

KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA: A BES ROWMA

Santhi Rose CMC

Abstract: Bes Rowma is the sum total of the spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara. The house at an elevated ground that Chavara along with his companions located for the foundation of the first house of their religious community tells us of his elevated spiritual vision. This article explores how the spirituality of Chavara overflows into various expressions of his social and ecclesial concerns.

Keywords: Bes rowma, penance, virtue, vision, austerity, filiation, mysticism, Eucharist, charity, media, family, Carmelite

1. Introduction

Living in a house on a hillock, raising his mind and heart to the most high and contemplating on the Divine, Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara reached the heights of holiness. The expression '*bes rowma*' embodies his life and vision. His pilgrimage towards the mountain of the Lord made him reach the *bes rowma*.

In the New Testament, the 'city on the hill' and the 'lamp on the stand' are metaphors that Jesus employed when he taught about discipleship. Similarly, there are numerous examples of God appearing before men who seek and encounter Him on the mountain in solitude. There is a profound connection between the *bes rowma* that Fr Chavara sought to establish and the city on the hill that Jesus talks about. Both these characteristically remind us of bearing witness to Jesus. The discipleship that radiates its splendorous beauty should neither be hidden nor be shadowed by anything. The instruction of Jesus is to 'Let your light shine before others' (Mt 5:16). The *bes rowma* established on the top of the hillock in Mannanam became a beacon for the surroundings because of the sacredness radiated in the life of Fr Chavara. Because of this divine presence radiated through him, Fr Chavara could himself be considered a *bes rowma*.

Bes rowma constitutes a vision that is to be realized; at the same time, it is also a mission to be accomplished. Just as Christ who

preached the Good News was himself the Good News and spread God's Kingdom and in Him was realized the Kingdom of God, so, Fr Chavara who conceived and built the *bes rowma* became the *bes rowma*.

2. A Sign of the Times

There are many people in the modern world who seek a *bes rowma* where they could live and experience the divine presence and bear witness to the same. It is a compelling demand of our times that those who opt for a life in the *bes rowma* lead a life that is transparent, and rise up and shine above the watered down spirituality of our times, to heal the poison-spitting religious fanaticism, to stride over the modern consumerist culture and to inculcate values that offer an antidote to the ailing modern world. It is in responding to similar demands of his own time that we see the integrity, strength, and uniqueness of Fr Chavara. It is now, in this era of genetic manipulations, breakdown of families and communities, ethnic conflict, violence and corruption that the vision of Fr Chavara becomes all the more relevant. This great man who illumined the nineteenth century Kerala inspires today's men and women to dispel the darkness that looms large in our twenty-first century, because in his holy life and purity of deeds, he surpassed his era.

3. A Spiritual *Bes Rowma*

In the Church, there is no scarcity for pious movements, spiritual conventions, and retreat centres. However, some of our prayer meetings and retreats have become a celebration of noise pollution. Fr Chavara would hold that prayer is an opportunity for the soul to meet with the Lord in solitude, a time for an intimate dialogue between God and human soul, a time for a God-man encounter in a transparent realm. In Fr Chavara, we see a mystic who was in constant communion with the divine, enjoying the fullness of divine love. He was not only a saint who lived a life of prayer, but a sage who turned his life into prayer. His daily meditation was a time of endearing communion with the Lord. His very presence before the Blessed Sacrament for long hours spoke volumes and gave credibility and authority to whatever he spoke. Well aware of the transiency of life, he was constantly on a heaven-bound pilgrimage.

4. Penance, Virtue, Vision

Penance, virtue and vision are three constituent aspects of the spirituality of Fr Chavara. The *bes rowma* on the hillock of Mannanam was also called *tapasubhavanam* (house of austerity) and *darsanaveedu* (house of vision) whereas, he called the first house founded for the religious women *punyasanketam* (house of virtue). These three names that Fr Chavara gave to the first religious houses denote the progressive stages of growth in spirituality, which was the essential reason for which they were founded.

4.1. The Stage of Austerity

In the first stage, that is, the stage of austerity, the soul undergoes a process of purification. The soul cleanses itself of its inclination to sin, evil habits, imperfection, and all its inordinate appetites. The means adopted in this stage include penance, mortification, and abstinence. This is a life-long process which can be achieved through conscious control of the senses, sacrifice, and concentration in prayer. Fr Chavara longed to live the life of a solitary monk and in the *bes rowma* he lived a penitential monastic life. He was actually following the lifestyle of the prophet Elijah and his companions on the Mount Carmel in Palestine. According to Chavara, asceticism was a means to get closer to the God. Through penance and sacrifice he tried to attain a complete annihilation of self-centeredness and freedom to serve only the Divine Master. This was his lifestyle – a life of detachment, freeing the soul from everything that could come between itself and God, a lifestyle contrary to the modern way of total self-centredness.

