

Report on the proposal to share St Teresa's with the Syro-Malabar Church

Executive summary

The Syro-Malabar Church is one of the oldest in the Catholic Church, dating back to St Thomas the Apostle and his bringing of Christianity to India. Here in Taunton there are nearly two hundred families belonging to the Syro-Malabar Rite. They were recently declared a mission and are now looking to become a parish, by having their own church and presbytery. They have been offered the use of St John's Anglican Church, but some parishioners have asked us to consider whether St Teresa's could instead be the future location for the Syro-Malabar Parish in Taunton.

A Syro-Malabar Rite Priest would move into the Presbytery at St Teresa's and the Church would be used for Syro-Malabar Rite celebrations. For the existing parishioners at St Teresa's, there would continue to be a Latin-rite Mass at St Teresa's at 11am on Sundays and 10am on Fridays. The idea is that it would enrich the existing parish community without taking anything away from it.

A consultation was carried out with parishioners, which gave a range of views. A majority were in favour, but there were a significant minority against the proposal.

If we were to proceed with the proposal, there was a strong wish expressed for this to be a binding agreement between the Diocese and the Eparchy setting out a number of things to safeguard the life of the existing Latin-rite parish. These include:

- Continued use of the Church by the Parish for Sunday Mass at 11am and Friday Mass at 10am (with confessions from 9.30am and Stations of the Cross in Lent). Continued 11am Easter Sunday Mass. Continued Christmas Eve 4.30pm Mass and Christmas Day 11am Mass.
- Continued use of the grounds for social events on Sundays after Mass, up to 2.30pm to allow time for clearing up
- The Syro-Malabar Rite community would have left the site by 10am on Sundays to avoid any issues with parking and ensure music group can begin just after 10 as currently
- Use of the large sitting room in the Presbytery on Sundays after Mass for parish teas and coffees
- Removal of Syro-Malabar rite liturgical items for Latin-rite celebrations, as set out below
- The Syro-Malabar rite would pay £1200 a month to rent the Church and £1300 a month to rent the presbytery. They would take over responsibility for paying utilities bills.
- Use of the church by the flower arranging team on Saturdays from 10.30am to 1.30pm.

If we were to go ahead, parishioners expressed a preference for either all or the majority of the Latin-rite Masses to continue to be celebrated by the priests resident at St George's, and for them to provide pastoral care for the parish. Many favoured a blended approach with some of these Masses being celebrated by the priest resident at St Teresa's.

If we were to proceed with the proposal, careful consideration would also be needed in terms of the impact on a couple of other groups. The first is a Romanian Pentecostal group who currently use St Teresa's on Sunday mornings and would no longer be able to do so if this proposal was to go ahead. We would need to liaise with them and help them to find another venue or time.

The second group is a refugee family who rent the presbytery at St Teresa's. If the proposal were to go ahead, in the longer term, we would need to have the presbytery for the Syro-Malabar priest and mission. It would be really important to give the family plenty of notice and to help them find suitable alternative accommodation before this went ahead.

Final report

The Consultation

The proposal was first raised by parishioners at the finance council meeting on 4 October 2024. It was then presented to the parish with an explanatory leaflet on 6 October. Parishioners were invited to a synodal meeting after Mass on 20 October. About 20 parishioners attended this. After the synodal meeting, parishioners were asked to submit their feedback on the proposal either by completing a form, or emailing or writing to us with their thoughts. At the synodal meeting, a number of participants asked for more details about the proposals. Initial feedback also asked a number of questions about the proposal. As a result, a more detailed proposal, taking into account the views expressed, was produced and distributed on 25 October. Following on from this, further feedback was invited, with all those wishing to participate asked to provide feedback by 10 November.

Results of the consultation

Thirty one responses were in favour of the proposal.¹ Nine of the responses were against the proposal. Three were undecided. One person, describing herself as a "grumpy 71 year old woman" gave an 'other' response, feeling that the future of St Teresa's should be decided by the young people who are going to be here in the future. Four people wrote in with thoughts or questions on different things, but didn't express a view in favour or against the proposal (one wanted to clarify the financial figures given in the proposal, one was giving results of a consultation with the flower team, one wanted to

¹ Two of these sent in initial responses saying they were against the proposal, but later changed their minds following the details and changes to the proposals in the more detailed document and sent in a further response saying they were now in favour (albeit with reservations for one of them).

understand the impact on the tenants in the presbytery and one wanted to make suggestions about how it might best work if the proposal was to go ahead). Two married couples submitted responses explicitly stating they were writing jointly as a couple (both in favour). One response explained that they were writing on behalf of their family and another family and asked if this could be counted as six 'votes' in favour of the proposal. One response which was against the proposal said "I speak for three people who won't say anything". If these are all counted as individual responses this would be 38 in favour and 11 against. This means we had responses representing a total of 54 people. Sunday Mass attendance at St Teresa's averaged 143 at the last count.

The consultation gave people four options (in favour of the proposal, against the proposal, unsure/undecided or other). In retrospect it might have been better to have used a five point Likert scale, as a couple of people wanted to qualify their views to give a sense of the strength of their feeling, with one strongly in favour and one strongly against. One person said they were 'currently' against the proposal.

The majority of people included comments, many of which had clearly been the fruit of careful thought and prayer. Five people just ticked the box to say they were in favour (3 responses) or against (2 responses, including the person speaking for 3 people who didn't add anything other than this) the proposal.

At the synodal meeting and in the initial responses to the consultation, a number of questions were raised about a couple of issues. The first was the impact on the church of having Syro-Malabar liturgical items present. The second was about how the celebration of Masses and pastoral care for the parishes would be provided. Thus in the second phase of the consultation, we also asked people about their views on these two questions.

