

# Preserving the Apostolic Faith

The Living Faith of Indian American Catholics



# **PRESERVING THE APOSTOLIC FAITH**

*The Living Faith of Indian American Catholics*

Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church  
Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Island Affairs  
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
Washington, DC

*Preserving the Apostolic Faith: The Living Faith of Indian American Catholics* was developed by the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Island Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was reviewed and endorsed by the Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church, and it was authorized for publication by the USCCB Administrative Committee at its September 2025 meeting. It has been directed for publication by the undersigned.

Reverend Michael J.K. Fuller, S.Th.D.  
General Secretary, USCCB

Cover image: *The Faith and Culture of Indian-Catholics in the US,*” by Rev. Peter Gray, P.S.S.

*St. Thomas, the apostle of India and Our Lady of Velankanni whose apparition took place in 16th century in India demonstrate the primary source and reinforcement of the faith of the Indian-American Catholic community. The boat carrying St. Thomas and Our Lady of Velankanni reflects the Indian-Americans preserving and practicing the Apostolic faith and Marian devotion in the US.*

*The maps of India and the US below the cross, the boat (catamaran), and the waves symbolise the Indian immigration to the US. The word ‘catamaran’ (ancient Indian boat) emerges from one of the Indian languages (Tamil) means ‘logs bound together’, signifies how Indian-American community unites its distinct cultures, languages and ethnicities under one Faith and one Mother, our Lady of Velankanni.*

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# Foreword

## PRESERVING THE APOSTOLIC FAITH: THE LIVING FAITH OF INDIAN AMERICAN CATHOLICS

As an Indian American Catholic, the son of Indian immigrants and the first Indian American Bishop in the United States, it is my privilege to present, with pride, the latest volume of the Small Book Series of the USCCB Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Island Affairs, *Preserving the Apostolic Faith: The Living Faith of Indian American Catholics*. The aim of this work is to familiarize readers with the rich history of Catholicism in India, the living faith of Indian immigrants to the United States, and the traditions and cultural richness of Indian American Catholics, which may serve as an evangelizing force in the United States.

In 2016, a book entitled, *The Other One Percent: Indians in America*, which studied and analyzed data about Indian immigrants, who now make up one percent of the US population, was published. It described the waves of Indian immigration to the United States. These waves are also described in this work. The authors noted that Indian immigrants are among the wealthiest and highly educated group of migrants. Beginning in the mid-1960s, waves of Indians came here, engaged in the fields of medicine, engineering, computer science and technology. They have demonstrated an entrepreneurial spirit, contributing to the economic vitality of this country and have become living signs of mutually beneficial migration.

However, what is the role of faith, and, in particular, the role of the Catholic faith? Indian Catholics, while a small minority in India itself, are having a greater and greater influence on the Church in the United States due to the presence of many Indian priests and religious who carry out missionary work here due to the vocational crisis afflicting the Church in the United States. In some dioceses, nearly one-third of the

priests are from India.

It is not priests and religious alone who are exerting an ever-greater influence. New waves of Indian immigrants and Catholics are coming to the United States, populating universities and playing critical roles in the fields of medicine, engineering, and IT, to name a few. Indian American Catholics are taking a more visible role in our parishes and are making great strides to integrate into the Church in the United States. This small book helps readers better appreciate the rich gifts of these members of our Catholic family.

While some of these are Latin-rite Catholics from regions such as Goa, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, evangelized by the Europeans, others are from the province of Kerala. Quite often, I am mistaken for a Latino bishop, and when I explain that my parents and brothers came to the United States in 1970, frequently, I am asked: “Were you always Catholic?”

People are surprised to discover that my family was first evangelized by St. Francis Xavier. I explain to them that the European attempts at evangelization are much later than the origin of Christianity in India, which traces its roots back to Apostolic times, most notably through St. Thomas the Apostle. I explain how the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Catholic Churches also share full communion with the Latin Church and with the Pope. In 2018, the USCCB issued a document *Encountering Christ in Harmony: A Pastoral Response to our Asian and Pacific Island Brothers and Sisters*; we could say that the Catholic Church in India understands how to live the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic faith in harmony, uniting, through the power of the Spirit, the different liturgical, spiritual, cultural and linguistic gifts.

Speaking on Indian American Catholic Heritage Day in Philadelphia in 2018, His Eminence Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States remarked that the gifts of Indian Catholics can be a truly evangelizing force in the United States. He stated:

“The Indian American Catholic community has much

to offer from the perspective of faith. You are a distinct minority in India and in the United States, yet your rich liturgical and cultural traditions can direct others to the Transcendent, to the Mystery of God.

Therefore, in the task of evangelization, I invite you to think about what you as Indian Catholics can do to enrich the Church in the United States through your gifts and talents. Certainly, you know about authentic pluralism, dialogue, and proclamation. You have also successfully navigated the challenges of migrating. What hope can you offer to those coming from other nations? How might you be a force for the new evangelization or an antidote to secularism and materialism?”

This volume helps us not only to understand and appreciate Indian Catholics in the United States, but it is an invitation to readers, including those not of Indian descent, to think more deeply about how Indian Catholics can address barriers to evangelization. India is a religiously rich culture. Even if Catholics are a distinct minority, Indian Catholics teach us how to preserve our Faith and Catholic identity; how to dialogue and co-exist with other religious traditions; how to be of service to the poor and those who lack opportunities for education and employment; and how to make new disciples, even in the face of persecution. Indian Catholics are also strong advocates for religious liberty, which remains threatened in the United States, having suffered and continuing to suffer religious persecution, and for peace and non-violent protest against grave injustice.

With a strong emphasis on family and respect for elders, Indian Catholics can offer sage advice and the balm of mercy to those families that are broken or in need of support. The presence and contribution of Indian Catholics, as well as their successful integration into society and into our parishes, may also serve as a remedy for the fear surrounding the waves of new immigrants and may serve as a sign of hope to the new



immigrants that Catholic parishes can be, not only a refuge but a true spiritual home.

In 2024, at the National Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis, one of the major liturgies celebrated in Lucas Oil Stadium was the Holy Qurbana, the sacred liturgy of the Syro-Malabar Church, presided over by Bishop Joy Alappatt. It was a moment of pride for Indian Catholics, but many Catholics in the United States were evangelized by the beauty and joy of the liturgy. The publication of this small book is also an occasion of joy and pride for Indian Catholics and should be of great benefit to all who read it.

Most Rev. Earl K. Fernandes  
Bishop of Columbus  
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee  
on Asian and Pacific Island Affairs

# Introduction

The Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Island Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has expressed a desire to study the faith practices and cultural integration of Asian and Pacific Islander Catholic immigrants in the United States. This document is an attempt to show the cultural background and spiritual adaptations of Asian Indian immigrants and Asian Indian Americans in the United States of America. This document also strives to partially meet the expectations of USCCB's document *Encountering Christ in Harmony: A Pastoral Response to Our Asian and Pacific Island Brothers and Sisters* (2018), focusing on Asian Indian American Catholics and Indian immigrants living in the United States. The expression of Catholic faith in Asian and Pacific cultures is a source of strength and enriching vitality for the growing immigrant Catholic Church in the US. As Pope Francis notes:

When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity.

The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and

enables us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity,

where all things find their unity. He builds up the communion and harmony

of the people of God. The same Spirit is that harmony, just as he is the bond

of love between the Father and the Son.<sup>1</sup>

This document unfolds in eight chapters on the theme of “Preserving the Apostolic Faith – The living faith of Indian American Catholics”. It explores a brief history of Christianity in India from the first century

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1 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 117

to the present including the arrival of Saint Thomas and Saint Francis Xavier, and the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It lists the number of saints and holy men and women in the ecclesial community of India. The text presents the situation of Indian immigrants to the US and Indian American Catholics, their contributions to the American Catholic Church, and their pastoral and spiritual challenges. It presents certain Indian cultural festivals, practices, and sociological complexities, including the multi-linguistic, regional and caste differences. As Indian Catholics follow three different Rites - Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara and Latin - this text includes a chapter on each of these rites. Given the complexity of Indian socio-cultural and religious diversity, this text can only attempt to introduce a general view of Indian Catholic life and practices in the US.

# Chapter 1: History of Christianity in India

India is one of a few countries with an ancient civilization with a culture and tradition of continuity. The archeological discoveries of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa in Sindu (Indus) valley suggest the antiquity of Indian civilization dating back to 3000 BC.<sup>2</sup> The region of India had long been a destination for trade and international travel. Along with other travelers, Saint Thomas and Saint Bartholomew, apostles of Jesus, were believed to have traveled to India in the first century to evangelize.<sup>3</sup>

On his second visit to India, Pope Saint John Paul II issued the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, “Ecclesia in Asia.” In the exhortation, he recognized the apostolic origin of the Indian church evangelized by Saint Thomas the Apostle, and that there had been a Christian community present in the region for the past two millennia.<sup>4</sup> The Pope strongly urged that evangelization during the third millennium should direct special attention to Asia.

## 1.1 Ancient India in the Time of the Old Testament (500 - 100 BC)

The arrival of Saint Thomas to India can be understood through the geopolitical and commercial relationship that existed among the kingdoms, traders, and travelers predating the Christian era. During the Iron Age, around the Fifth Century BC, the Middle Eastern kingdoms were interested in ancient India for trade and geopolitical reasons.

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2 R.C. Majumdar, *Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1952), 20-21.

3 Chandra Mallampalli, *South Asia's Christians: Between Hindu and Muslim*, Oxford Studies in World Christianity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 18-19.

4 Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 9

## *A) Ancient India in the Persian Empire*

The Achaemenid Empire (known as the first Persian Empire, was founded by Cyrus the Great in the Sixth Century BC who was succeeded by Darius the Great), kept Babylon, as its political capital and extended its territory up to the Indus River region in India. Thus, around the Fifth Century BC, when Esther, a Hebrew woman, was queen of Persia, the Persian Empire included parts of India, Egypt, and Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup> The vast area of the Persian Empire indicates that widespread political, socio-cultural, and commercial exchange existed among its regions.

## *B) The Greek Empire and India*

Alexander the Great annexed the Persian Empire in the Fourth Century BC after thirteen years of war. Alexander came to India and took over the regions of Punjab and the Indus River in 326 BC after the Battle of the Hydaspes. The Book of Maccabees refers to the Greek Empire overtaking the Persian Empire (I Maccabees. 1:1-7), and an Indian mahout engaging in the battle of Beth-Zechariah (I Maccabees 6:37). Among Alexander's numerous conquests including parts of Asia Minor, Egypt, and Ethiopia, India gained importance as an active and recurrent destination for political and commercial travels.<sup>6</sup>

## *C) The Roman Empire and India*

During the first century B.C, the Roman traders used the already known land route to India for trade. But later they also discovered the sea route to reach south India faster. Augustus sent an embassy in 20 BC to Pandya (*Pondion*), then comprising also southern Kerala (in south India). As historian George Nedungatt, S.J. describes in *Quest for the Historical Thomas, Apostle of India*:

The embassy sent by the Pandian king with precious

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<sup>5</sup> Esther, 1:1;8:9.

