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India-based Catholic rite gets official US HQ

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WASHINGTON -- Pope Benedict XVI has established an apostolic exarchate for the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church in the United States and appointed Father Thomas Naickamparampil as its first bishop.

The pope also named the priest apostolic visitator for Syro-Malankara Catholics in Canada and Europe.

Creation of the exarchate and the priest's appointments were publicized in Washington July 14 by Msgr. Jean-Francois Lantheaume, charge d'affaires at the apostolic nunciature in Washington.

Bishop-designate Naickamparampil is a priest of the Archeparchy of Trivandrum, India.

An apostolic exarchate in the Eastern Catholic Church -- the equivalent of an apostolic vicariate in the Latin church -- is created by the Vatican for the pastoral care of Catholics in an area outside the territory of the Eastern Catholic Church to which they belong.

An apostolic visitator is a papal representative who is charged with familiarizing himself with the situation of a given community and reporting on its status to the Vatican.

Bishop-designate Naickamparampil was born on June 6, 1961, in Mylapra, a village in Pathanamthitta district in the southern state of Kerala. He was ordained a priest Dec. 29, 1986. He has a doctorate in philosophy from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

The headquarters of the new exarchate will be at the Malankara Catholic center in New Hyde Park, N.Y. The Malankara Catholic Church on Long Island will be its main parish.

The Syro-Malankara Catholic Church is one of the two Eastern churches that, along with the Latin Church, make up the Catholic Church in India. The other is the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. The two Eastern Churches predate the Latin rite missionaries who came with European colonizers. The two Eastern churches trace their origins to St. Thomas the Apostle, who tradition says evangelized the Subcontinent.

The Syro-Malankara church is led by Major Archbishop Isaac Cleemis Thottunkal of Trivandrum, which is in Kerala. The church has eight eparchies (dioceses) and more than 500,000 Catholics.

On Feb. 10, 2005, Pope John Paul II raised the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church to the rank of major archepiscopal church. It is currently served by 600 priests, 130 men religious and 1,740 women religious.

In North America, there are 16 Syro-Malankara parishes and 15 mission stations serving about 10,000 Catholics. There are 30 priests and 34 women religious who minister to them.

Syro-Malankara Catholics first began to migrate to the United States in 1984, settling first in the New York area.

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