

The Malankara Church-Chaldean Syrian Union - A Forgotten Chapter



Gathering of the Malankara-WesternRite- Chaldean Syrian Prelates

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**Special Courtesy- His Beatitude Abba Seraphim – VIIth Patriarch of the British
Orthodox Church.**

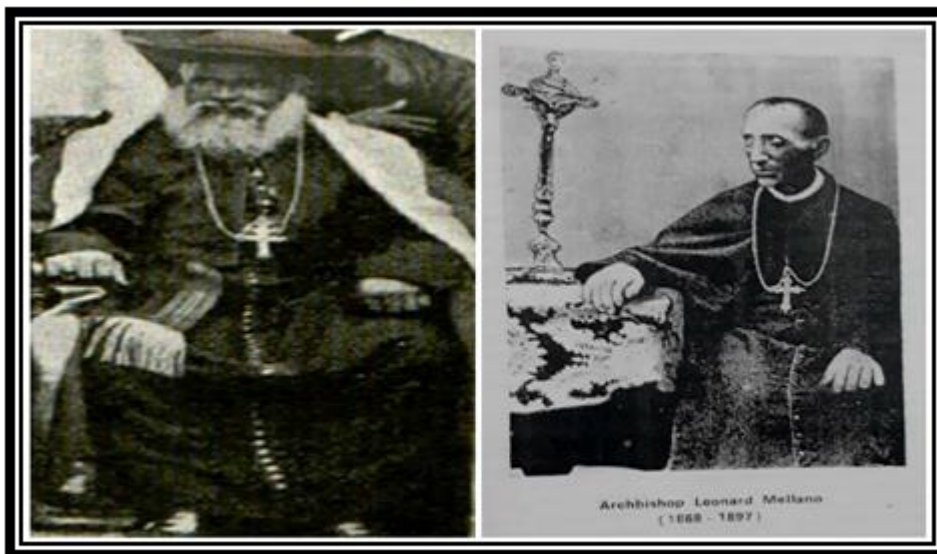
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This piece is an attempt to deconstruct the past relations between the Malankara Church and the Chaldean Syrian Church. This article is not a conclusion; rather it explores various aspects of the forgotten relationship.

The above photo (taken in 1882 or 1892?) is a historical document for the Malankara Church. It is a topic of discussion among theologians and Church historians, mainly because the photo shows the assembly of the legendary Prelates of Malankara and Western Rite and that of the Chaldean Syrian Church.

Few arguments regarding this historic photo are presented below. For a detailed analysis of the photo and its comparison study, please subscribe to the first part of the book 'Western Rites of Syriac-Malankara Orthodox Churches'.



A photo comparison of Archbishop Alvares Julius (L) and Archbishop Leonard Mellano (R)

Firstly, eminent historian Dr. M.Kurien Thomas stated in his article '*Two Mistaken Pictures*' that the photo was taken during an ecumenical gathering in British Cochin and that the bishop seated at the extreme right is not Archbishop Alvares Julius. He states that it is Latin Archbishop Leonardo Mellano (St. Louis OCD) of Varapuzha (Verapoly).

However, the photo of Archbishop Leonardo Mellano in the Verapoly portal (<http://verapolyheritage.org/bishops/>) looks different from the one in the group photo. Archbishop Mellano's photo appears clean-shaved, in a Latin cassock.

Historians Joseph Manishad Mattacaki and Sister Dr. Susy Kinattungal (C.T.C) of the Latin Archdiocese of Verapoly examined the photo of Archbishop Alvares Julius and the

group photo, and they compared the same with photos of their prelates, especially Archbishop Mellano, and they could not find any similarity between the photo of Archbishop Mellano and that of Archbishop Alvares Julius.

They commented that the bishop in the group photo on the extreme right in the front row is of Indian origin. During the period (1882 and 1892), bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in Kerala were foreigners. Archbishop Mellano was Italian. Verapoly historians confirmed that during this period, the Roman Catholic Church had three dioceses in Kerala. All three dioceses had foreign missionary bishops and none of their missionary bishops were present in the historic photo.



Bishop João Gomes Ferreira (L) and Mar Alvares (R)

Another person mentioned by Dr.M. Kurien Thomas in his article is Bishop João Gomes Ferreira of Cochin. However, Bishop Joao Gomes doesn't have any similarity with Archbishop Alvares Julius.

Dr. Kuiren also states that, according to the chronicle of Mar Simon Dionysius (then Nazrani bishop of Kochi), the British Governor of Madras who visited Cochin convened an ecumenical gathering of the Christian Prelates in 1882. However, the absence of British officers in the photo raises further doubts on any such claims.

It shall be noted that Archbishop Alvares Julius used Latin cassock with Cappello Romano hat. He acquired permission from the Goan court for the same in 1890. As the Apostolic Prefect, Alvares Julius used a purple cassock with a red cincture, and a clerical hat (Capello Romano). It is clear that Independent Catholic prelates used vestments and hats similar to their Roman Catholic counterparts. Metropolitan Alvares used Syriac-Malankara vestments as well.

