# The second meeting of the Working Group for Coordinating Bilateral Relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church was held



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On April 24-27, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Mathews III, Catholicos of the East & Malankara Metropolitan, the Working Group for Coordinating Bilateral Relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church held its second meeting at the Stavropegial Convent of the Protection of the Mother of God in Moscow.

The Moscow Patriarchate was represented by: Metropolitan Leonid of Klin, Patriarchal Exarch of Africa, co-chairman of the Working Group; hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov), DECR secretary for inter-Christian relations, secretary of the Working Group; deacon Dimitry Serov, head of the Moscow Theological Academy Publishing House; hierodeacon Pyotr (Akhmatkhanov), staff member of the Department for External Church Relations.

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church was represented by: Metropolitan Abraham Mar Stephanos, Metropolitan of the Diocese of UK, Europe & Africa; Rev. Aswin Fernandis, Executive Director of the Department of Ecumenical Relations.

The Working Group members noted the utmost importance of their meeting with His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia held in the Patriarchal Chambers of the Kremlin Faceted Palace on 25th April 2023. The issues raised during that meeting provided a basis for further deliberations at the Working Group's session concerning the development of the bilateral relations.

During the meeting, the Working Group reviewed collaborative projects implemented since its previous meeting in Kottayam (February 3-7, 2020). The participants of the meeting noted the following:

· Despite a long period of the anti-epidemic restrictions caused by the world-wide spread of COVID-19 infection, a number of important projects had been carried out.

· As one of the outcomes of the inter-church dialogue, the Working Group members mentioned cooperation between the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations and the Orthodoxy Cognate PAGE (OCP) – a media network acting under the auspices of the Malankara Church. Considered especially important were also the joint projects aimed at supporting Christians in the African countries where they were subjected to persecution. For instance, a number programmes were made, telling about the situation in Ethiopia, and on the initiative of the Russian Orthodox Church an international online conference On the Plight of Christians in Africa was held on 22nd December 2020 on a platform of Rossiya Segodnya media group. Among the participants in the conference were the OCP representatives.

· On 10th February 2022, Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov), as an invited expert, took part in an international online round table organised by the OCP.

· In August 2021, a delegation from India led by Rev. Bijesh Philip, professor of the Orthodox Theological Seminary in Kottayam, visited Russia. During their visit the delegation members undertook a pilgrimage to the holy sites in Moscow, the Moscow Region and St. Petersburg and held meetings at the Moscow and St. Petersburg Theological Academies.

· As part of the student exchange programme in 2022, Deacon Anoop Raju graduated from the Choir Director's School of the Moscow Theological Academy. At the moment, Priest Aroon George Mathew and Deacon Melvin Mathew are studying at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy.

· On 26th – 29th July 2022, Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov) visited India to take part in the celebrations of church-wide importance for the Indian Christians. During the celebrations, seven new hierarchs of the Malankara Church were ordained, including a member of the Working Group, Metropolitan Abraham Mar Stephanos.

As was mentioned at the meeting, cooperation in the media sphere had a very important outcome – a documentary about Apostle Thomas and his Indian heritage that had been filmed in India and shown on "Spas" federal Orthodox TV channel on Saint Thomas Sunday.

During the meeting, Metropolitan Leonid and Metropolitan Mar Stephanos outlined the current state of affairs in the Russian Orthodox and the Malankara Churches respectively and shared some relevant information of importance for the whole Christendom. The delegation of the Malankara Church expressed understanding with regard to the Moscow Patriarchate's position on the persecutions against the canonical Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

The Working Group pointed out the following 15 aspects of the bilateral cooperation to be implemented in the near future:

**1. Upholding traditional values and supporting Christians**

It was deemed important to voice concerted position on such issues as preservation of traditional values and to exert joint efforts in response to the persecution of Christians in various regions of the world.

It involves cooperation in upholding traditional Biblical values and counteracting the efforts aimed at introducing into the life of society the LGBT ideology, the so-called "gender ideology," as well as at legalizing abortion and euthanasia and destroying the institution of family.

2. **Cooperation at international forums**

The Working Group members acknowledged the necessity to coordinate efforts at various international forums, first of all, the World Council of Churches when topics of mutual interest are discussed and to voice concerted position on the most burning issues.

The Moscow Patriarchate representatives expressed particular gratitude to the delegation of the Malankara Church led by the Working Group co-chairman, Metropolitan Zachariah Mar Nicholovos, for supporting the Russian Orthodox Church delegation at the WCC 11$^{th}$ Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2022, and for opposing the attempted discrimination against the Russian Orthodox Church.

3. **Cooperation in academic sphere**

Student exchange has always played an essential role in the relationships between the two Churches. The first person to put forward an idea of admitting students from India to theological schools of the Russian Orthodox Church on a regular basis was Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov) of blessed memory.

