation had completely deteriorated: while the Malankara Christians were content to acknowledge separate apostolic traditions, respectively from St. Thomas and St. Peter, the Catholic missionaries sought to bring the Indian Church under the administration of Rome.

The post-Portuguese story of the church in India from the 16th century is relatively well documented. In their combined zeal to colonise and proselytise, the Portuguese ignored the way of

life of the St. Thomas Christians. Many converts joined the Catholic Church especially from coastal areas under Latin **prelates** (an archbishop or bishop) that were ignored by the Orthodox Church, but the colonisers and missionaries also took extra efforts to bring the existing communities under the influence of the Bishop of Rome.

The culmination of their efforts was the Synod of Diamper (1599), which proclaimed the Malankara Church a part of the Roman Catholic Church. Although canonical irregularities meant that Rome never accepted the synod, its conveners nonetheless enrolled the support of the local government and began enforcing use of a Latinised Liturgy.

Resentment continued to grow about this attack on our Faith and on January 3rd, 1653 several thousand Malankara Christians finally rebelled and gathered before the Cross in Mattancherry and took an oath to no longer submit to the Roman Church. So many gathered to take this oath that they could not touch the Holy Cross, so they tied ropes to the Cross and passed amongst themselves so they could all be in unity and touch the Cross together. The story is that the cross bent under pressure and hence the name 'Coonan Kurishu Sathyam' or the 'Bent Cross Oath' came about.

The oath resulted in the excommunication of those who participated. With no Orthodox bishop to guide them, the faithful had to face serious difficulties. Yet, our ancestors were determined to keep the true Faith entrusted to us and



Coonan Kurishu Sathyam or the Bent Cross Oath

accordingly, Archdeacon Thomas was raised to the title of Mar Thoma, the first in the long line up to Mar Thoma IX.

However, Rome sent groups of Carmelites attempting to reclaim the lost churches. The Carmelites reclaimed eighty-four churches around 1665 A.D. leaving Archdeacon Mar Thomas I (who led the Coonan Cross Oath) with 32 churches. The 84 churches and their congregations were the body from which the **Syro Malabar Church** descended.

### Pause

How did the Church in India maintain its faith and practices through difficulties?



## West Syrian Connection

The remaining 32 communities eventually entered into communion with the West Syrian Orthodox Church at the request of the Church in India. His Grace Mar Gregorios Abdul Jaleel of Jerusalem came to India and in 1665 confirmed the episcopal consecration of Mar Thoma I as the head of the Orthodox Church in India. The Syriac Patriarch of Antioch helped restore the Church in India and allowed the faithful to adhere to Orthodox faith and practise.

Many of the rites and practises of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church today tie to this restoration with the West Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch.

## British Era

The tensions and strains of the relationship between the Syriac Orthodox hierarchy and the clergy in India were some-

times strained. In 1771 Bishop Mar Gregorios, a representative of the Syriac Orthodox hierarchy from the Middle East, had grown dissatisfied with how Metropolitan Mar Dionysius I (the 6th Metropolitan of the Malankara Syrian Church) had treated him. Against Mar Dionysius' wishes, Mar Gregorios consecrated as bishop a leading dissenter, the monk Kattumangatt Kurien, in a secret but canonically legitimate ceremony. The new bishop took the name Mar Cyril (Koorilos), and eventually this schism became the **Malabar Independent Syrian Church**. This was the first of several schisms from the Orthodox Church and the following centuries unfortunately gave rise to many more schisms and divisions.

In 1876, another split took place, when Anglican-inspired reformers within the Malankara Church broke away to form the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar. History repeated itself in another form when the British in India encouraged reformation within the Orthodox Church partly through Anglican domination of the theological seminary in Kottayam and working to attract membership into Anglican congregations from 1836. Finally, the reformist group broke away to form what is known today as the Mar Thoma Church. The Mar Thoma Church today has more than 400,000 members and is in communion with the Church of England.

## Anglican means..

relating to the established episcopal Church of England and churches of similar faith.

This crisis within the Church in India was contained with the help of Patriarch Peter III of Antioch who visited India in 1875-1877. The outcome was twofold - a reaffirmation of the distinctive identity of the Orthodox Church under its own Metropolitan and, at some dissonance with this renewal, an enlarged influence of the Patriarch of Antioch in the affairs of the Indian Church.

The Patriarch of Antioch had attempted to use this opportunity to exert his authority in the Church and suppress the authority of the Malankara Metropolitan. The interference of the Antiochian Patriarch resulted in legal fights and the final judgement of the Travancore Royal court in 1889 which declared that the Patriarch had spiritual supervisory powers over the Malankara Church. But, it also declared that the Patriarch does not have any temporal authority in the Church. The Patriarch was not satisfied with this decision, one of many factors that led to our current phase of factionalism in India.

## Factionalism

Although the Malankara Church was already autonomous, or a self-governed

part of the Syriac Orthodox Church, our Church desired autocephaly, or its own head rather than reliance on the patriarch of Antioch. The Church declared its autocephaly in 1912, and became known as the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. This was also upon the foundation that the relocation of the Catholicate of the East took place in 1912 in India which was originally in Seleucia and later in Tigris.

In 1912, His Holiness Moran Mar Baselios Paulose I was elevated as "Catholicos of the East" and **primate** (ecclesiastical usage, the prelate is usually the head of the Church) of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. This was with the personal participation of Patriarch Abdul Messiah of Antioch and in 1934 the Constitution of the Orthodox Church in India formally documented our Church as an autocephalous Church with a West Syriac Theological flair proclaiming the faith of the three Holy, Catholic, and Ecumenical Councils, namely that in Nicea, Constantinople, and Ephesus. This made us members of the Oriental Orthodox Family.

However, a faction of the Orthodox Church in India felt this elevation in 1912 was invalid and pledged their allegiances solely to the head of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Ignatius Yakub III. Thus, a schism pitting Orthodox Christians against the other Orthodox Christians came to be.

Our Church confesses and proclaims the supremacy of the Catholicos. Formerly we were the **Malankara Ortho-**

**dox Syrian Church** (sometimes falsely and derogatorily referred to as Metran Kakshi, or Metropolitan's group), while those who claimed the spiritual and temporal primacy of the Syrian Patriarch of Antioch continued as the **Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church** or **Jacobite Syrian Christian Church** (Bhava Kakshi, or the Patriarchal group). A peace accord in 1958 mutually signed between the Catholicos and Malankara Metropolitan HH Baselios Geevarghese II and HH Patriarch Ignatius Yakoub III occurred. There HH the Patriarch Ignatius Yakoub III affirmed the Catholicos as the official Primate of the Orthodox Christians in India as well as the validity of the 1934 Constitution. This truce brought a brief period of peace and reunion between the two factions between 1958 and 1975. However, this peace sadly did not last and the divisions persist even to this day.

Our church is fully self-governed by its local leadership and is indigenous. We do remember and pray for the Syrian Patriarch of Antioch who bears the name of "Mar Ignatius". But we are truly an autocephalous Church and our Bishops are honoured and recognised by all other Orthodox Churches.

Sadly, yet another schism occurred in 1930 when two Metropolitans of our Orthodox Syrian Church, Geevarghese Mar Ivanios and Jacob Mar Theophilos, entered into communion with Rome bringing with them the Bethany Ashram monastery and a number of faithful. Their followers sub-

sequently became the **Syro-Malankara Catholic Church**, remaining as an Eastern Rite Catholic Church using essentially the same Liturgy as their former Orthodox brethren. Thus, even amongst the St. Thomas Christians sharing an identical Liturgy, there are at least three jurisdictions celebrating separately in Kerala on any given Sunday.

We must all continue to pray for peace, forgiveness, and unity between the Malankara and Syriac Orthodox Churches. We are of one faith and true brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ.

### What is the difference?

Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church  
vs.  
Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church

### Summary

The Malankara Orthodox Church hereafter referred to as the Orthodox Church of India or the Indian Orthodox Church, is the second largest group of the ancient church of the St. Thomas Christians in India, which stood until 1657 as a single and united Church with a character of its own. This ancient church of the St. Thomas Christians is an Apostolic Church like all other Apostolic Churches around the world and originated from the evangelical work of St. Thomas. In

that sense our church is one of the oldest churches in the Christian world. Since the Roman Catholic Christians came to India only in the 16th century and Protestant Christians arrived only in the 18th century, it is also the oldest church in the sub-continent. The Malankara Church is an indigenous Church with a distinctive heritage and characteristics of its own. Moreover, it is a church which stood for centuries in close contact with the East Syrian Church which once flourished in the present regions of Iraq and Iran.

As we profess in the Nicene Creed, there is only One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Although we have a very ancient and rich tradition of Apostolic roots tracing back to St. Thomas, the various schisms and divisions indeed is not a joyous story. However, as the Church outside India continues to grow, what is important for us and the generations who follow is to learn the struggles and adversities of those who came before us. At any given point in time, the Orthodox Church could have ceased to exist in India and sadly this was the case in other countries including China. But, with the prayers and tears of our ancestors and the power of the Holy Spirit, Faith prevailed.

As we sing during Holy Qurbana, remembering our ancestors in prayer and learning from struggles is the greatest way to pass on the Faith given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that was illumined by Christ to His Apostles, and which St. Thomas carried to India.



## Through our off'rings and our prayers (Daivasuthanmarayiduvan)

*Through our off'rings and our prayers  
We make good mem'ry of our fathers  
Who in their life taught us to -  
Be children of God*

### Reflection Questions

1. Reframe the story of the “doubting Apostle Thomas”. St. Thomas is the one who travelled to India and eventually suffered martyrdom to share the Gospel with such zeal and love for Christ. The “doubt of St. Thomas” has helped many to affirm their true faith.
2. Examine the history of one of the non-Orthodox denominations in India and explain why we are in communion with them. (Speak the truth with love when explaining).
3. How can we better appreciate the struggles and adversities of the Church in India through the centuries? How can this help us grow our Church outside of India?

# The Church and You

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can explain the apostolic tradition of our Church.*
- *I can explain how one becomes an Orthodox Christian.*
- *I can recognise the different means to grow in faith in our church life.*
- *I can identify the responsibilities of an Orthodox Christian in society.*



Ship of faith icon

## Ecclesiology

“No one can have God as their Father who does not have the Church as their mother”. In saying this, St. Cyprian of Carthage demonstrates that the Church is integral to the life of a Christian.

**Ecclesiology** is the study of the Church. It comes from the Greek word for Church - “ekklesia”. Ecclesiology describes how the Church operates, how She is organised, how She addresses problems that arise, and how She interacts with other spiritual communities.

The Church is often seen as a ship in Orthodox **hymns** and teachings, one which carries and protects her passengers as they travel towards God. Since St. Mary is also often compared to the Church, we sing:

### Qolo

Ququlion for the Mother of God  
(Akhila jagalpathiye..)

*Like a ship, Mary carried,  
Adored, and honoured  
The Captain - who is the Lord  
Of all creation*

Using this imagery, ecclesiology describes how to enter the ship, how the passengers are cared for, who the captain is, etc.

The Orthodox Church, as an Apostolic community, has to carry the mis-

sion, namely, spreading and cementing the Gospel into the hearts of her children. Leaders and faithful of the Orthodox Church have the specific calling of being sent by Christ. The Holy Spirit helps everyone to understand, assimilate, and live out the characteristics of the Holy Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. One shall remember that we recite this at the end of the third paragraph of the Nicene Creed. Therefore, one can say with assurance that any Church, which lives out these four characteristics of the Church does have the fullness of Christ in it in today’s fragmented world. We can understand the statement of Jesus Christ in **St. Matthew 16:18** only in this context: “**You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church**”. The faith that St. Peter confesses, Jesus is the Christ, is this One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church and it is upon this faith that Christ builds His Church. Even the gates of Hades won’t be prevailing against it.

Images of Church from St. Paul’s understandings:

- a. The Holy Church is the Body of Christ (**1 Corinthians 12:27**) and every Christian is a member of this cosmic Body. Christ is the head of this body so that the Church can become the body, which is integrally together with Christ. There is no living body without a head, and there is no living head without the body. Thus, the Church is One with Christ.

- b. The Church is the temple of God (**1 Corinthians 3:9-11; 16**) because the Spirit of God is living in each member of the Church. **Ephesians 2:9-22** reads that Christ is the cornerstone of this temple called the Church and every member of the Church is a brick in it (**1 St. Peter 2:5**). This makes the concept of Holiness the Church has and the Church's apostolicity which stems from Christ all meaningful. St. Peter therefore, can say without doubt that the Holy Church consists of chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and is God's special possession (**1 St. Peter 2:9**).
- c. The Church is the bride of Christ (**Ephesians 5:25-27; 2 Corinthians 11:2; and Ephesians 5:24**). The church will be fully united with Christ, the Bridegroom, at His second coming. The Church is therefore eagerly awaiting the second arrival of Christ. The eternal union of Christ and His bride will take place then as **St. John in the Revelation 19:7-9; 21:1-2** narrates. One can also follow the parable of Ten Virgins (**St. Matthew 25:1-13**) here to understand why the Church is so Holy, devoted, committed, with no wrinkles, without blemish, or anything similar.
- d. The Church is the flock and Christ is the chief shepherd. In **St. John's Gospel 10:11-18** one can read the

importance of the Good shepherd and how He is protecting the Church. Every member of the Church is a sheep and it listens to the voice of the Shepherd.

Therefore, one can say without doubt that everything extends from the Church and does so with a mission and a purpose. After our Baptism, we all become full members of the Church. As St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy, **"Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity"** (**1 Timothy 4:12**). We are all members of the Church! And as such, no matter at what level we work or in what capacity, the way we operate and make decisions day to day, how we perform our duties and work with each other, how the Church operates, and how we solve problems both inside the Church and outside is always focused on Christ. We are to be His Hands and Feet in this fallen world. This is the importance of understanding ecclesiology and its impact on our life and salvation.

### Remember

*"No one can have God as their Father who does not have the Church as their Mother"*

— St. Cyprian of Carthage



## The Early Church

This was seen even in the early life of the Church as documented in Acts of the Holy Apostles. One of the first major conflicts in the early Church was the issue on how to receive Gentile converts. As the Church grew and more Gentiles became followers of **the Way**, the Church had to specify what was required of the new converts. The Judaizers were of the opinion that the converts to Christianity should be circumcised and so become Jews first. They thought that the Law of Moses still applied to the Christians. They were unsure if non-Jews could become full members of the New Covenant without fulfilling the requirements of the Old. In addressing this issue, the early Church set the precedent for how future theological controversies and false teachings would be addressed.

When Paul and Barnabas disagreed (Acts 15:1-2) with the Judaizers over the issue of circumcision, the Church decided to send Paul, Barnabas, and others to Jerusalem to discuss this issue with the apostles and elders. Here, we see the precedent for addressing doctrinal issues. The entire Church came together in the form of a council to discuss the issue at one location. In Acts, we see the apostles, the elders and the laity all gather in Jerusalem for the Council. One party shares their opinion. **“But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command**

**them to keep the law of Moses’” (Acts 15:5).** The leaders of the Church address this view. **“And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them...” (Acts 15:7).** Peter proclaims that he was chosen by God to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles and that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. He proclaimed that the Gentiles are saved in the same manner as the Jews. Even though Peter made this proclamation, it is important to note that the Church does not immediately accept his view as the final word on the issue.

Next, the other bishops share their views. **“Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12).** Here Paul and Barnabas argue against circumcision using their own missionary experience as evidence. Once again, this is not accepted as the final decree of the Council.

Next, the bishop of the local Church expresses his view. At the Council in Jerusalem, James, the bishop of Jerusalem, reviewed the Scriptures and quoted the Prophets, and suggested four different abstinences for the new Gentile converts. **“Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:19-20).** At this point, the entire Church led



The first Council

by the apostles and elders wrote a letter specifying the result of the Council. **“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things...”** (Acts 15:28). Here we see the synergy between the Church and the Holy Spirit.

The council of Jerusalem set the precedent for how the Church dealt with future issues such as Arianism, Macedo-

nianism, and Nestorianism. The pattern outlined above is what is followed in the Ecumenical Councils.

The Orthodox Church follows the model from the Council of Jerusalem for faith matters for it is not a democracy nor is it a dictatorship. Every decision is made in the context of the Church. No individual decides dogma for themselves. No bishop is above the



Church. The ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church is synodal - a synod (or council) governs the faith of the Church. The Catholicos is seen as the first of the Holy Episcopal Synod. In return the members of the Holy Synod acknowledge the Catholicos as first out of respect and honour for God. The Catholicos respects all other bishops as brothers in love for Christ, while the other bishops reciprocate the same. This is also Trinitarian as all three persons in the Holy Trinity have the same will and same energy.

### Remember

The Orthodox Church; as an apostolic community, has to carry the mission, namely, spreading and cementing the Gospel into the hearts of her children. Leaders and faithful of the Orthodox Church have the specific calling of being sent by Christ. The Holy Spirit helps everyone to understand, assimilate, and live out the characters of the Holy Church



And above all, each and every Bishop acts to adore, praise, and glorify God. Have you ever wondered why the Catholicos are addressed as “His Holiness” and the Bishops of our Church as “His Grace”? The “His” in the titles of our bishops are not to direct the respect and honour towards the individual, but rather to remember, honour, and glo-

rify God. As we proclaim during Holy Qurbana, “the One Holy Father, the One Holy Son, and the One Holy Spirit, alone is holy”. This has been the model for the Christian Church for all ages and the importance of understanding ecclesiology.



H H Moran Mar Baselios Marthoma Mathews III, Catholicos of the East.

The Holy Episcopal Synod presided over by the Catholicos, is the highest body of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, and is composed of all bishops. The Holy Synod's authority is definitive and binding in the church's theology and faith practises, as well as in the sequence of Apostolic Succession to the Throne of St. Thomas. The Malankara Syrian Christian Association's decisions

and the Church Constitution of 1934 serve as the primary sources of authority for the Church in all things about worldly affairs. The metropolitans are responsible for administering the dioceses given to them by the Malankara Managing Committee as approved by the Holy Episcopal Synod. The respective Diocesan Councils and the Diocesan Assemblies assist the Metropolitan in this process.

