

November

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THE STREAM

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Do you understand the wisdom of trees?

Trees grow old beautifully...they let their dying leaves go... and wait for Spring patiently...

Fall is a spiritual season. Part of the tree dies in order to regenerate a healthier version of itself for later in its life. What part of your soul will change this season?

What's New this Month

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Saint Geevarghese Mar Gregorios

Synonymous with Purity, Prayer & Fasting

Born 15 June 1848 Mulanthuruthy, Kerala

Died 3 November 1902 (Aged 54) Parumala, Kerala

Canonized 2 November 1947

Feast 2 November



Quotes by the Saint

"Avoid arrogance, quarrel and pride while dealing in Church matters; instead, let your humility shine before others. Those who place their trust in God, and satisfy the people are blessed".

Let no one grieve because of you. Never let go of an opportunity to do something good. Only those things will remain with you till the end."

"If there is a quarrel in the family, keep away. A quarrelsome house is the haven of the devil and God is nowhere near it."

Tomb of Jesus opened for first time in centuries

Preservation experts have opened for the first time, in at least two centuries, what is believed to be Jesus's tomb inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Some of the historic work, was at the site, believed to contain the rock, upon which Jesus was laid in, around 33 AD as it was uncovered, as part of ongoing restoration at the site. A marble slab covering the site, among the holiest in Christianity, was pulled back for three days as part of both restoration work and archaeological analysis. A shrine was built in the 19th century over the site of the cave where Jesus is believed to have been buried before his resurrection, and it is visited by throngs of tourists and pilgrims each day. Earlier this year, a major restoration project began, surrounded by a structure called an edicule and located at the center of the church in Jerusalem's Old City, underneath its dome. The project required the agreement of the various Christian denominations that share the church, which also contains the area where Jesus is believed to have been crucified and his body anointed. The restoration project is expected to be completed around



March 2017, in time for Easter, and the site has remained open to visitors for nearly the entire time, although the ornate edicule has been surrounded by scaffolding. Its marble slabs have weakened over the years, caused in part by the thousands of people who visit daily. The shrine is being painstakingly dismantled and rebuilt. Broken or fragile parts are to be replaced while marble slabs that can be preserved will be cleaned, and the structure supporting them will be reinforced. The work is being funded by the three main Christian denominations of the Holy Sepulchre - Greek Orthodox, Franciscans and Armenians -- and by public and private contributions.

METROPOLITAN'S COLUMN

My Dearly Beloved,



Our Nation, The United States of America, is entering a new era of its history with a new President. With the coming into power of President Trump, we can boldly say that the election to one of the most powerful positions on this planet is the greatest example of how powerful democracy can be. The Republican Party holds on to some Christian attitudes, which have been the foundation of this nation. The legalization of homosexuality and abortions will truly shred the fabric of this nation. What we do in the name of freedom should be carefully and prayerfully analyzed. May this nation be enabled to maintain and nurture godliness, dignity and honor, especially in the fields of justice, law and order, education etc. We pray that the new Government will become a model of impartiality, honesty and a government which focuses on maintaining the integrity of what this nation stands for.

The Holy Church is also entering into a new liturgical year with the Sunday of 'Kuddosh Etho' (Sanctification of the church). The Sanctification of the faithful is indeed the sanctification of the Church. The beginning of the liturgical year reminds us of an utmost necessity - of *personal purification* and *deification*. We being, the living temple of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit - a real contrition of heart and dedication to the sacredness of God is inevitable in our lives.

We need to make ourselves aware of the fact that we are pilgrims. We are on a pilgrimage, moving towards eternity to receive Christ our Lord at His second coming. It is this reality that serves as a reminder to us that, we are called to be perfect as Christ has taught us by living in this world, as a perfect human being. He taught us that, "We should be Holy just like our Father in heaven is Holy" (Matt 5:48). The measuring rod of holiness is the Holiness of the Father in Heaven. The command of Christ, the '*theantropos*' (Perfect God and Perfect Man) of becoming perfect in holiness is a direct command as we see in the Book of Leviticus, when the Lord God spoke to Moses saying, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2)

The month of November is significant for the memorial feasts of many of our Malankara Church fathers, especially the feast of St. Gregorios of Parumala. This year we celebrate the 114th memorial of this great saint. The

reputation of the holiness and intercession of Parumala Mar Gregorios crosses the boundaries of Malankara. The acceptance, respect and veneration that Parumala Thirumeni receives is because of the life he led here, in this world, keeping the command of God that, "You must be Holy just like Your father in heaven is Holy". Parumala Thirumeni lived in a period where the social situation in Kerala and India in general was drastically different from our current times. Untouchability, Illiteracy and all kinds of discriminations were at its peak. This was also a time St. Thomas Christians were facing the challenges of safeguarding its faith from the cruel and heretical threat of the English and Roman missionaries.

