

**Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 4**

**A PILLAR AND GUIDING LIGHT**  
**Kuriakose Elias Chavara,**  
**a Theologian of the Church**

Dharmaram Publications  
No. 455

*Presentation*

**CHAVARA, A TRAILBLAZING THEOLOGIAN  
IN THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH**

**Saju Chackalackal CMI**

*General Editor, Theological Studies on Saint Chavara*

Although I am positively inclined to hold that every Christian is a theologian by virtue of subscribing to the living faith, as it involves a personal interpretation of the faith, theologizing *per se* is a formal activity of systematically clarifying, interpreting, and deepening the foundational faith of a person or a community in Jesus Christ. Just as constituting a local church requires not only the local faithful but also the local clergy and an indigenous hierarchy, I strongly believe that theologizing by the natives, in communion with the universal Church, is an essential ingredient to constitute a local church; the emergence of an indigenous theologizing would be a dynamic testimony of the maturation of the faith of the local church. From the very inception of the Church itself, we see that the leaders of the faithful, such as Saint Peter and Saint Paul, attempted to interpret the richness and depth of their faith in Jesus Christ by attempting to make these teachings relevant to the ecclesial communion and the society at large from divergent angles; this gave rise to the first generation theologizing available to us in the New Testament and in the writings of some of the Fathers of the Church. These trailblazing attempts at theologizing in the early Church not only created an identity for the community, but also helped it to anchor itself and to flourish in the given existential context. This spiritual embarkment and progress of the community were mainly the result of theologians' ability to interpret the

socio-cultural reality of their times in the light of the Gospel message while simultaneously attempting to relate the Gospel message contextually, and to incarnate it in the idioms, phrases, and cultural expressions of the local people.

The Syro-Malabar Church, having its celebrated apostolic origin dating back to the first century AD, based on the preaching of the Gospel on the Indian soil by Apostle Thomas, and, subsequently, the initiation of Christian communities in different parts of the land. Saint Thomas Christians can legitimately be proud of the fact that it has gracefully survived two millennia and has also truthfully carried forward the faith in Jesus Christ bequeathed to it by the first century ancestors. This community of the faithful – which does not have any extant sources to testify to its development and maturation in faith other than the existence of the community itself, as far as the available historical documents go, at least from the seventh century onwards – has been animated in its spiritual growth and temporal administration, first, by the East Syrian Church and, later, by the Latin Church. While the former succeeded in literally sharing its East Syrian liturgical patrimony with the faithful of the Saint Thomas Christians in India through its exclusive and longer association, the latter was known to have made unsuccessful attempts to break the community away from its age-old indigenous Christian traditions, because they were different from the traditions followed by the European church (and, hence, assumed to be erroneous). Although the first group did not involve itself directly in the temporal administration of the community (as the archdeacon was entrusted with such duties), the latter, with its overarching powers, ably buttressed by the colonial political powers, succeeded in wielding all-encompassing administrative powers over the Saint Thomas Christians in India.

Although the efforts of both these ecclesial traditions were supposed to have animated and empowered the Saint Thomas Christians, both of them, in fact, seem to have failed to facilitate and sustain a self-reliant and autonomous local church of Saint Thomas Christians. It is strange to see that during the reign of both these churches in enlivening the faith of the Saint Thomas Christians, the local church never gained full-fledged growth in terms of facilitating a local hierarchy; both the churches did not take any substantial steps to support the local church develop its own hierarchy. This is obvious from the fact that a church existing from the first century onwards received its first native bishop (according to recorded history) only in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The lack of a native ecclesial leadership had, therefore, stifled the growth of this church and almost all areas of Christian life for a long time.

Many writers give an impression that most of the problems faced by the Syro-Malabar community from the sixteenth century onwards are due to its invasion by the Latin hierarchy; though there is a certain truth in this regard, it does not seem to constitute the whole truth. Although the problems of autonomy were accentuated in the sixteenth century after the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries and the establishment of a Latin hierarchy with exclusive ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the Oriental Catholics, many of the issues that surfaced during that period had their root in the earlier history of the Church in Malabar. Just as the liturgical language of the Saint Thomas Christians was foreign, namely, Syriac, for all practical purposes, even bishops who came from Bagdad (or Babylon) to Malabar were foreigners. As a result, not only wasn't there any native bishop, who comprehended the nuances of the culture and mindset of the natives, but there were also no efforts made by the then

