

# **Faith and Practices of the Mar Thoma Church**

## **Introduction**

The Mar Thoma Church is a unique church. It is not only unique but one of the ancient churches in the world also. The late Metropolitan, Juhanon Mar Thoma calls this church as a “bridge” since it is a church between the East and the West. While holding the heritage of the East; it is influenced by the West in its mission mandate and ecumenical outlook. Abraham Malpan who led the reformation made it sure that church must be Oriental in nature and keep the old traditions of liturgy, which were enriched with all the components of worship, gestures and symbols. And it is also built on the rock of apostolic faith. As a community belongs to this faith and tradition we must know the unique and distinctive characteristics regarding faith and practice. When we recite the prayers (based on the Bible) and participate in the worship a clear understanding of faith and practice of the Mar Thoma Church, to we belongs is an essential pre-requisite for us to participate meaningfully in its life, witness and mission. So the purpose of this article is to give a clear a clear understanding of faith and practice of the MarThoma Church.

Church is the body of Christ. Churches are formed on the rock of apostolic proclamation that was started from Jerusalem. The disciples were commissioned to make disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Mtt.28: 18-19). In the 1<sup>st</sup> century itself Christian faith was spread in Antioch, Alexandria and Rome. These churches helped a lot to spread the good news in Asia, Africa and Europe.

MarThoma Church is one of the ancient churches in India based on the rock of apostolic tradition. The church was formed in India in A.D.52 by St. Thomas who came at Crangannore (a place in Kerala) and established seven and half churches in India St Thomas was one of the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ, and our church is also known by the name of that Apostle. The tradition says that Christianity is rooted in India in the 1<sup>st</sup> century itself. The missionary work of the Anglican missionaries made a tremendous impact upon the church in India. While holding and preserving the characters of the Eastern Church traditions, it was built with autonomy, independence and ecumenical outlook. The church bears witness to the fact of the eastern origin of Christianity along with the other “Lesser Eastern Churches” in its liturgy and mode of worship, its ceremonies, rituals and traditions. To understand the meaning of it we should have a deeper understanding of the ancient Eastern Churches. Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Rome were the five metropolises dominated the Christian world until the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The first four were led by the Armenian, Syrian, Alexandrian and Greek churches respectively and the last by the Roman Catholic Church. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century the first four became divided in to two blocks, the Eastern and Western Churches. The churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople are known as Eastern Churches and the last one (Rome) is known as Western Church. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century the reformation occurred and the Eastern Churches further grouped into the Greater Eastern Churches (The Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches) and Lesser Eastern Churches (Coptic, Armenian, Syrian and Indian Churches)

The years 1830-1889 are very important in the history of the MarThoma Church. While holding the faith and practices of the Eastern Church, it was influenced by the work of the Anglican missionaries. The communion with the Anglican Church led to

reformation. Abraham Malpan and the Metropolitans firmly held the conviction that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone as revealed in the Scriptures and continue in the apostolic faith that St. Thomas brought to India. The MarThoma Church declared that it accepts as basis for all the matters of faith & doctrine, the Holy Bible consisting of the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. It affirms that salvation is the gift of God, appropriated by faith in Jesus. The Mar Thoma church believes in the Trinity and accepts as its goal and function to be repository of the divine doctrines revealed by Jesus Christ and proclaimed by his apostles. The MarThoma Church also maintains these doctrines in their purity, and promotes the spiritual life of its members through the administration of sacraments and by the ministry of the Word of God. The MarThoma church also believes that it is responsible to make disciples of all nations by the proclamation of the Gospel to the world and through the administration of Holy Baptism in the name of the Triune God. The MarThoma Church also accepts the Creed formed at

The Councils of Nicea (A.D.325), Constantinople (A.D.381) and Ephesus (A.D.431) and we follow the true doctrines formed at these three councils. Mar Thoma Church believes in Apostolic succession beginning with Apostle Thomas. Communion with the Anglican Church has given missionary zeal to our church. MarThoma Church was also influenced by the reformed doctrines of the Western churches. So we got a wider ecumenical outlook. While continuing the apostolic Episcopal tradition and ancient oriental practices it upheld the inspiration availed from the Western Reformation. Thus the MarThoma Church combines both evangelical and reformed doctrines with ancient forms of worship and practices. The MarThoma Church therefore, is neither a Protestant Church of the Western type nor an Orthodox Church of the Eastern type. Each and every religion is based on its own doctrines. It does not mean that all the followers of the religion should know the doctrines in depth. But all of them experience these doctrines through worship and practices. Worship is the visible expression of faith. Though the worship contains the basic elements like adoration, praise, prayer of confession etc, it reflects each community's traditions and practices. So the worshipping community find happiness not only in reciting the prayers but following certain practices, gestures and symbols that are prevalent in the society also. For example as a sign of reverence we may stand up and show the reverence. Hence worship means not only the expression of faith but it is the expression of each community's life and life style, tradition and practices.

