



The Reform of the Sacraments of Initiation in the Syro-Malabar Church: Impact and Implementation of OE 12-14¹

The initial part of *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (1-11) focuses mainly on certain ecclesiological and canonical issues, and the articles that follow (OE 12-23) deal with sacramental and liturgical disciplines. This latter set of articles starts with the rules regarding the Sacraments of Initiation, particularly in OE 12-14. This study concentrates on these three articles of OE, and its impact and implementation in the Syro-Malabar Church.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first part is an analytical study of the unity of the Sacraments of Initiation according to OE 12-14. We have no intention to make a comprehensive study of OE 12-14, nor the canonical and pastoral issues connected to it, however we analyse the notion of 'unity' of the Sacraments of Initiation, as founded in OE 12-14, in a liturgical perspective. Whereas the second part of this paper is a historical survey of the liturgical reform in the Syro-Malabar Church with regard to the celebration of the Sacraments of Baptism-Chrismation till this day.

1. The Unity of Sacraments of Initiation according to OE 12-14

The first part of this paper progresses in three stages. First, we start with the general content of OE 12-14, and its historical context of formation. Second, the notion of unity of the Sacraments of Initiation in OE 12-14, in the light of other Conciliar documents. Third, a reading of OE 12-14, on the basis of post-Conciliar documents.

1.1 Textual History of OE 12-14

In the early phase of OE, the Eastern Council Fathers objected the whole section of sacramental discipline, because they felt it as an unnecessary infringement into their autonomy solemnly guaranteed by the Council itself (cf. OE 5).² But gradually this objection lost its ground, as they realised that these articles never encroached their freedom but are guiding principles in an inter-ecclesial and ecumenical context.

OE 12 confirms and approves the ancient discipline of sacraments existing in the Oriental Churches and "also the ritual practices connected with their celebration and administration, and ardently desires that this should be *re-established* if circumstances warrant it". The latter part of this article is only an application of OE 6 to the sphere of sacraments. OE 6 is a crucial conciliar text, but often translated defectively, that invites

¹ © Published in *Revisiting Vatican II: Orientalium Ecclesiarum after Fifty Years*, Francis Thonippara (ed.) Dharmaram Publications, Bengaluru 2016, 157-172.

² J. H. Hoeck, "Decree on Eastern Churches", *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. I, Herbert H. Vorgrimler (ed.), New York 1967, p. 323.



all members of the Eastern Churches to strive to *return* to the ancestral traditions, "if they have unduly fallen short (*indebite defecerint*) of them owing to circumstances of times and persons".³ This return is of course an ecclesial act, observing the "common and particular laws" (OE 14).

OE 13 *restores* the Eastern custom regarding the minister of Confirmation: "priests validly confer this sacrament, using chrism blessed by a patriarch or a bishop". This allowance represents an official reversal of the papal prescriptions regarding the administration of this sacrament.⁴ The earlier version of this article began with a reservation, "although the bishop alone is the regular administrator of confirmation", and since it was hardly compatible with Eastern practice, it was omitted in the final draft. But by adding that "chrism blessed by a patriarch or a bishop", the Episcopal *origo* (*minister originarius* rather than *minister ordinarius*, cf. LG 27) of the sacrament of initiation is indirectly suggested.

The great novelty of OE 14, with regard to the liturgical celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation, is that it permits the celebration of Chrismation even apart from baptism, a custom not in line with the Eastern patrimony. "All Eastern Rite priests, either in conjunction with Baptism or *separately from it*, can confer this sacrament validly on all the faithful of any rite including the Latin."

1.2. Interpretation of OE 12-14 in the light of Council Documents

An important guiding principle for the sound interpretation of Vatican II, according to the Extra-ordinary Synod of Bishops of 1985 (held to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Council), was to interpret each passage of the Council in the context of all the others, so that the integral teaching of the Ecumenical Council may be rightly grasped.⁵ Accordingly, we examine the unity of the Sacraments of Initiation in OE 12-14, in the light of parallel conciliar documents.

