

LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE BISHOPS OF INDIA

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. The remarkable *varietas Ecclesiarum*, the result of a long historical, cultural, spiritual and disciplinary development, constitutes a treasure of the Church, *regina in vestitu deaurato circumdata variegata* (cf. *Ps* 44 and *Leo XIII, Orientalium Dignitas*), who awaits her groom with the fidelity and patience of the wise virgin, equipped with an abundant supply of oil, so that the light of her lamp may enlighten all peoples in the long night of awaiting the Lord's coming.

This variety of ecclesial life, which shines with great splendour throughout lands and nations, is also found in India. The Catholic Church in India has its origins in the preaching of the Apostle Thomas. It developed through contact with the Churches of Chaldean and Antiochian traditions and through the efforts of Latin missionaries. The history of Christianity in this great country thus led to three distinct *sui iuris* Churches, corresponding to ecclesial expressions of the same faith celebrated in different rites according to the three liturgical, spiritual, theological and disciplinary traditions. Although this situation has sometimes led to tensions in the course of history, today we can admire a Christian presence that is both rich and beautiful, complex and unique.

2. It is essential for the Catholic Church to reveal her face in all its beauty to the world, in the richness of her various traditions. For this reason the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, which celebrates its centenary year, having been established through the farsightedness of *Pope Benedict XV* in 1917, has encouraged, where necessary, the restoration of Eastern Catholic traditions, and ensured their protection, as well as respect for the dignity and rights of these ancient Churches.

3. The *Second Vatican Council* embraced this vision of the Church and reminded the faithful of the need to protect and preserve the treasure of the particular traditions of each Church. "Moreover, within the Church particular Churches hold a rightful place; these Churches retain their own traditions, without in any way opposing the primacy of the Chair of Peter, which presides over the whole assembly of charity (cf. *Ignatius of Antioch, Ad Rom., Praef.*), and protects legitimate differences, while at the same time assuring that such differences do not hinder unity but rather contribute toward it" (*Lumen Gentium*, 13).

4. As *Lumen Gentium* teaches, it is for the Bishop of Rome to promote unity in the diversity of the Body of Christ. In this task, the Roman Pontiffs faithfully interpret and apply the voice of the *Second Vatican Council*, which expressed the ardent desire that the Oriental Churches, venerated for their antiquity, should "flourish and with new apostolic vigour execute the task entrusted to them" (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 1). Their responsibility is not only to become ever more effective instruments of that "special duty of promoting the unity of all Christians, especially Eastern Christians" (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 24), but also to promote their "equal dignity [...] for they enjoy the same rights and are under the same obligations, also in respect of preaching the Gospel to the whole world" (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 3).

Thirty years ago, my beloved predecessor *Saint John Paul II* wrote a Letter to the Bishops of India. Drawing on the *Second Vatican Council*, he sought to apply the conciliar teaching to the Indian context. In India, even after many centuries, Christians are only a small proportion of the population and,

are at present fully involved in the life of the Latin Church. I am convinced, however, that all those involved will understand that there is no need for concern: the Church's life should not be disrupted by such a provision. Indeed it must not be negatively interpreted as imposing upon the faithful a requirement to leave the communities which have welcomed them, sometimes for many generations, and to which they have contributed in various ways. It should rather be seen as an invitation as well as an opportunity for growth in faith and communion with their *sui iuris* Church, in order to preserve the precious heritage of their rite and to pass it on to future generations. There is already an instruction by the Congregation for the Oriental Churches to the Eparchy of Faridabad, which indicates that a member of the Syro-Malabar faithful, by virtue of the law itself, belongs to the Syro-Malabar parish where he or she is domiciled (*Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, Can. 280 §1); yet at the same time, he or she can remain fully involved in the life and activities of the parish of the Latin Church. No dispensation is required from the law currently in force for the faithful to practice their faith serenely, but only the solicitude of both the Latin and the Syro-Malabar pastors (cf. Prot. No. 197/2014, 28 January 2016).

