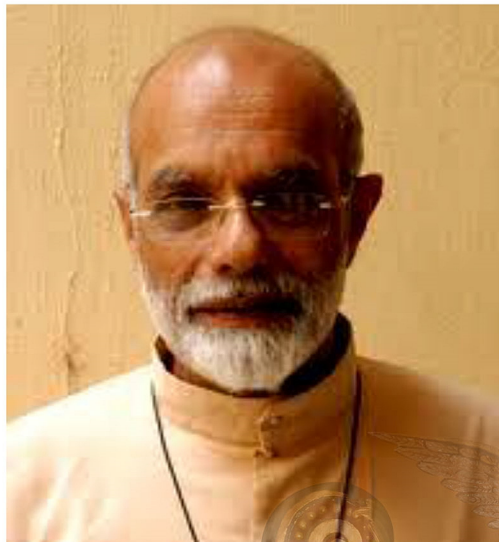




THOMAS CHRISTIANS: CHURCH OF THE EAST



Rev. Dr. Xavier Koodapuzha

1. INTRODUCTION

The Church of the Thomas Christians of India, which is as old as Christianity itself in the Indian soil, is the legitimate heir of an unique ecclesial heritage among the Churches of the Catholic communion. The awareness of its unique identity and heritage is essential for its organic growth which will enable it to contribute its legitimate share to the renewal of the Universal Church. This contribution is of great importance in this post Vatican II period of renewal and reconciliation of the Churches which were the primary goals of the Council.

During the preparatory period of the Vatican Council II

Rev. Dr. Xavier Koodapuzha, holds a doctorate in Theology from the Pontifical Urban University Rome, and Licentiate in Philosophy, Oriental Sciences (Pont. Oriental Institute Rome) and canon law (Pont. Gregorian University Rome). He has many years of experience as professor of Ecclesiology and Church History at Paurastya Vidyapitham, Kottayam and as visiting professor at Redemptorists College Bangalore. He is the founder of MOC Kottayam and was its first principal. He has authored Books and articles in English and Malayalam. At present he is the Superior of Mar Thoma Sreeha Monastery Nallathanny, Murinjapuzha P.O. Idukki DT, Kerala, India. Pin 685 532
Tel. 0486 9 288 20



Pope John XXIII made a prophetic statement that in order to achieve the goal of Vatican Council II the Church should “shake off the dust of the Roman Empire which had crept into the Roman Church from the time of the Emperor Constantine”. The Pope encouraged the scholarly research of his friend Yves Congar O. P. on the secular inroads of the Roman imperial system into the Church. The results of his studies were first published in French with the title “Pour Une Eglise Servant Et Pauvre”. The book was quite timely and became very popular. Its English edition was published during the Council with the title “Power and Poverty in the Church” (transl. By Jennifer Nicholson, Geoffrey Chapman, and London-Dublin, 1965). Congar was made an official theologian (Peritus) of the Vatican Council II and his theological and historical studies had an effective impact on the deliberations of the Council. As a sign of official recognition for his contribution to the Church he was made a Cardinal. The studies of Congar and many other scholars have pointed out what had happened to the Roman Church during the course of the centuries. It had far reaching consequences also in the other Churches, which had come under the influence and rule of the missionaries from the West. It was very real from the time of the period of western colonization during which the missionaries worked with the support of their colonial masters. The Church of the Thomas Christians of India is a typical example of this ecclesiastical colonialism.

Similar to the studies made by Congar in the West, Fr. Placid J. Podipara, a great Son of the Church of the Thomas Christians of India, who was also made an expert theologian (Peritus) of the Vatican II, had his historical, canonical and theological research studies on the nature of the Catholic Church in general and



of the Eastern Churches in particular. He defined the pre-colonial Church of the Thomas Christians of India as “Indian Culture, Christian in Religion and Oriental in worship”. As Congar has pointed out what had happened to the Roman Church Placid did bring to the attention of the Christian world what had happened to the Church in India from the time of western colonialism and what still continues under the neo-colonial leadership of its own indigenous leadership! By neo-colonialism we mean the attitude of those who have a dislike towards their own venerable ecclesial heritage and want to perpetuate the alien system imposed during the period of western colonialism

2. THOMAS CHRISTIANS, CHURCH OF THE EAST

The Church of the Thomas Christians of India and the neighbouring Churches of the Persian Empire had their origin and development in the East, outside the Roman Empire. The general division of the Church into Western (Latin) and Oriental is based on the division of the Roman Empire. The Churches which had their origin and development within the Oriental regions of the Roman Empire began to be called Oriental Churches and those Churches in the Western regions called Roman or Latin Churches. From this it is clear that the Church of the Thomas Christians does not come strictly under the division based on the Roman Empire. It existed in the East outside the Roman Empire and hence called Church of the East in India with their apostolic tradition in communion with the other Churches especially of the St Thomas tradition.



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