

Queens priest seeks to preserve ancient language

By Queens Courier Staff

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Rev. Joseph Palackal, parochial vicar at Maspeth's St. Stanislaus Kostka Church, is attempting to save the ancient language of Aramaic.

ERIC JANKIEWICZ

The Rev. Joseph Palackal saves more than souls. The parochial vicar at St. Stanislaus Kostka Church (<http://www.ststansmaspeth.catholicweb.com/>) in Maspeth (<http://queenscourier.com/tag/maspeth/>) is trying to save the ancient language of Aramaic, said to be spoken by Jesus and early Christians.

This summer he plans to revisit the unlikely home of the last Aramaic speakers — in the southern Indian state of Kerala, where many Christians trace the origin of their faith to Thomas the Apostle.

“Few people know this, but up until recently Christian Indians held religious services in the ancient language Aramaic,” Palackal said.

He explained that since the 1960s the churches in India held mass in the ancient language that much of the Middle East spoke in the early Christian years. Much like Latin, the spoken language has since faded into history.

“In Kerala, the language was kept in a time capsule,” he said, explaining that Christians in Kerala, unlike those in the Middle East, weren’t persecuted and could thus speak the language freely. “And so I’ve been trying to record as many people as possible who have knowledge of the language.”

The trick, Palackal said, is finding people who were born no later than the 1950s and attended the local church, where Aramaic was used for songs and worship. People born after that time wouldn’t have been exposed to the language because the church adopted the local language of Malayalam.

“So it is a very time-sensitive project and I have to hurry before all those who remember the language are gone,” Palackal said, explaining that he tracked down Indians who were part of the Syro-Malabar Church, the largest of the St. Thomas Christian denomination, which has its own forms of worship and theology. Many were able to sing the Aramaic religious songs of their youth.

Palackal hopes to have enough recordings of the language, which is preserved through religious song, to submit it to the Library of Congress.

And if he succeeds in his quest, the movie “The Passion of the Christ” won’t be the only place where Aramaic is heard or appreciated.

“It’s like a gold mine of musical melodies,” he said. “And if I don’t do it, no one else will. It will be a complete loss for humanity.”

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