

Holy Apostles College & Seminary

Rev Dr. Joseph J Palackal

by

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Early life

Rev Dr. Father Joseph J Palackal was born in Pallipuram, Kerala, India. He is the oldest of 8 children and was born into a family of loving and ardent Syro Malabar Catholic parents. "I was born after 5 years of my parents' marriage. So, I got all the love and attention I could ever want. And I was able to share this same love that I received from my parents to the 7 siblings after me."¹ His parents were very devout Christians who belonged to the Palackal family. The Palackal family has a noteworthy history of devout priests in their family tree. Particularly, Fr. Palackal Thomma Malpan is of note, who influenced the admiration to priesthood and fidelity to the Church in Fr. Joseph Palackal. Fr. Thomma was an ancestor to Fr. Palackal, who was the founder of the congregation called Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) and the rector at the local seminary. "Since his early years the Malpan seems to have cherished the notion of a Cenobite order of the Dominican kind; his experiences in running the seminary might have strengthened the resolve."² Father Palackal notes that his father would go to the tomb of the saintly predecessor and ask for his intercession or offer masses in his honor before undertaking a arduous task. This inspired in father Palackal a respect, admiration and love for the priesthood that was instilled in him as a child.

Father Palackal notes that his musical education started as a child. He was born in the 1950's, in the pre-Vatican time and before the influence of television in individual homes. He recalls that his mother was expedient in Syriac and would sing to him Aramaic hymns from both the divine liturgy and oral Catholic tradition. "One of the first hymns I recall learning was a hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Syriac."³ Growing up, he used to serve at the altar, and

¹ Palackal Joseph, (Composer) in Discussion with the author, December 2022.

² Palackal Joseph, "Saintly Palackal Thomma Malpan" at The Christian Musicological Society of India (12 December 2021) <http://www.thecmsindia.org/index.php>

³ Palackal Joseph, (Composer) in Discussion with the author, December 2022.

because he had an acumen for singing, he was asked to join the choir as well. Because it was still the pre-Vatican era, he learned all the hymns in Syriac. However, when he was joining the seminary, the transition from Syriac to the vernacular was being made. It is fair to say that he was at an interesting cusp in time where he got the best of the "old world" in Syriac, and the "new world" in the vernacular. After he had discerned his call to the priesthood, he joined the local seminary where he excelled academically and musically. He remarks going to theology and psychology classes in the morning, then going to a different college in the afternoon for music. "I was young and full of energy, perhaps that is why I was able to manage my musical and theological education simultaneously."⁴ He notes that after a soul stirring experience at a retreat, he decided not to sing any more secular music but to dedicate his musical talent and acumen in service for God.

Career

Father Palackal notes that his gaze for the admiration of sacred music shifted to the composition of sacred music in the late 70's with the launch of his first album. Before elaborating on the album, it needs to be noted that the musical background Fr. Palackal has is in classical Hindustani (Indian) Music. This is very different in style, meter and composition from western music as exemplified in music of Europe. With this said, Fr. Palackal's first album, "Christian Bhajan", weaved classical Indian "Ragas" with Christian lyrics and theology. Bhajan means a devotional song and is the term colloquially used in Hindu religious services for their devotional hymns. Fr. Joseph is seen singing one of the hymns he composed from the album "Om Jagat Jyothi"⁵ Which translates light of the world, in reference to Christ with the Indian Sanskrit sound

⁴ Palackal Joseph, (Composer) in Discussion with the author, December 2022.

⁵ Palackal Joseph. "Christian Bhajan" (Released on 33 1/3 RPM LP Record DY Deccan Records) Bangalore 1979.

Om. Father noted that while this album was groundbreaking in the post Vatican era to bring Catholic Theology into the greater Indian culture, he nevertheless, also received criticism for including Om. With this and many other musical recitals in his repertoire, he was encouraged by his mentor in music to pursue higher education in the United States.

With the full intellectual, emotional, and monetary support of his congregation, Fr. Palackal pursued his musical studies further in the United States with a Master's at Hunter College. While studying in New York, he performed Off Broadway by singing a Christian devotional song in Hindi. Other performance venues include Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York, Princeton University and Columbia University. He was further encouraged to pursue a PhD in ethnomusicology by his mentors. He jokingly remarks that he was accepted to both Columbia and CUNY but "because CUNY gave him a scholarship, he decided to go there to avoid any student debts." But in all seriousness, he elaborates that while he was not versed in western musical theory, his background in Theology and classical Hindustani Music gave him an opportunity to pursue his PhD studies in "Ethnomusicology." This gave him the ability to display Syriac music and the interplay of Indian musical influence on it into the academic world. This was a pioneering effort of its kind and introduced Syriac chants from the Syro-Malabar rite into the secular stage as well.

