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Dear and Reverend Fathers,

Greetings from Bishop's House, Thuckalay!

The liturgical year of the Syro-Malabar Church begins with the period of Annunciation. The four weeks in preparation to the feast of the Nativity of Jesus, celebrated on 25th December constitute this season. Since we practice abstinence from 1st to 25th December in preparation for Christmas, we call this period “25 days Lent”. The clarion call of St John the Baptist should reverberate in our minds: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of the God” (Lk 3:4-6). It also brings to light one of the last verses of the Book of Revelation: “Come, Lord Jesus” - *Maranatha* - (Rev 22:20). Thus the twenty-five days of intense preparation leads us to the celebration of Christmas.

The story of Christmas reminds us of the roles that Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels and the three wise men played. It also recalls to our minds how there was no room at the inns and how the manger became the cradle for the Messiah. However, the heart of Christmas lies in what St John wrote: “God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

Since the fall of Adam and Eve, we read in the Scriptures how God attempted to reach out to human beings in varied ways. The climax of God communicating with us in the Old Testament was when He entered into a covenant with Moses on Mount Sinai. God joined himself to us in a covenant and we were joined to God in a covenant. But we still sinned so God raised prophets to call us back but only a small number of people paid heed to the prophets. Through Hosea, God complained that Israel has been like an unfaithful wife committing adultery by going after false gods. All through the centuries of the Old Testament, God pursued us like a lover but we had broken the covenant and God had to make a new unbreakable covenant with us. For this new covenant, God became flesh and bones like us, and shed his blood in the person of Jesus to convince us once and for all to accept his invitation to be his people. Jesus was the climax of God reaching out to us. “The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory” (Jn 1:14).

Christmas is a moment of paradoxes. We see the light shining in the darkest season, the fire blazing in the cold of winter, life stirring in the fallow of the year. We participate in the paradoxes of the season when we acknowledge the infant light at the darkest point of the year. We read in the Gospel of John, “The light still shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1: 5). Just as the light of the sun is secretly rekindled and reborn, so are we given an opportunity for our divine spark to wax and grow in light. Christmas is a feast of the interior light, a rekindling of the spiritual spark within us, even as we see the fire blazing in the cold of winter.

In the Gospel of St Matthew 1: 23, we read: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means, God with us.” Let us seize the

moment and allow ourselves to feel the presence of this God of ours who prefers to be with us. He comes with the message of forgiveness. He asks to forgive one another so that he can also forgive us our sins. "Forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us" (Lk 11:4). Christmas is a time to feel that are all brothers and sisters created in the image and likeness of God. In our country, people belonging to different religions are able to live in peace and mutual understanding although communalism with its evils is raising its ugly head every now and then. Even among Christians, there are different denominations. But we need to work in tandem to bring the message of forgiveness and peace that the Lord came to give us to the people around. The prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper comes to my mind: "They may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I you, that they also may be in us" (Jn 17: 21).

Christmas is also a time of sacrifice in that we often participate in the giving of gifts and contributing to charities at this time. The nativity and birth that we celebrate at Christmas Eve is a sacrifice as well. Jesus sacrifices the glory and light vesture of the celestial aeons in order to take on human form and dwell upon the earth. Writing to the Philippians, St Paul was able to capture it. "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God, something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness: (Phi 2:6-7). There is no book, no scripture and no authority outside of one's self that is an authentic source regarding the mystery of incarnation. It is a mystery that can only be witnessed individually in each one's own heart.

As we know, Christmas belongs not only to those who call themselves Christians but also to the entire world. The lowly animals, birds, plants and trees all participate in this nativity of the divine light at Christmas. An old French legend tells how all the animals were given the gift of speech on Holy Night; so that they were granted the ability to give outward expression to their consciousness and recognition of the light. Our compassion for our human brothers and sisters is increased when we realize that the animals and trees are also wondrous light-beings in even more humble, limited and unrecognizable form than ourselves.

The baby Jesus was born in a stable used to shelter animals and is laid in a manger - a humble birth for the proclaimed King of kings. We also share that humble existence in this world. We also experience the sacrifice of the glorious light of the aeons and see our light power as a tiny spark of its original flame. The holy birth at Christmas represents the birth of the Christ-Sun within us, an awakening of our consciousness to who we are and the light from whence we came, an awakening from the sleep of forgetfulness. As the Christmas is nearing, let us experience the birth of Christ in our hearts.

NEWS AND EVENTS

Decisions of the Second Session of the XXV Synod: During the Synod, it was decided that our Churches and Chapels should not be given for shooting commercial films. However, permission may be given for shooting programmes of Catholic channels like Goodness TV, Shalom TV, etc. (Minutes of 22 August 2017).

The Synod has asked each Eparchy to appoint a priest to be in-charge of evangelization. It will be his duty to constantly interact with the retreat centres of the Eparchy and to get in touch with the catechumens of various parishes of the Eparchy for continued pastoral care (Minutes of 22 August 2017).