## Worship.

Worship is the highest activity of a living community to glorify God. The church gives primacy to worship for it is through worship that life and witness of the church are maintained, and the unity is also maintained through worship. Out of the teachings of Christ the church formulated three important and basic elements, which are essential for its life and witness. They are: 1) Creed or a body of accepted truths in which the basic faith of the Church is expressed. 2) Code-a body of regulations which became the guidelines for the life of the church. 3) Cult or manner of worship. Our worship is corporate worship. The very nature of the church constitutes the need for corporate worship.

There are some basic elements in worship. Some people think that only praising God is important in the worship, but that is not correct. While praise and adoration are most important in worship penitence and confession before God are also integral to any true worship along with intercession. Therefore, the issues of politics and economics, science and technology, of rural and urban societies, of war and peace, of tension and strife, of injustice and oppression, of racial hatred and communal tensions may find some expression in our worship. Authentic worship is one that brings joy and sorrows of all

humankind to the altar along with the bread and the wine and our offerings. Through worship the worshippers must be inspired to do the will of God. *Madbaha* should be a platform to offer not only ourselves and our blessings but it should be a platform to offer the whole creation also. And through worship each worshipper must be reminded of his or her mission. We use certain liturgies for worship. So we will have a detailed study of the liturgies.

### History of the development of the Liturgy

In the early centuries itself, different traditions were formed in the way prayers were arranged for worship. These worship forms were called liturgies or *THAKSA* which is a Syriac word. When we offer the praises and prayers in the liturgy we became the part of the universal church. We may ask why we want to repeat these prayers every Sunday. By repeating these prayers a new insight will come to our mind that the church is not only a gathering of present believers but it contains the believers in the past and the future also. The church is not limited in this world, it is eternal. The important liturgical traditions were formed in five regions. 1) Alexandria, Egypt 2) Palestine and Syria 3) Cappadocia and other eastern regions 4) Africa and 5) Northern Italy and other places. East Syrian liturgies come under the second group and which can be divided again into two groups. They are 1) the Eastern liturgies and 2) Western liturgies with the traditions of the first three ecumenical synods.

Including the MarThoma Church all other churches in Kerala of the St. Thomas tradition use West Syrian Order of Worship. West Syrian churches are churches centered in places like Antioch and Jerusalem in Roman Empire. There was tremendous influence of Roman Catholicism in the liturgy, doctrines etc. But after the revolt in A.D. 1653 (Coonen Cross) the Malankara Christians, who were freed from the Roman influence, placed themselves under the jurisdiction of the West Syrian Patriarch of Antioch (Jacobites). Thus the Syriac Liturgy of Antioch was introduced in India by 1655. This Liturgy is known as the St. James Liturgy. It comes from the church in Jerusalem and is closely connected with the 4<sup>th</sup> century rite of Jerusalem, which was subsequently adapted by the Church at Antioch sometimes in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

There are some special characteristics for this liturgy. This liturgy is apostolic in origin. They are rich in theological teachings on Trinity, Incarnation, Salvation, the Eucharist, the Church, Intercession and Eschatology. Since this liturgy maintains the very mystical character of God, it invites the devotional spirit of the worshippers. Since this liturgy is ancient, the modern Biblical scholarship has the opinion that much of the Scripture was originally formed in the liturgical context. So this eastern liturgy is soaked in Scripture. When the Bible was not available, the liturgy took the role of the Bible.

We follow the St. James Liturgy that is the most ancient and venerable of the Antiochean group of liturgies. Since it maintains a continuous dialogue between the celebrant and the worshippers it can be called a people's liturgy. The liturgy is neither a text nor simply a set of prayers, but it is an act of congregation, and it maintains a continuous dialogue between the celebrant and the worshippers. Holy Eucharist is the main part of our liturgy. The prayers are replete with idioms, images and echoes of the Bible and full of symbolism. These help greatly for engaging the faculties of the body, mind and soul and invite the faithful to an ever-deepening understanding of the mystery of the Holy Eucharist. The predominant notes in this liturgy are joy and praise. There is in it a faithful re-enactment of the drama of divine Redemption. Our liturgy consists of different gestures of the priest and laity as in the kiss of peace, in the bowing of heads etc. We use

separate order of worship for each sacrament. For Holy Qurbana we use St.James liturgy. Now let us briefly discuss the structure and content of St.James Liturgy.

