

SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

The Beginner of Consecrated Life¹

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Abstract: Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara played a pivotal role in establishing the first indigenous religious congregation of India. The seed of the inspiration for the venture comes from the lament of the saint about the Apostolic Church that is bereft of consecrated life! The formation of a band of likeminded people and the steps taken to obtain ecclesiastical and civil permissions, necessary funds, locating a suitable site for the dream house are articulated in detail. Having established a community, the long wait for the approval and its final arrival at a great expense, is heart-wrenching for the founder, though the project reaches its climax on a joyful note with the birth of the new religious order.

Keywords: Church, monastery, vocation, religious harmony, consecrated life, community, religious profession, beth-rauma, charism, humility, pastoral care, seminary, spiritual resort,

¹This article for the most part is excerpts from the author's book *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mumbai: 2014. The abbreviations used in the article are: (i) ASJM = Archives of St Joseph's Monastery, Mannanam. (iii) CSK I/II/III/IV = *Chavara-accante Sampuurna-kr̥tikal* 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*, Lucas Vithuvattical CMI (ed), 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. Valerian (Plathottam) CMI, *A Heroic Son of Mother Malankara Church* (Malayalam), Mannanam: 1939.

ecclesiastical approval, prudence, Canonical status, Discalced Carmelites, evangelical counsels, Teresian Carmelites

1. Introduction

One thing for which the Church in Kerala is indebted to St Chavara is the role he played in establishing communities of consecrated persons in this State. Although the Christian community in Kerala is almost as old as Christianity itself, there was no canonically approved consecrated life among the Christians there. Of course, many of the European religious orders had already come and set up their communities there and were engaged in mission work. But they would not admit any of the locals who they seem to have thought were not strong in matters of faith.

2. An Apostolic Church Bereft of Consecrated Life!

Regarding the state of the Church in Kerala that traces its roots back to St Thomas the Apostle, Chavara observes:

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 practiced religious virtues but they did not have living examples of religious virginity, except that men who had the privilege of priesthood lived a life of chastity. As for women, even those who desired to live a virginal life had no way of embracing such a life style. They had no option. They had to accept marriage and live in the world. The people were living in this sad plight for a very long time.²

Then "he [Fr Palackal] and his most trusted friend Rev. Fr Thomas [Porukara] realized that in the absence of a house of austerity [*tapasu-bhavanam*] in Malabar even for priests, much good was left undone." Therefore, "they yearned to establish a religious house [*darśana-vīṭu*]. They were sad at heart as there was no one to give them support, but they went on praying."³ It is significant that they called a monastery or convent by names such as *tapasu-bhavanam* and *darśana-vīṭu*, a house of austerity and vision.

Father Thomas Palackal then was the *malpan* (rector) of the seminary at Pallipuram, and Chavara was a seminarian under him. Fr Thomas Porukara was a zealous pastor in the vicariate of Varapuzha

²CWC I (1990): 193; CSK I (1981): 230.

³CWC I: 1; CSK I: 1.

who was recently appointed the secretary of the then vicar apostolic Bishop Maurilius Stabilini. Fr Pascal Baylon, a priest of the Latin Rite and a man of character, virtues, learning and prudence, was the bishop's trusted consulter, confessor as well as chancellor. "He too extended full support for the cause of a religious house" says Chavara.⁴

The trio - our *malpān*, the secretary and the chancellor - were now pondering over the establishment of a religious house trusting in our Lord's words: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them," and "Ask and you shall receive."⁵

3. Ecclesiastical Permission

In 1829, "one day both of the Fathers, Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, having discussed the question of opting for religious life, decided to approach the bishop for permission. They approached him and said: "Both of us would like to live somewhere in solitude [*vāccaṭattum otunki pārkkānamennu nirūpicittuṅṅu*]. We beg to be permitted to do so. We shall arrange for someone else to take the place [of secretary] here."⁶ "His Excellency, who was like a mirror of virtues, spending days in fasting and prayer, and keeping vigils, heeded to their request. Hearing it, he who was thirsting for holiness, was as delighted as does a parching land in rain."⁷

The bishop then said: "If you, the only one or two who are knowledgeable, go away to live in silence and solitude [*miṅṅaṭakkamāyi vāccaṭattum otunkipārttāl*], who else will be left to teach the people. If you like, you may establish a monastery so that all people can benefit from it. Their reply was: "Is that possible? Who will help us with money? If here we had a Christian king, he would help us!

The bishop said: "Don't worry! If you are determined and diligently set out, you will succeed. For you are so many Christians. Go to them, and ask for contributions. They will certainly give you enough funds."

The priests returned, and discussed the matter with some of their friends who, too, found the bishop's proposal agreeable. So once again they went to the bishop and expressed their willingness to

⁴CWC I: 2; CSK I: 3.

⁵CWC I:2; CSK I: 3.

⁶CWC I: 2; CSK I: 3.

⁷CWC I: 2; CSK I: 3.

proceed as he suggested. They requested him to give them a letter recommending the cause to the public. He was reluctant to do so. However, he greatly loved them and had much confidence in them so that he was unable to refuse any of their requests. So he directed them to draft a letter soliciting donations from the people. They wrote it well and showed him. Having signed it, he immediately gave them Rs 200 as his contribution.⁸

In Father Chavara's words, "He [the Bishop] was delighted to grant the permission, and issued an order appealing to all who seek to please God to support the cause by offering financial assistance."⁹ The contents of the letter, dated 1 November 1829, are as follows:

It is necessary that in this territory there are persons who are continuously engaged in prayer and good works for the greater glory of God and the edification of the Church. Even in places where the gospel was preached much later, there are monasteries for men and women. But you, who have received the gift of faith from ancient times, do not yet have any of them, although you have requested the Holy Church to establish them among you. In order to open a door for religious life, these two priests, Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, desire to establish a religious house [*darśana-vītu*] with a church and other necessary provisions for those men who are willing to follow this blessed way of life. But they do not have the required means for it. So the necessary funds are to be made available to them. Hence, I earnestly recommend that donations be made from the churches and the people. Those who give are indeed more blessed than those who receive. Those who would help in this project will undoubtedly share in all the benefits resulting from it. The religious will be free from all worldly affairs and they will devote themselves entirely to spiritual things. By the zealous work of these elect souls, all possible blessings will be secured for the Church and the entire world. Their example will instruct the ignorant.¹⁰

4. Funds and Site

The first thing then was to raise funds. Frs Palackal and Porukara started on journeys to the Syrian parishes and priests appealing for

⁸Kaniyanthara: 6-7.