St. Gregorios of Parumala pioneered to safeguard the church and the nation from all these kinds of evils. The establishment of educational institutions, organization of priestly education, fighting against caste discriminations were tirelessly initiated along with the rigorous life of prayer and charity. St. Gregorios of Parumala is a great paradigm in the Orthodox spiritual discipline of fasting. Despite his weak health, he upheld a lifestyle of strict fasting. It was not to torture his body but to discipline his mind and sanctify his soul. He was an exemplar in his generous life of charity. While remaining hungry with his life of fasting, he made sure that other hungry stomachs were taken care of. We who live in America cannot fathom such a lifestyle. We are the largest consumers of food in the entire world and at the same time we are also the greatest food wasters on the entire planet. The increase in violent crimes, decrease in our morality and ethics and the pain of obesity are signs of undisciplined use of food in our daily lives.

Parumala Thiumeni's life stands apart as a beacon of light and wisdom to our broken and dark world - teaching us that a life of simplicity and self-control, especially in our food intake habits help us in our pilgrimage of Holiness and perfection. We need to consider this thought especially in the context of how we celebrate our Parish Feast Day which



commemorates a saint who spent most of his life in fasting. We his children on the other hand are under the misnomer that we honor him with the intensity of our feasting and

extravagant ways of celebrating his feast day. Isn't it high time, we put thought into our celebrations and our definitions of celebration??? May the Grace of God and the prayers of St. Gregorios of Parumala help and guide us all.

Metropolitan Alexios Mar Eusebius

DIOCESAN UPDATES

Malankara Orthodox Church Presents Archdiocese with \$25K for Syrian Relief



His Eminence Metropolitan Alexios Mar Eusebius of the Malankara Indian Orthodox Church Diocese of Southwest America visited St. Nicholas Cathedral of Brooklyn on the afternoon of November 8, 2016, to present the proceeds of collections in their diocese for Syrian Relief.

Archpriest Thomas Zain, Vicar General of the Archdiocese and Cathedral Dean, received the check on behalf of His Eminence Metropolitan Joseph, who was on an arch pastoral tour.

Father Thomas welcomed Metropolitan Alexios Mar Eusebius and thanked him on behalf of those who are suffering and displaced as a result of ongoing Syrian war. This generous gift of \$25,000 will be used to help educate the children of those new immigrants who have arrived as a result of the war and have come with nothing or very little. Father Thomas then gave the Metropolitan a tour of the Cathedral and hosted him to lunch before the Metropolitan departed for the airport to return to his headquarters in Houston. The hierarchs, clergy, and faithful of the Antiochian Archdiocese are grateful to Metropolitan Alexios and the entire Malankara Diocese for their thoughtfulness and concern for the displaced people of Syria who have found their way to these blessed shores.

Morth Mariam Vanitha Samajam Annual Conference – 2016



The 8th annual conference of MMVS was held successfully at **St. Thomas Orthodox Church, Atlanta** from **Oct. 7th to 9th**. 120 members from 17 churches took part in the conference.

Our Diocesan **Metropolitan H.G Alexios Mar Eusebius** blessed the occasion with his presence. The key –note speaker was **Rev. Fr. Dr. Mathew Koshy** and the theme was **“Keep yourself in the love of God”**. **Fr. Mathew Koshy’s** second speech was about **“Women’s role in maintaining health in the family.”** **Rev. Fr. P. C. George** was another speaker who spoke on the topic **“Eschatology – An Orthodox Perspective”**. He explained how the protestant churches are looking forward for “Rapture” to occur and we as Orthodox Christians should believe that **His** second coming can happen at any time, since that time is known only to the Father Almighty. **H. G. Alexios Mar Eusebius** explained how we can **become a blessing to others**. He explained **how we can meet and hear God in silence and**

peace, and what we have heard should be conveyed to others. **Mrs. Ammini Daniel** from St. Thomas Orthodox Church, Atlanta, spoke about **how we can raise God-fearing children**. The **Health Talk** was given by **Dr. Sheraj Jacob** from St. Mary’s Orthodox Church, Atlanta. He spoke on “Colon Cancer, Heart Burn, and Bloating”.

A business meeting was held in which annual and financial reports were read. Another highlight, was the release of two books. One of the books was the English translation of **“Annamayum Pastarum”** (The translation was done by Gigi K. Simon & Santhamma Mathew). The second book was **“Pearls of MMVS”** which is a collection of articles, short stories and poems that are written by members of our MMVS. A short entertainment program was presented by the delegates. ‘Vote of Thanks’ was given by **Rev. Fr. Binny Kuruvilla, Vice President of MMVS**. After Sunday Mass, the conference was concluded with a short ‘Vote of Thanks’ by Santhamma Mathew.