responsible ecclesial leadership to identify or foster a single bishop from the local church to episcopacy for the purpose of strengthening that church with an indigenous leadership. If we are to cast aspersions at Rome or the See of Peter for its failure to provide the local church with bishops of native origin, we should not bypass the fact that all bishops from Babylon who came legitimately or illegitimately till the period under discussion were only foreigners. Indeed, even the Patriarch, who was the head of the Chaldean Church, which treated the Saint Thomas Christians as its filial church, never took steps to facilitate native ecclesial leadership. Had he taken the necessary steps to address the quest of the native faithful in Malabar at the right time, the issue of stagnation of and unwarranted divisions within the Saint Thomas Christians - before and during the period of leadership offered by the Latin Church - would not have occurred. Hence, the accusation that local leadership was not created for the Syro-Malabar Church should be judiciously attributed to the Chaldean Church than to the Latin Church, if we approach the history with a critical perspective. We, in all likelihood, can observe the lack of missionary dynamism and natural ecclesial evolution within the Syro-Malabar Church, especially in integrating the native cultural practices as well as thought patterns, and almost a non-existent indigenous theology and a stagnant East Syriac liturgy almost without any scope for local adaptation among the Syro-Malabar Christians to the lack of native ecclesial leadership, on the one hand, and the administrative policies of the Chaldean Church (till the sixteenth century) and the Latin Church (from sixteenth to twentieth century), on the other.

Moreover, the clergy of that era seemed to be more in line with cultic priesthood, as they were primarily trained and ordained to celebrate the sacraments, particularly the

Eucharistic Liturgy, which was restricted to Sundays and the days of obligation; as the liturgical language was Syriac, a foreign language, a major part of their clerical training practically consisted of learning the language and familiarizing the priestly candidates with the liturgical texts and rubrics. Such a state of affairs did not leave much to aspire for any theological acumen or to lead to any substantial theological contributions; as the language of the Chaldean liturgy and the language of ordinary communication were different, there seemed to have been no incentive for the ecclesiastical leadership to promote any local efforts to theologize in the local language. Most of the clergy remained complacent about their minimal understanding of liturgical texts, and those who were inclined to seek theological sources were content with the available texts in Syriac, mostly from the Fathers of the Church; hence, there was no incentive for indigenous theologizing. Moreover, we do not have any recorded evidence to indicate any significant attempt on the part of the native members of Saint Thomas Christians to theologize either in their own local language or in their liturgical language.

It is unbelievable that a vibrant community that was living and transmitting its faith in Jesus Christ – with its own and borrowed traditions of celebrating the faith – did not make its own attempts to theologize in its native tongue. While there exists evidence for the conscious but deplorable efforts made by the Latin hierarchy to burn all local sources soon after the Synod of Diamper (1599), it is not clear from the historical sources about what had gone wrong with preserving and perpetuating the writings, if any, and other sources from the first few centuries of the life of Saint Thomas Christians in Malabar. Were there any covert efforts on the part of the leadership in eliminating traces of attempts made by the local

community of Saint Thomas Christians? Unfortunately, we have no source at hand to argue in either direction. Thus, going by the extant sources, it can be inferred that till the second half of the nineteenth century, there has hardly been any evidence available to indicate that any significant theologizing effort or theological work was made by any of the sons and daughters of the church, except to have bequeathed the liturgical and theological sources to the natives that were made available to her by the East Syrian Church in her association of more than a millennium. The conspicuous absence of indigenously developed worship forms among the Saint Thomas Christians (which is applicable to all churches in India claiming their origin to Apostle Thomas) was also due to the fact that no effort was made with regard to indigenous theologizing. There was also the absence of a local hierarchy to guide and animate the faithful and the clergy towards their own self-identity and its perpetuation and evolution. So, the absence of indigenous theologizing, or its suppression for long, resulted in the adoption of foreign forms of worship, which, in the absence of any other alternative, over a period of time, became familiar and acceptable to the native community of Saint Thomas Christians, with some finding it impossible to even conceive of a native form of theology and worship. Even in this latter instance, I am inclined to believe that the bishops from the East Syrian Church, who animated the local community of faithful in their liturgical life for long, did not encourage native Christians to develop their own indigenous forms of worship, which is evident from the fact that most of the extant liturgical texts are, for all practical purposes, exact copies of the liturgical texts that were in vogue in the Chaldean Church. This gives rise to speculation and certain questions: Was it an oversight on the part of the then ecclesial

leadership offered by the Chaldean Church? Did it result from the lack of sufficient indigenous leadership? Or, was it the result of a bigger plot or grand plan on the part of a sister church that offered its spiritual and liturgical leadership to an indigenous church in India, to keep the latter dependent and subservient and, thus, to force it to adapt to the familiar ways of the former forever? Although it would be extremely difficult to understand the historical processes objectively, we are even at an utter loss when we see that, along with the spiritual leadership of an East Syrian bishop, there was a native archdeacon to administer the temporal affairs of the Saint Thomas Christians who could have animated the natives into processes of theologizing to deepen their faith expressions; however, the historical records do not give us much to think that even such a key office was productive in this regard. Although it is difficult to arrive at any conclusive answers, as they were not left with any other known alternative, it is only fair to acknowledge that the adoption of the Chaldean liturgical practices (despite the adoption of a foreign form of worship as well as a foreign tongue as its liturgical language) has contributed to maintaining and enlivening the faith of the Saint Thomas Christians.