⁹CWC I: 2; CSK I: 3.

¹⁰The original of this letter is kept in the Archives of St Joseph's Monastery, Mannanam (ASJM 4/B/2); a Latin version is given in *Positio*: 88f.

contributions, and the result was very positive and encouraging. Everywhere they received hearty welcome and generous contributions from the clergy and laity alike. In the first journey itself they received 1,000 measures (bushels) of rice worth Rs 200 from the parish of Kalloorcad, and 10,000 *chakrams* worth Rs 400 from the parish of Koilmukku, which were obviously huge amounts in those days.¹¹

The next concern was to find a suitable site for the monastery. Soon the search began in which almost the entire society irrespective of caste and creed joined the two priests with an extraordinary spirit of unity and cooperation. The people who were working together, making journeys up and down in various directions in search of a suitable site, tirelessly engaged in negotiations with the parties concerned, and contacting and corresponding with the government officials for legal matters, were Fathers Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara and a young man named Jacob Kaniyanthara from Kalloorcad. Sometimes Fr Paschal, the chancellor, accompanied them. Mr Ittiaip Kallungal joined them in the first journey, and a low caste boy called Ittan on several occasions.

Although each of the three [Fathers] were immersed in his own work - our *malpān* in his work of teaching, Fr Paschal in his job as the chancellor, and Fr Porukara in his office as the secretary, yet, all of them had at heart the project for which they had received money from His Excellency, Koilmukku Parish, etc.¹²

The bishop supported the founding Fathers completing all the ecclesiastical formalities within his capacity and with various letters of recommendation. Fr Ittoop Mundackal of Kothamangalam, though he was staying at a distance from them, shared their idea. He met Fr Palackal at Pallipuram and the bishop at Arthungal, and joined them on the second journey of exploration for the land. They received plenty of offers and invitation from all parts of the state. But they had in mind the following specifications for the site: large in area, reasonably elevated, open and fertile, having a good source of water, and accessible by land and river. *The Chronicles* mentions five journeys, sometimes by land and other times by boat as they explored the possible plots. They were indeed difficult journeys, especially for the elderly, sickly and inexperienced people like Fathers Palackal and Paschal. There were also instances of their passing through dangerous places like Kadanattippara, and facing dangerous wild animals. For

¹¹CWC I: 2-3; CSK I: 3-4.

¹²CWC I: 7; CSK I: 9.

longer journeys to places like Kollam, Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Alangad for official matters it was usually Fr Porukara or at times Kaniyanthara, who either volunteered or was chosen by the group.

There were nine or more sites which they considered one after another. All of them except two were almost outright rejected as they did not meet one or more of the specifications mentioned above. For example, in one case: "Looking over the place they found it good and spacious enough but inaccessible by boat and too high to get materials carried up." And in another case: "Here, too, they could not find a suitable place, for if water was not available in one place, location was not ideal in another."¹³

5. Chosen Mount

Finally they found a plot of land on the eastern side of the small church at Kudamaloor. It was during a journey from Pallipuram to Athirampuzha (via Mannanam) that Fathers Palackal, Porukara and Jacob Kaniyanthara saw it. It was a hill called Olankannamukal, now popularly known as Mannanam mount. To the north-west of it there was another hill called Kariyattam, which Br Jacob thought was suitable for the purpose of a monastery. For others, however, the Mannanam mount seemed better as on the one hand it was a more open place, and on the other the thriving bushes and trees proved the soil to be more fertile.¹⁴ Thus at long last, Mannanam mount becomes the chosen land, which they named *beth-rauma*, a Syriac word meaning "a house on the hill-top."¹⁵

6. The New Priest Sharing the Charism

In the meantime, Kuriakose Elias Chavara, following his ordination on 29 November 1829¹⁶ and the next day's High Mass in his parish church at Chennankari stayed back there for about a month, i.e., the whole

¹³For these details about the search for a suitable site, see CWC I: 5-9; CSK I: 8-12.

¹⁴CWC I: 12; CSK I: 15.

¹⁵CWC I: 13-14; CSK I: 16-17.

¹⁶According to the usual practice, the ordination 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, Bp Stabilini displeased with quarrels between the "Seven-hundreds" and "Five-hundreds" had cancelled all the programmes and had decided to return to Rome. Hence, the ordination did not take place then (CWC I: 3f.; CSK I:4f.). It was conducted later on 29 November 1829 in Arthungal to where the bishop had in the meantime shifted residence.

month of December. Then he moved to Pulinkunnu and made some journeys and visits. As the Lent began, he preached a retreat in a chapel on the southern side of Pulinkunnu Parish, which was much appreciated by the people. Chavara, too, really enjoyed doing such pastoral services and felt encouraged by the initial success and positive response from the people. But he sensed that his *malpān* Fr Palackal was not so happy about his wanderings and visits in different places. So, afraid of displeasing him, he stopped journeying and returned to Pallipuram and settled down with the latter in the seminary. He supported and cooperated with him in all matters. In Chavara's own words: "Thereafter in all matters I followed his directions and views."¹⁷ Already "from his young age he was determined to be of one mind with the *malpān*" and he admits that he was led to priesthood by being guided by his and Father Porukara's wisdom.¹⁸ Therefore, we can reasonably conclude that he, too, shared the thoughts and plans of Fathers Palackal and Porukara for starting a religious house, and gradually got more and more involved in the efforts related to it.

Already while offering the first Mass with the bishop and the second one in his own parish of Chennankari Chavara had prayed for God's blessings on the efforts to establish a monastery, as he himself testifies.¹⁹ Already while a seminarian, he had shared and cherished the inspiration of starting a monastery that was being considered by his *malpan* Fr Palackal and Fr Porukara. It is also important that the new priest's presence and sharing the responsibilities of the seminary made Fr Palackal freer for the works of the religious house. According to *The Chronicles*, Chavara joined the group in their third journey in search of a site for the monastery.²⁰

7. Government Permission

Immediately the Fathers initiated the formalities required to take possession of the land, which, however, were not without bureaucratic and other hurdles as such things ever are. The land was a government property which the Tharakan brothers had on lease from 893 (according to Malayalam calendar which is around 1718 AD). It should now be registered with the government in the name of the proposed

¹⁷CWC I: 22; CSK I: 25.

¹⁸CWC I: 22; CSK I: 25.

¹⁹CWC I: 22; CSK I: 26; *Positio*: 401, fn. 40; SP: 25; Beccaro 2003: 6.

