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Slovak Archbishop Cyril Vasil of Košice is seen in this file photo taken at the Vatican in Novem

Slovak Archbishop Cyril Vasil of Košice is seen in this file photo taken at the Vatican in November 2013 when he was serving as secretary of the then-Congregation for Eastern Churches. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Vatican City — August 10, 2023
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As controversy and deep division continued in an Indian archdiocese over the direction the priest faces during the celebration of the liturgy, the Vatican confirmed that Pope Francis named Slovak Archbishop Cyril Vasil of Košice as his pontifical delegate to help resolve the dispute.

The archbishop arrived Aug. 4 in Kochi, the base of the Syro-Malabar Archdiocese of Ernakulam-Angamaly, the Vatican said Aug. 10.

But, according to a report Aug. 8 by UCA News, an Asian church news agency, the legitimacy of the archbishop's appointment was questioned by a large group of priests and laypeople opposed to implementing the uniform liturgical rubrics adopted by the synod of bishops of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church in 1999.

Prior to the bishops' decision, some priests faced the altar during the entire celebration of the eucharistic liturgy, called the Holy Qurbana by the Eastern-rite church, while others faced the congregation throughout the liturgy. The bishops' decision was to have the priest face the altar during the eucharistic prayer but face the congregation during the Liturgy of the Word and again after Communion.

Priests in most Syro-Malabar dioceses quickly complied with the bishops' decision, although dispensations were issued for the Archdiocese of Ernakulam-Angamaly and a few other territories. The bishops decided to end those dispensations in November 2021.

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The Archdiocesan Movement for Transparency, a group of priests, religious and laity in Ernakulam-Angamaly, has protested the way the dispensation was revoked and has insisted on continuing to celebrate the entire liturgy with the priest facing the congregation as has been the practice since 1970.

After Vasil, a former secretary of the Dicastery for Eastern Churches, arrived in Kochi, the group asked for proof that he was, in fact, appointed by the pope because neither he nor the apostolic nunciature provided an official letter of appointment.

Riju Kanjookaran, the spokesperson of the Archdiocesan Movement for Transparency, told UCA News Aug.7, "Our delegates met Archbishop Vasil. He is not ready to listen to us, instead, he wants us to simply comply with the uniform Mass adopted by the synod. It leaves no scope for any further discussion or dialogue."