9. The path of the Catholic Church in India cannot be that of isolation and separation, but rather of respect and cooperation. The presence of several bishops of the various *sui iuris* Churches in the same territory will surely offer an eloquent witness to a vibrant and marvellous communion. This is the vision of the Second Vatican Council, which I quote once again: "Between all the parts of the Church there remains a bond of close communion whereby they share spiritual riches, apostolic workers and temporal resources. For the members of the people of God are called to share these goods in common, and of each of the Churches the words of the Apostle hold good: 'According to the gift that each has received, administer it to one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God' (*1 Pet 4:10*)" (*Lumen Gentium*, 13). It is in this spirit that I urge all the beloved Churches in India to be generous and courageous as they witness to the Gospel in the spirit of fraternity and mutual love. For the Syro-Malabar Church, this continues the valued work of their priests and religious in the Latin context, and sustains their availability for those Syro-Malabar faithful who, although choosing to attend Latin parishes, may request some assistance from their Church of origin. The Latin rite Church can continue to generously offer hospitality to members of the Syro-Malabar communities who do not have church buildings of their own. The cooperation among all the *sui iuris* Churches should continue, for example in the area of retreats and seminars for clergy, Bible conferences, celebrations of common feast days and ecumenical endeavours. With the growth of spiritual friendship and mutual assistance, any tension or apprehension should be swiftly overcome. May this extension of the pastoral area of the Syro-Malabar Church in no way be perceived as a growth in power and domination, but as a call to deeper communion, which should never be perceived as uniformity. In the words of Saint Augustine, who sang the praises of the Trinity and of the wonderful communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I also ask you: *dilatentur spatia caritatis* (*Sermon 69, PL 5, 440.441*). May there be a growth in love, communion and service.

Dear brother Bishops, I commend all of you to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and I assure you of my closeness in prayer. To all of you, the Church and the faithful in India, I impart my Apostolic Blessing, and I ask that you pray for me.

From the Vatican, 9 October 2017

FRANCIS

Prot. No. 197/2014

Instruction of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches concerning the request of some faithful of the Syro-Malabar Church residing in Delhi to be permitted to receive the sacraments in the Latin Church.

For many years, the Archdiocese of Delhi has generously provided for the pastoral care of the Syro-Malabar faithful living within the confines of that ecclesial Circumscription. Consequently, it is not surprising that some members of this Oriental Church, having lived for a long time in a Latin ecclesial context, should experience a sense of disorientation after the erection of the Eparchy of Faridabad of the Syro-Malabar faithful. Nevertheless, the situation can be happily managed, even within the framework of the law, if all concerned act with mutual understanding and respect.

In the first place, it could be useful to recall a few juridical points of reference. There does not exist a general right to choose one's rite; rather, there is a duty to follow one's own rite in so far as possible (cfr. CCEO can. 40-3 and can. 35). However, situations arise in which the request to pass to another Church *sui juris* is comprehensible. In the case at hand, the Bishops concerned are ready to facilitate the passage for anyone desiring it, and the assent of the Apostolic See may be presumed (cfr. CCEO can. 32-2). Care should be taken to register all such transfers according to CCEO can. 37.

Some faithful of the Syro-Malabar Church, who experiences difficulties participating in the parish of their own Church *sui juris*, do not wish to pass over to the Latin Church: this is most understandable and even praiseworthy, in the light of what has been called above. Such persons may exercise their right to participate in the liturgical functions of any Church *sui juris* (cfr. CCEO can. 403-1, CIC can. 923). The Code of Canon Law of the Latin Church emphasizes that the custom of receiving the sacraments in a given Church *sui juris* does not imply ascription to it (CIC can. 112-2).

Consequently, a Syro-Malabar faithful, who, in force of the law itself, is a member of the Syro-Malabar parish where he has domicile (CCEO can. 280-1), can remain fully involved in the life and activities of the parish of the Latin Church. Both pastors are called to understand the delicate situation of such persons and to facilitate the tranquil and serene prosecution of their life of faith.

In practice, this requires that the Latin pastor, who substitutes for the faithful's legitimate pastor, fulfill what is established by law for the following

Signed

Leonardo Card. Sandri

Prefect

Signed

Cyril Vasil SJ

Archbishop Secretary