The liturgical renewal introduced by *Sacrosanctum Concilium* called for the link between confirmation and the other initiation-sacraments to be restored. For example, SC 71 states that "the rite of Confirmation is to be *revised* so that the intimate connection of this sacrament with the whole of the Christian initiation may more clearly appear". LG 11 and AG 14, affirm Confirmation's central place among the Sacraments of

³ Translation is taken from G. Nedungatt, "Return to the Pre-Diamper Traditions", *The Synod of Diamper Revisited*, G. Nedungatt (ed.), Rome 2001, p. 246.

⁴ For instance, Pope Pius X in 1907 forbade Ruthenian Catholic priests from administering the sacrament of Confirmation in the United States. K. Anatolios, "The Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*", *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition*, M. Lamb & M. Levering (eds.), Oxford 2008, p. 345.

⁵ "The theological interpretation of the conciliar doctrine must show attention to all the documents, in themselves and in their close inter-relationship, in such a way that the integral meaning of the Council's affirmations—often very complex—might be understood and expressed." *The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod*. Cited from <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/SYNFINAL.HTM>



Initiation.⁶ In other words, the Council insists on the integration of Confirmation into the order of the Sacraments of Initiation, even for the Latin Church.

Sacrosanctum Concilium gave certain principles for liturgical revisions. For example, SC 23 states that, "careful research should first be made - theological, historical and pastoral - about each section of the liturgy to be revised". Again, "there must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them and care is taken that the new forms in some way grow *organically* from the already existing forms." This idea of organic growth as a criterion for liturgical restoration in SC 23 was taken up in the draft of OE, and was introduced into OE 6: "no change is to be admitted unless it makes for *organic progress*".⁷ Thus, the norm of organic progress in OE 6 and SC 23 becomes the guiding principle for the *restoration* of the Sacraments of Initiation in OE 12-14.

1.3. Post-Conciliar Interpretation of OE 12-14

Among the various magisterial documents published after Vatican II, we limit our discussion to three main documents.

(1) *The Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* (CCEO) is not only an official interpretation of the Council documents but also an authoritative "return" to ancestral traditions of the Eastern Churches. The strict link existing between the three sacraments of Christian Initiation, above all the unity of their liturgical celebration, was canonically stipulated in canons 695-697. Canon 695 prescribes Chrismation immediately after baptism which, without it, is incomplete. The possibility of the celebration of Chrismation separately, permitted in OE 14, is now limited to "a case of true necessity". Even in these cases, Chrismation should be administered *quam primum*, without breaking the moral unity of the rites. In drawing directly from OE 14, canon 696 deals with inter-ecclesial laws. In conformity with OE 12, the canon 697 states that "sacramental initiation in the mystery of salvation is perfected in the reception of the Divine Eucharist", and therefore asks that the Holy Eucharist be administered *quam primum* to the faithful, after Baptism and Chrismation. Besides, the return to the early practice of Sacraments of Initiation is an ecclesial act, regulated by "the particular law of one's Church *sui iuris*".

(2) The 1996 *Instruction* of the Congregation for the Eastern Churches for *Applying the Liturgical Prescriptions of the CCEO of the Eastern Churches* clearly states that if an Eastern Church has changed the unity of the Sacraments of Initiation under external pressure, then it is a legitimate element "*unduly* fallen short" that needs

⁶ "Then, when the sacraments of Christian Initiation have freed them from the power of darkness, having died with Christ, been buried with Him and risen with Him [baptism], they receive the Spirit who makes them adopted sons [confirmation] and celebrate the remembrance of the Lord's death and resurrection together with the whole People of God [Eucharist]" (AG 14). "Incorporated into the Church through baptism... bound more intimately to the Church by the sacrament of confirmation... [then] taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life, they offer the divine Victim to God" (LG 11).