²⁰CWC I: 8-9; CSK I: 11.

monastery. A no-objection certificate had to be obtained from the locals. Since they were mostly dependants of the Tharakan brothers, the latter easily persuaded them to give it. Then Kaniyanthara and Fathers Porukara and Chavara revisited the locality to have a better look at the mount. The whole place was thickly wooded. So it was with great difficulty that they, breaking or cutting off tree branches, reached almost near the well there. They found the land so broad and breezy that all of them liked it.²¹ Trusting in God's unfailing providence and patiently going through a lot of hardships and with the generous help of many good people, they finally obtained the required government permission.

8. The House on the Hilltop

The stage was set for the laying of the foundation stone for the little chapel. Certainly, it was an event of great importance, as it was this "little chapel" that was gradually to develop into the monastery. Therefore, in Father Chavara's words, it was "the laying of the foundation stone for the monastery [*kovent*]. The bishop readily agreed to come and do it on 11 May 1831. But as the day approached, he was much less enthusiastic about it. For on the one hand he was suffering from itches and boils in the hands and legs; and on the other, he was yearning to leave for Europe. By then, however, all the priests who were Father Palackal's students and friends were informed of the date fixed for the function, and, therefore, it was not possible to change it. So Fathers Palackal, Porukara and Paschal somehow prevailed upon the bishop to come.²²

For the bishop to rest when he comes to lay the foundation stone, very close to the proposed site for the chapel they set up a tent. Tharakan provided a bamboo frame which they fixed upon four pillars and thatched it with palm-leaves. They divided it into two rooms with mats as walls. As mentioned above for health reasons the bishop had already moved from Arthungal to Kudamaloor. From there he was brought to the hill-top on the previous day of the function. He spent the night in the tent. So, too, did all the priests. Father Chavara writes: "The bishop was brought already on the previous day. It was in that improvised tent that he spent the night. All of us priests, too, slept in it. It was indeed an experience of life in the forest."

²¹CWC I: 8-9; CSK I:17-19.

²²CWC I: 20; CSK I:24.

In the morning when it was time for the function, the bishop was so sick that he was unable even to put on the sacred vestments. So he suggested that Fr Palackal should lay the foundation-stone, while the latter wanted Fr Porukara to do it. Then for a while it was a trial of the two priests' humility and mutual love and respect. Finally Fr Porukara was persuaded to be the celebrant.

Then arose the question regarding who should be the patron of the foundation. Again there were different opinions. The bishop suggested St John the Baptist. In Father Palackal's mind they were already Dominicans, and as such he was also particularly devoted to St Dominic. So he wanted the new foundation to be in this saint's name. Fr Porukara, a great devotee of St Joseph, naturally proposed him to be the patron. Finally, the bishop and Fr Palackal respected Father Porukara's desire, and thus St Joseph's name was unanimously adopted. Fr Chavara notes: "Thus on 11 May 1831, the foundation-stone for the monastery was laid in the name of St Joseph by Fr Porukara in the presence of Rt Rev. Bishop Maurilius Stabilini."

9. The Way of Life

Even as the construction works of the monastery were going on, a well disciplined, deeply prayerful and pastorally committed community was formed. The members consisted mostly of priests who giving up their ministry as successful parish priests had opted for consecrated life. In the year 1833, they started, attached to the monastery, a seminary in order to train the diocesan as well as the religious candidates. There was also a mutually supporting and strengthening relation between the Mannanam community and the vicariate of Varapuzha. Not only the Varapuzha administration but the entire people of God - the hierarchy and the laity alike - always looked to Mannanam for help in all their spiritual needs such as retreats, confessions and other sacraments as well as sacramentals, liturgical services, renewal programmes, seminary formation and pastoral care. Mgr Stabilini's prophetic instruction to start a monastery from which not only the members but all people should benefit was realized. Later on, in the context of the foundation of a congregation for women Fr Chavara said that a religious house should be a "spiritual resort" (*punya-samketam*), which was already true of the house on the hill-top (*beth-rauma*) of Mannanam. This reminds us of Jesus' own words: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill-top cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on a lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house" (Mt 5:14-15).

The group in the *beth-rauma* was a well disciplined and praying community. Not only did they spend long hours in prayer but also inspired others to pray. Being prayerful they also prayed for and with the people. They meditated on the Word of God and preached it to the people. They looked after their spiritual and pastoral needs. It was a monastic community from which not only the members but all others, too, benefitted. To attend the liturgical and Lenten services people from far and wide thronged. The weekly Way of the Cross during the Lent soon became so popular that devotees from the parishes of Athirampuzha, Punnathara, Kudamaloor and Kaipuzha began to come to participate in it. Such public events of worship won for the monastery more and more people's support and probably inspired many vocations, too. For instance, Antony Kudakachira was one who having often come to Mannanam to participate in the devotions, eventually decided to join the seminary there.²³

10. In the Line of Joshua

The first and the second of the beginners disappeared leaving Father Chavara, the youngest of them, alone. He was grief-struck but did not falter. Fr Kuriakose Porukara aptly compares the situation to Aaron and Moses, 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.²⁴ The same author writes:

In the meantime our superior and first founder ... *malpān* Thomas Palackal on 16 January 1841, and the second superior and founder *malpān* [Thomas] Porukara on 8 January 1846 left for God's presence without seeing the culmination of the works they had started, to receive the reward for the labours they had undertaken. Both of them died having entrusted everything to Fr Prior [Chavara]. He was grief-struck 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 started following in the footsteps of his predecessors, carrying their burden.²⁵

Father Chavara's task then was to continue and consolidate the work that was already begun, and to get canonical approval for the

²³CWC I: 29; CSK I: 34.

²⁴SP: 26-27.

²⁵SP: 26.

community in Mannanam. The physical aspects of the project were more or less realized. Necessary infrastructures and facilities were ready. There was also enough number of members who included priests, major seminarians, aspirants, and candidates for brotherhood.

