

## Raza - The Most Solemn Eucharistic Celebration of the Mar Toma Nasrani Church (An Introduction)

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The three fundamental elements of Catholic life are the Sacred Scripture, the Magisterium and the Tradition. As part of the tradition, the liturgy evokes and expresses the faith experience of the Church. Any Church is the symbol of the continued presence of Jesus Christ in the world. It is primarily in her liturgy that a Church proclaims and exhibits her nature through signs and symbols.

The Catholic Church is a communion of 23 Churches of equal rights yet with distinct identity spread all around the world. They come under four liturgical families, viz., the East Syriac or Chaldaic family, the West Syriac family consisting of the Antiochene, the Maronite, the Byzantine and the Armenian Liturgies, the Alexandrian with the Coptic and the Ethiopian liturgies, and the Latin. Sharing the Christ-Experience from St. Thomas the Apostle, the Mar Toma Nasrani Church (Syro-Malabar Church) follows the East Syriac Liturgy which was developed by the disciples of St. Thomas, around Edessa and influenced by all St. Thomas Christians. The Raza or the most solemn form of the Eucharistic celebration is the distinctive feature of the Syro-Malabar Liturgy. Though it is unknown to many in the East Syriac family, Raza was always in use in the Mar Toma Nasrani Church.

The Syro-Malabar tradition summarizes the whole mystery of salvation in its celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharistic Celebration is called Qurbana, which means an offering, a gift or an oblation. The most solemn Qurbana is the Raza. The word Raza could mean mystery. In the Raza, the word Raza itself is used 26 times both in singular and plural. The Sliba (Cross), the Word of God, and the Body and Blood of Christ are three living representations of our Lord. They are given supreme priority in various prayers, hymns and rituals of the Raza. The mystery of the Sliba, the Word of God and the Body and Blood of Christ is completely unveiled in the Raza. Thus Raza is the celebration of the Sliba, the Word of God, and the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Raza is introduced by the remembrance of the command of Christ (Lk 22:19) by both the Celebrant and the faithful. The Raza begins with the proclamation of the incarnation of our Lord through the symbol of the Angels' Hymn, "Glory to God in the highest..." (Lk 2:14). Gradually the worshipping community enters the Old Testament background of the incarnation and the hidden life of Jesus in the Enarxis (Introductory Rites). The community responds to it by pronouncing Amen. It comes from the Hebrew word Aman which means 'truthfully, faithfully, certainly' and so on. The liturgical assembly responds to the reenactment of the whole Mystery of Salvation by pronouncing Amen. In the Raza Amen is used 65 times whereas repeated use of it as Amen Amen is seen 13 times.

The Lord's Prayer is recited thrice in the Raza as in other forms of the Qurbana. As a distinctive feature of East Syriac Liturgy, the Lord's Prayer is recited at the commencement and at the conclusion of the Raza. After the Rite of Reconciliation, the confident community without blemish, with pure hearts and trustful countenance, calls the Father in heaven using the Lord's Prayer, as is usual in all Liturgies including that of the Latin Church.

One of the often repeated prayers in the Raza is n-Salle Slamma Amman, i.e., Let us Pray. Peace be with us. It is uttered by the deacon. Slamma means peace, but it is not just peace alone. Slamma stands as the symbol of the risen Lord. In the Raza, Slamma Amman is used 15 times in different contexts. In a way Raza is a celebration of Slamma, the Risen Lord.

The Church uses the Psalms as symbols to lead more deeply into the Mystery of the Incarnation. They help the community to identify themselves with the Old Testament life and proclaim it as part of the mystery of our salvation history.

One of the unique features of the Raza is the observance of a special rite after the Psalms, viz., the Anthem of the Sanctuary (Onitha d-Qanke) and the Kissing of the Sliba. After the priestly prayer which follows the Psalms, the first Deacon hands over the Sliba in the Bema to the Celebrant. After paying respects to it by kissing, he helps the Archdeacon, the deacons, the other ministers and the faithful to do the same. The choir sings the proper Anthem of the Sanctuary during this time.

The resurrection hymn, Laku Mara d-Kolla is sung thrice in every Raza. This hymn is attributed to the Catholicos Simeon Bar Sabba (AD 323-341). Laku Mara d-Kolla is a hymn of celebration by those who were in Siol when our Lord descended into it after His death, for His victory over suffering, death and Satan. It is also an ancient creed. When Laku Mara is sung, the sanctuary veil is drawn. The sanctuary veil separates the sanctuary from rest of the Church. The sanctuary veil indicates that the heaven is hidden from ordinary human perception. It is in liturgy that one is given the experience of heaven. The sanctuary veil symbolizes Jesus, who is the only mediator between God and men (1 Tim 2:5). The sanctuary is veiled again during the Karozutha and during the hymn Dhill-At just before Holy Communion.

During the Laku Mara, the deacon incenses the whole sanctuary, the whole church and the community assembled. Incensing is a symbol of our total submission to God, of the prayer that rises up to heaven from the community and is a sign of forgiveness of sins. There are four more instances in the Raza where incensing is done. During the rite of preparation the chalice and paten are incensed.