Pastoral Care of the Parish and celebration of Masses

If we were to go ahead with the proposal, there are three possible options for the provision of pastoral care and celebration of Masses for the parish. One option would be for the priest who is resident at St Teresa's to provide pastoral care and celebrate the Masses for the Latin-rite parish as well as the Syro-Malabar rite parish. This works successfully in other parishes such as St David's, Newport. The advantage of this is that it would mean that St Teresa's would have a resident priest with pastoral care for the parish, who might be more easily accessible to the parish community. Another option would be for the pastoral care of the parish and celebration of Masses to continue to stay with the priests resident at St George's. Some people expressed in their comments that they would prefer this approach, as they really value being part of the Taunton Vale Catholics family, and feared that taking the other approach might weaken this sense of belonging and potentially undermine the longevity of the faith community. This works successfully in parishes such as Blessed Sacrament, Cardiff. A third option would be a blended approach similar to what we currently do, with some Masses celebrated by the priests based at St George's and others by the priest who would be resident at St Teresa's.

A total of nine respondents answered this question, with seven of them favouring a blended approach and two suggesting that all the Masses and pastoral care be provided by the priest resident at St George's. Of those preferring the blended approach, several indicated they would like to continue with the current approach of the majority of Masses being offered by the priests resident at St George's.

If we were to go ahead with the proposal, the Syro-Malabar rite priest would also offer to celebrate additional Latin-rite Masses for the parish, if there was a demand for this. We therefore asked people if they would value this. There was quite a weak response to this, with only three people giving a view. One person said they would be delighted to have additional weekday masses and would attend these. One person said that if more evening masses could be added for workers that would be fantastic and much appreciated. The third respondent said that they are generally not a weekday Mass attendee but would welcome an extra Mass on Feast Days at St Teresa's.

Changes to the Church

A number of initial responses to the consultation highlighted the impact of any changes to the Church and its appearance. As a result, we set out in detail the options on this and included photos showing these.



These pictures show the Church set up as it would be for the Syro-Malabar Rite (as is set out below, the statues could be either on the sanctuary or in the body of the church depending on the views expressed in this consultation – these photos show both options). As can be seen, there are a number of additional items in the Church. These are:

- A second altar in front of the tabernacle, as the Syro-Malabar rite uses two altars
- Statues of St Sebastian, the Patron of the Syro-Malabar Mission in Taunton and of Mary
- A Syro-Malabar Rite altar frontal placed over our altar frontal for their celebrations
- A Nilavilakku (special lamp)

- Beskisas (Syro-Malabar rite credence tables)
- Signboard showing the liturgical seasons

It's important that the simplicity and character of the Church that is so important to many parishioners is preserved, and that people don't feel alienated from their Church by Syro-Malabar liturgical items such that they no longer feel it is their home as Latin-rite parishioners.

All of the items needed for Syro-Malabar Rite liturgies would be fully removable, and the Syro-Malabar rite community would be happy to remove them for Latin-rite liturgies. Some of the items are quite heavy and cumbersome to move, so we also asked people's views on whether they would be happy for some Syro-Malabar rite items to remain on the sanctuary during Latin-rite celebrations, so as to make things logistically simpler for the Syro-Malabar rite community or if people would want all of them to be removed for these.

The options would be (in order from greatest change to least change):

1. The Syro-Malabar altar frontal is removed from our altar for Latin-Rite Masses so that we use the normal Latin-rite frontals for Latin-rite Masses. The signboard showing the liturgical seasons is removed and replaced by our board with hymn numbers.
2. Additionally, the Syro-Malabar rite altar frontal on their second altar in front of the tabernacle is covered with a white cloth so as to make it less visually intrusive for Latin-rite Masses
3. Additionally, the statues of Mary and St Sebastian are removed for Latin-Rite Masses.
4. Instead of being covered with a white cloth, the second altar and beskisas are completely removed for Latin-Rite Masses
5. Additionally, the Nilavilakku is removed for Latin-Rite Masses so that no Syro-Malabar Rite liturgical objects at all remain in the Church.



This picture shows one of the intermediate options. The second altar has been covered with a white cloth and the statues removed, but the beskastas are still in place, as is the Nilavilakku. Unfortunately, when taking this photo we forgot to remove the Syro-Malabar rite candles and other objects on the altar. These would always be removed for Latin-rite Masses and would look the same as now.

Eleven people gave a preference on this element of the proposal. Of these, one was in favour of the first option, two in favour of the second option, five in favour of the third option and the flower arranging team in favour of the fourth option. One person favoured an intermediate between options three and four, with the second altar left in place but the beskastas removed. One person suggested that in the first instance we had the fifth option and then a ballot was held in a few years time to see if parishioners still minded having the extra statues. If the statues were to remain in place, there was a unanimous preference for these to be in the nave rather than on the sanctuary.

Any liturgical changes that involve placing an item, whether fixed or moveable, in the church for a continuous period exceeding three months also require Diocesan permission. This would therefore be required for any of the options except option 5. Thus, advice has been sought from the Diocesan Liturgy Office about which of the options would be acceptable.