The life in Mannanam also was patterned on the monastic tradition. It was already so from the beginning under the direction of Fathers Palackal and Porukara, and now continued under Father Chavara. In it were beautifully blended the contemplative and apostolic dimensions of monastic vocation, as Fr Bernard portrays:

On the one hand theirs was a contemplative life: Living in the monastery they endeavoured to sanctify themselves and realize union with God. For it they employed the means such as prayer, meditation and solitude. On the other hand it was also an active life with apostolic works. Conducting catechism classes and retreats they helped the people to secure salvation; through teaching and formation programmes they gave the seminarians a proper training; hearing confessions and preaching the word of God they enhanced the quality of the people's good conduct. Thus the life in Mannanam was a blending of the contemplative and active forms of consecrated life.²⁶

The official approval of the community, which would permit the members to make the profession of religious vows according to the canon law, was indefinitely delayed about which the Fathers were concerned. 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.²⁷ Fr Leopold also writes:

Fr Kuriakose 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 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.²⁸

At long last, the Vicar Apostolic Archbishop Ludovic Martini "promised to ratify the monastery [by giving it the ecclesiastical

²⁶Bernard 1989: 37.

²⁷Valerian 1939: 99.

²⁸Beccaro 2003: 8f.

approval] on presentation of a request signed by all the members.”²⁹

Fr Chavara promptly wrote a petition, in which all the members except two signed, and submitted it to the vicar apostolic.³⁰ But there was no immediate response. Again years passed!

11. Closer to the Promised Land

Archbishop Ludovic was called back to Rome in 1851, and died in 1853. He was followed by Bernardine Baccinelli of St Theresa. It was he who finally granted the approval to the great joy and relief of the Fathers. Fr Bernard writes:

He [Archbishop Bernardine Baccinelli] 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 other priests of the region 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. He directed our Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara to let him know in writing of the rule of life followed in Mannanam. Accordingly Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara wrote down and presented to the Archbishop the daily schedule in Mannanam.³¹

12. Concrete Steps

Not long after Fr Chavara submitted the daily schedule of his community, Archbishop Baccinelli started taking concrete steps to approve it canonically. The first thing 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 Discalced Carmelites (OCD), which the prelate chose for the purpose. As ordered by the Archbishop, Fr Chavara read out the rules to the entire community of priests, seminarians and aspirants, not once but several times, says Fr Bernard. But many of them felt the provisions about fasting, silence and enclosures to be too strict and hard. Fr Chavara brought it to the Archbishop's notice. But the latter was not in favour of relaxing the rules.

²⁹CWC I: 50; CSK I: 56.

³⁰CWC I: 50; CSK I: 56.

³¹Bernard 1989: 38-39.

13. Crucial Choice

The Archbishop chose 8 December 1855 the day for the members of the new community to profess the vows of evangelical counsels, and made arrangements for it. To prepare them with a retreat, the archbishop sent to Mannanam Fr Marceline, a Carmelite missionary from Genova, Italy.

It was repeating the Archbishop's order that "only those of good will and determination need to be admitted to the congregation," that Fr Marceline began the retreat. Along with it the monastic rules of silence and enclosures also were enforced. The rules - especially regarding 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 ripening fruits of his hard labour were suddenly found to be worm-eaten!"³² He shared his painful feelings with the Archbishop. But his cool, if not cold, response was: 'Do not worry about the drop-outs. 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!³³

14. The Joy of Birth

Finally the day of religious profession dawned. Saturday 8 December 1855! The long-awaited day of celebration for the entire Church of Malabar! It was 9 am when the procession, led by Father Marceline who was the Archbishop's delegate to receive the profession, from the monastery to the church began. Reaching the sanctuary, Father Marceline sat facing the people, in a decorated chair specially kept a little to the north of the centre. Father Chavara stood kneeling before him.

All remaining in solemn silence, Father Marceline opened the service with ritual questions and answers. He then gave a moving sermon explaining the meaning of consecrated life and vows, and the basic virtues required of a religious person, especially humility. Still

³²Valerian 1939: 104.

³³Bernard 1989: 41-42; Valerian 1939: 104.

on his knees Father Chavara listened to the sermon with rapt attention. All admired his humble and devout pose. His face was amazingly radiant!

Then it was time for the central act of the function. Father Chavara, holding with both hands the document of profession, knelt right in front of Father 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, Father 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!

With the help of others he then put on the scapular and belt, and lay prostrate on the floor while the choir sang the Syriac hymn of thanksgiving to God. Concluding the function all went back to the monastery in procession in the same order as they had come in. As they reached Father Chavara's room, Father Marceline spoke briefly thanking God and congratulating the newly professed. Accepting the latter as their Prior all the members of the community, beginning with the senior-most, knelt before him and kissed his right hand. His appointment by the Archbishop as Prior was already made, not by a formal letter called *patent* in ecclesiastical terminology, but by addressing him so in the introductory part of the rules he had given them.

Then there was a short interval and the second session of the ceremony began in which Father Chavara as Prior received the profession of vows made by the other ten priests.

This was the beginning of the first religious institute in Kerala. Its founders, especially St Chavara, under whose leadership the first community made the religious vows, should be given the credit of being the beginners of consecrated life in this land. Their plan to open the way for consecrated life among the Syro-Malabar Christians was fully realized when later in 1866 with the support and help of an Italian Carmelite called Fr Leopold Beccaro, St Chavara founded the first convent in Koonammavu which made it possible for the womenfolk as well to lead a life of consecrated virginity. We may, therefore, reasonably call St Chavara as the Father of Consecrated Life in Syro-Malabar Church. The women's community was later bifurcated as: *Congregation of the Mother of Carmel* (CMC) in the Syro-Malabar Rite, and *Congregation of Theresian Carmelites* (CTC) in the Latin Rite.

SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Pioneer of the Indian Christian Monasticism

Francis Thonippara CMI

Abstract: St Kuriakose Elias Chavara is the pioneer of the Indian Christian monasticism. Within Christianity monastic life is inseparably linked to the very nature of the Church. Analysing the beginnings of Christian monasticism in the East and in the West, it is observed that the great abbeys were symbols of stability, which gave a new spiritual and cultural dimension to the society. The eremitical and coenobitical life developed among the Syriac Christians met the European monasticism among the St Thomas Christians and the result was the foundation of the first indigenous religious monastic community at Mannanam in 1831, under the leadership of Chavara and his companions. After giving a historical overview of the life of the community and its canonical foundation, the study explores the efforts of Chavara to found a convent for women which bore fruits on 16 July 1868, on which day the first four members of the convent made their religious vows. The study ends with a challenge posed before the members of these communities inviting them to go back to the original spirit of the founders and to make themselves and their mission more people-centred.

Keywords: Monastic life, missionaries, Church, Eastern monasticism, monks, martyrdom, abbeys, eremitical life, coenobitical life, Syriac tradition, *dayra*, Indian Christianity, travellers, Indian monastic community, Dominicans, Carmelites Mannanam, founders, community, history, convent

1. Introduction

The idea of cutting oneself off from the world devoting oneself fully to the service of God Almighty is found in almost all world religions. India is the homeland of various religious monastic traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. The monks of some of these

traditions were great missionaries who took an active role in spreading their religion beyond the boundaries of the country.