### Structure and content of St.James Liturgy.

Structurally it has two parts:-1)*Thuyaba* or the Preparation Service, 2)Public celebration of the Holy Qurbana.

#### 1 *Thuyaba* or Preparation Service.

From the name itself it is clear that here the Priest and the worshippers prepare for the Holy Qurbana. It also has two parts and in the first part the Priest makes prayers in the *Madbaha* (it can be done secretly or public). In the second part the Priest wears Kappa and prepares bread and wine for the Holy Qurbana.

#### 2 Public celebration of the Holy Qurbana.

It also has two parts, the first one starts from “O, Lord Jesus Christ, born of Mary, baptized by John.....”till the sermon. This part gives importance to reading and hearing of Word of God. This part is known as Ante Communion or Pre-Anaphora. And the second part is known as Anaphora; it starts from the kiss of peace and ends with the fourth (last) blessing. Certain factors are important for worship. They are place of worship, sanctuary, articles in the sanctuary, etc. The Celebrant also has an unavoidable part in the worship.

### Place of worship

Our places of worship are built in the form of Jerusalem Temple. It is divided in to Sanctuary (*Madbaha*) and *Haickala* (it is the place where people gather for worship)

Our places of worship are built east west with the Sanctuary (*Madbaha*) to the east. What is the importance of “east” in the worship? East is the place of the rising suns that is the symbol of the Risen Christ, the sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2) and His Second coming. Another thing is that east symbolizes the Garden of Eden that was situated at the east (Genesis 2:8). The Sanctuary is separated from the rest of the place by a veil with the sign of a cross. The worship of the Eastern churches symbolizes the heavenly worship. *Madbaha* symbolically represents Heaven *haickala*, the earth and veil the sky.

### *Madbaha*(Sanctuary)

*Madbaha* means place of sacrifice. Holy Qurbana, ordination of deacons and priests, and consecration of bishops are conducted here.

It is situated at the East of the church. When we gather for worship the worshippers face to the east where the *Madbaha* is situated. We have seen the importance of East in our worship. And again it is believed that the second coming of the Risen Christ will be at the East (Mathew 24:27).

In the *Madbaha* we have a consecrated place known as “*thronos*”(altar), it is the throne of God that is our Lord is reigning as king on His throne He is offering Himself as a sacrifice. Hence *Thronos* is altar. In Isaiah 6:1 and in Revelation 4:5; 7:9-11 we see the heavenly worship where the Throne of God is in center. So in our worship also “*thronos*” is the important place of the *Madbaha* and it also reminds us the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the *thronos* we see different articles like cross, light, incense; chalice and paten etc and all these symbolize the Heavenly worship. The articles placed on the *thronos* including the altar spread must be consecrated before use except the cross. It is because other things are consecrated with the cross.

## The Curtain or Veil

The curtain with a cross in the middle hiding the Sanctuary is the symbol of the sky separating heaven and earth. The *Madbaha* signifies heaven and the *haickala* signifies earth. According to the Eastern churches earthly worship symbolizes the heavenly worship. So the door of the *Madbaha* is always made in the shape of the ark. Veil indicates the sanctity of the *Madbaha*, the mystical nature of the Holy Qurbana and the invisibility of God. Veil is drawn from right side to the left. It is found only in the Eastern Churches.

## Cross

It is an important symbol in the Christian worship. When we dedicate the church, Thirumeni places the Cross at the center of the *thronos*. It symbolizes the presence of God through the crucified and resurrected Christ. In our worship also we use the sign of the Cross many times. When the celebrant gives the blessing he puts the sign of the cross, the worshippers, as a sign of accepting the blessing put the sign of the cross. This is also done at the time of the declaration of the Trinity and also at the time of indication of the Cross. Since Cross symbolizes peace, love and the new life through the self emptying act of Christ, we should try to understand meaning, hidden in the sign. When we put the sign of the cross we remember the salvific act of the Lord, that is Lord Jesus Christ came down from heaven to earth brought us from left to right. The line drawn from the head to the chest signifies the coming down of the Son from heaven to earth. Then we draw another line from the left shoulder to the right shoulder, signifying our transference to the sacred ones on the right hand side from the left hand side through His cross. We draw the sign of cross with three fingers representing the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Making the sign of the cross is a speechless prayer reminding us of the presence of our Lord in our hearts, a symbol of receiving the merits of our Lord's sacrifice and a symbol our identification with the crucifixion of our Lord. But many of our people do not know the meaning of the sign of Cross and do not draw the sign of the Cross.

