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Study Trip to India (12–22 February 2025)

Report

From 12 to 22 February 2025, a group of professors and students from the Faculty of Theology at the University of Opole – primarily from the Christian Oriental Studies program – undertook a study trip to southern India. The trip was organized by the Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Rev. Prof. Mateusz R. Potoczny, in cooperation with the St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (SEERI) in Kottayam.

For many participants visiting the world's most populous country in the Far East for the first time, the initial sense of embarrassment and astonishment caused by the prevailing chaos and disorder gradually gave way to fascination with the culture, vitality, and practicality of daily life, as well as the extraordinary openness and kindness of the Indian people. Particularly striking was the symbiosis between people and nature, such as cows freely crossing busy streets, though sadly this co-existence extends also to the omnipresent litter. The southern regions of this Asian country are distinguished not only by their varied landscapes but also by impressive civilizational development, evidenced by multilane highways and layered express roads under construction.

The primary aim of the study trip was to explore the culture and traditions of southern India in connection with St. Thomas the Apostle, who, according to tradition, arrived in India in the year 72, preached the Gospel there, and died a martyr's death. The first two days of the visit were devoted to sites associated with St. Thomas's mis-

sion and martyrdom, including his tomb in Chennai. Participants also visited Hindu temples, reflecting the rich religious mosaic of the Indian population.

The remainder of the trip focused on the activities of the St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, an important center for theological study and research, which houses a well-equipped library. For the academic group from Opole, SEERI served as a gateway to learning about the history of the local Church, the Syro-Malabar liturgy, and as a base for numerous visits and encounters with various communities and individuals who form the vibrant social fabric of India.

In addition to Catholic churches of various rites – mainly Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara – the group had the opportunity to visit a synagogue and one of the oldest mosques in India. A particularly memorable part of the trip was a visit to the Kurishumala Ashram monastery in the mountains, where the group met with monks, experienced Eastern spiritual meditation, and admired the mountainous landscape dominated by tea plantations.

A full-day boat cruise on the Pamba River provided a unique setting for an engaging academic debate on the Christian Oriental Studies program. Participants shared their insights, observations, and suggestions regarding the program's operation and future prospects at the University of Opole.

During numerous meetings, the group came to realize that the true strength of the Churches in Southern India lies not in their numerous and richly decorated churches or roadside shrines, but in their human potential – especially among children and youth. This was evident not only in full Sunday liturgies and packed school gymnasiums but also in institutions like the St. Thomas Apostolic Seminary in Vada-vathoor, which currently has 280 seminarians. The visit included participation in vespers in the Syro-Malabar rite, exchange of experiences, discussion of contemporary challenges with students and faculty, and the establishment of new connections. A similar exchange took place at Mar Thoma Seminary in Kottayam, a center of the Syro-Malankara Orthodox Church.

Equally enriching were meetings with Church hierarchy representatives, including Archbishop Thomas Koorilos Chakkalapadickal of the Syro-Malankara Archdiocese of Thiruvalla, Bishop Raphael Thattil of the Syro-Malabar Diocese of Kottayam, and Cardinal George Alencherry, who served from 2011 to 2023 as Major Archbishop of Ernakulam-Angamaly and was the head of the Syro-Malabar Church. All meetings were held in a cordial, friendly, and welcoming atmosphere, offering insights into both the challenges and the richness of these Churches, particularly evident in their vibrant younger generations.

For many participants from the University of Opole, the trip became an opportunity to discover the rich traditions of the Churches that trace their roots back to the

mission of St. Thomas the Apostle. These Churches have preserved their Catholic identity and vitality despite their distance from the Latin Church, attempts at Europeanization through Portuguese expansion at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, and modern-day internal divisions. Even though Christians form a minority in Hindu-majority India, in the Kerala region they appear to be a dynamic community shaping the rhythm of local life through their mindset, rituals, traditions, and religious practices. Further collaboration between the Faculty of Theology in Opole and theological study centers in India is expected, bringing mutual understanding and enrichment.



Meeting with Cardinal George Alencherry