⁷ G. Nedungatt, "Return to the Pre-Diamper Traditions", *The Synod of Diamper Revisited*, G. Nedungatt (ed.), Rome 2001, pp. 242-243.

restoration. The *Instruction* pinpoints "the norm of organic progress" (SC 23 & OE 6) as the guiding principle for the restoration (n. 42). Besides, the *Instruction* gives a detailed pastoral directive, a gradual preparatory program before any liturgical reform.⁸

- No haste in liturgical reform
- In-depth study of all early texts, their publication with critical edition
- Special concern towards non-catholic practice, and ecumenical impact
- Liturgical catechesis, first to clergy and, then to laity
- Faith formation, mystagogy and a dynamic catechesis to children

(3) The third post-conciliar document that we consider is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC). CCC 1233 articulates the inseparable nature of the Sacraments of Initiation as follows:

Today in all the rites, Latin and Eastern, the Christian initiation of adults begins with their entry into the catechumenate and reaches its culmination in a single celebration of the three sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. In the Eastern rites the Christian initiation of infants also begins with Baptism followed immediately by Chrismation and the Eucharist, while in the Roman rite it is followed by years of catechesis before being completed later by Confirmation and the Eucharist, the summit of their Christian initiation.

An authentic interpretation of OE 12-14, basing on conciliar and post-conciliar documents, puts forward the following affirmations on the unity of the Sacraments of Initiation. 1) Christian initiation is a single celebration of three Sacraments of Initiation. 2) Any Church that has *unduly* fallen short of this custom should restore it, with its particular liturgical practices. 3) The liturgical restoration of this rite should follow "the norm of organic progress". 4) The reform of the Sacraments of Initiation is itself a 'Christian initiation': it should precede research, not only theological and historical, but also ecumenical and pastoral, above all with liturgical catechesis. 5) The reform of the Sacraments of Initiation is an ecclesial act, involving clergy and laity, and principally the children.

2. Reception of OE 12-14 in the Syro-Malabar Church

⁸ Though without acting hastily, an in-depth study of the ancient practice, obtained from related manuscripts and printed texts which have been published by Eastern Catholics and also by Orthodox, should first be prepared. The practice still in use by the Orthodox should also be taken into account. The necessary instruction should be provided so that the motivations can be understood by all: clergy, theologians, and the Christian people. While the restored practice is being introduced, care should be taken to not interrupt the necessary, progressive catechesis of newly initiated children, as soon as they are ready to approach the comprehension of the mysteries of the faith, and to continue until they reach maturity. The participation by children in the brief but regular moments of the liturgical celebrations is already in itself a precious element of catechesis, because it introduces them concretely into the life of the Church, with an initiation that is not so much notionalistic nor rational but efficient, inserting them in a celebrative climate where the gestures introduce them into the invisible reality. The whole process will also require a creative effort to adequately connect the new practice in the context of the current life. Though not an easy intervention, it is indispensable in order to truly revitalize one's own heritage, to the benefit of the universal Church.

The second part of our paper deals with the liturgical history of the Sacraments of Initiation among the Malabar Christians till this day. The long span of time is conveniently broken up into three chronological periods: 1) before 1599, the Synod of Diamper, 2) from 1599 till 1965, the Vatican II and 3) from 1965 till today.

2.1 Sacraments of Initiation among the St Thomas Christians (till 1599)

Francis Ros, who eventually became the first Latin Prelate of the Malabar Christians (1599-1624), in his "A Report on the Serra", dated 1603/1604, writes,

they used to baptise men and women nude by immersion into water. In the baptism they were using also the holy oil, with which they anointed the baptised on the chest before baptism and on the head after baptism. The said oil was blessed by the same priest as was baptising. (...) About the sacrament of Confirmation they did not have any custom nor have I found any mention of the sacrament of confirmation in these Chaldean books. (...) Grown-ups and all children without any distinction used to receive the Communion.⁹

Francis Ros did not find any mention about Chrismation in the liturgical manuscripts because, the unity of the liturgical rite of the Sacraments of Initiation in the East Syriac tradition is so strong that, the Ms title "Baptism" implied all three phases of Christian initiation. The above witness clearly confirms the single celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation, and most of its particular elements (like immersion, blessing of oil and water), among the Malabar Christians before the Synod of Diamper.

