

# Correspondence between the Popes and the Rajahs of Travancore in xviii Century

(Contributed to *The Magazine*, St. Joseph's  
College, Trichinopoly, February, 1921)

We here publish the translation of letters exchanged between the Popes and the Rajah of Travancore towards the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. They are of interest as illustrating the happy relations that existed even then between the Rajah and his Christian subjects. We feel sure that these documents will appeal to our readers, especially to our Malayalee students who form such a large proportion of the students of St. Joseph's College. They will be pleased to find that, as far back as a century and a half ago, the bonds of sympathy between the reigning sovereign and the Christian population living in his kingdom were as strong as they are to-day.

These letters also throw light on a phenomenon which till now has not been adequately explained. The flourishing Catholic Community of Travancore, Cochin, and the Southern Malabar District, occupies a foremost place

among the several large Catholic agglomerations in India. Out of a total Indian Catholic population of two and a half millions, the Malabar Catholic community counts as many as 770,846,<sup>1</sup> or a little over a quarter of the entire Catholic population of India. The existence of such a numerous and, we may add, prosperous and influential community in the Indian States of Travancore and Cochin, and the British District of Malabar, can only be accounted for by a study of the history of the Christians in Malabar. The letters here published form a useful contribution to that history, and are evidence that the *protection* generously extended to the Christians in the past by the Hindu Rajahs of Travancore and Cochin, was an important factor in the development and prosperity of the Catholics living under their enlightened and tolerant rule.

The first letter<sup>2</sup> was addressed to the Rajah of Travancore by Pope Clement XIV, requesting him to protect the European Missionaries working in his kingdom and his Christian subjects.

---

<sup>1</sup> These figures are collected from the *Catholic Directory* of India, Burma, and Ceylon, for 1920.

<sup>2</sup> These letters are translations from the original Latin.

“CLEMENT P. P. XIV.

“Health and light of Divine grace:  
O illustrious and most powerful king!<sup>3</sup> Our  
missionaries of the Order of the Carmelites  
who are working in some parts of your king-  
dom, have very often written to Us in their  
letters about your kingly magnanimity and  
other eminent and praiseworthy qualities;  
they continually tell Us in particular of the  
benefits bestowed upon them by you. Great,  
therefore, is the renown gained by your name,  
and your virtues in these parts of Europe, and  
numerous are the praises deservedly bestowed  
on you in the speeches of many. But these  
singular gifts of yours, your great kindness  
towards these missionaries, touch Us most of  
all, who are the head of the Christian Religion,  
and under whose name and command they  
labour. We therefore greatly commend your  
virtues and kindness, and your services and  
benefits to them, which We acknowledge and  
consider as done to Ourselves. Wherefore We  
have desired to write this letter to you, that  
We may openly make known to you Our

---

<sup>3</sup> There is no exaggeration when the Pope addresses the Rajah as “most powerful king.” In the eighteenth century there were *five* great kingdoms in Southern India—Malabar Travancore, Madura, Mysore, and Tanjore. (Vide *Orientalis Christiana*, pp. 214-234). The present State of Cochin was included in the kingdoms of Travancore and Malabar, the latter being under the Zamorin.

deepest sentiments towards your ideals and towards the praises betowed on you, and for once testify Our feelings towards you, and that We may at least return thanks for your kindness to Us. The missionaries themselves will convey to you a great deal about our feelings towards you, and about Our great desire for your happiness. Meantime, We beg of you particularly that you may increase your services and gifts towards Ourselves; and the missionaries, treated benevolently and living under you, will be pledges of Our sincere friendship. Thus much We shall be able to make known to you with certainty, that no one will be more faithful or more attached to you than they, no one will be more prepared to obey you. This is enjoined by the very Law they profess,<sup>4</sup> and is as strictly ordered by Us. Hence, therefore, We confidently trust in you for the well-being of Our Christian doctrine and its heralds, Our missionaries. Finally, We beg of God Almighty that He may grant you a long and prosperous life and a great increase of all good things to you, illustrious and most powerful king. Above all, may He grant you His grace, that through the acknowledgment of the Truth, you may reach the true and everlasting bliss.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Catholic Religion inculcates loyalty and obedience to all lawfully constituted civil authorities, whatever the form of Government is. [Cf. St. Paul.]

Given at Rome at St. Mary Major, under the seal of the Fisherman, 2nd July, 1774—the 6th year of Our Pontificate.”

This letter of Pope Clement XIV, written in 1774, was handed to the Rajah at Trivandrum<sup>5</sup> by the Rev. Fr. Paulinus of St. Bartholomew<sup>6</sup> accompanied by the Rev. Fr. Clement of Jesus, in 1780; “it affected the king with much joy,” and “was received in the Assembly of the Chiefs of Administration as a sign of honour,” and “on that occasion the king granted immunity from taxation to the fields

---

<sup>5</sup> Trivandrum was even then the capital of the State of Travancore.