The Working Group members expressed satisfaction at how the student exchange projects were carried out. Proposals were made to invite lecturers, scholars and experts from both Churches to deliver lectures and give seminars on different church disciplines.

4. **Translating ecclesiastical literature**

The Malankara delegates noted that their Church is interested in translating into the languages used in India and publishing the lives of the Russian saints, books on the history of the Russian Orthodox Church and works by the Russian theologians.

5. **Cooperation in the youth sphere**

For 2023 - 2024 is planned to exchange youth delegations within the framework of the so-called "summer institutes".

6. **Cooperation in social ministry**

Sharing expertise in social ministry and humanitarian work is an essential aspect of the bilateral cooperation. As His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia suggested, the first project in this sphere could be a visit of a delegation including representatives of administration, management, doctors and medical personnel of St. Alexis of Moscow Hospital to India in February 2024 to acquaint themselves with the work of St. Gregorios Hospital in Parumala and discuss prospects of further cooperation.

7. **Cooperation in the monastic sphere**

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As the Malankara delegates pointed out, their Church would like to gain a deeper insight into the monastic traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church and, based on them, develop monastic life in India.

For this reason, a project postponed because of the COVID-19 restrictions will be resumed and three nuns from India will be sent to one of the Russian convents for several months this summer.

8. **Cooperation in media sphere**

The aforementioned documentary about St. Thomas and his Indian heritage filmed in India in February 2023 and shown on “Spas” Orthodox TV channel was a success, as the Working Group members pointed out. The Moscow Patriarchate representatives conveyed gratitude to His Holiness Catholicos Baselios Marthoma Mathews III for his assistance and for the interview in which he had expressed his love for Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. They also thanked Rev. Aswin Fernandis for all the work he had done to help organise the filming.

Making documentaries, TV programmes and other media content on the Christian traditions of Russia and India and the history of the bilateral dialogue was regarded as an area of significance for further cooperation.

9. **Promoting mutual pilgrimage visits**

The participants in the meeting deemed it important to support the growing interest of the Russian and Indian Christians in each other’s religious heritage and to provide assistance in organising pilgrimages to the Christian holy sites in Russia and India.

10. **Cooperation in the sphere of church art**

The Malankara Church is interested in learning more about the Russian icon-painting traditions and promoting them in India. Hence, the Working Group will initiate and help carry out the appropriate projects.

11. **Visit of His Holiness Catholicos Baselios Marthoma Mathews III to Russia**

During the aforementioned meeting between the Working Group members and the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill conveyed an official invitation to the Primate of

the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church to visit Russia. The Working Group felt it important to begin preparations for this visit as soon as possible.

12. **Furthering veneration of the Blessed Matrona of Moscow in India**

The Working Group hails the growing interest towards and the veneration of the Blessed Matrona of Moscow in India. Prayers to this saint have already been translated into the Malayalam language. It was deemed helpful to translate a documentary about St. Matrona and show it later in India.

As Metropolitan Mar Stephanos informed the participants in the meeting, a process had started to include the name of the Blessed Matrona of Moscow in the liturgical calendar of the Malankara Church.

Participants of the meeting felt important to note that St. Matrona is considered to be a heavenly patron of the bilateral dialogue between the two Churches.

13. **Carrying out projects and joint events dedicated to the history of the bilateral contacts**

The participants in the meeting mentioned several outstanding figures in the history of the bilateral relations who had done a lot to promote the inter-church dialogue. Such, among others, were Archimandrite Andronik (Yelpidinsky), Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov) of Leningrad and Novgorod, Metropolitan Paulose Mar Gregorios (Paul Varghese), and Nikolai Zernov. The Working Group members acknowledged the importance of popularizing their contribution and assisting in preparing and releasing publications about them in Russia and India.

14. **Cooperation in the diaspora**

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church take pastoral care of their faithful living beyond their canonical territories and have diocesan and parochial bodies in the diaspora, in particular, in Europe, America, Asia and Africa. As the participants in the meeting pointed out, cooperation between those bodies at the regional level will be useful in providing mutual support on a wide range of issues.

15. **Promoting theological talks**

The history of the bilateral contacts between the two Churches has a rich tradition of theological talks which the Working Group members considered to be of great importance. This experience is be explored and popularized and the talks are to continue in future.

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The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church delegation expressed appreciation to Metropolitan Leonid of Klin and the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate for hosting the second meeting of the Working Group in Moscow.

The Working Group members thank Hegumeness Feofaniya, mother superior of the Stavropegial Convent of the Protection of the Mother of God, and the sisters and staff of the monastery for their warm hospitality and assistance in organising the meeting.

The results of the Working Group's activities will be presented to the Holy Synods of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Malankara Church for final approval.

The next meeting of the Working Group is due to take place in the territory of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in May 2024.

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