News



Police officers stand outside St. Thomas Church, Chittoor, on the outskirts of Kochi, Kerala, during the Christmas midnight Mass as protesters demanded the synodal Mass. Police arrested the protesters. (Thomas Scaria)



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Nuns in a southern Indian archdiocese find themselves caught between a papal order and the local priests and Catholics who defy the pope's ultimatum on how to celebrate Mass.

The situation in the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese is "disgusting and frightening," said Sr. Linet of the Congregation of Mother Carmel, who coordinates the administrative services of St. Mary's Basilica Cathedral Basilica in Ernakulam.

The dilemma involves how sisters should respond to defiance of Pope Francis' December order to the archdiocese to face the altar during the eucharistic prayer — the format approved in 1999 by the Syro-Malabar Synod, the Eastern-rite church's governing body — or face disciplinary action. (The Ernakulam-Angamaly archdiocese belongs to the Syro-Malabar Church, which is the second largest among 23 Eastern-rite churches in communion with Rome. The largest is the Ukrainian Catholic Church.)

"Whether we like it or not, obedience is central to our vocation, and it is highly disturbing to violate a papal order," Linet, who uses one name, told Global Sisters Report as she was preparing for Christmas Eve midnight Mass in their convent chapel adjacent to the cathedral.



Thousands of people, including nuns, attended the Dec. 10 Mass at the Bharata Mata College grounds, Kakkanad, celebrating the centenary of the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese Dec. 10. (Courtesy of Riju Kanjookaran)

The majority of the priests and parish communities in the archdiocese have rejected the synod's decision, instead opting to face the congregation throughout the Liturgy of the Word and after Communion. They want to continue their five decades' practice and keep with the liturgical teachings of the Second Vatican Council, in which the priest faces the people throughout the Mass.

In a Dec. 7 video message shared on social media and in news, Pope Francis called on priests and people in the archdiocese not to separate themselves from the church, "but to walk together with the Synod, with your Bishops, and with the Major Archbishop by implementing the liturgical decisions of the Synod by Christmas, 2023."

Disobeying this could lead to excommunication from the church, he hinted. "If that should happen, with great sorrow, sanctions would be incurred," Francis said in Italian.

The pope's message also asked the archdiocese to open the cathedral, which has remained closed since the first Sunday of Advent 2022.

Related: Amid liturgical dispute in Indian archdiocese, sisters keep faith alive

The liturgy dispute "is a significant challenge for the nuns serving the Ernakulam-Angamaly archdiocese, as most of the clergy and parish communities continue to sideline the papal order," said Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu, president of the Kerala Conference of Major Superiors.

Kuzhinapurathu, a member of the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ, told Global Sisters Report that she has advised the nuns in the archdiocese not to get into any "controversies but continue to serve the people of God in the parish and other ministries."



Imitation of Christ Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu heads the Kerala Conference of Major Superiors, which represents some 33,000 religious men and women in Kerala, southern India. (Thomas Scaria)

Linet said the manner in which Mass is celebrated will be "left to the priest, and we have no say in it."

In a symbolic gesture on Christmas day, almost all 328 parishes in the archdiocese celebrated one of the three Masses in the synod's preferred style, but they reverted to their old mode thereafter.

Fearing trouble, the vicar of St. Mary's Basilica remained closed on Christmas and other days.

Riju Kanjookaran, spokesperson of the Archdiocesan Moment for Transparency, which opposes the synod Mass format, said one Mass in nearly all parishes on Christmas was celebrated in the synodal mode, but it will not continue as a general practice, with priests in the archdiocese reverting to facing people during Mass.

Linet, who is among more than 3,000 nuns from the archdiocese's 80 religious congregations, said most of her colleagues who serve the cathedral parish in one way or another have "no option but to follow the liturgy offered in the parish church."

"Everyone wants to end this rift soon," she added, noting confusion among laypeople.



Three days after Pope Francis asked them to adopt the synodal Mass, 400 priests of Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese in India celebrated Mass Dec. 10 facing the congregation. This Mass at the Bharata Mata College grounds, Kakkanad, marked the archdiocese's centenary. (Courtesy of Riju Kanjookaran)

Sr. Rose Mary, provincial of the Congregation of the Holy Family who uses a single name, said that "as religious women, we are helpless in taking sides.

"We are bound by our vow of obedience, and at the same time, we cannot go against the archdiocese's official stand," she told GSR.

Sisters pray for resolution

The provincial said sisters pray that those appointed to solve the liturgy controversy find an amicable solution soon.

One such effort was the second visit of papal delegate Jesuit Archbishop Cyril Vasil of Slovakia to the archdiocese Dec. 13. During his first visit four months earlier, the delegate said his mission was to get the synodal Mass implemented in the archdiocese.