Along with the successful completion of his PhD dissertation, Fr. Palackal was simultaneously working on founding the Christian Musicological Society of India, publishing scholarly articles, and continuing his research on Aramaic music. The Christian Musicological Society of India aims to be an "international forum for interdisciplinary research, discussion and dissemination of knowledge on the music, art, and dance of the Christians of India."⁶ With the

⁶ Palackal Joseph, "Joseph J Palackal; Biography" at The Christian Musicological Society of India (12 December 2021) <http://www.thecmsindia.org/index.php>

"Aramaic Project" Fr. Palackal has created a vast reservoir of playlists on YouTube that preserves the ancient Aramaic chants and hymns before they are lost in the audio form. The project has interviews and original singing by the priests, deacons, and choir members from the pre-Vatican era time or their proteges who prayed, changed and sung Syriac hymns daily in worship and for pleasure. Next, father Palackal released another album titled "Qambel Maran". He can be seen singing the hymn "Receive O Lord"⁷ a verse from the album in the interview. Qambel Maran is a collection of ancient Aramaic chants and hymns that are used in the Office of the Deceased and the liturgy of the Syro Malabar church. The album also contains Syriac translation of Latin chants by St. Thomas Aquinas as well as prayers from the liturgy of the hours of the Syro Malabar Church. Furthermore, his work has appeared in three encyclopedias, including "the prestigious *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* and more recently he has contributed a chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World*."⁸ With these and many lectures, publications, performances and research papers under his belt, it is fair to say that his life and work has been impactful not just in the Syro Malabar church but also the greater world of music.

Impact on Music

The influence and impact of Fr. Palackal in the Syro Malabar Church is without a doubt of significance. He was commissioned by the Bishop of the newly formed Syro Malabar Church in Chicago, His Excellency Jacob Angadiath to compose music for the liturgy that was newly translated into English for the first time since Vatican II. Although reluctant at first, he agreed and started to work meticulously. He drew inspiration from his background as a classical

⁷ Palackal Joseph. "Qambel Maran" (Pan Records) Netherlands 2002.

⁸ Palackal Joseph, "Joseph J Palackal; Biography" at The Christian Musicological Society of India (12 December 2021) <http://www.thecmsindia.org/index.php>

Hindustani singer, his academic contributions in ethnomusicology, and the research and curation of ancient Syriac chants. He recalls that some melodies came more naturally from his background in Hindustani music, while others were inspired more spontaneously. In his interview he recalls that one such spontaneous inspiration was when he was coming back from a dentist appointment, he got inspired to write the melody for the "Anthem of Mysteries" on the bus. Nevertheless, he worked with the text that the Church gave him and created original compositions that are sung in most, if not all, English speaking Syro Malabar Churches throughout the globe. He humbly recalls an incident where while visiting a Church in Bangalore, India and he heard his composition being played for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy.

Furthermore, he has been interviewed by the Library of Congress and the Vatican Radio where he eloquently enumerated the importance of preserving and celebrating the original Aramaic hymns from the time of Jesus Himself. His impact is also visible in the secular world as can be seen by the interview that he did with CNN on the origins and the presence of Christians in India called St. Thomas Christians. His widely curated work and his expertise served as a guide for the CNN documentary and interview and showcased the Catholic faith in a secular limelight. In his final remarks, he had hoped that more and more second and third generation Syro Malabar Catholics would grow to understand, love, and cherish the ancient hymns and traditions of the Church. It would be his joy to see many more scholars and composers who are offering their talents for the love of God, at the service of the Church. In conclusion, it can be fairly acknowledged that Fr. Palackal's work has been impactful in the Catholic, academic, and secular world for now and for time to come.

Personal Commentary

I was personally familiar with Fr. Palackal's work by having memorized the liturgy parts and having sung them day in and day out during service. I got more acquainted with him when I consulted him for the revision of the propria and the ordinary that I got commissioned to work on. One thing that caught my eye and that I wrestled with initially was how the music for the English liturgy service sounded Indian. There were many hymns that I admired, and some I felt sounded quite out of place in the American or western cultural context. A philosophy that I firmly believe in and I wish to offer to the diocese is to have Syriac melodies to the English text. Hopefully this will be a reality soon and not just a dream. However, one perspective that I got enlightened in because of my conversation with Fr. Palackal was an insight into the musical philosophy of St. Ephrem. What I didn't realize was that what was considered "secular" in the times of St. Ephrem is not what is considered "secular" now. For instance, when the farmers are laboring in the field they might sing 4 lines on repeat or when a mother is putting a baby to sleep, she might sing a simple lullaby. This was considered secular in that time. This is starkly different than my idea of secular- Adeles "Hello". To illustrate this point, he sang a song from his album "Oshana." The song "Oshana Oshana"⁹ has Catholic text and theology but is set in a melody that is sung when farmers are reaping their summer harvest. This perhaps helped me understand why Fr. Palackal's composition of the liturgy sounds Hindustani; there is an undeniable fact that there is influence from his musical background, but also the fact that it was written with the immigrant Indian Syro Malabar faithful in diaspora. Overall, I would say it certainly has been a privilege and honor to interview Fr. Palackal and write about him. Three of his original compositions have been attached- the "Anthem of Mysteries" from the Syro Malabar Divine Liturgy, the "Qambel

⁹ Palackal Joseph. "Oshana" (Pilgrims Communication) Bangalore 1989.

Maran", and the "Oshana." My hope is that overtime, more and more people will refer to, understand and appreciate the gem that the ancient Aramaic chants are, and how they have been meticulously preserved and celebrated by impactful personalities of the Syro Malabar Church such as Rev Dr. Joseph J Palackal.

Bibliography

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