

THE CELEBRATIONS IN SOUTH INDIA IN HONOUR OF ST THOMAS AND ST FRANCIS XAVIER

THE CELEBRATIONS in India to commemorate the nineteenth centenary of the coming of St Thomas the Apostle and the fourth centenary of the death of St Francis Xavier took place at Ernakulam. It is a big city and business centre on the west coast of Southern India, facing the beautiful harbour of Cochin. There are several educational institutions and Catholic churches in the city, and the metropolitans of the two hierarchies—Latin and Syrian—have their residences there. Though other religious communities are numerically strong, the Catholics wield a great influence in the city. Ernakulam had the rare privilege of witnessing both St Thomas and St Francis and hearing from them the message of Christ.

Cardinal Norman Thomas Gilroy, Archbishop of Sydney, presided over the centenary celebrations as Papal Legate. On 28th December at 8 p.m., he arrived at Ernakulam in a special train, and was received at the railway station by His Grace the Most Rev. Joseph Attipetty, PH.D., D.D., Archbishop of Verapoly and His Grace, the Most Rev. Augustine Kandathil, D.D., Archbishop of Ernakulam. Several bishops from other parts of India were also present. Over a thousand priests took part in the reception. Thousands of religious of both sexes came to attend the celebrations. Over a million of laity thronged to witness the function, and among them several thousands of non-Catholics also were included. The Cardinal went in procession to the Herbert grounds, where the celebrations were held, and was there given a civic reception. The Municipal Chairman read and presented an address on the part of the public of Ernakulam. The Archbishop of Ernakulam gave another address on the part of the Catholics of Malabar. The Cardinal in his speech said, among other things, that he was very much impressed by the living faith of the Catholics of Malabar. At the end of the speech he declared open the National Eucharistic Congress. With that the functions of the day closed.

On the 29th, Pontifical High Mass was sung in the Syro-Malabar Rite by His Excellency, Mar Savarios, the bishop of Tiruvalla. After the Mass several meetings were held at different centres presided over by different bishops to discuss the various problems facing the Catholic Church in Independent India.

On the 30th, Pontifical High Mass was sung by His Excellency, Mar Mathew Kavukatt, the bishop of Changanachery in the Syro-Chaldaic

Rite. After Mass meetings were again held to continue the discussions of the previous day.

On the 31st, the Papal Legate sang the Pontifical High Mass. The Eucharistic procession in the evening of the same day was the crowning event of the centenary celebrations. The procession started from the church of the Carmelite fathers which is a mile away from the grounds. The roads along which the procession was to go were decorated in the papal colours. The festoons and the hangings overhead danced in the evening breeze and paid their mute homage to the Eucharistic Lord. The evening sun shed its golden rays. At the head of the procession were golden and silver crosses, together with multi-coloured silk umbrellas. Then came the members of pious associations and the religious of different congregations in their colourful and attractive dresses. Thousands of priests holding lighted tapers in their hands followed them. The bishops in their royal purple dress walked behind the priests. It was indeed a royal procession. Huge crowds lined up along the road to see the triumphal march of the Eucharistic King. At last came the car carrying the Blessed Sacrament. The Papal Legate and his assistants knelt in the car. The procession moved slowly to the accompaniment of hymns and prayers, starting from the church at 3.30 p.m., and reaching the grounds at 6.30 p.m. The Papal Legate gave Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

After Benediction, the Cardinal was thanked by His Grace, the Archbishop of Verapoly. In the concluding speech the Papal Legate was visibly moved, and expressed his gratitude for the great honour paid to him. The celebrations closed with the broadcast speech of His Holiness the Pope. Among other things the Holy Father said that the Catholics of Malabar should be proud to call themselves "St Thomas' Christians." Though they might be of different rites they should work together in a spirit of unity. Catholics should take a leading part in the formation of the new Indian state.

A word or two about St Thomas the apostle, the central figure of the centenary celebrations, will be of interest. I just mention below the traditions of the Catholics of Malabar, leaving out all disputed points.

It is believed that St Thomas the apostle came to India in A.D. 52. He landed at the port of Cranganore, which was an important harbour in those days and was known by the name Mussiri. Pliny makes mention of it. Rome, Greece and other European countries were trading with Cranganore. Pepper, pearls, ivory and other things were exported from this harbour.

The king, who ruled Malabar in those days was very tolerant. His capital was Cranganore, and he allowed every religious sect full freedom of worship. Some of the Jews, who were expelled from Babylon about 5 B.C., came to Cranganore and were allowed to settle down

somewhere near this town. The descendants of these Jews are still seen in Cochin.

It is believed that St Thomas came to Cranganore in the company of a Jewish compatriot, who had been to Jerusalem and was returning to his country of adoption. The religious-minded king gave the apostle permission to preach the Gospel in his kingdom. Like the other apostles, St Thomas also may have preached to his brethren in their synagogue and made converts among them. Then he went to the Hindus. Many Hindus, including some of the princes of the royal family, received baptism from his hands. He built a church for the small Christian community at Cranganore. Then he went to evangelize other parts of Malabar. It is the tradition among the Christians of Malabar that St Thomas built seven churches there, but practically nothing is left of these. In some places even the site is not known.

In A.D. 68 or A.D. 72 St Thomas suffered martyrdom. A bigoted Hindu pierced him with a lance while he was praying on the mountain at Mylapore, now known as St Thomas' Mount, on the east coast of India. The king hearing of it, had his sacred remains buried there. After several years the bones of the apostle were removed to Edessa in Syria. From there during the Mohammedan invasion the relics were transferred to Ortona in Italy, where they are venerated to this day.

"St Thomas' Christians" of Malabar and other Eastern churches celebrate the feast of St Thomas on 3rd July. They believe that the apostle was martyred on that day. Catholics of the Latin rite all over the world celebrate the feast on 21st December.

The community in Malabar, calling themselves "St Thomas' Christians", claim that they are the descendants of the converts of St Thomas the apostle. They say that St Thomas converted only caste Hindus and naturally they come from that stock. They are also known as Syrian Christians. They look down upon the Latin Christians; and long and hot discussions on this point have taken place at the expense of fraternal charity. Now it has become a sore point. Everybody thought that the combined celebrations of St Thomas and St Francis Xavier would help to heal the breach. But unhappily it is not so. These "St Thomas' Christians" do not realize that the kingdom of God is not of flesh and blood, and that everybody who is baptized, whether bond or free, Roman or Greek, belongs to the mystical body of Christ. This disunity and these petty quarrels are a great hindrance to the spread of the kingdom of Christ in India, and are a scandal to non-Christians. Would that St Thomas and St Francis Xavier might bring them to an end.

A MISSIONARY.