4.2. The Practice of Virtues

Once the soul purifies itself through a life of penance, the practice of virtue becomes possible. Monasteries and convents are places where the atmosphere is conducive to flourish in virtues, both individually and communally. The whole land should be permeated with the fragrance of virtues emanating from such holy places. Fr Chavara founded two religious congregations in Kerala to level the lack of adequate role models in the practice of virtues in the Church. It is when these havens of virtues (*punyasanketam*) lose their radiance as a result of workaholicism and other modern maladies that the ideals of Fr Chavara should remind us that it is time to relive the founder's vision, namely, it is not the quantity of religious activities that we should increase but the conviction, depth, and overall spiritual quality.

4.3. The Divine Vision

Indian spirituality proposes to attain heavenly bliss through a life of penance, abstinence, and detachment. Having been purified, a soul attains the vision of God as per the promise of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-12). In a pure heart, holy life become natural and any place turns into a house of God as God is experienced everywhere and in everyone (*darsanaveedu*). In the journey towards the heavenly bliss, one attains real world-vision and human vision. This vision leads to an all-embracing way of life which rises above caste, creed, and social status. Thus, the world will be able to see God in the face and the actions of the religious; only then the world will see the divine mercy in their deeds.

5. Divine Filiation

The New Testament reveals in Jesus the spirituality of divine filiation. Meditating upon the Father, fulfilling the will of the Father, and being in the father, Jesus was aware of his being the Heavenly Father's son in a profound way. It is by participating in this awareness of Jesus that Fr Chavara had his *appa* awareness. With the trust of a child and the ensuing total dependence, Fr Chavara was always in God's presence in and through his personal relationship with Jesus Christ. For him, happiness, fortune, food, drink and everything was Jesus. Since he had lost his own father, mother, and brother at a tender age, he was able to completely surrender himself to Jesus, who he addressed '*appan*'. Personalizing the relationship of Jesus to his own mother, Fr Chavara considered the Blessed Mother to be his own beloved mother. Thus, he was able to look heavenward always and in his spiritual experience he could surrender and let himself go completely into the providential hands of Jesus.

Being able to experience and enjoy God as the loving father is a heroic experience of spirituality. Coupled with this experience, Fr Chavara cherished openness to the neighbours and to the entire creation. An unfathomable sense of gratitude, a deep feeling of unworthiness, a complete surrender to the divine providence, and a life always looking forward to eternity are the characteristic features that we see realized in the person of Fr Chavara.

6. The Longing for the Divine Vision

A thirst for God is inherent in the basic nature of every human being. His *Dhyanasallapangal* reveals the fact that Fr Chavara was a mystic

whose thirst for God resulted in real God-experience. His yearning to behold the face of God, as exhibited in his repeated prayer "*kanakenam*," reminds one of the prayer of the psalmist: "my soul thirsts for God... When shall I come and behold the face of God?" (Ps 42). This is the kind of hunger and thirst that Fr Chavara had for a communion with Christ, which in turn is a unique feature of the spirituality of Fr Chavara.

7. A Bes Rowma of Mysticism

Mysticism is an experience in which the human heart attains union with God. This interior presence of God in the human heart is experienced in deep solitude and silence. This state of spirituality is attained by means of constant contemplation of Father and doing only the will of the Father. Mysticism is the fruit of perfect obedience and surrender to the will of God. The intimacy and union with the Almighty is a gift, a gift of deep faith and complete trust. God abides in a heart that yearns for the union in an eternal love-relationship with the Emmanuel. Fr Chavara enjoyed prayer as a natural and spontaneous overflow of love that resulted in a conversation with God as a close, intimate friend. Just as Moses was in ecstatic conversation with God while at the same time actively involved in leading Israel from slavery to the Promised Land, so did Fr Chavara whose experience in contemplative prayer led him in a profound way to involve in a very active life aimed at the renewal of the Church and the society.