It is against this backdrop that we see the pioneering, but exceptional and unparalleled efforts of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871), a celebrated faithful from among the Saint Thomas Christians, who was ordained in 1829 and (along with others) founded the first indigenous consecrated communities in India, namely, Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI, 1831) and Congregation of Mother of Carmel (CMC, 1866). Having acquired mastery over the prevalent East Syrian liturgical traditions and local Christian practices during his formative years, under the able guidance of Malpan Thomas Palackal, and having been involved in the



establishment of the first indigenous communities of consecrated life for men and women, Saint Chavara emerged a spontaneous leader of the Saint Thomas Christians during the nineteenth century. While he remained faithful to the then existing legitimate ecclesiastical jurisdiction (namely, of the Latin hierarchy) and fought tooth and nail in sustaining the unity of the Church, he had the Spirit-led aspiration to motivate the community of Saint Thomas Christians to a deeper understanding of faith, its clearer articulation and a sound interpretation, to ensure that his brethren were assisted in their efforts to profess and practise the faith.

Although we do not come across any precursors of theologizing among the Saint Thomas Christians, it is a matter of curiosity to know how Saint Chavara emerged a theologian in the Syro-Malabar Church. Malpan Thomas Palackal, his formator and mentor, was known to collect all available books, even in Tamil, which were naturally accessible to Saint Chavara as a seminarian and, later, as the assistant of the Malpan. This may have facilitated better opportunities for reading and reflection on the part of Chavara, which could have indirectly played a preliminary but significant role in his grooming as a theologian. It is also believed that during the seminary days Saint Chavara, on the instruction of Malpan Thomas, started to gather together the East Syrian Liturgy of the Hours, which had not yet been codified as one unit (it was later prepared for publication by Chavara himself, though its formal approval from Rome came only after his demise); this clearly indicates that he not only had mastery over the foreign language and the intellectual acumen to carry out the task at hand, but also had the confidence of his own master, who was at that time recognized to be one of the best formators of priestly candidates in the Syro-Malabar Church. Moreover, with his

high intellectual calibre exhibited even when he was a young boy, we can visualize Saint Chavara receiving special training in various languages during his seminary days with Malpan Thomas Palackal, on the one hand, and with the establishment of the first indigenous religious congregation for men at Mannanam and the consequent leadership he offered as the Prior of Mannanam Monastery to his religious confreres and to the ecclesial life of the Syro-Malabar community, on the other. He was bestowed opportunities and responsibilities that required of him a deeper understanding of the Christian faith and its systematic articulation in order to animate the communities entrusted to his care. In addition, I am also inclined to think that his closer association with the European missionaries of the Vicariate of Verapoly, who were involved both in the administration of the religious community as well as that of the Vicariate, gave opportunities to Chavara to familiarize himself with the various ways in which Christian doctrines were inculcated among the faithful in the Latin tradition; his familiarity with them and their extensive missionary operations may have influenced Chavara to adopt some of their best practices for the common good of the faithful in his own church. Further, it is also reasonable to consider his continuous involvement in the formation of priestly and religious candidates at the Mannanam Monastery as another source of his theological acumen, which required of him (along with his confreres) a better and deeper understanding of the Sacred Scripture, and mastery over the Christian doctrine based on the available, but restricted sources; the transformation that the priests, who were trained at these monasteries, had impacted among the faithful testifies to the fact that they went far beyond the traditional role of cultic priests, and enhanced their faith as well as that of the natives with a deeper understanding of

biblical and ecclesial sources. When we put all these factors together, we understand that it was the consequence of a spontaneous development that Saint Chavara emerged as a pioneering theologian among the Saint Thomas Christians.

It must also be admitted that, though Saint Chavara had been formally appointed to train and examine candidates for priesthood in the Syro-Malabar Church by the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly (thus he was bestowed the title 'Malpan', meaning professor and examiner), he did not write or publish any scientific theological treatises or expositions on theological themes. Although he did instruct the candidates to priesthood as well as consecrated life, in his capacity as Malpan and Prior at Pallipuram, Mannanam, and Koonammavu, we are not in possession of any notes from his discourses or instructions. However, his extensive writings, necessitated by pastoral exigencies and religious decorum, such as exhortations, chronicles, poetries, circulars and letters, literary and spiritual writings, etc., do contain sound and significant theological content where we witness his reflections on and interpretations about the Christian faith content, with particular reference to the person of Jesus Christ whom he had encountered personally in the pages of the Gospel, in his own personal contemplative prayer, and in his extensive encounter with the people of various social strata in his capacity as consecrated pastor. It seems plausible that Saint Chavara's attempt to theologize was more a by-product of his commitment to the person of Christ and his pastoral involvement in the Church than an intentional goal in itself.