<sup>6</sup> Fr. Paulinus of the Carmelite Order himself gives us an account of these transactions in his *Orientalis Christiana*. He was born at Hoff in Lower Austria on the 25th of April, 1748, and died in Rome on the 7th of January 1806. Having entered the Carmelite Order, he was sent in 1774 as missionary to Malabar, and he was there appointed Vicar-General of his Order and Apostolic Visitor. Recalled in 1780 to Rome in order to give an account of the State of that Mission, he was charged with the editing of books for the use of the Missionaries. On account of political troubles he stayed from 1798 to 1800 in Vienna. He returned to Rome as Prefect of Studies at the Propaganda College. He is the author of several learned books on the East, which were highly valued in their day, and have contributed much to the study and knowledge of Indian literature and Indian life. We are indebted to him for the *first printed Sanskrit Grammar*. It is from his *India Orientalis Christiana* that the materials for this article are taken.

and palm gardens belonging to the Mission of Verapoly.”<sup>7</sup>

To this letter of the Pope, the Rajah replied in 1788, promising protection to the Christians of Malabar; Fr. Paulinus transmitted the reply to the Holy Father.

The following is the translation of the letter of the Rajah to the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly.

“To be seen by the Bishop of Verapoly.—

“We have understood everything in the letter sent to us. The letter which the Holy Father directed to us, and which the fathers brought, has caused great joy. We have received it and gone through it with great and deserved respect. We have understood also all the business exposed by the fathers. We have written to our administrators concerning these affairs, and the fathers themselves will further enlighten you. Thus I, the Head Clerk, Marthanda Madavan, have written by order of the King.

(Signed) *Sri Padmanabhan*, (KING).”

On receiving the letter of the Rajah, the Pope, Pius VI, who had succeeded Clement

---

<sup>7</sup> Verapoly was the headquarters of the Carmelite Mission; even now the Archdiocese and Province of Verapoly are under Carmelite jurisdiction. The town of Verapoly is in North Travancore.

XIV, sent to the Rajah the following letter, dated 24th February, 1790.

“ PIUS P. P. VI.

“Health and Light of Divine Grace. O illustrious and most powerful king ! The most appreciated letter of your Majesty which was handed to Us very recently, was received with as much joy and honour as becomes the dignity of a powerful king, and as is wont to be shown by Us when letters come from the greatest kings of Europe. From this you will easily be able, O illustrious and most powerful king, to know Our mind towards you, and what value We attach to anything received from you, and how much We try to spread your fame and ensure feelings of gratitude towards you among all. We do this the more carefully and studiously, because great is the magnanimity of your soul and your kindness to Us, as shown in your letter. What can be more gratifying and more acceptable than to hear from you, what can give greater joy to Our heart than to know from yourself with what kindness, clemency, and kingly patronage you proceed, and favour those Our missionaries and all Christians, whom we embrace with fatherly love, and number among Our dearest children. Your gifts thus surpass the affection We bear towards you and will most certainly

continue to bear. For you have attached great weight to Our commendations, by which We urge you in particular to cherish the Christians, both Latins and Syrians,<sup>8</sup> who live under your sway; especially the Vicars and the Fathers living at Verapoly, that they too may ever freely have recourse to your help; may you be always for them their help in the exercise of their religion. That you may with greater willingness do all this, We assure you that, in conformity with all Our religious precepts and commands<sup>9</sup>, they will bear unto you all the reverence that is due to the king; they will show to their patron all possible fidelity, respect, and obedience. They will perform their actions to your satisfaction. You will never repent of the favours shown to them. This also We again assure you, that whatever kindness you do unto them, We will consider

---

<sup>8</sup> The term "Latins" denotes the community which consists mostly of the converts of the Portuguese missionaries and their successors since the 16th century; and by "Syrians" are meant chiefly those descendants of the early converts and Syrian settlers, who constitute the Syrian Church of Malabar, following the Syro-Malabar Rite.

<sup>9</sup> This idea was emphasised in the previous letter, addressed by Pope Clement XIV. In fact the Christians are said to be the most law-abiding subjects of the Travancore and Cochin States.



as done unto Ourselves. Further, that we may convince you how welcome is your portrait<sup>10</sup> which you have sent to Us, we have been induced to send Our portrait in return; it will remain with you as a proof of Our love, regard, and interest in you, and likewise of Our desire for a most happy and long course of life to you, and of Our earnest wish for a successful reign. Finally We pray that Almighty God may give you strength, by which you may gain true wealth, and by which you may come to true happiness. Most powerful king, farewell. Given at Rome at St. Peter's under the Fisherman's<sup>11</sup> seal, the 24th February 1790, the 16th year of Our Pontificate."



---

<sup>10</sup> This allusion to a "portrait" indicates that through the Fathers, the Rajah had sent a portrait of himself to the Pope together with his letter; and this again is an additional indication of the friendship between the Papacy and the Travancore Royal Family.

<sup>11</sup> A similar Brief was written to the Cochin Rajah by Pope Gregory XIII.