Positive impacts of the proposal

In their comments, people outlined a number of possible positive impacts of the proposal

- Welcoming and supporting fellow Catholics in their faith

- A desire for the Church to be welcoming and inclusive to others. As one person put it “The Church is the house of God and as children of God, it is our house as well. I want my house to be welcoming so it is of course yes for this new community to come.”
- The Church which is only currently used a couple of times a week would be used much more regularly for prayer and worship
- Maintaining a unity with Syro-Malabar Rite Catholics. A number of comments spoke of how much the Syro-Malabar Rite community is valued as part of our Catholic family here. Sharing a building with them would continue to help to foster that deep sense of unity, which might be weakened if they moved to St John’s.
- St Teresa’s currently only has one weekday Mass, on a Friday. If we were to go ahead with the proposal, the Syro-Malabar Rite priest serving St Teresa’s would be happy to also offer Latin-rite Masses for the parish on other days, if people wanted this.
- Sharing costs with the Syro-Malabar Rite community would make the parish much more sustainable in the long-term, ensuring a Catholic future for the church. Further details of this are set out in appendix 2.
- Having a resident priest would ensure that St Teresa’s would continue to have a Sunday Mass if we got to a position where this was no longer possible otherwise, with fewer priests in the Diocese. Further details are given in appendix 2.
- The presbytery sitting room could be used to provide tea and coffee after Mass on Sundays, strengthening our sense of community.
- The possibility of building a hall at St Teresa’s. St Teresa’s has for a long time wanted to have a parish hall, which would make a huge difference to the life of the parish. At present the parish is unlikely to have the financial resources to progress this. The Syro-Malabar Rite community would also love to have a hall, and by sharing costs there would be a much greater possibility of this happening. There are, of course, no guarantees that this would happen as there are a number of hurdles that would need to be overcome, such as gaining planning permission and raising sufficient funds.

Negative impacts of the proposal

The proposal would also have a number of negative impacts on different groups

1. The family resident in the Old Presbytery

We have welcomed a wonderful refugee family from Syria in the Old Presbytery since 2019. The love and support that the parish has given them in settling in has been really precious. They are a very special family to welcome, who also help us significantly by cutting the grass and putting out bins. This proposal would mean them having to move to another home. We would want to ensure that they had plenty of notice of this, and that they had suitable alternative accommodation before they moved. Some felt that it would be completely wrong and selfish to ask them to move under any circumstances. Others felt that the support we can give in housing refugee families in our properties is always a time limited helping hand until they are established, as we might need

properties again to house priests and religious. Many respondents, both in favour and against the proposal, stressed the importance of giving the family plenty of help and support and ensuring that they had somewhere suitable to move to before going ahead.

2. Betleem Taunton

We hire St Teresa's to a Romanian Pentecostal group who use the church on Friday evenings and Sunday mornings. They also have a Sunday evening time of prayer at St George's. Whilst we could continue to accommodate the Friday evening and Sunday evening services, this proposal would not be compatible with the timings of their Sunday morning services, so they would need to move to a different time or venue for these. We would support them in this and give them plenty of notice to give them time to find an alternative time or venue. Some people commented on the very good working relationship we have with the Romanians and the sadness it would be for us and for them no longer be able to use the church on Sunday mornings.

3. The Parish of St Teresa's

A number of comments also highlighted potential negative impacts on the parish of St Teresa's.

- This feels like an imposition on our spiritual home.
- The priest living in the presbytery makes it feel as though St Teresa's would be more Syro-Malabar rite than Latin-rite. For some people it feels more like a takeover than a partnership. One person felt they would be destined to be a mere visitor in their Church.
- Many people commented on the negative impact of having Syro-Malabar Rite statues, altar and other items permanently in the Church. The addition of a Syro-Malabar rite second altar, statues and other liturgical items would fundamentally change the character and simplicity of the Church. For many people this would make the Church feel less prayerful and welcoming for them. As one comment put it "The simplicity of our beautiful church at St. Teresa's would be lost and many people have fought to keep it as it is. I feel very close to God in this church and would be very sad to leave it. I love this church very much and I would not like to see it changed." These changes to the building would also be a constant reminder that St Teresa's is in the minority of the sharing. One person gave as their reason for being against the proposal "I was opportune to be present at one their Mass and there was statue next to the Blessed Virgin Mary which I think depict Jesus. It has a conflicting idea about the crucifixion of Jesus for my children". Having listened to the importance of these considerations for people and in consultation with the Syro-Malabar rite community, we have established that all of the items could be removed for Latin-rite Masses and in the second phase of the consultation included a more detailed question asking for views as to whether this should be the approach, or the inclusion of a limited number might be acceptable to people, as detailed above.
- A fear that the proposals could lead to diminishing attendance at St Teresa's or threaten the life of the existing community. A sense that as we currently have a

vibrant flourishing parish it would be foolish to do anything that might put this at risk.

- A fear that over time the Syro-Malabar Church would change the agreements, and the Latin-rite parish would lose out.
- A fear that this proposal would lead to the Syro-Malabar Rite taking over completely and that our much-loved church would be handed over and sold-off to the Syro-Malabar Rite Church.
- People sharing houses/churches tend to get on each other's nerves / sooner or later there will be problems.
- One person gave as their reason for being against the proposal "It will be difficult explaining to my kids the different rite. We are still trying to follow rite".

Other considerations

A number of comments made suggestions about how the proposal might best be implemented, should we go ahead.

- A couple of people suggested that we hold regular joint social or liturgical celebrations, to continue to build the link between the two communities.
- There would need to be carefully thought-out arrangements in place for liaising between the two communities so as to facilitate the smooth running of arrangements and iron out any issues.
- The crib would need to continue to be able to stay in front of the altar at Christmas.
- One person suggested that the Syro-Malabar rite should add an additional sign outside the Church, giving the details of their Mission.
- Some people expressed a desire to learn more from the Syro-Malabar rite community, and the opportunity for spiritual growth in learning from them. One asked if it might be possible to have an English translation to Syro-Malabar rite Masses to facilitate Latin-rite parishioners who wanted to attend the Syro-Malabar rite Mass to be able to do so.
- One person said that whatever the outcome, we should concentrate on bringing our community together through prayer, given the differences in views about the proposal.
- One person said that if we were to go ahead it should be celebrated with positive PR across all local and regional media.

