

# What is the Syro-Malabar Rite in Catholic Church?

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page 8

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Within the universal Church, the Churches of the East and the West not only have distinct liturgical rites, but they also have characteristic theologies, spiritualities, disciplines and law, and customs to distinguish them. Each has its own heritage and tradition, its own distinct identity as a particular Church within the communion of Churches. Each tradition refers to a specific patristic heritage and origin.

The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church stems from the Syriac spiritual tradition following the East Syrian liturgical rite rooted in the ancient Christian community of Edessa (Syria).

This particular Church traces its origin to St. Thomas the Apostle, who, according to tradition, came to the Malabar coast of southern India (Kerala state today), landed at Cranganore about 52 A.D., and founded seven Christian communities. The early Christians of southern India became known as St. Thomas Christians, and this name persists today.

The Vatican assigned the name Syro-Malabar Church to this particular Christian community in the 19th century. It is governed by a Major Archbishop (somewhat

similar to a patriarch), who is head of the Major Archdiocese of Ernakulam-Angamaly in Kerala, India.

The Syro-Malabar Catholics number 3.8 million faithful worldwide, with five archdioceses and 21 dioceses. The St. Thomas Diocese of Chicago, established in 2001, comprises 33 parishes across the United States and Canada, with its pastoral center in Cicero, Illinois. (web site: [www.stthomasdiocese.org](http://www.stthomasdiocese.org))

The original liturgical language of the Syro-Malabar faithful is Syriac (a form of Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus). The vernacular languages of Malayalam and English are now commonly used.

Since St. Thomas and his followers preached to Hindus in India, the Christian communities adapted to the local culture and many Malabar churches are designed in Indian or Hindu architectural style. Their churches have no pews or chairs or kneelers. People stand with the priest in prayer for the entire length of the Mass. Kneeling and genuflection are not part of the Indian culture. The Eucharistic liturgy is understood as walking in the path of Christ, so all stand.

Repetition is an essential element of Indian prayer, and it is evident in the

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## Syro-Malabar Catholics trace their origin to the journey of St. Thomas.

Syro-Malabar liturgy to induce union with God.

The sanctuary is separated by a veil, which is opened during Mass after the creed until the time of Holy Communion. In the sanctuary are the altar, the focal point of the entire setting, and the St. Thomas Cross.

A side chapel enshrines the Blessed Sacrament, and on the other side is a chapel for the Holy Bible.

Gold, representing the kingship and divinity of Christ, is the sole liturgical color for vestments. No other colors are used.

There is but one Mass, celebrated for the glory of God. There are no special Masses for special intentions (e.g., for the deceased, for a special occasion, etc.) or

otive Masses. A solemn Mass takes about three hours, with the priest and faithful standing and singing for the duration. An ordinary Mass lasts about one and a half hours. And the church is usually packed for each service.

As in the Eucharistic liturgies of all the Eastern Churches, there are no specific words of consecration. Consecration and transubstantiation are the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the Eucharistic Prayer. This emphasizes the mystery aspect of the Eucharist. All the while, the priest stands facing the altar with his back to the congregation, symbolizing that both are on the pilgrimage to one goal, and are facing east awaiting the second coming of the Lord.