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New Syro-Malabar Catholic eparchy in Australia to 'start from zero'

Anto Akkara Catholic News Service | Mar. 7, 2014

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The bishop appointed to head the newly erected Syro-Malabar Catholic Eparchy of St. Thomas the Apostle of Melbourne, Australia, said he has "a tough task ahead."

"We have to practically start from zero," said Bishop Bosco Puthur, who was to be installed March 25, the feast of the Assumption, to lead the 40,000 Syro-Malabar Catholics in Australia. Until his appointment, he served as curial bishop of the Syro-Malabar Church.

The eparchy in Australia is the Syro-Malabar Church's second outside of India. The first was established in Chicago in 2011.

Puthur, 67, told Catholic News Service the Syro-Malabar Church in Australia has no church building or other infrastructure to support its members.

"It is a big task to bring together scattered families and set up parishes and centers for the organized pastoral care of our faithful," the bishop said in an interview at Mount St. Thomas, the church's headquarters.

Pope Francis appointed Puthur Jan. 11 to head the new eparchy in Melbourne. The bishop also will be the apostolic administrator of nearly 4,000 Syro-Malabarese immigrants in New Zealand.

The Melbourne eparchy is "unique in many ways," Puthur said, explaining that 85 percent of church members are younger than 40 and that most are immigrants from Kerala working in health care and information technology.

Although Australia already has four dioceses of Eastern Catholic churches, Puthur said the Syro-Malabar community is one of the largest in the country.

The establishment of the Australian eparchy followed a 2011 meeting at the Vatican among Australian bishops and a delegation from the Syro-Malabar synod led by Cardinal George Alencherry of Ernakulam-Angamaly, major archbishop of Syro-Malabar Church.

The Syro-Malabar Church has more than 4 million members worldwide. It traces its origin to St. Thomas the Apostle, who is said to have reached the shores of Kerala in A.D. 52.

Puthur said the eparchy will depend on other Catholic churches to host liturgies and prayer services in Malayalam, the language spoken in Kerala.

"We cannot avail of the prime time in these churches as they have fixed schedules," he said. "Our people have to be patient until we set our infrastructures and priests in place. It is a challenging task."

Meanwhile, Archbishop Denis Hart of Melbourne, president of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, recognized the establishment of the eparchy as an indication of the interest the Vatican has in meeting the spiritual needs of the thousands of Syro-Malabar Catholics who have settled in Australia.

"I welcome Bishop Bosco Puthur as the first bishop of the St. Thomas Catholics in Australia, and I look forward to working with him ... (who has to take) care of his brothers and sisters through the whole country," the archbishop said.

Puthur welcomed the support the Syro-Malabar community has received from the Australian bishops, saying their backing will strengthen the community.

While more than 70 Syro-Malabar priests already serve across Australia, the bishop pointed out that there is not a single nun from the church in the country.

"We need proper structures and dozens of priests and nuns to bear witness to the faith in our own tradition in a highly secularized society," he said.

Fr. Francis Kolencherry, recently appointed as vicar general of the new eparchy, told CNS in an email that just nine chaplains have been appointed to specifically serve Syro-Malabar Catholics. He said that of those, he is the lone full-time chaplain.

"The SMC has 10 Mass centers with more than 2,000 families in Melbourne, while 11 communities in other cities have weekly Masses, and many others have Mass once a month or whenever a priest is available," he explained.

"We look forward to a more effective national coordination to share the human resources properly to ensure efficient pastoral mechanisms like liturgical celebration, adult (faith) formation, catechism, marriage preparations courses, online Oriental theology courses, annual retreats, etc.," he wrote.

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