

Who is Mar George Alanchery?

A man with black Rudraksha chain and wooden cross exuding Indian culture, one of the faceless masses, an ordinary in the ordinary sense, savour of environment and human life, committed to consensus through dialogue, unity & universality.

James Kottoor

Who is Bishop George Alanchery, unknown to me and many like me? He never figured anywhere among the probabilities making the rounds in the minds of the Syro Malabar (SM) community of Bishops, priests, sisters and people, anxiously praying for the one to suite their hearts' expectations, not even among print media personnel or TV channels forecasting tomorrow's news today

Those who dared to name names started with the Ernakulam Curia Trio, moved on to Archbishop heavy weights in the state and finally to reigning bishops in Kerala. None could think of anyone from outside. As for the trio, Bishop Bosco Puthur was the front runner for some in the media. In a group discussion a sister suggested the name of Bishop Adayanthrath to which another objected, only because of his juniority. When it came to major Archbishops alarm bells were heard to ring from distant shores like New York that a certain Money Bag had landed in Kochi ahead of elections to canvas for candidates from Trichur, Palakkad etc. As for me, honestly I could think of no exceptional luminary in Kerala to fit the post with unquestioned leadership qualities, appealing to all sections and therefore one all could look up to as their man approved. Therefore prayerfully I left it to providential churning in the hearts of assembled prelates to come up with the dark horse to everybody's surprise



Man with Rudraksha Trade mark

So it did happen when my eyes fell on the printed image of a venerable looking prelate with austere bearded face, simple and serene, clad in ordinary clerical white but most important projecting prominently a chain with large sized black Rudraksha beads proclaiming Indian culture and a wooden cross hung on it, which simply gave him away for what he was and is. Eureka! my mind thundered unknowingly! It spoke volumes to me and made a flood of images flash through my mind.

First was that of Pope John XXIII who gave a very precious gift to the world of bishops who attended the second Vatican Council – a wooden pectoral cross hung on a cotton thread to wear as mark of their identity as followers of the crucified. It was not on a silver or golden cross that Jesus was raised up. It also reminded me the words of St. Augustine: "For you I am a Bishop, but with you I am a Christian." Next came the image of Mother Teresa, the saint of the gutter clad in white cotton sari with blue border which has been the trade mark of her simplicity for the whole world to see. That image made my mind leap on to a parallel image in a totally mundane political field, that of Mamata Banerjee sporting her down-to-earth simple white sari and chappels always which speaks constantly of her identification with the faceless masse.

A fourth image that flashed through my mind was that of a curia sporting, cycle pedalling and beedi smoking departed bishop (God rest his soul) Sopen of Daltangang. That was his way of proclaiming to the world that he really meant to be an ordinary in the ordinary sense among his ordinary flock, totally different from the rest of Ordinaries, his ecclesiastical confreres and Excellencies, not ordinaries in the ordinary sense. Reportedly he had even met Pope Paul VI also in curia in one of his Ad Limina visits. I saw him that way long long ago presiding over an Evangelisation seminar in Delhi to which I was invited to report by the Late Amalorpavadas of the Bangalore Liturgical Centre. Memorable at the meet was the critique made by the then young energetic bishop Powathil on statistics reeled out by Amalor to substantiate his thesis of Indianisation which the bishop labelled as "lies, lies and arch lies". Amid that thunder and lightning of a heated verbal exchange Bishop Sopen literally rose to the occasion as a consensus man in curia to provide light rather than lightning and sense rather than sound.

An Ordinary Consensus Man

A consensus man, an ordinary among Ordinaries, a down-to-earth person concerned with the yearnings and aspirations of the common man, especially the last, the least and the lost! Those were the comforting thoughts the first sight of Bishop George Alanchery triggered to flood my mind. You see what you expect and eagerly look forward to see. So I need not be proved correct as the expectations of many in this election were proved wrong. Only time will tell whether the SM Synod succeeded to make the right choice at its first attempt. That I leave to the inscrutable workings of divine designs to decide. But the fact was there was a great sigh of relief from all sections of the Syro Malabar Church (SMC) and even from all secular quarters as the media brought out his compelling credentials for the post – coveted and disappointed for many, but for a few like Bishop George seen as a crown of thorns like that of his Master. Therefore he must have even prayed with trepidation "let this chalice pass from me" for feeling "unworthy" for the post.