Ecclesiology safeguards the faith of the Church. Apostolic Succession is very important in the Orthodox tradition. In the priest's prayer of absolution for the faithful, apostolic succession is very much seen. "May God have mercy upon you, and may He guide you to everlasting life through the authority of priesthood which was entrusted by our Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples who, in turn, entrusted it to their successors until it was given me". This spiritual succession of authority comes from Christ Himself. However, there are times where those with Apostolic Succession from Christ lead the Church astray. Nestorius was Archbishop of Constantinople - he had received Apostolic Succession. Despite that, he started promoting heresy. Ecclesiology ensures that Apostolic tradition is maintained while also emphasising the importance of apostolic succession.

## Summary

For Orthodox Christians, everything begins with the Church. It is in the Church that we are received into the True Faith. It is through the Church that we receive adoption as sons and daughters of God and receive the Holy Spirit. Despite having received grace, we fall away from God due to the illness of sin. The Church provides the medicine of Confession to wipe away all that separates us from God. When we are physically or mentally sick, the Church provides anointing. It is in the Church that man and woman are joined to become one through the mystery of Holy Matrimony. This mystery is a symbol of the mystical union between Christ, the Bridegroom and the Church, His Bride.

As Fr. Bijesh Philip notes, "*The Church is the continuation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In union with Christ, the Church makes God visible to the world. As a mother, [She] brings up [Her] children in the image and likeness of God.*"<sup>1</sup>

It is important for us to remember that we are the Church, and we must participate as members of the Body of Christ to be the Church and be a witness both inside the parish and to our friends and community. Without understanding ecclesiology and how the Church has and always lives as witness to God, we are in danger of failing to live to our calling as baptised Orthodox Christians.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://mosc.in/the\\_church/theology/ecclesiology](https://mosc.in/the_church/theology/ecclesiology)



## Remember

The Orthodox Church follows the model from the Council of Jerusalem for faith matters for it is not a democracy nor is it a dictatorship. Every decision is made in the context of the Church. No individual decides dogma for themselves. No bishop is above the Church. The ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church is synodal - a synod (or council) governs the faith of the Church.



## Reflection Questions

1. How could you exemplify Christ in your everyday activities as an Orthodox Christian?
2. In the concluding hymn during the Sunday of the Renewal of the Church we sing this verse:

*Bless'd are You, O Holy Church  
For You guard the One True Faith  
The Lord who died for Your sake  
Takes pride in Your faithfulness*

What are some ways we can show our faithfulness to the Church in school and at home?

3. Reflect on and analyse the following quote from Fr. Thomas Hopko: “*If a parish has no awareness and consciousness of being “sent” by God to speak His words, to do His work, and to accomplish His will in this world, then it is not an Orthodox Christian parish.*”

## Highly Favoured One

### Lesson Goals :

- *I can explain why we hold the All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary in such high honour.*
- *I can learn about our path to holiness from the life of the Theotokos.*
- *I can understand why we honour the Theotokos and clearly defend that we venerate and not worship the Mother of God.*



Orthodox Christians revere the Theotokos more than all the saints and angels because she was found worthy to give birth to Christ, the Saviour of the world by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. Many hymns and prayers in the liturgy are dedicated to the All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. It is important to understand that we honour but do not worship her. An accurate understanding of the Theotokos is essential to learn how we can be saved.

The All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary was like any one of us, a human being. However, by her special calling to be the Mother of God, she led a life ever-pleasing to God. She is a child of God, a servant, a willing handmaid who did what God called her to do. She lived a pious and humble life, serving, praying, obeying and praising God. She was

chosen as one that God highly favoured, blessed among women to bear the Son of God, the fountainhead of our salvation, “a dwelling place of holiness for the One who is above the Cherubim.” She is the archetype for our life and a great inspiration and example in our journey of Theosis. She is the greatest example of synergy, purity and righteousness, determined to obey the will of God in everything she does.

### Research

Take a look through the Qurbana Kramam and find 3 hymns dedicated to the Theotokos



## The New Eve

The initial chapters of the book of Genesis detail how man was separated from communion with God. When God placed man and woman in the Garden of Eden, they were to obey a sole commandment made by God - to not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (**Genesis 2:16, 17**). But Eve went against God's commandment. Sin and suffering entered this world, through Adam and Eve, separating all mankind from their creator. The disobedience of Eve along with Adam, caused mankind to fall away from the grace of God and become subject to mortality.



On the contrary, in the New Testament, we are introduced to another woman, Mary, a descendent from the royal lineage of David. She was the daughter of Joachim and Anna, who, af-

ter a lifetime of barrenness, through persistent supplication, were blessed with a child in their old age. They raised her in prayer, and dedicated her to the Temple of Jerusalem. We commemorate her birth as the Feast of the Nativity of Theotokos, on the 8th of September every year.

While she was espoused to Joseph, Angel Gabriel appeared to her and delivered the divine annunciation to bear Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity. The Church celebrates the Annunciation (Suboro) to the Theotokos annually on the 25th of March as well as the fourth Sunday in the season of Annunciation.

The All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary's response to Angel Gabriel is that of the highest obedience to God. She set aside her will and her personal wishes, and through her willing obedience and unique resignation to uphold the Divine will, brought redemption to the sinful humanity. Through her obedience, all creation bore witness to the glory of God, through the Incarnation of Jesus. The All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary is the supreme example of co-operation between God (incarnation of the Word) and the free will of man. The Ever-Virgin Mary is also designated as "the second Eve" or "the new Eve" because her free and obedient submission to the will of God, offsets the fatal disobedience and fall of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Her life is a rule of life for all. Our goal as a Christian is to have Jesus within us just as Mary chose, to have Christ within her!

## Remember

She is the archetype for our life and a great inspiration and example in our journey of Theosis



## The Mother of God

Throughout the Gospels, we see events and references to The All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary. She appears in the New Testament first, when Angel Gabriel announces Jesus' birth (St. Luke 1: 30-31). We see her again when Jesus was dedicated in the Jerusalem temple for naming (St. Luke 2:21-22), when they went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover (St. Luke 2:41), at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (St. John 2:1), at the cross of Jesus (St. John 19:25) and at the end when Mary together with the disciples (Acts 1:14) was praying in the upper room. Thus, we are exposed to the important role that the Virgin Mary played in Jesus's life and His ministry and in the growth of the Church.

## The Dormition

While the All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary was praying on the Mount of Olives, Angel Gabriel once more appeared to her, and disclosed: "Thus says your Son, The days are approaching when I will take My Mother unto Me". Thus the Virgin heard those

much longed for words which she received with gladness. At the time of her death, the disciples of our Lord who were preaching throughout the world returned to Jerusalem to see the Theotokos. Except for the Apostle Thomas, all of them including the Apostle Paul were gathered together at her bedside. At the moment of her death, Jesus Christ himself descended and carried her soul into heaven.



Icon of Dormition

Following her repose, the body of the Theotokos was taken in procession and laid in a tomb near the Garden of Gethsemane. The Apostle Thomas arrived three days after her repose and desired to see her body. According to Sacred Tradition, the Most Holy Theotokos three days after she reposed was resurrected from the dead and ascended bodily to the heavens. During her ascension, she

gave her Holy Zoni (which is translated as either “Belt” or “Girdle”) to the Apostle Thomas. Thomas, along with the rest of the Holy Apostles, opened up her grave and did not find the body of the Theotokos, and a sweet fragrance came forth. In this way the Holy Belt is proof of her resurrection and bodily ascension to the heavens, and, in a word, of her metastasis (transposition). On August 15, every year, we commemorate and celebrate the falling asleep of the Theotokos i.e The Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos (Shoonoyo).

When we celebrate the dormition, and glorification of our Lady, we are celebrating our own death, resurrection and glorification with Christ. For everything that we say happens to the Theotokos will one day happen to those who follow Christ and love His appearance.

### Remember

When we celebrate the Dormition, assumption and glorification of our Lady, we are celebrating our own death, resurrection and glorification with Christ. For everything that we say happens to the Theotokos will one day happen to those who follow Christ and love His appearance.



### Addressing Heresies

There were some controversies within the Church on her importance. One

such heresy was addressed in 431 AD, at the third Ecumenical Council, that met at Ephesus.

Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople taught that when St. Mary gave birth to Jesus Christ, He was only a human being and God came and dwelt upon Him later on. The Council led by St. Cyril of Alexandria, declared Nestorius’ teaching as false and that Jesus Christ from the very first moment of His incarnation is one person - fully God and fully man.

As the all Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary gave birth to God Himself, she is the Theotokos, a Greek word which means God-bearer ('Theos' -God and 'Tokos' from the verb 'tiktein' - to bear). The Syriac term “Yoldath Aloho” and the Malayalam term “Daiva Prasavithri” clearly asserts this as the one who begets or gives birth to God. This is different from “Christokos”, the one who gave birth to Christ. The Council added “the virgin Mary, mother of God” to the Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed. The title Theotokos is more a glorification of Christ rather than St. Mary.

We have to also keep in mind that this explanation rules out the false notion that God the Word started His existence in the womb of the Virgin Mary. God existed forever and has even created time. The divine Son of God was born as a man from the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit (Mt 1; Lk 1). Jesus is born from the Virgin Mary because He is the divine Son of God, the Saviour of the world. It is the formal teaching of the Orthodox Church that

Jesus is not a “mere man” like all other men. He is indeed a real man, a whole and perfectly complete man with a human mind, soul and body. But he is the man which the Son and Word of God has become. Thus, the Church formally confesses that Mary should properly be called Theotokos, which means literally “the one who gives birth to God.” For the one born of Mary is, as the Orthodox Church sings at Christmas: “... he who from all eternity is God.”

The Theotokos continued to be a virgin all her life, addressing her as the Virgin Mary or the Virgin Mother. The Holy Scriptures do not contradict this belief. The New Testament refers to the brothers and sisters of Jesus. It is believed that Joseph, being an older man, had been married, and had children, and his wife had passed away, leaving him a widower. In the Ma'nitho of Mar Severus, we reaffirm the Holy Virgin Mary as glorious, chaste and pure, Mother of our God.

with her hand she directs us to the Infant she is holding. Above her head are the letters “MP OY”, an abbreviation of the Greek: “Mater Theos” – the Mother of God.



Mother of God

## Take a Look

Find and take a look at the Ma'nitho of Mar Severus

That Infant is identified to us as Jesus Christ (abbreviated as IC XC), who even as a child is shown with a scroll, embodying all the wisdom of the true God. His halo contains the Greek letters meaning “I AM”, testifying to His divinity, and even as an infant His right hand is shown giving a blessing. His receding hairline and large forehead shows that this child in the arms of St. Mary is old, and is God existing forever. An icon of St. Mary with Christ is not referred to as an icon of St. Mary but rather an icon of Christ.

## St. Mary in Icons

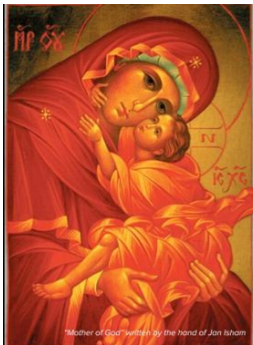
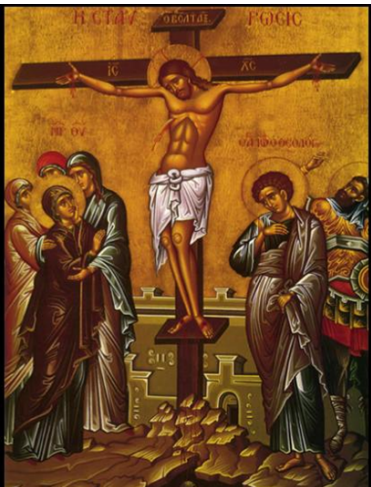
In the iconographic tradition of the Church, St. Mary is usually presented as holding in her arms the child Jesus. On this icon, Mary looks directly at us, yet

## Highly Favoured

Due to her role in the Incarnation and God's plan of salvation, we honour Theotokos as the pre-eminent and the most exalted among all the Saints. The salutation "highly favoured one" was addressed to her, indicating that God Himself had chosen to honour the Virgin Mary. But like every other Saint, it is not about their glory or honour but about Christ in them. It is important to note that as Orthodox Christians, we do not "worship" the Virgin Mary but we "venerate" her, for worship belongs to God alone.

The All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary

exemplifies humility, unconditional obedience and wholehearted devotion to God. She is the most blessed woman because of her complete willingness to receive God's grace i.e. hearing the Word of God and keeping it. As the Ever-Virgin Mary bore Jesus physically, we as Christians now have the privilege to bear God within us, spiritually. She is the personification of the Church. Just like the Church carries Christ, the Head of the Church, she carries Christ - as a ship, who carries the captain who steers it. We imitate her practical spiritual life, including the purity and humility by which she guided her free will into perfect obedience to do the Will of God.

 <p><i>"Mother of God" written by the hand of Jan Israhm</i></p> <p><b>"But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart."</b> (Luke 2:19)</p>	<p><b><u>The Procession to Golgotha</u></b></p> <p>Matthew 27:31-33 Mark 15:20-22 Luke 23: 26-30 John 19:17</p> <p><b><u>Great Friday 1st Procession Hymn</u></b></p> <p>As He came from the city, With the cross on His shoulders, The Hebrew women gathered. They wept bitterly for Him. His mother stood from afar With her friends surrounding her Like a dove, she moaned with grief, "Where my Son are You going? My Belov'ed only Son, Where are they taking You to? Why did You give Yourself up To the ungrateful people? O my Son, woe be to me Woe is me, my belov'ed." Bless'd is Your Passion for us, And Your great humility!</p>	
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Right from the Annunciation, she was well aware of the purpose of the Incarnation and the fate of her Son. Simeon

prophesied when she took Jesus to the church on Ma'altho that a spear would penetrate her heart. Every year, in the



procession hymn, which is sung during the Great Friday service, we are reminded of the heart-breaking scene when St. Mary cries (like a dove) asking Jesus why He has allowed these bad people to do this to Him? She was a mere human like any of us with all these natural valid human feelings, but she never let it stand in the way of God's plan, which is a great inspiration for all of us as Christians. In obedience to God's clear intentions, we honour the Theotokos through icons, hymns and special feast days. As the Theotokos she was the most intimate with Christ on earth and can intercede with her Son on our behalf, affirming the biblical principle that there is only one Mediator, Jesus, between God the Father and humankind. We ask her, as the mother of the church, for guidance and

protection. Through her life, she shows how all people must be when they are sanctified by the Holy Spirit as servants of God and imitators of Christ.

Fr. Thomas Hopko once quoted, "She is, in every aspect of her life, as Father Alexander Schmemmann so often said, not the great exception, but rather the great example. From her conception to her dormition, that is, her true and real death, she shows how all people must be when they are sanctified by the Holy Spirit as servants of God and imitators of Christ."

### Take a Look

Find the hymn in the Qurbana Kramam that refers to St. Mary as the ship. What does this hymn mean?

### Reflection Questions

1. How do we explain the tradition of the veneration of the Theotokos in the Orthodox Church? Explain the difference between worship and veneration.
2. How does our belief about the Theotokos reflect what we believe about Christ?
3. What are the practical lessons we can learn from the life of the Theotokos?



# The Mother of God

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can reflect on my life and think about how I can emulate the humility and obedience of St. Mary.*
- *I can observe icons, hymns and Scriptures to discover the ever-virginity of St. Mary.*
- *I can discuss how the Ever-Virgin Mary represents the Church to bear Christ to the world.*



## The Importance of the Theotokos

One of the greatest tragedies of modern Christianity is how the topic of St. Mary's importance became one of great debate and controversy.

As explained throughout this lesson, the teaching of our Church is quite simple that St. Mary is the Mother of God (i.e. Daiva Maathavu, the Theotokos) because Jesus was always fully man and fully God even in her womb. There was never a moment in time that Christ was not God. This is how the Church defines the perpetual sanctity of life, from being in the womb of our mother through to the last breath of our lives. The sanctity of life continues through to the second coming of Christ and thereafter in the Kingdom of God because Christ has experienced all these phases in His life and thereafter. Sanctification of human life

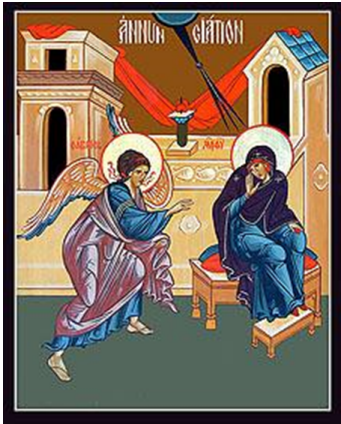
started in the womb of St. Mary, because Christ lived in her womb.

In comparison with the Roman Catholic Church, we see a significant similarity in the belief that St. Mary was indeed the Theotokos. However, through the centuries the Catholic Church's theology developed new concepts such as the Immaculate Conception of St. Mary that are not aligned with the ancient teachings of the Church. At the other extreme, the Protestant Churches reduced the original teachings by denying many fundamental truths such as St. Mary was the Theotokos and the ever virginity of St. Mary.

Our veneration for the Theotokos also goes beyond our faith and the theological truth that all men and women (including St. Mary) were created in God's image and likeness (**Genesis 1:26-27**) with free-will. St. Mary's life choices

made her a holy human being. They led to her being chosen to be the Mother of God and thus she is a role-model for us all. More importantly, what happened to St. Mary is an indication of what will happen to us at the second coming of our Lord.

For Orthodox Christians, the importance of the Theotokos in our lives is without debate. As Fr. Thomas Hopko reflected, “She is, in every aspect of her life, as Father Alexander Schmemmann so often said, not the great exception, but rather the great example. From her conception to her dormition, that is, her true and real death, she shows how all people must be when they are sanctified by the Holy Spirit as servants of God and imitators of Christ.”



Annunciation to the Theotokos

## Partner Talk

Reflect and discuss with a partner what is meant by the statement below. As Fr. Thomas Hopko reflected, “She is, in every aspect of her life, as Father Alexander Schmemmann so often said, not the great exception, but rather the great example.



