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Pope Francis arrives for his weekly general audience in the Pope Paul VI hall at the Vatican Jan. 10. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

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Pope Francis on Jan. 10 confirmed a new leader for India's Syro-Malabar Church in a step toward healing a decades-long liturgical dispute that became so dire that Francis recently threatened to excommunicate hundreds of priests.

Francis confirmed the election of His Beatitude Mar Raphael Thattil as major archbishop of the arch-eparchy of Ernakulam-Angamaly, located in southern Kerala state where many of India's Christians live.

Thattil had been elected to the position by the synod of bishops of the Syro-Malabar Church, one of the 23 autonomous eastern rite churches in communion with the Holy See. Francis confirmed the choice as called for under church law.

Thattil's appointment opens a new chapter for the church, which has been badly divided by a dispute over the celebration of the liturgy. In 1999, the church's synod decided to adopt a compromise, unified liturgy but most of the estimated 460 priests in Ernakulam-Angamaly refused.

Francis for years has urged them to comply and over the summer appointed a personal envoy, the Slovak Jesuit Archbishop Cyril Vasil, to try to help resolve the standoff.

Tensions came to a head on Dec. 7, when Francis issued a videotaped warning to the dissident priests that they risked excommunication if they didn't conform by Christmas and celebrate the unified liturgy.

"In the name of the Lord, for the spiritual good of your church, of our church, I ask you to heal this rupture," Francis begged them in the video. "It is your church, it is our church. Re-establish communion, remain in the Catholic Church!"

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That same day, Francis accepted the resignation of Cardinal George Alencherry, whom Thattil now replaces.

According to Rome-based prelates familiar with the Indian church, many, if not most, of the priests celebrated Christmas according to the compromise formula, which involves the priest facing the congregation for part of the service and the altar for the Eucharistic prayer.

Francis made no mention of the dispute in a letter to Thattil that accompanied the announcement of his appointment Jan. 10, though the pontiff said he was praying for unity.

"May the Holy Spirit foster the unity, fidelity and mission of the Syro-Malabar Church, so that it may grow and flourish under your paternal guidance," Francis wrote.

Thattil is known to have accepted the unified liturgy and in some of his first comments after his election, said, "We are together and we work together," according to the AsiaNews missionary news agency, which has followed the dispute closely.

There are around 20 million Catholics in India, with most belonging to the Latin rite Roman Catholic Church. The Syro-Malabar Church is the largest eastern rite Catholic church in communion with Rome after the Ukrainian Church.

It counts some 5 million believers, most in India but also in communities in the United States, Canada, Britain and Australia, according to the church's website.