Theology, consequently, for Saint Chavara was not an academic pursuit or systematic affair, but an attempt to affirm his deeper experience of the person of Jesus Christ, who readily embraced everyone, particularly the poor and the needy, and endeavoured to establish the kingdom of God

that aimed at cultivating an integral and inclusive outlook in the whole society. Equally, his theological orientations, devoid of discriminating boundaries, were fine-tuned by his pastoral concerns: he took it upon himself to lead his flock to better pastures by way of animating them spiritually and socially, to uplift them by enhancing their socio-cultural status, particularly by focusing on the poor and the marginalized, to offer them opportunities of education with the hope that he could nurture future generations with values and culture, prepare them for a better social and religious outlook, and ready them to take up their familial and social responsibilities with the aim of furthering the common good of the whole society. In these pioneering efforts that Saint Chavara immersed himself in, he was motivated primarily by his profound faith in Jesus Christ and his selfless commitment to the people of God; hence, along with his social interventions, he had a clear perception of his anchoring in Jesus and was also bent on making efforts to articulate this faith content so that others could understand and cherish it in the best way possible.

As the theology of Saint Chavara evolved from his existential contexts and pastoral exigencies, we see certain necessary strands merging together in its spontaneous development. The first strand is identified from the fact that for Chavara Jesus was indeed a person whom he encountered in his everyday life, a person with whom he had a personal relationship. This faith was nurtured through his life of prayer, liturgy, and other spiritual exercises. Chavara had developed a habit of intense prayer from his early years as a religious priest, when he spent hours on his knees before the Blessed Sacrament; his confreres attested to the fact that he was deeply immersed in contemplation both during his community prayers and during the long hours of his personal

prayer; he aspired to be locked up within the tabernacle: he cherished an intimate and mystical union with Jesus; even when he was involved in hectic activities for the uplift of the people around, by being prayerful throughout the day, he could maintain an unbroken relationship with Jesus, whom he endearingly addressed "*ente appa*" (my beloved father). Hence, theological reflections emerged primarily from his intense and close proximity with the person of Jesus Christ and his earnest efforts to articulate this dynamic relationship for the sake of others so that they could also, in turn, be animated to develop a similar personal relationship with Jesus.

The second strand of Saint Chavara's theology emerged from his pastoral commitment to the faithful whom he reached out to, and cared for, throughout his ministry as a pastor and religious. The Church of his time was more inclined to focus on the liturgical needs of the people than to initiate efforts for their holistic welfare. Such a state of affairs led to few expectations by the people from the church and from the cultic leadership. Chavara, along with his confreres, however, brought extensive changes on the pastoral scene, cultivating an integral outlook and conceiving of their pastoral involvement going far beyond the cultic needs of the faithful. Accordingly, the integral and inclusive outlook that he cultivated necessitated him to animate people in their needs be it social, cultural, structural, or religious. Being the leader of the pioneering religious community, he was bent on realizing the founding charisma of the CMI, namely, to realize "*kannu kattapetta nanmakaloke,*" meaning "all that has been shown to be good [by the Spirit]." This urged him to proactively respond to the needs of the people, which got him involved in setting up the first centralized seminary at Mannanam, opening a Sanskrit school, starting a printing

press, visiting churches to preach retreats, establishing catechumenates to empower new converts, etc.: in all, as a consecrated pastor, he considered it necessary to respond to the needs of the community and to get involved in a myriad of things with the only intention of furthering the common good of the society, ensuring that the benefits of his actions reached everyone, cutting across all sections of the society. Thus, the theological perspectives that he had developed rose from his close proximity with the people as a pastor, who involved himself in their concerns, and who was inspired by the Gospel teachings as well as the spiritual stirrings emanating from his incessant relationship with Jesus.

A third strand of Saint Chavara’s theological inspiration came from his attempts to explain and formulate the faith content of Christianity, which he cherished as the core of his being. As the head of the first indigenous consecrated community and as a pastor placed at the helm of the affairs of the Syro-Malabar Church, he experienced various instances that required him to articulate the core elements of the doctrine to offer clarity as well as to inspire his wards for a deeper faith experience. For example, in the letters or circulars he wrote to the members of the consecrated community, he instructed his confreres on the basic teachings on religious consecration with a view to animate and stabilize the members in their unique calling. As a pastor involved in nurturing the faith of the people, or in rebuilding the lost unity within the Church in connection with the presence of an unauthorized bishop from Bagdad, or in corresponding with higher ecclesiastical authorities, it was required of him to substantiate his instructions or requests with sufficient theological content; there were also instances of Chavara offering instructions to the candidates to consecrated life as well as to priesthood. These candidates were guided in the

seminaries attached to the monasteries. In all these instances, it was necessary for Saint Chavara to explicate the faith content with significant theological basis.