<sup>6</sup> Majumdar, *Ancient India*, 98-99.

presents to Augustus took the land route and was four years on the road. The Indian envoys reached also the courts of Claudius, Antonius Pius, Julian and Justinian. By land route caravans from Damascus could reach north India along the Silk Road via Edessa, Dura-Europa, Hamadan, Damghan, (in Parthia proper) and Bactria, where the Silk Road bifurcated with a northern route proceeding to China and a southern route to India. The latter veered down southwards to Texila, the capital of the Indo-Parthian kingdom. From Texila the highway swung farther south to Mathura (Methora, Modura) and trifurcated to Ozene (Ujjain), the hub of central Indian commerce, with one branch proceeding east to Pataliputra (Palimbothra), the Mauryan capital, while another branch turned southwest to reach Masolipatnam on the Bay of Bengal and the third turned southwest to reach Barygaza (modern Broach in Gujerat), close to the mouth of the river Narmada (“Narmades”) on the western coast.<sup>7</sup>

The Roman sailors and travelers had the tradition of keeping a periplus: a manuscript or logbook to record their travel experiences, maps, sea routes, and names of important ports and cities. It refers to the detailed accounts of marine activities and sailing itineraries around the Mediterranean Sea and the Erythraean Sea, included the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean. The periplus also mentions important port cities such as Rome, Athens, Myos Hormos, Berenice; and port cities of the Indian subcontinent including Sindh in the Punjab region, Muziris and Korkai on the Malabar coast, and Kaveripattinam and Arikamedu on the southern

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7 Nedungatt, George, S.J. *Quest for the Historical Thomas, Apostle of India* (Bagalore: Theological Publications in India, 2008), 72. See also M. Cimino, ed., *Ancient Rome and India: Commercial and Cultural Contacts Between the Roman World and India* (Rome, 1994); H.G. Rawlinson, *Inter-course Between India and the Western World from the Earliest times to the Fall of Rome* (London, 1916).

Coromandel coast.<sup>8</sup> Other archeological findings such as Greco-Roman coins, pieces of pottery, and traded commodities support a thriving relationship between ancient India and West-Asian kingdoms.

## **1.2 India in time of the New Testament**

Following the command of Jesus, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation”,<sup>9</sup> the apostles initially preached the Gospel in the territory around Palestine and later went to the ends of the earth.<sup>10</sup> Some traditions indicate that Thomas may have traveled to India, but the evidence is still debatable. Nonetheless many Indians continue to cherish the belief that Thomas went to India and have found inspiration in the stories about Thomas’s work in India.

## **1.3 India, an Apostolic Church**

### *A) Saint Bartholomew, the Apostle*

Some traditions denote that Saint Bartholomew, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, is believed to have arrived on the Konkan coast of the Indian subcontinent. The ancient Konkan coast geographically refers to the coastal area of Arabian Sea covering the present-day Indian states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Goa. From the Second Century, there were travelers and missionaries from the eastern church who visited India found the trace of apostolic origin of Christian Faith. Eusebius, a genius historian, apologist, and bishop of Caesarea of the Fourth Century wrote:

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8 “The Periphelus of the Erythraean Sea,” *University of Washington Silk Road Project*, n.d., <https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/periplus/periplus.html>

9 Mark 16:15

10 Acts 1:8

[Pantaenus] is said to have gone among the Indians,  
where as is reported,  
he found the Gospel according to Matthew among  
some people there  
who had already acquired some knowledge of Christ  
before his arrival.  
For Bartholomew, one of the Apostles, had preached  
to them and  
had left them this writing of Matthew in the Hebrew  
language,  
which they had preserved till then.<sup>11</sup>

St. Jerome reaffirmed the oral tradition of Saint Bartholomew's missionary works in India and supported the writings and works of Saint Pantaenus. St. Jerome in his letter to a Roman friend wrote, "Pantaenus, a Stoic philosopher, renowned as an outstanding scholar, was sent to India by Demetrius, Bishop of Alexandria, to preach Christ to the Brahmans and the philosophers of that nation. And he found there that Bartholomew, one of the twelve Apostles, had preached the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to the Gospel of Matthew".<sup>12</sup>

### *B) Saint Thomas, the Apostle*

The trade routes to India were frequented by commercial boats from Antioch and other ports in Egypt during the First Century BC. Consequently, Roger Hedlund says, "a diaspora Jewish colony, dating from the Old Testament period, was in Cranganore (in Kerala and other parts of India) and engaged in trade with the Mediterranean world. There is an enduring tradition that the apostle Thomas arrived [in India] in a trading vessel from Alexandria."<sup>13</sup>

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11 Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* V, 10, 3 (PG 20, 456), as cited in Nedungatt, *Quest for the Historical Thomas, Apostle of India*, 181.

12 Jerome, *Epistula 70, Ad magnum oratorem urbis Romae* (PL 22, 667), as cited in Nedungatt, *Quest for the Historical Thomas*, 182

13 Roger Hedlund, *Christianity Made in India*, (Minneapolis : Augsburg Fortress, 2017), 13.



The tradition of the apostle Thomas preaching the Good News in India traces his arrival in India to around AD 52. He is believed to have founded the first Christian community in Parur, situated on the Malabar coast of India.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Christianity became one of the ancient religions in India, as documented in the apocryphal work, the “Acts of Thomas,” originally written in Syriac during the second or third century in the city of Edessa (a city in present day Turkey), where St. Thomas is venerated.<sup>15</sup>

The “Acts of Thomas” mention that Saint Thomas converted Indian nobility, such as King Gundaphar of Gandhara in north India and the queen of King Misdai of south India. Because Saint Thomas had a background in architecture and construction, he worked for local kings and later built seven churches in Kerala.<sup>16</sup> The names of Indian kings found through an archeological excavation correlate to the time of Saint Thomas and appear to validate the “Acts of Saint Thomas” consequently confirming Thomas’ mission in India. During his visit to the tomb of Saint Thomas on February 5, 1986, Pope St. John Paul II said,

“It is an honor and special grace for me to come to  
the Cathedral Basilica  
of Saint Thomas the Apostle here in Madras. As so  
many pilgrims before me  
have done, I too come to venerate the tomb of the  
Apostle to India. This holy  
place speaks of the history of the Church in this  
beloved land. It calls to mind,  
not only Saint Thomas and his martyrdom, but all  
the others after him who have

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14 Anthony Samy, S.J., *A Saga of Faith: St. Thomas, The Apostle of India*, (Chennai: Santhome Cathedral Basilica, 2004), 43.

15 ‘Act of Thomas’ is an apocryphal work which is not accepted by the Church while it is referred here to a limited extent in order to provide some historical accuracy about St. Thomas.

16 Samy, *A Saga of Faith: St. Thomas, The Apostle of India*, 52.

dedicated their lives to the preaching of the Gospel,  
all those who have borne  
witness to Christ both in word and deed.”<sup>17</sup>

## 1.4 India in time of the New Testament

The Greek and Latin fathers of the Church – Origen, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. Ambrose, St. John Chrysostom, St. Paulinus, St. Gaudentius, St. Gregory of Tours, St. Isidore, and St. John Damascene refer to the mission of Saint Thomas in India. In addition, St. Ephrem’s hymn describes how St. Thomas worked miracles, suffered martyrdom, and was buried in India. St. Jerome reports in detail about people in India and the mission of St. Thomas.<sup>18</sup>

Marco Polo, a merchant from Venice, Italy, visited the Malabar province in 1292. In his travel diary, he referred to the Christian presence in south India and his visit to the tomb of Saint Thomas. When Pope Gregory XIII ordered an official listing of the Roman martyrs in 1584, the life and martyrdom of Saint Thomas were included as: “The Martyrdom of St. Thomas the Apostle, who preached the Gospel to the Parthians, the Medes, the Persians, and the Hyrcanians. Then he went to India where, after having instructed the people in the Christian Faith, he died (at Calamina in present day Chennai) pierced with a lance by order of the King”.<sup>19</sup> Strabo, a medieval historian, noted that about one hundred and twenty ships trading pepper, pearls, ivory, silk, and other goods sailed from the West to Indian west coast ports, especially Barygaza in Gujarat and Muziris on the pepper coast of the Malabar in Kerala, every year. Strabo continues to note that Roman sailors of a later period took advantage of the monsoon winds.<sup>20</sup>

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17 John Paul II, *Address of John Paul II on Occasion of the Visit to the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Thomas the Apostle* (Madras, 5 February, 1986) [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/february/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19860205\\_s-tommaso-apostolo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19860205_s-tommaso-apostolo.html).

18 Samy, *A Saga of Faith: St. Thomas, The Apostle of India*, 39.

19 Samy, *A Saga of Faith: St. Thomas, The Apostle of India*, 62.

20 Samy, *A Saga of Faith: St. Thomas, The Apostle of India*, 62.

## 1.5 The Indian Church and European Missionaries in the Early Modern Era

During the colonial period (17th and 18th Centuries), the popes encouraged Western missionaries to evangelize the newly discovered Americas and European holdings in Asia. Many missionaries from European countries, particularly Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, and Ireland, traveled the world preaching the Gospel and establishing new footholds for Church.

In 1542, Saint Francis Xavier, one of the companions of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, arrived in Goa, Portuguese India, as a missionary and papal representative. He evangelized Goa and traveled the western and eastern coasts of south India. He baptized thousands of Indians. He loved the poor and pleaded for them with the Portuguese rulers. St. Francis Xavier also went to Ceylon, Indonesia, Malaya, and Japan to preach the Gospel.<sup>21</sup> He died on the island of Shangchuan in 1552 before reaching mainland China. It is believed that St. Francis Xavier converted about 700,000 people to the Catholic faith. St. Francis Xavier was canonized in 1622 and was declared “Patron of the Orient” by Pope Benedict XIV. Pope Pius XI proclaimed him “Patron of the Missions.” His body remains miraculously incorrupt and is venerated at the Basilica of Bom Jesus in Goa.

Saint John de Britto, a Portuguese Jesuit, arrived in Madurai in 1673. He is also known as “Arul Anandhar.” He mastered the Tamil language and adopted local attire and tradition. Saint John de Britto preached the Gospel and converted many to Christianity, including the local king. He was persecuted and beheaded in 1693. He is known as the “John the Baptist of India.” He was canonized in 1947.

Reverend Robert De Nobili, an Italian Jesuit, arrived in India in 1579. He was very interested in inculturation and adopted local attire and traditions. He mastered Indian languages and wrote catechism and several apologetic works in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Telugu. After decades

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21 John C. Reville, S.J., *Saint Francis Xavier: Apostle of India and Japan* (New York: The America Press, 1919; repr., St. Athanasius Press, 2024), 33-38.

of tireless missionary work, he died at Mylapore near Madras in 1656.

Reverend Constanzo Beschi (1680-1747), another Italian Jesuit, arrived at Madurai in Tamil Nadu. He mastered the Tamil language to proclaim the Gospel and became a Tamil litterateur. He bore the Tamil name “Viramamnnivar”. “Like Nobili, Beschi assumed the persona of a local sage and became known for his extraordinary commitment to indigenous knowledge production. He is responsible for producing literary works in the classical south Indian genre; he also published philosophical treatises, grammars, and dictionaries and translated Tamil texts.”<sup>22</sup>

Numerous European missionaries of both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds came to India up until the twentieth century. The missionaries not only preached the Gospel, but also established an excellent educational system, built schools and colleges, produced textbooks, literature, dictionaries, established institutions of higher education and promoted the printing of books. Bishop Robert Caldwell and George Uglow Pope (both Protestants) wrote dictionaries and translated Tamil classics into English. Christian education led to social reforms in India. It challenged the caste system, discrimination of women and the poor, killing of lepers, immolation of widows, and sacrifice of children. Missionaries like Saint Mother Teresa also contributed to health care and social work in India by setting up numerous hospitals, and clinics. Thus, missionaries continued the preaching and healing ministry of Jesus in India.