Other comments

There were a number of other comments which, although they don't have a direct bearing on the proposal, it was important to include in this document.

Gratitude to Fr Rajesh

A number of comments expressed their gratitude to Fr Rajesh for his pastoral ministry and support of the parishes over the last two years.

Sadness at worshipping with Syro-Malabar Rite Catholics less regularly

At present the Syro-Malabar Rite is only celebrated on two Sundays a month in Taunton, and Syro-Malabar Rite Catholics join the Latin-rite Masses on other Sundays. With the recent declaration of Taunton as a Mission, the Syro-Malabar Rite community will be moving to having Syro-Malabar Rite Masses every Sunday, either at St Teresa's if this proposal is accepted, or at St John's if it isn't. Several comments expressed a sadness at this and a potential weakening of unity and spiritual friendship between the Catholic communities.

Comments about the consultation

There was some initial scepticism about the genuineness of the consultation, with one parishioner feeling this was a 'fait accompli' rather than a sincere desire to find out the views of the parish. These fears seem to have been allayed somewhat by the process of consultation.

We asked those who took part in the synodal listening whether this was helpful and if it changed or clarified their thoughts. Comments on this were generally positive, with most people describing it as helpful and insightful. One person said 'it helped raise issues but clearly polarised views which are of concern'.

A number of people commented positively on the detailed consultation document, saying how helpful and informative they found this in coming to a decision.

Several people commented positively on the quality of listening to their views, and that they felt these had been really valued. There were a couple of more negative perceptions of the consultation, with one person commenting "What perhaps has not been taken into account are the feelings of St T's community, a community who went around Taunton fund raising to build the church and there are still many people who helped with the planning, building and even laid the first bricks, people who fought to have a church built in the community." One person expressed a concern that the Bishop and his Council might not take into account the views of the parishioners expressed in this document in coming to a decision, but felt somewhat reassured by an assurance that this would not be the case.

Questions and clarifications

There are a number of points that were raised that were either questions that needed clarification or misunderstandings.

What are the Eastern Catholic Churches?

The vast majority of Catholics worldwide belong to the Latin Church and use the Latin Rites to celebrate the Mass and other liturgies. Latin here doesn't refer to the language used to celebrate the Mass, but the family of Rites which includes the Roman Rite which most Catholics throughout the world celebrate. As the Latin Church is by far the

largest (of approximately 1.3 billion members of Churches in communion with the Pope, only about 18 million are members of the Eastern Catholic Churches) many of us are less aware that there are also 23 other Eastern Catholic Churches, which although they have a distinct liturgy and heritage are fully in communion with the Latin Church and with each other.

Over the years, given the overwhelming dominance of the Latin Rite, there have been attempts to Latinise and assimilate the minority rites, which have often resulted in schism.

At various times over the centuries, Popes have defended the Eastern Catholic Churches from these attempts at Latinisation and assimilation. In the 18th Century, for example, Latin-rite missionaries (mainly Franciscans) tried to Latinise Melkite Catholic Rites, leading to a division in the Church. In response, Pope Benedict XIV issued the apostolic constitution *Demandatam* forbidding any changes to the Byzantine Rite and for any Byzantine Rite faithful to pass to the Latin Church.

In 1894, Pope Leo XIII issued the apostolic constitution *Orientalium dignitas* in which he powerfully sets out the reasons for the existence of the Eastern Catholic Churches, the richness that they bring to the universal Catholic Church and sets out severe penalties for priests who encourage Eastern rite faithful to transfer to the Latin rite. As Adrian Fortescue puts it, he "begins by explaining again that the ancient Eastern rites are a witness to the Apostolicity of the Catholic Church, that their diversity, consistent with unity of the faith, is itself a witness to the unity of the Church, that they add to her dignity and honour. He says that the Catholic Church does not possess one rite only, but that she embraces all the ancient rites of Christendom; her unity consists not in a mechanical uniformity of all her parts, but on the contrary, in their variety, according in one principle and vivified by it."

The Second Vatican Council in its decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* reemphasised the importance of the Eastern Catholic Churches preserving their own rites and not becoming Latinised.

A particular challenge comes for immigrant communities from Eastern Catholic Churches who move to countries that are seen as belonging to the West. The papacy has repeatedly emphasised the universal character of Eastern Catholic Churches and supported the rights of Eastern Catholic Churches in these countries. A prominent recent example of that support was the recent choice of Bishop Mykola Bychok, the Bishop of the Eparchy of Saints Peter and Paul for Ukrainian Greek Catholic Rite Catholics in Australia to be a Cardinal.

One of the most powerful and influential documents to address the challenges facing Eastern Catholics immigrants living in other countries was the pastoral letter *The Courage to Be Ourselves*, written by Bishop Joseph Tawil who was Archbishop for the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in the United States. This is such a rich and helpful document that it has been included in full as an appendix to this document. As well as setting out the importance and value of the presence of Eastern Catholic Churches in

the West, it also points out a couple of dangers for its members: on the one hand falling into a ghetto mentality and on the other being assimilated.

What is the Syro-Malabar Church?

The Syro-Malabar Church is one of the largest of the 23 Eastern Catholic Churches, with an estimated 5.5 million members worldwide. The term 'Syro-Malabar' reflects its use of the Eastern Syriac liturgical tradition and its geographical origins in Malabar (modern Kerala). It traces its origins to St Thomas the Apostle who evangelised India.

Would the proposal mean an extra priest coming to Taunton?

Some responses were based on a misunderstanding that this would involve an extra priest coming to Taunton, probably because the initial information leaflet wasn't carefully worded enough. There would not be an extra priest. The proposal is instead that the existing Syro-Malabar rite priest (Fr Rajesh or his successor) would move to St Teresa's, which would become the base for the Syro-Malabar Rite parish.