GROUND BREAKING CEREMONY OF CHAPEL ON OCT 15TH

Groundbreaking ceremony of **Urshlem Diocesan Center** chapel, named after the **Holy Apostles** was held on Saturday, **October 15, 2016** after the Holy Qurbana. **Diocesan Metropolitan His Grace Alexios Mar Eusebius** celebrated the Holy Qurbana and led the services. Clergy and faithful members from South Region Parishes attended the ceremony.

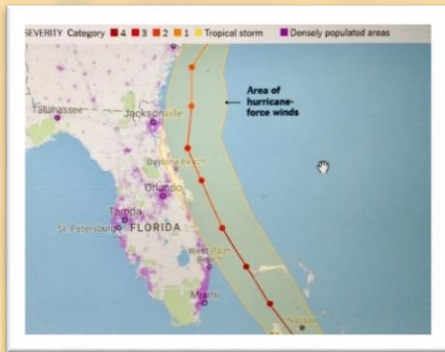
VISIT TO GALVESTON - HOUSTON ARCHDIOCESE, ROMAN CATHOLIC

His Grace Alexios Mar Eusebius visited **Arch-Bishop Daniel Cardinal DiNardo** of the **Galveston - Houston Archdiocese** of the Roman Catholic church on Thursday, **October 13, 2016**. The visit was a part of strengthening our Inter-Church relations and was arranged at the Chancery of the Diocese at downtown Houston adjacent to the Co- Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. The Bishops discussed the daily challenges and obstacles the Holy Church faces in the modern world and agreed upon, for future, mutual cooperation, where ever possible. **Reverend Father Dr. V. C. Varghese** (Vicar, St. Gregorios Orthodox Church McAllen & St Mary's Orthodox Church San Antonio), **Reverend Father Rajesh K. John** (Vicar, St. Gregorios Orthodox Church, Houston) and **Mr. Yeldo Peter**, (Diocesan PRO) accompanied the **Diocesan Metropolitan** during the visit.



MIAMI, ORLANDO, JACKSONVILLE

Hurricane Matthew churned north along the coast of Florida, staying far enough offshore to spare the state a direct hit, but still caused flooding, wind damage and power failures. It was a Category 2 storm, with sustained winds of up to 110 miles per hour and Florida was not hit as catastrophically as was possible. Officials warned that Jacksonville could suffer the worst damage. But while there was flooding in the area, the eye of the storm remained about 40 miles offshore as it passed Jacksonville. We praise The Lord for his mercy. **Malankara Orthodox Church has six parishes in the affected area.**



VISIT FROM BISHOP OF MARTHOMA SYRIAN CHURCH

Diocesan Bishop of North America, Marthoma Syrian Church, The Rt. Rev. Dr. Isaac Mar Philoxenos Episcopa visited our **Diocesan Metropolitan** at the **Urshlem Diocesan Center at Beasley** on **Oct 26, 2016**. Houston area clergy accompanied the Episcopa during his visit. **H. G. Isaac Philoxenos** was visiting for the first time, the Houston area parishes of the Marthoma church after assuming the office of the Diocesan Metropolitan in April 2016.



CREMATION IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

By Fr. Dr. Mathai Alakot OSJ, BCC



A recent news article of Times of India stated that Christians in Kerala can now opt for cremation instead of only burial. "In a far-reaching move, the bishops' synod of Syro-Malabar Church (SMC), the most powerful Catholic rite in Kerala, has decided to permit cremation of bodies. The synod vested the bishops with powers to sanction cremation if relatives of the deceased requested it". I prepared a 16-page detailed presentation for a Clergy conference of the South West American Diocese in July 2016. This article here is a brief from the Conclusion section.

Cremation is a reality for a very large section of the American population. The Bible neither condemns nor condones this practice. Had it been sinful, God would have condemned it just as He did other misguided religious customs. Therefore, what believers do is entirely a matter of personal choice.

"Dust though art and unto dust shalt thou return." (Genesis 3:19) In my understanding, interring body is a tradition to the Church and is biblical. God has touched each one of us in a special way. We have a unique identity in God's sight. According to *Genesis Ch2:7*, "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils". Science has proven that there is no fingerprint or DNA that can be

matched with another person among the living, the deceased or yet to be born. That is a mystery! Reason being that each one of us is touched individually by God. Blood, plasma, heart, liver, tissues, organs can be matched and another body may accept or reject it. We carry the very touch and breath of God in us and our name that he called us (*Isaiah 43:1*). Therefore, his word will be fulfilled in each one of us. We will hear his voice again at resurrection. *"I myself will see him with my own eyes." (Job 19:27)*

A Future Predicament

As the faithful servants of the Malankara Orthodox Church in USA, we have a major dilemma at hand that needs our immediate attention. **Culture, Faith and Tradition** are the three spiritual elements a person upholds where ever he may go. As immigrants in this country these three virtues may gradually diminish from the next generations because we live in a nation of imperialism that translates scripture to read: *"Dollar is my shepherd and I shall not want"*.

