



**CATHOLIC
HOME
MISSIONS**

Young Diocese, Ancient Church: St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago



The altar servers of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Syro-Malabar Catholic Mission of Greater Washington listen to the Palm Sunday homily given by Bishop Joy Alappatt of the Syro-Malabar Diocese of St. Thomas of Chicago.

By Beth Griffin

One of the newest dioceses in the United States also has one of the largest footprints. The St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago—established in 2001 by Pope St. John Paul II—covers the entire United States. The diocese includes almost 90,000 parishioners in 50 parishes and 30 missions in 28 states.

Catholic Home Missions (CHM) grants help the diocese bridge the geographical divides to serve its growing membership.

The Syro-Malabar Church is the second largest of 24 Eastern Catholic Churches across the globe that enjoy the same dignity, rights, and obligations as the Latin Church. Eastern Catholic Churches have distinctive liturgical and legal systems that reflect the national or ethnic character of their region of origin. Some Eastern Churches also call their dioceses “eparchies.”

St. Thomas the Apostle founded the Syro-Malabar Church in southern India, in the present state of Kerala. At the time, the people referred to themselves as St. Thomas Christians. They spread the faith slowly to other areas of India after St. Thomas was martyred in AD 72. The name “Syro-Malabar” is derived from the Syriac language used in the liturgy and the Malabar area of southern India where the Church flourished.

Syro-Malabar Catholics began to arrive in the United States in the 1970s. Bishop Joy Alappatt, who was installed as the second bishop of the diocese in October 2022, said migration began with a demand for trained nurses.

“Christians are about 2.5% of the population in India. It’s a small percent, but still a large number, considering the huge population of the country. The Catholic Church gave higher priority than others to education. As a result, more professional people were available to seek job opportunities in America,” he said.

Initially, Syro-Malabar immigrants to the United States depended on Roman Catholic parishes for spiritual sustenance, the bishop said. But as their numbers increased, they sought the community of fellow Syro-Malabar Catholics and the comfort of their familiar liturgy. Visiting priests celebrated Mass, known as Qurbana, in Malayalam, the language of Kerala.

Bishop Alappatt said the formation of the dedicated diocese was consistent with the Second Vatican Council’s encouragement to foster the faith and religious traditions of individual groups within the universal Catholic Church.

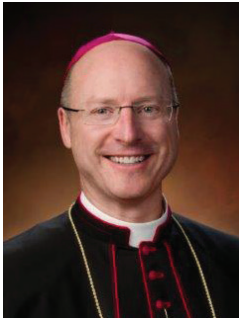
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Neighbors

ISSUE 3 2022

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers
and Sisters in Christ,

Throughout its history, the Catholic Church in the United States has been a church of immigrants. That is still true now; and though the Catholic immigrants of today come from Latin America, Africa, and Asia rather than Europe, their communities are still animated by the faith that sustains them as they adjust to life in a new land and a new culture.

The St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago is one of the newest dioceses in the United States, established in 2001 to serve the needs of Catholics from India who belong to the Syro-Malabar Church. Worldwide, the Syro-Malabar Church is the second largest of the 24 Eastern Catholic churches in full communion with the Latin Church. Their unique Catholic tradition can be traced back to the time of the first Apostles, when St. Thomas the Apostle founded the Church in southern India.

With support from Catholic Home Missions, the St. Thomas Diocese of Chicago has a robust youth ministry and catechetical program that helps to strengthen the faith of immigrant families and their US-born children as they adjust to the cultural differences of life in the United States.

Your support of Catholic Home Missions makes a crucial difference for the Syro-Malabar Church and other Eastern Catholic churches that minister to the unique cultural and pastoral needs of their largely immigrant members. Thank you.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight
Bishop of Jefferson City
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions



In Gaithersburg, MD, on a chilly Palm Sunday morning parishioners gather at the driveway entrance to Our Lady of Perpetual Help Syro-Malabar Catholic Mission to dedicate a grotto shrine to Our Lady prior to processing to the Church for the Palm Sunday celebration of Holy Qurbana.

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The establishment of the St. Thomas Diocese of Chicago coincided happily with a second wave of Syro-Malabar immigration, this one fueled by a call for information technology specialists and computer professionals.

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago gave the former St. John Chrysostom church in Bellwood, Illinois, to the new diocese for use as its cathedral. Now known as Mar Thoma Sleeha Syro-Malabar Cathedral, it serves a parish community comprising more than 1,200 families.

In the Washington, DC, area, a mission parish was incorporated in 2007 to serve Syro-Malabar Catholics in the greater Washington area, including Maryland and northern Virginia. The worship community was hosted by various Latin rite parishes and ultimately purchased land in several areas including in Gaithersburg, Maryland. After years of planning, fundraising, and building, Our Lady of Perpetual Help was dedicated in 2021.

Fr. Roy Moolachalil, the founding pastor, said 60 families are registered at the parish. Liturgies are well attended, and the parish emphasizes catechism and youth programs. The parish's 25 volunteer catechism teachers use material prepared in Kerala and adapted by the St. Thomas Diocese of Chicago.

Youth programs are developed by a diocesan youth apostolate (DYA). Young people from Our Lady of Perpetual Help participate in an annual Mid-Atlantic youth conference, a Haiti mission, and Jesus Youth, a charismatic youth movement that originated in Kerala. Fr. Roy said that youth are also drawn to movie nights and sporting events at the parish.

The parish also offers active prayer and social groups for mothers, a robust Knights of Columbus council, and regular opportunities for parish-wide lunches, retreats, and picnics.

Fr. Roy said he and other original priests of the diocese came here from India and were trained to minister there. “To know the second generation is not easy. We are doing our best to maintain the youth. They wrestle with being a Catholic and trying to find a perfect partner,” he said.

