

SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Founder of the Women TOCD in Kerala

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Abstract: One of the most significant contributions of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara to the women of his times and of all times is the foundation of TOCD for women. Taking into account the personal reflections and contributions of Chavara in realizing a long cherished dream of founding a convent for women and the circumstances that led to the actual fulfilment of this project, this article unveils the purposeful investment of time, energy, and other resources made by Chavara and his spiritual and formative accompaniment of the sisters at the initial stages of the foundation.

Keywords: Carmelites, women, CMC foundation, testament, convent, Chavara, Beccaro

1. Introduction

Saint Teresa's Convent, Koonammavu, founded as the Third Order of the Carmelites Discalced (TOCD) on 13 February 1866 is the first indigenous Congregation of consecrated women in the Church of Kerala, India. From this evolved later the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC) in the Syrian Rite and the Congregation of Teresian Carmelites (CTC) in the Latin Rite.

2. Women TOCD as God's Response to the Cries of Women

Chavara opens the *Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent* (CKC) with the pathetic situation of the women of the nineteenth century Kerala Church. He states that their condition was deplorable for a long period because, in addition to various sociological reasons, they had no opportunity to serve God with single-minded devotion:

In the land of Malayalam [Kerala] even though the true Christian religion was in practice from very early times, there existed no monasteries or convents. The people had heard of men and women who practised religious virtues but they did not have living

examples of religious virginity... As for women even those who desired to live a virginal life, had no way of embracing such a lifestyle. They had no option. They had to accept marriage and live as worldly women and they were living in this sad plight for a very long time.¹

Chavara repeatedly states that the women were sad and helpless. They were in a state of hopelessness, too. Their hopes were enkindled in 1860 when they saw the building of the first convent at Puthenpally, which was beyond their wildest dreams. In order to give a sense of seclusion, a huge compound wall was raised up around the convent. According to a letter written by Msgr. Bernardin Baccinelli to Italy, thirty-three women were eagerly waiting to bury themselves in the solitude of the convent.² However, unexpectedly their dreams were shattered when the ecclesiastical authorities decided to convert the convent building into a seminary. Chavara notices the disappointment of the women and records: "With this we lost all the hopes we had and again got plunged into the former sad plight of helplessness."³ However, God heard the cries of these women and inspired Chavara to establish a religious congregation for women in the Church of Kerala. It was fulfilled in Koonammavu on 13 February 1866.

3. Foundation of a Convent

In order to understand that the foundation of the Women TOCD at Koonammavu was God's response to the cries of women we must know the situation of women of the time. Women's space was mainly in the household and their movement was rather restricted. They were cut off from the intellectual life of the community and were without access to the decision-making process that shaped the society. Socially, educationally and religiously women's status was low. Women had no economic independence among the Syrians. The husband was in charge of the finance. In matters of the inheritance of the ancestral property, they followed the male line. The wife was to be supported by the husband but she had no right whatsoever to the family properties. Women were not expected to take up any job besides their

¹*Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent*, 1, 1. Hereafter abbreviated as CKC.

²AGOCD, *Plut.* 35 e, Circular Letter of Baccinelli written to Molto Reverende Madri Priore a Religiose Carmelitane Scalze, Figlie della Nostra Signora Madre Teresa di Gesù, on 29 June 1860, addressing "Molto Reverende Madri."

³CKC, 1, 2.

household work. Within the family itself, discriminatory treatment was meted out to the male and female children in the general socialization process. The opportunities for girls to be educated on a par with boys remained a distant dream.

The position of women in the Church was not much better. Bernard of St. Thomas, a well-known Church historian, clearly states that women were least welcome for the retreats conducted in their own parishes.⁴ *The Chronicle of Mannanam Monastery*⁵ provides some details of the catechumenate, which was officially inaugurated on 9 October 1864 at Mannanam. However, note that there were no girls present:

On Sundays and feast days many boys came to study catechism and remained here until five o'clock in the evening. Some of them came from distant places. Some of them were poor. In order to promote more efficiently this wholesome and fruitful work, they thought that it was necessary to feed the boys at noon with *kanji* [rice gruel]. They were also given clothes and pious articles, like rosaries, scapulars, etc.⁶

These words make it clear that in events like retreats conducted in the parishes, they did not target girls. Moreover, girls could not attend catechism classes as well. In short, women found themselves confined to home, responsible for maintaining a human, loving environment for the husband and children.