In all, these attitudes emerging from his existential Christian life, he, without any conscious effort, gave shape to a theological outlook, which can very well be deciphered from his numerous writings. His spiritual, pastoral, and doctrinal aptitudes merged together in shaping his theology, making it fundamentally Christian, pastorally grounded and practical. Moreover, a combination of the spiritual and the pastoral outlook made Saint Chavara's contributions more prophetic in nature: his involvement in any sphere of the life of the people challenged them in continuing with their unchristian ways and, in turn, aided them in initiating a truly Christian transformation. His prophetic engagements were positively welcomed by the faithful as well as the general society as they were convinced of his genuine intentions to serve them and to uplift everyone, especially the poor and the marginalized. Being spiritual and pastoral in his orientations, in his writings, Chavara was not primarily and exclusively motivated by any doctrinal concern; at the same time, it was also true that his writings in no instance had gone against the doctrinal positions of the Church. Indirectly, this also attested to the ecclesial authenticity of the theological contributions of Saint Chavara.

Some of the theological concerns that Saint Chavara addressed in his writings as well as pastoral engagement can be identified as follows: At the centre of Saint Chavara's theology we see his firm footing upon the Holy Trinity. The intense and intimate relationship among the three persons of the Holy Trinity was conceived by him in the form of a relationship among family members. He employed one of his favourite expressions to designate the Holy Trinity, namely,

*Trittoakudumbam*, meaning the Trinitarian family, which being associated with a familiar term *kudumbam* (family), better expressed its inner reality and dynamism, and the interpersonal relationship in a vibrant manner. Moreover, Saint Chavara maintained a more personal and intense relationship with the second person in the Trinity, namely, Jesus Christ the son, and addressed him as Father; there are many instances in his writings where we come across his usage of the most endearing address, *ente appa* (my beloved father) to address Jesus. Although it is unconventional in theological circles to address Jesus as Father, he had his inspiration in the New Testament theology of Saint John’s gospel, where Jesus affirmed to Philip that whoever has seen him has seen the father (Jn 14:9; Jn 12:45). The centrality that Saint Chavara accorded to the persons of Jesus Christ in his understanding of the Holy Trinity also indicated that, for him, the Trinity was not merely a distanced transcendent reality, but was personally represented in one person who had lived in this world as one among us. This made it possible for him to also establish and maintain a closer personal relationship with the Trinitarian Godhead. In this regard, it is also interesting to see that Chavara presented the *Trittoakudumbam* as the supreme model to be emulated both by biological families and consecrated communities.

Saint Chavara’s writings also offer us a rich understanding of Jesus Christ as the second person in the Holy Trinity. While his divinity and humanity are integrally perceived, his aspiration for a personal and intense relationship with Jesus Christ gave him an added reason to dwell more on his human character without in any way bracketing his divinity. Some of the poetic expressions of Chavara in his famous *Atmanuthapam* give us a grasp of his gospel-based understanding of Christology too. It is very clear in his



articulations that human beings are given easy access to the Trinitarian communion through the second person in the Holy Trinity, who was incarnated in human form, and lived amidst us (*Emmanuel*). Being the only perfect man and God in human history, Jesus, to Saint Chavara, offered us the best and easiest example of an ordinary human being, who, despite the trials and tribulations faced by him, continued to invest strong faith in the most Holy Trinity.

The pastor in Saint Chavara was genuinely concerned about the holistic care that he and his confreres could offer in grooming Christian families, as he not only conceived of the family as a miniature of the Church, but also as a replica of the Holy Trinity that embodies heavenly love and care. One of his ground-breaking insights on family is his statement in the *Testament of a Loving Father (Chavarul)*: “A good Christian family is the image of heaven.” According to his understanding, a family is oriented in its life and behaviour solely to the realization of eternal salvation; at the same time, being placed in a society, he also conceived of each Christian family having its immediate goal of peaceful coexistence with everyone else as well as contributing towards the common good. Having realized the good resulting from an orderly and secure life with his parents and as a seminarian under Malpan Thomas Palackal and, later, the head of the first indigenous consecrated community, Saint Chavara was convinced of the good resulting from a disciplined Christian life. Moreover, as a pastor closely accompanying families associated with the monastery, and from his extensive retreat preaching in parishes as well as his office as the Vicar General in the Vicariate of Verapoly, he had opportunities to understand how families broke up as a result of the wayward style of life of its members; hence, focusing on the importance of families in Christian living and keeping heaven as their

ideal, Chavara held that all families should insist on orderliness in general and in the grooming of children in particular. *The Testament of a Loving Father*, a letter addressed to the kith and kin in his native village Kainakary, offered them very crisp but pertinent practical instructions as to how to enhance and maintain orderliness in the whole family (first part) as well as on grooming children with proper Christian values and priorities (second part). More than a piece of practical advice, the *Chavarul* offers families a solid Christian foundation, anchoring itself on the Bible as well as on the teachings of the Fathers of the Church; hence, along with every piece of advice he offers, Chavara succeeded in this document to offer them a truly Christian perspective on family. It is, therefore, natural that he considered the *Trittvakudumbam* (Holy Trinity) and *Tirukudumbam* (Holy Family) to be the ultimate heavenly ideal and earthly model, respectively, for Christian families.