Beatification of Venerable Rev. Sr. Rani Maria FCC: The beatification of Venerable Rev. Sr Rani Maria FCC, a Martyr of the Syro-Malabar Church, was held on 4 November 2017 at Indore. I participated in this momentous event together with five of our FCC Sisters. On 2 November I met

our Brothers studying at Ujjain and on 3 November, I visited Udainagar, the village where Blessed Rani Maria was martyred. Over fifty prelates including Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops concelebrated the beatification Qurbana. A large number of priests and religious also attended the programme. More than twelve thousand people gathered for the celebration at St. Paul's School grounds, Indore. It was proud moment for the Indian Church and more especially for the Syro-Malabar Church.

Eparchial Day and Conclusion of the Silver Jubilee Celebration of the Major Archiepiscopal Church: The Eparchial Day celebration was held on 11 November 2017 at Asseer Auditorium, Kalluvilai. The celebration began with Holy Qurbana at 9.30am. Mar Thomas Tharayil, Auxiliary Bishop of Changanassery, presided over the meeting. Along with the Eparchial Day Celebrations, we marked the conclusion of the Silver Jubilee of the establishment of the Syro-Malabar Church as Major Archiepiscopal Church and the extension of the territory of Eparchy of Thuckalay up to Madurai. During the felicitation ceremony, Rev. Sr. Bergmans SH and Ms. Salammal from Munchirai parish were honoured with *Sevai Semmal* Awards for their dedicated mission work in the Eparchy. The programme ended with lunch, which was served at 1.30 pm. I thank all the Fathers, Sisters and Lay people for their committed service to the Eparchy. In a special way, I thank Rev. Fr. Joseph Santhosh, Rev. Fr Sumesh Velliyamthadathil, Parish Priests of the Forane parishes and Curia members for taking the initiative to make the celebration a grand success.

Episcopal Ordinations: The Episcopal Ordinations of the newly elected Bishops of our Syro-Malabar Church was held during the last month. Rev. Dr. Joseph Pamplani, Auxiliary Bishop of Thalassery was ordained on 8 November 2017, Rev. Dr. Sebastian Vaniyapurackal, Curia Bishop of Syro-Malabar Church was ordained on 12 November 2017 at Kanjirapally; Rev. Dr. Tony Neelankavil, Auxiliary Bishop of Trichur, was ordained on 18 November 2017 and Rev. Fr Sebastian Pozhiparambil, Bishop of Hosur was ordained on 22 November 2017. The installation of Mar Raphel Thattil as the Bishop of Shamshabad will be held on 7 January 2018. I was able to take part in the all Episcopal Ordinations except the Episcopal Ordination of Bishop Tony Neelankavil, Auxiliary Bishop of Trichur.

Thanksgiving Celebration of Blessed Rani Maria at Thettiyoode: The Eparchial level thanksgiving celebration for the beatification of Venerable Rev. Sr. Rani Maria was held on 25 November 2017 Thettiyoode parish. The programme began with the arrival of the Holy Relics of Blessed Rani Maria. Rev. Sr. Celia FCC, Provincial of FCC, San Joe Province, Thuckalay brought the Relics. I received the Relics and Rev. Fr Jose Muttathupadam carried it to Thettiyoode parish in procession. A large number of people took part in it. The Holy Qurbana and a brief commemoration meeting were also held. Rt. Rev. Jeromedas Varuvel sdb, Bishop of Kuzhithurai, presided over the meeting and Rev. Fr. John Kuzhanthai from Kottar, Postulator for the canonical process of the beatification of Venerable Rev. Sr. Rani Maria, Rev. Sr. Starly FCC, and representatives from the Dioceses of Kottar and Marthandam took part in the event. Rev. Fr. Jinu Thekkethalackal, FCC Sisters and the parishioners of Thettiyoode arranged the entire event. I thank them. I also place on record my gratitude to all the Fathers, Sisters and the faithful who took part in the programme.

Visit to the Extended Territories of the Eparchy: As we all know, the territory of our Eparchy was extended up to Madurai. During the last month, I along with Fr. Thomas Thuckalay was able to visit a small community of Syrian Catholics in Madurai on 23 November 2017. The CMI Fathers from Coimbatore are taking care of their pastoral needs. The people come together in the Formation House of CMI Fathers to receive the Sacraments. We need to organize the entire programme and may be in the future it is to establish a parish there.

On 28 November 2017, I and Fr. Thomas Sathianesan visited the Syro-Malabar communities in the District of Theni. The CMI Fathers of Kottayam province are looking after them. The fathers are very happy that we visited them and looking forward to our formal entry and to begin mission works.

Blessing of DNN Additional Building: The additional structure that was constructed to accommodate more patients at DNN was blessed on 30 November 2017. The institution also celebrated its 11th Annual Day on the occasion. Due to the heavy rain and cyclone the formal celebration was cancelled but we had the Holy Qurbana and the blessing of new building. Rev. Fr. Vinod Kanakalil initiated the construction work and he worked hard to raise the required funds for the building. I am grateful to him and to the benefactors for supporting financially for the construction work.