Would the proposal mean statues on the sanctuary?

They could be either on the sanctuary or in the body of the church, as shown in the photos below, or be removed completely for Latin-rite celebrations, as detailed above. There was a marked preference among respondents for these to be in the body of the church rather than the sanctuary.



Would the second altar make it difficult to access the Tabernacle? Would we need to realign or change the steps to accommodate the second altar?

This was an important question to look at, so we set up an altar as shown in the photos and found it was still easy to get to the Tabernacle. There would be no need to change the steps.



In the Syro-Malabar Rite, the priest faces East to celebrate the consecration. Would this mean that the priest would also do this for the regular St Teresa's Masses?

There's no suggestion that we would change the way we celebrate our liturgy, which would continue to be with the Priest facing the people. It's just the Syro-Malabar rite who would continue to have their tradition of celebrating the Eucharistic Prayer facing East.

Would the length and timings of Syro-Malabar rite Masses impact on parish activities or create issues in terms of parking?

The Syro-Malabar Rite community are proposing to have a Sunday morning Mass at 8am, which would be without any singing so a bit shorter and so finish about 9.15 (but probably safest to say 9.30am in case they overrun). The agreement would specify that they would be off site by 10am. This would allow the current music rehearsal before our 11am Mass to continue as usual. Their second Mass would be 2.30 or 3pm and be the longer one with Rosary and singing and be followed by their catechism classes for children. They propose to hold these partly in the church and partly in the downstairs rooms in the presbytery.

St Teresa's has social events after Mass roughly once a month. In Winter these tend to last about 45 minutes, but from May to September we have BBQs which can last until just after 2, and with clearing up time mean that people don't leave until 2.30pm. The continuation of these is really important and would be part of the agreement. The timings of the Masses work well for this.

For parish social events, we currently borrow tables and chairs that are left in our storage unit by the Romanian group. What would happen if these were no longer available?

The Romanian community will stop using St Teresa's at some stage, either when Hinckley Point is completed or possibly sooner, at least in terms of Sunday mornings, if

we were to go forward with these proposals. At this stage they would probably take their tables and chairs with them, and we would want to replace these by purchasing our own. As these would also be really useful for the Syro-Malabar community, they would be very happy to split the cost with us, so probably a cost of about £1000 to the parish.

Would the agreement with the Syro-Malabar Church be just an understanding that could be later changed so that the parish could be disadvantaged at a later date or would it be a formal binding agreement?

This would be a full written and binding agreement between the Diocese and the Syro-Malabar Eparchy.

Would the celebration of Syro-Malabar Rite Feasts and liturgical seasons have an impact on our Masses and events? What about Christmas and Easter?

Syro-Malabar usage of the Church wouldn't have any impact on the times ring-fenced for our celebrations (our existing times of Friday mornings at 10am with confessions, and Stations of the Cross during Lent, 11am on Sundays and Christmas Day, and 4.30pm Christmas Eve). At Easter, we would be continuing our existing arrangements of the Latin-rite celebration of the Triduum taking place at St George's while the Syro-Malabar Rite use St Teresa's.

If the proposal went ahead, how many Masses would be celebrated each week and how many of these would be Syro-Malabar rite and how many Latin-rite?

The idea is that there would eventually be two Syro-Malabar rite Masses on Sunday (8am and 2.30pm) and one every weekday evening, thus a total of 8 Syro-Malabar rite Masses a week. In terms of Latin-rite Masses, this depends on the outcome of the consultation and what people want. The Syro-Malabar rite priest has offered to also celebrate additional weekday Masses in the Latin-rite, if people wanted this. As detailed above, there has been limited interest expressed in additional weekday Masses, but this is something that could be revisited. Thus the total number of Latin-rite Masses could be anywhere between 2 (if we just had the existing Masses) and 7 (if people wanted a daily Latin-rite Mass).

Would we continue to be able to have weddings and baptisms at St Teresa's?

Yes, although the Church would be in much more use than it is currently, there would still be plenty of times available for weddings and baptisms.

The family who live in the Old Presbytery also help us by cutting the grass and putting the church bins out. What would happen about this if they moved?

If we were to go ahead with the proposal, the Syro-Malabar rite community would be very happy to take on cutting the grass and putting bins out.

Would the parish lose out financially as a result of the loss of rental income from the Romanian group and the letting income from the house? Given the dependence of the parish on this rental income, would this affect the viability of the parish?

No, the Syro-Malabar Rite community would pay to rent the Church and Presbytery. The proposal is that they would pay £1200 a month to rent the Church and £1300 a month to rent the presbytery. This would replace the income lost from the Romanians and the letting of the house.

What would happen about utilities bills?

As the Syro-Malabar Rite community would be using the Church much more than it is currently, it has been agreed that if we went ahead with the proposal, they would pay the utilities bills. Our current usage is not very high, but with much more use and heating of the Church, this would allow the Syro-Malabar Rite community to heat the Church as they wanted to without posing a financial risk to the parish.

What would happen about insurance?

The buildings would continue to be insured by the Clifton Diocese, which we pay for through our parish share. Public liability cover would rest with the user of the Church (the Diocese for Latin-rite celebrations and the Syro-Malabar Rite Eparchy for Syro-Malabar Rite celebrations).

There are a large number of people attending the Syro-Malabar Rite Mass. Would this exceed the number permitted by fire regulations? Are our fire exits and precautions adequate and would these proposals put people at risk?