The Malankara-Chaldean Union

It is pertinent to seek about the Chaldean Syrian (Assyrian Church of the East)–Malankara connection. It is said that the Malankara prelates were in dialogue with the Chaldean Syrian Church in order to accept them as an autonomous rite of the Malankara Church. Some historians believe that an ‘agreement of mutual cooperation’ was established between the Malankara Church and the Chaldean Syrian Church. The nature of cooperation and the discussions undertaken remains a mystery.

Metropolitan Alvares Julius was also involved in the negotiations. *The Independent Catholic*, the ICM’s magazine-newspaper (published from Colombo), published news on the Malankara Bishops’ Conference in Trichur (Thrissur), and visits of Metropolitan Alvares Julius to the Chaldean Syrians in Trichur and so on. Kunnamkulam (place of Metropolitan Pulikkottil Joseph II Dionysius) was close to Trichur, and this could be another reason for the Malankara prelates to select Trichur as a common meeting place.

Decoding the Photo

Photographing Church events were not a common practice in the past, unlike the modern days. Only important occasions were covered. The gathering of the Malankara-WesternRite-Chaldean Prelates was an event of high importance and culminated in a group photo.

Most probably the event took place (and the photo was taken) after the departure of Mar Mellus to Middle East (Mar Mellus was sent by the Chaldean Patriarch and worked in Thrissur until 1882). It is also interesting to note that Chorbishop Michael Augustine was not part of the group photo. Chorbishop Michael worked as an assistant to Mar

Mellus and later served as the defacto head of the Chaldean Syrian Church (until 1908) after the demise of Mar Abdisho in 1900. Some sources claim that he was consecrated a Bishop of the Church of the East. But this claim is highly disputed. Upon the request of Chorbishop Michael Augustine, Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Benjamin Shimun sends Metropolitan Mar Abimalek Timotheus to Thrissur in 1908.

It can be assumed that the photo of the gathering of the Prelates was taken in Trichur (in the premises of the Marth Mariam Big Church) as part of the negotiations/discussions between the Malankara Church and the Chaldean Syrian Church (Church of the East in India). As mentioned earlier in this article, the assembly held at Trichur was part of the negotiations to accept the Chaldean Church as an autonomous Rite of the Malankara Church or to establish an 'unusual cooperation' between them.

The Bishop seated on the extreme left in the front row was not Archbishop René Vilatte but was instead Mar Abdisho (Oudheeso) Thondanat of the Chaldean Syrian Church.

Moreover, the April (1892) edition of the *Independent Catholic* reports that 'His Grace Archbishop Alvares, the convalescent from the Influenza, went for a change from Kottayam to Trichur, where H.L. Mar Augustine and his Christians gave His Grace a cordial reception.' Archbishop Alvares Julius was also part of the negotiation process between the Malankara Church and the Chaldean Syrian Church in India.

Another report states that 'A conference of Bishops presided by the Metropolitan, was held recently at Trichur to make the final arrangements for the consecration of the Very Rev. Father Vilatte.'- (Magazine-Newspaper of the Independent Catholic Church of Ceylon, February 1892).

Transfer of Mar Basilius Soares from the Western Rite of Malankara Church to Syro-Chaldean Church

Mar Abdisho was called to rest in 1900. After the death of the Mar Adisho, Mar Baslios Soares claimed authority over the Chaldean Christians scattered at the time in Trichur, Dindigul, and Ceylon.

Mar Baselios Soares (Fr. Luis Mariano Soares) was a close ally of Mar Alvares and he was an active priest in Ceylon with the Independent Catholic Church (Western Rite of Syriac-Malankara Orthodox Churches). He was consecrated a Bishop for the Syro-Chaldean Church by Mar Abdisho, assisted by Chorbishop Michael Augustine. It is important to note that Mar Baselios Soares smoothly transferred himself from the jurisdiction of Independent Catholic Church of Ceylon, Goa, and India (Western Rite) to the Syro-Chaldean Church. He did not face any objection from Mar Alvares or from the Prelates of Syriac and Malankara Orthodox Churches. Even if he was condemned, we do not have any documents on the same.



From (L) Mar Abdisho, Mar Basilius, and Chorbishop Augustine

Information Acquired from the Filed Work

From interviews with some of the leading Chaldean Syrian historians, we understood that the Chaldean Syrian Church do not venerate or remember Mar Basilius Soares. Basilius Soares is not even considered a late Bishop of the Assyrian Church, as he failed to receive the 'letter of acceptance' from the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church.

The negotiations for cooperation/unity between the Malankara Church and the Chaldean Syrian Church generate a lot of interest and curiosity among historians. An in-depth analysis of the secondary data is required to understand the past. The Chaldean Syrian archives may have a few documents. However, access to such data remains a herculean and an almost impossible task.

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