

SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

A Man of God's Thoughts

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Abstract: This study presents snap shots of the life of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara with a special focus on his ability for crisis management backed by his faith vision. Ability to assess events, persons, and objects in the light of faith generates judiciousness, which eventually contributed to the preservation of a tradition that Syro Malabar Church continues to safeguard in communion with Rome.

Keywords: Justice, vocation, seminary, ordination, family, Rite, Malpanate, parish, consecrated life, community, Diamper, padroado, religious profession

1. Introduction

St Kuriakose Elias Chavara¹ can rightly be called a man of God's thoughts. Looking at everything through God's eyes he easily saw His

¹The abbreviations used in the article are: (i) Am = *Aatmaanutaapam* in CWC II and CSK II. (ii) ASJM = Archives of St Joseph's Monastery, Mannanam. (iii) CSK I/II/III/IV = *Chavara-accante Sampuurna-krtikal* in 3 vols, Ernakulam: 1981 (vols I-III), 1982 (vol IV). (iv) CWC I/II/III/IV = *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara* in 3 vols, Ernakulam: 1990 (vols I, III and IV), 1982 vol II). (v) *Positio* = *Positio super Introductione Causae et Virtutibus...* Vatican: 1977. (vi) SP = *Sthaapaka Pitaakkanmaar* (Founding Fathers), Mannanam: 1905. The other source works are: 1. Beccaro, Leopold OCD, *A Short Biography of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, ed. Lucas Vithuvattical CMI, Mannanam: 2003. 2. Bernard of St Thomas CMI, *A Short History of T.O.C.D. in Kerala* (Malayalam), Mannanam: 1989. 3. Koyipallil, Philip CMI, "A Short Biography of Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara..." (Malayalam Manuscript kept in ASJM) : 1920. 4. Kaniyanthara, Jacob CMI, "History of the Foundation of Mannanam Monastery" (Malayalam Manuscript kept in ASJM). 5. Mundadan, A. Mathias CMI, *Blessed Kuriakose Chavara*, Bangalore: 2008. 6. Parappuram, Varkey CMI, "Chronicle" (Malayalam Manuscript kept in ASJM): 1902-05. 7. Valerian (Plathottam) CMI, *A Heroic Son of Mother Malankara Church...*, (Malayalam),

provident hands at work in all that happened to and around him and, therefore, every experience, pleasant as well as unpleasant, was equally acceptable for him. St Peter with the best of intentions tried to dissuade Jesus from carrying the cross. Scolding him sternly Jesus instructed that he should look at the cross “with thoughts from God, not from himself” (Mt 16:23). Those days the cross was the greatest punishment that a criminal could be given. To impose it on Jesus who was the most innocent of all, was humanly speaking the grossest injustice. However, from God’s side it was a necessary part of the work of the redemption of humankind and, therefore, not something to be rejected but welcomed. In a similar way, Chavara looked at everything from God’s side and gracefully accepted it. That indeed is the key to explain his spirituality. He understood everything that happened in his life as God’s will and nothing else. This realization, on the one hand, kept him humble and realistic and, on the other, made him grateful to and confident in God. In his good old age, looking back upon his life, he thought to himself:

Are all those things that God made me do, within my power?

How have you arrived so far?

Who made you leave your family?

How come you were ordained a priest?

How did you join the monastery?

Where did the religious congregation come from?

Who appointed you as prior?

How have you reached here?

Are you worthy of anything of these?

Not, certainly not! So what?

God’s will is done. It will always be done!²

Indeed, in everything that happened to him, Chavara saw God’s will being done, and he was sure that it was so. In our search for the Chavara spirituality, we should not be looking for unusually mystical experiences such as those in the lives of St Teresa of Avila or St Alphonsa; nor should we expect highly theological thoughts as in the writings of St Thomas Aquinas or St John of the Cross. Even his initiatives, great as they were in his socio-cultural milieu, are not in themselves the yardstick of his spirituality. Generally speaking, he was not an intellectual or highly talented in many things. His asset was the

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²*Colloquies* in CWC III: 1; CSK III: 1.

simple faith which endowed him with a spiritual perception of people, things and events. That indeed made him different in his responses and dealings with the people and their affairs.

We shall presently glance through the life of Saint Chavara in order to see some of the things that God made him do, and how he experienced God's provident hands in all the occurrences in life. We are concerned more about how as a man of faith with God's thoughts he faced the challenges of life with equanimity and Christian optimism. We do not propose to make an entirely original contribution but to reproduce almost verbatim a selection of instances presented in the author's previous works,³ which clearly show that Chavara was a man of faith with God's thoughts. The article also hopes to establish that Chavara's life and mission were not all that pleasant and easygoing but full of trials and tribulations as well as agonizing experiences requiring the courage of faith and trust in God's providence.