## Annunciation to the Theotokos

The **Annunciation** (Suboro: Syriac) to St. Mary is so significant in the Orthodox Faith that it is celebrated twice during the liturgical calendar: in the beginning of the Church calendar, 3 weeks after Koodhosh Eetho, and then on March 25, exactly 9 months before Christmas. This date for celebrating is fixed, even if it falls on Good Friday, when the Holy Qurbana is usually prohibited. In other words Holy Qurbana is conducted on this day, regardless. Our Church gives primary importance to this event because it indicates that Jesus Christ was already alive the moment Angel Gabriel made the announcement to Mary that she was going to deliver the Son of God to the world. The significance of this event is described in the Concluding Hymn sung during the Feast of Annunciation:

### Concluding Hymn sung during the Feast of Annunciation

*The archangel  
Announced to Mary, "Peace be  
with You,  
The Lord is with You"  
O Mary, you  
Carry in your womb Him Who  
carries  
The whole creation*

First, Gabriel mentions "The Lord is with You" to indicate to Mary that God is living inside her already. Second, the message to her is that, "You carry in your womb Him who carried the whole creation" to portray an incarnate God that is the same as the Creator who is living in the womb.

The Annunciation is also celebrated during the Orthodox season of Nativity, and the Promion is read with these words:

### Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit, Volume 2, p.58

Praise... to the Eternal Word and Only Son of the Father who at the announcement of Gabriel the archangel came to dwell in the Virgin. Blessed is the womb that bore you. Blessed are those who hear the word of God and do it.



We always recite the gospel from **St. Luke 1:26-38** during the days when Annunciation is remembered. St. Mary chose to accept the announcement that Angel Gabriel made to her and carry Jesus Christ in her womb and deliver Him to the world. She did not do it hastily, as she questioned Gabriel about how it was possible prior to making this great decision and finally answered, **“Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.”** (St. Luke 1:38) Although she questioned how it would happen, she never doubted the plan of God that it would happen.

### Self-Reflection

What are activities in your life that take time away from God? What life change can you make to incorporate some time to spend with God?

As she was recently betrothed to Joseph, she could have rejected this and moved on, but instead, she surrendered to the Word of God, and not to what the other people would have thought about her. This is a perfect application of when Jesus said “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.” (St. Luke 9:24). St. Joseph was entrusted with St. Mary and it was expected of him to protect without having spot or wrinkle or any such thing and without blemish (cf. Ephesians 5:27).

St. Mary had never planned for such a mission when she received this announcement. That Mary was willing to not debate this with God and surrender is what sets her apart. We may have trouble getting out of our comfort zones as well when we are directed to do the work of God. We may be busy with other aspects of our life and may even say we do not have time, but St. Mary ensured that God’s word was fulfilled.

She was willing to risk her life, her freedom and her reputation to fulfill God’s promise. It is definitely not easy, but St. Mary shows a true example of how to be a true follower of Christ.



Mother of God



Icon of the burning bush

## Iconography of the Theotokos

Besides Jesus Christ, only St. Mary has been the focus of many of the icons of the Church. That speaks to the significance and resemblance the Theotokos has to God.

In fact, the first **icon** was created by Luke who was inspired first to paint one of the icons of the Mother of God holding Jesus Christ the child.

The red veil covering Mary is a sign

of humility, and that is the tradition that girls and women carry in our Church today. The outside clothing colour of red symbolises divinity while the inside colour of her clothes is green and blue to symbolise humanity. The three stars indicate her virginity before, during, and after her pregnancy with Jesus Christ. The Greek word above her right shoulder says “Hodigitria” which means guide, as she is showing with her right



hand to guide us to Jesus. The words above her say “MP OY” which is an abbreviation in Greek for “Mater Theos” or Mother of God. The “IC XC” over infant Jesus translates from Greek to “I Am”, indicating the huge responsibility the Theotokos took in delivering Jesus Christ.

The icon of the burning bush above indicates that the nature of the Theotokos was never destroyed. It is also a **typology** of the burning bush where the Lord appeared to Moses and the bush was on fire, yet did not get burned. St. Mary also persevered throughout her life as a holy figure. We sing this in one of the stanzas of our pre-Qurbana hymns.

## Theotokos and the Church

St. Mary is also a model to the Church in how to bear Christ and be a light to the world. This is why the liturgical calendar dedicates many days to her.

St. Cyril of Alexandria doubtlessly identifies St. Mary with the Holy Church. He preaches to the Council of Ephesus thus: “Let us praise with songs of joy Mary the ever-virgin, who herself is clearly the holy Church, together with the Son and most chaste Spouse! To God be praise forever!”

### Research

Look through the Qurbana Kramam and find prayers that seek the intercession of St. Mary to Jesus Christ.



St. Jacob of Sarug can't keep himself quiet when he describes St. Mary in the following lines: “The wise Virgin was the mouth of the Church, and she heard the explanation for the creation of the whole world”. St. Ephrem the Syrian also says through citing **Isaiah 7:14** that the virgin in this verse is representing St. Mary as well as the Holy Church. St. Mary and the Holy Church are holy and virgin at the same time. The Church has never compromised on her faith just like St. Mary has preserved her virginity all along. Just like the Holy Church, she is chaste, pure, glorious, and splendid (cf. **Ephesians 5:21** ff). The Holy Church through baptism delivers her children without a physical father and St. Mary delivered her Son without a physical father.

The Feast of the Dormition to St. Mary, or **Shoonoyo**, is dedicated to the Theotokos as the day she fell asleep to be with God. We observe a 15 day lent starting August 1st in honour of St. Mary. Wednesday Sh'himo prayers are also dedicated to St. Mary, apart from the other saints. We only venerate St. Mary and do not worship her. Our prayers seek the intercession of St. Mary to Jesus Christ, because she carried Jesus. She delivered Christ as her son and the Son of God through the Holy Spirit. At the same time, the Church considers St. Mary as a human being who needs salvation. Therefore, we pray for St. Mary, as well. During the Thuyobo service the celebrant always prays for St. Mary to Jesus Christ. Why? Because we are not ele-

vating her to the ranks of God, but she is a special human being. She is holy, she presented humanity to the second person of the Holy Trinity, she is venerable, and she is a perfect role model for every human being.

### Reflection Questions

1. Why do different faiths have such different perspectives on the role of Mary? Why is she such a polarising figure in the Church?
2. What makes the Annunciation so significant that it takes precedence over Good Friday? Why is the Annunciation usually during the Holy Week?
3. Icons of St. Mary usually include infant Jesus Christ. Why is this the case?

# Undoubtedly the God Bearer

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can explain the Church's teaching on why the Virgin Mary is addressed as the Mother of God.*
- *I can interpret the theology of the Church through the hymns on the Theotokos.*
- *I can illustrate that the Holy Church's adoration of the Theotokos is veneration and not worship, which is offered to God alone.*



Enthroned Theotokos at Hagia Sophia

In the Orthodox Church, the Virgin Mary is referred to as “Theotokos” or “Yoldath Aloho” – a title given to Virgin because the only-begotten Son of God, equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit, entered the world through her womb. The Greek term *Theotokos* and Syriac term Yoldath Aloho means God bearer. The Virgin Mary is undoubtedly the Mother of God because the one who is born of her is God through Whom the whole universe was created. That’s why we honour the Virgin with such radiant and impressive titles in the Church.



## Theotokos

The Orthodox Church reverence for the Virgin Mary is centred on Christ. It's important to frame our entire understanding of the teachings of the Church about the Virgin by beginning with Christ. The title, Mother of God, seems to have first been used in liturgical and devotional practice by Christians in Egypt. It appears in an ancient prayer, *Sub Tuum Praesidium* which dates back to the third century.

### Remember

The Orthodox Church reverence for St. Mary is centered on Christ.



Nevertheless, the title, Mother of God, was used in an Alexandrian creedal formula. When challenged in 322, Patriarch Peter of Alexandria defended its legitimacy. Use of the title, Theotokos was formally sanctioned by the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431.

The Church declared that both Divine and human natures were united in the person of Jesus, the son of Mary. Hence, the Virgin Mary may be called Theotokos, since the son she bore according to the flesh, Jesus, is truly one of the Divine persons of the Trinity. This title is really a Christological statement, which affirms that the second person of the Trinity, who was born into history as fully human, is really 'God with us'.

St. Cyril defended this ancient Church

understanding in his *anathema* against Bishop Nestorius. Anathema is a Greek word, and it literally means anything devoted to evil or an accursed thing. It is used by the Church not as a permanent and final judgement as our strong belief is God is our judge. However, it is a formal statement by the Church usually against a teaching that clearly contradicts the teachings given to us from God. St. Severus of Antioch in his 29th Cathedral Homily says citing the story of Achan in (Joshua 7) that the gold, silver, and expensive robe that Achan stole were not supposed to be kept by an Israelite. They were anathema. In other words, anything that shall not be among the children of Israel, within their tents, and in possession with them is anathema. It is something forbidden, something that does not belong to them, and anyone who holds on to them is also forbidden. Anathema is thus a curse pronounced upon a rebel or an adversary, as well.

In the words of St. Cyril, "If anyone will not confess that the Emmanuel is very God, and that therefore the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God (Θεοτόκος), in as much as in the flesh she bore the Word of God made flesh [as it is written, The Word was made flesh] let him be anathema."

St. Cyril's defence that the Virgin Mary was the Theotokos (God bearer or birth-giver of God) focused on the truth that Jesus is God. The Syriac term, "yoldath aloho" literally means "the one who begets" or "gives birth to God", and we

remember St. Cyril in the 5th Thubden of Holy Qurbana as the one who “clearly expounded and declared the Incarnation of God the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, who took flesh.” Severus the Great of Antioch defended Orthodoxy building on the strong foundation from St. Cyril and we remember him in the same Thubden as one “who preached all the time that Mary was undoubtedly the God-bearer”.

## Research

Look further into the teachings of St. Cyril and Severus the Great of Antioch. What else did they say specifically about St. Mary?



The All Holy and Virgin Mary was chosen by the Father to bear His only begotten Son – a fact that we remember when we sing the Quqliyon (or cycle of prayers) to the Virgin Mary:

(Ninnal sthuthiyodu..)

*The King's daughter stands in glory,  
Halleluyah w Halleluyah  
And the Queen at Your right hand*

*Leave your people and your father's house  
Halleluyah w Halleluyah  
For the King will desire your beauty. Barekmor*

From the Wednesday night vigil prayers

*The Virgin bore a wonder - let us go and contemplate  
The Ancient of Days - wrapped in swaddling clothes  
The Virgin bore an elder, the Ancient of Days  
He who holds mountains is carried by a maiden  
He gives bread to the hungry  
But is nursed like an infant  
The Son with no beginning - willed to have a beginning  
He came to birth and - He is without end. Barekmor*

Jesus received His humanity from the Virgin Mary, but never at any moment was devoid of His divinity. Jesus was and is always God, and this means even in the womb of the Virgin Mary, He was divine. This great mystery is worthy of our wonder, and often included in our prayers and hymns. For example, from the Wednesday night vigil prayers.

### Contemplating the Virgin Birth

One of the central claims of the Christian faith is the Virgin Birth of Christ. The Virgin Mary became the vessel for the Lord of Glory Himself, and bore in the flesh Him whom heaven and earth cannot contain. Would this not have been grounds to consider her life, including her body, as consecrated to God and God alone? The Virgin Mary teaches us about the Incarnation of the Word of God requires that we first accept the Incarnation. Once we do, then her virginity not only after birth, but also before and indeed the character of her entire life become in themselves a wellspring of teaching about life in Christ and the glory of God. The role of the Theotokos in our salvation was prepared from the beginning of the ages. The significance of the Virgin Mary in the Salvation can never be fully understood but it is worthy of our awe and reflection. Scripture, hymns, and prayers make references to the Virgin Mary's role and often illustrative words that are intended to spark our interest and curiosity. The proper veneration of the Theotokos which the Or-

thodox Church has always held, not because the Virgin Mary is the great exception but because she is the great example.

The Virgin Mary's royalty is declared when we consider that God is Pantocrator - the Almighty and Creator of Heaven and Earth. All things come from God, and that one of His creations was so pure and holy to be worthy of bearing God in the womb can never be fully explained. The images and words used are given by the Holy Church to encourage us to understand this amazing woman, one who proclaimed that "generations will call me blessed" (St. Luke 1:48). The glory and honour given to the Virgin Mary because of her role as mother is because of the one she bore in her womb - from the Qolo of the Quqlion to the Theotokos,

(Krobe Sraapikal than..)

*Glory to the Pow'r  
Who left the Cherubim  
And the Seraphim,  
Descending to dwell  
In the Virgin's womb;  
And He took flesh from her  
To save Adam's sons  
From Death and Satan.*

### Veneration of the Theotokos

These are a few of the many reasons why we venerate the Virgin Mary, but it's im-

portant to understand the difference between veneration and worship. Worship belongs to God, while veneration can be ascribed to human beings, who were completely attune with God. In Greek these are different words - lateria is the veneration reserved only for God, and proskynesis is the veneration used for saints and most of all, Mother Mary. In Malayalam veneration is *vanakkam* and worship is *aaradhana*.

## Remember

These are a few of the many reasons we venerate St. Mary, but it's important to understand the difference between veneration and worship of God. In Greek these are different words - lateria is the veneration reserved only for God, and proskynesis is the veneration used for saints and most of all, Mother Mary.



An Orthodox writer and teacher Dr. Clark Carlton explains, *“There is nothing - absolutely nothing! - that we affirm dogmatically about the Virgin Mary that is not at once a witness to the incarnation of her son and also a confession of what we ourselves expect as members of His Body. When we celebrate the Dormition, Resurrection and Glorification of our Lady, we are celebrating our own death, resurrection and glorification with Christ. For everything that we say happens to the Theotokos will one day happen to those who follow Christ and love his appearing”.*

It's important for us to know that everything we believe about the Virgin Mary is also in Scripture, and we should be able to answer any questions with humility and love about our Faith and most of all our own Mother, who is the Theotokos and the one whom God favoured because of who she chose to be!

## Our Salvation

In **Romans 12:2**, we are reminded that we must transform ourselves to be like Jesus, the 2nd person of the One Triune God who became man. The “perfect will” of God is to be One with Him, and St. Paul uses the word “mind” to mean not just our intellect but our thoughts and our heart. Transformation is more than being happy after hearing a good sermon but rather the choice of transforming how we live and how we think, changing so we are thankful for the fast before major events/feasts, and being happy to pray and be with God.

The Virgin Mary, like all the saints, was human. She was born like any other human and died a natural, human death. However, by calling her a Saint, the Church confirms that she led a life pleasing to God, that her life was a model for us on how to live a Christ-like life. And for Mother Mary, the Theotokos, in particular we hold an even higher level of respect, veneration and honour...and that is even written in the Bible as being proclaimed by an angel! (**St. Luke 1:28**)

For Orthodox Christians the Theotokos is the first to walk in the path



Theotokos

of salvation. Her obedience is a symbol and example of the obedience required by us also as we set Christ in our hearts. She is a symbol of the Church itself, whose members are called to consider the body the “temple of the Holy Spirit,” (I Corinthians 6:19) just as she became the Temple of the Holy Spirit and Throne of Christ the King at the incarnation of God.

### Remember

Transformation is more than being happy by a good sermon, but rather the choice of transforming how we live, how we think, changing so we are thankful for the fast before major events/feasts, and happy to pray and be with God.



## Reflection Questions

1. Why were the Church Fathers particular about defending the title Theotokos against those who tried to teach that “God cannot have a mother”?
2. We sing during the Shimo prayers, “*By three mysteries the Church does teach a lesson to doubters: A tree (Genesis 22), a rock (Exodus 17:6, St. John 4:13), and a fish (St. Matthew 17:27) The tree and the lamb (Genesis 22) which brought forth wondrous fruit*”. How would you defend the mystery of Virgin birth to those who doubt this teaching?
3. What was the role of the Theotokos in God’s plan for our salvation?

# Born to Save

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can explain how the Nativity of our Lord is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy.*
- *I understand how Incarnation becomes the means to salvation.*
- *I acknowledge the Divine mystery that Jesus is fully and perfectly God and fully and perfectly man.*



### Prayer of the Priest in the Anaphora of St. James

“O God the Father, Who by Your great love toward mankind, did send Your Son into the world to bring back the sheep that had gone astray.”

## Union Broken -- The Fall Separates man from God

God created humankind in His own image and likeness, and granted humankind free will. St. Ephrem the Syrian says, “For when God created Adam, He did not make him mortal, nor did He fashion him as immortal; this was so that Adam himself, either through keeping the commandment, or by transgress-

ing it, might acquire from this one of the trees which outcome he wanted.”<sup>1</sup>

St. Irenaeus of Lyons speaks of Adam and Eve as spiritual children who needed to grow into spiritual adulthood (and achieve spiritual perfection). The human being had not yet reached his proper end of being deified. Man was created in a state of spiritual immaturity with the capacity for growth into spiri-

<sup>1</sup>St. Ephrem, Hymns on Paradise, p. 208-209.

tual perfection and also with the capacity of decay into spiritual corruption or non-being.

Man used his given free will to choose to sin. By disobeying God, mankind's union with God was weakened. By sinning, man walked away from God, the source of Life, towards death. The result of the Fall is restricting the spiritual growth of humanity. The potential for further union with God was limited. Due to the Fall, the likeness of God in man became tainted. Human nature was still inherently good but now there was an inclination to sin which did not exist before the Fall. The consequences of the Fall were that all humanity now is born with a *fallen* human nature. All of humanity became susceptible to death. Though humanity is not guilty of the sin committed by Adam and Eve, it inherited all of the effects of that first sin. Despite man choosing to walk away from God, God's love for man and His desire for union with man did not change. From the beginning and even after the Fall, God wanted humankind to be in union with Him. For this union to take place, the Incarnation was always inevitable. Scripture testifies of this in the first epistle of St. Peter when it says, "He [Christ] was foreordained before the foundation of the world" (**1 Peter 1:19**). St. Isaac the Syrian describes the purpose of Incarnation as *only* to express divine love. "God did all this for

no other reason, except to make known to the world the love that He has." He became man "not to redeem us from sins, or for any other reasons, but *solely* in order that the world might become aware of the love which God has for the whole of His creation."<sup>2</sup>

## Yeldo : Incarnation as Salvation

The Incarnation is the expression and fulfilment of God's love for man. It is the means by which God redeems and by which He saves - enabling mankind to once again grow in union with Him. The purpose of the Incarnation is for man to become like God as God had always intended. St. Athanasius aptly summarises the Incarnation when he says "For He was incarnate that we might be made god." In other words, the Son of God became the Son of Man so that sons of men might become sons of God. The Word of God, in the Second Person of the Trinity, became man to restore man to his intended state of being which was corrupted by the Fall and to lead Him to His proper intended end of being deified.