Having chosen to become a consecrated priest during the final stage of his seminary days, and having been associated with his own Malpan and other senior companions in founding the first indigenous community of consecrated life at Mannanam in 1831, the later grooming of which was his unique but God-given assignment, Saint Chavara also developed a solid theological position on consecrated life. As he began his public life as an ordained parish priest, his aspiration to be part of this consecrated fraternity led him to esteem community life to great extent and, in his later life he addressed his confreres as *koodappirapukal* (children of the same parents or co-borns). Hence, he conceived of consecrated life also as a family, after the dynamic unity of the Holy Trinity (*Trittvakudumbam*), with a close knit bonding among the members, whose internal life in the monastery and external life in the ministry were seen as ecclesial

expressions of their collective faith consciousness and commitment to the person of Jesus Christ. Further, their expertise in consecrated communion, resulting from a vowed life of all its members, was anchored on the three evangelical counsels, which, according to his expression, are *manavatitvam* (celibacy), *agatitvam* (poverty), and *cholvoli* (obedience). These native expressions used by Saint Chavara to indicate the three vows clearly express the core meaning of consecration that each religious is called upon to live. The total self-surrender stemming from one's personal call to radically follow Jesus Christ in the Church is facilitated by these evangelical counsels lived out in the consecrated community with supernatural motives. He conceived of and lived out his consecrated life as a way of life in which relinquishing choices in the biological, economic, and autonomous realms of life he had to submit him to the community and its superiors for guidance and animation, motivated by supernatural aspirations that aim at the realization of "the salvation of all" and "one's own salvation."

Coming to his vision of the Church, Saint Chavara was not inclined to exclude anyone or any tradition from his pastoral purview, but cherished an integral and inclusive approach in his attitude as well as engagements. From many of such instances, we shall draw our attention to his synthetic approach towards the East Syrian and Latin traditions. As he was groomed in the East Syrian liturgical tradition, he had a natural preference for it; however, as a pastor, he was not ready to settle for it as the only and final form of his Christian worship. Although there were reasons for accentuating the antagonism between these two liturgical traditions, especially based on the socio-cultural differences between the communities and the differences of opinions emerging from

the ecclesiastical administrative arrangements, Saint Chavara encouraged unity among the faithful by way of sharing their resources for furthering the common good. While he made numerous efforts to perfect the East Syrian liturgical tradition, as it was being practised during his lifetime (like organizing the liturgical calendar, setting up the authentic text of the Eucharistic Liturgy and its orderly celebration, and compiling the Liturgy of the Hours which was available from various sources in bits and pieces), he also tried to enhance it by adapting the best from the Latin liturgical tradition, especially to fill the lacuna that he had identified within the East Syrian liturgical practices (for example, translating the service on Great Saturday and seeking approval for the same from Rome, adopting popular devotions such as rosary, forty hour adoration, etc.). In all these, it was not his exclusive favour for one liturgical rite over the other that mattered to him ultimately, but the vibrant faith practice of the faithful and their animation towards holiness; his concern was to enliven the faith of the people in the best way possible. Common good moved him to adopt an integral and inclusive approach wherein he was ready to synthesize the best practises from various sources into the liturgical practices of his community, as he believed that all good comes from the same Divine source; he was ready to integrate those elements which did not in any way conflict with the fundamental faith content of his ecclesial community. In fact, through these efforts, he was positively contributing towards the evolution of a new ecclesial identity for the Church of Saint Thomas Christians in India, which, being an apostolic church founded by Apostle Thomas himself, was not destined to be a mere replica of the East Syrian Church, but have its own identity.

Chavara’s preference for any one particular ritual church did not emerge from his blind adherence to one or the other,

but from his reasonable understanding of anyone creatively contributing to the enhancement of Christian living in the native community of Saint Thomas Christians, which seemed to have been unduly over-dominated by multiple foreign ecclesial bodies, none of which possessed a true Christian approach in furthering the autonomous and integral growth of his own native ecclesial community. At the administrative level of the Church, as the Syro-Malabar community was under the jurisdiction of the Vicariate of Verapoly, Chavara was more of a bridge-builder between the Latin hierarchy and the Syro-Malabar faithful; this is best attested in his much acclaimed efforts to fight against the division that emerged in the Church due to the unauthorized presence of Bishop Roccas in the churches belonging to the Syro-Malabar Church. Even when he vociferously fought against Roccas and made every effort to oust him from among the Saint Thomas Christian communities, he cherished an ideally Christian and merciful attitude towards his opponent and extended all possible support to him to settle the matter without in any way hurting him or publically humiliating him. All these clearly attest to the fact that the Christian perspectives of Saint Chavara were more integral and inclusive and it had no scope to exclude anyone from the all-embracing attitude of Jesus, his Supreme Master and Lord.