2. Brought up by God

We may start with Chavara's childhood recollections. He is full of gratitude to God for the birth as a healthy boy in a noble, middle class family:

Oh! Lord of all good things, out of your compassion, you did not create me among the ignorant and non-believers, or those afflicted by various handicaps or those suffering from different diseases and poverty. This makes me obliged to serve you. You have granted me yet another favour by not including me among the kings and princes of this world, nor did you count me among the rich. How unfortunate it would have been if I were born among them! You graciously made me neither too rich nor too poor! That is the reason why I am so happy today!⁴

Chavara then praises God also for his spiritual birth by baptism:

Oh! Merciful God, bathing me in the baptismal water, you cleansed me of the original sin, freed me of all fear, and adorned me with the beauty of grace and virtues. Great, indeed, is this blessing of yours! What can I render you, oh! Lord, for this gift of mercy? At the very start of my life you rid my soul of all stains, and blessed me.

³See my "Blessed Chavara: A Man in God's Hands and Moved by God" in *Journal of St Thomas Christians*, 24 (2013) 2, 47-81; *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Mumbai: St Pauls, 2014).

⁴Am 2:68-96; CWC II:1982, 8; CSK II: 8.

Through baptism you made me your child, and extended to me the bliss of salvation in heaven.⁵

Chavara is equally aware of God's providence in imparting to him an ideal Christian upbringing through his parents, especially his mother.⁶ Obviously, young Chavara was uniquely fortunate to have a good Catholic family with pious parents who were deeply rooted in faith, gospel values and devotions. The role they played in his character formation was certainly decisive. Gratefully recalling the gentle but firm manner in which his mother trained and taught him in all the basics of Christian faith, he exults in joyful praise of God.⁷ Here we have a perfect model of child-mother relationship, in which the mother, on the one hand, readily appreciates whenever the child behaves well and, on the other, firmly disapproves its misbehaviour, in both cases, her motive being pure love and concern for the child's wellbeing.

In studying Chavara's spirituality, what is important for us to note is that he traces and attributes all the beautiful things he had in childhood to God. He is not speaking the usual language such as: "I was born in a noble family. I had very ideal parents," and so on. Instead, in all humility, he says: "God in his mercy gave me birth in a noble family, provided me with good parents," and so on. This is the language of faith, indeed.

3. Called by God

Chavara has similar reflections about his vocation to priesthood as well. In the human way of speaking, Malpan Thomas Palackal happened to meet him and suggested to his parents to send young Kuriakose for priestly studies. Overcoming the natural reluctance to part with the child at such a tender age, they eventually agreed and sent him to the Malpan's seminary in Pallipuram. But in Chavara's recollections it was all God's works:

As I thus reached the age of ten, you out of great kindness called me!

Within me I am deeply convinced of it.

Otherwise I would not come to this [state of life]!

Moreover, those days there was no priest in my family
[Who would inspire me to follow this life].

⁵Am 1: 33-42; CWC II: 1982, 2; CSK II: 2.

⁶Am 1: 45-60; CWC II: 1982, 2f.; CSK II; 2f.

⁷Am I: 61-86; CWC II: 1982, 3; CSK II: 3.

Then there came someone⁸ to lead me in this great path!
 Nothing indeed happens by chance, [but by God's providence].
 When that [news of my vocation] reached my mother's ears, she
 was immensely delighted.
 She said to herself convincingly: how noble it is to offer one of the
 two sons to God!
 There was, however, the pain of parting, of course!
 It was God who in his overflowing mercy willed
 That in order to be with him from that day onwards I should stay
 away from her.

We may note that Chavara understands his priestly vocation as a gratuitous gift from God. He was convinced that God out of great kindness called him. He discerned his vocation even as a ten year old boy. There wasn't any human agent prompting him to choose priesthood. It was, indeed, God's inspiration from within himself. But of course, his people prepared and supported him in following the inner call. His parents, especially mother, felt the natural pain in sacrificing their child. But their Christian faith prevailed. At that critical hour of surrender to God's will the relatives and the ministers of the Church came to their assistance. In their cooperation and the coincidence of events Chavara sees God's providence at work.

4. Love Is Not Revengeful

In 1818, Kuriakose was formally initiated into the seminary with the reception of tonsure (and presumably the first four minor orders, too, as was the practice then among the Syrian Catholics) from Bishop Peter Alcantra, the then vicar apostolic of Varapuzha.⁹ On that solemn occasion, Kuriakose adopted the motto: "The Lord is my portion" (Ps 16:5; 119:57). Following the reception of tonsure there was the customary practice of the seminarian visiting the home parish - in Kuriakose's case the parish of Chennankari. However, instead of being warmly welcomed, he was refused entry into the parish church. Although the relatives were very angry about this ignominy, Brother Kuriakose pacified them and took them to the Holy Cross Church at Alapuzha where the ceremony was conducted.¹⁰ Later on instead of expressing any displeasure, he on his own initiative visited the parish

⁸Here the reference is to *Malpan* Palackal is clear from what Fr Chavara says in *The Chronicles* (CWC I: 54f.; CSK I: 60).

