

Syro-Malabar bishop tells pope his church is treated unjustly

VATICAN CITY – The Vatican and many of the Latin-rite bishops of India are not treating the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church with justice, and that makes the church look bad, Auxiliary Bishop Bosco Puthur of Ernakulam-Angamaly told Pope Benedict XVI.

While other Christians and other religions enjoy the freedom to build churches and conduct services anywhere in India, the Eastern Catholic churches “are denied it, paradoxically not by the state, but by our own ecclesiastical authorities,” the bishop said.

Bishop Puthur, administrator of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, made his remarks to Pope Benedict April 7 at the end of the Syro-Malabar bishops’ “ad limina” visits to the Vatican to report on the status of their dioceses.

Generally, the leaders of the Eastern Catholic churches such as the Syro-Malabar church enjoy full freedom to elect bishops and erect dioceses only in their church’s traditional territory; otherwise, the responsibility is left to the pope, often in consultation with the Latin-rite bishops of the region concerned.

In the case of the Syro-Malabar church, Bishop Puthur told Pope Benedict that its traditional territory was all of India until Latin-rite missionaries arrived in the 15th century. Now any of its faithful living outside Kerala state are subject to the authority of the local Latin-rite bishop.

“We are convinced that it is the credibility of the Apostolic See that is at stake if this jurisdictional right is not restored to its pristine status,” the bishop said.

Bishop Puthur presented five requests to Pope Benedict: the restoration of “all-India jurisdiction” to the Syro-Malabar Church; permission to establish dioceses throughout India; permission to set up archdioceses in Delhi and other large cities; the establishment of a special jurisdiction for the Persian Gulf states, in order to serve the tens of thousands of Syro-Malabar Catholics from India working in the

region; action to improve the pastoral care of Syro-Malabar Catholics in Europe, Australia and other parts of the world.

The Syro-Malabar leader thanked the Latin-rite bishops of the United States and Canada for supporting the appointment in 2001 of a Chicago-based bishop for his church's faithful in North America.

The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church has about 3.7 million members around the world, Bishop Puthur said. Currently, there are 29 dioceses served by: 32,855 women religious; 3,987 diocesan priests; 3,133 religious order priests; and 745 religious brothers, he said.

In his talk to the bishops, Pope Benedict urged them to work for unity within their dioceses, in their church and with the all the bishops of India.

"This responsibility is of special importance in a country like India where the unity of the church is reflected in the rich diversity of her rites and traditions," he said.

Another area where efforts toward unity must be given priority is the family, the pope said.

"A privileged expression of sharing in the divine life is through sacramental marriage and family life," he said.

Pope Benedict said the church can no longer assume that society at large will support or supplement its efforts to provide a "sound and integral education of young people in the ways of chastity and responsibility," nor will it always reinforce a vision of marriage as a permanent bond between a man and a woman open to having and educating children.

"Have your families look to the Lord and his saving word for a complete and truly positive vision of life and marital relations, so necessary for the good of the whole human family," he said. "Let your preaching and catechesis in this field be patient and constant."