Moreover, although he displayed a preference for the East Syrian liturgical tradition, Chavara did not seem to have any preference for the ecclesial leadership of the Chaldean Church. While this would have been motivated by the ecclesial legitimacy of the leadership of the Vicariate of Verapoly, it would also have been due to the reason that the ecclesial leadership offered by the hierarchy of the East Syrian Church as such did not contribute much towards the spiritual and ecclesial growth of the Saint Thomas Christians in India.

As Chavara (along with his senior collaborators) was worried about the Saint Thomas Christians remaining *macci* or infertile in being and becoming a church (according to him, especially for not having produced any canonized saint in its history of eighteen hundred years), and as the ecclesiastical leadership offered by the hierarchy of East Syrian Church did not produce any tangible benefits for the Saint Thomas Christians, except to have a foreign bishop as a figurehead, he had reasons to believe that any further association with the East Syrian Church would neither help the native Saint Thomas Christians towards their spiritual development nor in the growth as a full-fledged autonomous local church of apostolic origin with its own spiritual, liturgical, and ecclesial frameworks. He had already surmised that once a native bishop was appointed as a response to the long-standing longing of the faithful of Malabar, the orientation of the Saint Thomas Christians towards Babylon would end. Moreover, as he was witness to the aspirations of his own people for a native bishop, on the one hand, and against the ecclesiastical jurisdiction offered by the Vicariate of Verapoly, also due to the discrepancy of liturgical rites and use of languages, on the other, he believed that in the long run, the most ideal solution would be to have an indigenous ecclesiastical leadership with independent jurisdiction for the Syro-Malabar Church and Latin Church. Accordingly, in one of his letters to the *Propaganda Fide*, he dared to directly communicate the same to Rome, clearly stating that the only solution would be “to have two bishops here: one for the Latin Church and other for the Syrian Church.”

His unique contributions such as establishing consecrated life for men and women with true ecclesial orientations and creating disciplined families and the grooming of the younger generations were aimed at strengthening the local

church of Saint Thomas Christians, which had lacked proper pastoral guidance in the past. As he felt that the community remained infertile (*macci*) due to the lack of indigenous leadership in the hierarchy (mainly due to an impoverished training of the clergy and total absence of native hierarchy), Saint Chavara made every effort to fill that lacuna by offering systematic seminary training attached to the monasteries and made all possible efforts to convince the authorities about the need for establishing a native hierarchy. The only concern for Saint Chavara in his involvement in the administration of the Church was its sole foundation in the person of Jesus Christ and prevalence of charity and unity among the faithful.

In all these developments, however, Saint Chavara's ecclesiology stood out as one that insisted on establishing indigenous ecclesial leadership while, at the same time, wilfully submitting himself to the legitimate authority instituted by the Church. His personal preference for native leadership did not dissuade him from his respect for the ecclesiastical leadership offered by the Vicariate of Verapoly. Despite the ritual differences, the Catholic Church, to Saint Chavara, was one under the sole leadership of the See of Peter. It was this conviction that inspired him to fight against those who thwarted the ecclesial unity for any reason, even if they were in favour of his preference for native leadership of the Saint Thomas Christians. It was the same spirit of the one and united Church that also inspired him to wilfully integrate best practices from the sister churches into the ecclesial life of the Saint Thomas Christians.

Interestingly, the theological contributions of Saint Chavara, solidly founded on the biblical sources as well as the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, had a conspicuously humanitarian face. His theologizing efforts were not conceptually or doctrinally oriented; rather, his

theological reflections made better sense when seen as efforts to make his faith practices more authentic as well as inspiring to his co-pilgrims. His concerns in Christian faith were spiritual and pastoral to the extent that they should, according to him, ultimately help everyone become better human beings, or humane individuals, who are ready to respond to a needy neighbour or a person who finds himself or herself on the margins of the society or the church. Instead of being satisfied with giving directions to others, Saint Chavara dared to lead from the front, immersing himself in the task of spiritual and social progress of the human beings around him, breaking new ground in Christian social uplift, spearheading the whole process with the sole weapon of his unshakable faith in the Divine Providence stemming from a life anchored in Jesus Christ within the ecclesial horizons of the Catholic Church.

