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## Christian Religious Centres in Kanyakumari District

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### ABSTRACT

*The church is a community of persons who have radically decided to follow Jesus Christ. They have committed themselves to Jesus, to Christian faith and praxis. They take Him to be the decisive path in their whole life. Thus, the church which has a faith aspect is an ekkaleo: a community called by God (through Jesus Christ) to share in His life. The church is the spirit filled dimension of the Christian community and its divine origin, maintenance and destiny.*

### Introduction

The first and the most ancient group of Christians who followed oriental rites trace their origin to St. Thomas, an apostle of Jesus Christ. The origin of Christianity in India begins with the establishment of the Syrian Church in 52 A.D. The early Christians called their congregations as Syrian Churches because of the missionary activity of Syrian Missions and support they received from the Syrian Churches in India and they called themselves as St. Thomas Christians. The first Christian church in Kanyakumari District is St. Mary's Church at Thiruvithancode. This church is known as Arappally (1/2 church). It claims an antiquity of about two thousand years. St. Thomas, the Apostle of Christ came to Kerala by 52 A.D. He founded seven and a half churches (Elaraippalli). Thiruvithancode church is considered as one of those seven and a half churches. The seven churches founded by St. Thomas in Kerala are Kodungalloor, Palayoor, Kottackavu, Kokkamangalam, Niranam, Kollam and Chayal (Nilackal). These seven churches and the holy church at Thiruvithancode are the seven and a half churches. This is the traditional belief. But historians maintain the opinion that seven and a half churches means seven excellent or magnificent churches and not seven big churches plus a small church.

### St. Mary's Church, Thiruvithancode

The Syrian Christians are the first Christian community in India. This church was established by St. Thomas, the Apostle of Christ. As the Syrian Christians were commercially very important people, they used to live near the palaces of kings and very important cities. They had very high position in the society and so they had permission to enter into king's palaces. There are many proofs to confirm that the Syrian Christians were the inhabitants of Thiruvithancode, Kanyakumari and other places of southern part of Venad.

In 1494 and 1526 AD, two royal orders from the king were promulgated from the old Syrian Church of KumariMuttom. Durate Barbosa (1514) a Portuguese historian, has written about the church at Kanyakumari. In the documents of Synod of Diamper in 1599, there is a mention of the church at Thiruvithancode.

A foreign missionary of 16<sup>th</sup> Century writes as follows: "There are very many Christians -if they can be called Christians - in places between Kollam and Kanyakumari of Thiruvithancode. They desire very much to receive sacraments. For the last 50 years they have not even seen a priest. They have only the name of Christians. They are proud of being Mar Thoma Christians (Syrian Christians)". According to V. Nagam Aiya, it is certain that before the arrival of the Portuguese there were many Mar Thoma Christians in the area from Kochi to



Cape Comorin. These historical facts prove that there were Syrian Christians in Kanyakumari region, centuries before the foreign missionaries founded Latin Church.

The church is made of granite stones. The walls of this church are one foot thick. It is of 45 feet length, 16 feet width and 10 feet height. There is a Cross carved on the granite wall at the right side of the entrance to the altar. The facade of this church was built in Portuguese style in later years. The present roof of the church was built later, since the first roof was spoiled by the roots of a tree. This church now is in the possession of the Orthodox Church. There was an attempt to convert the Syrian Christians of Thiruvithancode to Hinduism. Those who stood with courage refusing conversion were called *Tharisayees*. The word *Tharisayees* means true believers.

### **The Cathedral of St. Francis Xavier at Kottar**

The Cathedral of St. Francis Xavier, one of the most impressive historic monuments of India, containing a small chapel of Our Lady where Xavier used to celebrate Holy Mass, is situated at Kottar. It is a renowned pilgrim centre for Christians and it is generally known as 'Second Goa'.

The Cathedral at Kottar is a complex of many structures built at various times. It came into prominence after the death of St. Xavier. A new church dedicated to St. Xavier was built in the year 1600 A.D. by the side of the St. Mary's Church when Father Andreas Buserio was the Parish Priest. He used to celebrate the feast every year on the day of the death of St. Xavier and for that feast the greater part of the Christians of the coast were converted to Christianity by St. Xavier, used to gather.

In the year 1865 the Church was enlarged and the shrine of Our Lady where Xavier used to celebrate Holy Mass was also renovated and vaulted over. In 1930 the church was raised to the status of a Cathedral. The Cruciform Church (cross shaped) has acquired different styles of architecture. The old church of round arches and vaults is Romanesque, the extension with high-pointed arches is of Gothic and the fine stone *mandapa* in front is purely Indian. The twelve towers in the Church represent the 12 disciples of Jesus Christ.