8. A Life Centred on the Eucharist

The two faces of the self-emptying act of Jesus are the suffering leading to the crucifixion and the mystery of the Holy Eucharist. The passion of Jesus and the crucifix have got a prominent place in the meditations of Fr Chavara. He meditated on the crucified Christ for long hours before the Holy Eucharist with tears rolling down his cheeks. Jesus' self-renunciation is also the prerogative of his disciple. Fr Chavara sees his own soul as the bride receiving Jesus crucified as the spouse in the chamber of Calvary. In his own days of agony and suffering, Fr Chavara leaned on the crucified Jesus. It is his contemplation on the crucified Jesus that enabled him to find meaning in times of trials and tribulations. He was able to withstand the troubles and was constant in following Jesus in his self-abandonment. The awareness of the transient nature of the world and earthly matters gave way to asceticism which led through the narrow path that

ascended to the crucified Christ. Just as Jesus had himself become bread to satiate the hunger of the humankind, Fr Chavara, imitating Jesus, became the source of love and compassion for those whom he met. He imbibed strength from the daily Eucharist to burn and to empty himself for his people.

Now-a-days, adoration of the Holy Eucharist and Eucharistic conventions have become very common. In introducing Eucharistic piety in our land, Fr Chavara wished that the spirit of the Eucharist might become the guiding principle in our lives and, in turn, our lives become springs of comfort to the neighbours. This is the transformative effect of the Eucharist that Fr Chavara experienced in his life

9. A Bes Rowma of Charity

We know a tree from its fruits. The path of a disciple is the same path of the master, who went about doing good and spreading the Good News of the kingdom, healing the sick and comforting the ailing. In this conduct, the master invited the disciples to come down from the heights of spirituality to the valley of tears where the needy exist and struggle for their survival.

Jesus came to “preach the Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and to announce the year when the Lord will save his people” (Luke 4:18-19). This is the function also of every disciple of Jesus Christ. Prayer, proclamation, testimony of life, witnessing Jesus, and a life of sacrifice and renunciation are the means of spreading the Good News from the *bes rowma*. The most diverse tasks, the day-to-day trials and the monotony of repeated works should not affect the disciple’s interior union with the master, but deepen and strengthen it through every act. Fr Chavara was aware and confident that he was doing the work of the Lord for the glory of the Father and the salvation of souls.

As it is in the case of every mystic who was also active in the world, Fr Chavara also eventually realized that with the help of his mystical experience, he was called to work for the salvation of his people. This awareness made him a herald of contemplation and Christian charity. The spirit of his love for his fellow beings was expressed in the efforts for the emancipation of the whole human person – body, mind, and soul.

Fr Chavara’s contemplative life in the *bes rowma* was active so as to give a helping hand to uplift the lives of his fellow beings, enabling

them to have an all-round liberation; such a liberation process, which he primarily identified as the "redemption of souls," gave him the look of a social reformer. He was also the forerunner of a number of accomplishments in the land of Kerala. Starting with the renewal of priestly life, he engaged himself in several humanitarian activities for his people. His love for his people made him work relentlessly for the renovation of the people of Kerala. He was an ambassador of God's immeasurable love and mercy for all, regardless of their caste, creed, and status.

Fr Chavara lit the light of learning to dispel both the spiritual and intellectual darkness from the land. His view was that there would be no sanctity without learning. He became the champion of the education movement in Kerala that spread like a wildfire. Those who are engaged in the apostolate of education today are invited to be motivated by this vision of Fr Chavara.

By introducing *sannyasa* and asceticism to Kerala, Fr Chavara became the father of a new spiritual vision in the Indian Church which is still alive in a developed manner. Introducing the piety of the Stations of the Cross, forty-hour adoration, parish retreats, and many other pious practices, he lit a lamp to dispel the gloom that the Kerala Church had faced. In order to keep the flame of this lamp alive and glowing, he founded two religious communities in whose way of life asceticism and contemplation blend with activities for the people.

Praiseworthy are the efforts that he made along with his companion Fr Leopold Beccaro, to found a religious community for women. His exalted vision for women in the society was translated in and through the liberative activities of the religious community for women that he founded. The faith formation that he imparted and devotional practices that he introduced to this religious community became the source of their spiritual life and commitment. He made spiritual life more vibrant and vital by means of printing press, books, schools, and many other apostolic activities that benefitted the people a lot.

10. The Impact of the Media

By means of the foundation of the rudimentary press at Mannanam, Fr Chavara brought immense progress to the land in the spiritual, moral, and intellectual spheres. His efforts and activities in the field of media and communication brought about a socio-cultural explosion. He had amassed the sublimating power of knowledge with the help of all the available good books. It is this power that he wanted to disseminate and impart to the future generation. However, the world of media and

communication is being manipulated by market interests, and their glaring negative effects are clearly visible in the present society. Along with glorifying Fr Chavara from whose pen flowed rivers of literature as history, poetry, and meditation, we are invited to look for the beauty of his vision in the verses and prose he has left to posterity. Similarly, we need to make the young people aware of both the positive and negative influence of media in their daily life and train them in a healthy use of media and to constantly involve in a critical and creative evaluation of the same in enhancing the life of the society.