## 1.6 Christianity in India Today

The Pew Research Center reports that Indian Christians form around two percent of the total population, and this percentage has remained the same from 1951 to 2011, even as the overall Indian population

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22 Mallampalli, *South Asia's Christians*, 78. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 78. See also Sascha Ebeling and Margherita Trento, “From Jesuit Missionary to Tamil *Pulavar*: Constanzo Gioseffo Beschi SJ (1680-1747), “The Great Heroic Sage,” in *L'Inde et L'Italie: Rencontres Intellectuelles, Politiques et Artistiques*, ed. Tiziana Leucci, Claude Markovits, and Marie Fourcade (Paris: Editions de L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2018), 1-37.

grew four hundred percent over those six decades.<sup>23</sup> Although, the seed of Christianity was planted in India during the first century, it did not spread fast and wide enough. Currently India is estimated to have about 32 million Christians, including Catholics of the Latin rite, Syro-Malabar rite, Syro-Malankara rite, the Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants that form 2.4 percent of the total population, mostly living in Goa, Mangalore, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and the northeastern States. However, the small percentage of Catholics remain ardent and vibrant. Thus, once a missionary country, India now produces missionaries to serve the world. Currently, there are more than 30,000 Catholic priests and about 100,000 Catholic religious women/nuns serving in 173 archdioceses or dioceses, including 35 arch/eparchies of the Syro-Malabar rite and 12 arch/eparchies of the Syro-Malankara rite. At present, India is blessed with six cardinals and 194 archbishops or bishops. About 9 million students (the majority of whom are non-Christians) enroll in Catholic educational institutions in India every year. Millions of the sick, elderly, and mentally/physically challenged are treated or sheltered in about 2,000 Catholic hospitals or other institutions, primarily serving rural India.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the Christian contribution to the welfare of India, Indian Christians are persecuted in many parts of India, now more than ever. There are increasing examples of mob violence against the Christian minority, including the razing, burning down, and vandalizing of churches, Christian institutions, and Christian homes, alongside the killing or threatening of Christians. Most state governments strictly enforce anti-conversion laws that result in the imprisonment of many priests and threats to their lives. Non-profit organizations that serve the poorest and the impoverished are jeopardized.

To bring solidarity and support among persecuted Indian Christians, “Indian Christian Day” (*Yeshu Bhakti Divas*) was introduced on July 3,

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23 “Population Growth and Religious Composition in India,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, September 21, 2021 [https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/09/21/population-growth-and-religious-composition/pf\\_09-21\\_india\\_demography\\_1-3/](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/09/21/population-growth-and-religious-composition/pf_09-21_india_demography_1-3/).

24 “Statistics” *Catholics India*, April 18, 2018. <https://catholicsindia.in/statistics/>.

2021. The day is also meant to commemorate the martyrdom of Saint Thomas in India, to celebrate the pride of being part of an apostolic church, and to support one other amidst continued persecutions and threats to religious freedom. Indian Christian Day is observed annually with the motto of “love your neighbor, serve society, celebrate Jesus and bless India,” following the command of Jesus, “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

# Chapter 2: The Arrival of the Indian Catholic Community in the United States

The presence of the Indian community in the United States can be traced to the early twentieth century. There have been three waves of immigration and settlement so far.

## 2.1 The First Wave of Indian Immigrants (1900 – 1964)

In the 1900s, approximately 10,000 Indians from the region of Punjab in British India came and settled in the US, mainly in California. Indian immigration continued for the next three decades. Many of them claimed Sikhism as their religious belief and worked in the railroad, lumber, and agricultural industries. The Luce-Celler immigration Act of 1946 allowed Indians already in the US to become naturalized citizens. Thus, around half a million Indians, including Catholics, became naturalized citizens. A number of Indians with graduate degrees and occupation achievements were hired as skilled laborers and settled in different parts of the US and later became the naturalized citizens.<sup>25</sup> This is considered the first wave of Indians settling in the US.

## 2.2 The Second Wave of Indian Immigrants (1965-1989)

The second wave of immigrants came to the US after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that allowed immigration based on skills and familial relationships. Because of this, about twelve thousand

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25 Lee C. Lee and Nolan W. S. Zane, eds., *Handbook of Asian American Psychology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 406.

Indian skilled laborers, especially from Punjab and Gujarat, were hired by US-based companies during this period. Most of the professionals were engineers, doctors, and scientists. In the 1980s, there was another small wave that consisted of immigrants who were the parents, and families of skilled laborers who came after 1965.<sup>26</sup> During this period, there were about thirty thousand family-based immigrants coming to the US each year.

## 2.3 The Wave Third of Indian Immigrants (1990- 2022)

The third wave started in the 1990s. It is called the immigration of the “IT Generation.” This wave superseded the first and second waves of immigrants by eight times. Over one hundred thousand immigrants, arrived in the US each year. In 2014, there were one hundred and forty-seven thousand Indian immigrants, especially from the states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu (mostly hired for IT jobs), making them the largest immigrant group, surpassing Chinese immigrants that numbered 132,000 and Mexican immigrants with 130,000 immigrants. Indian immigrants became the second largest foreign-born population after the Mexican-born population. (Cf. p2.)<sup>27</sup> According to a Pew study (2021) on the key facts about Asian origin groups in the US, Indian-origin Asians are the second largest Asian immigrant population, making up twenty-one percent of the total of 4.6 million Asian immigrants, largely concentrated in twenty-two states in the Southeast and Midwest region.<sup>28</sup>

Most Indian immigrants came from the Indian states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Punjab, Kerala, Goa, and West Bengal. At the same time, the states with the largest Catholic populations in India are Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa, parts

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26 “Emigration, Immigration, and Diaspora Relations in India,” *Migration Policy Institute*, February 1, 2007, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/emigration-immigration-and-diaspora-relations-india>.

27 Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur, and Nirvikar Singh, *The Other One Percent: Indians in America*, Modern South Asia Series (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

28 Neil G. Ruiz, Jens Manuel Krogstad, and Luis Noe-Bustamante, “Key Facts about Asian Origin Groups in the U.S.,” *Pew Research Center*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/>



of Maharashtra, and Delhi, many of the immigrants from these states are Catholics. According to Pew research (2013) on “Cultural Diversity in the Catholic Church in the United States,” the total population of Indian Americans is 3,260,460, and the Catholic population is 149,981, forming 4.7 %. This is higher than the percentage of Catholics living in India, which is 1.55 %.

The main cities of Indian settlement are in and around New York, New Jersey, Washington, DC, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, San Jose, Seattle, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Austin, Houston, and Dallas. Indian Americans are widespread in the states of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Delaware, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, Georgia, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kansas, Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Indiana, Massachusetts, and Arizona.<sup>29</sup> According to Pew research, there were 4.6 million Indian immigrants and second-generation Indian Americans in 2019. Most of the immigrants tend to be in their twenties and thirties. It is predicted that recurring second-generation Indian Americans will double the existing number of Indian immigrants, by the year 2030 totaling about six million.<sup>30</sup> The Third-wave Indian immigrants and the second-generation are by far the best-educated group in the country, and they make the single highest-income level of any group in the country.<sup>31</sup>

It is estimated that there are about seventy Indian American Catholic organizations actively engaged in the above-mentioned cities, situated in the archdioceses and dioceses of San Jose, Houston, Dallas, Austin, Camden, Trenton, Newark, Metuchen, Rockville Centre, Brooklyn, New York, Oakland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Chicago, Philadelphia, Arlington, Phoenix, and Columbus, Ohio. Of all Indian religious sub-groups, Indian Christians, and especially Catholic immigrants, make their cultural and social assimilation easily and they interface with the American

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29 Ruiz, Krogstad, and Noe-Bustamante, “Key Facts About Asian Origin Groups in the U.S.”

30 Chakravorty, Kapur, and Singh, *The Other One Percent*, 14.

31 Mary Hanna and Jeanne Batalova, “Indian Immigrants in the United States,” *Migration Policy Institute*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/indian-immigrants-united-states-2019>.

system and values and call themselves “Americans.”<sup>32</sup> According to a 2020 Pew survey,<sup>33</sup> Christians are the most observant group in regard to attending religious service. Indian American Christians self-report state that they are spiritual, prayerful, and religion is vital to them. Catholics tend to connect with other Catholics from India despite the regional, linguistic, and caste differences.

According to US Citizenship and Immigration Services (2023), “over 1.2 million Indians, including dependents, are waiting (for highly skilled immigrant visas) in the first, second and third employment-based green card categories.”<sup>34</sup>

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32 Sumitra Badrinathan et al., “Social Realities of Indian Americans: Results From the 2020 Indian American Attitudes Survey” (2021), 19. <https://mediahost.sais-jhu.edu/saismedia/media/web/files/social-realities-final.pdf>

33 Travis Mitchell, “Measuring Religion in Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/01/14/measuring-religion-in-pew-research-centers-american-trends-panel/>.

34 Stuart Anderson, “More than 1 Million Indians Waiting for High-Skilled Immigrant Visas,” *Forbes*, April 14, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2024/04/14/more-than-1-million-indians-waiting-for-high-skilled-immigrant-visas/?sh=3112654124ce>.

# Chapter 3: Identity and Uniqueness of Indian American Catholics

Indian American Catholics bring with them their well ingrained customs, values and practices inherited from their family, community, and society.

## 3.1 Indian Family

### *A) Indian American Catholic Way of Marriage and Family Life*

Marriage and family play an essential role in the lives of Indians. Usually, Indians keep the ancient tradition of “endogamy”<sup>35</sup> - a strong tendency to marry within the same caste system, same region, same religion, same community, and same language to keep the married life intact while maintaining social support and bonding. The arranged or proposed marriage is still considered as an effective and valuable aspect of Indian society. Those who immigrate to the US tend to continue this practice.

According to Pew research, many Indian American parents keep the tradition of arranged marriages for their children: therefore, they disapprove of dating and strongly forbid premarital sex.<sup>36</sup> Indians consider marriage as a bond between the families of the spouses. It involves not only the spouses but their entire families and extended families. The traditional Indian wedding ceremony can last from three to seven days to get acquainted with one another. While the spouses remain passive, the parents, grandparents, relatives, guardians, and marriage-brokers play vital roles in matching the marital partners. In most cases, children believe their parents know them well and do their best for their well-being.

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35 Badrinathan et al., “Social Realities of Indian Americans,” 9.