## Tableetha (Table-let)

It is placed on the *thronos* and is consecrated at the time of the consecration of the church. It is a wooden plank reminding us that the Holy Qurbana is a sacrifice without blood. This is placed under the "*virikkuttu*" where paten and chalice are placed on the *thronos*. Without this the celebrant is not allowed to conduct the Holy Qurbana. This reminds us the table Jesus used for the Passover meal. It is known as the portable altar as it has to be taken with the celebrant whenever he conducts the Qurbana (Achsens are allowed to give Qurbana for the sick and those who are unable to come to church in the case of emergency)

## Chalice, Paten, *Kablana* and *Sosappa*

Chalice is the vessel used to keep the wine mixed with water and Paten is the small plate used to keep the bread at the time of Qurbana. *Kablana* is a small cloth used to cover the vessels. *Kablana* is said to represent the '*shekinah*'(light) above the mercy seat in the ark of covenant in the Jerusalem temple "As the priests were leaving the Temple, it was suddenly filled with a cloud shining with the dazzling light of the Lord's presence, and they could not go back in to perform their duties"(1Kings 8:10-11). *Sosappa* is also a white cloth with beautiful work and it is also used to cover paten and chalice after the preparation of Qurbana. This reminds us of the light believed to be

present above the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant, placed in the Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem temple. This also reminds us of the bright cloud that appeared on the mount of transfiguration.

## Bread and Wine

According to the New Testament tradition it is the leavened bread we use for the Holy Qurbana. It is circular in shape and is divided in to four parts and again each part in these four parts is divided in to three. So there are twelve parts in total and in each part we can see the sign of the cross, which signifies the twelve apostles, united in Christ. We use wine mixed with water for Holy Qurbana. The biblical basis for the mixing of wine with water is found in John 19:34 “One of the soldiers, however, plunged his spear in to Jesus’ side, and at once blood and water poured out” Since we have a detailed study about Holy Qurbana, I am not dealing with it in detail.

## Spoon (*tharvodo*)

It is used to take the Holy Qurbana represents the tong with which the live coal was given to the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:6-7). There is a small cushion on the right side of the

*Thableetha* to wipe the hands of the celebrant after touching the holy body and holy blood, and is called “*Gmurtho*.”

## Censer

Incense is an important factor in our worship. It was used in ancient days to pay honor and respect. It denotes the offering of a sweet smelling sacrifice to God “Your life must be controlled by love, just as Christ loved us and gave his life for us as a sweet smelling offering and sacrifice that pleases God.”(Ephesians 5:2). Incense always stands for the invisible presence of God. In the Old Testament times incense was used as a sin offering, and it is believed that the prayers go up to God with incense. The use of incense in worship is referred to in several biblical passages. “And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar, before the throne and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God”.

## Candles

Light is the symbol of God’s presence. We use candles in the liturgy as the continuation of the ancient practice. In the New Testament times lamps were used in the worship “Many lamps were burning in the upstairs room where we were meeting”,(Acts 20:8; Reve.4:5),especially when they worshiped in the caves and combs.

In our worship we use 12 candles, 6 each on both sides of the *thronos*. The number 12 represents the 12 disciples. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life”. Since Jesus is the light of the world, we, the followers of Christ should walk in light. So light has an important place in the worship.

## Gestures

There are certain gestures we practice in our worship. The gestures of the priest and the laity, in the kiss of peace, in the bowing of heads, the reverence paid to the Eucharistic elements, the signing of the Cross-all these are the part of the liturgical act. Eastern churches have the practice of standing at the time of worship. Standing was the normal practice of prayer among the Jews and the early Church followed it. Our worship starts with “*Kauma*” (adoration) which is a Syriac word means to stand. We believe that

God is present in the worship and when we experience the presence of God we should stand as a sign of reverence and adoration. The early church was also practiced standing for prayer with hands raised facing the east. It also expresses the joy of Christian in the resurrection. It also shows the active participation of the laity along with the clergy who also stand, instead of sitting as passive spectators.

We usually sit at the time of 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Bible readings and sermon. Jewish tradition says that the disciples of a teacher used to sit and learn at the feet of the teacher (Lk.10:39). During Lent season we have the gesture of prostration especially at Passion Week. This gesture reminds us that we are sinners and can't even stand before the Holy God (Reve.5:8). Raising hands while praying has also got some meaning. It is an ancient practice of the Jewish people (Ps 141:2, Ex 17:11). Paul also says about this (1Tim 2:8). While doing this we are praying for others. This gesture symbolizes one's intercession.