The introduction of Latin liturgy, through their Syriac translations, was unofficially begun in Malabar during the time of Mar Jacob (+1552) and Mar Joseph (+1569), and was intensified by the time of Mar Abraham (+1597), the last Chaldean Metropolitan of Malabar. With the help of the Jesuits of Vaipicotta seminary, Mar Abraham translated the text of Confirmation from Latin to Syriac. However, he administered it as a separate rite only to those whom he wanted to ordain, so that the missionaries could not question the suitability of the *ordinandi*. The translation of liturgical texts including the Sacramentary was canonically approved in the Third Provincial Council of Goa in 1585. Thus in Diamper at the end of the Synod, each parish priest was given a Syriac translation of the Roman ritual (according to the use of Braga, Portugal).

The Synod of Diamper, since it applied the reforms of the Council of Trent, considered Baptismal rite in Malabar defective because of the inappropriate form. It introduced the Latin rite of Confirmation, thus definitively separating Chrismation from Baptism, and stipulated that the ordinary minister of Confirmation is the bishop and not the priest. Thus in 1599 the St Thomas Christians lost their ancestral practice of the single celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation.

⁹ "A Report on the Serra", G. Nedungatt (ed.), *Synod of Diamper Revisited*, Appendix IV, pp. 329-331.

2.2 Baptism-Confirmation in Malabar during the Latin period (1599-1965)¹⁰

Francis Ros, the first Latin bishop of Malabar Christians (1599-1624), effectively implemented the liturgical prescriptions of the Synod of Diamper, including the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation according to the Syriac translation of the Roman Ritual.¹¹ Since after the Synod of Diamper, all East Syriac manuscripts of Baptism were burnt, the only text available for the following two centuries, was the manuscripts prepared by Ros and their handwritten copies.

In 1775, after consulting the priests of Malabar, the Syriac translation of the Roman Sacramentary (*Ordo Chaldaicus Ministerii Sacramentorum Sanctorum*) was printed under auspices of Propaganda Fide. Since it was intended for priests, logically it did not contain the rite of Confirmation, which was to be administered by the Bishop, following the Latin mode. In 1845, the second edition of the Syriac Roman Ritual was published, with some additional Latin prayers.

Even though Francis Ros made a Syriac translation of the Roman Pontifical, soon after the Third Provincial Council of Goa in 1585, it was never printed nor promulgated. Generally the Latin bishops after Francis Ros did not know Syriac, and hence they celebrated the rite of Confirmation according to the Latin Pontifical. After 1896, when native bishops were nominated for Malabar Christians, they faced the dilemma of celebrating the Missal in Syriac and the Pontifical in Latin. Therefore, a Syriac translation of the Latin Pontifical was prepared, and was sent to Rome for approval, but with no reply. Yet again, in a letter dated 20th April 1929, the then Syro-Malabar bishops repeated their request for a Latin Pontifical to the Oriental Congregation. Disclaiming the ideology of the superiority of the Latin rite (*praestantia ritus latini*), Pope Pius XI in person wrote to the Malabar bishops on 1st December 1934: "the Holy See does not want to latinize but only to catholicize".

Practically the Roman rite of Baptism (in Syriac) and Confirmation (in Latin) was celebrated in Malabar until 1968, when a partially reformed liturgical text in Malayalam was introduced.

2.3 The Liturgical Reform after 1965¹²

In the light of the conciliar directives, especially OE 12-14, in 1966 the Oriental Congregation prepared a text for Baptism, *Ritus Sancti Baptismi*, without a separate rite for Chrismation, simplifying the ancient East Syriac rite but preserving most of its characteristics. We limit our discussion to five liturgical elements (First Anointing,

¹⁰ For details: P. Pallath, *Iniziazione cristiana nella Chiesa Siro-Malabarese*, Roma 2011, pp. 97-130.

