

STUDENT ESSAY



Syro-Malankara Liturgy – Photo by Simon Cheakkanal

صَعَكْبَا وَمَعِ وَؤَم (“Birth from Above”):

A Study of Christian Initiation in the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church in Connection with the Rites of Christian Initiation

In his article, “Rite[s] of Baptism in the Catholic Church: A Theological-Pastoral Commentary,” James F. Puglisi, a Roman Catholic theologian, questions whether the *lex orandi* of the Catholic Church suggests that there is more than one baptism. He writes, “in reality, three rites for baptism exist within the Catholic Church: the rite of baptism for infants; the rite that terminates the process of Christian initiation of adults (and for children of catechetical age); and, finally the rite of baptism in the oriental Catholic churches.”¹ He also notes the difference in theological understanding despite similarities in these baptismal

¹ J. F. Puglisi, “Rite[s] of Baptism in the Catholic Church: A Theological-Pastoral Commentary,” in *Baptism Today: Understanding, Practice, Ecumenical Implications*, ed. Thomas F. Best (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 29.

rites. Authentic diversity² of sacramental practice among Churches, however, does not detract from the unity of the mystery being celebrated, but rather, contributes to it. Thus, though several images or emphases have dominated the Eastern and Western perspectives on initiation respectively, there is a complementarity among the various traditions. This suggests the possibility of mutual enrichment, whereby both the Eastern and Western Christian traditions can draw from one another to augment their respective practices and theological understandings because of “the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church which is preserved and grows in the life of the Churches of the East as in those of the West.”³

Unfortunately, Puglisi restricts himself to a consideration of the Latin baptismal rite and does not examine either the initiatory practices of the Eastern Catholic Churches or the opportunity for mutual enrichment. It is necessary to understand the initiatory process among the Eastern Catholic Churches too, if one is to understand the process of Christian initiation in the Catholic Church. In this study, we restrict ourselves to the study of Christian initiation in the Malankara Syrian Catholic Church. As a *sui iuris* Eastern Catholic Church, the Malankara Syrian Catholic Church serves as a representative of the Eastern Catholic practice of Christian initiation, especially according to the Antiochene rite. Furthermore, the sacramental practice of initiation of the Malankara Syrian Catholic Church⁴ can serve as a model for understanding mutual enrichment between East and West. Before identifying the areas of mutual enrichment, however, it is necessary to give a description of the administration of the Sacraments (Mysteries) of Initiation in the Syro-Malankara tradition and then the theology which underlies this practice by comparing the Malankara process to

² There are diversities of sacramental practice which hinder unity. These diversities are those which arise from an ignorance or avoidance of the liturgical text or those which arise from a heretical or otherwise deficient understanding of the theology of the Church. It is not these forms of diversity being discussed in the present work.

³ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Oriente Lumen*, 2 May 1995, no. 1; available online at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_02051995_orientale-lumen_en.html. Accessed 14 November 2010.

⁴ Another, more common, name for this *sui iuris* Church is the Syro-Malankara Church. The liturgical tradition of the Syro-Malankara Church is the Antiochene or West Syrian rite. The liturgical tradition of the Syro-Malankara Church is the same as the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church. This liturgical tradition came to India only in middle half of the seventeenth century and its introduction into the Indian Church was only gradual. Though it would be useful to study the introduction of the Antiochene rite, it is beyond the scope of the present work. Also, the present work draws from Oriental Orthodox theologians like Dr. Sebastian Brock, Rev. Fr. Jacob Kurien and Fr. Baby Varghese.

the process of Christian initiation in the Latin Church (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults; hereafter, RCIA).

The Mysteries (Sacraments)⁵ of Initiation in the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church

The liturgical heritage of Syro-Malankara Catholic Church can be traced to Antioch and the Syrian Orthodox Church. According to Bryan D. Spinks, the Antiochene or West Syrian rite has two baptismal *Ordos*, one of which is attributed to Timothy of Alexandria (d. 477) and the other to Severus of Antioch (d. ca. 538).⁶ The *Ordo* according to Mor Severus is currently in use among the Malankara Syrian Churches, both Catholic and Orthodox. The other baptismal *ordo* is no longer used. Jacob Kurien, a priest and theologian of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, describes the development of the present baptismal liturgy as occurring over the course of several centuries.⁷ Though the original form may have been composed by Severus of Antioch, it was translated from Greek to Syriac by Jacob of Edessa and modified and given its current form by Bar Hebraeus in the 13th century.