Monastic life is inseparably linked to the very nature of the Church and the Church has always fostered monastic life with special care. In the history of the Church, monastic life renders a sure criterion for interior life. Where authentic Christian monastic life flourishes, the inner life of the Church and the qualitative Christian life in the Church, also flourishes. On the contrary, when monastic life declined, history witnessed the decline of the qualitative Christian life. Hence the famous expression: religious life is at the heart of the Church. St John Chrysostom asserted that monasteries were necessary because the world had not yet known Christian values; once it knows the precepts of Jesus, the need for the monastic separation would disappear.¹

2. The Beginnings of Monasticism

The monastic life in the Church emerged not through the initiatives of the highest authorities, but from humble beginning, and through the efforts of a few individuals. Egypt was the cradle of Christian monasticism at the beginning of the second half of the third century. One view regarding the origin of monasticism was that during the persecutions, the Christians who had fled into the desert undertook to live there as hermits. However, the reality was that the first monks had their habitat not in the wilderness, but in the cities.² There are others who hold the view that Christian ascetical and monastic life became very popular among the faithful in the context of the religious freedom granted to the Church by Emperor Constantine with the Edict of Milan. There were no more persecutions and the Christians who wanted to lead a radical Christian life opted for a life in the wilderness. Now in the place of martyrdom by shedding the blood, there is the martyrdom by renouncing the world - a new type of martyrdom called white martyrdom.

It is interesting to note the great personalities who championed monasticism in the East. St Antony the Great (+356) and St Pachomius (+346) rank prominent among the pioneers. The Life of St Antony, published by St Athanasius after 360, made a deep impact on the

¹Jordan Aumann, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1985, 38.

²Ludwig Hertling, *A History of the Catholic Church*, The Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland 1957, 116.

spread of monasticism both in the East and in the West. The Westerners on their way to the Holy Land made a side-trip to Egypt just to experience the life of the monks.³ St Basil the Great (+379) brought new order in the Eastern monasticism and is respected as the Lawgiver of the Eastern Monasticism. In general, Eastern monasticism was more self-willed.

In the West, there were individual monasteries which were the results of the initiatives of the Church leaders like Martin of Tours, Ambrose of Milan and others. Eusebius of Vercelli and Augustine of Hippo tried to bring their clerics together in a common life on the model of the monks. John Cassian was another promoter of monasticism in the West. The monastery at Lerins, in France and St Patrick and subsequent Irish monks redrew the religious map of Europe. St Benedict (+547) and his sister Scholastica gave new vitality to the Western monasticism. They began their solitary life at Subiaco and later moved to Montecassino (both in Italy) which became the mother house of the Western Monasticism. There St Benedict composed his famous Rule for monasteries, and thus he became the Lawgiver of the Western Monasticism. Pope Gregory the Great (+604) by the publication of the biography of St Benedict titled *Dialogues*, popularised the Benedictine monks and Benedictine Rule in the Western world. During the Carolingian age, the noun 'monk' and 'Benedictine' were synonymous. Benedictines preserved the European Christian culture by collecting, copying and making use of the ancient manuscripts. The abbeys were symbols of stability and the Abbot was the father of the monastic family. *Ora et Labora*, the life principle of the Benedictines, gave a new spiritual and cultural dimension to the European society.

3. East Syriac Tradition

A variety of eremitical and coenobitical life was developed among the Syriac Christians, including Stylites, Shepherds, Sleepless Monks, Laura, *Dayra* and others. The original meaning of *Dayra* is a dwelling place. However, today it refers to the monastery, especially among the Jacobite, Orthodox and Mar Thoma communities in India. East Syriac monasticism was intimately associated with the missionary commitment and the monks crossed the boundaries of their own places of origin and took the Gospel to other nations. There are reasons

³Hertling, *History of the Catholic Church*, 119.

to believe that the so-called Nestorian monks were actively involved mission work in different parts of India and China.⁴

4. Indian Christianity and Monastic Life

Christianity in India is as old as Christian religion itself and the St Thomas Christians have a glorious history of two thousand years. We do not have many references to the existence of religious communities among the St Thomas Christians till the establishment of the Mannanam monastery in 1831. The testimonies of various travellers or visitors to India give evidences to the presence of monasteries and monks in the Indian Church. As we do not have any physical remains of these monasteries, the positive proof of the power of these testimonies loses weight. "Gregory of Tours (+594) gives an account of the monastery of St Thomas in India based on the report he had heard from a monk called Theodor who had visited that monastery."⁵ The Arab historian Amribn Matta wrote in 1340 that "Thomas' tomb is on the island of Meilan in India, on the right hand of the altar in his monastery."⁶ The Syriac *Life of Hermit Yonan* of the fourth century speaks about the "priest, monk, and archimandrite of the monastery of St Thomas in India."⁷ Fr Joseph, a priest leader of the St Thomas Christians, popularly known as 'Joseph the Indian' travelled to Europe in the company of Pedro Alvares Cabral in 1501 and narrated to his European friends that there were monks in black habit who led an ascetic life of great poverty and chastity. There were nuns also.⁸ Francis Ros S.J., while speaking about Angamaly, calls the church there the hermitage of Ss. Gervasis and Protasis. Antonio de Gouvea describes some old people and widowers adopting a kind of religious life.⁹ While referring to the location of the tomb of Apostle Thomas, the pre-Portuguese documents speak of the church or monastery or house of St Thomas. The Western tendency was to call it a church.¹⁰

⁴Cfr. Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. I, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore, 2006.

⁵A. M. Mundadan, *Traditions of St Thomas Christians*, Dharmaram College, Bangalore, 1970, 15.

⁶Mundadan, *Traditions of St Thomas Christians*, 16.

⁷A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. I, CHAI, Bangalore, (Revised Edition, 2001), 56.

⁸Mundadan, *History of Christianity*, 187.

⁹Mundadan, *History of Christianity*, 188, footnote 97.

¹⁰Mundadan, *Traditions of St Thomas Christians*, 26.