Although Saint Chavara had made unparalleled contributions in shaping up a theology existentially suitable to the Saint Thomas Christians through his relentless and overarching efforts to animate and strengthen the community of faithful, it is regrettable that no significant effort has been made so far to unravel his theological contributions, though there were innumerable attempts from various corners to bring out a number of popular publications highlighting his spiritual as well as socio-cultural and administrative contributions. Despite the great appreciation for the socially and administratively significant contributions made by Saint Chavara, it seems that no body took the trouble to study his writings to unearth his theology. Many trained Catholic theologians, whose teachings and writings are solely inspired by the methodology of western theologians, have never taken it upon themselves to study this key figure in the ecclesial spectrum of a vibrant Indian Church; even many others who



take the native thinkers seriously seem to have bypassed Saint Chavara's contributions probably because he hailed from the southern-most state of India and belonged to the Syro-Malabar Church; the fact that most of his writings are in Malayalam also might have been a roadblock for some in exploring his pioneering efforts at theologizing for a native Christian community in India. It is strange and unfortunate that although he had treaded a path unparalleled in many respects, even after his canonization on 23 November 2014, neither the ecclesiastical authorities nor his own confreres took the trouble to bring out his indigenous and pioneering contributions towards theologizing among the Saint Thomas Christians. It is in this context that *A Pillar and Guiding Light*, a well-organized scientific study by Sophy Rose, a member of the Congregation of Mother of Carmel which was founded by Saint Chavara himself, clearly delineating the unique as well as pioneering theological contributions of Chavara, gains its prominence both on the ecclesial horizons and within the academia. The objective of this work, as the author puts it clearly in the introduction, is "to bring out and systematize his theological vision and insights in a systematic manner by making use of certain theological models and disciplines."

*A Pillar and Guiding Light*, a well-argued out survey on the theological contributions of Saint Chavara, has successfully brought to the public light those significant theological insights offered by Saint Chavara during his lifetime, though they went undetected due to the fact that they were spread across the width and breath of his manifold writings. With a masterstroke, Sophy Rose has managed to pool and string them together to present a convincing argument that Saint Chavara was indeed a theologian of great merit, who could be placed alongside the great Fathers of the Church as far as the Saint Thomas Christians are concerned. After an

extensive and focused analysis of the contributions of Saint Chavara, Sophy Rose takes a definitive position that “his writings contain the doctrines and dogmas of the Church in a vivid manner.” His uniqueness, according to Sophy, is that, in Saint Chavara, we find an integral synthesis of the teachings of the Fathers of the Church in the early centuries and the Second Vatican Council of the twentieth century.

True to his aspiration to be an agent of Christian synthesis, seen throughout his life, Saint Chavara’s theological contributions also bridged Catholic teachings from different epochs. Highlighting some of his key theological contributions, especially in the light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which came almost a century after his death, the author insightfully makes the following list about his achievements: “... he imbibed the centrality of liturgy for the renewal of the Church from within, the first and foremost duty of the pastors to preach the Word of God, the urgency of providing formation to the family, necessity of giving solid formation to the seminarians, the necessity of fostering religious life for the missionary endeavour of the Church, the need of giving catholic education to the children, offering all possible care to the poor and the needy, etc.” From an enlightened ecclesial administrative point of view, Saint Chavara is acclaimed to have “ascertained the need of protecting and promoting the apostolic heritage of the Church, acknowledged and asserted the apostolic succession and the ecclesiastical jurisdiction, demanded the shepherding of bishop for each Rite from their own Rite, defended the unity of the Church, promoted the communion with the Holy See, encouraged unity with diversity in the Church, and upheld the equality of churches.” In the light of the above, Sophy Rose minces no words to affirm that he was indeed “a

man with divine wisdom and pastoral prudence," qualities that are essential to constitute a genuinely Christian theology.

In *A Pillar and Guiding Light: Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a Theologian of the Church*, we have a mystic theologian, a pastoral theologian, and an ecclesial theologian merging together perfectly in the person and writings of Saint Chavara. Although his writings may not be classified as theological treatises in modern theological parlance, the rich theological content that we come across in them is so compelling to confirm that Saint Chavara was indeed a theologian of great merit. This is more appealing when we also realize that he had no precursors in theologizing in his own land or in his own Syro-Malabar Church: practically, he had to start from the scratches, based on the limited access he had to some rudimentary sources; this, however, made his theological contributions more existential, which had great practical import for the whole Church of Saint Thomas Christians, especially when her faithful had no sound but native ecclesial leadership to animate them in their life of faith. In this regard, it is also clear that the theological acumen of Saint Chavara was instrumental in transforming the life of the Saint Thomas Christians and in guiding them to affirm that theirs is an apostolic church that should be accorded its legitimate administrative autonomy to see its full-flowering in Christian faith and charity. Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a pioneering theologian of the Saint Thomas Christians, an ecclesial theologian of great merit, indeed continues to be a trailblazer, a 'pillar' and a 'guiding light' in effectively navigating the Church of Saint Thomas Christians towards her providential destiny.