Incense is part of the procession of the Evangalion book. At the beginning of the Qudasha, as an expression of showing reverence and adoration to the Eucharistic gifts and to the altar the celebrant incenses them.

Finally, during the rite of reconciliation as a symbol of forgiveness of sins, the celebrant, the deacons, the community, the altar and the Holy Mysteries upon it are incensed. This elaborate rite of incensing during the rite of reconciliation is seen only in the Syro-Malabar liturgy.

The public life of our Lord is commemorated during the Liturgy of the Word in the Raza. It begins with the Trisagion (Is 6,3; Rev 4,8) sung thrice. The Church recognizes this hymn as one proclaiming the role of the most Holy Trinity in human salvation, and one that expresses the great joy of the liturgical assembly in hearing, understanding and accepting the details of this salvation history through the Sacred Scripture.

There are four Scriptural Readings in the Raza which are according to the day of the Liturgical Season. In general, the readings are from the Law, the Prophets, the Apostle and the Gospel. The four readings in the Raza are a comprehensive celebration of the whole Bible, and a confession with unconditional acceptance of it as the source of Christian faith. The combination of the Responsorial Hymn (Shurraya), Instructional Hymns (Turgamma) and the Alleluia Hymn (Zummara) during the Raza show how important the Word of God is for human beings. Instructional Hymns before the reading from the Apostle and the Gospel and the solemn procession of the Evangelion book are unique features of Syro-Malabar Liturgy, especially to the Raza.

At the end of the Alleluia Hymn, the Archdeacon and the deacon accompanied by all other ministers, take the Evangelion book and the Sliba which are placed on the right side and on the left side of the Altar respectively. The Archdeacon leads the procession by lifting the Evangelion book up to his forehead, reaches the Bema and hands it over to the Celebrant. The Celebrant kisses it first and then extends it to other ministers, if possible to all the faithful, to be kissed. He then places the Evangelion book and the Sliba on the table in the Bema. The deacons go to the entrance of the Sanctuary, face the people and alternate the Turgamma of the Gospel with the community. At the end of the Turgamma, the Celebrant chants the Gospel, while the deacons stand on either side of him with lit candles and the Archdeacon on his left side holding the Sliba. After the chanting of the Gospel, the Celebrant closes the Evangelion book, kisses over it and gives it to the deacon at his right side, who places it on the table in the Bema. The Sliba is also placed on the same table.

The second deacon proposes the Proclamation Prayer (Kározutha), which presents the actual disposition and situation of the faithful. The response to the Karózutha prayers, "Our Lord, have mercy on us," (Mt 20,29-34; Mt 15, 22; Lk 17, 13) shows the right attitude of someone asking favours. After the Karózutha, the celebrant prays in a loud voice with hands extended. Once the prayer is over, the archdeacon takes the Sliba and hands it over to the celebrant, who in turn, passes it to the deacon at his left side. The Celebrant then takes the Evangelion book and gives it to the deacon at his right side. The deacons go up to the altar and stand facing one another in front of it.

There is the Imposition of Hands at the end of the Liturgy of the Word. It is to be noted that the blessing is believed to be directly given by God and hence during this time, everybody in the community including the celebrant bows the head. The celebrant goes accompanied by the archdeacon to the middle of the nave near to a large veil with Sliba printed on it, spread out on the floor, and recites the prayer facing the altar.

Now, the deacon dismisses and sends out all those who are not baptized, those who have not received the sign of life (proper reconciliation) and those who are not prepared to receive the Holy Communion. Then the second deacon kisses and receives the Evangelion book held by the first deacon and the first deacon kisses and receives the Sliba held by the second deacon. The Evangelion book and the Sliba are then placed at the right and left sides of the Altar, respectively. This symbolizes that the Son and the Holy Spirit are seated at the right and left side of the Father.

The Celebrant then begins the hymn Kahnaik Nelbshun and the Choir and the deacons sing their part. After each part of the hymn, the celebrant kneels and kisses the veil on the floor three times and stands up and blesses the community with the sign of the Sliba. He does this on the other three sides of the veil and comes back to the original position facing the altar. The deacons now facing the altar sing the couplets "For ever more..." and turn to the celebrant and sing "We entreat Your great mercy...". The celebrant and the deacons sing the couplets "Behold, I am with you all..." and "By Your grace ...." respectively thrice. After each set is over, the deacons walk down toward the celebrant. Once they reach the veil and stand opposite to the celebrant they all sing "Save us from temptations ...". All then prostrate together and kiss the veil. While kneeling, the celebrant blesses the deacons. Then all of them stand up and the celebrant blesses all. The archdeacon and the deacons kiss the sacred Paina of the celebrant. The whole ritual which is unique to the St. Thomas Christians of India is seen as humbling of the celebrant as an immediate preparation for the Qudasha, veneration to the Sliba and as a farewell ceremony of the celebrant as he will soon leave the Bema.

