



People pray at the St. Mary's Basilica Cathedral, the main church of the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. (Thomas Scaria)



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The COVID-19 pandemic that killed millions worldwide is also blamed for a liturgical dispute that has shaken the largest of India's two Eastern churches.

The dispute in the [Syro-Malabar Church](#), the second-largest of the 23 self-governing Eastern Churches in the Catholic fold, has also engaged the pope and the Dicastery for the Eastern Churches, but a solution remains elusive.

"One outcome of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns was the introduction of online Masses. People were given the freedom to choose the form of Mass they liked," said Fr. Kuriakose Mundadan, presbyteral council secretary of the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala, the dispute's epicenter.

The dispute is not about how the priest celebrates Mass. The synod of the Eastern Rite Syro-Malabar Church, the church's governing body, in August 2021 decided to implement a uniform mode for Mass, as its 35 dioceses lacked a common way.

In the Mass, the priest faces the altar during the Eucharistic prayer, and the congregation during the rest of the Mass, including Communion.

While other dioceses complied, the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese opposed the change, asserting that it would celebrate Mass with the priest facing the congregation throughout, as the Latin rite churches do.

More than 400 of the archdiocese's 470 priests and most of 550,000 Catholics claim this is in accordance with the teachings of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council.

Mundadan, a leading dissident priest, said that during COVID-19 lockdowns, television and YouTube channels received unprecedentedly high subscriptions for the people-facing Mass, which led to more participation.

This alerted the Syro-Malabar hierarchy "who feared losing their influence on their people, and the bishops hurriedly called an online synod to enforce the uniform Mass," the 60-year-old priest told NCR in mid-February, a month after police forcibly [removed](#) some priests from the Archbishop's House.



The Archbishop's House of the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala (Thomas Scaria)

The priests were on an indefinite hunger strike demanding the dismissal of the archdiocese's newly constituted curia and withdrawal of certain documents issued by its apostolic administrator.

The archdiocese's current vicar general, Fr. Jacob Palackappilly, termed the priests' defiance "unpardonable" as it violated their pledge of obedience to the pope taken during ordination.

He, too, agreed that fresh trouble in the liturgy dispute erupted after the pandemic, but denied that the synod acted because of the increase in online subscriptions for people-facing Mass.

"The synod noticed that priests using different rubrics to attract viewers had led to chaos and confusion among people," Palackappilly told NCR. The church called the urgent online synod to enforce the uniform way of Mass, he added.

The vicar general asserted that Vatican II, which introduced several reforms, had recognized the Eastern Churches' uniqueness and traditions, such as celebrating

Mass with the priest facing the altar.

He regretted the dissidents' defiance of the synod, the dicastery and the pope in the liturgy dispute.

"Sadly, the priests rejected even the pope's video message directly asking the archdiocese to obey the synod or face excommunication," Palackappilly said.

The dissidents also rejected Jesuit Archbishop Cyril Vasil, who was [sent](#) by Pope Francis as his personal delegate to resolve the dispute. The archbishop is head of the Slovak Greek Catholic Eparchy of Kosice, Slovakia.

Vasil arrived in Kochi, where the Syro-Malabar Church is based, on Aug. 14, 2023, and soon asked all parishes and institutions in the archdiocese to adopt the synod Mass. He too threatened to excommunicate those defying the order.

The dissidents [rejected](#) Vasil's order, accusing him of bias and not making any attempt to understand their grievances.

Mundadan alleged that the synod misinformed the Vatican, "which was clear from the one-sided and biased response from the papal representative and the video message from the pope."

Explaining the dissidents' defiance, Mundadan said the Mass orientation was introduced by Joseph Parecattil, who was archbishop of Ernakulam from 1956 to 1984 and became the Syro-Malabar Church's first cardinal in 1969. Parecattil attended Vatican II.



Fr. Kuriakose Mundadan, parish priest of St. Augustin's Church, Kuzhuppilly, leads a procession for a feast. The parish is under the Ernakulam-Angamaly Syro-Malabar Archdiocese in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. (Thomas Scaria)

"We consider Cardinal Parecattil as the father of the modern Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese and we keep the rubrics and spiritual practices he taught as central to our faith, and closer to our hearts," Mundadan said.

Mundadan said Vatican II insisted on "restoration, revision and adaptation," but the synod "has taken up only the restoration of old practices," leaving the rest.

Jose Kulangara, a parishioner of St. Augustine's Church, Kuzhuppilly, some 20 miles north of Kochi, said Catholics like him in the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese have grown up attending the people-facing Mass. "Going back to centuries-old practices gives us no meaning," the lay leader told NCR.

Kulangara said his parish had introduced one synod Mass on Sunday, but nobody found it meaningful. "I could not concentrate in Mass once the priest turned to the altar," he said.

The dispute has led to assaults, street protests and verbal abuses.

Clashes between two groups of Catholics [closed](#) St. Mary's Basilica Cathedral, the archdiocese's major church, on Nov. 27, 2022. It was [reopened](#) July 16, 2023, for evening prayers and rosary but no Mass.

On Feb. 1 this year, dissidents [assaulted](#) a senior priest, Fr. John Thottupuram, when he tried to celebrate the synod Mass at St. Sebastian's Church Prasadgiri in Thalayolaparambu, 21 miles southeast of Kochi. A YouTube [video](#) shows a dissident priest leading the assault.

The dispute has far-reaching consequences for the Eastern Church as the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese is the seat of its major archbishop. It accounts for some 10% of the entire Syro-Malabar Church's more than 5 million followers.

Its people live in a territory shared by the Latin Archdiocese of Verapoly and its suffragans — Cochin and Alleppey — which celebrate the people-facing Mass.

In contrast, the main supporter of the synod Mass is the Changanacherry Archdiocese, which is surrounded by denominations that do not recognize the pope. The Jacobite, Orthodox and Marthoma Churches celebrate Mass with priests facing the altar.

Palackappilly said the synod in 1999 proposed the altar-facing Mass, but at least six dioceses, including the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese, opposed it.

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The synod then suggested the dioceses study the changes and report to the synod, but nothing happened, the vicar general said.

"This led to further complications with priests celebrating Mass in different styles. The online Masses during the lockdown made the differences very explicit," Palackappilly said.

The vicar general wondered why the dissidents stick to this 50-year-old tradition, when the church's traditions and history go back 2,000 years.

Riju Kanjookaran, spokesperson for the Archdiocesan Movement for Transparency, said the archdiocese's administration has changed several hands in the past seven years, but no one could really understand their demands.

"We are tired of meetings," he told NCR.

While insisting on the people-facing Mass, he wants Tellicherry Archbishop Joseph Pamplany, who became vicar of the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese in January, to drop all cases against the priests who had staged the hunger strike in the Archbishop's House. Another demand is to appoint new curia members.

Fr. Rajan Punnackal, who was wounded in the police action against the striking priests, told NCR that the entire archdiocese will stand together to fight for justice, "whatever may happen."

Cyriac Sebastian, a Changanacherry Catholic settled in Kochi, says the synod's insistence on Mass rubrics is a pretext to cover up scams in the church.

The synod, he told NCR, should allow the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese to continue with its Mass as before.

Sebastian, who has worked in northern India, said mission stations there and elsewhere celebrate Mass under trees or on rocks.

"They are not worried about facing east or west, altar or people, what matters is worship. The church should move with time and people and not above them," he said.