There is significance in the manner in which God became man. All of humanity was born with a fallen human nature due to the Fall. Man has no choice in the matter. He receives fallen nature as an involuntary inheritance. This includes St. Mary, the Mother of God. Contrary to the doctrine of Immaculate Concep-

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<sup>2</sup>The *Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* by Met. Hilarion Alfeyev (Cistercian Publications, 2000). p.



tion of the Catholic Church, she is born with the same fallen humanity as the rest of humankind. In the Catholic theological understanding, the transmission of corrupted nature (and death) took place through procreation and in order to save St. Mary from having a corrupt human nature, they had to innovate the theory of Immaculate Conception of St. Mary.

### Remember

The Incarnation is the expression and fulfillment of God's love for man. It is the means by which God redeems and by which He saves - enabling mankind to once again grow in union with Him. The purpose of the Incarnation is for man to become like God as God had always intended.



In this context, the significance of the Virgin Birth of Christ is seen. On the one hand, the Virgin birth allows for the Incarnate Word of God to be both divine and human. On the other hand, Jesus Christ was born of a virgin womb, and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity took flesh and became human.. Christ was born with the humanity of Adam *after* the Fall. As God, He was not susceptible to the corruption of death, and as God became human He was able to reverse the corruption. Here lies the great mystery. The Lord chooses, *voluntarily*,

to take on corruption. He did not have to die. Yet, He freely chooses to die to free the rest of humankind from humanity's slavery to death. Again, He is born with the fallen humanity of Adam in order to heal, redeem, save, and ultimately deify it. As St. Ephrem says, "He clothed Himself in the likeness of humanity in order to bring humanity to a likeness of Himself."<sup>3</sup> Christ suffered the effects of fallen human nature (such as hunger, fatigue, etc.), but did not commit any personal sins. He did all of this of His own free will, however, and not from necessity. The goal of Incarnation is the gift of salvation to mankind, which shows the ultimate love of God.

The purpose of Incarnation as salvation (through becoming children of God and becoming like God) is seen throughout the Liturgical tradition. At every Holy Qurbana and in the Sixth Hour Prayer of each day, the Ma'nitho of Mor Severus is sung. In it, we sing,

*"Who by His grace, descended for all mankind to bring life and salvation for our fallen human race. He trampled death by His death and destroyed our death."*

Christ descended to bring salvation to the human race. In the second Qolo of Matins of Wednesday, we sing

<sup>3</sup>St. Ephrem, Hymns on Paradise, 11.6

*“Glory to the Holy Father who sent forth His Holy Son. And He dwelt in the Holy womb. He became a son of man in our image and likeness that we may become like Him. And might be made children of His Father and partakers of His One Holy Spirit.”*

He became a son of man so that we may become like Him and be adopted as children of the Father. In the Sedro of Vespers of the Second Friday of the Great Fast, we pray,

*“By Your mercy, You descended and became man in order to restore us as children of God. O Lord, You set out to find the lost ones. You found our race, rose us on Your holy shoulders, and brought us to the house of Your Father.”*

## **Yeldo: Fulfilment of Prophecy**

The Messianic coming was revealed through prophets – In the Sedro of Nativity Vespers, we read “all the prophets spoke of Your invisible nature and with their voices, all the preachers revealed Your existence and with the eyes of the Spirit saw Your human birth from the holy virgin”. A few of the prophecies are listed below.

- “Abraham, the father of innumerable generations prefigured You by the tree

that bore the ram.” Instead of sacrificing Isaac, Abraham sacrificed the ram.. This ram represents Jesus Christ.

- Moses on Mount Horeb, saw the glorious fire that dwelt in the bush without burning or consuming the bush, which is the fire of divinity that dwelt in the womb of the holy virgin while preserving her.
- Isaiah, the son of Amos, foretold of this Child Who manifested from the holy virgin and Whose authority does not pass away, and Whose Kingdom is everlasting (**Isaiah 7:14**).
- The prophet Isaiah saw this holy Child and cried out: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and He will be called the Wonderful,’ for He is God and man. (**Isaiah 9:6**).
- The prophet Ezekiel saw this hidden Child on the chariot with four faces (4 gospels) and preached that He would appear to the world in the flesh (**Ezekiel 1:6**).
- Today was born the One Whom David called the Son that sits at the right hand (**St. Matthew 22:44; St. Luke 20:41-44; Psalm 110:1 KJV - 109:1 OSB**). David sang of this Child of wonder, saying that He shall descend like rain upon the fleece (**Psalm 71:6 OSB - 72:6 KJV**) which is the holy virgin, and again when he sang, “You are My Son, today I have begotten You”, (**Psalm 2:7**)

- Jeremiah represented this beloved Child, saying, “The Lord shall raise a ray from David” (**Jeremiah 37:9 OSB - 30:9 KJV**). Daniel saw this compassionate Child and called Him the stone hewn without hands (**Daniel 2:34**).
- Job - ”I know that my Saviour is living and He will be seen on earth at the end” (**Job 19:25**).<sup>4</sup>

### Jesus: Fully God and Fully Man

Although Christ became fully human, at no point did He stop being fully divine. When He was born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ was both man and God as one person. We sing this in the Qolo of Matins about St. Mary on Friday:

*“Praise to the Strong One who left the ranks of the angels and descended and dwelt in the virgin's womb. He entered her as God and came from her as God-man. Halleluiah! Come, you peoples, and praise God who became man to save us!”*

St. Cyril of Alexandria taught a unity of the human and divine natures in Christ. The emphasis on the unity of natures is seen in his famous formula of “one incarnate nature of God the Word.” This unity does not mean that one of the natures overtakes the other in any way.

Christ is “perfect in Godhead—and also perfect in manhood at the same time; truly God and truly man.” Jesus shares the same substance, essence, or nature with the Father according to the Godhead, and yet He also shares the same substance, essence, or nature as humanity in order to save us. The existence of human nature in Christ is what allows for His suffering and His death. By definition, God, Himself, cannot suffer. However, since God fully takes on humanity, He suffers, because humanity is His own. He has a human body and thus He sanctified the human body. He has a human mind and thus sanctified the human mind. He has a human will and thus sanctified the human will.

### Remember

Although Christ became fully human, at no point did He stop being fully divine. When He was born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ was both man and God as one person.



Christ saves man through His Incarnation, through the communication of properties of His divine and human natures. For there to be a full communication or exchange of properties, Christ *is* fully human (and fully divine). “The great Image of glory was seen in mankind’s likeness/ To make man par-

<sup>4</sup>The Septuagint translation (Orthodox Study Bible) does not use the term “Redeemer/Savior” but the Peshitta translation does. See *Holy Bible from the ancient Eastern text : George M. Lamsa's translations from the Aramaic of the Peshitta*. (Harper Collins, 1968).

take in His great glory; He is the image of God and yet, the image of man!” (Madroscho, Lilio of Nativity). To the extent that God took flesh and became human, he redeemed and saved it. The

Word becomes flesh to restore communion between creation and God. God has united Himself to us that we might be united with Him. This is the purpose of the Incarnation.

“

*For the Word, realising that in no other way would the corruption of human beings be undone except, simply, by dying, yet being immortal and the Son of the Father the Word was not able to die, for this reason He takes to Himself a body capable of death, in order that it, participating in the Word who is above all, might be sufficient for death on behalf of all, and through the indwelling Word would remain incorruptible, and so corruption might henceforth cease from all by the grace of the resurrection.*

St. Athanasius,

On the Incarnation, Section 9

”

Reflect on the following stanza from the Communion hymn from the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord:

*The Creator has been revealed  
Today, He put idols to shame  
Today, has come the Physician  
To grant healing to all the sick  
Today, the fortress of Satan  
Has been destroyed and abandoned  
Today, the Son of the Virgin  
Became the Saviour of the world  
We cry aloud, Lord, and sing praise  
“O Blessed Child, Glory to You!”  
We, His servants, cry out and sing:  
“Glory to the Incarnate Son”*

## Reflection Questions

1. Analyse the connection between the Incarnation and our salvation. How is the Son of God fully and perfectly God and fully and perfectly man? Why is this so important?
2. How is death referred to in this hymn? What connection is there with the “Physician” and healing?
3. Evaluate how we understand the statement - Christ is the “Saviour”. What is he saving us from?

# Light Dawns in the River Jordan

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can demonstrate knowledge of the Feast of Theophany as observed in the Malankara Orthodox Church. .*
- *I can reflect why the blessing of the water symbolises the purification and redemption of the entire fallen world.*
- *I can articulate ways in which the Feasts of Nativity, Theophany, and Presentation in the Temple are related.*



## The Festival of Lights

Every festival celebrated during the liturgical year commemorates, enacts, and relives the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. As a result, every Feast represents a "refraction" through time of the special mystery of redemption. The Feast of Denho is celebrated each year on January 6 and for the Holy Church this is the commemoration of the **Baptism of Christ**. The Syriac word *Denho* means 'shining forth' (**dawn or daybreak**) (St. Luke 1:78). Daybreak in this context means the rising of the **Sun of Righteousness** (Malachi 4:2, Isaiah 60:1, 2 Samuel 23:4; Habakkuk 3:4) that was manifested at this festival. Denho is

one of the oldest feasts in the life of the Church, older than the Feast of Yeldo or Nativity.

The divine revelation of the Holy Trinity happened at this Feast, and therefore, this is also called the Holy Theophany or Epiphany. At the **Baptism of Christ**, all three Persons of the Holy Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — are made manifest. Thus, the name of the Feast is **Epiphany**, meaning **manifestation**, or **Theophany**, meaning **manifestation of God**. All three words—Denho, Epiphany and Theophany—are proper terms. However, as Eastern Christians we should prefer Theophany, and as Syriac Christians we should know and use Denho.



Baptism of our Lord

From the first century of the Christian Church, there has always been “The Festival of Lights”. When the Sun of Righteousness dawns, the whole creation sees the light (**Psalm 35:10 OSB and 36:9 KJV**). We sing this also in the song “By your light we see the light Jesus, full of light.” It became a tradition later that in the depth of midwinter, the Festival of Lights was celebrated from Nativity (Christmas) till Theophany.

Over the centuries, the various aspects of this festival were separated into individual Feasts on different days: His Nativity, the Visitation of the Magi, His circumcision, and His presentation in the Temple. But the principal event of the Feast of Lights – Christ’s Baptism – continued to be commemorated on January

6.

## Why is the Baptism of Christ so Important?

At the feast of Nativity (Christmas), we celebrate the incarnation of the Son of God, but the sonship was revealed at His Baptism. It is recorded in all four gospels (**St. Matthew 3:13-17, St. Mark 1:9-11, St. Luke 3:21-22, St. John 1:29-34**). When Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened suddenly, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him. The Bible records that the Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus. The Father’s voice from heaven bears witness to the Son, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased”; and at the same moment the Holy Spirit, Who proceeds from the Father, descends in the form of a dove and rests upon the Son” (**St. Matthew 3:16-17**).

In the Orthodox tradition, this is seen as a revelation of the Holy Trinity. The Father and the Holy Spirit give testimony to the appearance of the Son of God in the flesh among mankind. The celebration of baptism, the divine manifestation, universal salvation, and the restoration of cosmic order helps those participating in the Feast remember their responsibility to live as God’s children on earth and motivates them to protect creation as the place of the manifestation of divine love.

Saint Ephrem in his hymns on the Nativity and Theophany mentions the importance of Denho - “All of the feast days

derive their beauty and are adorned from the treasures of this Feast Day. Greater is this day than every day for on it the Compassionate One came out to sinners. The first-born Feast Day is this Day that is the first to conquer all the Feast Days Our Lord, increasing peace for us that we may celebrate The three Feasts of the Deity.”

His Baptism is a prefigurement of His death. The waters of the Jordan become symbolic of Hades. Christ’s descent into the waters becomes his descent into Hades where he “leads captivity captive” (**Ephesians 4:8**) and sets free those who have been held in bondage to death. So there are not one but two theophanies, one that occurred in the past when Christ was baptised and the second in the future which will happen with glory at the end of the world. Paul says to be “looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (**Titus 2:13**)

### Why did Jesus get baptised?

Jesus came to the river Jordan not to receive the forgiveness of sins or for receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit. People were baptised by John, confessing their sins, as a sign of repentance. When Jesus came to Jordan, John the Baptist tried to prevent him, saying “I need to be baptised by You, and are You coming to me?” (**St. Matthew 3:14**). These words demonstrate that Christ did not come like others for repentance because He Himself is perfect.

### Why Did Jesus Get baptised?

- Christ’s baptism in Jordan was “theophany,” a manifestation of God to the world, because it was the beginning of our Lord’s public ministry. It was also a “theophany” in that the world was granted a revelation of the Holy Trinity. All three Persons were made manifest together: the Father testified from on high to the divine Sonship of Jesus; the Son received His Father’s testimony; and the Spirit was seen in the form of a dove, descending from the Father and resting upon the Son.
- Christ was baptised in order to reveal the truth to John the Baptist; to show the way that human beings have to follow in their life; and to sanctify the waters; “not to begin with receiving sanctification, but granting participation in sanctification.”
- Christ submitted to Baptism in order to teach us how we should behave in order to attract the grace of the Holy Spirit. This is why he became an example, in all things, that he might reveal the Holy Trinity; the Father witnessing from above, the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove and Christ himself bearing witness that he is the Son of God.

### Why Did Jesus Get Baptised by John?

- Christ himself was baptised by John not because he was sinful and needed to repent, but because in allowing himself to be baptised he showed that



indeed he was God's "Beloved Son," the Saviour and Messiah, the "Lamb of God who takes upon himself the sins of the world" (See Mt 3, Mk 1, Lk 3, Jn 1-3).

- Christ who was not known to the majority of people by his divine birth from the Virgin. This is why John the Evangelist says: "he stood up in the midst of the people" (John 1:26). Saint Paul says that, "John baptised the people with a Baptism of repentance asking the people to believe in him who was to come after him, namely Jesus" (Acts 19:4).
- So we see that Christ was baptised in order that the multitude of people who were there might know him and be-

lieve in him; and also in order that "all righteousness might be fulfilled" (Matthew 3:15)

## Blessing of the Waters

When the church celebrates the feast of Theophany, water becomes the means of healing and grace. The celebrant prays to bless the water "for the healing of sickness; for support of the weak... for the purification of passions; for the sanctification of the homes; for the preservation from all injuries". The holy water from the church is given to the faithful to consume so that we may receive the gift of the divine healing of our soul, body, and spirit.

The following excerpt from the blessing of the water of the Denho service shows how waters continue to be a source of blessing and grace for His chosen people:

"By the water and the Spirit, You have renewed our nature which was corrupted by sin; by the waters You overwhelmed sin in the days of Noah; by the waters of the sea You delivered the Hebrews from the bondage of Pharaoh; by the fire and water of the Prophet Elijah's sacrifice You absolved Israel from the worship of Ba'al. Even now, Oh Lord, as You bless these waters by Your grace, bestow upon all those who touch them or participate in them or use them, in true faith, for any purpose whatsoever; blessings, holiness and purification; health, healing and rest to the afflicted; encouragement, aid and freedom from all mental and carnal passions."

## The Restoration of Creation

Christ in His baptism purified the waters. As He entered into river Jordan, all waters on earth became purified. He came to redeem not only human beings

but, through them, the entire creation. The waters become the means of healing and grace. But not only waters, any other material thing may be a bearer of the Spirit.

The Feast of Epiphany speaks of the

restoration of the pure human image, as well as of all material nature. Creation “will be set free from its bondage” and will obtain “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (**Romans 8:20**). All things are to be set right. They are to be permeated by the light, love, grace, and glory of God. In the Feast, the Church reminds us of the historicity of the Incarnation and the goal of Christian existence: to “become partakers of the divine nature” (**2 Peter 1:4**). The verb baptise means sink, dip, and wash. This symbolises the burial of the dead in the tombs as the baptised are buried with Christ to rise up with Him in the new life.

### Remember

Jesus came to the river Jordan not to receive the forgiveness of sins or for receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit.



## Season of Epiphany

Epiphany is not only a feast of the Church, but it is also a full season within the liturgical calendar of our Church. The calendar is divided into seven seasons, one of which is the season of Epiphany, which lasts from the day of Nativity until right before the beginning of the Great Lent.

During this season, Ma'altho, or Presentation of the Lord, is also celebrated.

The feast of the Presentation is linked to the Jewish rite of purification of the

mother which was performed according to Mosaic law 40 days after the birth of a male child (Leviticus 12:2-6). According to the law, only the mother needed to be purified, but, as a firstborn son, Jesus needed to be redeemed (Exodus 13:11ff). Thus the Feast of the Presentation is logically celebrated 40 days after Christmas. “Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord.” (**St. Luke 2:22, OSB**) Hence, this feast is celebrated on February 2. The earliest information regarding the celebration of this feast comes from Egeria, a woman who described her pilgrimage to the Holy Land around the year 390.

Why, then, do we celebrate this feast after the Feast of the Theophany on January 6th? The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ is considered the completion of the Nativity, where the light from heaven shines down on Him to reveal the incarnation of God to the world. It is the conclusion of the Twelve Days of Christmas, as Theophany is celebrated 12 days after Nativity.

During the first four centuries of the church, the Feasts of Nativity and Theophany were celebrated as one feast on January 6 and it was referred to as the Feast of Epiphany “revelation from above”. Later in the fourth century, the two feasts were separated, and the practice of celebrating Nativity on December 25 was introduced by the Church of Antioch. In the fifth century, this practice was adopted by the Church of

Alexandria, and later was also adopted by Jerusalem. Since January 6 was an earlier and older set date by the Church, we still have Theophany on January 6, and the date for the Presentation of our Lord to the Temple is set 40 days after the Feast of Nativity - which was changed to December 25.

### Reflection Questions

1. Why do we find the water that is used for Denho service so powerful?
2. Why did Jesus need to be baptised if He is already God? Why did he pick John the Baptist to baptise him?
3. Why do we celebrate the Feast of Theophany 12 days after Nativity?
4. Explain how Epiphany, Theophany, Denho and Baptism of the Lord can be used interchangeably.