36 Lee and Zane, *Handbook of Asian American Psychology*, 139-140.

In modern times, the arrangement and proposal of the wedding happens through social media, advertisements, matrimonial websites, and matrimonial agencies, etc. The Indian traditional marriage, in general, is arranged to match not only the spouses but also their caste, age, employment, education, family's socioeconomic conditions, and sometimes 'dowry' – a gift given by the bride's family to the bridegroom's family. The parents traditionally ensure that the bride is younger than the bridegroom so that the bridegroom plays a role of governance, protection, and provision. The husband is traditionally considered the head of the household, breadwinner, and guardian, and he protects and provides for his spouse's needs. In some cases, husbands can misuse their role as the head of the household. The arranged or proposed marriage also involves background character checks to ensure the spouse has no other romantic relationship elsewhere.

Indian American Catholics attempt to continue their tradition of arranged or proposed marriage. The practice of arranged marriage does not take away the freedom of choice from the wedding partners. Both bride and groom have an option to accept or reject the partner proposed by his or her parents before their consent to marriage. Most young Indians who immigrate as graduate students, eventually find jobs, and settle in the US. Many still depend on their parents, who live in India, to find spouses for them. Some find spouses of their choice from their colleges or universities, their workplaces, or various social platforms. The urgency to get married is a crucial part of Indian culture and tradition. Most Indians or Indian Americans in their 20s or early 30s either get married or become religious or priests. It is uncommon to remain unmarried. Thus, both young people and their parents feel pressured to settle their marital status before turning forty.

When choosing their spouse, Indian American Catholics often disregard the traditional boundaries of marrying someone within the same region and language; rather, they focus on choosing someone with an Indian origin and Catholic background as their spouse. Seventy-seven percent of Indian-born Americans and forty percent of American-born

Indians tend to marry someone with first or second-generation Indian origin.<sup>37</sup>

Maintaining the tradition of arranged marriage is meant to protect and nurture Indian marriage and family values: and culture, and to keep marriage and family life stronger and more sustainable. Although in-person dating before marriage is very uncommon among Indian immigrants, online dating has become prevalent alongside the traditional arranged marriage system. Indian American couples have the lowest divorce rate due to the “stronger emphasis on marriage and family, divorce stigma, and high socioeconomic background of the married couples.”<sup>38</sup>

### *B) Parental Responsibility: Indian American Catholic Parents' View of Children's Well-being*

Indian American parents consider their families the center and essential meaning of their lives. As protective parents, Indian Americans take responsibility very seriously throughout their children's lives. Indian culture places importance on hierarchical structure in the family system. Fathers in a traditional Indian family play an important role in providing for the needs of the family and maintaining discipline at home. At the same time, mothers take care of child-rearing and the governing of the house. The primary goal of Indian American parents is usually to provide the best possible education for their children. In some areas of India, when the hierarchy of the caste system restricts each caste, education can enable some Indians to pass through the invisible boundaries into higher social and economic status and recognition. In this hierarchical familial system, children depend on their parents but seek approval for most decisions and rely on their parents for many needs, including education, job seeking, and finding a spouse.

Second-generation Indian American children admire their parents' care and responsibility but struggle to understand their parents'

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37 Badrinathan et al., “Social Realities of Indian Americans,” 3.

38 Lee and Zane, *Handbook of Asian American Psychology*, 112.

expectations. Due to difficulties in psychological adjustment and inculturation of Indian immigrants, the second-generation Indian American children find substantial cultural and religious value differences and disparities. Thus, the second generation of those of Indian descent find a conflicting situation between two worlds: the world outside their home and the world of their first-generation parents. In general, they seem to develop an ambivalent attitude toward assimilation, adaptation, identity development, and acculturation like many other ethnic immigrant groups. Many are attached to their inherited worldview while appreciating new cultural and religious practices. Such a mix-and-match way of life tends to confuse them. According to independent research, Asian Indian immigrant parents “encourage their children to be independent and assertive in dealing with U.S. society, [while expecting them] to be obedient, dependent and deferent to their parents at home.”<sup>39</sup>

### *C) Filial Love and Respect*

In general, Indian parents strive to ensure their children maintain family traditions, including the tribal, caste and regional traditions. Parents do their best to provide the best possible education, family property, social status, employment, and spouse. Thus, children grow up learning the value of filial reverence from their parents and grandparents. In general, many Indian households function as joint families with close family systems that include the parents and sometimes the siblings of the spouses. Children consider their parents as representatives or images of God’s love, and respect them, keep them in high esteem, and enormously value their goodwill. Filial irreverence or disrespectful behavior is considered a curse or disgrace to oneself and one’s family. Thus, Indian Americans maintain high levels of gratitude, love, and respect toward their parents and grandparents.

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39 S.S. Dasgupta, *On the trial of an Uncertain Dream* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), as cited in Lee and Zane, *Handbook of Asian American Psychology*, 145.

### *D) Academic and Professional Excellence*

Indians usually give a high priority to education. Most Indian American parents, in both first and second generations, try their best to support their children in striving for the highest performance at every stage of education. The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 8th graders in 1988 showed that Indian American students were “most likely to be socioeconomically advantaged, with more educated parents and higher family incomes and occupational status. [They recorded the highest reading scores and their] parents held higher educational aspirations for their offspring and discussed grades and college plans with them more often.”<sup>40</sup> Statistics show that from the 1990s onwards, there were about a 120,000 to 130,000 Indian immigrants every year, with 80,000 H-1B or L-1 visas for computer-based jobs, 30,000 with F-1 visas to do higher education in STEM disciplines, and about 20,000 family-related visas.<sup>41</sup>

### *E) Family as the First School of Catholic Values*

The Indian family system creates an environment of empathetic richness, respect for the elderly, patience, tolerance, collaboration, and religiosity. A traditional Indian family is usually a joint family with multiple children and grandparents. Adult children usually remain at home until their own marriages. Indian American second-generation children grow up learning to support each other and to understand the hierarchy of the family system. The parents become role models by respecting and taking care of their own parents. The children learn from their parents to respect and support their grandparents and all their elders. The empathetic atmosphere within the family usually inspires Indian Americans to foster a spirit of altruism. The empathy and compassion shown in the family are extended to the underprivileged in society. More than 1,000 Indian American-founded nonprofit organizations are estimated to collect

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40 Lee and Zane, *Handbook of Asian American Psychology*, 329.

41 “Foreign-Born STEM Workers in the United States,” *American Immigration Council*, April 2024, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/foreign-born-stem-workers-united-states>.

considerable donations to help people in need, within the US and India.<sup>42</sup>

## 3.2 Indian Community

### *A) Community of Communities*

The Catholics in India form a minority group who live among people of other faiths. As faith unites people, Indian Catholics are accustomed to making networks within and between their parishes. They also try to affiliate themselves with small faith and language-based communities in the area. If they do not find one, they will create one. On the other hand, the Indian immigrants in the US enjoy the advantage of living among a Christian majority. Hence, it's easy for most Indian American Catholics to integrate and merge themselves into the mainstream of Catholic faith and practices. However, Indian American Catholics prefer expressing their faith through various practices of their own regional culture and traditions, using regional languages such as Konkani, Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Bengali, etc. As a result, there are hundreds of Indian American Catholic communities, organizations, associations, and nonprofits. These can be found predominantly in the Mid-Atlantic, West Coast, and Southwestern regions.

The main national-level organization uniting Indian American Catholics is the Indian American Catholic Association (IACA). One of the most significant contributions of IACA was their installation of the statue of Our Lady of Vailankanni at a special altar in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC., dedicated in 1997. The IACA gathers Indians of different communities nationwide each September for a Marian pilgrimage to the National Shrine to celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Vailankanni.

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<sup>42</sup> Alex Counts, "Growing and Better Recognizing Indian-American Philanthropy: An Emerging Action Agenda," *Indiaspora Blog*, September 16, 2018, <https://www.indiaspora.org/blog/growing-and-better-recognizing-indian-american-philanthropy-an-emerging-action-agenda>



### 3.3 Indian Society

#### *A) Caste System in India and among Indian Catholics*

The term “caste” comes from the Portuguese word “casta”. This term was introduced by the colonial Portuguese in sixteenth-century India, but the idea of caste (class / rank / group) was first introduced into Indian society by the Aryan invaders who came from central Asia around 1500 BC. After the dawn of the epic age (1000 BC), the caste system was developed as a systematic hierarchical structure in different sagas, legends, theories, poems, and stories, including the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Upanishads*. From 300 BC, *Manusmriti* (*Law of Manu*) and the *Puranas*, written Indian religious laws, were imposed to govern and exploit the lower caste of Indian society.<sup>43</sup>

Two of the most popular theories that portray the caste system are: (1) *Jati*(*caste*) which combines *kula* (clan), *gotra* (patrilineage), *biradari* (kinship), region, language/dialect, and occupation; and (2) *Varna* (color of the skin) which is based on both *guna* (qualities) and *karma* (actions and thoughts). According to these two theories, the society is divided into four castes: *Brahmana*, the priestly class, *Katriya*, the ruling class or warriors, *Vaisya*, the farming and business class, and *Sudra*, the skilled class or artists and craftsmen.<sup>44</sup>

There is also a fifth group outside the four-caste system (out-caste), known as *Pancama* or *dalits*, the so-called “untouchables.” The untouchables perform the menial work in urban and rural communities, such as cleaning the streets and restrooms, removing dead animals, using animal skins in shoemaking, drumbeating at village celebrations, and working on the land or farm as bonded laborers. Tribal peoples are also included in the untouchables category, but they work and live in hills and forests. In 1933, Mahatma Gandhi renamed *Dalits* (untouchables) *Harijans*, meaning ‘children of God’, because he believed everyone should be treated equally. Under the umbrella of the five main

<sup>43</sup> “Scripture,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 16, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/scripture>

<sup>44</sup> Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus – An Essay on the Caste System*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 6-10.

castes, there are 3000 major castes and 2500 subcastes in India.

Even after converting to Christianity, many Indians maintain their caste status. According to a Pew Research study in 2021, caste consciousness is prevalent even today. The same research shows that

most Indians (68%) identify themselves as members of lower castes, including 34% who are members of either Scheduled Castes (SCs) or Scheduled Tribes (STs) and 35% who are members of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) or Most Backward Classes.<sup>45</sup> Three in ten Indians identify themselves as belonging to General Category castes, including 4% who say they are Brahmin, traditionally the priestly caste.<sup>46</sup>

Caste-based discrimination is more commonly reported in the north-eastern states of India:

For example, 38% of northeastern respondents who belong to Scheduled Castes said they have experienced discrimination because of their caste in the last 12 months, compared with 14% among members of Scheduled Castes in eastern states of India. About three in ten Brahmins (29%) said they would not be willing to accept members of Scheduled Castes as neighbors.<sup>47</sup>

The Indian Constitution (1950) guarantees equal rights to all citizens and prohibits discrimination based on one's caste, religion, race, sex, or place of birth. At the same time, to protect the fundamental rights and dignity of the *dalits* and tribals, the Indian constitution categorizes

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45 "Attitude About Caste," *Pew Research Center*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/attitudes>.

46 "Attitude About Caste," *Pew Research Center*.

