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Pastoral Letter

Cardinal George Alencherry, the Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church,
to the Archbishops, Bishops, Priests, Men and Women Religious and
Lay Faithful of the Syro-Malabar Church.

Praise be to Jesus Christ!

“I willingly take the occasion of the recognition of the new Raza Qurbana Taksa to exhort the clergy, religious and lay faithful to proceed to a prompt implementation in the uniform mode of celebrating the Holy Qurbana, for the greater good and unity of your Church. May the Holy Spirit foster harmony, fraternity and unity among all members of your Church as you work to implement the Synodal decision”.

- Pope Francis

Dearly beloved brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

As you are aware, our Church was in the path of renewal of the Liturgy from 1934 onwards. Deeper investigations into the heritage and the identity of the Church which gave new insights began to take place with the implementation of the *Raza* text of the *Qurbana* in 1986. As a result of that effort, it was possible to form a uniform text for all the Sacraments and for the Sacred Orders. But the efforts to have a uniform mode of celebration of the Holy *Qurbana* did not bear fruit on account of several factors. Although a model for a uniform mode of celebration was given by the Synod in 1999, it was not implemented in all the eparchies. Because of that, demands were made from the different levels of the Church for a uniform mode of celebration. The members of the Church also were praying for it. At all the Major Archiepiscopal Assemblies, the delegates asked for a uniform mode of celebration. The Synod of Bishops at their different Sessions was trying to implement a uniform mode of celebration. At the Synod of 2019, the secretaries of the pastoral councils who were present along with the Bishops have asked for a uniform mode of celebration. The Synod of 2020 made the suggestion that the non-compliant eparchies should be asked to conform to the uniform mode of celebration.

During the Corona crisis, people were disturbed when they watched the Holy *Qurbana* celebrated in different ways. This lack of unity in the mode of celebration has also upset the Apostolic See. The Congregation for the Eastern Churches came to the conclusion that it would be absolutely necessary to have a uniform mode of

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celebration. Hence the Apostolic Nuncio sent a letter on 4 May 2020 to the Major Archbishop in this regard. When the revised text of the *Qurbana* was submitted for approval, the Congregation for the Eastern Churches wrote back on 09 November 2020 asking for uniformity in the mode of celebration. Granting *recognitio* to the revised text of the Holy *Qurbana*, on 09 June 2021, the Congregation for the Eastern Churches gave clear directions for the implementation of the uniform mode of celebration. As a continuation of this, the Holy Father wrote a letter to the bishops, priests, religious and the laity of the Syro-Malabar Church exhorting to follow a uniform mode of celebration. This was a letter meant for the whole Syro-Malabar Church. Hence every member of the faithful of the Syro-Malabar Church has an obligation to follow this directive. The words of this appeal of the Holy Father are quoted at the beginning of this pastoral letter.

In this context, the Synod that was held online from 16 to 27 August 2021 studied and discussed this topic in detail. What is most distinguishing about the Syro-Malabar Church is its unwavering and unbreakable fidelity to the Holy See. Our ancestors gave us the tradition of this faithfulness to Peter (*cum Petro et sub Petro*) and obedience to the Head of the Church and to the Bishops. It is worthwhile to remember the words of Mar Augustine Kandathil, the former Archbishop of Ernakulam, in a similar context with regard to the liturgical celebration in 1934: “Whatever may be the decision of the Holy See, we accept it.” This is the model we have to follow. We believe that the Holy Spirit teaches us through the Holy Father. We know that the faithful are obliged to obey the directives of the Holy Father (*CCEO* c. 45). The Church documents also affirm this fact. It is the Holy Father who is to give the final verdict in matters of worship (*SC* 22). No one, whether priests or the laity, has the right to change or add to the text of the liturgical celebrations (*SC* 22,3). Hence we are obliged to obey the direction given by the Holy Father. Neither the Synod nor any individual Bishop has the right to take a contrary decision. We should not forget that obedience is greater than sacrifice (1 Sam.15-22). The way shown by the Holy Father is the way of God’s grace for us. Hence, our only choice is to follow the mode of celebration of the Holy *Qurbana* which is exhorted by the Holy Father, approved by the Synod and desired by the faithful as an expression of our obedience to the Holy Father and the discharge of our responsibility as members of the ecclesial communion.

There may be people among us who hold that what is needed is not uniformity but unity. Although unity and uniformity are not the same, they are complementary. Unity won’t be possible without uniformity in the basic forms of the Liturgy. The history of our Church attests to this. The uniformity of the celebration consists in this: The celebrant faces the faithful until the end of the Creed, then turns to the Sanctuary until the end of the *Anaphora* up to the Communion and then faces congregation after the Communion for thanksgiving prayers and for final benediction. The Second Vatican Council teaches us that there should be both the *Bema* (the Table of the Word) and the

Altar (the Table of the Bread) for an authentic celebration of the Eucharist (*DV 14*). The tradition of our Church shows also the same.