# Triumphant Entry of Jesus

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can interpret Hosanna as the blessing of all creation - especially the vegetation.*
- *I can analyse Christ's Entry into Jerusalem from the perspectives of the Jews.*
- *I can connect Christ's entry into Jerusalem with His entry into our hearts.*



## Significance of Palm Leaves

The Feast of Hosanna commemorates the event when Christ entered Jerusalem on a colt. The people who had heard Christ was approaching, cut branches from the palm trees and gathered to meet Him. (**St John 12:13**)

This event was spoken about by the prophets. As stated by the Prophet Zechariah, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Proclaim it aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King comes to you; He is righteous and saving; He is gentle and mounted upon a donkey, even a young foal". (**Zechariah 9:9**)

The palm leaves that are blessed and distributed during the Feast of Hosanna are first described in the Book of Leviticus. During the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, God instructed the people of Israel to "...take for yourselves on

the first day the ripe fruit of a tree, leaves of palm trees, the branches of leafy trees, and the pure willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days". (**Leviticus 23:40**).

The Prophet Ezekiel had a vision where the image of palm trees was used to decorate the heavenly temple. As stated, "...on each entrance chamber were ornamental palm trees, equally displayed on one side and the other". (**Ezekiel 40:16**) Again, "...from the space above the door, even to the inner room, as well as outside, and on every wall all around, inside and outside, by measure within and without were depicted cherubim and palm trees, between cherub and cherubim. Each cherub had two faces, the face of a man toward a palm tree on one side and the face of a lion toward a palm tree on the other side. Thus, it was depicted throughout the house all



The triumphant entry to Jerusalem

around. From the floor to the threshold, the cherubim and the palm tree were interspersed upon the walls". (**Ezekiel 41:17-20**)

Also, the design of palm trees was placed on the doors of the temple as well. As stated, "Depictions were upon them, cherubim and palm trees upon the doorways of the temple, like the depiction of the sanctuary..." (**Ezekiel 41:25**). Furthermore, when King Solomon was constructing the Temple in Jerusalem, "...he carved all the walls of the temple all around, both the inner and outer sanctuaries, with carved figures of cherubim

and palm trees." (**1 Kings 6:28**) The temple constructed by Solomon and the one seen in Ezekiel's vision were the same in their design.

The imagery of palm trees is not solely found in the Gospels but has been carried through since the time God gave the law to His people. The significance of the palm branches is elaborated by St. Severus of Antioch, who states, "Indeed, on the one hand, the fact that the donkey walks on the branches and leaves of palm trees would make it clearly known that not only He who was mounted upon it but also those who would believe in

Him were going to subdue all their enemies, trample them under their feet and win a glorious victory. For the branches and leaves of palm trees are the emblems of victory.”



Prophet Ezekiel

The palm branches are a sign of the victory that is given to us through Jesus Christ. The victory that is achieved is the victory over death through Christ’s death on the cross. Through His death and resurrection, Christ has granted us the gift of eternal life.

During the Feast of Hosanna, the priest blesses the palm leaves during the special service that commemorates the Feast. While the chief celebrant blesses the leaves, he blesses branches and trees from which they were cut off and blesses all the lands and plants. Those blessed leaves make the palms

of blessings, guardians of homes, conquerors over Satan and for the deliverance from all temptations. (LRD 2020).

Those blessed leaves are cared for with reverence. In one of the prayers for the blessing of the palm leaves, the following is stated by the priest, “You, O Lord, God, who, by all providence, have performed all these wonders on our account, even now, by Your plentiful mercies, bless these branches and the trees from which they were cut off and also all the plants which Your Lordship created. Let them be a blessing to their recipients, a deliverance for those who hold them, make them branches of glory, leaves of holiness and hosanna of purity.” Another prayer said by the priest, “Yea, O Lord, by the abiding of Your grace, bless all of us and all the lands and the plants, together with these branches, and make them palms of blessings, guardians of homes, conquerors over Satan and for the deliverance from all temptations.”

## Remember

The palm branches are a sign of the victory that is given to us through Jesus Christ. The victory that is achieved is the victory over death through Christ’s death on the cross. Through His death and resurrection, Christ has granted us the gift of eternal life.



As evident through Scripture and our liturgical prayers, the usage of palm

leaves is a sign given to us by God as a symbol of victory and a reminder of our connection to creation itself. In addition, the palm leaves serve to indicate that the physical space it is in is considered to be holy and sanctified. Therefore, palm leaves show that the whole world has been sanctified by Christ and are a reminder of the victory we have through Him.

The worship reminds us to confirm Jesus as the King of all nations and invite Him into our hearts. The elegance of our worship is not simply saying some petitions. Rather, we stand before God as angels do and remember things that God did for the world and its inhabitants. In fact, the Palm Sunday worship depicts heavenly worship, “*After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, people, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*” (**Revelation 7:9**)

Palm Sunday is our chance to prepare our hearts for the King who came down from heaven to save us from our sins. He reigns with peace and love if we open our hearts for His triumphal entry. Through our majestic worship, we join the heavenly worship for the Heavenly Kingdom.

## **Jewish Perspective on Christ's Entry into Jerusalem**

The Jewish people had mixed perspectives during Christ's entry into Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders, such as the priests and scribes, were frustrated and furious with Jesus Christ. His popularity increased, especially after He raised Lazarus from death (St. John 11:38-44). The Jewish leaders saw Him as a threat. As stated, “And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, ‘Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.’ But He answered and said to them, ‘I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out’” (St. Luke 19:39-40).

However, not all Jewish leaders were against Christ. The key word in this passage is ‘some’. Even among the Pharisees, some supported Christ, but only in secret.

An example is Nicodemus, who visited Christ at night to speak to Him. As stated, “There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus at night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him’” (St. **John 3:1-2**).

At the moment of Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the people were joyous at receiving Jesus into Jerusalem. St. Luke's gospel states, “...as He went, many spread their clothes on the road. Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the

whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen....” (St. Luke 19:36-37). Yet, all this changed by the time of the crucifixion when the Jewish people wanted to crucify Him.

The reaction of the Jewish people is a reflection of how our relationship with God can sometimes be. There are moments when we honour God through our lives and are joyous for His blessings. However, there are other moments where we find ourselves in opposition to God. When life doesn't go as planned, and we experience frustration, we should learn to rely on God more and more and thus, experience the grace of God more lovingly.

### Remember

Palm Sunday is our chance to prepare our hearts for the King who came down from heaven to save us from our sins. He reigns peace and love if we open our hearts for His triumphal entry. Through our majestic worship, we join the heavenly worship for the Heavenly Kingdom.



## Jerusalem and Our Hearts

When Christ entered Jerusalem, it was a time of peace, celebration, and joy. St Severus of Antioch connects the arrival of Samuel the Prophet to Bethle-

hem with the triumphant entry of Jesus to Jerusalem. In **I Samuel 16:4**, the people of Israel ask Prophet Samuel whether he came peaceably. Why so? The answer was that peace between God and humans was already lost. When Christ entered triumphantly into Jerusalem, the people received Him with olive tree branches and palm leaves, indicating peace between God and humans getting established. Olive branches meant peace. When the dove brought an Olive branch, it conveyed peace to Noah (**Genesis 8:11**), the end of the sin of Adam. Palm Sunday was the answer to the question of the people of Israel to Prophet Samuel, says St. Severus of Antioch, and thus it was the new beginning. There was the feeling of hope that God had come to help and save His people. Jerusalem holds a special place in the hearts of the Jewish people.

King David established Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. His son, King Solomon, built the original temple. The temple was the place where the Ark of the Covenant was placed. Inside the ark were the tablets of the law, Aaron's budding rod, and the jar of manna. Jerusalem held a special place in the hearts of the Jewish people because of the blessings God had bestowed on the inhabitants of the city and on all of Israel. Jerusalem stood as a sign of God's favour and protection for His people. As expressed in the Book of Psalms, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten; may my tongue be glued to my throat if I do not remember you, if I do



not prefer Jerusalem in the beginning of my merriment” (**Psalm 136:5-6**).

However, there is something more significant to God than the city of Jerusalem. In his Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul says, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are” (**1 Corinthians 3:16-17**). When we celebrate the moment of Christ entering Jerusalem, we are to reflect on whether we can joyously celebrate Christ entering into our hearts once again.

God considers us to be more valuable than any temple built by human hands. We are made in the image of God and are more valuable than any building. By becoming one of us, God’s incarnation established the immeasurable value we possess as human beings. When Christ

entered Jerusalem, the gates of the city were opened for Him. Whether we open the gates to our hearts for Christ is a choice we must make.

As Christ says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come into him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (**Revelation 3:20-21**). The Feast of Hosanna is more than a commemoration but a contemplation of whether Christ will triumphantly enter into our hearts.

### Remember

God considers us to be more valuable than any temple built by human hands.



### Reflection Questions

1. What is the significance of the Palm leaves used in the Feast of Hosanna?
2. How do we reconcile with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem as King, and then the King who enters into His Passion and Crucifixion?
3. What steps can a believer take to have Christ be and remain the centre of their life?

# The Lamb of God

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can establish connections between the Passover of the Old Testament and Christ as the fulfilment of that Passover.*
- *I can understand the differences between the Passover accounts in the Synoptic Gospels and St. John's Gospel.*
- *I can examine Christ's words of the Institution of the Holy Qurbana and understand their implications for our salvation.*



## Christ the Passover Lamb

When St. John the Baptist saw Christ coming towards him to be baptised, he testified an important revelation to all - “Behold, the Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sin of the World!” (St. John 1:29).

Passover is one of the most important festivals in Judaism. It is a celebration of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and it is also an opportunity to reflect on the theme of deliverance from death. In this chapter, we will explore the significance of Passover as the deliverance from death and the role of the lamb in this celebration. In addition, we will examine what days led to Christ's betrayal and crucifixion.

The story of Passover begins with the

Israelites in Egypt, who were enslaved by Pharaoh. Moses, chosen by God to be their leader, was tasked with convincing Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. When Pharaoh refused, God sent ten plagues upon Egypt, the final one being the death of every firstborn in the land. However, the Israelites were instructed to mark their doorposts with the blood of a lamb, so that the angel of death would pass over their homes and spare their first-born sons (Exodus 12).

The Passover celebration includes several traditions that are observed by Jews to this day. One of the most significant is the Seder meal, which is a family meal that takes place on the first two nights of Passover. During this meal, the Haggadah (a book that tells the story of the Exodus) is read, and several sym-

bolic foods are eaten, including unleavened bread (matzah) and a roasted lamb bone.

The lamb bone on the Seder plate represents the Paschal lamb that was sacrificed in the Temple during the time of the Exodus. This lamb was required to be male, one year old, and without blemish, and it was roasted whole and eaten by the Israelites on the night of the Exodus. The symbolism of Jesus Christ as “the Lamb” alludes to Christ’s death on the Cross “to take away the sins of the world”.

The unleavened bread (matzah) is another important symbol of Passover. According to tradition, when the Israelites were fleeing Egypt, they did not have time to let their bread rise, so they baked unleavened bread instead. This bread represents the haste with which the Israelites left Egypt, and it also symbolises the purity and simplicity that is required for a life of faith. The unleavened bread is often referred to as the bread of affliction, and it is eaten with bitter herbs to remind the Jews of the bitterness of slavery in Egypt.

The Passover celebration is deeply rooted in Jewish history and tradition, and it also points to the fulfilment of prophecy in Christ. In the Gospel of Saint John, Jesus is referred to as the “Lamb of God” (St. John 1:29), and in the book of Revelation, He is described as a lamb that was slain (Revelation 5:6). Just as the Passover lamb was a symbol of deliverance from death, so too is Christ’s sacrifice on the cross a means of deliverance from sin and death.

The connection between Christ and the Passover lamb is a topic that has been explored extensively by the Church Fathers. One of the most notable references to this connection is found in the writings of Saint John Chrysostom, who wrote: “As the Jews were celebrating the Passover with the slaying of the lamb, so we celebrate the Passover with the offering of the Lamb, Christ. They celebrated the shadow, we, the truth. The shadow passed away, the truth has come” (*Homilies on the Gospel of John*).

Saint Cyril of Alexandria also wrote extensively on this connection, noting that the Passover lamb was a type or prefiguration of Christ, who was the true and perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He wrote: “The lamb which was slain as a type of Christ was a male of a year old, and without blemish, and had no broken bone, and was slain by the whole multitude, as it were, of the people of the Hebrews. And Christ, the true Passover Lamb, is of one year, that is, of one dispensation, and without blemish, that is, without sin; and He suffered willingly, and was slain by the whole people, that is, by the Jews and Gentiles alike” (*Commentary on the Gospel of John*).

Saint Gregory of Nyssa also saw the connection between the Passover lamb and Christ, writing: “The Passover of the Jews was a type of Christ, Who is the true Passover, because the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world was sacrificed for us. The blood of the Passover lamb saved the Israelites from death, and

the Blood of Christ saves us from eternal death” (*The Great Catechism*).

Overall, the Church Fathers saw the connection between Christ and the Passover lamb as a crucial element in understanding the salvific work of Christ. The Passover lamb was a type or prefiguration of Christ, who was the true and perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. By understanding this connection, Christians can better appreciate the depth of God’s love for humanity and the extent to which He was willing to go to save us from sin and death.

Passover is a celebration of deliverance from death that is deeply meaningful for Jews and Christians alike. The traditions of the Seder meal, the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb, and the eating of unleavened bread all point to the theme of deliverance, both in the context of the Exodus and in the ultimate deliverance that is found in Christ. As we reflect on the significance of Passover, we are reminded of the power of God’s saving grace and the hope that is available to all who put their trust in His salvific sacrifice.

## **Passover in the Synoptic and Johannine Gospels**

When we read all the Gospels, we understand that Saint John’s timeline of the Passover seems to differ from the Synoptic Gospels (Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The Synoptic Gospels indicate that the disciples prepared the Passover

meal “on the first day of Unleavened Bread,” or Thursday night (Saint Mark 14:12; see also Saint Matthew 26:17; Saint Luke 22:7). Judas went out to betray our Lord Jesus Christ that evening, and Jesus was arrested in the night. He was then crucified on Friday. He was in the grave until Sunday morning, on which day He was raised from the dead.

In the Johannine Gospel, Saint John records three Passovers. These three Passovers occur in the three years of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Saint John alone recorded the three separate Passover celebrations. Saint John mentions the first in John 2, the second Passover in 6:4 and the third one in 11:55; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28, 39; and 19:14. This third Passover was the one that occurred on the night before Jesus died, and it is the one recorded by all four Gospel writers in conjunction with the Last Supper and the death of Jesus.

## **Synoptic Gospels**

In the Synoptic Gospels our Lord Jesus Christ sends some disciples (only Saint Luke says it was Peter and John) into Jerusalem to prepare for His last meal; in all three Synoptics, it is clearly a Passover Meal, which commemorates the Exodus of the Jews (Saints Mark 14:12; Matthew 26:17; Luke 22:7-8, 15). All three Synoptics show Jesus speaking the blessing prayers, and saying the bread and wine is His own body and blood (Saints Mark 14:22-25; Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:15-20). Only Saint Luke has Jesus

Christ explicitly say, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Saint Luke 22:19). Only Saint Luke gives evidence of the Passover tradition of blessing multiple cups of wine (Saint Luke 22:17, 20). Saint Luke also has much more incidents during the Last Supper, including Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial (Saint Luke 22:31-34; cf. John 13:36-38). In Saint Mark and Saint Matthew, our Lord Jesus Christ's prediction of Peter's denial takes place just after the supper, as they are on their way to Gethsemane (Saint Mark 14:26-31; Saint Matthew 26:30-35).

### **Saint John's Gospel**

In Saint John's Gospel, our Lord Jesus Christ's Last Supper is not a Passover Meal, but takes place just before the Feast of Passover (Saint John 13:1) and in Saint John, Jesus is crucified on the same afternoon that the Passover Lambs are slaughtered (cf. 19:31-37). The “Eucharistic” words of Jesus are not recorded in Saint John 13, but were already spoken earlier (Saint John 6:22-59). During this final meal in Saint John's Gospel, Jesus washes all of His disciples' feet (John 13:2-16). Then He tells them, “For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (13:15). During the meal, Jesus foretells Judas' betrayal (Saint John 13:21-30) and Peter's denial (13:36-38). During the meal, Jesus also gives a “Farewell Discourse” (13:31—16:33) and addresses a long prayer to God the Father (17:1-26).

### **Christ at Passover**

As Christians, we confess that the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist or “Holy Qurbana” was instituted by our Lord at His final meal with His disciples before entering into His Passion. This institution by Christ is important because Christ foreshadows His death and resurrection through the Eucharist. We, as Christians, are able to understand that the Passover meal and the bread and wine that Christ offers as His Body and Blood truly point to His death and resurrection. That is why it is imperative to follow the Lord's command and to partake in the Eucharist in remembrance of Him (St. Luke 22:18-20; I Corinthians 11:23-25).

Christ is the author and the One who acts in all the Sacraments of the Holy Church, of which the Eucharist is at the centre. This sacrament is one that Christ Himself establishes, directly commands us to partake of, and to do so in remembrance and participation of His Death and Resurrection.

It is important to note here that Christ does NOT say that the bread and wine are symbols of His Body and Blood. He says that it is His Body and Blood, and thus we confess that through apostolic succession, we continue to receive that Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Holy Qurbana. This may be difficult for us to understand, and even some in the Scriptures struggled with these words that Christ taught about being the Bread of Life and walked away (St. John 6:60-

61). The Church does not try to explain how the bread and wine we offer becomes the Body and Blood. It is a mystery! So, even though we don't know how the bread and wine we offer become the Body and the Blood, we believe that it does and we confess it to be so. Not only that it is true, but that through His Body and Blood, we gain eternal life and He abides in us always (St. John 6:56).

### **When was Jesus crucified?**

The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ is one of the most significant events in Christian history. It is during this time that we see the ultimate sacrifice made for humanity. The events leading up to this moment are important to understand, as they give context to the ultimate sacrifice that was made.

The timing of Jesus' sentencing and crucifixion has been a topic of debate among scholars and theologians for centuries. While some argue that Jesus was sentenced on Thursday night/Friday morning and crucified on Friday, others contend that he was sentenced and crucified on Wednesday/Thursday, in accordance with the timing of the Passover feast.