We had a professional fire risk assessment carried out in March 2020 which suggested a number of remedial actions, all of which have been implemented. Pete Moore, the professional fire risk assessment consultant, who has many years of experience and extensive qualifications working in the fire brigade and subsequently in fire risk management, came back to review this in March 2024 and fully approved our fire measures. The assessed normal capacity of the church calculated by Pete Moore using DLUHC guidance calculations based on structural fire resistance and width of exits is 316. On occasions where we would need to have more people in the Church, he has assessed that we could have up to 450 provided that additional control measures were put in place (essentially training some volunteer fire marshals). The normal attendance at Syro-Malabar Rite Masses is 230-240 people, with this increasing to 275-280 at major celebrations such as Christmas, so well within the assessed capacity.

Is the proposal a plot to close St Teresa's as a parish?

No, there is no plan to close St Teresa's. As outlined above, if we were to go ahead with the proposal, this would probably be more likely to ensure a long-term future for St Teresa's parish.

At present Church cleaning takes place fortnightly on a Wednesday morning at 9am. This is carried out by four volunteers who are all aged over 70, and we have struggled to recruit new volunteers to the cleaning team. With extra Masses taking place, would the 9am Wednesday morning time still be available, and how would cleaning work, given the much greater use of the Church and extra cleaning required?

The Syro-Malabar rite weekday Masses would take place in the evening, so the Church would continue to be available for cleaners at 9am on Wednesdays. Due to work commitments the Syro-Malabar cleaning teams would be unable to join the existing team, so the best solution is that the Syro-Malabar community would have a team doing a clean every week in addition to the St Teresa's cleaning team. This would ensure that the Church was kept suitably clean with the higher usage.

What would happen about flower arranging?

Our team of flower arrangers meet on a Saturday morning to arrange flowers. The Syro-Malabar rite community would want to offer a Saturday morning Mass, but would time this so as to suit the team of flower arrangers. The proposal is that we would continue to do the flower arranging, so that it didn't feel like the Church was being taken over by the Syro-Malabar rite, and they would provide flowers for their major feasts and celebrations such as First Holy Communion, in coordination with our team.

Why does a single priest need to live in a large house? Could they not continue to live at St George's? With today's technology could they not be contacted just as easily wherever they live?

The house would not just be used as a living space for the priest. It would also be a centre for Syro-Malabar Rite pastoral activities, such as meetings, catechesis and social activities. Using the presbytery as well as the Church would allow the Syro-Malabar Rite Mission to do much more.

Would a faculty from the Historic Churches Committee be required for the Syro-Malabar rite altar, statues and other liturgical items, given that we are a Listed Building?

Geoff King, our Diocesan property support surveyor has advised that 'there shouldn't be a need for a faculty, they can be removed at any time and neither bringing them in, or taking them out would cause any alteration to the building, Faculties are usually only for the addition of anything that would actually alter the building in some way, and I don't think that what's being proposed here would.'

What happens next?

This final report will be presented to Bishop Bosco to be considered by him and the Bishop's Council on 27 November. The report will also be published on our parish website and hard copies available on request.

If the proposal is rejected, the Syro-Malabar Rite community will then move to St John's Anglican Church.

If the proposal is accepted, this would happen in stages. We would begin by informing the Romanian group that the Church would now be needed on Sunday mornings, and working out a solution with them. To give them plenty of time to adjust, Syro-Malabar Rite services at St Teresa's wouldn't begin until early 2025. The presbytery would be on a much longer timescale, as we would want to ensure that the tenants had a very long notice and had suitable alternative accommodation before a Syro-Malabar priest moved into the property.

Appendix 1 – Pastoral Letter *The Courage to Be Ourselves*

To our beloved children, the priests and faithful of the Melkite Church in the United States, peace in Christ our Lord, greetings and blessings.

OUR INCOMPARABLE PATRIMONY

The incomparably rich writings of our Fathers are the voice of your own ancestors in the faith. Their names are known throughout the Christian world – Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil the Great, the two Gregories, John Chrisostom, John of Damascus, and the rest. We alone can truly say that they are bones of our bones, flesh of our flesh: ours in the truest sense of the term. They lived in the lands of our origin and the riches of their inheritance is now the treasured possession of the entire Church. Still we are the most rightful heirs of their inestimable treasures, for we are their very descendants, sons of the same soil.

However true this may be, we do not live in the past, but in the present. Why must we exert so much energy to preserve the heritage of days long since past, we who are such a minority in American Catholicism? Since we live in the United States now, why do we not simply follow the majority of Catholics and become Latin? These questions are often heard and deserve answers.

We can do no better than recall the teaching of Vatican II which declared: "History, tradition, and numerous ecclesiastical institutions manifest luminously how much the universal Church is indebted to the Eastern Churches. Therefore, ...all Eastern rite members should know that they can and should always preserve their lawful liturgical rites and their established way of life ... and should honor all these things with greatest fidelity."

OUR MISSION TO ROMAN CATHOLICS

For a long time the principle of the superiority of the Roman rite, which had become general during the Middle Ages, prevailed in the West. The Latin tradition was considered the only true Catholic tradition, and this led to a certain fixedness among

Catholics: the Latin way is the only way! Events of the succeeding centuries only served to heighten the feeling among Latin Catholics that to be Catholic one had to be Roman. Vatican II put an end to this provincialist view of the Church once and for all. The Church cannot be identified, it stressed, with any one culture, nation, or form of civilization without contradicting that universality which is of the essence of the Gospel.

The existence of Eastern Churches as part of the Catholic family, although they have distinct customs and traditions in all areas of Church life, dramatically shows that to be Catholic one does not have to conform to the Roman model.

Indeed, the Roman Church, as the Council affirmed, has learned many lessons of late from the East in the fields of liturgy (use of the vernacular, Communion in both kinds, baptism by immersion), of Church order (collegiality, synodal government, the role of the deacon), and spirituality. In a very real sense, the Western Church “needs” a vibrant Eastern Church to complement its understanding of the Christian message.