### The Kiss of Peace.

This is a universal practice in the Eastern liturgies and is a very meaningful experience. It is of apostolic origin (Rom 16:16; 2Cor 13:12; 1Pet 5:14) and is used in our liturgy to signify `the fellowship of the Spirit`. There are many things included in this gesture. It expresses the reverence, the love and reconciliation. It declares that all are united in Christ "Greet one another with the kiss of Christian love" (1Pet.5: 14). It is not simply an external act but it is a symbol of unity and reconciliation between persons. According to the divine command, before offering the sacrifice, one should pray for forgiveness and be reconciled with others by forgiving one another (Matt.5: 23-24). The passing down of `peace` from the altar shows that the peace comes from God, and passes to the worshippers through the symbolic act of giving of hands (*kayyasoori*).

### Reading of the Gospel

Our practice is that the celebrant stands at the middle of the *Madbaha* during Gospel reading and faces towards the worshippers. Through the Gospel reading Jesus talks to the worshippers. Usually only the bishops or priest does gospel reading. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. To express this idea the priest stands at the center of the *Madbaha* and reads the gospel. As the sign of reverence the crowd stands at the reading of the Gospel. Epistle reading is by the Lay Leader and at the time of Epistle reading he stands at the south side of the *Madbaha*.

### Washing the hands

The celebrant used to wash his hands after the prayer of confession. It symbolizes purification from sin. As God is Holy, those who serve Him should be holy. Jewish tradition also had the practice of washing the feet of the guest by the host when he enters in to the house (Genesis 18:4; Lk.7: 44)

At the time of the last blessing the celebrant used to raise his hands. This is also from the Jewish tradition. Lk.24: 50 say that at the time of Jesus' ascension he lifted up his hands and blessed the disciples. Likewise at the last blessing the celebrant blesses the worshippers and sends them for mission. It is an authority given to the Church.

## The vestments

The vestments used by the priest during the worship have biblical aspect (Exodus 28; 40:13-15). Wearing the vestments shows the preparation of the priests in the presence of God.

The vestments used in the liturgy have symbolic meanings. The vestments signify the dignity and righteousness with which the priest is clothed, in order that he may stand worthily in the presence of God representing the people

Different parts of the vestments are white cassock, *kappa (phaino)*, *kuthino*, *uroro*, *girdle (zunnoro)*, *zendo*, and *phains*.

**White cassock:**-It is a practice from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It symbolizes holiness getting through the baptism. The Book of Revelation says “those who win victory will be clothed like this in white, and I will not remove their names from the book of the living”(Reve.3: 5; 7:9)

**Kappa:** -The vestments that the priests wear during the holy Qurbana and the other sacraments are known as *kappa*. It is a sign of glorification for the one who serves God (Ps.132: 9-10). The priest wears an alb of white linen or cotton called *kuthino*, which symbolizes purity and holiness. A broad strip of material worn over the neck and hanging down in front is called the stole (*uroro*) which represents the breastplate of justice against the power of spiritual enemies (Ps.18: 39-40;Eph.6: 14). The girdle signifies divine strength with which the priest is girded which wears around the waist. When it wears with the cassock, it signifies the ministry of servant hood and the willingness to serve at all times (Jn.13: 4,5;Eph.6: 14) A cuff (*zendo*) is worn over each sleeve of the alb, going up to the elbow showing that the hands are prepared for action in the service of God. It signifies the preparation and protection against enemies.

## Vestments of the Bishops

**Masanapso:** - The Bishops of the Marthoma church always wear on their head, embroidered with thirteen crosses called *masanapso* (hood). The crosses represent Jesus Christ and twelve disciples. Mt.27: 29 say that they put a crown of thorns on his head and mocked him. It is used by the monks (*ramban*). Since all the Bishops of the Eastern churches are from the monks, they all wear *masanapso*. Our Bishops are not from the married clergy. The bishops usually wear red cassock and the red color denotes kingship.Mt.27: 28 says that, “they stripped off his clothes and put a scarlet robe on them.” Here it is clear that the Jews put a scarlet robe on Jesus and the scarlet robe is the sign of kingship. Since bishops are the followers of Christ’s kingship the bishops also wear red cassock.

**Pastoral staff:**-It is called *Murneetha*. It is the sign of a shepherd. Bishops are considered as the shepherd of the sheep, who follow Jesus, the great shepherd. The staff is given to the herd the lamb and to drive away the wolves (John 10:21; Heb.13: 20-22; Ps.23: 1). It is also the symbol of authority.

**Sleebe (cross):**-It shows the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It represents victory. Bishops use this at the time of blessings and at the time when they bless bread and wine. Kissing the cross denotes reverence to the cross. In the Eastern Churches there is a practice of kissing Bishops’ ring as a mark of showing allegiance to the bishop’s authority.