⁹Beccaro, 2003: 5f.

¹⁰*Positio*: 57; *Puraatana Paattukal*: 3f; *Koyipallil*: 6f.

priest of Chennankari, stayed, made friends and had meals with him. Still later, he donated to the same parish a beautiful statue of St Joseph, which he had got as a present from Europe. Still again every year he would go there for the titular feast and preach the sermon. Never in his life did he mention the rejection he had received there. Still more, considering the parishioners always to be his own people, he addressed his parting message called *Nalla Appante Caavarul* (Testament of a Loving Father) to the members of Kainakari parish, which was originally part of Chennankari.

5. Vocation Crisis

During his seminary life an epidemic broke out in which his parents and the only brother died, leaving the latter's wife with a girl child. So the uncles, concerned about the family's lineage, took Kuriakose back from the seminary and strongly advised him to give up priestly studies in order to get married. But he held on to the motto: "The Lord is my portion." He discussed the matter with his sister who was living with her husband in Edathva and, eventually, entrusted to them the care of the family and the brother's daughter. He had also promised in writing to entrust them the family property, which, however, as the uncles objected, he later withdrew. He, then, returned to the seminary and resumed his studies. Fr Thomas Porukara has summarized this incident as follows:

While Kuriakose was in the seminary, his parents and brother died. Only the latter's wife and girl child were left. He bore the pain of separation in a spirit of submission to God's will, and, in accordance with the training he had received from the parents, re-dedicating himself as a servant of the Mother of God, lived with deeper faith in God.¹¹

Here we have a very persuasive model for the young seminarians and religious of all times. The important point is that once the call is discerned and responded to, they should remain committed to it, come what may. They should not be under any illusion that the path before them is without obstacles and hardships. Discouraging experiences should be expected. Even those in responsible positions may turn out to be unhelpful. But nothing on the way, negative or positive, should distract or dismay them. A strong will and deep faith and unwavering trust in the Lord are required of them to resist the temptations and overcome the obstacles. Single-minded love for the Lord, cooperation

¹¹SP: 25.

with the superiors, community spirit, hard work, and disciplined life are basic rules of clerical and religious life. Being called to the radical discipleship of the Lord, one should "let the dead bury their own dead" (Lk 9:60) and "having put a hand to the plough one should not look back" (Lk 9:62).

6. Graceful in Disgrace

Kuriakose was one of the three students whom Fr Palackal took to Varapuzha and accommodated with his friend Fr Nicolas. They were to join the Latin language course in the seminary there. But being denied permission to sit in the same class with the Latin Rite students, they were brought back to Pallipuram. Kuriakose later recalls that the whole incident was sickening for all concerned as it caused disgrace, waste of time and money, and made the three students forget even the little Syriac they had learned.¹² Anyway, Kuriakose never entertained any ill-feeling about anybody involved in the episode. He was ever so graceful even in disgrace.

According to the usual practice, the ordination of Deacon Chavara was first scheduled to take place sometime around the feast of the Holy Cross on 14 September 1829 and, in fact, Chavara and other deacons of the vicariate with their *malpans* arrived in Varapuzha for the ceremony. By then, however, Bishop Maurilius Stabilini, displeased with quarrels between the *anjoottikkar* ("Seven-hundreds") and *ezhunoottikkar* ("Five-hundreds,") had cancelled all his programmes and decided to return to Rome. Hence, the ordination did not take place then.¹³ It was conducted later on 29 November 1829 in Arthunkal parish to which place the bishop had in the meantime shifted his residence.

One can easily imagine a deacon's distress to learn about the indefinite postponement of his ordination for which he had come from a far off place with all the preparations! But there is no indication that Chavara complained. On the contrary, he and his companions wholeheartedly cooperated with their *malpans* and the entire community to pacify the prelate and resolve the crisis in an edifying manner.

¹²An epidemic that caused several deaths there those days was an additional reason for the return of the students from Varapuzha.

¹³CWC I: 3f.; CSK I: 4f.