ECUMENICAL VOCATION OF EASTERN CATHOLICS

By our fidelity to maintaining our patrimony, by our refusal to be assimilated, the Eastern Churches render a most precious service to Rome in still another area of Church life. Latinizing this small number of Easterners would not be a gain for Rome; rather it would block – perhaps forever – a union of the separated Churches of the East and West. It would be easy then for Orthodoxy to see that union with Rome leads surely to ecclesiastical assimilation.

Thus it is for the sake of ecumenism – to create a climate favorable to the union of the Churches – that the Eastern Catholic must remain faithful to his tradition. This providential vocation which is ours opens to the Church an unlimited perspective for preaching the Gospel to all peoples who, while they accept faith in Christ, must still remain themselves in this vast assembly of believers.

From what has been said above, it is easy for us to find our place in America’s pluralistic societies with its varied Churches and religious groups. In the now famous words of the late Patriarch Maximos IV, “We have, therefore, a two-fold mission to accomplish within the Catholic Church. We must fight to insure that latinism and Catholicism are not synonymous, that Catholicism remains open to every culture, every spirit, and every form of organization compatible with the unity of faith and love. At the same time, by our example, we must enable the Orthodox Church to recognize that a union with the great Church of the West, with the See of Peter, can be achieved without being compelled to give up Orthodoxy or any of the spiritual treasures of the apostolic and patristic East, which is opened toward the future no less to the past.”

A DANGER TO THIS MISSION: THE GHETTO MENTALITY

We have not yet mentioned the principal dangers which threaten our communities and their mission to the Churches: the ghetto mentality and the assimilation process.

In a ghetto life is closed in upon itself, operating only within itself, with its own ethnic and social clichés. And the Parish lives upon the ethnic character of the community; when that character disappears, the community dies and the parish dies with it. One day all our ethnic traits – language, folklore, customs – will have disappeared. Time itself is seeing to this. And so we can not think of our communities as ethnic parishes, primarily for the service of the immigrant or the ethnically oriented, unless we wish to assure the death of our community. Our Churches are not only for our own people but are also for any of our fellow Americans who are attracted to our traditions which show forth the beauty of the universal Church and the variety of its riches.

A SECOND DANGER: THE ASSIMILATION PROCESS

Without doubt we must be totally devoted to our American national culture. We must have an American life-style. We must be fully American in all things and at the same time we must preserve this authentic form of Christianity which is ours and which is not the Latin form. We must know that we have something to give, otherwise we have no reason to be. We must develop and maintain a religious tradition we know capable of enriching American life. Otherwise we would be unfaithful to our vocation.

It is often easier to get lost in the crowd than to affirm one's own personality. It takes more courage, character, and inner strength to lead our traditions to bear fruit than it takes to simply give them up. The obsession to be like everyone else pursues us to the innermost depths of our hearts. We recognize that our greatest temptation is always to slip into anonymity rather than to assume our responsibility within the Church. And so, while we opt for ethnic assimilation, we can never agree to spiritual assimilation. One prime source of spiritual assimilation for Eastern Catholics has been the phenomenon known as 'latinization', the copying by Eastern Catholics of the theology, spiritual practices, and liturgical customs of the Latin Church. Latinization implies either the superiority of the Roman rite -the position denounced by Vatican II – or the desirability of the assimilation process, an opinion with which we cannot agree. Not only is it unnecessary to adopt the customs of the Latin rite to manifest one's Catholicism, it is an offense against the unity of the Church. As we have said above, to do this would be to betray our ecumenical mission and, in a real sense, to betray the Catholic Church.

For this reason many parishes are attempting to return to the practice of Eastern traditions in all their purity. This has often entailed redecoration of the churches and elimination of certain devotions on which many of the people had been brought up. In some places, our priests, attempting to follow the decree of the Council in this matter have been opposed by some of their parishioners. Other priests have been reluctant to move in this direction, as they feared that division and conflict would result. We should all know in this regard that a latinized Eastern Church cannot bear anything but false witness, as it seems to be living proof that Latinism and Catholicism are indeed one and the same thing.

To be open to others, to be able to take our rightful place on the American Church scene, we must start by being fully ourselves. It is only in our distinctiveness that we can

make any kind of contribution to the larger society. It is only by being what we are that we retain a reason for existence at all.

GRATITUDE TO OUR FOREFATHERS

Immigrants from Western Europe to the United States had less to do than our fathers did to adapt themselves to the American life-style. The Easterner, on the other hand, found himself immersed in a far different world than that which he knew. The temptation was great to throw off his entire heritage and become what he was not. And so we remember with gratitude our fathers and grandfathers and the priests who accompanied them from the old country for the foundations we have in this immense continent. Those who followed them have also worked well, often building splendid churches with the assistance of the Latin hierarchy. Now we are in the age of the young, American-born priests. To them especially falls the task of perfecting the work begun before them. They are still too few in number, but we hope with confidence that their number will increase.

We cannot be grateful enough to those Roman Catholic bishops of this country who took the steps necessary to preserve our heritage while we had no hierarchy of our own on these shores. We think most of all of the late Cardinal Richard Cushing, undoubtedly the greatest benefactor of our church in the United States. Thanks to his apostolic openness and love, he worked for the establishment of our exarchate and generously endowed it with his psychological and financial support once it had been erected. For this reason we have directed that a solemn Liturgy be celebrated annually in our cathedral to perpetuate his memory.

TOWARD THE FUTURE

This is not the place to describe in detail the projects we are currently working on. We only list some here: a diocesan religious education program for both adults and youth, a unified text and musical setting for the Divine Liturgy to be followed by similar texts for the other services of the Church, such as the sacraments, a diocesan handbook which we will soon be happy to offer to the faithful and to the friends of our Church, a periodical which will also appear before long, and the general sharing with the faithful of our pastoral responsibility, as in parish councils and an active diaconate among other things.