The Introductory Service and the Liturgy of the Word in the Holy *Qurbana* remind us of the birth and the public ministry of Jesus. It is because of this that the first part of the *Qurbana* is offered facing the people. Then, after the creed the celebrant, “with clean heart and clear conscience”, enters the Sanctuary as a representative of the Christ and on behalf of the Church and offers the sacrifice to the Heavenly Father. It is on account of this that the direction is given for the celebrant to face the Sanctuary during the *Anaphora* and the consecratory part. In the Eastern as well as in the Western Churches, the Eucharist was offered facing the Altar until 1965. The Holy Father is asking us to recover the ancient tradition of the Church. When the offering part is over, the celebrant turns to face the congregation after the communion to say the thanksgiving prayers and to give the final blessings.

The Eucharist is the sacrifice offered by the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ in union with the Head to the Heavenly Father. The Church from the first centuries thought it appropriate for the people of God and for the priest who acts in the name of Christ to face the Altar which is the throne of God. The priest who offers the *Qurbana* represents Christ and the Church at the same time (*alter Christus et altera ecclesia*).

The Church also proclaims that the Christian life is a pilgrimage to heaven. The people of God as a whole are on a pilgrimage to heaven which is symbolized by the *Madbhaha*. All the prayers in the *Qurbana* are arranged for a joint celebration of the people on earth with the angelic choirs and Saints in heaven. The Altar which is considered to be the throne of God and the sepulcher of our Lord has a dominant role in the Liturgy. It is because of this that the “turning to the altar” is considered to be the turning to God by the Fathers of the Church (*conversi ad Dominum*). On account of this sacred tradition of the Church the decision was made by the Synod to ask the celebrant to turn to the Altar from the beginning of the *Anaphora* up to the communion and the same was exhorted by the Holy Father to be implemented promptly.

The realization that the unity in the Liturgy is the basis of ecclesiastical communion has come to us late and because of that many divisions did take place which created wounds in the body of the Church. We shall confess this failure in humility and contrition before God. Let the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI that “Without unity at the Altar, there will be no unity in the Church” be the guiding light for us.

The Fathers of the Synod discussed sincerely the difficulties raised from some corners in implementing the uniform mode of celebration. The Bishops are aware of the concerns and apprehensions that would arise when a mode of celebration that was in practice for several decades in a few eparchies undergoes a sudden change. But the Fathers felt that the Holy Spirit was guiding them to obey wholeheartedly the direction given by the Holy Father to guide the flock of the Lord in unity. This

decision should not be viewed as a victory or a failure of a particular line of thought. The Holy Father has asked us to follow the decision of the Synod that has tried to integrate the two differing lines of thought in Liturgy.

Hence the Synod has now decided to implement the revised text of the Holy *Qurbana* (*editio typica*) in the uniform mode of celebration as directed by the Holy Father, from the beginning of the next liturgical year, which is the first Sunday of the Season of Annunciation that falls on 28 November 2021. The Synod Fathers are requesting everyone to implement this decision with a single mind, taking into account the common good of the Church and setting aside the individual likes and dislikes.

The whole Church was praying and fasting in the last month for the success of the Synod. This prayer was helpful for the Synod to receive the Grace of God to take good decisions.

We shall take a common decision to make the celebration of the Holy *Qurbana* an occasion for receiving the grace for the unity of the Church. All have to be beware of creating dissenting voices in this matter. I am urging with great fraternal solicitude the priests and the consecrated men and women to pay their serious attention to this matter. Let the sacrifice of Jesus which was offered for the redemption of mankind be our own self-sacrifice. Let us surrender ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit that destroys the walls of division. May the intercession of our Blessed Mother who was a full participant in the sacrifice at Calvary and that of St. Thomas who transmitted to us the Light of Faith along with that of the Saints and Blesseds of our Church guide us in our path of Unity!

May the Grace of the Merciful Lord be with you always!

Given this from the Major Archiepiscopal Curia of the Syro-Malabar Church at Mount St. Thomas Kakkanad on 27 August 2021.



Cardinal George Alencherry
Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church



NB: *This pastoral letter is to be read out during the Holy Mass on Sunday, 05 September 2021, in all churches and chapels of the Syro-Malabar Church where there is Sunday Mass for the public, respecting the regulations given by the government. Copy of this pastoral letter is to be made available through social media to those faithful who cannot participate in the celebration of Holy Qurbana in churches.*