## The Sacraments

Sacraments have important place in our worship. Sacrament is a means of grace, a visible sign, used to signify a spiritual truth and blessing. Sacrament assures God's blessings and assumes the faith of the participants. Our Acheens, at the time of ordination they are commissioned to preach the word of God and to administer sacraments and rites. As we know certain symbols are used in the administration of the sacraments. We may think that how far external actions are necessary to have the grace in the sacrament. Through symbols connected with the sacraments, we can have lively and intense relationship with God. We will have deep spiritual experiences when all the senses of our body get involved and when importance is given to spiritual experience. Evelyn Underhill says, "Sensible stimulations of the eye, ear or even of taste, touch or smell can give supra sensible suggestion to us and awaken, nourish and deepen the worship sense. Any exclusive spirituality which rejects these homely aids, defeats its own end." Our emotions cannot be fully expressed in words. Actions and gestures are essential to express our thoughts and feelings, and to receive the inner experience of penitence and joy. For example, kneeling down is the expression of our humility, penitence, and dependence on God's mercy. Jesus himself used matter for the administration sacraments. Holy Qurbana was instituted with bread and wine (1Cor.11: 24, 25). So also the sacrament of Holy Baptism was instituted with water and the sacrament of the Holy Unction with oil. Thus we find that Jesus himself gave importance to the outward symbols and actions in the sacraments. It brings the inward spiritual experience also. There is also a possibility that the sacrament may get degraded and become mechanical and they become a substitute for the real experience. Hence we have to participate in the symbolic actions and rituals with the whole heart, submitting ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit and continuing in the same spirit in practical life.

Since we have a detailed study of the sacraments, I am not giving a detailed study of it (please refer the other study book)

## Festivals, Feasts and Fasts.

Are there any festivals in the Marthoma Church? This is a question asked by many of us. But our constitution strictly admonishes us that the festivals, feasts and lent are not to be removed or altered. These include the observance of the Sundays as per the church calendar, the different feast days and lent, especially feasts commemorating the important events in the life of our Lord. These feasts are called *Maranaya Perunalukal*. For a Christian, Sunday is the most important day in a week, because it is the day of our Lord. Since our Lord has resurrected on Sunday, it is regarded as the first day of the week. So Sunday is separated for worship and witness. Sunday is known as the Day of the Lord. As a church we must gather together to worship the Lord who came down from heaven to save us.

## Fasts

During the season of Lent every member of the church is expected to set apart a time for serious reflection self-examination and renewed commitment with fasting and prayer. It is a time in which we wait upon the Lord in fellowship and are transformed to fulfill his will. During Lent some people observe restrictions regarding food, it is good if it facilitate concentration more importantly leading to a feeling of deep concern for the hungry and poor and a real sense of self-denial.

We observe 50 days as Lent period including the 40 days in which our Lord fasted and 10 days commemorating his passion and crucifixion. There are some important days in these 50 days. First Wednesday of this 50 day is known as Ash Wednesday, ash symbolizes repentance. There is *Dahana Perunal* (Epiphany) on 6<sup>th</sup> January, Christ's glory revealed to the Gentiles. (Commemorating the day the magi (wise men) from the East visited the infant Jesus. There are some other events that are also important during the Lent season. They are Feast of **Annunciation**, March 25<sup>th</sup> the Gabriel, the angel announced about Christ's birth to Virgin Mary. Then Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter are also important days in the Great Lent. During the Great Lent season the Eastern churches reveal the glory of our Lord through the Gospel readings starting from the sign that the wedding at Caana where Jesus changes water in to wine till the resurrection of Jesus.

There is 25 days of Lent from 1<sup>st</sup> of December to 25<sup>th</sup> of December, which includes annunciation to Zechariah, to Virgin Mary and to Joseph. Beside these on the month of January there is three days of Lent, which reminds us the repentance of Jonah. On June 13 Days Lent that reminds us about all the Apostles. On August we have 15 days Lent. All these Lent seasons should lead us to repentance and renewal. Eight weeks before Christmas are separated for sanctification and renewal of the church. There are two more festivals on 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Sundays of the month of November that are known as "*koodash eatho*" (means consecration of the church) and "*huedas eatho*" (means reformation or renewal of the church.) Beside these festivals there are some other festivals, which reminds us about the life and ministry of Mar Stephen, Mar Thoma, Mar Matthew and John the Baptist (Mar means Holy).

The important feast and festivals observed in the Church are given below (some of these are mentioned in the above paragraph)

***Dahana*(Epiphany)** celebrated on 6<sup>th</sup> January, commemorating the day the magi(wise men) from the East visited the Infant Jesus and his glory was revealed the Gentiles.

Feast of Annunciation:-It is on March 25<sup>th</sup>, the Day of Gabriel; the angel announced the news of Christ's birth to Virgin Mary.

