



Qurbānā (“Offering”) The Eucharistic Celebration of the Syro-Malabar Church

General Information

Joseph J. Palackal, CMI

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The Syro-Malabar Church is one of 23 Eastern Churches that constitute the Catholic communion. With 3.25 million members, it is the second largest among the Eastern Catholic churches, after the Ukrainian Church. The term “Syro-Malabar” refers to the Syriac language, the liturgical language until 1962, and the Malabar region that is currently known as Kerala, on the southwest coast of India. The Syro-Malabar Church is one of the eight churches among the St. Thomas Christians (over six million, out of approximately twenty-five million Christians in India) that trace the origin of their faith to St. Thomas the Apostle; the Apostle is believed to have preached the Gospel in South India and died a martyr at Chennai in Tamil Nadu in AD 72.

The Syro-Malabar Church follows the Chaldean rite that originated in Persia. The Chaldean liturgical tradition in Syriac, which is a form of Aramaic that Jesus and His disciples spoke, was brought to South India by immigrant Christians from Persia in the fourth century. A unique feature of the Eucharistic liturgy in the Chaldean rite is the Anaphora (Eucharistic prayer) that Mar Addai and Mari (who are believed to have been among the 72 disciples of Jesus, see Lk 10:1) wrote in Syriac. So far as we know, this is the earliest extant anaphora.

In the Syriac traditions (i. e., Chaldean and Antiochene), the Eucharistic liturgy is referred to by a Semitic word, *Qurbānā*, which means “offering” (see how Jesus uses the term in Mk 7: 10-12). The current English missal has retained this usage.

Puqdānkōn

The introductory dialogue between the Celebrant and the congregation, just before starting the *Qurbānā*, is intimate and interesting. The Syriac text reads:

Celebrant: Puqdānkōn (literally, “your [plural] mandate/command”)

Congregation: Puqdāneh d’msīhā (“mandate of the Messiah”)

The text, like poetry, is polysemic (i. e., having multiple layers of meaning) and, therefore, a literal translation of the phrases may not do it justice. Primarily, it is an act of seeking permission from the community of worshippers, who turn the request around, and tell the Celebrant that he already has authority from the Messiah. It puts the celebrant in a humble state of mind.

Theologically, the Celebrant's request is an acknowledgment of the priesthood of the people (1Peter 2:5, 9) who have gathered for the supreme sacrifice. The Celebrant reminds himself that those who are baptized among the worshipping community are "co-offerers" (see more in Varghese Pathikulangara, *Qurbānā: The Eucharistic Celebration of the Chaldeo-Indian Church*, Kottayam, Denha Services, 1998, pp. 151-153). According to Dr. Pathikulangara (*ibid.*, p. 153), this ritual may be of Indian origin.

The Nativity Hymn (Teśbōhtā l'alāhā bamrawme / Glory to God in the highest)

Notably, the Qurbānā does not begin with the invocation of the Holy Trinity ("In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit") as in the Latin rite. Rather, after the initial dialogue between the Celebrant and the people, the Celebrant starts the Qurbānā with the angels' hymn at the birth of Jesus, "Glory to God in the highest;" the congregation responds with "Amen." In the solemn celebration of Qurbānā in Syriac, this hymn used to be sung three times in three ascending pitch registers.

That the supreme act of Christian worship does not start with the invocation of the Holy Trinity may sound uncanny to some people; nonetheless, it may be a remnant of the early liturgical practices that predates the formulation of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." However, many of the orations (slotha) have a cadential formula with reference to "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." [The penitential rite comes before the Communion rite, not at the beginning of Mass as in the Latin liturgy].

The Lord's Prayer with Thrice-Holy and Doxology

Immediately after the Nativity Hymn, the Celebrant begins the "Our Father." The format of the Lord's Prayer is unique to the Chaldean liturgy. It has two forms: the ordinary form and the solemn form. The solemn form includes the heavenly hymn of the angels, "Holy, holy, Thou art holy" (Is 6:3; Rev 4:8), and the Doxology ("For Thine is the Kingdom ..."). The Thrice Holy appears as a trope twice in the first part of the prayer. The simple form (i. e., without the Thrice-holy and doxology), is recited during the communion rite. It may be noted that the text of the Lord's Prayer in the Chaldean rite uses the phrase "deliver us from the evil one" (Mt 6: 13, Jn 17: 15), instead of "deliver us from evil."

The Thrice holy has a significant place among the prayers and hymns in the Chaldean liturgy. It appears at least six times in the various sections of Qurbānā. According to the vision of Isaiah, and the author of the Book of Revelation, the heavenly liturgy consists of the angels constantly singing "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of almighty!" There are innumerable references throughout the Qurbānā to this heavenly liturgy. Early on, in the solemn form of the Lord's Prayer, angels and men create a bond by crying out together the Thrice-holy. The Syriac text reads *īre w' nāšā qāēn lāk: qaddiś qaddiś qaddiśat* / "Angels and men cry out to you: holy, holy, Thou art holy."