¹¹ When the Synod of Diamper is silent about the manner of Baptism, Ros in the *Diocesan Statutes* (1606) decreed that in urgent cases, "the priests should go the house of the child and reciting the essential formula should baptise pouring water on the head". Scaria Zacharia, *Randu Praachina Gadya Krithikal*, p. 123.

¹² For details: P. Pallath, *Iniziazione cristiana nella Chiesa Siro-Malabarese*, Roma 2011, pp. 97-130; T. Mannoorampampil, *The History of the Formation of the New Text of the Sacraments in the Syro-Malabar Church*, Kottayam 2011.



Blessing of water and oil, modality of baptism, formula of Baptism-Chrismation and liturgical unity of the Sacraments of Initiation).

1. The First Anointing of Baptism was absent.
2. The blessing of water and oil, an essential part of the rite, should be done during the rite itself.
3. The modality of baptism is triple immersion.
4. The original East Syriac formula for Baptism-Chrismation is maintained.
5. Christian Initiation is celebrated as a single celebration of three sacraments.

The Syro-Malabar Bishops Conference (SMBS) entrusted this text to the Central Liturgical Committee (CLC) for study, and they came out with a completely new text. This new text was printed in 1968, without any approval of the Holy See, and it was soon used for the liturgical celebration of Baptism and Confirmation. The new text of 1968 was effectively a Malayalam translation of the Roman-Syriac Ritual used in Malabar, with some modifications according to the East Syriac tradition and integrating certain cultural elements. Curiously the rite of Confirmation from the Latin Pontifical was also included in this new text. The main characteristics of this text can be enlisted as follows.

1. The First Anointing of Baptism was absent.
2. The blessing of water and oil are considered optional.
3. The modality of baptism is aspersion.
4. The formula for Baptism-Chrismation is still that of the Latin rite.
5. The celebration of the sacraments of initiation still continued to be separated.

This was a clear case of poor reception of OE 12-14, none of the five elements are restored. Unsatisfied of the new text, in 1974 itself, SMBC nominated a sub-committee to prepare a new text of the sacraments on the basis of original sources. Again, during the meeting of CLC in 1985, a special committee of three experts was appointed to study the sources. The publication of CCEO in 1991, of CCC in 1992 and *Instruction* in 1996 gave a new impetus and guideline to the Syro-Malabar liturgical reform. Under the leadership of CLC, a draft was prepared after detailed discussion from 1991-1994. This draft was approved by the Syro-Malabar Synod in 1996 with necessary modifications and was sent to Rome. The main characteristics of this reformed draft is as follows.

1. The First Anointing of Baptism was absent.
2. Option is given in the rite for the blessing of water and oil.
3. The modality of baptism is given in the following order: 1) aspersion, 2) infusion and 3) immersion.
4. The formula for Baptism-Chrismation was not of the Latin rite but did not manifest the East Syriac identity.
5. A separate rite of Confirmation was given, and hence single celebration of sacraments of initiation becomes facultative.

After a detailed study, Rome had given certain directives for the consideration of the Synod on 31-03-2000. The main suggestions can be summarised as follows.



1. The First Anointing of Baptism should be preserved.
2. The blessing of water and oil is obligatory in each rite, *except in an emergency*.
3. The modality of baptism is immersion and infusion; aspersion is suppressed.
4. The original East Syriac formula for Baptism-Chrismation should be maintained.
5. Christian Initiation should be administered as a single celebration of three sacraments.

The revised draft prepared by the Synod on the basis of the Roman suggestions of 2000, was sent to the dioceses for further observations. Considering the opinions from the dioceses, the final text was approved by the Synod on 2001, and was sent to Rome for *Recognitio*. Though most of the directives given by Rome was inserted, the Synod requested for the following:

1. The First Anointing of Baptism may be given optional.
2. The blessing of water and oil is the general rule, but *for valid pastoral reasons* exception may be given (instead of, *in an emergency*).
3. Aspersion should not be suppressed.