Also high on our priority list are the concerns of youth. Without the participation of the young, we can be assured that all our work is in vain and that our communities will disappear. And so we look forward to implementing a diocesan youth program as well before long.

We also recognize that we are reaching only a small number of our faithful while the majority of them are unknown to us. Like the Good Shepherd concerned about the lost sheep, we ask ourselves what can be done for them. We are presently in the process of studying these situations and hope to provide for their pastoral care where possible.

With what joy, then, was it to hear Bishop Mark Hurley of Santa Rosa, California observe in a recent speech that “in many of our dioceses Eastern Christians are without churches of their own. It is the duty of the Latin bishops to see that the venerable rites of the East are preserved.” The bishop then called on the Eastern Catholic bishops in America to form parishes in these areas so that “the example of the East may continue to instruct Western Catholics and that the true universality of the Catholic Church may be experienced.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Dear faithful, be united to one another in the love of Christ. Form one soul and one heart with your priests and with one another, for it is only by this union in love that God is truly glorified.

With these prayers and sentiments, dear faithful, we ask for you and your families the most abundant blessings of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Archbishop Joseph Tawil

Christmas, 1970

Appendix 2 – The future of St Teresa’s

A number of responses to the consultation centered on the long-term sustainability of St Teresa’s as a parish. Although St Teresa’s is a thriving parish and has a secure future over the next few years, there are a couple of major challenges that will be faced by the parish in the medium to long term. These are the longer term financial sustainability of the parish and the diminishing number of priests in the Diocese. The detailed consultation document set out the implications, and this has been included as this appendix to the final report.

Financial sustainability

Our income is essentially from people giving by standing order or through the cash offertory collection and from rental income on the Church and Presbytery. The standing order giving was £11,256 in 2023. A successful financial appeal earlier this year has resulted in some generous new standing order donors and others increasing their existing donations, so that we are now getting about £1261 in monthly standing orders, so a total of £15,132 over the year. Cash offertory giving was £12,816 in 2023. We’re able to claim gift aid on the majority of standing order giving and an additional £2000 on offertory plate giving. This would be a total of about £5483 that can be claimed in annual gift aid. Rental income from the presbytery and rental of the Church generated £23,526 in net income in 2023. With the increase in standing order giving we have a total projected 2024 income of about £58,000.

In terms of costs, this varies somewhat from year to year depending on the extent of building works necessary. The bulk of our spending is on premises costs, such as building works and repairs, utilities bills etc. In 2022, we spent £61,080 on this, with extensive work on the tower and the windows. In 2023 we spent £21,238, which is a much more typical year. We’re likely to finish 2024 with a slightly higher spend of about

£23,000 on this. Our other major costs are an annual parish share paid to the Diocese for providing central services such as our insurance and banking, central support services, paying for the training of new priests and supporting the retired ones, and various other central costs. In 2024 this contribution is £13,500. Finally, as part of Taunton Vale Catholics we make an annual contribution of £3600 towards shared costs such as sacristy supplies, administrative costs and clergy. These shared costs are about £53,300 each year, of which £3600 is paid by both St Teresa's and St John Fisher and the remainder by St George's.

This gives total annual expenditure of £76,710 in 2022, £36,638 in 2023 and probably about £42,500 by the end of 2024.

As can be seen, at present the parish is financially sustaining itself with a healthy surplus. In the medium term, there are a number of potential financial challenges facing the parish. Of the £15,132 annual income from standing orders, £9552 comes from donors aged over 75 (once gift aid is taken into account this means £11,940 of annual income comes from people aged over 75). Many of our younger parishioners are first generation immigrants with significantly less disposable income.

The likelihood is that the Romanian group would continue to use St Teresa's for the foreseeable future while construction work at Hinckley Point is completed. The current projected completion date is between 2029 and 2031. Their departure would lead to a substantial drop in our income.

Central diocesan costs are increasing with inflationary pressures, and the likelihood is that we will be asked to pay more in Diocesan parish share in future years.

We currently benefit from a government scheme which allows us to reclaim the VAT on any building works, significantly reducing our costs on these, but this scheme is due to end in March 2025 and there is a strong possibility that it won't be renewed.

Thus, whilst our financial outlook for the next five years looks reasonably secure, the outlook beyond this is much more uncertain. The critical thing would be to continue to be able to continue to afford to maintain the buildings. It might well be that we are able to continue funding this, but sadly we have seen churches elsewhere in the Diocese, most recently Holy Cross in Bedminster, having to close because essential repairs weren't affordable to the parish.

Decreasing numbers of priests

The Diocese currently has about 45 diocesan priests active in the Diocese, of whom almost 20 are aged over 65. There are three men in seminary training to be priests for the Diocese. In the last few weeks three active priests serving parishes in our Diocese have died suddenly: Fr George Malecki, Parish Priest of Christ the King, Thornbury, Fr Paul Gonsaves, Parish Priest of St Joseph, Devizes and Fr Michael Derrick D'Mello, Parish Priest of Christ the King, Knowle West. We are adapting to a reality of fewer

priests serving wider areas with some challenging decisions needing to be made about deployment of priests and where Sunday Masses are celebrated.

What would be the long-term effect of adopting this proposal?

If we were to go ahead with this proposal, it would be likely to have a positive long-term impact in facing these challenges. The Syro-Malabar rite community would share the costs of maintaining the buildings, making it more sustainable financially in the longer term. Having a resident priest would ensure that St Teresa's would continue to have a Sunday Mass if we got to a position where this was no longer possible otherwise, with fewer priests in the Diocese.