In 1942, in commemoration of the fourth centenary of the arrival of St. Xavier in India, a beautiful tower to the saint, a grotto to Our Blessed Mother and a small shrine to St. Ignatius, who sent St. Xavier to India, were constructed in the Cathedral premises. It is to be noted that the beautiful statue which adorns the main altar has been brought from Goa. In 1955, the Church was further extended and the chapel of Our Lady was incorporated into the Church.

The Church of St. Xavier enjoys a great fame as a place of miracles from early times. The fame of these miracles spread far and wide and ever since the church is being visited by thousands of pilgrims for fulfilling their desires. It has become almost proverbial to say that, "*Kettavaram Tharum Kottaru Xavier*" (Xavier of Kottar grants all prayers). Salt and candle sticks are offered to St. Xavier even by the Hindus during the festival days.

### **Vettuvenni St. Antony's Church**

St. Antony's Church at Vettuvenni is one among the seven Holy Catholic shrines in Kanyakumari District. People gather here for silent prayer to feel divine presence. They believe



that the deity of this church will cure any type of disease and therefore there is a large crowd everyday in this church.

It is said that there was only a small stone cross during the time of Martyr Devasahayam Pillai. It was worshipped in those days by thousands of people and who got their diseases cured of completely. On knowing this, people from different localities came to this holy place and kissed the cross and invoked God's mercy.

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Parish Priest of Puthukkadai, Rev. Fr. Varghese initiated the idea of constructing a Kurusady where the Holy Cross was kept. In 1972, the Parish Priest of Thiruthuvapuram, Rev. Fr. Sthanislas got permission from the Bishop Arokiaswamy for renovating the Kurusady and he conducted mass every Thursday with Bishop's consent. In 1981, the Kurusady was extended further. On every Sunday, Mass was conducted by Rev. Fr. Jesudhas Thomas. The Kurusady would become one of the sub-churches under the Kottar Diocese. In 1997, further construction of the church was undertaken by Rev. Fr. Robert and the Parish Priest Rev. Fr. Sebastine. The present beautiful church was constructed with the donation of Mr. Veludhas and Mr. Ponnappan. The entire construction was completed in the year 1997 and on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1997 Bishop Leon R. Tharmaraj conducted the first mass in this church. The church grew in its popularity and has attained the present glory. Rev. Fr. Hillary and the Parish Priest Rev. Fr. Antony Muthu spent their time for the further growth and development of this church. Bishop Leon R. Tharmaraj offered all his assistance to them in this matter. People from all over Kanyakumari District are coming to visit the church.

### **Shrine of Our Lady of Periyamayagi Church at Thiruvithancode**

During the Sangam period the ancient Tamilaham was ruled by the Cheras, Cholas and the Pandyas. The area ruled by the Cheras was known as 'Cheralam' which in due course called as 'Keralam' and 'Kerala'. After the Sangam age, when the Cheras declined from power, their State was divided into many petty kingdoms. Those kingdoms were called as 'Codus'. Important among those was Thiruvithancode. On Jan. 29<sup>th</sup>, 311 A.D. king Kulasehara Perumal ascended the throne of Thiruvithancode as its first king. At that time only, St. Thomas and his disciples were preaching the Holy Gospel. There is a saying as per the tradition that St. Thomas built seven full Churches and a half Church.

The half church built at Thiruvithancodu was built according to the Greek architecture. The place for the construction of a new church was donated by the venad kings. For centuries this church was served as an independent congregation. During the year 1850 the Spanish clergy Rev. Fr. Athiriyam, who was on his way to this church for delivering a sermon, passed away and was interred here. After this point in time, this church along with the villages under it was merged with Karankadu congregation. In 1861, it was made with a part of Mulagumudu congregation and 1954 it was brought under Kalkurichi congregation and since 1971 it became a part of Mylacodu congregation.

Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century this church was known as the shrine of Our Lady of Ascension. St. Francis Xavier visited this church in the year 1544. It was here that he received the permission for evangelising the coastal Villages. This sight is also closely connected to the history of Martyr Devasahayam Pillai. As part of his torture, he was tortured and marched around as a spectacle to worm people who underwent a change of faith. During this time, he was imprisoned in the tunnel beneath in this church which exist even today. After a period of



156 years, Thiruvithancode was made an independent congregation. Sunday Class is being offered since 1954. On 15-10-2004 the Bishop of Kottar Diocese Rev. Leon Dharmaraj offered the mass and declared this the 1032 congregation. The feast of Our Lady of ascension is celebrated for 10 days starting from the 40<sup>th</sup> day after Easter. The festival of Periyannayagi is celebrated for three days in the month end of January. The foundation for a new church was laid in the year 2002, during the office of Fr. Yugin and was consecrated during the year 2012.