Although Spinks divides the baptismal *Ordo* of Severus into two services with six parts, the *Qudashakramam* (hereafter, *Order of the Mysteries*) does not give this division.⁸ In the *Order of the Mysteries*, the ritual of Christian initiation is separated into two sections: Baptism and Confirmation (or rather, Chrismation). Furthermore, although the practice is to administer all three Mysteries of Initiation at one time, in the *Order of the Mysteries*, there is no separate prayer for

⁵ The word sacrament, from the Latin *sacramentum*, inadequately expresses what is meant by the Eastern concept of mystery. The Syriac word for mystery is ܪܘܙܐ (*rozo*; Gk. *μυστήριον*) and expresses a “truth, whose existence can be known by human reason only by way of revelation, while its essence cannot be properly and fully understood, even after revelation” (“Mystery”). In Holy Scripture the word mystery refers not only to a secret thing in general, but specifically, the divine things of kingdom of heaven (Matt 13:11) and the revelation of the salvation of the world through Christ the Redeemer (Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26; etc.). In the present work, the Sacraments of Initiation as a group will be referred to as the Mysteries of Initiation and “chrismation” will be used in place of “confirmation” for conformity with the Eastern tradition.

⁶ B. D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 80.

⁷ J. Kurien, “The Baptismal Liturgy of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church,” in *Baptism Today: Understanding, Practice, Ecumenical Implications*, ed. Thomas F. Best (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 27.

⁸ Spinks, *Early and Medieval*, 82

the administration of first Holy Communion.⁹ The separation in the *Order of the Mysteries* could be to delineate between two parts of one initiatory process and is not necessarily a separation of Chrismation from Baptism. In the sacramental practice of the Malankara Church, there is clear recognition of the close relation between Baptism, Chrismation (Confirmation), and the Eucharist. In his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI teaches that Baptism and Confirmation are ordered to the Eucharist. The Holy Father writes, “The Holy Eucharist, then, brings Christian initiation to completion and represents the centre and goal of all sacramental life.”¹⁰ This has consistently been the Eastern practice of initiation. Citing the *Didache*, Maxwell Johnson describes the fourth stage in the emerging ritual process of Christian initiation as ongoing participation in the Eucharist; however, he notes that on the basis of the *Didache* alone, it is not clear “if ‘first communion’ functioned as the culmination of the baptismal rite itself.”¹¹ Paul F. Bradshaw, in addition to a number of other scholars, notes that historically there was no separation between baptism and the Eucharist, even though the introduction of a separate post-baptismal anointing is a later development, especially in the Syrian Tradition.¹² Thus, despite the absence of a special prayer (besides the verse) for the administration of communion or the addition of a post-baptismal anointing, the normative process of Christian initiation in the Malankara Church remains

⁹ The only exception is this verse the *Soogeeso* which follows the Entry into the Sanctuary and Crowning:

ÉúáĀ_ØPĪ BÜPÆĀ Øá° ÞĶÈP_A ÞE È ÜĀ / ØÞĶĪÞ_ÆĀ
 ŌĪ ĪA áK àÈÞZ _ÈBX ÈÞŌBW.

(Translation: *The fruit which Adam did not taste in Paradise / is on this day placed upon your lips with joy*).

Even this verse, however, may be omitted if the baptism and confirmation immediately precede (rather than follow) the Eucharistic celebration. According to J. Kurien, the absence of a separate prayer “could very well imply that Holy Communion was not originally considered as part of the baptismal text, but rather that the baptismal liturgy as a whole was part of the Eucharistic celebration” (p. 24). See *Order of the Mysteries*, p. 36. [All English translations in this paper are the author’s own.]

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 22 February 2007, no. 17; available online at:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis_en.html. Accessed 7 November 2010.

¹¹ M. E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 45.

