

The Pope Francis of India?

Bishop Philipose Mar Chrysostom worked with unlikely partners—including communist leaders in Kerala—to bring about social change.

by [Jesudas M. Athyal](#) in the [July 28, 2021](#) issue



Philipose Mar Chrysostom, emeritus metropolitan of Mar Thoma Syrian Church in India, died in May. (Photo © Navaneeth Krishnan S via Creative Commons license)

When Philipose Mar Chrysostom died in May at age 104, he was credited as the longest-serving bishop in India, if not the world. As emeritus metropolitan of Mar Thoma Syrian Church, an ancient Christian community believed to have been founded by the apostle Thomas, Chrysostom was beloved by the people, but he also drew strong criticism for his radical thought and his cooperation with communist leaders on social justice initiatives. Theologian K. M. George noted that “but for his disarming humor and self-deprecating laughter, Mar Chrysostom would have been stamped a heretic by some of the traditional church circles . . . including his own.” He has been described as the Pope Francis of India.

Born Philip Oommen, he received the name Chrysostom when he was consecrated as a bishop in 1953. Roughly translated, the name means “golden tongued,” a fitting choice for a prelate known as much for his wit as for his good will. “He made religion a simpler thing to understand,” said A. M. Thomas, a professor at Mahatma Gandhi University. In his 68 years as a bishop, Chrysostom was present at the Second Vatican Council and three assemblies of the World Council of Churches.

But even more remarkable than his longevity was his role as a spiritual leader in his home state, Kerala, where the church and communism are equally strong. Chrysostom walked the fine line between the two throughout his long years of service, often bringing them together to effect lasting change.

It was not always so. In the early decades of independent India, the Communist Party of India and the church maintained an antagonistic relationship, and Chrysostom assumed a similar stance in opposition to communism. Communist leaders, too, were dogmatic in their position of not compromising with “believers.” Several developments, especially at the national level, seem to have influenced the evolution of the bishop’s approach.

First and most importantly, the mainstream communist parties in India veered away from the course of communism in much of the world and embraced a democratic path very much within the framework of the country’s constitution. In 1957, Kerala made history when the communists ascended to power in the first-ever elections of the state assembly. During the following decades, members of the communist left were frequently re-elected. Even as communism declined in much of the world, it continued to be a political force in parts of India, including Kerala.

“The Emergency”—the controversial period from 1975 to 1977 when Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi suspended elections, civil liberties, and democratic rights and jailed thousands of political activists of the opposition parties—provided the first opportunity for the progressive church and the communist parties to work together for the restoration of civil liberties. A decade later, the resurgence of religious nationalism and communalism gave progressive Christians and communists another chance to come together to uphold the secular fabric of the country. Indian Christians realized then that the immediate danger of majority religious nationalism in their country posed a far graver threat to the church than communism did.

While Chrysostom did not directly participate in those movements, they seem to have had a decisive impact on him. He was deeply impressed by the communists' commitment to social justice, even as his own commitment to justice found its source in his Christian faith.

Chrysostom was convinced that the nurturing of the community was a ministry of the church. He would frequently ask, "Is the world for the church or the church for the world?" As he put it: "Jesus went to the multitude. Today we have a theology of the church unrelated to the multitude. For us, the multitude—the community—is just a spillover of the church; we see the community as potential church members. That is not proper ecclesiology. There is no church without the community."

He went on to point out that we have developed a theology that treats the church as a congregation of the chosen few waiting for the Lord's second coming. "That must change," he said. "The building up of a sustainable community should emerge as the objective of the church."

Chrysostom found multiple occasions to translate this theology into praxis. While living in Maramon in the 1990s, he worked with the local government to ensure that all the children went to school and that families were housed and had enough food. When the program was a success, the government in Kerala took note of his work and applied it statewide as part of the People's Plan Campaign, which diverted a portion of the state budget to local governments so that the people could determine and implement their own priorities. His friend M. A. Baby, a communist politician, told the newspaper *Hindu* that Chrysostom once called him to say he wanted to donate his eyes when he died—a call that, according to Baby, inspired the Kerala government's organ donation campaign which began in 2006.

Chrysostom was prepared to cooperate with the government on programs to create a just and peaceful society. And yet his cooperation was not unconditional. He frequently clashed with the communists and other political groups, especially when he felt they encroached upon the space of the church or other religious groups. Over time, however, they recognized the bishop's sincerity and commitment to justice. They respected him for that.

While differences between the Christians and the communists continue, their mutual admiration has led to a number of social reform movements in Kerala. When the progressive Christians and the communists came together and worked in tandem on

programs aimed at social reform, the results were spectacular, addressing the evils of poverty, environmental degradation, and caste and gender discrimination.

In 2018, the president of India presented Chrysostom with the Padma Bhushan, the third-highest civilian award for distinguished service to the country. The communist-run state government in Kerala also acknowledged him as a pioneer of social justice initiatives alleviating poverty and building a sustainable, egalitarian society. Chrysostom's reception of the T. K. Ramachandran Award, named for the late communist leader and influential Marxist theoretician, was a reminder of just how far both sides had come and the possibility of creative collaboration on a host of issues. In his tribute to Chrysostom, Pinarayi Vijayan, the chief minister of Kerala, noted:

As a bishop, His Grace could have confined himself to the comforts of his palace; but he stepped out into the "one-lakh housing colonies" and slums. He could have devoted himself to spiritual matters exclusively; but he also involved himself in social service. He could have only preached the gospel; but he also made speeches for creating awareness in society on how to live. His Grace has always been going ahead on the unique path he had set out for himself.

Chrysostom strove to build a just society for the people around him. He believed that Christians should primarily consider the pain and pathos of the people in this world, and he sought to combine spiritual resources with the material needs of the people. In his passing, he left behind both a model and an inspiration: wipe the tears of those suffering from pain, give support to those burdened with heavy weight, and stand by the tormented. This is the way of Christ and the way of the communists, too.