In the mean time, the Particular Law of the Syro-Malabar Church regulated that the "sacraments of initiation to be administered according to CCEO 694-695, and according to the prescriptions of the liturgical text".¹³ The Congregation of Oriental Churches finally gave *Recognitio* to the revised draft in 2004, with the following final directive:

1. The First Anointing of Baptism is always obligatory.
2. The use of already blessed oil *for valid pastoral reasons* is permitted, because the Synod desires so.
3. The modality of baptism should be reversed so as to give precedence to the age-old universal tradition of baptism: 1) immersion, 2) infusion and 3) aspersion.

Inserting the final directives of Rome, the Reformed Text of Sacraments of Initiation was finally published on 01-12-2004, and came to be effective from 6th January 2005. Compared to the Text of 1968, the present Text was a more authentic return to the ancestral patrimony of the Syro-Malabar Church. The main features of this text can be listed as below:

1. The First Anointing of Baptism is conserved.
2. The general rule is to bless the oil during the rite of baptism itself. But *for sufficient reason* (instead of, *valid pastoral reasons*), previously blessed oil may be used. Water for each baptism shall be blessed on the occasion of the baptism itself, *except in an emergency*.
3. The mode of Baptism is in the order: immersion, infusion and aspersion.
4. The original East Syriac formula for Baptism-Chrismation is conserved.
5. The possibility of a separate celebration of Chrismation is given. The *raison d'être* of this concession, was to give Chrism to those children who received only the

¹³ Canon 137,2; Synodal News, Vol 11/1 May 2003, 34.

sacrament of Baptism before the introduction of the Reformed Text of 2005. But since there is no clear directive, the celebration of Initiation is disintegrated.

Conclusion

The reception of OE 12-14 by the Syro-Malabar Church was a gradual process. First of all, SMC recognised that the loss of the unity of the Sacraments of Initiation during the Latin period (1599-1965) was a great wound in its ecclesial body. Since it was a liturgical custom "unduly fallen short" (OE 6), it was legitimate to *restore* it (OE 12). Even the Latin Church, inspired by its Eastern counterparts, has recognised Christian initiation as a single celebration of three sacraments of initiation (CCC 1233).

With regard to the restoration of "the ritual practices connected with its celebration" (OE 12), out of five of main elements that we analysed, three are completely restored (First Anointing, Modality of Baptism and Formula). In the light of CCEO 695, exception is given to the blessing of oil, *for sufficient reason*, and to the blessing of water, *in an emergency*. Basing on OE 14, permission is also given to a separate celebration of Chrismation, and therefore, the unity of the liturgical celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation is compromised. The following schema summarises well the gradual process of reception of OE 12-14, in the liturgical reform of the Syro-Malabar Church.

Elements	Rome 1966	SMBC 1968	SMC 1996	Rome 2000	SMC 2004	SMC 2005
First Anointing	X	X	X	√	x	√
Blessing water, oil	√	X	x	√	x	√x
Mode of Baptism	√	X	x	√	√	√
Formula	√	X	√	√	√	√
Unity	√	X	X	√	x	√x

Liturgical reform is itself like Christian initiation. No reform can be made in a day. It would be seriously imprudent and a sign of pastoral insensitivity to believe that age-old liturgical customs be eradicated in a fortnight. Like any living organism, a wound in the Church is healed gradually. The "norm of organic progress" embraces an organic recuperation of the proper customs, not of a sudden and artificial cure. Thus, from the Text of 1968 till the Reformed Text of 2005, there is an organic progress in its concern to preserve the identity of the Church, and a steady reception of OE 12-14. The directives of the Holy See in the light of Vatican II were always a corrective and therapeutic.

The liturgical reforms of the Syro-Malabar Church has its limitations. The reform lacked at times an ecumenical and pastoral approach, above all a dynamic liturgical catechesis. Enriched by a better formation, the faithful will gradually become more capable of living and rediscovering the riches of their own liturgy. Besides, the liturgical reform has not yet become a true ecclesial act, involving the whole people of God. Every



Church has lived its own making and unmaking of Tradition. The vicissitudes that the Syro-Malabar Church faces during this process of *return* is nothing but, "prunes to make it bear more fruit" (Jn 15:2).

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