¹² P. F. Bradshaw, “Christian Initiation,” in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), 603f.; Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 59-60.

the administration of all three Mysteries together for both infant and adult baptism.¹³

On the other hand, J. Kurien's presentation is more consistent with the *Order of the Mysteries* because he maintains the fundamental unity among the three Mysteries of Initiation which is implicit in the prayers and service.¹⁴ Therefore, the present work follows the description of J. Kurien as one service with eight parts. This is the structure of the current initiatory practice of the Syro-Malankara Church:¹⁵

1. Preparation (including *Quqilion*, *Proemion-Sedro*, & Scripture readings)
2. Exorcism and Renunciation
3. Adherence/Faith Proclamation
4. Anointing with Oil of Gladness
5. Immersion in Water Mixed with Chrism (Myron)
6. Anointing with Chrism (Myron)
7. Entry into the Sanctuary and Crowning (includes the reception of first holy communion)
8. Benediction and dismissal

Since the aim of the present work is to study areas of mutual enrichment between the Malankara Catholic Church and the Latin RCIA process, it would be more beneficial to study the initiatory liturgy of the Malankara Church in connection to the RCIA rather than an isolated study of the Malankara liturgy.

A Comparison of the Malankara Mysteries of Initiation and the RCIA: Areas of Mutual Enrichment

In the Malankara Church, the three Mysteries of Christian Initiation (Baptism, Chrismation, and Holy Communion) are normally administered together. In the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, also, all three Sacraments are administered as the culmination of the initiation process.¹⁶ This practice is based on the ancient Christian practice: "In accord with the ancient practice followed in

¹³ Kurien, "Baptismal Liturgy," 26ff.; Puglisi, "Rite[s] of Baptism," 35-37.

¹⁴ Kurien, "Baptismal Liturgy," 23-25.

¹⁵ Due to limitations in space, the present text does not explain or describe the initiatory rites in detail, but only lists the various components of the initiatory rites. For a more detailed explanation, see Kurien, "Baptismal Liturgy," pp. 24-25; and Spinks, *Early and Medieval*, pp. 82. Also, for ancient commentaries on the Mystery of Baptism, refer to George of the Arabs, *An Exposition of the Mysteries of the Church*, in *Two Commentaries on the Jacobite Liturgy*, Trans. R. H. Connolly and H. W. Codrington (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), pp. 11-23.

¹⁶ RCIA no. 206

the Roman liturgy, adults are not to be baptized without receiving confirmation immediately afterward....”¹⁷ Puglisi writes, “it is true that the actual rites for baptism in each case resemble each other, but there is a clearly a different theological understanding that undergirds each, as well as differing pastoral practices that are used in their preparation.”¹⁸ In this section, therefore, we will not so much examine the rites themselves as the theology which underpins these rites. For this, we examine these three areas within the rites: 1) active versus passive baptismal formulae; 2) pre- and post-baptismal anointings; 3) the role of godparents (sponsors).

1. *Active versus Passive Baptismal Formulae*

As Sebastian Brock notes, the Antiochene tradition and the Byzantine tradition employ a passive baptismal formula, whereas the Alexandrian and Western rites employ an active baptismal formula.¹⁹

This is the baptismal formula used in the Malankara Catholic Church:²⁰

نُصَبُّ (فَح) نَلَا صَحْبًا وَمِنَّا هَهُ حَصْبًا
 وَمَسِيحًا كَنُصَبُّ حَصْبًا وَأَبًا * هَوْدَا *
 هَوْدَا مِنَّا هَوْبَعًا * حَسْبًا وَحَلَكُمُ الْخَصْبُ

In the Latin Church, the baptismal formula is “N., I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”²¹

The commentaries of the Syrian Fathers on baptism provide many explanations for the use of the passive formula. For example, John Chrysostom, Doctor of the Church, writes, “For the priest is not the only one who touches your head; Christ also touches it with his right hand.... This shows that he [i.e., the priest] is the minister of the grace and merely lends his hand since he has been ordained for this by the Spirit. It is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the indivisible Trinity, who brings the whole rite to completion.”²² Also, George of the Arabs, a Syrian bishop (d. 724), writes, the passive baptismal formula makes

¹⁷ RCIA no. 213; cf. E.C. Whitaker and M. E. Johnson, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 62; George of the Arabs, *Exposition*, 14; S. Brock, “Studies in the Early History of the Syrian Orthodox Baptismal Liturgy,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 23:1 (1972), 22.

¹⁸ Puglisi, “Rite[s] of Baptism,” 29.

¹⁹ Brock, “Studies,” 59

²⁰ *Order of the Mysteries*, 20. Translation: “In the hope of life and for the remission of sins, [Name] is being baptized (Barekmor) in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the living Holy Spirit for life eternal.”

