

CHAVARA: A SAINT SO UNIQUE

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Abstract: This brief narration of the life of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara highlights his heroic leadership role in the spiritual, formative, social, and educational fields. It presents Chavara as a unique gift and blessing for our land and its people. A prophet of his time, Chavara's holy life was filled with the compassionate sensitivity of Jesus, which brought about a Carmelite blend of life in contemplation and action.

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A cloud can turn out to be a nurturing rain; a word can turn out to be a beautiful poem; a whisper can turn out to be a melodious song; a simple moment can turn out to be a golden memory and a person can turn out to be a holy history! We are in an auspicious moment of contemplating the holy history of a unique person, St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, who transformed a history of people and the Church into an excellent epic by his amazing talents and unselfish commitments. He was a bridge between God and man, between developed and undeveloped milieu, between spiritual insights and charitable actions. From his profound simplicity and intense spirituality God realized many of His own dreams for a grace-filled world. Around a half of a century, his powerful presence brought unprecedented renewal and prosperity in the society and in the Church. The leadership of St. Chavara in the spiritual, formative, social and educational fields was truly a heroic and an extraordinary one. He was a unique gift and blessing for our land and its people.

In the folios of human history one can find the amazing providence of God who in due time sent to His people powerful prophets to establish peace and wellbeing, true liberation and development both in spiritual and social spheres. Prophets have always showed the ineffable love and compassion of God and served as the mouthpiece of God, announcing the truth and justice and they were also in the forefront to bring out God's dreams for a people who are oppressed and distressed. If one observes the history of St. Kuriakose Elias

Chavara retrospectively, it is easy to discover God's special choice in empowering him as a prophet of his time. God chose an irreplaceable individual, Kuriakose Elias, to speak to the world the very Good News of Jesus who is the saviour of the world. In Kuriakose, God continued His task of accomplishing His promises and blessings of salvation at a time when the society and, most especially, the Christian communities were in great need of it. Thus, the birth of Kuriakose on 10 February 1805 was a moment of special grace to the society and the Church in India. Because Kuriakose was chosen to be a prophet of his time, he brought forth the saga of God's compassion and redemption in real actions and became an instrument to inspire thousands of his followers to realise the same mission in their lives. He chose Jesus as his sole model and Master and surrendered all that he was and all that he had to imitate him in his life as authentic as he could. Hence, we can proudly say that his charism was fundamentally the charism of Jesus Christ and Kuriakose actualized every aspect of the pastoral approaches of Jesus in his life.

As we read in the Gospel of St. Matthew, "Jesus went around visiting all the towns and villages; he taught in the synagogues, preached the Good News about the Kingdom of God, and healed people with every kind of disease and sickness" (9:35). St. Chavara went around Kerala and served the Church as the Vicar General. He renewed the lives of priests and brought in a new vigour in the liturgical life of the faithful by introducing devotions and true spirituality of Christian life. He introduced the idea of a school attached to every church; he began the first Home of Charity (*Upavisala*); he initiated the preaching during the Sunday celebration of the Holy Mass and encouraged conducting annual retreats for clergy and laity for the reform of their spiritual lives. St. Kuriakose had an authentic commitment and true zeal for the Church and the people. All these made him a unique saint of the Universal Church and he did prove that he was an authentic imitator of his Master Jesus in word and action in every pitiful situation of the Church and society. His holiness was his sensitivity to God and man. The 66 years of St. Chavara's holy life was filled with the compassionate sensitivity of Jesus. As Jesus saw the crowds, his heart was filled with pity for them. So too, Kuriakose had the heart of Jesus, filled with the compassion towards all his brothers and sisters in society, regardless of caste and creed. St. Kuriakose continues to convey the invitation of his Master to his disciples in CMI and CMC Congregations which he founded as the first Catholic monastic pattern of religious life in India through which

he realized the call of Jesus, "the harvest is large, but there are few workers" (Mt 9:37). In response, both these Congregations are missionary in their vision and approach and a big portion of the members of these Congregations are working as missionaries in the remote areas and they are engaged in the educational, social and healing apostolates in all the continents of the world. They are more than 9000 disciples of St. Chavara, the dedicated men and women for the service of the Gospel of Jesus, in the apostolates inspired by the Carmelite spirit of contemplation and action.

Our world in the modern times is fast changing and it demands a challenging pastoral engagement. Through the mass media communication apostolates the followers of Chavara are in the forefront to serve global communities. Publications, performing art centres and other media ministries are joyfully serving thousands of people with the zeal of St. Chavara. Educational institutes run by these Congregations around the world are the symbols of Chavara's commitment to the youth and to the future generations. The hospitals and clinics they run give the message of Christ's healing touch throughout India and their members are also engaged in healing ministry around the world. The social service centres and related ministries show the same spirit of Chavara's generous love for the poor. The formation houses and ecclesiastical institutes do the same dedication of Chavara who wished to form a highly motivated and qualified group of priests and leaders of the Church. As St. Kuriakose envisioned the holistic growth of the Church and the service of the faithful, the disciples of Chavara look after every need of the Church as well as the society.

Since he was a gifted writer and thinker he prepared the first instruction manual, "A Testament of a Good Father," for Christian families. It was first of its kind in the Church. St. Chavara's creativity was so outstanding that many inspiring compositions came out from him which had the magical touch to transform the conscience of all and inspire them for a true conversion. St. Chavara is well known for his authorship of the first Malayalam narrative poem, *Anasthasyayude Rakthasakshyam*, an amazing inspirational story of a Martyr named Anastasia. His other poetic and mystical literary works include *Atmanuthapam* (Compunction of Soul), *Dirge* (Songs on Death), *Dhyanasallapangal* (Colloquies in Meditation), *The Chronicles*, and *The Letters*. He was a well-known administrator and was famous as the first Vicar General after the time of Archdeacons in the Syro-Malabar Church. By his spiritual wisdom and strong faith he could protect the

Church from the schismatic outbreaks. As a visionary and supporter of evangelization he founded the first Catholic press and publishing house of the Syro-Malabar Church. Reflecting on the several ministries and contributions of St. Chavara we can earnestly say that he was an exceptionally talented and spiritually enlightened saint whose creative actions touched every important dimension of spiritual and social progress of the Church and society. As we compare him with thousands of other saints in the Catholic Church, we can confidently state that St. Chavara is an outstanding saint with a holistic vision of Jesus' all-embracing pastoral mission. He can be called as a Patron of Religious, Patron of Parish Priests, Patron of Formators, Patron of Seminaries, Patron of Educationists, Patron of Poets and Literary Writers and the Patron of Creativity in Liturgy and Ministry.

St. Chavara died on 3 January 1871. But he is very much alive and active in his disciples doing great things in all the fields of service. May his unique history inspire us to be more authentic and realistic in our love for God and humanity! May his great legacy continue to shape our future and bring prosperity and peace in all that we do and dream! His simplicity, humility, generosity, kindness, love, faithfulness, charity and creativity will surely influence the generations to come and will bring many more saints in our world. I believe that our culture is shaped by visionaries and spiritual teachers like St. Chavara and we will welcome such prophets to announce to us an authentic transformation in our thoughts and actions. Let us all join to light the lamp of St. Chavara in every heart and in every family that we become the children of light.