47 "Attitude About Caste," *Pew Research Center*.

them as schedule castes and schedule tribes respectively to reserve certain rights and privileges, such as education (including admissions into colleges and universities), employment (priority in providing state and federal jobs), and election (reserved seats in parliament). The Catholic Church appoints bishops from the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities to equally recognize and respect communal priests and people of God. A Scheduled Tribe bishop was named Cardinal in 2003, and another cardinal was selected from the Scheduled Caste community in 2022.<sup>48</sup>

In the twenty-first century, due to urbanization, westernization, and higher education, caste consciousness seems to be slowly declining in metropolitan cities and urban areas in India. However, Indians, by and large, still practice caste endogamy even as diasporas in the US. A Pew Research study from 2021 reveals that among Indians as a whole,

those who say religion is very important in their lives are significantly more likely to feel it is necessary to stop members of their community from marrying into different castes. Two-thirds of Indian adults who say religion is very important to them (68%) also say it is very important to stop women from marrying into another caste; by contrast, among those who say religion is less important in their lives, 39% express the same view.<sup>49</sup>

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48 Jahnvi Uppuleti, “Why Archbishop Anthony Poola’s Elevation as Cardinal Makes Dalit Christians Hopeful,” *The News Minute*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/teLANGANA/why-archbishop-anthony-poola-s-elevation-cardinal-makes-dalit-christians-hopeful-165765>.

49 “Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation,” *Pew Research Center*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/religion-in-india-tolerance>.

# **Chapter 4: Pastoral Consideration and Pastoral Care**

As Catholics are the minority in India, practicing the Catholic faith and tradition can be challenging. In certain parts of India, Christianity is under threat and even persecuted. Therefore, Christians in India take Christian faith, belief, and spirituality to heart. Most Catholics are passionate about practicing their faith seriously. Most Indian American families try to maintain such ardent religiosity and consider their parish as an extension of their significant world after their home and workplace. Most participate in Sunday Mass, engage in parish activities, and respect their priests. Indian Catholic parents ensure their children receive education in faith and learn the Catechism. The parents are very particular that their children are baptized and receive First Communion and Confirmation at an appropriate time. Most parents send their children to Catholic schools and colleges to give them the best academic and character education.

## **4.1 Emerging and Fast-Growing Indian Catholic Immigrant Population**

Pew research on the Religious Landscape Study from 2014 shows that among the Asian American Christian population in the US, 66 percent are first-generation immigrants. The 2014 Pew study also highlights that most first-generation and second-generation Indian Christians

fall between age 18 and 29, and that Asian Christian youth comprise the largest American Christian immigrant youth group.<sup>50</sup> Another Pew study from 2019, shows that the fast-growing Indian immigrant population forms 21 percent of total Asian immigrants, taking second place after Chinese, [including Taiwanese] immigrants, who make up 24 percent.

Every year, the Indian immigrant population increases. About 120,000 Indian immigrants come to the US every year. Most of them are young professionals, both married and unmarried. Thus, Indian immigrants contribute to the higher percentage of young people among Indian immigrants and Indian Americans. The young and unmarried engineers and other professional Indian immigrants look for churches and integrate themselves into nearby parish life. They mainly seek pastoral support in receiving advice and guidance as they transition into a new culture and spiritual life. The number of Church weddings among Indian American Catholics is rising yearly. Young Indian American Catholics need marriage preparation and pre-Cana classes that integrate their cultures and traditions. Some enter into mixed marriage, that is, marrying a person of Indian origin but from a different faith background. Usually, the Catholic partner tends to be faithful to his or her faith and invites the other partner to convert. The spouses of mixed marriages typically desire to have stronger pastoral support and care, including the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) process and follow-up after their initial sacraments.

Later, newly married couples might need spiritual advice and guidance beyond what they receive in the Indian context from their extensive family system and local parish. Young couples might need more moral and spiritual support during the early years of married life as they try to learn from each other. Due to arranged, proposed, or social media-aided marriage, most married couples do not fully know each other before marriage.

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50 “Religious Landscape Study,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, accessed October 28, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/>.

## **4.2 Increased Number of Indian International Catholic Students and Campus Ministry<sup>51</sup>**

The number of Indian international students grows in number every year. In the 2020-21 school year, 167,582 Indian international students flocked to the US for higher education, especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. For the past few years, India has remained the country supplying the second-most international students to the US. Indian-international students miss their parents, who are important in providing moral and spiritual values. Thus, pastoral care and support through campus ministry plays an important role in helping Indian immigrants to continue practicing their faith and find ecclesial support to strengthen their spiritual journey to holiness. International students benefit from campus ministry through Bible studies, praise and worship groups: prayer groups, Confirmation preparation classes, OCIA, and cross-cultural counselling. Some Indian-born students from other faiths would like to become Catholics. There is also an opportunity for sowing the seeds for vocations to the priesthood or religious life. The Pew research on Religious Landscape Study of 2014 shows that Asians who fall within the age range of 18-29 are 32 percent immigrants, and 34 percent second generation of whom are students and others are employees. Thus, young Asian Christian immigrants are on the rise every year.<sup>52</sup>

## **4.3 The Struggle of Second-Generation Indian American Catholic Youth**

First-generation Indian immigrants are firmly rooted in Indian culture and tradition. On the other hand, second-generation Indian American Catholics try to practice Indian culture and tradition at least

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51 "International Students in the U.S., by Country of Origin 2021/22," *Statista Research Department*, June 2, 2023, Accessed October 28, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/233880/international-students-in-the-us-by-country-of-origin/>.

52 "Religious Landscape Study," *Pew Research Center*.

at home because of their filial obedience, but they also seek to integrate into mainstream American culture at school and in society. They are fondly called ABCD's, meaning American-born confused Desis. *Desi* is a slang word for an Indian. Thus, the second generation Indian American Catholics are raised in two different cultures, and they try to understand both cultures. They would appreciate and value pastoral and spiritual support in their struggle to integrate culture and spirituality and practice it meaningfully. They can also take the role of 'betwixt and between' to connect with the third generation who never had first-hand learning of Indian culture and spirituality.

#### **4.4 Respect for the Priests**

Most Indian American immigrants are very spiritual. They are traditional and practicing Catholics who attend Sunday Mass, send their children to religious education, and follow Church precepts. They emphasize spiritual and religious matters in their family and personal lives. They prefer to have priests present at important events in their lives and to get their blessings.

As Indian Americans naturally value hierarchical structures, they value and respect the hierarchy in the Church. They tend to depend on priests for spiritual and moral advice. They seek the support of priests at times of uncertainty in their personal, spiritual, and family lives. Indian Americans love and respect their priests and bishops. They take their advice and to heart and seriously consider following them. They generously support their priests and bishops spiritually and financially as well as they can.

#### **4.5 Increasing Number of Indian-Born Priests in US Parish Ministry**

As the need for priests in the US increases, some archbishops and bishops make cordial visits to India to meet the local bishops and to recruit their priests to work with US Catholics on a contract basis. The

bishops in India feel a missionary obligation to send their priests to the US, as India received missionaries in the past. Despite priests trained in India taking more time to integrate themselves into American culture and to adapt to American English, many of them are committed to pastoral ministry and deeply spiritual. The elderly are highly valued in Indian culture as such Indian-born priests generally respect elderly people and show special care and concern for them. As Indian culture naturally respects hierarchy, the Indian-born priests usually respect, obey, and give reverence to their bishops. Some bishops in turn maintain confidence in Indian-born priests and sometimes entrust them with larger parishes and other significant ministries of diocesan leadership such as, priest personnel board member, vicar for clergy, vicar general, diocesan chancellor, tribunal personnel, and seminary faculty. It is estimated that more than one thousand Indian-born priests work full-time in various pastoral settings in the US. The process of creating a national association for Indian Catholic priests has begun to bring Indian-born priests under one umbrella and assist bishops in both the US and India.

#### **4.6 Understanding Indian Rituals and Customs in Liturgical Celebration**

Indian Americans use *Aarathi* at Mass. The word “aarathi” means offering praise and honor to God. Indian culture uses ‘aarathi’ to praise and worship God through hymns, chants, flowers, lamps, and incense. When Mass is celebrated with Indian Americans, the liturgy may include ‘aarathi’ in diverse forms at various parts of Mass, especially at the beginning of Mass to welcome and honor the celebrant, at the doxology to praise the Triune God, and before the Gospel reading to honor the Word of God. Indian Americans also use *kunkuma* (saffron powder) and sandalwood paste at the entrance of the church to welcome the people of God. In Indian culture, people are honored with a *Ponnadai* (cloth). The word ‘ponnadai’ means a golden shawl used in ancient times by kings and rulers. At the end of the Mass or the felicitation, Indian Americans present a ‘ponnadai’ to the dignitary.



# Chapter 5: Apparitions of Our Lady of Vailankanni (Our Lady of Good Health) in India

The Blessed Virgin Mary appeared three times in South India during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From that time onward, a profound and popular devotion to her has been spread among Indians of all faiths and Indian immigrants worldwide.

## 5.1 The Three Apparitions of Mary at Vailankanni

### *5.1.1 First Apparition*

A young shepherd boy from a poor family in Vailankanni worked as a milk supplier to a rich family in a neighboring town called Nagapattinam. One day, walking from Vailankanni to Nagapattinam, he was tired and rested under a banyan tree near a small pond on Anna Pillai Street. A young woman, clothed in an Indian saree and holding an infant in her arms, appeared to the shepherd boy, and asked for milk to feed her child. The shepherd boy generously gave her milk and then continued walking to Nagapattinam. When he reached his master's house, he apologized for the delay and for the missing milk in his pot. However, when the shepherd boy opened the lid of the milk pot, both he and his master were surprised to see it overflowing with an abundance of milk. The Christians in Nagapattinam were convinced that the woman and the child were a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary with the Child Jesus. From that day onwards, the pond at Anna Pillai Street came to be known as 'Matha Kulam' (Our Lady's Pond). Even today, pilgrims visit the pond and the shrine there in search of healing. They often drink the

Matha Kulam water or apply it to sick persons. Numerous miracles have been reported.