7. Learning Obedience through Suffering

The people generally were very enthusiastic and supportive of the new religious house and the community taking shape in Mannanam. But there were exceptions which came mostly from a certain group of people, who believed that Fathers Palackal and Porukara, together with Fr Paschal, were the ones who persuaded the bishop to ordain candidates from the *anjoottikkar* ignoring the strong objection from the *ezhunoottikkar*. They were, therefore, naturally opposed to those Fathers and the religious house they had started at Mannanam, and refused to cooperate with them.¹⁴ They complained about the monastery to Archbishop Francis Xavier, who in 1832 succeeded Bishop Stabilini as the Vicar Apostolic. They even reported that “a very capable Reverend Father [Porukara] was going about receiving donations and giving the money to his family.” Initially, the archbishop, having personally known Fr Palackal, seemed to ignore these complaints. However, he moved tactfully. He first enquired from Fathers Palackal and Porukara regarding who had given them permission to establish the monastery, and whether it was given in writing. They produced the letters of Bishop Stabilini. Although he went through them, he did not respond.¹⁵

They thought that the issue was closed. But the opponents had succeeded in influencing the archbishop against the monastery, and his response, which was clearly against it, came soon not merely in words but in deeds. First of all, he issued an order appointing Fr Chavara as the parish priest of the parish of Pallipuram. In the absence of Fr Chavara there would be no priest to say Mass and look after the construction works of the monastery. So, naturally, all were much aggrieved, and they instructed Fr Chavara to go and explain the matter to the archbishop, while remaining fully resigned to his answer, positive or negative. Fr Chavara did so. But the archbishop would not change his decision. Chavara writes in this regard:

I went and met the archbishop and humbly informed His Grace that as the *malpān* was ill and Fr Porukara was to go about and collect funds, there was none but me to be left in charge of the works at Mannanam, and that if I am transferred the work would suffer. His Grace answered that the order should be obeyed. When I went on to plead for the redressing of my grievance His Grace turned at me and in a stern tone of authority rebuked me, saying

¹⁴CWC I: 22-23; CSK I: 27.

¹⁵CWC I: 23-24; CSK I: 28.

that I could do whatever I liked if I had not yet learned to obey the orders of my prelate. With fear and trembling I withdrew and at once obeyed the order.¹⁶

Fr Chavara, thus, changed his residence from Mannanam to Pallipuram, taking charge as the parish priest. He was indeed "learning obedience through suffering," fully knowing that obedience was better than sacrifice. Providentially, there was the malpan's nephew Fr Varkey, who had been recently ordained. Entrusting him with the duties in Pallipuram, Chavara would frequent Mannanam and supervise the construction works.

There was, however, still worse to come. Soon afterwards the archbishop issued another order appointing Fr Porukara as parish priest of some churches in the diocese of Kollam. That was a greater grief than the previous one, because thereby Fr Porukara was prevented not only from being present at Mannanam but also from going about to collect funds. There was a shortage of both personnel and funds to carry on the construction works. Fr Porukara discussed the matter with the *malpan*. The former's own opinion was "that the superior's order was the will of God, and that it might have been given to test his spirit of obedience and so must be obeyed." The *malpan* agreed with him. However, it was obviously a painful experience. Fr Porukara was literally in tears.¹⁷ It was certainly a very hard test of obedience in the manner Abraham was tested when God said to him: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (Gen 22:2).

There was still more of the test to come, though. After the two Fathers were transferred, the construction works at Mannanam somehow continued with the involvement of Brother Jacob Kaniyanthara. Fr Palackal also would support them in the pastoral works in Pallipuram. Once, Fr Chavara deputed Fr Varkey to look after the parish matters at Pallipuram and went to stay at Mannanam for some time. On those days, the parish observed the usual three-day fast and abstinence. As part of this observance, there was in the church the ritual distribution of rice-pudding. During the distribution, Fr Varkey happened to beat one of the parishioners called Itty Kurisinkal with a cane. Itty was a rowdy belonging to an ancient family. His relatives felt insulted. They presented a petition to the archbishop,

¹⁶CWC I: 24; CSK I: 28-29.

¹⁷CWC I: 24-25; CSK I: 29.

complaining that Fr Chavara, their parish priest, entrusting the parish duties to an inexperienced young priest, was staying away at Mannanam for the construction works of monastery. They also added that "they were much hurt as one of them, a man of gentlemanly character, had been publically beaten" by the young priest.¹⁸

On receiving the complaint, the archbishop wrote below the petition an order that Fr Chavara should redress the family's grievance and that he should not stay away from the church at Pallipuram for more than eight days without his written permission. As Fr Chavara himself admits, this order grieved him more than ever before. Very soon he reached Pallipuram. By then Fr "Palackal had settled everything with the aggrieved people who now regretted having taken the matter up to the archbishop." But a more serious issue was the latter's order that Fr Chavara should not absent himself from Pallipuram for more than eight days. This order of the Archbishop entailed that his support for the works in Mannanam had to be stopped altogether. Looking for a way out, he suggested that he might request the archbishop to appoint Fr Varkey as the parish priest in his place. With the *malpan's* approval he went to Varapuzha to meet the Archbishop.