The sanctity of a traditional burial may become obsolete and concaved in to an urn as a pound of ashes sitting on a TV stand in a living room. The influence of Asiatic religions, the Protestant teachings and the Catholic canon permitting cremation will make burial an economic liability.

The Cremation Association of North America projects that the figure will be over 55 percent by 2025. Our Orthodox faithful are looking for guidance from our spiritual fathers.

There are Orthodox Churches that authorize their clergies to administer rites as the situation

warrants in the other countries. Particularly if the body of a faithful is in a country of the crematoria culture.

A Concerning Situation

The second dilemma is about the growing space crunch of burial grounds in our churches in Kerala, India. The Malankara Orthodox Church has become a minority Christian denomination among the 2.3% Christian population, where 1.5 % claim Catholic rites who allow cremation in India. Today the Greek Orthodox Church encounters a crisis that the government of Greece is building sufficient crematoria in the country. I am afraid, that may happen in India also where Hinduism has an 85% cremation statistic at present. Move has already begun for implementation of 'Ghar Vapasi' (Return to Hinduism) in the remote villages of North India. We cannot ignore the fact, that cremation may become the law of the land, in a move, under the pretext of environmental pollution protection and clean air globalization in a Hindu dominated democratic nation. The cry of 1-1.5 million people will remain unheard over a billion that support cremation. Hence, the church has to act

now to deal with the situation. Either accept or reject cremation. Let that be the directives of the Malankara Orthodox Church. Now is the time to act. Later may be too late. The faithful will stand solid with the decisions of the Holy Episcopal Synod, the Catholics, the teachers and leaders of our Holy Church. There are several other challenging issues that the Church has to address. Remember, in the past, the Catholics have introduced many things contradictory to the Orthodox Faith. The innocent faithful of the Orthodox Church also followed them out of ignorance. **Are we to lead or are we to be lead?**



ST. LUKE THE PROTO-ICONOGRAPHER

By Bijoy Thomas

Many of us may know St. Luke as being a companion to St. Paul during his missionary journeys and having authored the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. However, it is rarely known that he was the first iconographer or the Proto-Iconographer. He wrote the first icon of the Mother of God. This icon, which depicts St. Mary and the child Jesus, is known as the "Directress".



It is traditionally held that St. Luke personally knew St. Mary. The Gospel of Luke contains the most descriptive account of the Visitation of St. Mary by the Archangel Gabriel. The **Magnificat**, also known as the **Ode of the Theotokos**, is recorded only in the Gospel of Luke.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior; For He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden.

For behold, from this day all generations will call me blessed.

For the Mighty One have done great things to me, and holy is His name;

And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has exalted the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away.

He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever."

Iconography and Orthodoxy

In the Orthodox Church, the full use of the senses is engaged – one must worship God and engage in worship of Him, with everything. This is why incense, prostrations, bells, etc. are an important part of our worship. Our liturgy and sacraments are full of visual stimuli: vestments, colors, ornate altars and Icons.

Icons are not just pretty pictures. They call to mind the individuals or events that they represent and remind us that those saints are worshipping with us, and ultimately direct our thoughts to God.

In the icon, we see the Prototype. An icon of Christ reveals to us the Original. And through Him, we also glimpse the Father. Icons become for us windows to heaven, revealing the glory of God. Thus, we bow before the icon of Christ, seeing through it Him and His Father. These

icons, these windows, may be seen as offering movement in two directions. In an Orthodox Church the icons are for us who worship a passage into the Kingdom of God, but they also bring a revelation, a manifestation of the unseen heavenly host of angels, saints, and martyrs—yes, even the eternal saving events—into our presence. The Church becomes a true outpost of heaven on earth.

Icons are also a source of blessing. In the Acts of the Apostles, we see that the handkerchiefs and shadows of St. Peter and St. Paul would heal the sick. We also know of the woman with sickness that touched garment of Christ and was healed. How is it that handkerchiefs, and shadows and garments can heal? Simply because that the person they belong to makes them a vessel that transmits the very grace of God that the person is filled with. This is how something as immaterial as a shadow becomes a means of transmitting the Grace of God.