### *5.1.2 Second Apparition*

At the close of the sixteenth century, there was a poor widow in the village of Vailankanni with a son who was congenitally lame. To eke out an existence, the lame boy would sell buttermilk at a place known as 'Nadu Thittu', a slightly elevated spot where a huge banyan tree stood. One day, the Blessed Virgin Mary, with the child Jesus, appeared to that boy and asked for a cup of buttermilk to feed her child. Without hesitation, the boy offered a cup of buttermilk to Mary, and her son Jesus who both drank from it. At that moment, the boy was miraculously healed of his disability. Mary also requested that the boy go to Nagapattinam to apprise a particular rich Catholic gentleman of the Lady's appearance and inform him of her desire to have a chapel built there at Vailankanni in her honor. This gentleman, with the help of the village, built a small, thatched chapel in honor of Mary and erected a statue of Our Lady. The news spread to surrounding villages. People started flocking to the chapel, praying to Our Lady, and witnessing miraculous healings and cures. The statue of Our Lady - the miraculous mother with her divine infant Jesus came to be known as Our Lady of Good Health or Our Lady of Vailankanni.<sup>53</sup>

### *5.1.3 Third Apparition*

From the sixteenth century onwards, certain territories of India, especially Goa and Bombay, and Indian subcontinental and other Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Indonesia, Japan, and China, were progressively brought into the Portuguese empire. A Portuguese merchant ship sailing from Macau, to Ceylon in the

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<sup>53</sup> Dunia Kita, "Velankanni Church - How to Reach," *Top Best Tourist Destination Blog*, September 2011, <http://topbesttouristdestination.blogspot.com/2011/09/velankanni-church-how-to-reach.html>.

seventeenth century was caught in a dreadful storm. The Portuguese sailors invoked the help of Mary and pledged to build her a church in thanksgiving for their lives. The ship miraculously and safely navigated toward the shores of Vailankanni (on the Bay of Bengal in South India) on September 8, the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

*The sailors rebuilt the existing thatched chapel into a stone church of 24 feet in length and 12 feet in breadth, with a dome overhead and stained-glass windows. From that time onwards, the Portuguese sailors developed a custom of docking their vessel at Vailankanni en route to China to pray at the statue of Our Lady of Vailankanni. They continued adorning and renovating the chapel occasionally, including the Chinese porcelain plates that can be found even today at the altar and sanctuary, illustrating scenes from the Bible.<sup>54</sup>*

## **5.2 The Affection of Indian American Catholics for Our Lady of Vailankanni**

### *A) Our Lady of Vailankanni, The Mother of All*

Being Mother of God and ‘blessed among women’<sup>55</sup>, Mary is the most excellent role model of all mothers and reveals the characteristics of a perfect motherhood. In his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), Saint Pope John Paul II says:

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54 *Vailankanni Shrine History* (Vailankanni, South India: Shrine Publication, 2019), 18-25

55 Luke 1:42

*In Mary we have been given to understand the true  
 meaning of motherhood,  
 which attains its loftiest dimension in the divine  
 plan of salvation. For her,  
 being a mother not only endows her feminine person-  
 ality, directed towards  
 the gift of life, with its full development but also rep-  
 resents an answer of  
 faith to woman's own vocation, which assumes its  
 truest value only in  
 the light of God's covenant.<sup>56</sup>*

Mary, our mother, symbolizes unity, love, and compassion, personified in the title of Our Lady of Vailankanni. As such, Indians fondly call her 'Madha' (Sanskrit) or 'Amma' (Dravidian language). Our Lady of Vailankanni is the mother of all, as she gathers every child of God into one family. Through the apparitions at Vailankanni, Mary connected the western sailors and colonizers with local Indians - the farmers, shepherds, and fishermen of Vailankanni and Nagapattinam. She brought together the wealthy gentleman of Nagapattinam with the poor widow, and her son from Vailankanni. Mary gathered people of low caste and high caste, the illiterate and the learned, the poor and the rich, the sick and the healthy, Christians and people of other faiths living in Vailankanni and the surrounding villages.

Today, Our Lady of Vailankanni stands as the mother of all humanity, the New Eve (mother of all the living).<sup>57</sup> Our Lady of Vailankanni connects people all over the world as she is venerated in numerous countries, especially India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, Canada, the United States of America, South Africa, Mozambique, Portugal, and France under the title of Our Lady of Vailankanni. There are numerous streetside statues of Our Lady of Vailankanni in India, especially in Tamil Nadu, where

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<sup>56</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Genesis 3:20

Vailankanni is situated. The Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Vailankanni is visited by millions of Christians and non-Christian pilgrims of diverse backgrounds throughout the year.

### *B) Our Lady of Vailankanni – A Source of Good Health*

Since the Apparitions of Mary at Vailankanni, millions of people have continued to witness miraculous cures and healings through the intercession of Our Lady of Good Health. Vailankanni is fondly known as “the Lourdes of the East.” Numerous miracles of good health have been authenticated, and offerings are left as a sign of gratitude and fulfilment of pledges. They are displayed in the museum of offerings at the Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Vailankanni.

Pope Saint John Paul II was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in 1991. He prayed to Mary for strength and offered up his sufferings for the good of the Church. In 1992, he instituted the Annual World Day of the Sick to be celebrated on February 11, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. John Paul II invited everyone to support the care of the sick and to see the face of Christ in every sick and suffering brother and sister. — Recognizing the numerous miracles happening through the intercession of Our Lady of Good Health, John Paul II chose the Shrine of the Basilica of Our Lady of Vailankanni to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the World Day of the Sick. In his message, St. Pope John Paul II said:

*Sure of the Divine Mother’s unfailing help in their  
needs, with profound  
devotion and trust, millions flock to the Shrine.  
Situated on the shore  
of the Bay of Bengal amid the calm surroundings  
of palm groves,  
Vailankanni attracts not only Christian pilgrims  
but also many  
followers of other religions, especially Hindus, who  
see in Our Lady*

*of Good Health the caring ancient and compassion-  
ate mother of suffering  
humanity.” The Pope continued, “I pray that  
Mary, Health of the Sick,  
will continue to grant her loving protection to all  
wounded in body and  
spirit and intercede for those who care for them.  
May she help us to unite  
our sufferings with those of her Son as we journey  
in joyful hope to the  
safety of the Father’s House.”<sup>58</sup>*

Mary always remains a source of Good Health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Pope Francis composed a prayer to Mary and called her “Health of the Sick,”<sup>59</sup> the title attributed to Our Lady of Vailankanni.

### **5.3 The Strong Devotion to Our Lady of Vailankanni Among Indian American Catholics**

To express their strong devotion and fidelity toward Our Lady of Vailankanni, Indian American Catholics in the US, with the help and approval of the local Church and bishops, installed the statue of Our Lady of Vailankanni in 1997 at a special oratory assigned at the crypt level of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. People from all walks of life and diverse backgrounds, especially those from the Indian subcontinent living in the US, started frequenting the Oratory of Our Lady of Vailankanni. The devotees continue to profoundly experience the irreplaceable love of the Mother who gathers everyone into the flock of Jesus and remains the source of Good Health to all who call upon her.

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58 John Paul II, “Message of the Holy Father for the World Day of the Sick for the Year 2002,” August 6, 2001, no.8, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/sick/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20010813\\_world-day-of-the-sick-2002.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/sick/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20010813_world-day-of-the-sick-2002.html).

59 Devin Watkins, “Covid-19: Pope Offers Prayer to Virgin Mary for Protection,” *Vatican News*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/pope-francis-prayer-our-lady-protection-coronavirus.html>.

## **5.4 Twenty-Five Years of Marian Pilgrimage to the National Capital (1997-2022)**

Every year, the Indian American Catholics celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Good Health, Vailankanni, on the Saturday around the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the National Shrine in Washington, DC. To mark the twenty-fifth anniversary (1997-2022) of the dedication of the Oratory of Our Lady of Vailankanni and the annual pilgrimage to the National Shrine, the Indian American Catholic Association (IACA) organized a half-day pilgrimage on Saturday, September 10, 2022. There were nearly one thousand pilgrims, filling the upper level of the Basilica. The pilgrims came from different parts of the country, particularly New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and the District of Columbia. The program consisted of praying the Rosary, a litany to Our Lady of Vailankanni, a special novena prayer, singing Marian songs, and a solemn procession and blessing of children. The half-day celebration culminated with the Solemn Votive Mass presided over by His Eminence, Wilton Cardinal Gregory, the (then) Archbishop of Washington, DC. During the homily, the cardinal highlighted the relevance of Marian patronage as Our Lady of Good Health in our daily life, especially in the context of post-COVID uncertainty, and spoke on the three apparitions of Mary at Vailankanni. At the end of the Mass, Cardinal Gregory released the twenty-fifth anniversary souvenir booklet. The celebration continued with a reception dinner for pilgrims at The Catholic University of America. The annual pilgrimage liturgy is usually enriched by multi-lingual liturgical music coordinated by six different choir groups, in languages including English, Konkani, Tamil, Bengali, and Malayalam. The petitions during the Mass are prayed by pilgrims representing India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

# Chapter 6: Indian-Born Saints and Holy Men and Women

India was initially evangelized by the Apostles Thomas and Bartholomew in the first century. During the later centuries, it was blessed with many missionaries, some of whom eventually became saints, venerables, and servants of God. From the nineteenth century on, India has produced saints, venerables, and servants of God of Indian origin.

## **Here is a list of seven saints of Indian origin:**

(1) Saint Gonsalo Garcia was the first Indian to be canonized on June 8, 1862. He was born of a Portuguese father and an Indian mother in Vasai, Maharashtra. As a young man, he started a business and traveled to the Philippines and Japan. He gained wealth and acquaintance with high-ranking and royal families in Japan. After being inspired by the missionaries, he joined a Franciscan Friar (O.F.M) congregation as a lay brother and became a preacher and missionary. He went to Japan and joined other missionaries. By order of the King, Gonsalo Garcia, along with other missionaries and Christians, was crucified and martyred on February 5, 1597, in Nagasaki.

(2) Saint Alphonsa Muttathupadathu was the first Indian woman and Syro-Malabar Catholic to be canonized on October 12, 2008. She joined the Franciscan Clarist Congregation. She suffered from pneumonia and amnesia and united all her sufferings to the sufferings of Christ for the conversion of souls. She died in 1946, aged 35.

(3) Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara was born in 1805 in Kainakari, Kerala. He was the co-founder and member of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate of the Syro-Malabar Church. He was a great preacher and



promoted devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Blessed Sacrament, and the Holy Cross. He was beatified on February 8, 1986, by Pope Saint John Paul II during his visit to India. He was later canonized in 2014.

(4) Saint Euphrasia Eluvathingal was born of Nasranai at Kainakari, Kerala in 1877. She joined the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel. She was terribly afflicted by illness and miraculously healed through an apparition of the Holy Family. She was known as the “praying mother,” as she was strongly devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and offered all her sufferings in prayer. She was beatified on February 8, 1986, by Pope Saint John Paul II during his visit to India. She was later canonized in 2014.

(5) Saint Joseph Vaz was born at Benaulim, Goa, in 1651. He became an Oratorian Priest. He served in Mangalore and later went to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) as a missionary. The Dutch ruled Ceylon and only offered supported to the Dutch Reformed Church, which persecuted Catholics in fear of a Portuguese conquest. Joseph Vaz was a victim of this persecution from both the Dutch and the local king. He was eventually imprisoned and during his sentencing, he learned the local languages of Tamil and Sinhala. He translated prayers and the catechism into these local languages. He preached to and converted many natives and built churches for them. He performed a miracle of rain during a drought. After 24 years of tireless missionary activities in Ceylon, Joseph Vaz died in 1711, aged 59. He was canonized in 2015.

(6) Saint Mariam Thresia was born in 1876 in Thenchira, Kerala. She founded the Congregation of the Holy Family. She was blessed with the gift of stigmata. She suffered from mysterious illnesses and offered them up in union with the crucified Christ in prayer. She died at the age of 50 and was canonized in 2019.

(7) Saint Devasagayam Pillai (Lazarus) is the first Indian layperson and martyr to be canonized. He was born in Palliyadi, Tamil Nadu, in 1712. His parents hailed from a strong Hindu traditional high caste family and had significant royal influence with the king of Travancore.

Inspired by the exemplary life of the Dutch commander of Travancore and with the help of Jesuit missionaries, Devasagayam converted to Christianity. His life was radically changed, and he started treating low-caste people equally and gave up Hindu traditions and customs. Consequently, he was falsely accused of treason and misusing funds to convert others to Christianity. He was imprisoned, tortured, beaten up, and ill-treated for three years. Eventually, he was exiled to a forest and was shot dead in 1752.<sup>60</sup> Many people continue to flock to the site of his martyrdom; some have been cured of their sicknesses. While others have experienced miracles attributed to the intercession of Saint Devasagayam. He was canonized on May 15, 2022.