Fr Chavara entered the archbishop's room and showed his obeisance by kissing his hands. He saw the archbishop's face suddenly changing, which, however, he did not take seriously. His Grace asked why he had come. In a very matter of fact manner Fr Chavara replied that if he moved away from Mannanam, it would adversely affect the construction of the monastrey. He then requested to be replaced by someone else as parish priest of Pallipuram. His Grace gave no answer.¹⁹

Fr Chavara, however, in his childlike innocence, went on explaining that Fr Varkey being an able priest could very well do the parish priest's works for which he could also get guidance from the *malpan* who, on account of illness, would be always there at Pallipuram. Fr Chavara pleaded that His Grace be kind enough to appoint Fr Varkey as vicar. But the archbishop ordered him to quit. Fr Chavara felt very sad. The archbishop then said in a commanding voice to send Fr Varkey to him. It seemed he was positively considering Fr Chavara's suggestions. But the child in the latter once again took the freedom of explaining the matter further on that Fr Varkey knew how to

¹⁸CWC I: 25; CSK I: 29-30.

¹⁹CWC: I: 26; CSK I: 31.

administer the sacraments and manage all other things. Provoked by the unnecessary details the archbishop became furious. The latter, being frightened, humbly admitted that he spoke imprudently. His Grace reprimanded him: "Is it the way to answer a prelate? How can so young a priest behave like this? You deserve to be suspended at once! Go away!" He knelt down, kissed the archbishop's hand, and came away. In fact, the secretary Fr Michael, who from experience was able to discern the changes in the archbishop's mood, had in the meantime several times gestured to Fr Chavara to keep quiet. But the latter failed to take notice of those gestures. He says: "But my indiscretion and zeal for having the monastery built led me to give answers grave enough for suspension!"²⁰ Later on, Fr Chavara, on the one hand, admits that they were words of fatherly love and, on the other, that hearing them he was terrified.

Returning to Pallipuram he sent Fr Varkey at once to Varapuzha. His Grace was good enough to appoint him as parish priest, permitting Fr Chavara to be engaged fulltime in the affairs of Mannanam monastery. For the latter, however, it was more than a change of place; it occasioned a deepening of his commitment to consecrated life. Indeed, for all practical purposes it was the time when he made his final commitment. He says: "From that time I began to consider myself as an ascetic and was determined to keep away completely from my blood relations and to give myself up to the monastic pattern of life with all my income going to the common funds and all my needs met from the same."²¹

8. Daring Initiative

One of the remarkable initiatives of Fr Chavara was the setting up of a printing press in Mannanam. For him it was an enduring solution for the scarcity of good books among his people which had badly handicapped them in the spiritual as well as secular matters. The patience and the spirit of perseverance with which he worked hard for this noble cause offer us lasting inspiration. Fr Chavara's efforts for establishing a press started in 1843 with the help of Ittikuruville Thoppil, an employee at a press.²² With the intention of learning to set up a printing machine, he went twice to see the CMS Press in Kottayam, but was denied permission. He did not give up the project,

²⁰CWC I: 26-27; CSK I: 31-32.

²¹CWC I: 27; CSK I: 32.

²²CWC I: 38; CSK I: 43.

though. Fr Chavara mentions of a journey in 1945 that he made to Kollam to learn how a press was fabricated, although he did not succeed in this venture. He went there probably in the hope of seeing a press, but there, too, the proprietors did not permit him to have access to the press.²³ He then went to Thankassery and tried to get a press and ink from Pondicherry or Chennai through the recommendation of the delegate, a Carmelite missionary deputed by the Vicar Apostolic of Varapuzha to look after the faithful in that area. But he could neither afford to buy a press as it was too expensive (it would cost rupees 500) nor could procure the ink as it was not available in the market. In spite of all these, he did not lose heart. Instead, with determination, he “went about asking people who were in the field, and with the information received, started the work of constructing a press.”²⁴

Finally, Fr Chavara obtained the necessary information and translated it into action by manufacturing his own version of a printing press with the help of Fr Paulose Parampil of Muttuchira. He was a seminary mate of Fr Chavara under *Malpan* Fr Palackal. He was brought to Mannanam where he and Fr Chavara, after long discussions, with the grace of God, found out all the means to establish a press. They went to Thiruvananthapuram. With the help of some Catholic workers in the government press they were able to see and learn everything about the working of the press as much as they wanted. Fr Parampil possessed a good taste for and expertise in handicrafts and skilled works. Returning to Mannanam he made the model of a press in plantain stem. After this model, they got a press constructed in wood by a skilful carpenter. With a base crafted in granite the wooden press was complete and ready for printing.²⁵

However, many more things such as the letters, ink and paper were to be provided. Permissions from the ecclesiastical and civil authorities also were to be obtained. Fr Chavara along with his colleagues had to undergo a lot of physical and mental stress in this regard. Unshakeable trust in God and determination were his only armour. Finally, sometime in 1846 the press started functioning. At this stage, once again, they could experience the providential hand of God in the operation of the press. After having met all the expenses and the debts paid, they had run out of financial resources. There was no penny left

²³CWC I: 45; CSK I: 51.