²¹ RCIA no. 226

²² Quoted in Whitaker and Johnson, *Documents*, 46.

known the humility of the priest and that the baptismal act is not his but “by grace the gift has been bestowed upon him to administer these mysteries.”²³ The Syrian commentators, according to Sebastian Brock, have emphasized the theological significance of the passive formula.²⁴

In the East and the West, the Trinitarian formula is used but the Eastern and Western practices differ insofar as some of the Eastern rites use the passive baptismal formula. Both East and West admit that in the sacraments it is not the priest who acts by himself, but he acts for the Church. The action is sacramental insofar as it is “an action of God in the action of the Church.”²⁵ As noted by Maxwell Johnson, St. Augustine, a Western Doctor of the Church, was responsible for the articulation of the conditions for the validity of the sacraments.²⁶ Therefore, one area for mutual enrichment would be the adoption of the passive baptismal formula in the Latin Church. If the Latin Church were to introduce a passive baptismal formula, the *lex orandi* would better reflect the *lex credendi*.

2. Pre- and Post-Baptismal Anointings

A proper understanding of anointing is necessary to properly understand the role of the Spirit, and, therefore, the mysteries of Baptism and Chrismation; this represents the second area of mutual enrichment. As Brock and other sources make clear, from the fourth century onwards, the Antiochene tradition has a tradition of two pre-baptismal anointings or consignations in addition to one post-baptismal anointing.²⁷ Moreover, Spinks, Johnson and Brock note the shift in emphasis that occurs after the introduction of the post-baptismal anointing. Spinks summarizes Brock’s argument as follows: “Later, under the impact of a strict linear interpretation of the baptism of Jesus, and the revival of Pauline imagery of dying and rising, the themes of the older pre-baptismal anointing were transferred to a post-baptismal anointing, and the pre-baptismal anointings were given an exorcistic and protective interpretation.”²⁸

In the current practice of the Malankara Church, however, there is only one pre-baptismal anointing. However prior to this anointing there is one consignation. The pre-baptismal consignation and anointing are comparable to

²³ George of the Arabs, *Exposition*, 14.

²⁴ Brock, “Studies,” 59-60.

²⁵ Puglisi, “Rite[s] of Baptism,” 36.

²⁶ Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 191-92.

²⁷ S. Brock, “The Syrian Baptismal Ordines (with special reference to the anointings),” *Studia Liturgica* 12:4 (1977), 180. Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 76, 139ff.

²⁸ Spinks, *Early and Medieval*, 46.

baptismal anointing after the fourth century: “the mark of ownership” and “protection against the powers of evil.”³⁶ The reason for this shift is a shift in baptismal imagery: “...both death, burial, and resurrection in Christ *and* new birth through water and the Holy Spirit based on the Jordan event become synthesized and held together theologically.”³⁷ The introduction of the Pauline theme of baptism as burial has transformed the meaning of the pre-baptismal anointing. According to S. Brock, “attention is now paid to the fact that the Holy Spirit appeared *after* Christ’s baptism. The inner dynamic of the rite itself ... points toward the introduction of a post-baptismal anointing, to which the main themes originally associated with the pre-baptismal *rushma*, could be transferred.”³⁸

The formula for the post-baptismal anointing with Chrism in the Malankara Church reads:³⁹

حَفْهٖوٓ، قَبِّمًا حَفْهٖوٓ؛ وُسًا وَصَفْسًا:
 سُلُكًا هَلْجًا، هٓصْفُئًا وَهٓوٓ؛ هٓهٓصْكَا
 وَصَفْهٓحًا، وُسًا قَبِّمًا قَدْلَهٓ (ح)
 دَٓصْفُٓبِ كَعْمًا وَآحًا † هٓوٓ؛ وُسًا مِّنَا هٓقَبِّمًا † حَسْنَا وَحَنَكْمَ كَلْفِٓ

George, bishop of the Arab tribes, comments on the Chrismation following Baptism in this way: “That he is sealed after he has been baptized, makes known that by the seal he receives a sweet and spiritual savour. The seal itself, moreover, is that which completes the divine gifts.”⁴⁰

Currently, in the Malankara Church there is no formal process of Christian initiation for adults as there is in the RCIA. However, given the large number of converts to Christianity in India, specifically in the mission territories of the Malankara Church, the Malankara Church urgently needs to develop a process of Christian initiation which includes the formation of the catechumen in faith before entrance into the Christian community. It has already been noted above that a reason for the shift in pneumatological emphasis from the pre-baptismal anointing to the post-baptismal anointing was the introduction of the Romans 6 theology of baptism as participation in the death, burial, and

³⁶ Brock, “Syrian Baptismal,” 181; George of the Arabs, *Exposition*, 14.