It is this miserable situation of women that prompted Chavara to found a religious institute for women in the Kerala Church. Three of his early biographers – Leopold Beccaro, Kuriakose Eliseus Porukara and Philip Koyippally – recorded the purpose of founding the convent in almost same words. Leopold Beccaro, an Italian Carmelite missionary, who was Chavara's confessor, spiritual director, superior and collaborator to found the convent, testifies to Chavara's earnest desire to found the convent in the following words:

Among these, specially, he [Chavara] earnestly desired to found a convent for Sisters as a spiritual resort [*punyasanketham*] for the girls of Malayalam and for learning doctrines and traditions of the Catholic religion and Sacred Scripture, as well as to have them grow as good Christians. When God Almighty willed to accomplish

⁴Bernard of St. Thomas, *Malayalathile Karmelita Moonnam Sabhayude Charithram* [The Third Order of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate] (Mannanam: St. Joseph Monastery, 1908), 41.

⁵Henceforth referred to as CMM.

⁶*Chronicle of Mannanam Monastery* (1864-1872), vol. 3, 30.

that, the efforts taken by him are beyond the description of this narration.⁷

In addition to this valuable attestation of Beccaro, Chavara himself speaks of his ardent prayers and earnest desire for the same in several of his writings. Among these, there are two specific texts in the *CMM*, the first of which speaks of Chavara's yearning and prayer for the foundation of a convent for women and, the second, expresses his joy coupled with a sense of fulfilment when the convent was established. Both texts amply testify to the intensity of Chavara's desire to have religious institutes for women in Kerala.

3.1. Longing for a Religious Institute for Women

Chavara wrote of his longings for a convent for the women in Kerala while the construction of the bamboo-mat convent was in progress at Koonammavu: "For years⁸ I have been praying for the establishment of a convent, but for so long it was not possible. Behold! Now it seems that 'God has willed' to bring about the establishment of a convent."⁹ These words also refer to his earlier unsuccessful attempts.

When some immediate and concrete steps were taken in founding the convent, such as obtaining the permission of the Bishop, discerning the vocation of the candidates, and locating the site of the convent, he noted down in the *CMM* that God had willed to establish a convent for nuns. *CMM* introduces the story of the foundation of the convent in the above given words of Chavara. Subsequently, in the ten pages that follow, Chavara gives the detailed description of how the event took place, connecting it with the attempt at Puthenpally.¹⁰ He did not only desire but also persistently pleaded before God and attempted at different places and on various occasions for the cause.

3.2. Sense of Fulfilment

The second text found in his writings comes to us in the form of a prayer: "God, Almighty! I believe that it is to make me more indebted to You that You gave me a longer life so that I can see this event, too;

⁷Beccaro, *A Short Biography of Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, ed. Lucas Vithuvathal (Mannanam: St. Joseph's Monastery, 2003), 12.

⁸The expression 'long years' is noted in both *CMM* and *CKC (Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent)* while explaining the origin of the institute.

⁹*CMM*, 126.

¹⁰*CMM*, 126-136.

let Your name be glorified forever and ever. Amen."¹¹ Chavara recorded this prayer at the end of his description of the concluding ceremony of the blessing of the new building for the convent on 27 March 1867. Chavara firmly believed that God had increased his span of life in order to see the blessed event of the foundation of the convent. It means that the blessing of the convent was a great dream in his life. He took a matching keen interest to give religious formation to the first community of sisters in the newly founded convent. Beccaro notes in his biography of Chavara: "Even after the foundation of the convent, he took great interest in leading the Sisters in the path of a virtuous life. However, it is true to say that not all these works are done by mere words but by his unusually gracious behaviour and virtuous life."¹²

The ardent prayers and earnest desire of Chavara that are seen expressed in the *CMM* are true marks of founders of religious institutes around the world. On two occasions, Beccaro affirms plainly that Chavara is the founder of the convent at Koonammavu. On 3 January 1871, the day Chavara passed away, Beccaro wrote in his personal diary: "He [Chavara] was the founder and the first Prior of the Third Order of Carmelites of Malabar. He founded also the convent of the nuns after undergoing many hardships."¹³ The second comes from his biography of Chavara that we have cited above. These words of Beccaro provide sure evidence that in his estimation Chavara was the 'initiator' of the convent at Koonammavu. The goal to be achieved by the convent was clear in his mind and, accordingly, he took practical steps in collaboration with Beccaro to realize them. He played a vital role in deciding its nature, purpose and the formation of its first members.

4. Women TOCD in the 'Testament' of Chavara

It is highly significant to note that Chavara had a deep-seated awareness of 'owning' the Sisters' institute which was only a fledgling at the time. In his 'Testament', he entrusts it to the care of his religious community at Mannanam in a manner a father would instruct his sons to take care of his daughters. Chavara believed that

¹¹*CMM*, 139.

¹²Beccaro, *A Short Biography of Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 12.