The dilapidated Roman Catholic Church at Thiruvithancode contains an epitaph in the Tamil alphabet, recording the death of Alpasi on the 28<sup>th</sup> 7(month) in 1860 A.D. of Fr. Adrianus, a native of Madrid, who was born in 1818 A.D., took holy orders in 1848 A.D. and had joined the Quilon Apostolic Mission in 1855 A.D. He died in Thirukkannangodu and was buried in the Thiruvithancode Church. This church is one of the famous pilgrim centres in Kanyakumari District. Every day people from different places come to visit the church. Special prayers are conducted every Friday.

### **C.S.I. Church Marthandam**

Marthandam is a major trade centre in Kuzhithurai Municipality across National Highway in the Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu, India, closer to Kerala. Originally called Thoduvetty and it was a portion of Kanyakumari District which was added to the State of Tamil Nadu in November 1956. The Marthandam church which became a pastorate in 1983 had a history of over 75 years before it was upgraded to one of the largest district churches in the Kanyakumari Diocese, with Schools, Colleges, Hospitals and Embroidery Industry, a Book depot, a press and also a shopping complex. The church was built by Rev. Robert Sinclair born in Scotland who came to India after his ordination as a minister on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August, 1910 in Scotland. He succeeded Rev. H. I. Hacker in 1919 and came to Marthandam and served God from the year 1920.

During his service between 1919 and 1939, he built almost all mission buildings that adorn the church today. In India the number of Christians also increased day by day. Even though it is the headquarters of the district, the church where people worshipped could see sand and thatched roof. The church was used as school, so Rev. Sinclair planned to build a new church in foreign style. He received a plan from architects of Scotland and built this church with Indian masons and labourers under his own supervision.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 1924, the foundation stone was laid by Rev. C. G. Marshall for this magnificent stone church. Mr. Israel from Marthandam was the chief architect. The length of the church is 120 feet, and width is 20 feet. The three face Clock Tower is another significance of this church. Later the steps of this tower were reconstructed. The roof was made of flat asbestos. which was very strong and unbreakable. The pillars which carry the roof here are made of Malabar teak wood.

The six polished stone pillars which carry the roof two on each side are arranged beautifully. Inner side of the church looks bright. The frame of this church is made of iron blanks. The big spherical rose windows reflect sun light in the morning and evening and that makes a beautiful sight in the church. The tower - gate is bigger than other gates, and all the doors in the church are made of teak wood except the tower gate which is made of the most expensive rose wood. The church bell is bigger than other church bells. This was made in Moscow. The James Town church bell also was brought by Rev. Sinclair. The work of this



church was started in 1923 and completed on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1933. The arrangement of the opening day ceremony was conducted by Sinclair. On that day the church bell was brought from Scotland for conducting prayers. The total expenditure for the construction of the church was approximately one lakh in those days.

It took ten years to complete the construction work and Rev. Sinclair personally laboured with devotion to fulfill his vision. His dream was to make a beautiful place of worship for the emerging congregation in Marthandam. The church was completed and dedicated on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, 1933. Today it stands as a monument to his name. Owing to illness of Mrs. Sinclair, she went home on July 13<sup>th</sup> 1937. Rev. Sinclair followed his wife to Scotland in June 1939 and the Sinclairs were not able to return to Marthandam, India, due to the Second World War. Then he served as a pastor in Glasgow town in Scotland.

Peoples from different parts of the area in Kanyakumari District come and visit this church. Thus, the Christian church consists of all those who believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the saviour of the world. It is the church to render the saving work of Christ increasingly fruitful for all nations and individuals, under varying conditions of life and stages of culture. Church history describes the course of development through which the church as a whole passed from time to time, it shows the advances and retrogressions and how it had been furthered or hindered.

In all the churches in Kanyakumari District, celebrations like New year, Easter, and Christmas are conducted by the people. A night prayer will be conducted in all the churches to celebrate these functions. Special festivals will be done in Christian pilgrim centres without fail. Sunday Mass will be conducted in all the churches. People from India and abroad who come to visit these important places in Kanyakumari District will visit these pilgrim places too.

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