Patristic sources do not provide a clear consensus on this issue, but some offer insights that may shed light on the matter. For example, St. John Chrysostom argues that Jesus was indeed crucified on Friday, citing the fact that the Sabbath began on Friday at sunset (Homily 85 on the Gospel of Matthew). Augustine also

supports this view, stating that Jesus was crucified on the sixth day of the week, which was the day of preparation for the Sabbath (Tractate 120 on the Gospel of John). We also attest to this in our worship, especially on Great and Holy Friday, where there are many references to Adam being created on the sixth day and Christ being crucified on the sixth day.

However, other patristic sources suggest that Jesus was crucified on Wednesday/Thursday. For example, St. Gregory of Nyssa writes that Jesus was crucified on the day of the Passover, which was Wednesday (The Great Catechism, Book IV). St. Epiphanius of Salamis also supports this view, stating that Jesus was crucified on the day of the Passover, which was the fourth day of the week (Panarion, 51).

In terms of scholarly sources, the debate over the timing of Jesus' crucifixion continues to this day. Some scholars argue that Jesus was indeed crucified on Friday, while others maintain that he was crucified on Wednesday/Thursday. One argument in favour of the latter view is that the Gospel of John places the Last Supper on the day before the Passover (John 13:1), which would have been Wednesday evening according to the Jewish calendar. Additionally, the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) suggest that the Last Supper was a Passover meal, which would also place the crucifixion on Wednesday/Thursday.

We may never know what exact day that Christ was crucified, but this does not change the fundamental truth that

Christ died for us, took on the sin of the world as the Eternal Passover Lamb, and defeated death through His Resurrection. What is clear is that the events of His crucifixion and resurrection represent the ultimate sacrifice and victory over sin and death, fulfilling the Passover theme of deliverance from death and redemption.

In conclusion, understanding the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is essential in understanding

the sacrifice that was made for humanity. The Passover Feast and its traditions, including the sacrifice of the blameless lamb and the unleavened bread, provide important context for the ultimate sacrifice made by Jesus Christ, a sacrifice that is eternal and never has to be done again. The Old Passover is no more, and the new Passover with Christ as the Lamb is an eternal one that we all partake in at every Divine Liturgy and eternally.

### Reflection Questions

1. How is Christ the fulfilment of the Passover?
2. What do the different timelines in the Synoptics and St. John's Gospel tell us about Christ?
3. How is the Holy Qurbana relevant for our salvation?
4. Analyse St. Simeon's words, "Now let your servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen Your Salvation" (St. Luke 2:29). How can we also relate to this prayer and apply in our life as we receive the Holy Qurbana?

## The Life Giving Crucifixion

### Lesson Goals :

- *I can construct the journey of the faithful thief, through the Song of the Two Thieves.*
- *I can explain the concept of time in liturgy.*
- *I can describe how Jesus Christ "tasted death".*



As early as the 2nd grade, you may have learned that the Gospel of John is written differently than the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). It is called the Theological Gospel because of its depth in reflection on what God has done for our salvation. The Synoptic Gospels had already been written and circulated by the time the Gospel of John was written. Therefore, John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was able to use his limited amount of papyrus to communicate the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ in a more reflective manner, knowing the previous three gospels had already given "an orderly account" (St. Luke 1:3). For example, the Gospel of John begins with the same words as the book of Genesis, "In the beginning" knowing that an account of the Nativity has already been written in two other gospels. Therefore, he has the liberty to

go back to the very beginning and speak of the Incarnation of the Son of God and what that means for us in the prologue to this Gospel. Towards the end in chapter 20, John gives us the key to the purpose of this Gospel when he writes, "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (St. John 20:30-31).

One particular instance of this is in John 19: 25-27:

<sup>25</sup> *Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. <sup>26</sup> When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" <sup>27</sup>*



*Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.*

**John 19: 25-27**

These verses take us to the scene of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross. It is an emotional scene. It speaks of the reality of the situation that the Virgin Mary would need someone to take care of her after the death of her only son.<sup>1</sup> Also, John himself is the youngest of the disciples, a mere teenager at the time. He would need someone to take care of him as well. And yet, these details, though very heartbreaking, would not necessarily be worthy of the Gospel written "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." That is until you look again at the passage. Why were the names of Mary the Theotokos and John omitted? Verse 26 says: "When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by." It's an odd use of words. The sentence could have been: When Jesus saw Mary, his mother and me, John standing by. It would have taken less words, even in Greek. Yes, the beloved disciple is John. But, John wrote this so that it wasn't just him. He wrote you into the story as well. You are the beloved disciple. When almost everyone has abandoned our Lord Jesus Christ in His suffering at the cross, You are found there at the foot of the

Cross as the beloved disciple, remaining faithful to the Lord. Our Lord Jesus Christ has a concern for you. He does not wish to leave you alone.

<sup>26</sup> *When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!"*

<sup>27</sup> *Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.*

Therefore He entrusts you to your mother, The Church. And He also entrusts The Church to you the beloved disciple as well. It is a profound reality. You do not read a story of something that merely happened a long time ago, but these verses take you beyond time and space and place you at the foot of the Cross.

The Holy Liturgy does the same thing. On Great Friday, at the Service of the Veneration of the Cross, you are given the opportunity to worship and kneel before the Cross. You, along with the Church, are singing and chanting at the time: "We bow before the Cross, by which we receive salvation for our souls, and together with the thief we cry out, Remember us O Christ when You come!"

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<sup>1</sup>The need for someone to take care of the Theotokos also tells us two things, that Joseph has already passed away and that Jesus was St. Mary's only child. The brothers referred to in John 7:2-4 must either be children of Joseph from his previous wife who had passed away leaving him a widower or they must be his cousin-brothers which is a common word usage in both Semitic families as well as families of eastern cultures.

In The Song of the Two Thieves during the 9th Hour of Great Friday, the first deacon sings:

*Come, all peoples, and listen  
To the voice of the two thieves;  
Discern the words, which they  
speak  
To each other on the Cross!*

Note that the invitation is to all peoples in the present tense to listen to the conversation between the two thieves being crucified on either side of Jesus. The rest of the song calls your attention to everything that is happening during the Lord's crucifixion, from the rocks bursting because of the earthquake and the sun darkening, to the destruction of Sheol's gates and the trembling of Creation at the suffering of the Lord. Listening to this confession of faith of the thief on the right hand side is a moving experience that culminates in the whole congregation singing the final stanza:

*O Lord, who has promised life  
To those who believe in You,  
Remember us when You come,  
For we, O Lord, confess You!*

The Liturgy is not looking backwards and re-enacting something that has happened in the past. Instead, when you come to worship in the Orthodox Church, you are stepping beyond time and space and worshipping at the event

itself. You are both participating in the event itself and also the event is coming forward into the present now. The prayers and hymns of the Church reflect this. Note the use of the word "Today" throughout the liturgy.

When you stand in Church on Great Friday, you worship the Lord who has tasted death for Your sake today.<sup>2</sup> To taste death means to experience it. But, also, the last thing He did before giving up His Spirit was to receive the sour wine.

*After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, "I thirst!" Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. 30 So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.*

**St. John 19:28-29**

This is the reversal of the sin of Adam and Eve who had tasted the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil because it looked good to them. By their tasting of that fruit, death had entered into the world. And now, by our Lord tasting the sour wine, and entering into Sheol, death is destroyed. It is by His death that He then tramples upon death itself and destroys it, once and for all. Death has lost its sting (**1 Corin-**

<sup>2</sup>Hebrews 2:9

ans 15:55) because it cannot hold the sinless One. If it cannot hold our Lord Jesus Christ, then it cannot hold you either, because you have received Christ and He dwells within you because of the Holy Qurbana, the fruit from the Tree of Life that you have tasted.

Just before our Lord gives up His Spirit, He says, “It is finished.” It harkens back to the “In the beginning” found at the opening words of John’s Gospel, which had connected to the beginning of Genesis itself. According to

Fr. John Behr, this “It is finished” refers to the making of man in **Genesis 1:26**.<sup>3</sup> And now, having accomplished all these things, the Lord was going to rest in the tomb on the Sabbath. Now, the eighth day, the New Day of the Resurrection can begin. This is what you experience every Sunday in the Holy Qurbana. It is a foretaste of the Kingdom. It is both an end and a beginning at the same time. Through death you receive life. And now, today your participation in the death of Christ gives you life.

### Reflection Questions

1. When we celebrate a feast of our Lord in Church, are we looking backwards and re-enacting that feast?
2. Why do you think Jesus said “I thirst” while he was on the cross?
3. Read Hebrews 2:9, how does Christ “taste death” on Great Friday? What does this mean?

<sup>3</sup><https://youtu.be/xhQ5d2wNvMk?t=240>

# The Faith of the Councils

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can Describe the Faith of the Three Ecumenical Councils*
- *I can Elaborate on the Church being One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*
- *I can Explain the Veneration of the Holy and Ever Virgin Mary as the Mother of God*



The Church faced numerous challenging decisions as it advanced through history. The apostles and later the bishops served as the Church's appointed leaders. The Church always resolved disagreements and made decisions by coming to a consensus among all the inspired believers. In its first few centuries of existence Christianity witnessed the persecution of many of its members by officials of the Roman Empire. After persecution ended, the Church grew. In early days, Jerusalem was the centre of Christianity, later it became Rome, and now Constantinople. The apostles ordained men to succeed them. Today, they are known as bishops. Bishops were the shepherds of their flocks – rural bishops of small towns and villages, metropolitan and archbishops of larger cities and states, and the Patriarchs were by now five: Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem,

Alexandria, and Antioch. The Patriarchates were a position of honour and prestige but not a ruling oligarchy. When a council is called, just as at Jerusalem in the first century, all bishops converge, each with an equal vote.

At the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, two disagreements troubled the Church:

1. When should Christians celebrate Pascha (Easter)? Some Christians were celebrating, with the Jewish Passover, others on a particular Sunday, and others in a certain week, not on a Sunday.

2. What was the nature of Jesus – God or man? No one had yet put into words exactly what the Church believed about Jesus. Now that peace reigned for the Church, theology blossomed. What is theology? The study of God and formulation of Christian belief. Soon, a serious disagreement developed between Patriarch Alexander of Alexandria and one of

his priests, named Arius. Arius thought things through and decided that, if Jesus was born, there must have been a time when He was not, and therefore He could not be equal to God the Father. He was not truly God. Many Christians began to be swayed by his reasoning, splitting the Church.

### First Ecumenical Council

The First Ecumenical Council, also known as the First Council of Nicaea, took place in 325 A.D. in Nicaea (modern day Turkey). Emperor Constantine called the Council to address a dispute that had started between Bishop Alexander and Arius, an Alexandrian presbyter. By 325 A.D., the conflict had become so extensive that it appeared to be a threat to the stability of the Church in the eastern Roman Empire. The debate centred on whether or not belief in Jesus Christ's full deity and belief in the unity and transcendence of God were compatible. Arius claimed that the Son of God, manifested in Jesus Christ, could not possibly be "God" in the full and true meaning but was instead, the most elevated of all God's creatures, influenced by some Neo-Platonic intellectual schools.

Arius started spreading the new concept that the Son was not there at all at one point in time. Arius acknowledged that Christ was the son of God the Father, who had been made just a little bit earlier than the angels but who was nonetheless created and was not identical to the Father in essence. According to this heretical doctrine, Christ was not

God. How can He save man if He is not God? This is the main argument that Arianism generated.

At the Council, presided over by Bishop Hosius of Cordoba, Emperor Constantine and 318 Fathers denounced the teachings of Arius as heresy. They formulated the Nicene Creed, which affirmed the full divinity of Jesus Christ and His consubstantiality with God the Father. The *Nicean Creed*, otherwise known as *The Symbol of Faith*, was composed there, at what came to be known as the First Ecumenical Council. While other Creeds did exist before Nicaea, this new Symbol was meant to be the Church's official statement of belief. While rites differed from country to country and even province to province throughout the Empire, worship contained some constants—and one of these was the Creed. The Fathers at Nicaea recognized the need of having an easily memorised text which could be recognized from Great Britain to Constantinople and over to Syria and down into Egypt and Ethiopia and beyond as the standard of the Christian Faith. The Creed clearly combats Arianism; the Son is confessed to be: *One Lord Jesus Christ, THE Son of the Father, begotten of the Father BEFORE All Ages. Furthermore, He is Light of Light, True God of True God, Begotten NOT made, of ONE Essence with the Father, by WHOM all things were made.*

At this Council, it was resolved to celebrate the Feast of Resurrection (*Qyomto*) on the first Sunday after the first

full moon following the spring equinox, after the Jewish Passover. It also determined the various rules for bishops, priests, and deacons, their jurisdiction, and their elections/ordinations respectively. Canons that priests should be married, and many other canons regarding excommunication, and penance were established at the First Ecumenical Council.

## **Second Ecumenical Council**

Under the reign of Emperor Theodosius I, the Second Ecumenical Council met at Constantinople in the year 381 A.D. This Council was called in response to Macedonius, a bishop of Constantinople who taught falsehoods and denied the Godhead of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Holy Trinity. He said that the Holy Spirit is not God and that He is a created power, making Him like an angel subservient to God the Father and God the Son.

Gregory the Theologian, who presided over the Council, Gregory of Nyssa, Meletius of Antioch, Amphilochius of Iconium, and Cyril of Jerusalem were among the 150 bishops in attendance. The Macedonian heresy was denounced and rejected during the Council. The Council established the equality and unity of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son as dogma.

The Nicene Creed, or “Symbol of Faith,” was further strengthened by the Council with five Articles that set forth its teaching on the Holy Spirit, the Church, the Mysteries, the resurrection

of the dead, and life in the world to come. As a result, they created the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which serves as the true profession of the Church's faith.

The Council passed seven Decrees, which the Emperor further approved. The Canon reaffirmed the Nicene faith and anathematized doctrines that disagreed with it, which were essentially varieties of Arianism. Other canons forbids bishops to interfere in the affairs of other Local Churches, and defines how to receive into the Church people coming from various heretical communities.

## **Third Ecumenical Council**

Under Emperor Theodosius II, the Third Ecumenical Council met in Ephesus in the year 431 A.D. The false teaching of Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople, who taught that the Most Holy Virgin Mary merely gave birth to the man Christ, with whom God then united and dwelt in Him, as in a temple, as previously He had done with Moses and other prophets, prompted the call for the Council. As a result, Nestorius referred to the Holy Virgin as the Christotokos rather than the Theotokos and the Lord Jesus Christ as God-bearing rather than God incarnate.

Nestorius felt that Theotokos implied a blending of Jesus' divine and human natures, which he believed were joined only by the will. Nestorius' preferred term, Christokos, suggested a more complete separation of Jesus' two natures. The conflict on this point

of doctrine was especially hostile between Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria, and Cyril successfully petitioned to declare Nestorius' views heretical. The 200 bishops in attendance at the Council condemned and repudiated Nestorius' heresy and ruled that one should acknowledge that Jesus Christ's divine and human natures were united at the time of his incarnation. They also ruled that one should confess Jesus as the true God and the true Man, as well as the Holy Virgin Mary as the God-bearer (Theotokos).

In rejecting Nestorianism, the Council of Ephesus officially recognized Mary as the "Mother of God." The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed was likewise affirmed by the Council, and any alterations or additions to it were categorically forbidden. The Council of Ephesus also rejected the concept of Pelagianism. This view held that it was possible, at least in theory, to live a morally perfect life without special aid from God. A belief in Pelagianism amounts to a rejection of the doctrine of original sin (Romans 5:19).

Another unfortunate incident that happened in the aftermath of the Council of Ephesus and the condemnation of Nestorius was an immediate split in the Eastern Church, creating the Assyrian Church of the East.

## **Veneration of the Mother of God**

Orthodox Christians revere the All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary more than all the saints. The Church calls the Virgin Mary

Theotokos, translated from Greek, this word means "God-bearer," or "Mother of God". The Church ascribes this title to her because she did not simply bear the man Jesus Christ; she bore the incarnate God. Jesus Christ was not only fully man, but also fully God. By bearing Jesus Christ, the Son and Word of God [and thus also God Himself (John 1:1)], we give her the fitting title, Theotokos. She is the Most Holy (Panagia) beyond all saints and the Church gives the Mother of the Lord an extraordinary, most honourable, and most revered position.

The Archangel Gabriel greeted her at the Annunciation (Luke 1:28-29) as well as Saint Elizabeth, the mother of Saint John the Baptist (Luke 1:40-43). The Most Holy Virgin herself prophesied through the Holy Spirit: 'For behold, from henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me' (Luke 1:48-49). From these words we understand that the exceptional honour accorded to the Mother of the Lord is intentional and appointed by God Himself. This exceptional honour that is accorded by the Orthodox Church to the Ever-Virgin Mary forms the veneration of the Mother of the Lord. The Church honours the Mother of God because she is the mother who gave birth to the Son of God and the first one who intercedes for the world in the presence of the Most Holy Trinity.

It is important to note that ascribing particular titles (the Ladder which raised all from earth to grace; the Living Ark; the Burning Bush; etc.) to

Mary does not equate to worshipping her as one might worship God. The titles given to her merely explain the true nature of Christ and protect His identity as fully and perfectly God and fully and perfectly man. Any title she receives can only be understood in light of her Son and His saving activity. The Church offers the Ever-Virgin Mary honour and reverence (proskynesis) as the Theotokos, in worship. The Church recognizes that the Ever-Virgin Mary is the one who brought forth Christ, the pre-eternal, uncreated, Incarnate Son of God, through the good will of the Father in heaven, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is this God, the Trinity, one in Essence, whom the Orthodox Church worships and offers inward form of adoration (*latreia*).

## The Church

The Nicene Creed proclaims that the Church is One (John 10:16), Holy (Ephesians 5:26-27, 2 Peter 2:5&9), Catholic (Romans 10:18) and Apostolic (Ephesians 2:20), These are considered the four Marks of the Church.

**The Church is One** – Irrespective of the background of how a church came into being, the services provided, activities performed and the needs they fulfil, a parish has to be Christ's One Holy Church. One, here refers to unity among the believers which is essential for the growth and vitality of the Church. Irrespective of the physical attributes, eth-

nicity, language, sex, political affiliation, denomination or any other classification that could possibly divide us, we are all united and One in Christ. St Paul compares the members of the Church to the human body (Romans 12:4-5) each of which have a different purpose and function but work together to enable good health and life.