The Trisagion (Greek, "Thrice holy," to be discussed later) is sung three times at the beginning of the liturgy of the Word. In the Anthem of the Mysteries (to be discussed later), the choir will invite the congregation to "join with the heavenly choir to sing" the Thrice-holy. Thus, the Thrice-holy serves as a frequent reminder of the connection between the earthly and heavenly liturgies.

The Psalms

A set of selected psalms follows the oration after the Lord's Prayer. The collection of psalms vary according to the nine liturgical seasons. The final psalm concludes with the Trinitarian doxology, "Glory be to the Father and the Son and to the Holy Spirit," and alleluia. It may be noted that in the Chaldean liturgy the singing of psalms is treated as a separate unit within the introductory rites, and not, as in the Latin Mass, as a "response" to the first reading from the Old Testament.

The Resurrection Hymn

Liturgically and musically, the next significant event is the solemn rendition of the Resurrection Hymn, "Lord of all, we bow and praise you." This hymn is unique to the Chaldean rite, and it is accompanied with such rituals as the removal of the altar veil and the incensing of the sanctuary and people. The hymn is addressed directly to Jesus Christ; it states the reason for praising and glorifying Him: "For you give man glorious resurrection/ And you are the One who saves his soul." The hymn is to be sung twice, antiphonally; first by those who are on the altar, i. e., the Celebrant, Deacon, and servers, and then by the choir and the congregation. The Resurrection Hymn and the ensuing prayer conclude the introductory rites.

Trisagion (Thrice Holy)
Qaddiṣā alāhā / Holy God)
Qaddiṣā hailṣānā / Holy Mighty One
Qaddiṣā lā māyōsā / Holy Immortal One
Esrāham alain / Have mercy on us

The liturgy of the word begins with the Trisagion (Greek, "thrice holy"). The hymn probably originated in the Greek-speaking eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, sometime in the fifth century AD. The source of the hymn is Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4: 8. Due to its theological appeal, the Chaldean Church adapted the hymn (without the verse "who was crucified for us") into its liturgy, probably in the sixth century. As discussed above, the Thrice-holy was already in use, albeit in a different format, in the Chaldean liturgy in the form of a trope to the Lord's Prayer. In the Latin rite, the hymn is sung during the Good Friday service.

The Trisagion is sung three times with three different incipits. The liturgy prescribes the following performance practice: the Deacon invites the faithful to raise their voices and praise the living God; the choir and the congregation sing the hymn; the Celebrant, the Deacon, and the servers together repeat the hymn with the incipit: "Glory be to the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit;" and finally, the choir and the congregation sing the hymn with the incipit: "Forever and ever, Amen."

Šūrāyā (Syriac, "predication")

After the reading from the Old Testament, the Deacon invites the community to stand and sing the Šūrāyā. The term šūrāyā is used here as a title for the hymn that "predicates" the special reason for the day's celebration, i. e., the Feast of St. Thomas, Blessed Virgin Mary, Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Saint Alphonsa, et al. The hymn has a single strophe of four verses. The third verse is open-ended, "Let us commemorate the feast of . . .," so that the name of the saint or feast can be added. The same melody and text are sung five times, each time with a

different incipit. The incipits have a transitional role between repetitions of the same text and melody by way of introducing a new theme

The Celebrant (not the Deacon) carries the Gospel in procession and makes the proclamation.

The Liturgy of the Catechumens is concluded with the prayers of the faithful and a general blessing for the entire congregation. Traditionally, this is followed by the rite of dismissal in which the Deacon asks all those who are not baptized, as well as those who are not prepared for the reception of Communion, to leave the church, and orders the church doors to be closed. This ritual, although printed in the missal, is seldom followed nowadays.

The Anthem of the Mysteries

The Deacon prepares the bread and wine at the side chapel and carries them in procession to the main altar. During the procession, the choir sings the Anthem of the Mysteries: “Here is our Lord’s precious body and blood.” The anthem varies according to Sundays and feast days. The mentioned above is for weekdays. This anthem is significant for several reasons. From a theological perspective, it stands out at this part of the liturgy because the text refers to the bread and wine as the body and blood of Jesus, much before the Eucharistic Prayer (Anaphora) and the Invocation of the Holy Spirit (Epiclesis) after that. The anthem represents an Eastern and pre-“transubstantiation” approach in the history of Eucharistic theology. Poetically, this is an example of a single-strophe hymn that has two incipits. These incipits help the worshippers to sing the same song text with two different focuses. The choir sings the anthem with the first incipit, and the congregation repeats it with the second incipit.