²⁴CWC I: 38; CSK I: 44.

²⁵Bernard 1989: 26-27; Parapuram: 1411.

even for the urgent needs, including paying the workmen. Fr Chavara narrates the miraculous intervention as follows:

We started praying earnestly to the guardian angels and St Joseph. Then something like a sign of God's special favour happened. One day in great distress I was praying in the church. Suddenly a man by name Itty Nellipuzha from the parish of Cherpunkal arrived, and said that he had brought with him 500 *cakrams*. He added that if someone went with him, he would send 500 *cakrams* more. Hearing it I heaved a sigh of relief. Earlier also he had given us 1000 *cakrams*. His intention was that with the interest of the amount we must give alms to the poor. Making up my mind that either alms would be given here on his behalf or that a fund would be set apart for this purpose, I received the money and met the urgent needs.²⁶

9. Calm in Storm

In the meantime, Fr Chavara was laid up with smallpox, which was generally a fatal disease those days. Sometime in 1845, he was returning with brass sheets bought in Alapuzha for the press. It was a Friday when he reached Mannanam. He was not feeling quite well. Next day before taking bath he was trimming the hair to clear the tonsure, when he noticed a small boil on the stomach. He suspected something seriously wrong. He completed his shaving and had a quick bath. Sunday morning his doubts were pretty well confirmed. He had contracted smallpox! By afternoon he called Fr Porayattetta, who on arrival confirmed the disease. Fr Chavara would not panic, though. Perfectly composed and gracefully resigned to God's will, he made his confession. Immediately, he sent for his own parishioner and student Fr Kochumathai Padavupurackal and a certain Thomas. They arrived by Tuesday late evening and nursed him. By God's grace it took only 14 days for him to recover without much trouble. He thought perhaps it was not smallpox, but something milder than that. Whatever it was, the calm with which he accepted it is amazing and indicative of solid spirituality.

10. Left Alone with a Heavy Burden

The first two pioneers of the monastery died (Fr Palackal in 1841 and Fr Porukara in 1846). The youngest of them, Fr Chavara, was left alone. Although grief-stricken, he did not falter. Fr Kuriakose Porukara aptly compares the situation to that of Aaron and Moses,

²⁶CWC I: 39; CSK I: 45.

who without the joy of entering the Promised Land, died leaving to their disciple Joshua the responsibility of leading the people of God further to the destination.²⁷ The same author writes:

In the meantime our superior and first founder ... *Malpan* Thomas Palackal and the second superior and founder *Malpan* [Thomas] Porukara left for God's presence (on 16 January 1841 and 8 January 1846, respectively) without seeing the culmination of the works they had started. Both of them died having entrusted everything to Fr Prior [Chavara]. He was grief-stricken at the death of those venerable Fathers and at the heavy burden of the works, which he inherited from them. But in utter humility, trusting firmly in God and the intercession of Blessed Mother and St Joseph, with his naturally virtuous character, he began to follow the footsteps of his predecessors, carrying their burden.²⁸

He, then, continued and consolidated the work that was already begun, and proceeded to get canonical approval for the community in Mannanam. The physical aspects of the project were more or less realized. Necessary infrastructures and facilities were ready. There were enough members including priests, seminarians, aspirants, and candidates for brotherhood. The well-organized community also was patterned on the monastic tradition, blending the contemplative and active forms of consecrated life.

The official approval of the new religious community, which would permit the members to make profession of their religious vows according to the canon law, was indefinitely delayed about which the Fathers were concerned. They made repeated requests for it. Understandably, the same was the parting wish of Fr Porukara, who towards the end of his life had earnestly requested Aarchbishop Ludovic to formally approve the new community.²⁹ Then, in his turn, Fr Chavara, as his predecessors had desired and prayed for, requested the prelates (one after another) to ratify the congregation, granting it a constitution in accordance with the regulations of the Church.³⁰ In this regard, Fr Leopold writes:

Fr Chavara's prudence and exemplary life made up for his being so young in age. There were many other priests and seminarians living with him an orderly life. He, however, knew that, no matter

²⁷SP: 26-27.

²⁸SP: 26.

²⁹SP: 22.