The Directress Icon



with the index and middle fingers joined (to refer to the two natures of Christ) and his thumb locks

The "Directress" icon depicts the Virgin Mary presenting her son on her left arm to the viewer and with her right hand she is gesturing towards him, pointing to Christ as 'The Way'. Christ, on the other hand, has his right hand in a gesture of blessing

over the other fingers (to signify the **Holy Trinity**). The Greek letters on the left and right of the Virgin's head stand for the initials of the title - Mother of God ("**MP ΘΥ**"). The crosses on the Virgins shoulders and head symbolize the truth of her virginity. She was a virgin before, during and after the birth of Christ. In our prayers, we say:

"If disputants ask how a virgin conceived, answer them with these questions:

How do the trees conceive? The trees conceive from the breath of the winds, and Mary through the breath of the Holy Spirit"

Typically, all icons of St. Mary show her covered in a garment of red with an inner garment of blue. This is opposite of the icons of Christ where He is shown with a garment of blue covering an inner garment of red. These colors are significant and their usage in the icons is of great theological significance.

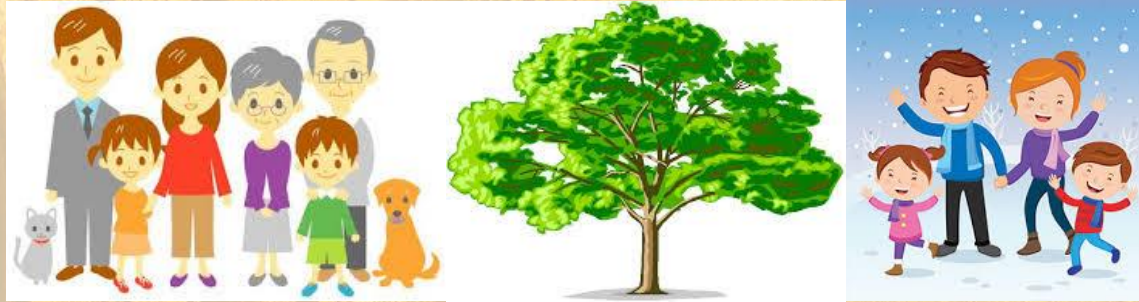
Blue is the color of the heavens and the divine and red is the color of the earth. Therefore, in the icons of Christ, we see that His divinity (symbolized by blue) wraps around His humanity (symbolized by the red) as in one garment (one nature). But in the icons of St. Mary, we see her humanity (symbolized by red) encompassing or containing the divine Logos (symbolized by the inner blue garment). This is why in our prayers we say:

"Like a ship did Mary bear,

Laud and Honor be,

Him the captain and the Lord,

God of the entire world"



CRUMBLING FAMILIES

"You don't choose your family. They are God's gift to you, as you are to them".

By Fr. Joshi Varghese, Diocese of Calcutta – Education Officer & PRO



Family is undoubtedly the oldest institution. The institution of family is a basic unit in the society.

Sociologically, people generally want to belong and feel included. Families provide a sense of identity or belonging among its members. It also provides for the rearing of children and to transfer culture and values to the next generation. Unfortunately, the need, type and relevance of family are questioned in recent times.

Shift from Extended to Nuclear Families

Earlier families usually consisted of several generations (Grandparents, parents, children and grandchildren) and branches of extended family living in the same house, or in the same village. Due to modernization and industrialization people started migrating from villages to cities in search of job. This relocation resulted in leaving behind the older generation in the villages and thus started nuclear families. The word Nuclear Family is first mentioned in The Oxford English Dictionary in 1925 – and refers to a household that consists of a mother, father and their children.

Consequences of the Shift

The advent of nuclear families also brought to light some issues that test the strength of family as a close-knit institution.

Divorce and Remarriage

Once considered as taboo, divorce is becoming like a fast spreading virus. Earlier the whole family depended on the income from agriculture or that of the head of the family. As job opportunities for women and young increased, they became less dependent on the head of the family. This financial freedom has emboldened them to take hard decisions like parting ways, without a second thought. Alcohol Abuses, Psychoses, Physical problems, personality disorders, domestic violence etc. are some other reasons for divorces. Along with the increase in divorces, cases of remarriages are also on a high.

Emotional Burnouts

Extended families acted as shock absorbers and helped the individual members to tread over a crisis and soothe the hurt. The tasks like child rearing or household chores were shared which eased the pressure on its members. In a modern family, particularly mothers, may have a tendency to burn out from attempting to meet needs of all the family members. Mother is the cook, maid, babysitter and sometimes, moneymaker. That leaves little time for pampering and nurturing herself and her relationships with others. Without help, she may need to take off work to care for sick children. Mothers may struggle to balance the demands of work, family and friendships without any outside assistance. Stress, depression, anxiety or other problems can all be a result of nuclear family burnout.

Improper communication

Even though we claim that the whole world has become a 'Global Village', the gap between its members is widening. The pressure of job and success hardly leaves any room for a healthy time for communication among family members. It's true that mobile phones and social media (e.g. Facebook) produced by modern technology has added new dimensions to communication. The irony is that we have more virtual (Facebook, Twitter) followers than friends in real world. We spend more time on social media and do not get time to have a heart to heart talk with our dear ones at home.