The Great Lent finishes with Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday Good Friday and Easter.

Palm Sunday:-On Palm Sunday Jesus rides in to Jerusalem. So on Palm Sunday we remember the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.Mk.11: 1-10

Maundy Thursday:-It is the remembrance of the Passover meal, which is, narrated in Exodus 12.In the New Testament it denotes the last meal of Jesus Christ with his disciples (Mk.14) The Holy Qurbana was instituted on this day (1Cor 11 23-26) by our Lord.

Good Friday: - This is the day our Lord was crucified. The self-emptying of Jesus for the remission of our sins (Mk.15)

Easter: It is the day that our Lord has resurrected from the dead (Mk.16)

The Day of Ascension comes 40 days after Easter.

The Day of Pentecost: -The day when the Holy Spirit was poured on the church.

The Day of Transfiguration.

## The Nicene Creed

This has an important place in the history of the Marthoma Church. It played an important role in shaping the faith of the church. The importance of the Creed is mentioned in the constitution also. In the *Thubden* prayer it is said that we should remember the councils at Nicea, Constantinople and Ephesus and follow the decisions. All the early churches acknowledged these three councils and their decisions.

### **Background.**

There were many heresies and false teachings among the early Christians and many interpretations were very common. At this situation the early church fathers felt the need for a common faith. So they met at Nicea in A.D.325. Nicea was a city in Asia Minor ruled by Roman Emperor Constantine who accepted Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and worked for the growth of the religion. Deacon Athanasius of Alexandria prepared the first draft of the creed. After a lot of discussions and changes the council of church fathers in A.D.325 at Nicea acknowledged it. This creed mainly states about the belief of the church. As a church what do we believe? Since the Nicene Creed contains the basic doctrines of Christian faith, it is regarded as the creed of the Universal Church. What is the content of the Nicene Creed?

**We believe:** -Here we see the subject in plural. Church is a society. So the faith of the whole community is important for the growth of the church. The churches in the East believe that church is a community of people of God. The next is the elaboration of what do we believe? We believe in God. The next lines are trying to answer the question, who is this God? Our God is a God, the Father Almighty. “We believe in one true God the Father Almighty.” This statement shows a strong and powerful relationship between Father and children. We are the children of our Loving Father. Then the creed says, “Maker of heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible.” The Christian faith affirms that God is the creator of all things. Through the creation God has revealed his power. And God has revealed as loving Father to the human beings. God is not the creator only but God, like a loving Father loves and cares his creation also. This is the uniqueness of our God. So the responsibility of the church is to believe and affirm the faith in this true God, the Father.

**We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ:** -Here the church understands incarnated Jesus Christ in the history. The church explains the relationship between Jesus Christ and God through the relationship between father and son. The personhood of Jesus is described here. As God is One Christ is also One. There were many heresies regarding the divinity of Jesus among the early Christians. So it was the responsibility of the church to affirm the faith in Jesus Christ. God is revealed in history through Jesus Christ as a part of the salvific act of Him. Since Jesus has submitted to the will of God he is elevated and he is worthy to be worshiped. And they believed that Jesus Christ is the Son and they affirmed the faith in Jesus. Gospels affirm that he is the only begotten Son of God and this affirmation helped the worshipers to believe in the Son.

The rest of the part explains how Jesus became the One Lord. Jesus Christ is the Very God of Very God that is in essence both are same, and Son is not the creation he was with God at the time of creation. If it is so one may ask the question, why did Jesus call God as Father? It is not because Jesus was not the one among all the creations but because has the same essence of God, he has the same glory of God the Father. Incarnation of Jesus was a historic event for the salvation of human kind. He came down from heaven and became man; Virgin Mary became an instrument for this by the help of

the Holy Spirit. Virgin Mary was the representative of the humankind who submitted herself to the will of God.

The following part explains how Jesus Christ became the Savior of the world through his incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. And the creed affirms that all these were historical realities. This is affirmed because for the accomplishment of his mission and ministry it was a necessity to prove his divinity and humanity as historical realities. The incarnation of Jesus was an important teaching of the Christian faith. Philippians 2:6&7 say, “He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to become equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant He became like a man and appeared in human likeness.” For our salvation Jesus came down from heaven, lived among us, as one of us he was equal to man except for sin and he bore pain, he was tempted and crucified. He shared all the feelings and pain of all other human beings. The only and important exception was that he was resurrected from the dead as the first born from the dead. So the Son of God became the Son of man.