¹³ASA, Beccaro, *Memoria Rerum*: "Fondatore e primo Priore di Terz. Carmelitani Scalzi nel Malabar ha fondato con somme fatiche il monastero delle monache" (entry made on 3 January 1871).

his responsibilities toward the Women TOCD would not end with his death. Intending to continue the historical mediation created by the founder in establishing the institute, he clearly designed its growth and development, and he articulated it in his Testament, or his final will.¹⁴

In view of the needs of the Church and the future expansion of the convent, Chavara thoughtfully pointed out in his Testament the specific places where the convents were to be established: "It is necessary and very useful to have convents, one at Mutholy and another at Mannanam with boarding houses attached."¹⁵ The details regarding the future course of action in the Testament and Chavara's care in entrusting the convent to the men TOCD reveal that he is the real founder of both institutes. He encouraged his sons to put more effort and diligence into accomplishing these things. He conceived the monastery, convent, and boarding house together as one unit with one single goal to achieve. In his Testament, the phrase "monasteries, convents and boarding houses" has been repeated twice and "monasteries and convents" twice, in addition to the mention of "boarding houses for girls" three times.¹⁶ It is worth noting one of his statements:

It is necessary that more monasteries and convents be opened in the south, that is, one monastery each to east and west of Mannanam and some convents with boarding houses... This will help very much to render necessary and useful spiritual ministry to the faithful of the two vicariates of Varapuzha and Kollam.¹⁷

The presentation of the "monasteries and convents with boarding houses for girls" as a single unit with a purpose of catering to the

¹⁴CK, VI, 5.

¹⁵CK, VI, 5, paragraph 3. A monastery was already there at Mannanam and the construction of the monastery at Mutholy was in progress when he wrote this passage. Fr. Kuriakose Porukkara, the successor of Chavara, took great interest and opened a convent at Mutholy, whereas, at Mannanam a convent was established much later.

¹⁶CK, VI, 5.

¹⁷CK, VI, 5. In spite of this clear evidence that the convent was entrusted to the sons of Chavara, Kinattungal states: "The 'sons of Chavara' had no involvement in the convent until the division of the Vicariate..." Kinattungal, *Servant of God Mother Eliswa*, 219. She again states: "Archbishop Mellano, Fr. Leopold OCD, Bro. Leopold TOCD, the people and clergy of Varapuzha testified that no Syrian priests were allowed to interfere in the affairs of St. Teresa's Convent until 1889." Kinattungal, *Servant of God Mother Eliswa*, 211.

needs of the two existing vicariates of Kollam and Varapuzha, which were under the Italian Carmelite missionaries, points to a noble vision of Chavara. One could say that Chavara dreamt of a Church where religious men and women work hand in hand without any distinction between Latin and Syrian Rites. He looked toward a future when women religious would engage in the mission of the Church with their feminine grace and courage. Chavara seems to support a spirituality of complementarity, which is based on the fact that both institutes of men and women TOCD are complimentary agents working together for the progress and development of the people of God.

In the Testament or the will, usually, one hands over one's treasured property to others. If Chavara had thought of the convent as founded by Beccaro or by someone else, it would not be relevant for him to provide plans in his Testament for its expansion nor would he have entrusted the institute of women to his sons in religion. He was convinced that he was the founder and Father of both the institutes and was led by a sense of commitment for the growth and welfare of these religious communities. Moreover, the decisive characteristics of the founders of religious institutes, such as, receiving the divine inspiration,¹⁸ awareness of being called to found a new religious institute in the Church,¹⁹ conceiving the institute with a purpose²⁰ and forming the members in their religious way of life²¹ are clearly perceived in the life and contributions of Chavara.

5. Conclusion

Those who lived with Chavara such as Beccaro and Kuriakose Porukara, along with the Sisters who were the beneficiaries of the first convent, testify to the fact that Chavara is the founder of the Women TOCD. The official declaration of Pope John Paul II on the occasion of Chavara's beatification confirmed Chavara as the founder

¹⁸*Perfectae Caritatis*, 1; Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio, Adhortatio Apostolica de Religiosa Vita Secundum Concilii Oecumenici Vatican II Renovenda Praeceptiones*, AAS 63, 1971: 497-526, Art. 11.

¹⁹Antonio Romano, *The Charism of the Founders: The Person and Charism of Founders in Contemporary Reflection*, United Kingdom: St. Pauls, 1994, 42.

²⁰*Evangelica Testificatio*, 11; *Mutuae Relationes*, 63. Cf. also Gian Carlo Rocca, "Il charisma del fondatore," *Cleretianum* 34, 1994, 73-106, at 79.

²¹SCRSI., *Mutuae Relationes, Notae Directive pro Mutuis Relationes inter Episcopos et Religiosis in Ecclesia*, AAS 70, 1978: 473-506. Art. 11.

of the institute: "Finally, with the cooperation of Leopold Beccaro, a Carmelite missionary and most pious man [Chavara Kuriakose Elias] founded the Congregation of women religious, to educate girls, in the year 1866."