The Anthem ends with Thrice-holy. This is the third time the Thrice-holy appears, after the “Our Father” and Trisagion. It will appear three times again, twice in the Anaphora, and once in the communion rite. The last two verses of the anthem reiterate the spiritual bond between the earthly and heavenly choirs. The choir invites the congregation, saying, “Let us all join with the heavenly choir and sing/ God is holy, holy, holy forever.”

The Commemoration Hymn

The Commemoration hymn follows the Anthem of the Mysteries. This is an invitation to remember those who have been closely associated with the Eucharistic mystery in the past: the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Thomas the Apostle, holy fathers of the church, martyrs, confessors who have borne witness to Jesus Christ, and those who have died in the hope of the resurrection. There are six strophes in the hymn; it is sung antiphonally by the Celebrant and the choir with the congregation. The inclusion of the name of St. Thomas the Apostle, the Father in the faith of the St. Thomas Christians, in the Commemoration hymn is significant. The text reads: “Let us celebrate the memory of our Father, St. Thomas ...”

The profession of faith follows the Commemoration hymn. The exchange of peace takes place at the beginning of the Anaphora, not before Communion as in the Latin rite.

Holy, Holy, Holy

The text of this hymn is slightly longer than the one used in the Latin liturgy. It has two sections; the first section consists of the Thrice-holy from Is 6: 3 and Rev. 4: 8. The second part includes

of text from verses 25 (“Hosanna”) & 26 (“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”) from Psalm 118; these are the verses that the crowd sang to welcome Jesus into the Temple of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Mt 21: 9; Mk 11:9-10). Added to this is the reference to the second coming of Jesus, “who came, and is to come in the name of the Lord.” Thus, the hymn alludes to different texts and contexts as well as multiple voices of the worshipping community.

The Institution narrative and the priesthood of the people

During the Institution narrative, the congregation exercises the privilege of its priesthood by signing in with “Amen” to the words of consecration (“This is my Body/ Blood”). [See the earlier discussion on Puqdānkōn]. This is absent in the Latin-rite Mass. Due to this, the communicants are not required individually to say “Amen” to the priest’s words (“the Body of Christ”/ “the Blood of Christ”) at the reception of Communion.

Epiclesis (invocation of the Holy Spirit) is at the end of Anaphora, not before the Institution narrative as in the Latin rite. A three-part reconciliation rite follows the Anaphora: reconciliation with God (Psalm 51), the breaking of bread, and reconciliation with members of the worshipping community. The concluding rite consists of separate prayers of praise and thanksgiving by the congregation, Deacon, and Celebrant.

Rite of Reconciliation

A rather elaborate rite of reconciliation follows the Anaphora. The ritual has three sections: reconciliation with God in the form of penitential psalms, the breaking of bread, and reconciliation with the members of the worshipping community. The first section consists of Psalms 51 and 122.

The Rite of Fraction and Consignation

The rite of reconciliation continues with fraction and consignation, i. e., the breaking of the bread into two, and dipping it into the precious blood. The congregation joins with the Cherubim, Seraphim, and Archangels, who observe in awe the Celebrant breaking the body of Christ for the remission of sins; they sing in praise of the “living bread that came down from heaven,” and the compassionate Lord who calls sinners to His presence.

Concluding Rite

The concluding rite in the Chaldean liturgy is much more elaborate in comparison with that of the Latin rite. There are separate prayers of praise and thanksgiving for the congregation, the Deacon, and the Celebrant; the prayers of the congregation and the Celebrant vary according to the occasion. In the most solemn form of Qurbānā, these prayers are followed by the recitation of the solemn form of the “Our Father,” with Thrice-holy and the doxology. After that, the Celebrant sings the final blessing.

Role of the Deacon

In comparison with the Latin rite, the Deacon’s role is quite prominent in the liturgy; he is like a master of ceremony, and a mediator between the worshipping community and the Celebrant. At present in the Syro-Malabar Church, however, the Deacon’s role is executed by non-ordained altar servers. This is because the Syro-Malabar Church discontinued the tradition, for reasons less known, of permanent deacons. Consequently and sadly, the English missal replaced

“Deacon” with “server.” One can only hope that the Syro-Malabar Church will ordain more permanent deacons and make their role prominent in the liturgical celebrations.

Source: The booklet accompanying the CD, **Solemn High Mass of the Syro-Malabar Church**, (Joseph J. Palackal, 2007). Line art of the Cross is by Dan Fuller; copyright (2007) Christian Musicological Society of India. Please send comments and suggestions to <jpalackal@gmail.com>