Bishop Alappatt attended a youth summit at the Vatican in June 2022. It gathered young Syro-Malabar Catholics from five huge dioceses that were formed outside India to minister to migrants.

“This is a new endeavor for our Church and we are challenged by the transition from the Eastern to the Western hemisphere. Many of our youth find confusion and some conflict as they try to merge with Western culture,” he said.

As a result, Bishop Alappatt said, the diocese places a premium on the DYA. “We foster community networks, have zonal meetings four times a year, offer charismatic retreats, and run an interparish sports festival that will take place in Austin this year,” he said. “And next year, we will have a talent festival.”

To strengthen and retain traditions, the parishes and missions operate cultural academies to teach dance, music, drawing, and the Malayalam language, the mother tongue used in the liturgy. Bishop Alappatt said more than 10,000 students attend religious instruction classes, and English liturgies are popular with younger worshipers throughout the diocese.

Bishop Alappatt and the recently retired inaugural Bishop Jacob Angadiath travel frequently to stay in touch with people in their diocese. All parishioners are invited to attend a national convention every several years and to participate in regional gatherings.

The diocese is blessed with eight current seminarians and has ordained six priests who were born to immigrant parents and raised in the United States. Bishop Alappatt said vocations are encouraged through youth camp, Syro study programs, youth and high school activities, and a vocations bureau.

“The pious associations like the Cherupushpa Mission League under the patronage of St. Therese of Liseux and St. Alphonsa, the first native woman saint of India, also work very effectively among

CCD students to promote vocations,” the bishop said.

“Vocations are always a challenging factor,” Bishop Alappatt said. “We need more priests from this country. The future of the Church depends on the youth who are born and brought up here. They will assimilate but hold on to their traditions, and things will be easier for them,” he said. “They will offer more energy to the youngsters.”

Bishop Alappatt said the diocese does not have permanent deacons. Some women religious from India serve in the diocese, but no Syro-Malabar congregations have been established in the United States yet.

Thomas Abraham Theniaplackal, a founding trustee at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, said finances and membership are twin challenges. The parish has a large mortgage on the new church. It conducts community outreach to invite new parishioners, including

house-to-house Christmas caroling and personal invitations to celebrate important feast days. The Syro-Malabar faithful who settled in the vicinity of Roman Catholic parishes are well-established participants there and are not inclined to move to a new parish, he said. Nonetheless, people are increasingly drawn to pray and celebrate Mass in Malayalam and revive traditional devotions. “This year, the 1,950th anniversary of the martyrdom of St. Thomas, we processed around the church property with an icon of the saint on his feast and finished at a new grotto at the entrance of the church,” Thomas said.

“Because the liturgical language is Malayalam, non-Indians are generally not attracted to the church, except if they marry a parishioner,” Thomas said. He added that additional parish growth from immigration is likely through family reunification programs and new hires in the medical and information technology fields.

Meanwhile, to retain the young people who leave for college, the new parish complex includes a gym. “It’s great to see kids come back during breaks and play basketball

and volleyball with their friends,” he said.

Bishop Alappatt said the St. Thomas Diocese of Chicago developed communities in different states and then focused on forming youth and families. Each parish has a family unit, in which 25 to 30 families meet monthly for Bible classes with the pastor. Representatives chosen from the family units form the parish council to help the pastor with administration. “We teach the need to stay with the Church,” he said.

“Most of the people are immigrants trying to sink roots in this country. In their struggle to settle in this new land, they may not contribute much, but they do contribute to the needs of the church,” Bishop Joy said.

“Catholic Home Missions has helped us very much, especially with our youth formation programs,” he said. “We also got invaluable support during the COVID-19 pandemic and appreciate the scholarship opportunities CHM has given us to send diocesan staff to national training programs.”

“We are establishing a flourishing Church in America, with a focus on family, youth, and faith formation. Our diocese has no institutions, only parish churches, so we are a liturgical, pastoral, catechetical church,” Bishop Alappatt said.

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Bishop Joy Alappatt



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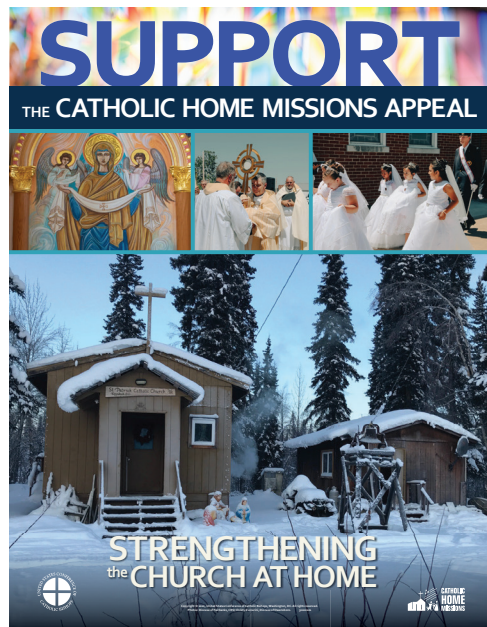
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DID YOU KNOW?

- The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church is the second largest Eastern Catholic Church in communion with the Bishop of Rome.
- Members of the Syro-Malabar Church are known as **Syrian Catholics** or **Roman Catholic Syrian Christians**.
- They are people from Kerala, India, and trace their roots and traditions back to the Apostle St. Thomas.

Our work is supported by the annual collection taken up in U.S. parishes. If you missed your parish collection, you may send your donation to: USCCB Office of National Collections | P. O. Box 96278 | Washington, DC 20090-6278. Please make checks payable to USCCB-Catholic Home Missions Appeal. iGiveCatholicTogether also accepts contributions to support the Catholic Home Missions program: <https://usccb.igivecatholictogether.org/organizations/usccb-catholic-home-missions>

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