The last part about the Son says that he will come again in glory. The Creed says, “He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead and of his Kingdom there will be no end.” There are many references in the New Testament that say about the second coming of Jesus Christ (Mt.24: 36, 42; 1Thess.4: 16, 17; 2Thess.2: 2; Acts 1:7; 1Pet.1: 8, 9 etc). When we say Christ will come again, we experience the presence of the living Christ as a comforter, as a guide, as a counselor and as a judge in the last day.

The last part of the Nicene Creed talks about the Holy Spirit, “**We believe in the Holy Spirit**”. The first part about this says that the Holy Spirit is a person, “the giver of life and proceeds from the Father who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified”. This shows that Holy Spirit shares the same essence with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is also be worshipped with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets and the apostles. Christian faith affirms the faith in Trinity. We believe in Triune God, that is, we believe that Holy Spirit is one in the Godhead and shares the same substance with the Father. The True God is the one reality that was experienced in three different ways to the believers.

The next part talks about the church, “**We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church**”. Four qualities are mentioned in the creed about the church, church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

**The Church is One:** -The church by its very nature has to be one because it is the undivided body of Christ. So it should not be divided.Eph.4: 5&6 say, “There is one Lord, one faith, on baptism; there is one God and Father of all mankind, who is Lord of all, works through all and is in all.” According to Paul there is only one church founded on Jesus Christ, and the local congregations are only regional expressions of the one Church. “For God has already placed Jesus Christ as the one and only foundation, and no other foundation can be laid” (1Cor.3: 11; 1Thess.2: 14; 1Cor.1: 13; 12:13).

**The Church is Holy:** -Church is holy because it is the body of Christ. The believers are to be set apart to lead a holy life. As the church is the body of Christ we share the holiness of Christ and through baptism the Christian believer partakes of the holiness of Christ. “You were chosen according to the purpose of God the Father and were made a holy people by his Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and he purified by his blood” (1Pet.1: 2; 2:5-9; Rom.12: 1-2; John17: 19)

**The Church is Catholic:** -The word “catholic” means that which is spread throughout the inhabited world or universal (the word catholic came from a Greek word ‘*catholicos*’ which means universal). This word can also be used to describe the

soundness of faith. That is the church is catholic means that the church has preserved and transmitted the apostolic faith correctly. Any church can claim catholicity if it holds the fundamentals of the Christian faith, even though there may be diversity in the doctrines and practices.

**The Church is Apostolic:** -The church is apostolic when it is built on the faith and tradition of the apostles. Eph.2: 20 make it clear, “You too are built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, the corner stone being Christ Jesus himself.” The word apostle means the one who is sent with a mission. The risen Christ had been sent the disciples to the world for the proclamation of the Gospel. (The Greek word *apostellein* means, “to send out”). So the churches, which are born as a result of the apostolic preaching, are apostolic in character. The primary characteristic of the church is that the church has an apostolate or missionary mandate.

As a church we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins and look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the new life of the world to come. We affirm one baptism in one’s life. There is a history behind it. At the time of early Christians because of persecution and tribulations some of them left Christianity and after some time they repented and wished to come back to Christianity. Some people argued that they should be baptized again if they want to become the members. This argument came to the council of Nicea and it discussed the matter and came to the conclusion that if one is baptized once it should not be repeated. We enter into the church through baptism. Through baptism we are identified with crucifixion of Jesus. Since Jesus was crucified only once we believe that baptism is also only once.

The basis of Christian faith is that there is a life after death. Death is not an end in one’s life. It is not only the present faithful ones but those who led a faithful life and died also are the members of the church (because they were also identified with the crucifixion of Christ through baptism). Church is waiting for the second coming of Jesus when the living and the dead will resurrect, transform and unite in Christ.

The detailed study of the Creed shows that it includes all the basic teaching of Christian faith. It explains the functions of Trinity and also it expresses power and character of the Triune God.

## Conclusion

The Mar Thoma Church is rich in its heritage. It is sure that the liturgy, which is filled with prayers and at the same time gestures symbols, has played an important role to formulate and strengthen the worshipper’s faith. They speak to the heart, mind and intellect in diverse ways. Through certain practices connected with the worship we can have lively and intense relationship with God. The practices in the Church add a new dimension to the faith of the believing community. The faith and practices of the church cannot easily be separated.

God speaks to us through different means like nature, prophets and finally through the Son Jesus Christ. Similarly we can also speak to God through prayers, offerings, and meditations and even through some actions. All these are the expressions of our deep relationship with our God. But all these become meaningful when we do it with the whole heart and submitting ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit and continuing in the same Spirit in the practical life. There is a possibility to get it degraded and mechanical and to become a substitute for the real experience. So in order to live by its meaning, one has to understand and stand in the rich heritage of the church. Hope this study will enable our worshipping community to worship in truth and spirit.

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