³⁷ Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 138.

³⁸ Brock, “Syrian Baptismal,” 182.

³⁹ *Order of the Mysteries*, 33. Translation: “By the Holy Myron, the sweet fragrance of Christ, the sign and seal of the true faith and the perfection of the gift of the Holy Spirit, [Name], is sealed (Barekmor) in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit for life eternal.”

⁴⁰ George of the Arabs, *Exposition*, 14.

resurrection of Christ. One way in which the Malankara Church can form the catechumens of her Church is to develop a program of catechesis based on the variety images for baptism consistent with her liturgical patrimony.

Here it is fit to refer to Maxwell Johnson's *Images of Baptism*. In *Images of Baptism*, Johnson studies four images or understandings of baptism and examines the development, emphases, and implications of each of these images. The four images are 1) baptism as participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ; 2) baptism as new birth and adoption by water and the Holy Spirit; 3) baptism as the sacrament and seal of the Holy Spirit; 4) baptism as incorporation into the body of Christ. And, although almost all contemporary baptismal theologies tend to focus on baptism as participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, this has not been the case historically. One way in which the Malankara Church can be enriched, and her process of Christian initiation augmented, is to recover and develop the other images of baptism. Johnson argues that this is crucial for the Latin Catholic Church. Thus, this represents an area of mutual enrichment for both the Latin and the Malankara Churches.

3. *The role of sponsors/godparents*

One final area of mutual enrichment is the role of sponsors and godparents. In the General Instruction to *Christian Initiation* the role of godparents is clearly articulated: "the part of godparents is to testify to the faith of adult candidates or, together with the parents, to profess the Church's faith, in which children are baptized."⁴¹ The baptismal liturgy of the Malankara Church does not directly exhort the godparents to fulfill their role, whereas in the RCIA, the godparents are more actively involved and are exhorted by means of the intercessions to be models for the elect.⁴² The Malankara process of initiation would be enriched if it were to make explicit the role of the godparents. George, the bishop of the Arabs, for example writes, concerning godparents/sponsors: "The sponsor—the same is the *qarribha*—is a teacher of virtue, and one who presents to the things divine. He also signifies the modesty of him who is presented: that he has not dared of himself, without the intervention of others, to approach to that which is too high for him."⁴³ Thus, the Malankara Church need not look beyond her Antiochene roots except insofar as the RCIA may serve as a model which can be adapted to the liturgical traditions of the Malankara Church.

⁴¹ RCIA General Introduction, no. 9.

⁴² RCIA nos. 131, 134A; cf. Kurien, "Baptismal Liturgy," 27.

⁴³ George of the Arabs, *Exposition*, 14.

Conclusion

Christian Initiation, properly understood, is a sign of salvation. It is a sacramental (or mystical) incorporation into Christ and a visible expression of entrance into salvation through the grace bestowed by Christ's passion, death, and resurrection and the liturgical rites of the Church. Christian initiation, moreover, is eschatological in nature; it is oriented toward participation in the life of the Trinity. This Trinitarian emphasis is not strictly Eastern, but is also present in the Western Christian understanding of Christian initiation: "[In baptism,] the blessed Trinity is invoked over those who are to be baptized, so that all who are signed in this name are consecrated to the Trinity and enter into communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (*Christian Initiation*, General Introduction no. 5). In the East and the West alike, the Sacraments or Mysteries of Christian Initiation are essential for salvation even if they are celebrated differently.⁴⁴ Above, we have attempted to show the complementarity among the Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin Catholic Church by offering a comparison of the process of Christian initiation in one *sui iuris* Eastern Catholic Church and the Latin Catholic *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. Furthermore, in the above sections, we have identified three areas for mutual enrichment – one area in which the Latin practice may be modified; one area for both the Malankara and the Latin Churches to address; and, finally, one area where the Malankara Church may look to the Latin Church as a model.

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⁴⁴ For more on the necessity of the sacraments of initiation, refer to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1212, 1257-61, 1285, 1322; cf. Mt 28:19-20; Jn 3:5. It is important to make clear that God's communication of grace is not limited to the sacraments.

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