³⁰Valerian 1939: 99.

how devout and orderly the life is, it would be wholly pleasing to God only when it is legally approved and confirmed by the duly appointed authorities of the Church. Therefore, on several occasions and in several ways he requested the bishops for it.³¹

As it was prayed for, finally, when Archbishop Ludovic Martini, the Vicar Apostolic, visited Mannanam on 1 October 1850 "promised to ratify the monastery [by giving it the ecclesiastical approval] on presentation of a request signed by all the members."³² Fr Chavara promptly wrote a petition in which all the members, except two, signed and it was submitted to the Vicar Apostolic.³³ In spite of the promise given by the Archbishop, there was no immediate response. Finally, it was in 1855 that, to the great relief and joy of all, the congregation was canonically approved by the Archbishop Bernardine Baccinelli, who was appointed co-adjutor in Varapuzha in 1853 and Vicar Apostolic in 1855. Fr Bernard writes:

He [Archbishop Bernardine] during the three years of his rule from the beginning of 1852 [or 53?] came to know very well the genuineness of the religious life of the Fathers in Mannanam. He also tested and proved it. He was convinced of the many benefits the people and the priests derived from it. Pleased with it he, therefore, decided to recognize it as a canonically approved religious congregation with a rule of life duly confirmed by the ecclesiastical authority. For it he directed our Fr Kuriakose Chavara to let him know in writing of the rule of life followed in Mannanam. Accordingly, Fr Chavara wrote down and presented to the archbishop the daily schedule in Mannanam.³⁴

Not long after Fr Chavara had submitted the daily schedule of his community, Archbishop Bernardine started taking concrete steps to canonically approve the community. The first step was to provide it with a set of rules. It was the constitution of the First Order of Carmelites, otherwise known as the Order of the Carmelites Discalced (OCD), which the prelate chose for the purpose. But to make it suit the local conditions and the people's needs certain changes were made by introducing some new clauses and deleting a few others. Alterations were made also in accordance with the Syrian practices and the spirit and charism of the new congregation. However, as there is no extant

³¹Beccaro 2003: 8f.

³²CWC I: 50; CSK I: 56.

³³CWC I: 50; CSK I: 56.

³⁴Bernard 1989: 38-39.

copy of this rule book,³⁵ we are not in a position to address with certainty the issues of changes made. Nor are we sure as to who made the changes. *The Chronicles* being silent about such details abruptly states that on 1 December 1855 His Grace Archbishop Bernardine was pleased to promulgate for the community at Mannanam the Carmelite rules as translated from Latin to Malayalam.³⁶

The events that followed suggest that in the process of changing and adapting the Carmelite rules to the needs and objectives of the new congregation either the community or even Fr Chavara had no significant role. It seems to have been mostly the work of the archbishop with little consideration for the community's feelings and proposals. Probably the changes were not very substantial, either.

As ordered by His Grace, Fr Chavara did read out the rules to the entire community of priests, seminarians and aspirants, not once but several times, attests Fr Bernard. But many of them felt the provisions about fast, silence and enclosures to be too strict and hard. For example, on all days of Advent and Lent fast was stipulated! The prevalent practice among the Catholics of Malabar was to fast only on 9 days during the year: the 7 Fridays of Lent, Holy Saturday and Christmas Eve. The Holy See had presumably exempted them from fast on all other days. Fr Chavara brought it to the archbishop's notice. In response His Grace asked him to produce the relevant document, and directed that, until it is produced, they should, in accordance with the decision of the Synod of Diamper (1559), fast on all days of Advent and Lent.³⁷

In was the influential prelates of Kodungalloor who had obtained the exemption, and the document concerning it was kept in Puthanchira, which was those days the residence of the *padroado governador*. Fr Chavara, therefore, writing to the parish priest of Puthanchira, got the document and presented it to the archbishop. Going through it he again enquired whether it was meant for the West Indian Catholics of Latin Rite or the East Indians of Syrian Rite. The question could not be answered immediately. So, the request to mitigate the rule of fasting was not granted. However, in 1856, the archbishop wrote to Rome for clarification. The reply was that, although the exemption had been granted to the Latin Catholics, since

³⁵All the copies of it were committed to fire. See Mundadan 2008: 318-19, and 319 fn 34.

³⁶CWC I: 66; CSK I: 76.