Lack of life skills

One of the main challenges faced by today's parents is how to help their child to be a good human being. In order to compensate for the lack of time, parents' shower gifts upon their child. They are pampered and shielded away from the hard realities of the world as Siddhartha (Buddha) was protected from the suffering of the outer world. The children live in a dream world and believe that the Dream is the reality. They become impatient, intolerant and selfish, unable to relate with others in a healthy manner. This makes them vulnerable and incapable to face crises in their life and often end up in suicides. Extended family, with differing opinions and ideas, can help members, especially the young, to see and appreciate alternate viewpoints and learn to effectively deal with conflicts and opinions other than their own.

How to better the family? Acceptance Frustration in family life starts due to failure in fulfillment of our expectation about other members of the family. One needs to accept other members as they are, with their strengths and weaknesses. Don't expect everyone else to think and behave like you. If there is something wrong with a member, take the person into confidence. Avoid emotional outbursts which will only harm the relationship. Remember that perfect families mostly remain in movies or serials.

Communication

As mentioned above lack or less communication among the members of family is one of the main

reasons for crumbling of family system. Nowadays children generally stay with the parents only for only fifteen to seventeen or twenty years. Unfortunately, during this period, the parents will be busy in earning bread the bread for children. The emotional needs of the children are mostly ignored or not revealed to the parents due to lack of proper communication. In order to fulfill their emotional needs children, search for real or virtual friends and many a time end up in trouble. Hence the parents should invest their quality time rather than wealth for children. The children should be guided in choosing friends, both in real world and in Social media.

Support System

As the saying goes, 'no man is an island' and it is appropriate with regard to families also. A complete U-turn from nuclear family to extended family may be impossible due to societal reasons. But each family can have its own support system consisting of relatives, friends, neighbors, colleagues, members of community or religion to turn in times of sorrow as well as joy. Children need the love and affection of not only their parents but of their grandparents and other relatives also.

Value system

Being in a family provides children with a sense of identity and security. They learn the norms and values of their societies, as well as the norms and values of the smaller groups to which they belong. By learning about their religious and cultural heritages, children gain a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves. By teaching children about their heritage, families ensure their culture will live on. The values like love, compassion, sharing, respect and regard for others, especially to the sick, weak and old, shall be inculcated. They should be taught that money is not all that matters. Handing over the spiritual traditions is also vital for its correctly said, 'A family that prays together stays together'. It's said that 'Marriages are made in Heaven'. But it takes lot of effort to continue to have that heavenly atmosphere in families. A little more care, concern and love shall certainly help our families to be perfect.

**Spokane, Washington: The first North American gateway
for converts into the Malankara Orthodox Church**



By SubDn. Alexander (Pradeep) Hatcher

As a half-Malayalee, half-Irish-American sub deacon in the Malankara Orthodox Church, I am used to being stared at in Malayalee churches. They know something is different. I definitely do not look Malayalee, (according to most Malayalees I meet, anyway), and I cannot help but notice how confused most uncles and aunties look when they try to figure out how this Arab (“or maybe Puerto Rican?”) kid ended up in a topee and black ‘kuppayam’ at their parish for Holy Qurbana that Sunday. Then, liturgy ends.

I always love what comes next. Once people get the opportunity to question me and find out where I’m from and how I came to be what I am, I get to share with them one of the biggest surprises for many regarding the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in North America: Non-Indians have been converting to Indian Orthodoxy for decades! What’s more, there are even White-American Achens and Semassens in the Malankara Orthodox Church who serve them!

Although established more than thirty years ago now, it is a bit frustrating that the existence of St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Mission Parish in Spokane, Washington is still such a surprise to many Malankara Orthodox faithful in the United States and Canada. But, thanks be to God, St. Gregorios has been thriving since 1984, when His Grace, the late lamented Thomas Mar Makarios established a mission on the eastern border of Washington State. When Mar

Makarios came to know of one Malayalee family (mine) and several other Oriental Orthodox families (mostly Eritrean at that time) in Spokane who were without access to the sacraments and any Orthodox church to minister to them, he saw an opportunity to begin a focused evangelistic effort in the Malankara Orthodox Church in the Western Hemisphere. As was common practice in Kerala until the 1950s, Mar Makarios asked the parishioners who they would choose as their priest (as he had no priests in his diocese available to move to Spokane). They chose my father, now Corepiscopos Fr. Michael Hatcher, an Irish-American who had come into the Malankara Orthodox Church through his wife (my mother), a Malayalee Orthodox woman born and raised in India. After Fr. Michael was then sent to Kottayam for further studies and training in the priesthood, he was ordained in 1987 to become the first priest of St. Gregorios Malankara Orthodox Church in Spokane, and the first non-Malayalee priest ordained in the Malankara Orthodox Church outside of India.