The celebrant washes his hands at the Bema as a symbol of purification of the community as the archdeacon and deacon go to the Beth gaze. The bethgaze, the treasure houses, are arranged on both sides of the altar. The chalice and paten are prepared in the south and north bethgaze respectively. In each Raza, only the particles needed for the communion are prepared.

While the choir sings Onitha d'Raze, the Archdeacon and the deacon bring the Eucharistic gifts to the altar which symbolizes the funeral procession of our Lord. The Archdeacon then raise them in his hands in cross form, deposits them on the altar and covers them with soseppa. This is to be seen as the burial of our Lord and covering of the tomb with a stone.

In the Liturgy of the Word, we celebrate the public life of Jesus and during the rite of preparation we commemorate His passion, death and burial. The rite of preparation being an immediate preparation to the central part of the Qurbana, namely the Qudasha or Anaphora, whatever is celebrated in the Qudasha is proleptically proclaimed in the rite of preparation as well.

In the second part of the Onitha d'Raze, the community remembers all those who are intimately related to the Mystery of Salvation in a typical St. Thomas Christian perspective, viz., the Holy Trinity, Blessed Virgin Mary, all the apostles very specially St. Thomas the Apostle, the Partirarchs, martyrs, just, confessors and the departed ones.

The Nicene Creed which is the summary of the mystery of salvation, is solemnly said by the community as they are moving to Anaphora, the central part of the re-enactment of the mystery of salvation in the Raza.

The celebrant approaches the altar with all humility by bowing down thrice on the way. After he reaches the altar, he kisses in the middle, the right and the left of it, representing the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, respectively.

In the Qudasha (Anaphora), the celebrant seeks the prayers of the community thrice, which is an expression of the intimate relation between the celebrant and the liturgical assembly in the ecclesial body. During the Qudasha, the climax of the Christ-event, death and resurrection of Jesus is celebrated and proclaimed. The Resurrection is proclaimed as the supreme action of the Holy Spirit. Thus the decisive action of the Holy Spirit in human salvation is also proclaimed in the Anaphora through the typical rite of Epiclesis. In the Qudasha of the Apostles Mar Addai and Mar Mari, there are four g'hanta prayers, prayers of inclining. They are said by the celebrant with bent head, low but audible and modulated voice. They are thanksgiving prayers to God. All the g'hanta prayers are introduced with a Kushappa, supplication prayer, and concluded with a qanona, antiphon of praise and thanksgiving. Kushappa is to be said in a low voice. At the end of the second g'hanta, the "Holy" hymn (Is 6,3; Rev 4, 8) is sung. In the middle of the third and fourth g'hanta prayers, the Institution Narrative and the Epiclesis are inserted, respectively.

The Rite of Reconciliation underlines the reconciliation of humankind with the heavenly Father by the help of the Holy Spirit. This Rite begins with praying "Peace of those in heaven...." which is a combination of Pauline theology in the captivity epistles and the theology of Psalms. Psalm 51 and 122 are used to open up a repentant heart, which is ready to confess the sins and seeks absolution. During the breaking of the Body and its mingling with the Blood, the purificatory effect of the Holy Qurbana is proclaimed along with the role of the most Holy Trinity in the celebration of the Mysteries. After the commingling of the Body with the Blood, the two halves are placed on the paten, one upon the other cross-wise, so that the broken side of the particle below faces the chalice, and the particle above, the celebrant. After this the celebrant makes the sign of the Sliba on his own forehead and that of the deacons. This is a summary of an elaborate Rite of Reconciliation that existed in the early Church. This shows the re-admission of the repentant sinner to the community. With the dialogue prayer in the second part in the Rite of Reconciliation, Raza becomes a public act of reconciliation with both the vertical and horizontal aspects of it. The dialogue prayer begins with the celebrant reciting the Pauline Salutation used at the end of the second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians. The Pauline Salutation is already used in the Raza before the dialogue prayer leading to the second g'hanta prayer. This salutation is a public confession of the fact that the Holy Trinity gives itself completely in Jesus Christ to man.

Since all those who are unworthy to continue, are dismissed at the end of the Liturgy of the Word, communion is a must in Raza. Communion under both species which are consecrated in each celebration is distributed to the community. In the Rite of Communion, the faithful are united to the risen body of the Lord and thus become inheritors of the heavenly Kingdom. After the communion, the community, the deacon and the celebrant express their thanksgiving separately. Then after the Lord's Prayer, the Huttamma, the sealing prayer is said by the celebrant standing a little to the right of the sanctuary door. Huttamma is concluded with the celebrant making the sign of the Sliba over the community and blessing them. The Raza is concluded with the celebrant's bidding farewell to the Altar, with the prayer "Remain in peace, altar of forgiveness...." said alone silently and by kissing it.

The Syro-Malabar Qurbana is a Liturgy that presents a unique mystical world. The mystical experience of this world is beyond human logic and ideas. It takes human beings to the Heavens, i.e., raising the earth to the Heavens and bringing down the Heavens to the earth. It is the meeting point of Heaven and earth. They become one. Hence, the challenge of Zophar to Job is also a challenge to all of us, "Can you fathom the mysteries of God or probe the extent of his perfection?" (Job 11: 7).

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