**The Church is Holy** – St Paul says that the Church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23), the Son of God who is Holy. So every part of the parish is holy – being sanctified by the holiness of God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit. And God commands us when we become part of the Church to be Holy as declared in Leviticus 20:26 – “You shall be holy to Me, for I, the Lord your God, who separated you from all peoples for Myself, am holy.”

**The Church is Catholic** – The word catholic is used to mean complete and whole – it lacks nothing in its mystical and sacramental being. The presence of the Holy Spirit enables this fullness of life, grace and truth. Though the members of the Church are imperfect, sinful and small-minded, they become complete through their willingness to become one with the fullness of God. This is enabled through their works and efforts to reflect Christ.

**The Church is Apostolic** – The Church is built on the foundation of the sacrifices of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20) and is therefore rooted in apostolic doctrine and tradition. The members of the Church are entrusted to keep and



live the faith (*paratheke*) delivered to the apostles and saints (Jude 3), passed on through the bishops and priests through the ages and then to each of us. St Paul calls Jesus *the Apostle and High Priest* (Hebrews 3:1) – He is God’s representative to man (Apostle) and man’s representative to God (High Priest). Jesus affirms the mission of the Church when He tells His disciples that His food (nourishment) is “doing the will of His Father who sent Him” (St. John 4:33-34). This is the same mission he entrusts the disciples as He sends them out saying, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you (St John 20:21) ... Receive the Holy Spirit (22)”. St Paul says that the Church is encouraged by the Holy Spirit. (Acts 9:31).

Each of us as part of the Church have the same mission as the disciples – bring God’s unity (One), holiness (Holy) and completeness (Catholic) to the people around us. If the Church does not have the awareness of being “sent” (Apostle) by God to “speak and do Christ” it is not

being the “right” (Orthodox) Church; it is just a “club” or a synagogue of Satan (Revelation 2:9) who will be made to bow down in front of believers (Revelation 3:9).

## Conclusion

The ecumenical councils were an extraordinary synaxis or meeting of all Bishops of the Church to discuss fundamental teachings. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed was adopted to counter false teachings and summarise the faith foundation of the Church. St Mary and the saints show us that regular human beings like us can accomplish spiritual synergy with the Divine – when our will is the same as God’s will. Though the Christian journey is not easy, we should get strength from Jesus’ assurance, “.. you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” John 16:33). For what is impossible with men is possible with God (Luke 18:27).

## Reflection Questions

1. Someone asks - ‘What is the Church?’ How would you respond to this question?
2. Your friend notices that you go to Church every Sunday. One day your friend asks you, “What exactly do you believe?” Respond to your friend’s questions using the Three Ecumenical Councils as a basis.
3. Reflect on the 4 marks of the Church.

# Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy

## Lesson Goals :

- *Understand the major differences in Orthodox Christianity, and other Major World Religions like - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, and Islam*



## How the Orthodox Church views the Non-Orthodox?

Religions are not all the same. They do not all worship the same “God”. This observation ought to be obvious to anyone who takes religious believers at their word when they describe their beliefs. Yet at the same time, we can recognize that there is truth in all religions and philosophies. When discussing the differences between Orthodox Christianity and other religions, we reference those other faiths as “incomplete” rather than “false”. Yes, they usually have false elements, but it is better to focus primarily on what is true and show how that leads to Orthodox Christianity, the fullness of God’s revelation to humankind.

From the Orthodox point of view, all Christians and non-Christian that are not Orthodox are not the Church. The Church is a concrete, historical community founded by Jesus Christ through His

apostles, which has existed in a real community for roughly two millennia. For any person, whether formally a member of the Orthodox Church in this life or not, the critical question is whether that person will be a member in the next life after the resurrection.

So, while we say heterodoxy is dangerous to the spiritual life, it is not up to us to judge any particular person in terms of how that danger affects them in particular. We do not know, because none of us can look into another’s heart. Nevertheless, because an Orthodox Christian believes that the Orthodox Church represents the fullness of the Christian faith, they are called by God to share their faith with others, to invite them to experience that same fullness and be transformed by it.

It is essential that all these discussions, while standing firm on what is true and right, be conducted with humility. The Orthodox must not say, “I am right, and

you are wrong,” because, after all, we refer to ourselves as the “chief of sinners”(1 Timothy 1:15) every time we receive communion. The Orthodox Christian faith is uniquely true and this is not to the credit of any Orthodox person. The Orthodox person did not invent it, and we all fall short of living it as we should, because we are sinners. Thus, the Orthodox Church proclaims her heritage as the one, original Christian Church founded by Christ not in pride, but in humility as a historical experience.

## Judaism

Of all non-Christian religions, the one with which Orthodox Christians have the most common is Judaism. We share a common inheritance from the covenant made with Abraham, though we interpret and apply it differently, and of course Christians also believe that there is a New Covenant.

Judaism emphasises a way of life, following particular rituals and, perhaps more famously, dietary requirements (Kosher). Ritual washings are a significant element. Orthodox Christianity shares this emphasis with Judaism on adopting a whole way of life designed to bring the remembrance of God into every moment, and some of our practices are even based on our common heritage.

Jews reject major Christian doctrines, such as the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, and His identification as the Messiah. Jews are still awaiting

the coming of the Messiah. Especially in this last sense, Christianity may be seen as simply the fulfilment of Judaism, which hoped for both the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. Seen in this way, the primary difference between Christianity and modern Judaism is that Christians see things as being at a different place on the timeline – the Messiah has come, and the resurrection has begun with Christ as the first-fruit.

Jews and us believe in monotheism, that there is only one God. We also share a common belief in divine revelation from God through the prophets, though we believe that the prophets ultimately were predicting the coming of Jesus Christ and that God made His final revelation to the apostles at Pentecost.

Like Christians, some Jews believe in an afterlife and believe in the final resurrection of the dead. Jews believe they are God’s chosen people. While Judaism receives its membership by birth, especially maternal ancestry, Orthodox Christianity demands the conversion of the soul to faith in Christ and entry into the covenant via baptism. Christianity, therefore considers itself the “True Israel,” which receives the covenant promised to Abraham by faith and not by the flesh.

The status of Jews belonging to the Old Israel who have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah is complicated in the New Testament. Paul seems to suggest in Roman 9-11 that unbelieving Jews may yet be grafted into the tree of Christ before the end, that they may have something

that is “irrevocable” (Romans 11:29). That said, Orthodox Christians do not teach dispensationalist doctrine that essentially set up Judaism as a parallel path to God. Dispensationalism is a theological framework of interpreting the Bible which maintains that history is divided into multiple ages or “dispensations” in which God acts with his chosen people in different ways.

## Islam

Islam originated when Muhammad, the last of the prophets, received a dictation from the Archangel Gabriel, which is now known as the Qur’an. The Arabic word Islam literally means “submission,” and it describes how the Muslim (“one who submits”) is to live toward God in Arabic, Allah.

Islam regards its relationship to Christianity similarly to the Christians regard their relationship to ancient Judaism - that it is the final fulfilment of previous Abrahamic religions. Islam sees Jesus as a true prophet and believes in His virgin conception and birth, as well as His second coming. Islam is radically monotheistic; however, rejects the doctrine of the Trinity and even the idea that God could have a son. Trinitarianism is looked upon by Muslims as disguised polytheism.

Muslims regard the Christian Bible as having been corrupted over time, believing that the original teachings of Jesus were essentially Muslim. The Qur’an, by contrast, is supposedly a direct dictation

from God Himself in Arabic. It is an absolutely authoritative text from which most doctrines and practice are derived.

Muslims believe that proper life consists in adhering to the five pillars of Islam:

- *Shahadah* - The confession, “I testify that there is no god but God, and I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” Making this confession with sincerity is how one converts to Islam.
- *Salah* - Ritual prayer performed five times a day, facing toward Mecca.
- *Zakat* - Almsgiving, both to help the poor and for the spread of Islam.
- *Sawm* - Fasting during the month of Ramadan, which consists of not eating or drinking anything at all, as well as sexual abstinence, before sunset or after sunrise. In practice, however, some wealthy Muslims will simply sleep through the day and then feast at night. The fast is much more difficult for poor and working Muslims.
- *Hajj* - A one-time pilgrimage to Mecca for all who can afford it.

Orthodox Christians share all of these elements of proper life in various ways, although they are not regarded as absolute obligation as they are for Muslims. Submission to God is what defines Muslim life. For Orthodoxy, the obedience we offer to God is given freely out of love for him, and because doing so transforms us inwardly to become more like Christ. In Islam, God is merciful and

perfect, but He is not truly loving. God is absolutely transcendent, and so there is no true communion with Him. All that said, most Muslims would probably say that they feel they have a connection with God.

## Hinduism

Hinduism is a group label for a collection of religions and associated traditions from India that range from classically pagan - a single tribe worshipping its individual god or gods - to a kind of attenuated monotheism. Some Hindus believe in multiple gods. Others believe there is only one God, and everything is part of Him. Still others believe there is only one God who may occasionally manifest Himself in various forms, avatars which have been mistaken by certain tribes as separate gods. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to define Hinduism.

Despite the great variation in Hindu beliefs and practices, there are certain common sets of belief which most Hindus share. For most Hindus, the human soul (the *atman*) is eternal. For some the soul is part of *Brahman* ("God," the universe), and so salvation consists in realising this fact and being absorbed back into the oblivion of non-personality.

Most Hindus believe in karma, a sort of universal justice in which those who do good (*dharma*, roughly "order") are rewarded, while those who do evil are punished. This justice is not necessarily the act of a god but is rather in some

sense the law of nature. Most Hindus seek to gain good karma, perhaps through good deeds or devotion to a god, so that they may experience a better life here on earth or in their next incarnation.

Because the soul is immortal, it may be incarnated into a new life whether as a human being or as an animal. The body is therefore ultimately meaningless, and cremation is the norm for the dead, with the ashes being cast into the Ganges River to symbolise merging with the universe.

Many Hindus will gladly accept Christ as yet another god or as an avatar of Brahman, because that is consistent with their religious system. The greatest difference between Hinduism and Orthodox Christianity is Orthodox particularism - the teaching that there is one God, who revealed himself perfect God and perfect man - Jesus Christ, who founded the one Church, who confesses one Lord, and upholds one faith and one baptism.

In terms of similarity, however, Hinduism is highly iconic (images are used to connect with the divine) and, in a sense, sacramental, with most of its religious imagery and rituals seen as participating in realities larger than the purely local. Like Orthodoxy, it is mystical in this sense.

## Buddhism

Buddhism originated at least four hundred years before the birth of Christ with the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama,

most commonly known as the Buddha (the “Awakened One”). The Buddha himself left behind no writing, so his teachings are a collection of traditions that are believed to have originated with him. In its essence, Buddhism is non-theist, believing in no god at all. It is therefore sometimes said to be a philosophy rather than a religion.

Like Hinduism, Buddhism also believes in karma, as well as the cycle of reincarnation. This cycle is called *samsara*, the endless experience of suffering. Life itself is seen as suffering and so escape from life and the cycle of rebirth is the highest goal. This escape is called *nirvana* which could be achieved in this life and after death. One who has achieved it is not bound by time or *samsara* any longer and has been absorbed into non-distinction.

The Buddha was the first bodhisattva, an enlightened person who has attained nirvana but stays behind in order to bring salvation from *samsara* to those who are less advanced. There are other *bodhisattvas*, and among Tibetan Buddhists, the Dalai Lama is regarded as one. In a sense, these figures also function similarly to Christian saints, though of course with many exceptions.

Buddhist philosophy is summarised in what are called the Four Noble Truths:

- The truth of the origin of *Dukkha* is that desire for pleasure or the rejection of pleasure result in dissatisfaction and the cycle of reincarnation (*samsara*).
- The truth of the cessation of *Dukkha* means that the cycle of dissatisfaction and reincarnation will also cease.
- The truth of the path of Liberation from *Dukkha* is that by following the Noble Eightfold Path - behaving decently, cultivating discipline, and practising mindfulness and meditation - one can be liberated from *samsara*.

Orthodox Christians can agree with these Four Noble Truths to some extent. Certainly, our passionate desires do indeed lead to suffering, though they are not necessarily direct causes. We also don't believe in *samsara* and its cycle of reincarnation, so our goal is not to be liberated from that. The practice of virtue and asceticism for us is to achieve union with God. We are not seeking to lose ourselves but be illumined and deified by communion with God.

## Final Thoughts

While we believe that Orthodox Christianity is the fullness of God's revelation to humankind, we also believe that God is working in all people throughout all of history. That work will manifest itself in a number of ways, including within other religions. All people are created in the image of God and meant for communion with Him and all are deserving of our love, honour, and respect.

## Reflection Questions

1. Describe the differences between monotheistic, polytheistic and non-theistic religions.
2. Reflect on the similarities between other world religions and Orthodox Christianity.

# Orthodox Living

## Lesson Goals :

- *I can describe monastic traditions of Orthodox Church*
- *I can assess Proselytism by Catholic Uniates.*
- *I can defend the unity of the Orthodox Church in India and delineate the distinct role of the Patriarchate of Antioch.*
- *I can appreciate and evaluate the leadership of important personalities in the modern period of MOSC including formation and growth of the Dioceses of the Church in the global north.*
- *I can appraise how the MOSC has persisted despite the many points of struggle/conflict.*
- *I can assess the Addis Ababa Consultation of January 1965.*



## Monastic Traditions

Since the early years of the Christian era, Christians have been called by Christ Himself to live in the world without being of the world (St. John 17:13-16). Monks are distinct from the world, because of their special conduct and exemplary ethical life, which is a life following the Gospel. They lived by themselves or in special houses as a community. At about the middle of the third century, they began fleeing the world and went to the desert, where they established permanent habitations, whether by themselves or in small groups. They are known as the anchorites, the hermits,

and the monastics. Saint Antony, who fled the world and established himself in the deserts of Egypt, is considered as the Father of Orthodox Monasticism.

Monasticism became a strong movement in the life of the Church. The Church guided and directed the monastic movement to define its own objectives and disciplines. One of the ways through which this occurred was through a convergence of monasticism and priestly orders: Monks were now professed in a special religious service at which they subscribed to special monastic vows, and thus becoming a special class of Christians standing between the



priests and the faithful. This development was mostly due to the efforts of Saint Basil, Archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia.

St. Basil set Christian perfectionism as the goal of monastic life. The monks were to practise Christian virtues together, especially love; to practise obedience to a spiritual father; to practise chastity and poverty, and share the common goods of the monastery. In their pursuits in achieving Christian perfection, sometimes they were allowed to come back to the world in guiding the faithful in their spiritual life. Monks were sparingly allowed to carry out meaningful social work as well. St Basil's institutions took care of orphanages, kitchens for the poor, and a school for the illiterate run by monks. This was St. Basil's way of utilising the monastic movement to benefit the mission of the Church in the world.

In the Syriac Tradition there are two ways of Christian life. *Dayaroyo* and *Olmoyo*. *Dayaroyo* are the monks, who live in a special place called *dayara*, the monastery. *Olmoyo* are the faithful, who live a regular life. *Olmo* in Syriac means the world and they live a worldly Christian life, which is equally important and meaningful. Both the *dayaroyo* and *olmoyo* march towards salvation through receiving the sacraments.

There are several monasteries in the Malankara Orthodox Church. The monk priests are called *Rambachen* in our Church. They wear special head coverings like the bishops and are called

*masnapsa*. They always wear black robes and the big overall robe has blue linings.

## Proselytism by Catholic Uniates

In the 1930s, our Church faced some strong challenges from the Catholic Church, which tried to convert our faithful and make them join their church. One of our bishops, Geevarghese Mar Ivanios of Bethany Monastery, Perinad, Ranni, near Pathanamthitta was influenced and he decided to leave our Church with another two more bishops and a number of faithful. Thus, the Malankara Catholic Rite evolved. This was the direct attempt by the Catholic Church to proselyte our faithful. The word proselyte means sheep stealing. The Catholic Church accepted these faithful as their members, and gave them a special status. Such groups joining the Catholic Church from an Eastern Church are called the Uniates. Today, after almost 90 years, they are still part of the Catholic Church and it was an unfortunate episode in the history of our Church.

## Unity of Orthodox Churches and Role of Patriarchate of Antioch

Leadership of our Church invited the Patriarch of the Antiochene Orthodox Church to India to seal the final deal of the end of relationships and court cases with the Marthoma Church, who were separated from our Church in later part of the 1800s. In 1876 the Patriarch HH

Peter III arrived in Kerala. Our fathers looked at him as the spiritual father who could stabilise the boat, the Orthodox Church in India. However, the Patriarch of Antioch had other ideas. He wanted our Church to be under him spiritually and temporally. He consecrated seven new bishops. In order to cement his goals to bring the Malankara Church under his authority the Patriarch of Antioch convened a Synod in 1876 at Mulanthuruthy. He cleverly divided the Malankara Church into seven dioceses, assigned the newly consecrated seven bishops to each diocese and asked them to write their consents to shepherd the dioceses as per the orders from the Patriarch. He also ordered these new bishops to collect the reseesa or individual tax from each faithful and send it to the Patriarch of Antioch. Reseesa can be translated to head tax, which all males above the age of 21 give to the head of the Church. Malankara Church was thus forcefully brought under the authority of the Patriarch of Antioch. Until then the bishops used to come from Antioch and they did not explicitly gain any temporal powers, although they tried to grab the power many times. Thus, the Church in Malankara was brought under the temporal and spiritual authority of the Patriarch of Antioch. A spiritual father, whom the Malankara Church had invited to establish peace and stability, rocked the boat and stole the authority from the hands of our forefathers. Successor of Patriarch HH Ignatius Peter III, HH Ignatius Abdulla continued the ef-

forts to subdue the Malankara Church under his authority. These efforts were successfully refuted in 1912, after so many attempts to establish peace failed miserably.

