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Laypeople in an archdiocese of India's Syro-Malabar Catholic Church have begun a round-the-clock vigil to stop the Vatican-appointed administrator from gaining entry into the archbishop's house.

Lay leaders in the Kochi-based Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese say Archbishop Andrews Thazhath, the apostolic administrator, unilaterally revoked the dispensation that had allowed priests to celebrate Mass facing the people, reported ucanews.com. The protesting groups want to continue with the traditional Mass in which the priest faces the congregation throughout, despite a rule that took effect in 2021.

Under that rule, devised as a compromise, the Syro-Malabar synod ruled that the priest "will face the congregation until the eucharistic prayer, and then again from Communion to the end of the Mass. From eucharistic prayers until Communion, the priest will face the altar."

The vigil at the Kochi residence was launched Oct. 16, and teams of laypeople from different parishes were assigned to ensure a 24-hour watch, ucanews.com reported.

"We no longer want the apostolic administrator to get inside our archbishop's house," Riju Kanjookaran, spokesman for the Archdiocesan Movement for Transparency, told ucanews.com Oct. 17.

As archbishop of Thrissur, Thazhath has a residence in Thrissur, about 53 miles or about a two-hour drive from Kochi.

Pope Francis appointed him administrator of the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese July 30, with a mandate to settle the liturgical dispute caused by the stiff opposition to the decision of the synod to have uniformity in the celebration of Mass.

Several days earlier, the Vatican asked his predecessor, Archbishop Antony Kariyil, to resign. Kariyil had granted archdiocesan priests a dispensation from following the synod-approved Mass.

The resistance to Thazhath took a turn Sept. 30 when he ordered all the priests to celebrate the synod-approved Mass immediately and revoked their dispensation.

Most priests publicly defied the order and continued to celebrate Mass facing the people. The priests also refused to read out Archbishop Thazhath's message, which announced the revoking of the dispensation and his order to the priests.

More than 450 institutions, including 328 parishes and subparishes, have refused to follow the apostolic administrator's orders, Kanjookaran told ucanews.com.

The liturgical dispute in the Syro-Malabar Church dates back nearly five decades, when the church initiated a revision of its liturgy. The simmering controversy was revived in August 2021 when the synod decided to implement its 1999 decision of introducing uniformity in Mass across all the dioceses.

All 35 dioceses of the Syro-Malabar Church, except the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese, began following the synod-approved Mass last November.

Thazhath, in a video message, defended his decision, saying he was merely following instructions from the Vatican.

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