11. Vision of Family

According to Fr Chavara, a Christian family is a miniature representation of heaven. However, the experience is that conflicts among members of family break up family relationship, the neglect and disrespect suffered by elderly tear our families apart. Although we boast of living in a civilized society with its scientific achievements, we fail to live in peace within the family. Fr Chavara recognized the role that family played in the ebb and flow of a society and held that for a healthier society in the future, family needs to have a sense of direction. It is to this effect that he wrote a statute for family life. This integral teaching on family in the statutes was so universal and unprecedented that it was benefitted by all the sections of the society. He explained the moral, spiritual, and human values as simple as it could be followed by ordinary people and guide families accordingly. As the basic unit of Christian living and the fundamental school of faith formation, family's role is of paramount importance in securing for everyone an authentic Christian life.

The eighth Extraordinary Synod of Bishops convoked by Pope Francis has reflected on the significance of family life. The Fourteenth Ordinary Synod of Bishops, to be convened in 2015, will also be concentrating on the importance of family and the challenges it faces in the modern society. It is in this context that the universal Church admires the farsightedness of Fr Chavara and his prioritized efforts to renew families.

12. A Perfect Carmelite

Carmelite vocation is to a life of prayer. The rule of Carmel stipulates: "Each one shall remain in his cell to meditating day and night on the law of the Lord." Every Carmelite must aim at continuous prayer and intimacy with God. The life of prayer and union with God constitute the Carmelite ideal. The peculiarity of the life of prayer is that in it

prayer itself becomes life. As a result, even those who are considered least in the community can be permeated with a spirit of contemplation. A Carmelite enjoys great liberty of spirit concerning interior life. The indwelling presence of God coupled with a bit of human effort, strengthens the person even amidst bitter experiences of daily life. The life of Fr Chavara is a shining example of a Carmelite in contemplation and a mystic in action.

The apostolic actions that he undertook resulted from his mystical experiences. Apostolate in Carmel is direct action which uses various means to manifest Christ and His message to the world. The action and involvement in the world, in turn, constitute a path of holiness and union with God. For Fr Chavara, the world was not an obstacle for union with God but a sphere where God is encountered, because love of neighbour is essential to the Carmelite apostolic spirituality in which holiness of religious life go hand-in-hand with apostolate. Goodness seeks to give itself and to communicate the richness it enjoys and, thus, good deeds of a Carmelite are nothing but an overflow of the inner self.

In the Carmelite apostolic spirituality, action relies upon contemplation for its fruitfulness and contemplation, in turn, as soon as it has reached a certain degree of intensity, overflows into active works. In this outlook, work and prayer are complementary. Fr Chavara considered the Carmelite apostolate as working with the saviour in transmitting divine values to others, considering himself as mere a channel. He carried the world in his heart and stood before God. Hence, we call him a contemplative-active and an active-contemplative.

A life of contemplation in action is the lesson that the new generation of religious and consecrated people learn from Fr Chavara. He was a man who attained deep mystical experiences; at the same time, he was fully engaged in helping the people, easing their pain, and teaching and leading them to true Christian life, pouring out to them the compassionate love of Jesus. His unshakable love for God spurred him on to tirelessly work for the spiritual, intellectual, and social uplift of the people of God.

13. Conclusion

Fr Chavara is a man who created history. Great and varied are his contributions not only to the Church in Kerala but also to the Indian society and the world at large. Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil, the former Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church gratefully

acknowledged him: "It is mostly thanks to Chavara's tireless and committed efforts that the Syro-Malabar Church was and what she is today."¹ Fr Chavara was man with practical wisdom and common sense, a man of great moral strength and fortitude, extraordinary courage, a high sense of justice, foresight and watchfulness. He was a visionary with a third eye, a reformed with a sixth sense, and a superior with a mother's heart. He can be called a man for others, always giving priority to the needs of the time and Church. He invested all the gifts and charism that he received from the Holy Spirit for the growth of the Church. He is the first fruit of the Indian Church. God alone was the fascination in his life. He can be undoubtedly called the *bes rowma*, a witness par excellence.

¹Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil, "Mahatthaya Jeevitam," in *Chavarayachan* (Mal) Souvenir on the occasion of the Chavara Birth Centenary Celebrations, Kottayam: Deepika Publications, 2004, p. 2.