### **The Holy See approves the following holy men and women of India for the process of sainthood:**

- 1) Blessed Augustinose Thevarparampil, a priest of the Palai diocese, Kerala.
- 2) Blessed Sister Rani Maria, a Franciscan Clarist, was martyred at Kampel, Indore, in Madhya Pradesh, in 1995.
- 3) Sister Mary Jane Wilson was born at Harihara in Karnataka and founded the Franciscan Sisters of Our Lady of Victory.
- 4) Archbishop Thomas Kurialacherry founded the sisters of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.
- 5) Agnelo Gustavo Adolfo de Souza, a Pilar priest of the Missionary Society of Saint Francis Xavier, was born at Anjuna in Goa.
- 6) Varghese Payapilly Palakkappilly, founder of the Sisters of the Destitute, hailed from Konthuruthy, Ernakulam, in Kerala.

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60 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_saints\\_of\\_India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_saints_of_India)

- 7) Mathew Kadalikattil, founder of the Sacred Heart Congregation.
- 8) Augustine John Ukken, founder of the Sisters of Charity of Trichur in Kerala.
- 9) Joseph Vithayathil, Co-founder of the Congregation of the Holy Family.

Besides the above list, there are about 50 more holy men and women of Indian origin who are already declared Servants of God and are in the process to sainthood. On October 18, 2023, the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints expressed “nihil obstat” to initiate the process of beatification for the Servant of God, Kantheswar Digal and his companions who were killed by Hindu nationalists in 2008 during the Christian persecution in the jungle district of Kandhamal in the State of Odisha.

# Chapter 7: Popular Festivals and Devotions of Indian American Catholics

Following the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), India was one of the first countries to integrate the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on liturgy and worship with local traditions and cultures. Through inculturation, India began to include some Indian festivals in liturgical celebrations. The most notable among these are the Harvest and Spring Festivals of various regions, the celebration of Diwali (the Festival of Light), and the New Year celebrations of different Indian regions. These cultural and religious festivals are still celebrated by most of the Indian Americans.

## 7.1 Harvest or Thanksgiving Celebrations of Indian American Catholics

### *A) Monti Fest/ Monti Saibinichem Fest / Bandra Fest: A Marian Celebration*

Monti Fest, Monti Saibinichem Fest, and Bandra Fest are three different names for the same festival, celebrated since the early sixteenth century on the Feast of Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This Festival is a celebration dedicated to Our Lady of the Mount in Old Goa, India. It coincides with the Indian festival of harvest and flowers. New crops, flowers, and garlands are offered and blessed during the Mass. Children clothed in festive costumes come to church and offer flowers to Our Lady of the Mount to receive blessings. It is celebrated by the Mangalorean community, the Goan community, and the East Indian community in the States of Maharashtra and Goa.

### *B) Pongal: A Thanksgiving Celebration*

Pongal is the harvest festival that coincides with the Feast of the Epiphany in January. It is celebrated in the State of Tamil Nadu for three days to thank God for the harvest and His Divine Providence in making it plentiful. It also seeks God's protection for all the farm animals in the region. 'Pongal' is the Tamil word for a rice dessert made from the newly harvested rice and sugarcane crops. On the day of this harvest festival, people offer their fruits from the harvest, (especially rice, coconuts, milk, sugarcane, turmeric, flowers, and cattle), before the Lord, and receive blessings during the Mass of Thanksgiving. One of the highlights of the festival day is the making of Kolam or Rangoli, a traditional Indian floor ornamental or drawing made with colorful flowers and rice flour. The youth participate in traditional games such as "uriyadi" or "dahi handi," a game in which they attempt to strike a pot while blindfolded.

Usually, traditional Indian celebrations include sharing various foods and desserts that bring the parish community together. During the celebration, they play seasonal songs that are particular to each festival. Every festival is enhanced with seasonal, thematic, colorful, and flowery decorations, especially the *kolam* or *rangoli*. Today, Indian American Tamil Catholics all over the country celebrate Pongal with a Mass of Thanksgiving.

### *C) Ugadi: A New Year Celebration*

There are about fifteen New Year celebrations in various regions of India between December and April based on the lunar calendar, solar calendar, and lunisolar calendar. The most popular Indian American New Year celebration is Ugadi or Yugadi. Yugadi is a Sanskrit word meaning "beginning of the 'age,' 'era,' 'year,' or 'epoch' (yuga)." It is celebrated by people from the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka during April. People dress up in traditional Indian clothing and attend a Mass of Thanksgiving. People also decorate

their homes and churches with flowers and mango leaves. Families and friends share traditional Indian foods and desserts, especially mangoes.

#### *D) Onam: A Harvest Festival*

‘Onam’ is a harvest festival celebrated by the people from the State of Kerala in the first week of September. The purpose of celebrating Onam is to thank God for the good harvest and ask for God’s blessings on the farm and the cattle. It acts as a cultural festival. Indian American Catholics dress in traditional costumes, in particular the women wear traditional *Mundu* and *Kasavu saris*. The Church and home are usually decorated with traditional lamps and floral designs called “Pookkalam”. Indian American Catholics celebrate a special Thanksgiving Mass and, later, as a community, participate in customary *pookkalam* or floral art contests and popular folk arts and dances such as *Puyilikkali* (tiger dance). The Indian American Catholic community or large families share the traditional Sadhya meal with about twenty-six vegetarian dishes.

#### *E) Diwali: A Festival of Light*

Diwali is one of the most popular festivals of light celebrated by Indian Americans. It is celebrated in the White House and some State Houses where Indian Americans work or live. Diwali is also very popular among young Indian American university or college students, most of all at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, the University of California, the University of Pennsylvania, and Yale University. Diwali is a celebration of the victory of light over darkness. As Diwali is usually celebrated toward the end of October, Indian American Catholics celebrate it by proclaiming Christ as the world’s light. Diwali brings meaning to All Saints Day and All Souls Day as it enriches the faith in the victory of light over darkness and everlasting life over eternal condemnation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On Diwali day, homes and churches are adorned with traditional Indian lamps,

and a special Mass is offered for continued victory over evil and injustice in society. People enjoy fireworks and food with their families and friends. They also share traditional Indian sweets and desserts.

## **7.2 Weekly and Monthly Religious Practices**

For Indians, the days of the week are traditionally and liturgically dedicated to commemorating the following: Tuesday for St. Anthony, Wednesday for Our Lady of Perpetual Succor or St. Joseph, Thursday for the Infant Jesus, Friday for the Sacred Heart of Jesus or Divine Mercy, and Saturday for the Blessed Virgin Mary. All these weekly devotions get special attention on the first Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of each month. These days, people attend Mass or pray a novena at home while fasting or doing some type of penance for their special intentions. People often offer a Mass or do charitable work as the fulfillment of their vow in connection with their prayer intentions.

The unique cultural and traditional celebrations, liturgies, festivities, food, costumes, and music create meaning and purpose for Indian American Catholics to come together and express their joy and fraternity to balance their busy work-life.

# Chapter 8: Three Rites of India

There are three Rites practiced in India – Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara and Latin. The Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Rites trace their origins to India, where they developed from the distinctive liturgical and spiritual traditions of the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara churches. These are two of the twenty-three Eastern Christian autonomous particular churches (*sui iuris*) in full communion with the Catholic Church under the Roman Pontiff. Both the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches are unique in the particularities of their liturgy, spirituality, and theology. Each has developed its own particular Rite. According to the Code of Canons of the Oriental Churches, “A Rite is a heritage made up of liturgy, theology, spirituality, and discipline – a heritage that is differentiated by the culture and circumstances of the history of peoples and is expressed by each church *sui iuris* [autonomously] in its own manner of living the faith.”<sup>61</sup>

As the Church started spreading both in eastern and western territories, people began using their local culture, practice, and language to worship, celebrate, and express their faith. This inculturation gave birth to diverse traditions. Thus, Eastern Rites emerged from five Eastern Traditions: Alexandrian, Antiochene (West Syrian), Armenian, Chaldean (East Syrian), and Constantinopolitan (Byzantine).

Both the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Rites trace their Christian lineage to Saint Thomas, the Apostle who according to tradition, traveled to India and landed in Muziris (Cranganore) on the Kerala coast in the Malabar region in AD 52. Therefore, they call themselves “St. Thomas Christians.” However, they were later influenced and affected by Chaldean (East Syrian) and Antiochene (West Syrian) Traditions, including their practices, liturgy, and leadership, for centuries.

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61 Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, 1990, canon 28 §1.



## 8.1 Thomas of Cana (4th C)

According to tradition, in the fourth century, Thomas of Cana (Knaï Thomman), a merchant from Persia/Assyria (modern-day Iraq and Iran) fleeing religious persecution, came to the Kerala coast and Malabar area in southwestern India along with a group of Christians. Thomas founded a town at Cranganore and obtained privileges from the local king for Christians. He also liaised between the Chaldean (East Syrian/Assyrian) Church and St. Thomas Christians in India. Consequently, a cordial relationship had been established between two Churches.

Eventually, the Chaldean Church started appointing the bishops for St. Thomas Christians, although without imposing its doctrines. St. Thomas Christians used Aramaic, Syriac, and Chaldean vernacular languages for liturgy. In the fifth century, a section of the Chaldean Christians fell into the heresy of Nestorianism, which persisted for the next thousand years.<sup>62</sup>

Portuguese missionaries came to India in the early sixteenth century and found that Christianity was already being practiced there. At the same time, they were surprised to see the influence of Nestorian teachings in the religious practices of St. Thomas Christians in the Malabar region. In response to the Nestorian influence, the Portuguese blocked the arrival of Chaldean bishops and tried to Latinize the St. Thomas Christians, to bring them under the jurisdiction of the Portuguese Church (Padroado).

## 8.2 Synod of Diamper and Coonan Cross Oath (16th and 17th C)

The Portuguese convened the Synod of Diamper (Udayamperoor in Ernakulam district) in 1599. The Synod decided to forcefully bring all St. Thomas Christians under the Latin jurisdiction of the Portuguese Padroado Archdiocese of Goa of and to begin the liturgy's latinization.

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<sup>62</sup> "St. Thomas Christians," *EWTN Catholic Library*, n.d., <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/st-thomas-christians-10662>

Some St. Thomas Christians cooperated with the decisions made at the Synod of Diamper. However, many protested the Latin rule and latinization of their customs, liturgy, and leadership. A series of protests against the Portuguese Padroado domination culminated in 1653. Under the leadership of Archdeacon Thomas Parambil, a group of St. Thomas Christian priests and lay people entered the Church of Our Lady of Life at Mattanchery (near Cochin in Kerala). They swore an oath on the Bible on the high altar that they would not be subjected to the Portuguese Archbishop of Goa. Since everyone could not touch the Bible to swear, they tied a rope to a cross in the churchyard and stretched it outside where people stood. Everyone touched the rope as a sign of participation in the oath. Since so many were pulling the rope, the cross started bending. Hence, this oath of protest was called the Coonan Cross Oath (Bent Cross Oath).<sup>63</sup>

In 1661, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith attempted to solve the issue by appointing Joseph Sebastiani, OCD, as Malabar's bishop and vicar apostolic. Some of those who protested accepted Rome's appointment of a separate bishop for Catholics in the Malabar area, but others joined the West-Syrian Church of Antioch. They were called *Jacobites*, and eventually became the Syrian Orthodox Church of India. A branch of the Syrian Orthodox Church later developed into the Syro-Malankara Church in India.

