News
Ministry



Sisters of various congregations take turns to pray for peace in the adoration chapel, opposite St. Mary's Basilica Cathedral, for a solution to the liturgical dispute in Kerala, southern India. (Thomas Scaria)



by Thomas Scaria

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Kochi, India — October 12, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Catholic nuns in a southern Indian archdiocese have a new mission: to keep faith alive while priests and laypeople clash with bishops over liturgy.

"Our parish church had remained closed for several months because of the dispute," Sr. Graceline Jose, who serves St. Mary's Basilica Cathedral of the Archdiocese of Ernakulam-Angamaly, told Global Sisters Report. "We try our best to sustain faith, especially among children."

The dispute, involving the Syro-Malabar Church, is not about theology or church teachings, but rather, how the priest celebrates Mass. The church's governing synod decided that the priest should face the altar during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and face the congregation throughout the Liturgy of the Word, and after Communion.

The Syro-Malabar Church is one of 23 Eastern Catholic Churches in the world with its autonomy, in full communion with the pope and the universal church, with self-governance under the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches. The Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese (Jose's archdiocese) is the largest jurisdiction for the Eastern-rite church, accounting for more than 10% of its about 5 million global members.



Congregation of the Mother of Carmel Srs. Graceline Jose and Sajina are pictured during a cultural celebration of the catechism in their convent under St. Mary's Basilica Cathedral parish in Kochi. (Thomas Scaria)

Although the decision was aimed at creating uniformity in all 35 dioceses, it was rejected by 450 of the roughly 470 priests and some 550,000 Catholics in the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese. They want to keep with the liturgical teachings of the Second Vatican Council, where the priest faces the people throughout the Mass.

On Nov. 27, 2022 (the first Sunday of Advent), a standoff between those supporting the synod and its opponents forced the police to shut down the basilica.

Jose, a 50-year-old member of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel said children were "really shocked to see the clashes" in the basilica and were in a "state of confusion" when they came to their convent for catechism classes after the cathedral's closure.

Opponents organized hunger strikes, burnt pastoral letters on the liturgy and the effigy of Cardinal George Alencherry, the Syro-Malabar Church's head.



The administrative office and seat of Cardinal George Alencherry, the major archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church, in Kochi, Kerala (Thomas Scaria)

Jesuit Archbishop Cyril Vasil of Kosice, who Pope Francis sent as his personal delegate to resolve the dispute, reopened the cathedral Aug. 14.

The rebels rejected even the delegate's decree that all parishes and institutions in the archdiocese should celebrate the synod Mass on Aug. 20, the first Sunday after the church reopened. The Slovakian archbishop, a former No. 2 official in the Dicastery for Eastern Churches, also threatened to excommunicate priests who defied his order. But no action has been taken so far.

When GSR visited the basilica on Sept. 10, its gates were shut with no sign of priests or worshippers in the church premises.

The only person present was the security guard who said no service had taken place in the church for months and that the faithful attend the Sunday Mass in a nearby Latin-rite cathedral or in some convent chapels.



A deserted St. Mary's Basilica Cathedral is pictured on Sept. 10, a Sunday. The main church of the Archdiocese of Ernakulam-Angamaly has remained closed for more than nine months because of a dispute over liturgy. (Thomas Scaria)

Antony Moonanjalickal, a member of St. Francis Assisi Latin Cathedral, told GSR that some Syro-Malabar Catholics attend Mass in his church, but the majority go to the chapels of convents or religious priests.

Jose's St. Mary's convent in the cathedral parish welcomed the parishioners, especially the children. The nuns teach Sunday catechism as well as conduct communal prayer meetings.

When GSR visited Jose's convent, the children were celebrating Onam, the main festival of Kerala state, in the presence of their parents and catechism teachers. Also present was the basilica's assistant parish priest Fr. Anson Naduparambil, who had earlier celebrated the people-facing Mass in the convent chapel.

When several nuns refused to discuss the dispute and clashes with GSR, priests such as Naduparambil explained their perspective.

Before the dispute, catechism classes were held on the cathedral premises. "But the sisters shifted them to their convent, as Mass in the cathedral was disrupted several times," Naduparambil said, adding his gratitude for the nuns helping the children overcome confusion on their faith during the liturgy crisis.

Jose said the catechism classes in their convent are regular, but attendance has come down by nearly 40%. "At least 300 children attend the Sunday school regularly, and many parents come for the Mass in our convent chapel," she said.



The teachers and students of the Sunday school prepare for Onam, a major festival of Kerala, southwestern India. (Thomas Scaria)

Sanjo Vazhayil, a layman teaching catechism in Jose's convent, said people help the nuns in catechism classes and ward prayer meetings. "We want our future generation to grow in peace and the sanctity of brotherhood and faith," he told GSR.

