

An article on Fr. Julius Mar Alvarez

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Alvares is neither a Syrian nor a Malayalee name. From this itself one will say that he can not be a Bishop of Maiankara Orthodox Church. Very few people know that one Fr. Alvares, a Goan has joined the Maiankara Orthodox Syrian Church in 1887 and consecrated as a Bishop in 1889 with the name Alvares Mar Julius.

One who visits the St. Mary's Orthodox Syrian Church Ribander (Goa) will see a beautiful 'Kabar' wherein the Holy Relics of the late lamented Bishop, Alvares Mar Julius is interred. This is the only church outside Kerala wherein a Bishop is laid in rest. A lot of people fully believe in his intercession and the prayers are well answered.

This makes the Goa church as a pilgrimage centre. Fr. Antonio Francisco Xavier Alvares was born on 29-04-1836 in an aristocratic Roman Catholic Family in Varhapuri (now Verna) about 25 km from panaji the capital city of Goa. As a very devout and pious boy he might have decided to work in His wine yard. On completion of school education he joined the famous seminary at Rachol (Goa). Thereafter he was at Bombay and ordained as a priest in 1862. He continued to work in Bomay for another five years and then returned to Goa. That was a turning point in his life. The period 1867 to 1887 changed the ordinary Roman Catholic priesthood in him. Then the church and the clergy were fully controlled by the Portuguese Government. By that time Fr. Alvares came to be known as a journalist and writer, Social worker, Educationist, Freedom fighter, Philanthropist, and over and above a firm believer in the true Christianity. Through his periodicals "A Cruz", and "A Verdade", (The truth) and later "The Times of Goa" and "Progress de Goa", the pamphlets like "Antioch and Rome", "Universal supremacy in the church of Christ", "Directions to the treatment of cholera", etc he educated the people, argued for the downtrodden and fought for the freedom of the church.

Though born and brought up and ordained as priest of the Catholic Church, he could not withstand the harassment meted out to him by the ecclesiastical and civil powers. He was against the false devotion and religious exhibitionism. A certain section of the Catholic Community lead by Fr. Alvares never consented to the agreement between the Pope and Portuguese Government regarding administration of the church in India. They resisted the efforts of the Pope to suppress them. They formed the independent Catholic Missions. In pursuit of finding out the true Christianity he went to Trayancore and contacted the then Matahkara Metropolitan Mar Joseph Dioriysius (Pulikottil Thirumeni) who irected him to Mar Gregorios of Parumala. Fr. Alvares was profoundly impressed by these great and pi-

ous Personalities. He was very much convinced that the faiths, beliefs, principles, heritage, customs and traditions of the Orthodox Church were correct and far better than that of the Catholic Church. Probably he disagreed with the Catholic Church and embraced the Orthodox Syrian Church in 1887, hence he, was excommunicated by his mother church. Due to his pious life he was elevated to the Episcopal status on 29-7-1889 as Metropolitan of Goa, India and Ceylon by Mar Joseph Dionyius, Mar Gregorios of Parumala, Paulose Mar Ivanios and Kadvil Mar Athanosious. Bishop Alvares stood to his last breath for his faith in the Church which he embraced. For this he suffered too much. He was persecuted by the Catholic Church and the political rulers.

Cases were fabricated against him and he was arrested on false allegations, stripped off his episcopal vestments and taken to the lock up only with his underwear. He was forced to live in filthy room without any amenities and proper food. Though he was acquitted, he was deprived of the Episcopal insignia. As a Metropolitan he spent a number of years in Canara (Costal Karnataka) and Ceylon. About 5000 people in Brahmavar (Canara dist.) joined the Orthodox Syrian Church. His last ten years was in his home state only. Though he was not physically strong at that age his spirit for social service was very high. He was a poor man then but patriotism was flaming and the love for the poor was burning in his heart. Practically his life was dedicated to such a cause. Then he was running a home for the poor. Infact his He was a poor man then but patriotism was flaming and the love for the poor was burning in his heart.... Then he was running a home for the poor. Infact his house in Fontainhas (Panaji) had become a heaven for the poor including some 'bhangis'. ... There was nobody to support him.

The Orthodox Church which he joined was no where near him. In fact it did not care as to where the Bishop Alvares was working, how he was, and whether he was alive or not? He was forced to beg to support himself and the poor who he had taken under his care. In a black cassock with a flowing beard, a bowl in one hand and a big staff in another to support him, he used to roam the streets of Panaji to collect donations from his well wishers. His last days were in Ribander hospital at the mercy of a charitable institution, fighting against dysentery at that old age. He breathed his last on 23rd Sept. 1923. Since he was a journalist, social worker, philanthropist etc. he had a number of friends. They could not support him very much openly, for they too would be branded as traitors.

But for his funeral each one of them assembled just like the 'Joseph of Arimathea', The citizen committee woke to give a very big funeral for this Patriot and Saint. His body was kept in state in the Muncipal hall for 24 hours to enable the people to pay their homage. The then Chief Justice took the lead though Bishop Alvres Mar Julius was considered as an enemy to the government and the Roman Catholic Church, the Governor General sent his representative. Thousands of people, especially so many poor paid their last respects. Funeral speeches were made by high dignitaries. A big funeral procession winding all the main roads of Panaji was taken and the body was laid to rest in the 'themmadikuzhi' of St. Inez (Panaji) cemetery. After four years (23.9.1927) his bones were collected by his friends and admirers, kept them in a lead box, buried in the same place, laid a marble slab with the inscription 'Padre Alvares- A great Humanitarian Missionary and a Great Patriot' and

erected a big cross there. Then for forty long years nobody visited the grave. Nobody knew where he was buried.

But a jewel could not be hidden for long. His Grace Mathews Mar Athanasios, the then Metropolitan of Outside Kerala Diocese (Later H.H. Baselios Mar Thomas Mathews I. Catholicos of the East) during his visit to Goa in 1967, after a lot enquiries found out the tomb. As per his and the Panaji parishner's wishes a small church by His Grace Philipose Mar Thiophilos, the then diocesan Metropolitan of Bombay on 05-10-1979. When the St. Mary's Orthodox Syrian Church was reconstructed in the same place, the holy relics was shifted to the present sephulchre which was specially made on the side of the madbaha by the Catholicose of the East His Holiness Baselios MarThoma Mathews II on 6-10-2001. The St. Mary's Orthodox Syrian Church Ribander-Panaji celebrates his shradhaperunal every year in September during the week falling 23rd, to honour this Apostle of Charity. A lot people are blessed through his intercession and so many visit his kabar with prayers and offertory, seeking blessing and favors.

P.S:

This is a very touching article and our hearts are stirred. It is because of such thirumenis our tradition of honoring bishops and priests continues as a legacy. Though our church has not canonised Mar Alvarez, We hope he will be soon declared saint. That shouldnt prevent us from saying Julius Mar Alvarez Thirumeni , interceed for us , sinners now and at all times even at the hour of our death .