His raw credentials? According to reports he visited every one of the 8000 families with 30,000 faithful of his newly established mission diocese of Thuckalay, a God-forsaken cluster of underdeveloped villages in Kanyakumari, Tamilnadu. It was started as a SM mission in 1961 which became a diocese in 1966. On hearing that, some asked: Where will you find a bishop who is eager to walk into your home uninvited as a matter of duty of a shepherd going after every one of his flock? Isn't it rare to find even Parish Priests who deem it as one of their prime duties to visit every family in the parish? Of course I have seen that second question proved wrong by Fr. Isac Damien of St. Jude's Parish, Thammanam, who used to visit all families every year as a matter of duty. To make those visits homely and productive, Bishop George not only picked up but excelled himself in Tamil to feel one with a new cultural community into which he was inserting himself following the incarnational principle of his master Jesus.

Of course besides Tamil he is also proficient in Malayalam, being from Changanaserry, in English and also in French, having studied in Surbone university, Paris for five years to take a doctorate in Biblical Theology in 1986. Before that he had graduated in economics from the Kerala University with second rank in 1965 and acquired Masters in Theology with first rank from the Pontifical Theological Institute, Alwaye. It was after all these he was consecrated by Archbishop Powathil as the first bishop of Thuckalay on Feb.2nd 1997. Now in God's own time he is raised as the Major Archbishop of Ernakulam and Ankamaly to shepherd a flock of 4 million SM Christians spread all over the world. Isn't it proof enough that he is a man of letters (he had also found time to write a book: Morality Today and Tomorrow), wisdom, spiritual insight, practical know-how and universal outlook to promote unity in diversity?

Man of Dialogue for Unity

That is what the substance of his recent pronouncements after election loudly proclaims. He had said: My mission gets achieved when I unite every one in God's love. That mission consists in protecting both man and the environment he lives in. God is to be found in the dialogue of truth. Absorb positive points in Indian culture, resolve conflicts in liturgical practices in different dioceses through discussion. Pursue the path of consensus not confrontation. Wherever there is division power of evil is at work. When one stream of thinking tries to stamp out the opposite it produces division, friction and conflict. I am committed to promote, not my plans and programmes but those which are the outcome of common discussions gone through and decisions taken jointly by bishops, priests, religious and the general public.

What more can one expect from a newly elected leader? No wonder the election of the new Major Archbishop was accepted with rapturous acclamation from all quarters. As new revelations of his precious personal traits are revealed admiration, appreciation, acceptance, expectation, contentment and joy abound and brim over in the SM community.

Hidden Fears & Apprehensions

That is not to ignore hidden fears some still entertain about his stand on the ongoing conflict of views for and against Chaldaisation, Indianisation and liturgical reform, all of which practically died down in Kerala but still raging in the SMC in US. Since Archbishop Alanchery happens to be very close to retired Archbishop Powathil who consecrated him bishop, they fear he could become his tool at least covertly to promote Chaldaisation. This section as reported in the US based Voice blog of 29/5/11, has already submitted, a mass petition to the Archbishop requesting that he should rather follow the path of Indianisation blazed by Cardinal Parecattil and resist the imposition of Manichean cross, altar curtain and chaldeanisation of the liturgy.

The subject is hotly discussed for and against in the two blogs: <http://syromalabarfaith.blogspot.com/> and <http://syromalabarvoice.blogspot.com/>

opposing each other, though their fears seem to be nothing more than a tempest in tea cup since a more sober section of the SM laity in US has already submitted a 12-point remedial suggestions to the Major Archbishop and the SM Synod of bishops to put an end to this unnecessary puerile controversy.

What is the answer? What is the solution? Where there is division and conflict the forces of evil are at work, Archbishop Alanchery had already affirmed. More over he had added, that he was committed to promote, not any of his or any one group's agenda but the one evolved and agreed upon through dialogue and discussion by bishops, priests and people. He is therefore a

man of consensus, not confrontation and as he wants to resolve conflicts through dialogue, no one should expect him to take instant decisions on any thorny issue but give him enough time to discuss and deliberate before he can come up with clear directives.

He has given his word and we have to trust and rest in peace while praying to the Lord who is the light, the life, the truth and the way, to help him lead his flock in the right path. Those who love good(God) everything is bound to turn out for their own good. So let the entire SM community give him a chance to prove his mettla and enough time to promote unity, universality and harmony as promised, under his leadership both in India and abroad.

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