In the 1660s, the Dutch fought with the Portuguese in certain parts of the west coast of India and captured Cochin, Kerala. Eventually, the Dutch expelled both the Roman bishop and vicar apostolic. This led Chandy Parambil of the local clergy, to become the bishop and vicar apostolic for the Catholics in the Malabar region. Through an agreement with the Dutch, the Pontifical Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith started appointing Italian Carmelites to be bishops and vicars for the people of Malabar in 1770. At the same time, there were St. Thomas Christians in the Malabar region who also functioned under the jurisdiction of the Portuguese Padroado archbishop. Meanwhile,

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63 "St. Thomas Christians," *EWTN Catholic Library*.

the protest continued against Latin rule and latinization. People wanted local-born bishops.

In 1787, the representatives of eighty-four churches developed a document called *Angamaly Padiyola*. It consisted of a list of sins of commission and omission committed by the foreign-born clergy. It was not addressed for many years. Eventually, in response to Angamaly Padiyola, Pope Leo XIII decreed a separate Rite and created two apostolic vicariates for St. Thomas Christians in 1887. Pope Leo XIII appointed two foreign-born Latin bishops to shepherd two vicariates. St. Thomas Christians continued to protest and to ask for local-born bishops. In 1896, Pope Leo XIII erected another vicariate and appointed a local-born bishop. Subsequent popes continued to support St. Thomas Christians. Pope Saint Pius X erected additional apostolic vicariates in 1911.<sup>64</sup>

### **8.3 Major Archeparchies of Syro-Malabar Catholic Church**

Pope Pius XI reconstituted the Syro-Malabar Church in 1923. Pope St. John Paul II elevated the Syro-Malabar Church to a major archiepiscopal Church, an autonomous church (*sui juris*). The Archdiocese of Ernakulam-Angamaly became the seat of a major archeparchy and head of the Syro-Malabar Church. The liturgical languages remain Aramaic and eastern Syriac, and after the Second Vatican Council, English, Malayalam, and other Indian regional languages were included in the liturgy.

After the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the Syro-Malabar Church is the second largest among the Eastern Catholic Churches, with about 4.5 million baptized Catholics. The Syro-Malabar Church is well rooted in the current state of Kerala in the southwestern part of India (the Malabar region).

Migrants from Kerala who settled in various parts of Indian territories and other parts of the world continue practicing their traditions and

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64 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syro-Malabar\\_Catholic\\_Major\\_Archeprarchy\\_of\\_Ernakulam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syro-Malabar_Catholic_Major_Archeprarchy_of_Ernakulam)

rites. Consequently, there were thirteen eparchies and five archeparchies in the state of Kerala and thirteen eparchies in other states of India in 2022. Four eparchies were established to serve people outside India in such countries as: the US, Canada, Australia - New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Thus, there are thirty-five eparchies in total.

## **8.4 The Syro-Malabar Eparchy in the US**

On March 13, 2001, Pope St. John Paul II created a Syro-Malabar eparchy of St. Thomas, in consideration of the growing pastoral needs of Syro-Malabar immigrants in the US and Canada. Mar Jacob Angadiath was appointed the first bishop of the newly established eparchy. Mar Joy Alappatt, appointed in 2022, is the second and current bishop of the Syro-Malabar eparchy in the US.<sup>65</sup> Mar Thomas Sleeha is the Cathedral for the eparchy in Chicago, Illinois. Among the Syro-Malabar Catholics in India, professionals and their families usually emigrate to the US. The majority of Syro-Malabar Catholics in the US are nurses, health-care employees, and para-medical employees. It is estimated that around 900,000 Syro-Malabar Catholics live in the US with about 80 parishes and missions in the country to serve them.

## **8.5 The Syro-Malankara Rite**

Following the Synod of Diamper in 1599 and the Coonan Cross Oath in 1653, some St. Thomas Christians continued to be dissatisfied with the Portuguese Padroado and the Pontifical Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. Hence, they continued to protest the latinization of their liturgy and tradition and appealed to the Jacobite Patriarch in Antioch for his leadership and support. The Patriarch sent a bishop to Kerala in 1665. Those who accepted the bishop from Antioch called

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65 “The Pope Grants Syro-Malabar Diocese in the U.S.,” *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2001, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/03/18/pope-grants-syro-malabars-diocese-in-us/96e32d89-92e0-4a46-b7bb-141004d5e691/>.

themselves Jacobites or Puthenkoottukar (people of new loyalty) and became the Syrian Orthodox Church of India. They follow Antiochian doctrines, liturgy, and tradition. Their liturgy was in the Aramaic and Western Syriac languages. In 1772, the Patriarch of Antioch sent two more bishops to Kerala to consecrate a local priest named Mar Dionysius as the new Syrian Orthodox bishop. In 1778, Mar Dionysius sent a petition to Rome requesting the reunification of the Syrian Orthodox Church with the Catholic Church. The Pope considered the appeal and sent a bishop to carry out this reunification; however, he died before reaching India. Mar Dionysius's successors also repeatedly attempted to reunite the Jacobites with the Catholic Church.<sup>66</sup>

During the 19th century, the British ruled India, and the Anglican church began influencing the Jacobites. Some of the Jacobites accepted the reforms and doctrines of the Anglicans, and eventually, a new Church called Mar Thoma Syrian Church was established in full communion with the Church of England. The rest of the Syrian Orthodox Church became the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church with the term 'Malankara' referring to the Jacobite community of Kerala.

## **8.6 Major Archeparchy of Syro-Malankara Catholic Church**

In the early 20th century, the Patriarch of Antioch started a property dispute with the Church in Kerala. This dispute ended up in the court of law. Rome intervened and consequently ordained a local priest as the new bishop, who took the name Mar Ivanios in 1925. Over the next few years, Mar Ivanios initiated the process of proper reunification of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church with Rome. The desire for reunification became a widespread movement throughout the Malabar region. There was ardent support and genuine interest among the clergy and laity toward the reunification with Rome.

On June 11, 1932, the Syro-Malankara Church was officially reunited

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<sup>66</sup> "Syro-Malankara Catholic Church," *Encyclopedia.com*, n.d. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/syro-malankara-church>

with Rome through the apostolic constitution *Christo Pastorum Principi*. Thus, Syro-Malankara became one of the Eastern Christian autonomous churches (*sui iuris*) in full communion with the Catholic Church under the Roman Pontiff. Pope Pius XI appointed Mar Ivanios as the first archbishop of Trivandrum and the Archdiocese of Trivandrum became the seat of a significant archeparchy and head of the Syro-Malankara Church.<sup>67</sup> Today, there are more than 440,000 baptized Catholics in the Syro-Malankara Church. Migrants from Kerala carry the Syro-Malankara tradition and Antiochene rite with them and continue to practice wherever they settle nationally and internationally.

Consequently, there are seven eparchies and two archeparchies in the state of Kerala and two eparchies in other states of India as of today. One other eparchy was recently established to serve people living in the US and Canada. Thus, there are twelve eparchies and archeparchies in total. The liturgical languages remain Aramaic and Western Syriac. After the Second Vatican Council, Malayalam, English, and other Indian regional languages were included in the liturgy.

## 8.7 Syro-Malankara Eparchy in the US

Considering the growing number of Syro-Malankara Catholics in North America, Pope Benedict XVI erected the Syro-Malankara Catholic Apostolic Exarchate (a step before becoming an eparchy) for North America on July 14, 2010. Bishop Thomas Eusebius was appointed the first exarchate of the Syro-Malankara Church in the US and Canada. On December 18, 2015, Pope Francis elevated the exarchate of Syro-Malankara Church in the US to an Eparchy of St. Mary, Queen of Peace.<sup>68</sup> The Pope also appointed Mar Eusebius as the first bishop of the newly erected eparchy. Mar Philipos Stephanos has been the eparchy's second bishop since October 28, 2017. Currently, there are more than 12,000 Syro-Malankara Catholics living in the eparchy.

67 "The Syro-Malankara Church," *Apostolic Nunciature India*, n.d., [https://www.apostolicnunciature-india.com/the\\_syro\\_malankara\\_church.aspx](https://www.apostolicnunciature-india.com/the_syro_malankara_church.aspx)

68 "Our Eparchy," Mar Thomas Syriac Catholic Eparchy of the United States and Canada (MCMYNA), n.d., <https://mcmyna.org/OurEparchy.html>.

St. Vincent de Paul is the cathedral for the eparchy of St. Mary, Queen of Peace, located in Elmont, New York. The Syro-Malankara Church follows the Antiochene Rite in the West Syrian language and in the vernacular languages of the people.

## **8.8 Latin Rite Indian American Catholics**

According to CARA research on “Cultural Diversity in the Catholic Church in the United States” (2013), the total population of Indian Americans was 3,260,460 and the Catholic population was 149,981 of which 75% follow the Latin Rite.<sup>69</sup> Indian American Catholics who follow the Latin Rite easily assimilate into the mainstream of the Catholic Church in the US. Most first-generation immigrants try to find local parishes, register themselves in the parish, and start engaging in parish activities and attending Sunday Masses without much difficulty. Many Latin Rite Indian American Catholics even volunteer at the parish to share their time and talents. They try to actively engage in parish activities, supporting their parishes by becoming choir members, cantors, sacristans, altar servers, ushers, catechism instructors, and extraordinary Eucharistic Ministers. Some join the Knights of Columbus, Legion of Mary, and other pious associations. Indian American Catholics also offered a bishop to serve the Church in the US. Bishop Earl Fernandes, a second-generation Indian American Catholic priest was named Bishop of Columbus, Ohio in 2022.

Indian Catholics living in the US bring with them the heritage of cultural diversity, religious and spiritual tapestry, and family values. Their active engagement and contributions adorn and enrich the American Catholic Church.

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<sup>69</sup> Mary Gray, Mary Gautier, and Thomas Gaunt, SJ. *Cultural Diversity in the Church* (Washington, DC: Centre for the Applied Research in the Apostolate, June 2014), 10.



Map of India with States and Capital Cities<sup>70</sup>

70 “India Map: Free Map of India with States, UTS and Capital Cities to Download.” *Maps of India*, www.mapsofindia.com/. Accessed 25 Sept. 2025.



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“His Eminence Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, remarked that the gifts of Indian Catholics can be a truly evangelizing force in the United States. He stated: *‘The Indian American Catholic community has much to offer from the perspective of faith... Therefore, in the task of evangelization, I invite you to think about what you as Indian Catholics can do to enrich the Church in the United States through your gifts and talents... What hope can you offer to those coming from other nations? How might you be a force for the new evangelization or an antidote to secularism and materialism?’* The publication of this small book is also an occasion of joy and pride for Indian Catholics and should be of great benefit to all who read it.”

- Bishop Earl Fernandez  
*Foreword, Preserving the Apostolic Faith:  
The Living Faith of Indian American Catholics*



United States  
Conference of  
Catholic Bishops