³⁷Bernard 1989: 40-41; Valerian 1939: 103.

the Syrians also were enjoying it in good faith and in consideration of the extremely hot climate of the place, the then Pontiff Pius IX was pleased to extend it to them, too.³⁸

11. The Last Minute Test

The archbishop went ahead with the process of the congregation's canonical recognition without waiting for clarification of doubts regarding the issue of fast. He fixed 8 December 1855 for the members of the community to profess the vows of evangelical counsels, and made arrangements for the same. As per the arrangements made by the archbishop, Fr Marceline OCD preached a retreat in preparation for the profession. The preacher began the retreat quoting the archbishop's order that "only those of good will and determination need to be admitted to the congregation."³⁹ Along with it the monastic rules of silence and enclosures also were enforced. They, specially the enclosures, looked strange not only to those in the monastery but also the outsiders! There were 22 participants in the retreat: 13 priests, 8 seminarians, and 1 aspirant. But by the end of the retreat 11 of them (2 priests, 8 seminarians and 1 aspirant), feeling that the proposed rules and regulations were too hard, decided against joining the congregation. It was a great blow to the paternal heart of Fr Chavara. "Great indeed was his grief at the loss of a half of the members whom he was painstakingly nurturing for almost 20 years. So, many of the ripened fruits of his hard labour were suddenly found to be worthless!"⁴⁰ He shared his painful feelings with the archbishop. But his cool, if not cold, response was: "Do not worry about the dropouts. Only those of good will and determination need to be admitted to the congregation. I, too, shall pray to God to take care of the remaining little flock!" Fr Chavara accepted those words of the prelate in the light of faith, although they were not quite consoling for the human hearts!⁴¹

12. The Supreme Act of Surrender

Finally, the long awaited day dawned: 8 December 1855. All remaining in solemn silence, Fr Marceline opened the service with ritual questions and answers. He then gave a moving sermon explaining the

³⁸Valerian 1939: 103-104.

³⁹Bernard: 1989: 40.

⁴⁰Valerian 1939: 104.

⁴¹Bernard 1989: 41-42; Valerian 1939: 104.

meaning of consecrated life and vows, and the basic virtues required of a religious person, especially humility. Fr Chavara, standing on his knees, listened to the sermon with rapt attention. All admired his humble and devout pose. His face was amazingly radiant!

When it came to the central act of the function, Fr Chavara, holding with both hands the document of profession, knelt right in front of Fr Marceline sitting in the chair. The latter placed both hands on the paper, keeping a crucifix tucked between the right hand fingers and the paper. After reverently kissing the crucifix and his hand, Fr Chavara read out in clear voice the formula of the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. With that supreme act of self-surrender to the Holy Trinity in the newly formed community of brethren, duly approved by the Mother Church, he realized the greatest of his dreams in life! Then, being installed as the Prior of the new congregation, he received the profession of the other ten priests.

13. Arduous Journey

We may say that the congregation had a gestation period of nearly twenty-five long years and a painful childbirth. Conceived in 1831 she was born in 1855. The Mannanam community was long formed and met all the requirements for canonical approval. They also enjoyed the support and appreciation of the hierarchy and the laity alike. But the official seal of approval kept indefinitely eluding. It was like Abraham waiting in unwavering hope for Isaac's birth that God had promised twenty-five years before. We must admire and take lessons from the Founding Fathers' patience and spirit of perseverance rooted in the Christian virtue of hope in God's providence. They were tested and proved like the legendary Job. The first two of the Founders, Fathers Palackal and Porukara, died without seeing the realization of their hearts' desire, though they died in the hope that God's promise would be fulfilled at His time and in His style. Their disappearance, painful as it was, did not dispirit Fr Chavara. Rising to the occasion he led the community to the great event of the final commitment.

Nearer the finale it was a hard time of stress and strain for Fr Chavara. "On several occasions and in several ways he requested the bishops for... [the canonical approval]."⁴² Even after submitting the petition for official approval in 1850 and the rule of life was presented in 1855, the archbishop rather high-handedly imposed on the community the Carmelite rule with practically little changes. Thus, the

⁴²Beccaro 2003: 8f.

way of life and spirituality they had by then spontaneously developed to their own and the larger society's satisfaction were ignored. Once again, Fr Chavara presented to the archbishop their observations and request for adaptation of rules to their reasonable needs and honoured traditions. But the prelate refused to budge in and insisted to oblige. Most painful indeed was the loss of half of the members caused by the Pharisaic severity of the rules, who were otherwise set to make the profession of vows with the others. In all these it was certainly Fr Chavara who suffered more than anyone else, especially in seeing his own brethren leaving the communion, which he had carefully nurtured.

Being placed between the community and the archbishop Fr Chavara had the delicate task of a mediator. He had to respect the feelings of both the parties without at the same time compromising the principles. He patiently bore his personal humiliation as well as the rejection of community's proposals by the archbishop, and himself being questioned by the latter. The sight of eleven members opting out of professing the vows was painful and heart-rending for Fr Chavara. He was probably embarrassed seeing the congregation putting on a habit, both physically and morally, that was not originally designed for her. But the man of faith in Fr Chavara was quick to see God's hands in all these, as he has clearly stated in his *Testament*: "Dear Children, by the special grace of God, we have been called to be in the Carmelite Order... This has been so, because God willed it so and not because man planned it thus..."

(to be concluded)