## **The Path to Autocephaly**

”Autocephaly” means having one’s own supreme head. Autonomy means self-governance with one’s own code of law. The Malankara Church’s next struggle was to regain autocephaly spiritually and temporally. Our fathers under the leadership of St. Geevarghese Mar Dionysius of Vattasseril strived to achieve autocephaly and autonomy from 1908, after his consecration as Metropolitan. In 1912 the dream came true as the former Patriarch of Antioch HH Ignatius Abded M’shiha arrived in Kerala and declared the Church in India autocephalous, and autonomous. The freedom of the Church in India, which was stolen by one Patriarch has been reinstated by another Patriarch of the same Church and that was a great moment of victory in the history of our Church. HH Mar Ignatius Abded M’shiha himself consecrated the first Catholicos, the spiritual Supreme Head of the Indian Church in the name HH Baselios Paulose I. Mar Dionysius continued to strive to create a Constitution for our Church. Although the saint couldn’t see the promulgation of the Constitution, he did all the groundwork before he passed in February 1934. In December 1934,

the Constitution of our Church was promulgated and we became autonomous.

### **Brief History: Diocese of UK-Europe and Africa**

The roots of the Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Syrian Church in the UK-Europe and Africa geographical region can be traced back to the 1930s, when Abo Alexios of the Bethany monastery (later Bishop Alexios Mar Theodosius) visited the UK. This visit was made possible by the tireless efforts of Prof. A. M. Varkey of Alwaye, a member of the 'Mission of Fellowship to England and Ireland' sponsored by the National Christian Council of India(NCCI). With the help and cooperation of people like Dr. William Paton, Canon John Douglas and others, an association called 'The Friends of the Syrian Church' was formed to render help to this ancient Church in India by offering higher theological training. The first candidate thus chosen was Abo Alexios, who also participated in the Jubilee celebrations of the Community of Resurrection, Mirfield. It is commendable that he was able to establish positive rapport with several religious communities in the UK.

The second priest who came to the UK under this scheme was Fr. T. V. John of U.C. College Alwaye in 1934. Holy Qurbana in Malayalam was conducted in those days at the chapel at King's College, London. Later on several others came to the UK under this programme. The most important milestone in the

early history of the diocese was the visit of the Catholicos H. H. Baselios Geevarghese II, accompanied by the Ramban C M Thomas (later Metropolitan Thoma Mar Dionysius) and Abo Alexios to participate in the second "Faith and Order Conference" of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Edinburgh in 1937. After the conference Ramban C. M. Thomas stayed with the Cowley Fathers for studies in Oxford and conducted Eucharistic services. By the 1950s and 60s the influx of migrant communities to the UK laid the foundation to the gradual growth of the Malankara Christian community. Services, however, were held only occasionally by visiting priests and prelates. Noteworthy visits by other clergy who came to the UK region for higher studies and other purposes include Metropolitan Mathews Mar Coorilos (late Catholicos H.H. Baselios Marthoma Mathews II), Fr. Dr K Philipose (late Metropolitan Philipose Mar Theophilus), Fr. Dr. C. T. Eapen, Fr. P. S. Samuel, Fr. P. V. Joseph (late Metropolitan Joseph Mar Pachomios) and Fr. Yuhannon (late Metropolitan Yuhannon Mar Athanasius).

Fr. Philipose (Mar Theophilus) particularly visited the faithful in the UK region on several occasions during his trips to Europe in connection with various programs of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Another person who rendered invaluable service to the Orthodox community in the region was Dn. K. G. George (late Metropolitan Geevarghese Mar Ivanios) who spent

several years residing with the Cowley Fathers in Oxford. During those days, Eucharistic services were held at the chapel of the Indian YMCA at Fitzroy Square, London. This service was generally ecumenical in nature so as to include the wider Keralite Christian community. As years passed by, the frequency of services conducted increased gradually. In the early 1970s late Metropolitan Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, during one of his pastoral visits, organised the St. Gregorios prayer fellowship. The growth in the community due to the influx of more migrants led to the inevitable segregation on denominational basis. By 1974, members of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and Marthoma Church formed separate congregations and commenced worshipping separately.

The next major milestone occurred in 1976 when the diaspora Orthodox community outside Kerala was reorganised. The European region thus came under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Bombay led by late Metropolitan Dr Thomas Mar Makarios. It was he who, during one of his visits to London, formally declared the congregation in London as the St. Gregorios Orthodox Parish. During the 1979 re-organization of dioceses, the European geographical expanse came under the Diocese of Delhi enjoying the privilege of the pastoral care of eminent scholar late Dr Paulos Mar Gregorios who visited the UK on a regular basis. The European congregations were again reorganised in 1993 under the newly formed diocese of Canada, UK

and Europe under the elite leadership of late Metropolitan Dr Thomas Mar Makarios.

The Holy Episcopal Synod of 2009 decided to once again bifurcate the area, thus forming the present diocese of UK-Europe and Africa. Newly consecrated Metropolitan Dr Mathews Mar Thimothios was appointed as the first Diocesan Metropolitan with his jurisdiction covering two continents, stretching from the western tip of the UK mainland to the southern tip of Africa. The Episcopal guidance of the multilingual and Old Testament scholar H. G. Dr Mathews Mar Thimothios was a great impetus in the growth of the Diocese during its founding years. From November 2022 onwards H. G. Abraham Mar Stephanos took charge as the Metropolitan of the Diocese of UK-Europe and Africa. There are currently a total of 62 Parishes (and Congregations) in 10 countries over the 2 continents of Europe and Africa.

### **Addis Ababa Consultation of 1965**

The Emperor of Ethiopia, His Highness Heile Sallassie conceived the idea in 1964 to create a common platform for the Orthodox Churches, which did not accept the Council of Chalcedon, 451 AD. A meeting of the heads of such five Churches was convened in 1965 in Addis Ababa, Capital of Ethiopia. Heads of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Armenian Orthodox Church, Malankara Orthodox Church, Antiochene Orthodox Church,

and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church came together and affirmed Communion based on the unity in faith. This family of five churches are then named as

the Oriental Orthodox Churches in contrast to the Eastern Orthodox Churches which confess the Chalcedonian Council of 451.

### Reflection Questions

1. How does monasticism influence our Church life and growth of the Orthodox faith?
2. Discuss the impact of Catholic proselytism in the history of Malankara Orthodox Church.
3. How meaningful is autocephaly and autonomy for our Church?
4. Reframe the struggles of our forefathers to gift us our Church in the United States and Canada.
5. Appreciate the leadership of Emperor Heile Sallassie in organising the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

# The Gift of God's Forgiveness

## Lesson Goals :

- *Define Sin*
- *Explain Holy Confession*
- *Describe the Steps for a Meaningful Confession*
- *Identify Peer Pressure and Ways to Overcome Such Pressures*
- *Distinguish Healthy vs Unhealthy and Moral vs Immoral Influences*
- *Identify Symptoms and Causes of Stress and Methods to Deal with Them*
- *Describe the Importance of Prayer to Improve Mental Health*



Alexander is a sophomore in a local high school. He belongs to the Indian Orthodox church and regularly goes to church and participates in all activities of church with the whole family. He is the only church going student among his immediate friend group in school. His friends usually talk about late night parties or television shows on Saturdays and Sundays when they come back to school on Mondays. Alexander has nothing similar to share during those discussions and he feels isolated.

Most of our Sunday School students in high school can relate to Alexander mentioned in the above situation. We are living in a multicultural society with

conflicting moral values. Some of them do not believe in God and some others come from broken families. Some students may have single parents or same sex parents. Many of them may not have any religious affiliation or experience of going to church. Some of them may be addicted to drugs, alcohol, movies, video games etc. Terms like Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and anxiety disorders are common problems among children now. According to the recent findings by the National Institute of Mental Health and the US Center for Disease Control, approximately 4.5 million children between the ages of 8

and 15 have a mental health disorder at any given time. In 2015, The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) estimated that 43.4 million American adults experienced at least one episode of mental illness (Grcevich,S; 2018). That means approximately 50 million Americans suffer from mental illness on any given day.

Although we attend church every Sunday, we are interacting with the above-mentioned population during the remaining six days of the week. This can create tension and identity crisis in all of us. Sometimes we question our own faith and try to find simpler ways to worship God and justify ourselves. During the course of time, we may move away from our faith and engage in sinful activities. Therefore, we need to understand our faith to defend against sinful outside influences.

What is faith? Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). Christians believe in everlasting life with our saviour Jesus Christ. We love God and give priority to God compared to anything in this world. Even if our relatives and own parents desert us, God is there to protect us (Psalms 27:10).

Our trust in God keeps us moving with confidence in our everyday life. When others around us are anxious about the future, we Christians surrender all our problems before God and pray for mercy. In fact, “fear not” appears 365 times in the Holy Bible, one for each day of the year.

Prayer is a communication between man and God. It is the process of allowing the Lord Jesus to enter into our hearts. The Lord says in Revelations 3:20, “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him and he with me.” This clarifies the strong fellowship between man and God.

The Lord Jesus has taught us that we should pray persistently in the example of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). We should avoid temptations and selfish desires during our prayer. Sometimes it is a struggle to focus on our prayer. Even our Lord Jesus was struggling in prayer even unto His death in the garden of Gethsemane. He said to Peter, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mathew 26:41). We should meditate on God’s love during prayer and trust that God knows our limitations and will provide for our needs at the right time.

## What is Sin?

Sin is referred to as *hamartia* in Greek, which means “to miss the mark.” The “mark” or “target” that Christians “aim” towards is a life lived to the best of our ability in accordance with God’s teachings, precepts, and commands. We sin when we fall short of this standard, when we miss the mark. Murdering is wrong. Envy and arrogance are sins. It is wrong to steal a car. A candy bar theft is wrong. Attending the Liturgy while harbouring

animosity against others is just as sinful as refusing to attend.

God gave us Ten Commandments to lead a lawful life in this world. People and nations around the world universally accept these tenets. Sin is the transgression of the law (1 John 3:4). Wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). We all commit sins knowingly or unknowingly every day in our life. How can we get rid of sins? God will forgive our sins if we genuinely confess (1 John 1: 9). Here we can find the significance of Holy Confession in our church. The story of the Prodigal son is a best example to illustrate the importance of confession. The parable of the prodigal son teaches us that our heavenly father is always ready to receive us whenever we, sinners, approach Him with due repentance.

Due to our selfishness, we are unable to keep good relationships with others. This is caused by our sinful nature. We have to take necessary steps to guard against such sins. The greatest commandment God gave us is to love one another. Unless and until we are at peace with our brethren, we are not worthy to worship Him. Therefore, it is necessary to review and renew our life through the sacrament of Confession. Holy Confession is a renewal of Holy Baptism. A spiritual elder says, “The tears of repentance are an extension of baptism.” We need to achieve *metanoia*, a state of spiritual conversion, through true confession.

## Why Should We Confess Before a Priest?

Our sin is primarily against God, “against You, You only, have I sinned.” (Psalms 51:4). However, our sin is also against the community, the church, the body of which we are members. In addition, sin is something that we commit against ourselves, because it causes inward tensions, struggles and unrest. Confession before a priest helps us in three levels:

1. As a representative of God, the priest has the authority to forgive our sins as mentioned in the Bible, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:23).
2. As a representative of the church and the community, the priest hears our confession and absolves our sins.
3. Confessing and sharing our mistakes with a respected person like the priest provides psychological relief. Oral confession provides personal counselling and guidance needed for a new start. The “seal of confession” makes it obligatory on the part of the priest to keep strict confidence of whatever is said in confession. This will help us to communicate honestly with the priest during confession.

## How Can We Prepare for Confession?

1. Self-Examination: Spend time in prayer and try to recollect your past and write down the mistakes made on a paper.



2. A Contrite Heart: We should have a genuine repentance before God when we realise our failings and shortcomings. Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death (2 Cor. 7:10).
3. Make a decision to improve one's conduct and change one's life. Metanoia, a Greek word, means turning off the mind, thought or of life. Thus through metanoia, we offer ourselves to God in contrition and humility.
4. Read the penitential psalms. There are seven penitential psalms. They are Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 129 and 142. Among them, psalm 51 is very important that depicts the story of King David's sinful behaviours and his repentance. Almost all services in our church begin with the reading of psalm 51. This is also one of the prayers in our everyday morning prayer.
5. During confession before a priest, kneel down before him and say, "I have sinned my father, pray for me." Then mention your sins without unnecessary details or misleading words. Be truthful to yourself and genuinely judge yourself so that God lifts up His judgement from you. Listen to the instructions of the priest and follow them accordingly. After the confession, spend some quiet time in the church and ask God to guide you to lead a holy life. Also, pray for the father confessor to strengthen his ministry.
6. Refer to the service book of the Holy Qurbano pages 380-386 for a list of possible sins and prayers we recite during Holy confession.

### **Peer Pressure and Ways to Overcome Such Pressures**

When people come together, they can be very powerful. This can be a good and helpful thing. Unfortunately, people do not always make the best choices, and sometimes this can cause other people to follow along or stumble. People's expectations or desires for us can cause us to conform to the behaviour that we think will help us look better in the eyes of others. This phenomenon is known as peer pressure. The most common perception of peer pressure may be with children or teens or in a classroom setting. Peer pressure can sometimes lead us to ungodly actions or sinning. For example, we may be tempted to partake in activities that go against our morals or treat others unkindly because others expect or want us to. This could mean the need to dress or act a certain way, cheating or copying someone else's work or letting others copy your work, being dangerous and reckless when driving, using drugs or alcohol, shoplifting or stealing, engaging in sexual activity, etc.

### **How to Overcome Peer Pressure?**

Peer pressure can be challenging, but approaching it from a Christian perspective can provide helpful guidance. In the

face of peer pressure, it's important to remember that our ultimate goal as Christians is to honour God and live according to His teachings. Here are a few ways to navigate peer pressure from a Christian standpoint:

1. **Know Your Values:** Take time to understand your own beliefs and values based on your faith. This will help you establish a strong foundation and make it easier to resist pressures that conflict with your convictions.
2. **Seek Guidance From Scripture:** The Bible offers wisdom and guidance on various topics, including peer pressure. Reading and meditating on relevant passages can help you gain insight and make informed decisions. Praying for guidance is also essential.
3. **Find a Spiritual Father and a Father Confessor:** A relationship with a spiritual father is one of the most important relationships in an Orthodox Christian's life. Right from the time one is twelve years of age, take the opportunity to truly learn what it means to confess and to delve into a deeper relationship with your parish priest as a true mentor and spiritual father.
4. **Surround Yourself with Like-Minded Individuals:** Build a support system of friends who share similar values and beliefs. Having a strong community can provide encouragement and accountability when faced

with peer pressure. The most common reason why young people fall astray is that they get mixed up with bad company. We all need friends, so the secret is to find friends who love God.

5. **Be Confident in One's Faith:** Develop a deep understanding of your faith and be confident in it. This confidence will make it easier to politely decline any activities or behaviours that go against your beliefs. As part of daily routine, have a fervent prayer rule and read the Holy Scriptures and other spiritual books. Make it a point to attend Holy Liturgy and other services in Church regularly.
6. **Practice Assertiveness:** Learn to respectfully voice your convictions and stand firm in your decisions. Remember that it's okay to say "no" if something goes against your values, even if it means going against the crowd.
7. **Be a Positive Influence:** Instead of succumbing to peer pressure, strive to be a positive influence on others. Lead by example and demonstrate the joy and fulfilment that comes from living a life aligned with Christian principles.

Remember, everyone faces peer pressure at some point, and it's how we respond that matters. Trust in your faith, seek wisdom from God, talk to your spiritual father, and surround yourself with

supportive people who will help you stay true to your Christian values.

### **What Causes Stress and How to Overcome Such Issues:**

One can experience stress due to various factors, such as academic pressure, social expectations, family dynamics, and personal challenges. From an Orthodox Christian perspective, the Church offers us some ways to help overcome stress:

1. **Prayer and Faith:** Turn to prayer as a source of comfort and strength. We as Orthodox Christians believe in the power of prayer, and seeking a deeper connection with God can provide solace during stressful times. Trust in God's plan and find peace in your faith.
2. **Embrace the Sacraments:** Participate actively in the sacramental life of the Church. Frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Confession can bring spiritual healing and renewal, helping you find inner peace and guidance.
3. **Practice Mindfulness:** Incorporate mindfulness techniques into your daily routine. Take moments to reflect, journal, do things that one enjoys like sports, quality time with good friends, engage in enriching hobbies, and be present in the current moment. These practices can help reduce anxiety and bring a sense of calm amidst stress.
4. **Seek Support from Spiritual Elders:** Turn to spiritual elders or experienced clergy for guidance. These wise individuals can provide spiritual counsel, helping you gain perspective and navigate challenging situations.
5. **Find Balance:** Recognize the importance of balance in your life. Prioritize your spiritual well-being, but also take care of your physical, emotional, and mental health. Make time for activities that bring you joy, such as hobbies, spending time in nature, or engaging in creative pursuits.
6. **Connect with the Church Community:** Engage with fellow Orthodox Christians and participate in church activities. Surrounding yourself with a supportive community can provide a sense of belonging, encouragement, and understanding, helping to alleviate stress.
7. **Prioritise Self-Care:** Take care of yourself by maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Get enough sleep, eat nutritious food, exercise regularly, and take breaks when needed. Nurturing your physical and emotional well-being allows you to better cope with stress.
8. **Practice Forgiveness:** Orthodox Christianity emphasises forgiveness as a means of healing and letting go of burdens. Learn to forgive yourself and others, as holding onto grudges or guilt can contribute to stress and anxiety.

Remember that stress is a normal part of life, but it's how we respond to it that matters. By incorporating these principles into your life, you can find strength, peace, and resilience to overcome stress and navigate the challenges of school and university life.

## Reflection Questions

1. Explore the reasons you could experience emotions of sadness, or loneliness, or depression.
2. What are some of the activities or hobbies that bring you joy and take you away from the stresses of life?
3. Did you notice any stress or anxiety related problems among your classmates in school? Explain
4. Have you prepared and gone for Holy confession in your life? If yes, how has your experience helped or not helped you?
5. How are priests or spiritual fathers or spiritual mothers helpful to you in your life?
6. Can priests/clergy/monks/nuns substitute mental health professionals like psychologists or psychiatrists in society for counselling? Share your thoughts.

## Gratitude

### Reviewers : Grade 10

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**ST. THOMAS, THE APOSTLE OF INDIA  
PRAY FOR US**



**O S S A E**  
**Diocese of UK, Europe and Africa**

**FIRST EDITION  
2024**