Rex Varghese, a 10th grader in the Sunday school, said he was lucky to continue catechism in the convent where his parents attend Mass.

"We were strictly instructed not to discuss the liturgy dispute in the catechism classes or outside," the 15-year-old told GSR.

Cathedral parish priest Fr. Antony Poothavelil laments the dispute has led to "a complete breakdown of the pastoral and spiritual ministries in the archdiocese, leading to a chaotic situation."

Poothavelil, who supports the synod formula and is still the parish priest, was rejected by the cathedral parishioners, but the papal delegate reinstated him Aug. 14.



St. Mary's Basilica Cathedral parish priest Fr. Antony Poothavelil, in the parish office in Kochi, a major city in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala (Thomas Scaria)

"People are scattered and disillusioned, youth have become atheists, catechism has been disrupted, vocations have decreased and others are laughing at us," he told GSR.

People opposing the synod Mass allege that the bishops want to enforce the uniform liturgy to divert attention from Alencherry's property dealings, in which the archbishop allegedly sold major properties of the archdiocese for a lower price than the market rate, thus causing losses to the church.

"They cannot face the people after mismanaging the property of the archdiocese," said Fr. Paul Chully, parish priest of St. Mary's Church in Alangad, around 20 miles south of the basilica. "We are united in obedience to the pope, but not to the dictatorial enforcement of changes that hurt us."

Several nuns said they have no option but to cooperate with the parish priest to do their parish ministry.

"We were literally caught between the priests, laity and the bishops, but that does not prevent us from doing our works in the parish," said Sr. Rose Mary, provincial of the Congregation of the Holy Family.

> 'We were literally caught between the priests, laity and the bishops, but that does not prevent us from doing our works in the parish.'
> —Sr. Rose Mary, provincial of the Congregation of the Holy Family
>
> Tweet this

Speaking to GSR at the provincial house in Aluva, some 20 miles north of Kochi on Sept. 9, Mary said her sisters continued the parish ministries as the liturgy dispute raged. Most rural parishes conduct catechism classes, while some city parishes faced disruption, the provincial said.

The sisters "have played a remarkable job in balancing the situation on those city parishes," she claimed.

Her congregation is based in the Trichur Archdiocese and its prelate, Archbishop Andrews Thazhath, is the apostolic administrator of Ernakulam-Angamaly, tasked to implement the synod Mass.

Mary said their superior general or counselors have not interfered with their pastoral mission in the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese.

She said Vasil, the pope's personal delegate, had convened a meeting of major superiors of all women religious congregations in the archdiocese to seek their support in implementing the synod Mass.



Slovak Archbishop Cyril Vasil of Košice is seen in this file photo taken at the Vatican in November 2013 when he was serving as secretary of the then-Congregation for Eastern Churches. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

"Among some 20 provincials and generals at the meeting, 19 expressed their displeasure at the change in liturgy," Mary said.

The same reaction occurred when the Syro-Malabar synod of bishops met with the superiors of both the men and women religious congregations.

The Holy Family provincial said the peculiar situation in the archdiocese has caused misunderstanding among their nuns in other provinces and dioceses.

Sister Sajina (single name), another Carmelite nun serving the basilica, said how the priest celebrated Mass has not bothered her. "What is important is to experience Eucharist and live a life in accordance with it," she told GSR while attending to the parents of the catechism children.

Sajina sees a positive side of the conflict. "The crisis has given us more responsibility to come closer to the people and live out our vocation more meaningfully," she added.

She said they have never abandoned their parish mission, even when the church was closed. A difficulty they now face is to get priests to attend to the spiritual needs of some 40 nuns in her convent.

Advertisement

The Nazareth Sisters, an indigenous congregation serving the archdiocese, also faced the same problem.

"We don't mind having Mass in whichever rite, but we need Mass every day," Nazareth Sr. Roselet Tharapel told GSR.

In the cathedral parish, nuns of various congregations take turns to pray in the adoration chapel opposite the basilica for an amicable solution to the dispute.

Riju Kanjookkaran, leader of a laity movement that was formed to protest against the synod Mass, said the nuns play a key role in pastoral and faith formation in the archdiocese.



Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu, a member of the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ (Courtesy of Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu)

"As long as we have the sisters supporting us, such family apostolates will continue," he told GSR.

The liturgy dispute is a "matter of sorrow and shame" for the universal church, not just the archdiocese, said Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu, the first woman to head the Kerala chapter of the Conference of Major Superiors in India.

Clarifying that she cannot judge the dispute, she said, "Only the Holy Spirit and prayer can liberate the bondages and set us free."

Kuzhinapurathu is a member of the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ, a congregation under the Syro-Malankara rite, another Eastern church in India.

The Latin, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara rites make up the Catholic Church in India.

"The universal church is always open to dialogue, not monologue," she said.