We come across a few documents which speak about the attempts made from the part of the St Thomas Christians for religious life. This was during the time of Stephen Britto S.J. who was the Archbishop of Kodungallur and George of the Cross, who was the Archdeacon of the St Thomas Christians. In 1624, Archdeacon George of the Cross took the initiative to revive the monastic life and efforts had been made to establish a religious Community at Edapalli.¹¹ This religious Community at Edapalli, Congregation of St Thomas, popularly known as *Recollecta*,¹² *Recolhimento*¹³ at Edapalli, which was officially inaugurated on 5 February 1626, did not have a long life and opinions vary on the disappearance of this community.¹⁴

With the arrival of the Western missionaries, St Thomas Christians came in contact with a number of European religious orders and societies like Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, Jesuits and others. We cannot come to any concrete conclusion regarding the extent of influence these religious orders had on the St Thomas Christians. From the records we know that they had cordial relations with the Franciscans and the Dominicans. The lifestyle of these religious orders indirectly influenced the spiritual life of the St Thomas Christians and many of their pious practices had their remote beginnings in the contacts they had with these orders. The Carmelites popularised the devotion to Our Lady and although the relationship was very cordial in the beginning, it became strained in course of time. However, the St Thomas Christians are indebted to the Carmelite missionaries for the

¹¹In some Portuguese and Latin documents Edapalli is also referred to as Repolim or Repelim.

¹²In the modern Portuguese language it is *recollecta*, noun, feminine, singular, meaning nun, a Recollect; monastery of Recollects; *Recollecto*, adjective, meaning, solitary, retired; noun, masculine, singular, meaning monk of a reformed order, especially Franciscan; Franciscan monk. In the documents we come across double L. However, in this study we follow the spelling followed in the document.

¹³*Recolhimento*, a Portuguese word, meaning retirement, solitude, privacy, seclusion, withdrawal, meditation, abstraction, contemplation, musing, shelter, home, refuge, asylum, retreat.

¹⁴According to Cardinal Tisserant, the Congregation was dissolved in 1634 because the Syrian priests indulged in intrigues against the Archbishop and publicly supported Archdeacon. Cfr. Eugene Cardinal Tisserant, *Eastern Christianity in India*, Calcutta, 1957, p.77.f.n. 2. However, the general view is that *Recollecta* continued till the Revolt of 1653, popularly known as *Coonan Cross Oath*. For the Rules to be observed by the members of the *Recollecta*, please refer *Recollecta at Edapalli: An Attempt for Monastic Life among the St Thomas Christians*, in *Power of Positive Presence*, Thomas Kollamparampil and others (Eds.), Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 2014, 159-166.

great service they rendered to the community in bringing unity in the aftermath of the incident at Coonan Cross in 1653. The Jesuits took over the administration of the community after the Synod of Udayamperur and the apostolic Church was brought under *the Padroado* jurisdiction. The St Thomas Christians always had a rebellious attitude towards the Jesuits as they were the first official Latin rulers of this apostolic Church.

5. Mannanam Monastery: the Montecassino of India

Generally, the historians of Western monasticism consider Montecassino, the first official monastery founded by St Benedict, the Patriarch of Western Monasticism, as the mother of all monasteries in the Western world. In the same way, St Joseph's Monastery at Mannanam being the first indigenous religious house in India can be aptly called the Montecassino of India. The desire for religious life among the St Thomas Christians was dormant for some time and it was reawakened in the early nineteenth century under the leadership of the saintly trio, Frs Thomas Palackal, Thomas Porukara and Kuriakose Chavara. When Frs Thomas Palackal, Thomas Porukara and Kuriakose Chavara founded a monastery at Mannanam in 1831, "the only capital was their own spiritual awareness and their sensitivity to the real needs of the Church."¹⁵ However, they were indirectly influenced by the Carmelites and the Dominicans. From the writings of Chavara we may presume that the founding fathers were more inspired by the Dominican way of life.

6. Fr Thomas Palackal (1780-1841)

Fr Thomas Palackal was born around 1780 in the ancient family of Palackal of South Pallippuram and had his priestly training under the famous *Malpan*, Abraham Thachil of Kuthiathodu. Soon after his ordination in 1808, Msgr Raymond Roviglia, OCD, the Vicar Apostolic of Varapuzha, called him to serve as his secretary, a position he held from 1808 to 1816. From 1816, he was consulter to the Vicars Apostolic. Fr Palackal led a very ascetical life dedicated to penance, prayer and study. As *Malpan* of the Seminary at Pallippuram, he imparted to the students the principles of Christian life, theological doctrines and dogmas and moral theology. Moreover, his personal life was a source of inspiration for all the students. From the timetable and daily life of

¹⁵A. M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 2008, 67.

the seminary, we conclude that the formation programme followed there was similar to that of the Dominicans.

7. Fr Thomas Porukara (1800 -1846)

This extraordinarily brilliant priest was born in 1800 in the well-reputed Porukara family of Kalloorkkad (Champakulam). It was his strong desire to lead a life of prayer and penance away from the world, i.e. an eremitical life. As parish priest, he brought about spiritual reform in the parishes. He was a great devotee of St Joseph. Msgr Maurilius Stabilini, OCD, the new Vicar Apostolic, appointed Porukara as his secretary. Fr Palackal had great affection for Fr Porukara. Both Palackal and Porukara desired intensely to live a religious life for the glory of God and for the good of the Church.

8. Fr Kuriakose Chavara (1805-1871)

Fr Kuriakose Chavara was born of pious and God-fearing parents in Kainakari village in South Kerala on February 10, 1805. He joined the seminary at Pallippuram under the tutelage of Malpan Thomas Palackal at the age of thirteen and was ordained on 29 November 1829. As a young priest, Chavara felt that a lot of good has been left undone due to the absence of a *tapasu bhavanam* (house of penance) in Kerala even for priests. Hence, as he recalls, they desired to start a *darsanaveedu* (house of vision) at least for priests. After the priestly ordination, Fr Chavara spent a few months in his home parish at Chennankari, and at Pulinkunnu preaching retreats, Sunday homilies and making visits to the families. Through these practices, he rejuvenated the Christian life of the people of Kuttanad. Then he returned to Pallippuram and settled down with Fr Palackal in the seminary. He actively got involved in the projects of Frs Palackal and Porukara to found a religious house and joined them in their third journey in search of a site for a monastery.

Brother Jacob Kaniyanthara (1800-1898), hailing from Kalloorkkad, the parish of Porukara, was greatly influenced by him. Inspired by the ardent desire of Porukara for eremitical life, Kaniyanthara abandoned the idea of marriage and joined the trio - Frs Palackal, Porukara and Chavara. Besides, Fr Pascal Baylon of Jesus Maria, the Chancellor of the Vicariate also joined Palackal and Porukara in the initial stages of deliberations of the founding of a religious community, and later helped in the search for a place for the *darsanaveedu*.

