Head of the Malankara Church of India: we express our support for the Russian Church in everything



The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church of India, one of the oldest Christian Churches in the world, is said to have been founded by the Apostle Thomas, a disciple of Christ himself, in the year 52. Its Primate Catholicos Baselios Marthoma Mathews III had recently ***visited Moscow and St Petersburg****. During his visit, he gave an exclusive* ***interview to RIA Novosti****, in which he spoke about his impressions of Russia and the events in Ukraine, about the life of the Oriental Orthodox in India and the prospects for developing dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church.*

- Your Holiness, have you ever visited Russia before 2023?

- The last time I was in Russia in 1977-1979. I studied at the Leningrad Theological Academy and visited Moscow. After 44 years, I again had the opportunity to visit Moscow and St Petersburg. And I saw many innovations.

- How, in your opinion, has the life of the Russian Orthodox Church changed during this time?

- The current leadership of the country has given the Orthodox more freedom to practice their faith. I think people are happy with this opportunity.

- How do you see the position of the Russian Church in the world, especially now, in light of what's happening in Ukraine?

- The Church is committed to peacemaking. Any Orthodox believer strives for peace. How does one achieve this peace is the question. On the one hand - the desire for peace, on the other hand - we see what is happening in Ukraine, when thousands of believers there are being persecuted. We need to look for ways to resolve this conflict.

- How does the Malankara Church view the Russian Church, and what is the value of our relationship?

- Relations between our Churches were established in the 1950s and 1960s, and they are now more than 70 years old. The first contacts took place at the conference of the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Delhi: among the representatives of the Russian Church there was Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov) of Leningrad and Ladoga. After that, relations intensified, there were mutual visits of representatives and Primates of the Churches. Now our friendship is stronger than ever: we consider the Russian Orthodox Church a sister Church. We cherish this friendship. The Malankara Church follows with great attention the successes of the Russian Church, empathises with it when it is in difficult circumstances, and sympathises when it is criticised. We express our support to the Russian Church in everything.

- Are contacts between the two Churches helping to develop the monastic tradition?

- We are familiar with the rich monastic tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church. I had the opportunity during my two-year study in Leningrad to visit monasteries, including those in Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia. I think that monasteries are the core of the life of Russian Orthodoxy. The Russian Orthodox Church is moved forward by their prayer and activity in society.

In India, the Malankara Church also has monasteries, both male and female, but not as many as in the Russian Church, because we are a small Church compared to the Russian Church. I think that in the future we will organise an exchange of experience: Russian monks will be able to visit our monasteries in India and live there for some time, and vice versa. Friendship between our Churches can bear fruit in the monastic life.

- What restrictions prevent our priests fr om praying and ministering together?

- There are many points of contact wh ere we can be united, many issues on which our positions coincide. But there are also certain obstacles to prayerful dialogue. They are related more to insufficient clarification and misunderstanding of certain points in canonical and theological issues. That is, it is more of a language barrier problem, when people explain the same theological issues in different languages.

In the 1950s, a round table organised in India took place when theologians of the Russian Church and the Malankara Church discussed the question of possible prayer and Eucharistic unity (ecclesiastical unity or unity in Eucharistic communion, i.e. the possibility of celebrating the Liturgy and receiving Communion together - ed.). The experts then stated that having studied the theology, triadology and Christology of the Malankara Church, they did not find any false teachings. But the matter had been very bureaucratised for political and other reasons. I hope that in the near future it will be resolved and we will be able to restore full communion and be able to serve and pray together.

- You mentioned many common points for the Russian and Malankara Churches, what are they?

- We have much in common in the service of the Divine Liturgy. The prayers, liturgical actions, vestments, and hymns differ slightly. But we have the same understanding of the Eucharist, the doctrine of the Body and Blood of Christ. The theology of the Liturgy and the Eucharist is the same as in the Russian Church.

- Do the Malankara Church in Russia and the Russian Church in India have representations? If not, are there any plans to open them?

- A great many students fr om India study at secular universities in Moscow and St Petersburg. As parishioners, unfortunately, they are not very organised. It is good that they can visit the churches of the Russian Church and get in touch with its liturgical tradition. The liturgical tradition of the Malankara Church could be preserved and passed on to the believers who live in Russia. But it is necessary to think how expedient it is to make a representation (metochion) in Russia. And we can solve this issue only with the blessing of His Holiness the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus'.

At the same time, there are several parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church in India. And we are happy about this, we are in contact and co-operation with them.

- How many believers now identify themselves as belonging to the Malankara Church - in India and elsewhere in the world?

- The Malankara Church now has 2.5 million members worldwide. The number of parishioners is not growing fast. But at the same time there are people who are trying to join the Malankara Orthodox Church. We have people coming from English and Spanish speaking countries, including in Europe and in Latin America. Historically there have been parishes in the UK, we have recently opened one in Paris. We hope to continue to grow the number of parishes. We have some new parishes in Asia as well, for example in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore.

However, the original territory of our Church is India and specifically the state of Kerala, wh ere the Apostle Thomas once founded it.

- How do the authorities in India treat the Malankara Church?

- We have no problem with the government of India. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi favours our Church and even protects our believers to some extent. We have co-operation with the authorities at the level of the state of Kerala (south-west coast of India - ed.). Our Church is recognised by the state as a traditional confession of India, that is, we are protected by law. India is our home, and we feel it.

- Does the Malankara Church interact with members of other religions in India?

- As for the representatives of other religions, we have brotherly coexistence, they respect us and we respect them. When I became Primate of the Malankara Church, I tried to visit representatives of all other religions of India. We are engaged in common charitable projects, they are directed not only to believers of a certain confession, but to all people regardless of their religion or social status. We provide medical assistance, help to find a job, find a home, aid talented young people to get education despite the fact that they have no money. In other words, we have well-established social activities with the authorities and representatives of other religions.

Interviewed by Artem Budyonny

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