

Knanaya Endogamy and Exogamous Marriage

Archbishop Mar Mathew Moolakkatt

My dear Knanaya brothers and sisters,

As you already know, I had a discussion these days with our priests serving in the U.S. and KCCNA executive to give some clarifications regarding the existing Knanaya parishes, and their role in fostering the unity and individuality of the Knanaya community. I thought some explanations in this regard will be useful for all of us.

Strong adherence to strict endogamy practiced from the time of Prophets Ezra and Nehemia (OT) and followed by the Jewish Christians has been strictly practiced by the forefathers of Knanaya migrants to Malabar coast in the 4th century. In 1896 when the Syro-Malabar Church has been officially entrusted to her own sons, Mar Makil was appointed the Vicar Apostolic of Changanacherry which included both Knanaya and non-Knanaya faithful. There was a strong movement from the non-Knanaya faithful for non-cooperation with Mar Makil who was a Knanite. But the Holy See insisted that the bishop appointed by the Holy See is to be accepted by all the Catholics for whom that bishop was appointed. Though the resistance continued, the decision of the Holy See to excommunicate all those who persisted in non-cooperation with the bishop appointed by the Holy See lead to the acceptance of the Knanaya bishop by the non –Knanites too. However, understanding the feelings of his faithful, Mar Makil took initiative for erecting a separate vicariate for the Southists, which culminated in the erection of the vicariate of Kottayam for the Southists. Mar Makil became its first vicar apostolic.

The Vicariate apostolic of Kottayam continued to be the ecclesial unit of the Knanaya Catholics and its jurisdiction was extended by the Holy See to the whole territory of the Syro-Malabar Church and the vicariate was made an eparchy. Till the early 1950s the diocese of Kottayam continued to be the sole ecclesial unit of the Knanaya Catholics. However, there arose an issue in which a Knanite wanted to be married to a non-Knanite. It was a difficult situation which was not foreseen by the request made to the Holy See by Mar Mathew Makil. However, the Diocese of Kottayam solved the issue by allowing the Knanaya person to join the non-Knanaya diocese. As more cases of this nature came up, the practice of allowing the Knanaya to join the non-Knanaya was accepted as a policy in this matter. The Knanaya person was asked to make a petition to the Diocese of Kottayam to relieve him/her from the Diocese of Kottayam and allow him/her to join the non-Knanaya diocese. This was a pastoral and practical arrangement made in this matter to resolve the issues involved.

In the initial stages these exogamous marriages were chosen by the parties concerned for their own interest. Gradually there arose issues when the Knanaya Catholics found it difficult to find out suitable partners from the Knanaya catholic community and unwillingly even, they had to accept non-Knanaya spouses. Then they began to question the necessity of getting themselves removed from the Kottayam diocese since they claimed that as Knanites they had the right to continue as members of the Kottayam diocese, even though the non-Knanaya partner and children had no right to be enrolled in the Kottayam diocese. But the diocese of Kottayam held that the practiced pastoral arrangement for the exogamous marriages was the only solution for such marriages and there was no question of including the exogamous persons in the Archdiocese of Kottayam. Some civil cases and ecclesiastical decisions questioned the logic of this stand and it resulted in the rescript regarding exogamous Knanites in the U.S. This difference of vision continued to exist.

When the St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Diocese of Chicago was established, the Holy See insisted that the practice followed in Kottayam was not acceptable to the Holy See and that endogamy should not be a factor in creating a parish in North America. Therefore after long deliberations it was agreed between the Bishop Mar Jacob Angadiath and the Knanaya Catholic Diocese of Kottayam that the Knanaya missions or parishes in the U.S. could be erected as the Vicariate of Kottayam was established by Pope Pius X in 1911. So Mar Angadiath created Knanaya parishes in North America. The issue of endogamy being a social practice was left to the community and the ecclesiastical establishment acknowledged the identity of Knanaya community as an ecclesial entity. In the presence of late Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil, the then Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church, it was accepted that the Knanaya missions and parishes will contain all and only Knanaya Catholics. The spouse and children of an exogamous kna will not be considered as member of the Knanaya parish. Accordingly Knanaya Vicars were appointed clearly indicating that they were vicars only of Knanaya Catholics.

Although this understanding was clear, KCCNA hesitated to accept this ecclesiastical set up and declared non-cooperation with the Diocese of Chicago. In spite of this non-cooperation and sometimes conditional cooperation, Mar Jacob Angadiath and the Bishops of Kottayam continued to cooperate with the KCCNA and asked them continuously to accept the ecclesiastical arrangement which was not different from what has been granted by the Holy See in 1911. Now, although most of the units of KCCNA has decided to cooperate with the Diocese of Chicago and went ahead with the establishment of Knanaya parishes, since the official KCCNA has not withdrawn the official non-cooperation, Mar Angadiath informed the KCCNA that he cannot any more cooperate with KCCNA and its convention until KCCNA declared cooperation with him and his diocese. In such a situation the bishops of Kottayam also will have difficulty to collaborate with KCCNA and its programs. So we had a meeting with the KCCNA executive and the Knanaya catholic priests working in the Syro-Malabar diocese of Chicago and are now trying to resolve this matter.

Nobody is against endogamy or its practice. It is a social custom of the Knanaya community which we uphold from very ancient times. The Church is not against that practice. Only Knanites can break the practice of endogamy and do harm to the age old custom of the community.

As far as the church is concerned, by the fact that somebody has violated a social practice, his membership in the parish cannot be terminated. Belonging to the Knanaya community is a right obtained by birth and cannot be taken away by any force. One can practice things that are contrary to the traditions and values of the community, but his membership in the Knanaya community can neither be taken away nor given to any non-Knanaya. So the community can have its own sanctions against one who violates its norms and traditions, but the Church cannot insist that he be removed from the parish because of the violation of a social practice that does not affect the Catholic faith.

Although the Church does not permit the exclusion of a Knanite from the Knanaya parish because of his exogamous marriage, the Church cannot ask that the non-Knanaya spouse and children should be included in the Knanaya parish. When an exogamous Knanite on his own insistence continues to maintain his membership in the Knanaya parish, actually it is he who keeps his family ecclesially divided. He has the freedom to join the non-Knanaya parish and keep his family ecclesially united. For that he is advised in Kottayam as well as in the U.S. to choose his membership in the non-Knanaya parish which is done by all in Kottayam and almost all in the U.S.

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