Today, all these years later, St. Gregorios in Spokane is comprised of around 60 Orthodox families (35-40 of which are active), including parishioners from several different Orthodox ethnicities (Malayalee, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Coptic, Antiochian, Syriac, Armenian, and Jordanian, among others) as well as individuals and families who have converted to the Malankara Orthodox Church from a wide range of backgrounds. We have former Protestants from both

the European-American and African-American communities, members who have joined Orthodoxy from the Roman Catholic Church, and even former agnostics and atheists who have become faithful Orthodox Christians. All of these diverse peoples are united in the One, Apostolic Faith through the Malankara Orthodox Church. Every Sunday, Holy Qurbana is celebrated according to the Malankara Orthodox Syrian tradition. St. Gregorios is a full parish under His Grace, Alexios Mar Eusebius as part of the South-West American Diocese. The parish has also owned its building since 2003 which, by God's grace, it has outgrown. The purchase of a new temple to house St. Gregorios Parish was completed in October of 2016. The clergy and parishioners of St. Gregorios take their mission very seriously – for it is the very mission of the entire Church, as instituted by Christ in St. Mathew's Gospel:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you... (Mt. 28:19-20)

Because this command to spread the gospel applies to all Orthodox Christians, I am blessed to be able to share some of the things that have worked well at St. Gregorios Spokane, which I pray may be of use in Malankara Orthodox parishes throughout both North American dioceses.

In order to bring non-believers into the Orthodox faith, St. Gregorios has taken a proactive approach in mission-work and evangelism. Every Holy Qurbana and every feast day of the Church is celebrated in English to serve the needs of diverse parishioners whose common, and often primary, language is English. English services also serve the needs of visitors and inquirers who are still learning about Orthodoxy, and who pray and understand in English. To attract visitors to the church, St. Gregorios has always advertised parish events to the surrounding community as much as possible. When I was growing up, for example, if the parish was holding an auction or dinner fundraiser, it would always put an advertisement in the local newspaper. Some Orthodox people looking for a church and converts have found us through such advertisements over the years. Recently, the church has also been building its presence on social media and its website for potential

seekers and inquirers into Orthodoxy. Putting signs on the corners of nearby major streets pointing to the church and listing the times of church services has also helped increase visibility in the surrounding community.

My upbringing at the Spokane parish taught me that visibility is crucial for a mission. If people who are searching for God do not know you exist, they will probably never find you. Beyond literally making your parish more visible via signs, online presence, etc., visibility and reach will be limited if the church is not an active member of the surrounding neighborhood or community. Poor and low-income families often seek out St. Gregorios Parish in need of financial assistance, food, etc. The Church is always prepared with funding set aside for such circumstances, and keeps a food pantry stocked in the basement of the Church. The parish has also organized and taken part in activities and outreach in the Spokane community. For the past two years, for example, the parish has stopped singing Christmas carols at the homes of church members. Instead, a group of parishioners sings Orthodox Christmas hymns and popular western Christmas carols on the streets of downtown Spokane in the days leading up to Christmas, handing out pamphlets about Orthodoxy to interested passersby and collecting food and clothing to be donated to local shelters. Prison ministry also began just this past year to serve the needs of two prison inmates who converted to Orthodoxy after incarceration (through Coptic Orthodox evangelists) as well as an inmate who reached out to the parish because of his interest in the Orthodox faith. Outreach to the other inmates to witness Orthodoxy to them is also a possibility in the year ahead, God-willing. By far, the most effective way to let people know about our church, however, has been by word-of-mouth. Many of the converts at St. Gregorios first stepped foot inside the church because they were invited by a friend, relative, or acquaintance who belonged to the parish.

My mission upbringing also taught me that once people know your church exists and set foot inside the church, ministry to them must start immediately. That means first-time visitors to the church must be greeted and welcomed by parishioners and the priest. Because some people are more comfortable or effective than others in taking care of guests (showing

them to a seat, helping them follow along in the book, etc.), many parishes, including St. Gregorios, have assigned church “greeters” to carry out this important function if guests walk in during Holy Qurbana. Educational materials about Orthodoxy must be readily available and easily accessible to visitors as well. At St. Gregorios, the parish bookstore is located at the entrance of the church for this reason. After liturgy, invite your guests for coffee-hour/lunch at your parish and introduce them to the priest and other parishioners. Make them feel welcome and ALWAYS invite them to come again. Ministry to others is not just the role of the priest, and this is especially evident in mission work. Visitors who aren’t made to feel welcome usually never come back again.