9. The Idea of a Monastery and the Foundation

After a long period of sharing and reflection, pondering over the long-cherished desire of founding a religious institute for the attainment of evangelical perfection and for the spiritual and moral advancement of the people, Frs Palackal and Porukara communicated their desire to Msgr Maurilius Stabilini OCD, the Vicar Apostolic of Malabar. Although Fr Porukara had an inclination for eremitical life, Fr Palackal being the Malpan of the seminary, might have convinced Fr Porukara the need for a monastic life for the uplift of the Syrian Christians. Msgr Stabilini encouraged the project and contributed Rs 200 towards the realization of the project. He wrote a letter in Malayalam on 1 November 1829, inviting the churches to contribute generously for the realization of the noble cause. In response to the letter, the parishes and a few individuals contributed generously.¹⁶

The pioneering search for a suitable site for the monastery was done by Frs Palackal, Porukara and Kaniyanthara Jacob with the wholehearted support of the local people. At times, Fr Pascal accompanied them. The response of the public was so enthusiastic that there were many offers from different parts of Kerala. Finally, they found a hillock at Mannanam and chose it for the purpose. A cross was solemnly erected on Mannanam hills on 28 April 1831 by Fr Porukara in the presence of many people. On 11 May 1831, the foundation stone for the monastery was laid in the name of St Joseph by Fr Porukara in the presence of Bishop Maurilius Stabilini, Frs Palackal, Chavara and many others, including Kaniyanthara Jacob. A small chapel was blessed on the feast of Pentecost in 1831 and the members regularly celebrated Mass in the chapel. Although Fr Palackal was residing at Pallippuram, he was recognised as the superior of the slowly evolving community at Mannanam. Fr Porukara went around the parishes and collected funds for the construction of the monastery, which was progressing. Fr Chavara and Br Kaniyanthara stayed on the Mannanam mount, looking after the construction work.

10. Mannanam Community

As a further development of Mannanam, a seminary was inaugurated in 1833. A few more seminarians joined the original team of two. In 1838 Fr Geevarghese Thoppil came to Mannanam to join the

¹⁶The original of this letter is in the Archives of Mannanam monastery, AMSJ (4/B/2).

monastery. A daily programme for the Mannanam community was organised under the able leadership of Fr Porukara. Eventually there evolved a well-disciplined, praying community at Mannanam. Recognising the involvement and contributions of Frs Porukara and Chavara in the area of priestly formation in 1844 they were raised to the rank of *Malpan*, and examiners in the Vicariate of Malabar.

The health condition of Fr Palackal deteriorated and he could not visit Mannanam frequently. He died on 16 January 1841 and Fr Porukara assumed the role of the community leader. He was called to eternal reward on 8 January 1846, leaving the destiny of the community at Mannanam in the hands of Fr Chavara.

11. Towards Canonical Foundation

The life at Mannanam was a blend of the contemplative and active forms of the consecrated life.¹⁷ It was well-received both by ecclesiastical authorities and by the people of God as a source of God's blessing. Archbishop Bernardine Baccinelli became the Vicar Apostolic in 1855. He came to know personally the spiritual movement at Mannanam and he wanted to erect the religious congregation canonically. The community at Mannanam led an intense prayer life starting at 5 am and ending at 11 pm. The three integral dimensions of monastic life, i.e., prayer, study and manual labour, were strictly followed by the members of the Mannanam community. The OCD Carmelite Rule was given to the members by the Archbishop with local modifications and changes.¹⁸ Fr Chavara read out the Rules to the entire community of priests, seminarians and aspirants several times and many felt that the provisions about fast, silence and enclosure were strict and hard. 8 December 1855 was fixed for the profession of evangelical counsels and for the enforcement of new Rules. Archbishop authorised Fr Marceline OCD, a Carmelite missionary, to preach the retreat as an immediate preparation for the religious profession. There were 22 participants in the retreat, 13 priests, 8 seminarians and 1 aspirant. But after the retreat 2 priests, all the seminarians and the aspirant left the community as they found the rules and regulations too hard. This caused great agony and shock to the benevolent and zealous heart of Fr Chavara.

Saturday 8 December 1855, was the long-awaited day of celebration for the entire Church of St Thomas Christians. The ceremony began at

¹⁷Cfr. Bernard, *CMI Sabha Adya Dasakangalil* (Malayalam, Reprint), 1989, 16 ff.

¹⁸Bernard, *CMI Sabha Adya Dasakangalil*, 40.

9 am in the presence of a large gathering of the faithful from the neighbouring parishes. Fr Chavara made the religious vows of chastity, poverty and obedience before Fr Marceline and took the name Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family. After the ceremony all the members of the community knelt before Fr Chavara and kissed his right hand, accepting him as their prior. After a short break the second session of the ceremony began. Fr Chavara received the profession of ten priests in the presence of Fr Marceline. Thus in the Mannanam community, besides the diocesan seminarians, there were 11 professed members, 2 seminarians, 5 aspirants and a few candidates for brotherhood. Among the candidates for brotherhood the most prominent was Jacob Kaniyanthara who had “shared the inspirations of the Founding Fathers and assisted them in the foundation.”¹⁹ He made the first profession on 2 February 1865. Fr Chavara, the community’s leader, was given title of Prior. As part of the growth of religious life, six more monasteries were established by him. With the establishment of other monasteries he became the common Prior and the general public of Kerala respectfully called him *Valiya* Prior. The new religious community at Mannanam was known as the servants of Mary Immaculate.

12. A Convent for Women

A convent for women was the second dearest dream of Fr Chavara. The purpose of the new congregation for women was “besides striving for their own spiritual realisation they have to teach other girls and train them in handicrafts.”²⁰ At Alangadu, a place was identified for starting a convent for women in 1859. However it was abandoned because of the distance from the Koonammavu monastery. Although the ecclesiastical authorities had strong desire to establish a convent for women and a two-storey building with the sole purpose of a Carmelite convent was constructed in 1860 at Puthenpally, the building was converted into a seminary taking into account the need of training well-qualified priests in the context of the disturbances that Bishop Roccas Thomas had caused in Kerala. In 1861, Fr Chavara was appointed as the Vicar General of the St Thomas Christians mainly to fight against the Persian intruder Bishop Roccas. In 1864, at the request of the Archbishop, Fr Chavara moved his residence from Mannanam to Koonammavu. In 1865 he shared his strong desire to establish a

¹⁹CMI Constitutions, 2014, 11.

