



## Eastern Catholic Church Heads Meet Pope

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Kochi -- For the first time in the history of the Catholic Church, a meeting took place recently of all the Patriarchs and Major Archbishops of the Eastern Churches at Castel Gandolfo, the summer residence of Pope Benedict- XVI. (The Eastern Churches comprise mostly those from India, Russia, Ukraine and the West Asia).

"The Pope wanted to know about the problems in West Asia," says Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil.

There has been a large-scale migration of Catholics from that area to Australia and New Zealand for various reasons.

Definitely, it is a risky region to stay. On February 29, 2008, Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho and three priests belonging to the Chaldean Church were abducted and killed in Mosul, Iraq.

Vithayathil says that the Syro- Malabar Church has a special connection with the Chaldean Church.

"We received their bishops from the IVth to the XVIth century," he says.

"It is their liturgy that we are basically still using. So, we empathise deeply with their sufferings." Among the leaders present were representatives from Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Ukraine and Romania.

Apart from Vithayathil, the other Indian delegate was Cleemis Thottunkal, Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malankara Church.

The Patriarchs from West Asia spoke frankly about the problems they are facing in their countries.

Following the interaction, the Pope announced that a two-week long 'Synod for West Asia' will be held for the first time in October 2010, in Rome.

"This will be a historic event," says Vithayathil. "The Pope wants to have an in-depth discussion about the situation in West Asia." Incidentally, the Eastern Churches comprise only 2 percent of the world population of Catholics.

The Ukrainian Church has the largest number of followers, at 60 lakh, followed by the 40 lakh strong Syro-Malabar Church, mainly in Kerala. After the meeting, in a separate ceremony, Cardinal Vithayathil presented the stamps and coins issued in the name of Saint Alphonsa to Pope Benedict.

"The Pope was delighted that the Indian Government, a secular one, had released these stamps and coins," says Vithayathil. "He said that nowadays very few governments around the world honour saints in this manner.

This shows the deep respect given to different religions in our country. We are deeply proud of this."

By Shevlin Sebastian  
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