“OCKHI”, THE CYCLONIC STORM: We witnessed the cyclonic storm that wreaked havoc in the Kanyakumari District of Tamilnadu and southern parts of the state of Kerala. The cyclone had hit the Kanyakumari District in the very early morning of about 4:00 AM on November 30, 2017. The people woke up to fearful morning with water all around in the low lying areas and very healthy trees in many numbers uprooted and many coming down in halves. Because of the heavy wind many electric posts fell on the ground and the electricity has been snapped completely since the early morning of November 30, and now only in the key areas the electricity has been restored, unfortunately most part of the district is still in the dark. Many people have lost their growth in the farms. One can see thousands of banana plantations, rubber plantations being brought down by the fury of the cyclone. Months and years of hard work have been affected. Their dream has been shattered.

We as a diocese, our priests, religious and lay and youth volunteers in different areas were watchful and assisted the suffering people in emergency areas by providing Mobile generators, drinking water etc. We kept open our schools, parish houses and churches, to the public use. We are using our available sources to help out our people. Some of our parishes and centres are badly affected by the cyclonic storm, which has brought havoc on the homes, trees, plantation etc. Many homes of the poor people in Plankalai parish have been destroyed by the cyclonic storm and have shifted to safe houses in their neighbourhood. KKSSS has come forward to give initial support to these poor people. Dear Fathers and sisters I am grateful and proud of you for venturing into the lives of our people who are in need and giving your best supportive hand with your presence, material help and above all prayers.

We are supposed to begin the three days’ Diocesan Annual Convention on December 1, 2017, had to be cancelled. **The next diocesan annual convention will be on 10 and 11 February, 2018.** This will help our people to prepare for the great Lent.

Transfers and Appointments:

- **Rev. Fr. Justin Suthesh** was appointed as the Parish Priest of Holy Family Parish, Thakkalivilai. He took charge on 5 November 2017.
- **Rev. Fr. Linslal Mangalath** is relieved from the office of Parish Priest of Holy Family Church, Thakkalivilai.

INFORMATION

- ❖ **Mission Sunday Collection:** Kindly submit the offerings that the people made for the Missions to Rev. Fr. Dency Mundunadackal, Procurator of the Eparchy, at the earliest, so that they can be despatched to Rome for the mission work around the globe. I thank each and every member of our Eparchy for his or her support and help for the mission work of the Eparchy as well of the universal Church.

- ❖ Kindly note that the pre-Christmas Celebrations for our presbyterium will be on **19 December 2017**. Since we did not have the emergency priests' conference on 3 December, we begin the 19th Dec. meeting at 4.00 pm at Sangamam. Kindly arrange all your programmes such a way that you can be present for it.
- ❖ Rev. Fr Jose Vayalil will be visiting Australia from 10 January 2018 for a week to baptize his cousin and to bless his aunt's newly built house. We wish him happy journey.
- ❖ Upon reaching the Diocese, Rev. Fr. Sajan Nettaponghu was transferred to Whitefield, Manchester on 24 November 2017. We wish him God's blessings for the success of his new assignment.
- ❖ The Diocesan and Forane level new *uravium* teams had their first meetings on 15 November at Kalluvilai. Kindly give cooperate with the Director of *Uravium* for their smooth functioning.
- ❖ The Eparchy is planning to begin the much-awaited one-year Theology course for lay people soon and Rev. Fr Christudas is already appointed as its Director. Further details will be communicated to you later.
- ❖ Rev. Fr Josy, who is working in Germany, was transferred to new parish and his address is Fr. Josy Thomas, Goethestr. 8, 73642 Welzheim, Germany. His new contact number is 004915232065194. His Whatsapp number remains the same.
- ❖ I have sent individual Christmas greetings to all the families. They would have reached your parish by now. Kindly do the needful as instructed in the personal letter that I have written to each one of you.

FORTHCOMING PROGRAMMES

04 December 2017	- First Death Anniversary of Rev. Fr Thomas Urumpaical
19 December 2017	- Eparchial Priests' Sangamam with Pre-Christmas Celebration
25 December 2017	- Christmas
29 December 2017	- Blessing of Little Flower Church Pilankalai
31 December 2017	- Year End

CONCLUSION

With grateful hearts for the numerous blessings that God has showered upon us, especially the beatification of Venerable Rev. Sr. Rani Maria, let us begin the holy season of 25 days fast. As mentioned at the beginning of this letter, the profound prayer of this season should be Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! It is also a time for looking both backward and forward. We look backward as we prepare to celebrate the historical birth of Jesus. At the same time, we look forward to the 'Second Coming' of Jesus as we get ourselves ready to welcome him into all the areas of our lives during this season.

Although there will be occasions when we can personally wish one another during this month, still let me, through this letter, wish you, dear Fathers, a Merry Christmas and a God-filled New Year 2018. May you have a faith experience of the Babe of Bethlehem as you prepare to celebrate Christmas!

With my prayers and blessings,

Yours in Christ Jesus,



+George Rajendran SDB
Bishop of Thuckalay