²⁰*Complete Works of Chavara*, Vol. I. 195.

convent with Fr Leopold Beccaro, OCD, an Italian Carmelite missionary. Elishwa Vakayil (34) a widow and her only daughter Anna (14) were residing at Koonammavu and they were the spiritual daughters of Fr Leopold. They expressed their earnest desire to lead a life of consecrated chastity. After long prayer and reflection, God showed Fr Leopold the right way. In September 1865, Fr Leopold shared with Fr Chavara the desire of the widow and her daughter for religious life. Fr Chavara welcomed the idea. The matter was communicated to the Archbishop and he enthusiastically supported the project. A small house with three living rooms, a prayer room and a dining room was constructed to realise the dream of a convent for women. Fr Chavara exclaimed that it was "a true abode of poverty". It was a bamboo-mat convent. There was one more candidate, Theresa, 18, Eliswa's sister, who joined the other two.

Another Eliswa (37) a widow from the parish of Vaikom, was leading an ascetic life in her brother's house. Attracted by the ascetical life at Koonammavu, at the direction of Fr Chavara, she arrived at Koonammavu on 11 February 1866. Since Fr Leopold had not interviewed her earlier, Eliswa had to stay outside the convent. The other three entered the convent on 13 February 1866. With the consent of the already existing members of the community, on 14 February, Fr Leopold admitted Eliswa into the convent giving her the name Clara. Thus the convent had now four sisters and one helper. Thus the two holy priests laid the foundation for the Congregation for women in Malabar with four zealous candidates. It was a humble beginning with the cooperation of all the sections of the society depending fully on divine providence. Fr Chavara writes: "We trust that God would now complete what we started. We said that He would see to it that a new building was constructed, even before the bamboo mats and the coconut leaves of the present convent are replaced."²¹

Frs Chavara and Leopold worked hard to raise funds for the construction of the convent by visiting various parishes, especially the parishes in Kuttanad area. They succeeded in raising some funds. With the special interest of Fr Leopold, two plots of land next to the monastery were purchased, and on 28 June 1866 the foundation stone for the new convent building was laid. The response of the faithful for the construction of the convent was enthusiastic and encouraging. The Archbishop also supported the project. On 27 March 1867, the community moved from the bamboo mat convent to the newly

²¹*Complete Works of Chavara*, Vol. I. 107.

constructed one. On the same day, the first four members – Eliswa, Anna, Theresa and Clara – were given the religious habit of the Third Order of the Discalced Carmelites. On 16 July 1868, these four made their religious vows of chastity, obedience and poverty before Fr Leopold. Thus the long-cherished desire of Fr Chavara for a religious congregation for women was realised and the women TOCD was founded. Fr Chavara records his satisfaction in the founding of the convent in the Chronicle of the Mannanam Monastery as follows: “It seems that God has willed to accomplish now, the matter of a convent for nuns for which we had prayed for a long time and still was not possible.”²² However, with the establishment of two Vicariates in 1887 exclusively for the Syriac Catholics, Rome decided to entrust the Koonammavu Convent to the Syriac nuns and in 1890 the Latin members of the convent went away and now they are known as the CTC, and the Syriac members as CMC.

13. The Founders

The foundation of the Congregation for women was only God’s miracle and it was a joint accomplishment of Frs Chavara and Leopold. However, Fr Chavara never wanted to project himself as prominent over Fr Leopold. The two priests were full of appreciation for each other and from their mutual love we could easily presume the complementary contribution of each one in the founding of the Congregation. That Fr Leopold recognised the sanctity of Fr Chavara is clear from the testimony he wrote on the day of the death of his dear friend Fr Chavara.

The roles played by Fr Chavara and Fr Leopold are complementary: “The two founders were united not only in thought and word but also in deed. They were almost always together in undertaking journeys and meeting people to collect money, doing the administrative work related to the convent, furnishing it with all necessary things, and finally blessing and establishing it. They were also almost invariably together in the frequent visits to the new community, instructing and guiding them and caring for the sick. They showed equal interest in teaching them arts and crafts in view of the apostolic work.”²³ Fr Leopold in his short biography of Fr Chavara states:

²²*The Chronicle of Mannanam Monastery*, Vol. II, 72 (from 1855 to 1870).

²³Thomas Kochumuttom CMI, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, St. Paul’s, Mumbai, 2014, 332.

It was his great desire to start a religious house for women with the main intention of making it a safe place for the girls of Malabar to live their religion as good Christians and to learn spiritual things. A full account of all the great things he had done for the realization of this desire, when God willed it so, is beyond the scope of this biography. It is known to all how interested and zealous he was in the orderly progress of the convent in virtue and perfection, once it was founded.²⁴

It is very relevant to quote the words of Pope Francis who addressed the Indian faithful on 24 November 2014, in the St Peter's basilica:

Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Sister Euphrasia Eluvathingal, who was a member of the religious Institute founded by him, remind each of us that God's love is the source, the support and the goal of all holiness, while love of neighbour is the clearest manifestation of love for God. Father Kuriakose Elias was a religious, both active and contemplative, who generously gave his life for the Syro-Malabar Church, putting into action the maxim 'sanctification of oneself and the salvation of others.' For her part, Sister Euphrasia lived in profound union with God so much so that her life of holiness was an example and an encouragement to people, who called her 'Praying Mother'.

It is best to say that both Fr Chavara and Fr Leopold are the founders of the religious community of women founded at Koonammavu in 1866. The convent founded by them began to grow and spread rapidly. A boarding house for girls was begun attached to the convent aiming at imparting education to the girls. Fr Chavara also made arrangements for the sisters and girls to have training in handicrafts and skilled labour like making rosaries.

14. Conclusion

On 23 November 2014, Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara was canonised by Pope Francis together with Mother Euphrasia, one of his spiritual daughters. Now both are raised to the altar for veneration in the universal church. The official decree of canonisation states that St Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family is the founder of CMI Congregation and the CMC congregation. Therefore, St Chavara can rightly be called the pioneer of the monastic religious life, both for men

²⁴Leopold Beccaro, *A Short Biography of Bl. Chavara*, Edited by Fr. Lucas Vithuvattickal, CMI, Mannanam, 2003, 12; Cfr. Also, Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 293.

and women, in the Indian Church. The great challenge before the CMIs and CMCs is to go back to the original spirit of the founders and the first members and to make the religious communities more people-oriented and people-centred.