If a person does start coming back, though, and expresses an interest in learning more about the Orthodox faith, they become what we commonly call an “inquirer.” This is another critical phase in the journey of someone into the Church. Educational materials and access to further learning opportunities must be available. St. Gregorios hosts a weekly Bible Study at the church, and many non-Orthodox people attend. At least a few people who later converted to Orthodoxy first came to the parish through its Bible Study. Starting this year, the church has also started “inquirers’ classes” on the same night as the Bible Study to meet the needs of individuals and families who have expressed an interest in the Faith.

Having a regular entry point into the church *in addition to* Holy Qurbana, such as a Bible Study or other adult classes, is incredibly important. Everyone is different, and converts don’t always get ‘hooked’ on Orthodoxy the same way. Some people are interested in learning more as soon as they see an Orthodox liturgy or prayer service. For others, the initial culture shock of a Holy Qurbana (which may be unlike anything they have ever seen before, especially American Protestants), a liturgy can be overwhelming and scare them away from Orthodoxy. For those people, sometimes Orthodox teachings through a Bible Study or adult class – or even joining parishioners for a service event in the community – may be the exposure that opens their hearts to Christ, His Church, and His plan for them. They may not be ready for a Holy Qurbana until they learn a bit more about what liturgy is and why it is done. Again,

everyone is different, so individual care and attention must be paid to every inquirer.

The next stage after inquiry is the catechumenate, when a person decides to become Orthodox and to prepare for their reception into the Body of Christ through directed study. One of the struggles St. Gregorios has had over the years has been the lack of an official or dedicated curriculum for catechumens in the Malankara Orthodox Church. The clergy here have often had to piece together resources themselves. Thankfully, by God’s grace, the new Sunday School curriculum of the South-West Diocese has been wonderfully done, and selected lessons have been picked out for reading by inquirers and catechumens at St. Gregorios. This has been the closest thing we have had to an adult curriculum which not only covers essential tenets of the Orthodox Faith, but also explores and teaches about traditions specific to the Malankara’s Syriac tradition. The *DivyaBodanam* curriculum might become useful for catechumens as well in the future. *DivyaBodanam* was somewhat unknown in Spokane until recent years because of the relative isolation of St. Gregorios from some of the resources used in India.

Above all, people will not come to Orthodoxy through a parish unless the parish is active, healthy, and loving. Visitors do not return to unwelcoming churches. Inquirers do not come back to parishes riddled with politics and infighting. Catechumens will not follow through with their journey into the faith if what they learn about faith and works is contradicted in the life they see at the parish. And what about the people who are already Orthodox and members of your church? Is there an active ministry and parish life for parishioners, both convert and born-and-raised Orthodox alike? Does the parish do anything for others or the surrounding community or is it completely isolated and inward-focused? If Christ’s love is evident in a parish, it can grow.

The birth of other Mission Parishes in the United States like St. Gregorios Spokane, including St. James in Dallas, Texas and St. Barnabas in the Baltimore-Washington D.C. area, has been a beautiful thing to witness for this half-Malayalee, mission-raised

member of the Malankara Orthodox Church. I am also overjoyed to see the formation of a mission-focused department of the South-West American Diocese. The faith and vision of our bishops in fulfilling the mission of the Church may very well bring many more souls to Christ, and could very well be a turning point for the Orthodox witness in North America.

The story of St. Gregorios Mission Parish in Spokane is essentially the backdrop of my entire life. It is, of course, easy to be passionate about evangelism and outreach having grown up in such a parish, but I urge all of my brothers and sisters in Christ from every background and in EVERY parish – to take heed of the Lord's command in the 28th chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. Bring Christ to others and bring others to Christ with every opportunity.



I believe that the devil exists...his greatest achievement in these times has been to make us believe he doesn't exist...His fruits are always destruction: division, hate and slander. ~Pope Francis

The International Association of Exorcists sponsored a gathering of **300 exorcists** from all over the world in **Vatican City** on the last weekend of October in 2014. The organization was formally approved by the Holy See in June. The global Press was enamored with the notion that the **Catholic Church** even recognizes the need for **exorcists** - or the **existence of evil**.

Father Aldo Buonaiuto, of the International Association of Exorcists, said that a **spike in demonic possessions in October** is down to the phenomenon of Halloween. Many say Halloween is a simple carnival, but there are always more evil rituals, animal sacrifices, desecrations of cemeteries and thefts of sacred bones as well as demonic possessions at the time of the 31st of October.

Father Vincent Lampert, a Vatican-trained exorcist says, **it's important for parents to remember to not celebrate in a way that glorifies evil**. Fr. Lampert said, "Ultimately I don't think there's anything wrong with the kids putting on a costume, dressing up as a cowboy or Cinderella, and going through the neighborhood asking for candy." **The danger lies in costumes that deliberately glorify evil and instill fear in people**, even if they think it's just for entertainment.



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