During his second visit, Vasil organized several meetings with priests, religious and laity, but left without an agreement.



Jesuit Archbishop Cyril Vasil of Košice, seen in this 2013 file photo, has twice visited the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese in India as a papal delegate attempting to resolve the liturgy dispute there. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Kanjookaran said a formula worked out with the papal delegate and the apostolic administrator allowed one Sunday Mass in the cathedral in the synod mode. Similarly, the synod Mass could be celebrated at the pilgrimage centers in the archdiocese and occasionally in its seminaries.

However, basilica vicar Fr. Anthony Poothavelil said no such formula was approved by the committee, nor was it signed by the papal delegate and the administrator.

He said the administrator decided not to open the basilica until a peaceful solution is worked out. "Archbishop Bosco Puttur did not want to celebrate the Mass with police protection," the vicar explained.

Poothavelil told GSR that the Vatican turned down the proposed formula and requested the archdiocese submit a detailed report on the situation from each parish. "The Vatican will give its further directions after studying those reports," he said.

'We don't want any controversy'

Three days after the pope sent his ultimatum, more than 400 priests commemorated the archdiocese's centenary with a Mass at the Bharata Mata College grounds, Kakkanad, facing the congregation.



The statue of St. Thomas the Apostle, patron of the Syro-Malabar Church, atop St. Mary's Basilica, the main church of the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese. (Thomas Scaria)

On Christmas night, the basilica looked deserted with no Christmas tree, crib, nor lighting. The adjacent St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Cathedral of the Verapoly Latin rite was lit up for the holiday. Some parishioners of the Syro-Malabar cathedral attended Christmas Mass there.

Sr. Little Flower, the provincial of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel in the archdiocese, told GSR that her superior general instructed her to refrain from taking a stand on the dispute.

"We serve several Syro-Malabar and Latin dioceses outside Kerala, and so, we don't want any controversy," said Sister Little Flower, who uses a single name. She also expressed her displeasure at the archdiocese's failure to resolve the dispute.

"We are saddened to see our cathedral church closed even during this Christmas," she said.

GSR spent Christmas Eve and the following day in the archdiocese and observed that people generally supported the people-facing mode of celebrating Mass. At the same time, they seemed worried about ignoring the papal ultimatum.



A Carmelite nun at St. Mary's Church, Alangad, near Ernakulam, leads a Christmas celebration for catechism students and their parents on Christmas Eve. (Thomas Scaria)

"We really do not want to take a risk by violating the papal order," said Augustine Koottala, who attended the synod Mass on Christmas day at St. Mary's Church in Alangad, near Kochi, Kerala's commercial capital and the base of the Syro-Malabar Church.

He predicted that other parishes too would accept the synod Mass since people in the archdiocese are not "ready for a conflict with the pope."

Annamma Puthusseril, a parishioner of Alangad, said she wants the Christmas message of peace and happiness to prevail in her community and "no more fights and divisions."

Alangad parish priest Fr. Paul Chully said only the festival Mass on Christmas was offered in the synod's way and that other Masses will continue with the priest facing the people. He told GSR that he was helpless as his people demanded Mass facing the congregation.

Some parishes witnessed opposition to the synod Mass during Christmas.

A group of parishioners protested the midnight Christmas Eve Mass at St Thomas Church, Chittor, during which priests faced the people. Mathew Thachil, the parish priest, told GSR that most parishioners preferred the people-facing Mass. Police arrested the protesters.

Thachil celebrated Mass in the synod mode Christmas morning. St. George Church, Edappally — one of the largest Syro-Malabar churches in Kochi — also celebrated the synod Mass on Christmas Eve.

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As of Jan. 18, no response from the Vatican about defiance of the pope's order beyond his Dec. 25 deadline had been made public.

The synod elected Archbishop Raphael Thattil as the new major archbishop of the Syro-Malabar church, effective Jan. 10. One tough task ahead for him is to resolve the liturgical dispute in Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese.

The synod, with Thattil's support, has issued a circular reiterating its call to start synod Mass in all churches in the archdiocese, and directs all priests to read and distribute it at Jan. 21 Sunday Masses.

"The decision comes in tandem with the message that Pope Francis had sent via a letter and video message," Bosco Puthur, apostolic administrator of the archdiocese, said in the circular. The "decision was attested to by all the bishops present in the synod in the presence of Major Archbishop Raphael Thattil," he added.

"I would like to remind all faithful, the religious men and women we need to overcome all divisiveness for overall well being and through the implementation of the Unified Holy Mass, work for the unity of the Church," Puthur said in the circular.