THE LEGACY OF SAINT CHAVARA'S PIONEERING RELIGIOUS LIFE

Challenges for the Consecrated Life in India

Louis Malieckal CMI

Abstract: The author makes a historical survey of religious life in the world in general and in India in particular in the light of the *kairos* ushered in by Vatican II, in order to present the legacy of Chavara's pioneering religious life and the challenges it poses before the consecrated life in India. He begins his study with the world scenario of consecrated life in the 19th century and the Council's vision of religious life in the third millennium. Here he deals with the merger of the horizon of the Church with the horizon of the Kingdom of God as the religious are involved in the world, where they are called to realize and reveal the pluralistic nature of the Church and thus to reveal the divine dimension of the whole creation. He then introduces Chavara's vision of a mission-oriented and prophetic community in the context of the Indian scenario of religious life before he entered the scene. In the light of his teachings, the author reviews the community, ecclesial and missionary dimensions of consecrated life. He reminds the religious of their social commitment for reconciliation, justice and peace among peoples, their option for the poor and dignity of human person and steps to be taken for women empowerment. Finally, he presents the contemplative and active dimensions of religious life presenting Chavara as a mystic, contemplative and a prophet.

Keywords: Legacy, *kairos*, Vatican II, communion, religious, charism, apostolate, community, Church, mission, ministry, vows, monastery, habit, cloister, Kingdom, dialogue, prophetic, Holy Family, multi-religious, reconciliation, empowerment, contemplative

1. Introduction

The Council of Vatican II was a historic event, a *kairos* that ushered in a new era of renewal in the life of the Church. The vision statement of the Council in this regard embedded in the document *Sacrosanctum*

Concilium[1] had four objectives: 1) to energize Christian life, which needs a return to the original sources of energy, 2) to empower the faithful to move forward with others in the world which requires her to make changes in institutions and life-style without sacrificing principles, 3) to translate her faith in Christ into love for one another which increases the spirit of ecumenism and fellowship and 4) to make her become a powerful symbol of unity and communion which will make her a sacrament of salvation for the whole world.

Similarly, the Council had also a vision of the renewal of religious life as spelt out in PC 2 and 3 with a five-point programme of renewal and updating, namely 1) an honest self-appraisal, 2) creative fidelity to religious charisms, 3) pruning of apostolically antiquated methods, tools, works and institutions, 4) adapting life-style and apostolates to meet the crying exigencies of the people, and 5) boldly launching into promising apostolic openings and areas of concern that call for urgent response from us.[2] In the Council's frame work given above and orientation of its total vision, we discover the foundations on which religious life rests in this new era of the Church. These foundations are 1) that religious life is a sign of the Church, the sacrament of Christ, 2) that religious life is a life of witness of the Church in the world, 3) that religious life is a life of communion of the faithful in the Church, and 4) that religious life is a mission-oriented life of the Church. The reason for this centrality of renewal of religious life for the whole programme of renewal of the Church is that "*the consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church*, as a decisive element for her mission," and as such, an "integral part of the Church's life."[3]

During the past five decades, after and under the impact of the Council, we have noticed the change of life-style and ministry of religious communities which we shall analyze later. But before proceeding further, it is necessary to have a glimpse of the world-scenario of consecrated life in the 19th century, when St Chavara came forward to found authentic forms of consecrated life for men and women in Kerala, India, anticipating the genuine mission-concerns of the Council.

---

[1] SC1.
[2] Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis* (PC), 2 &3.
[3] *Vita Consecrata* (VC) 3.

2. Consecrated Life in the 19ᵗʰ Century

Historically, monasticism pre-dates Christianity by millennia. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism and Islam (Sufism) include some form of monasticism, as do Protestantism, Anglicanism, Orthodox Churches and some ecumenical Christian movements as well as Catholicism. Prior to the development of monasticism in Christianity there were other non-monastic form, for example, professed consecrated virginity, lived within the early Christian communities and solitary hermit life in the desert. Although roughly from 500 to 1500 C.E., the monastic form of Christian religious life was the predominant one in the western Church, other forms also came up during this period, especially the military and hospitaler orders in the early middle ages and the mendicant orders in the high middle ages. But none of these was strictly monastic, because an important feature of these new forms was movement in the service of one's brothers and sisters in need outside the monastic enclosure.[4]

Monastic stability, fostered and expressed by enclosure and *horarium,* was relativized by these newer forms to allow the religious move from place to place ministering in a number of ways – nursing the sick, sheltering the pilgrims, teaching in the new universities, counselling the laity, preaching in the cities and country sides, converting "pagans" and so on. From the 16ᵗʰ century we find a striking departure from the monastic model that occurred in the clerical apostolic orders, like the Jesuits and the Redemptorists. In particular, the Jesuits decided that reciting the Prayer of the Church in common was not compatible with their apostolic vocation and make the decisive departure from monasticism. Moreover, the monastic habits in clerical orders began to give way to more ordinary clerical or contemporary civil dress or the habits themselves were restricted for use in the house. And simultaneously the residences of these religious were not permanently enclosed monasteries, but temporary houses

---

[4]Sandra Schneiders, "Discerning Ministerial Religious Life Today," Source URL:http//ncronline.org/news/ discerning ministerial religious life today, accessed on 11 September 2009, 1-12 (hereafter, S. Schneiders). It can be seen that in all instances of monasticism, the three unavoidable features were habit (whether saffron robes, veils and scapulars, shaved heads…), enclosure (monasteries, convents, ashrams...) and *horarium* (involving chanting of sutras or psalms, or recitation of devotional prayers, common meals, work and the like).

among which the members could move easily for the sake of their ministries.[5]

Naturally, such a transition and transformation of male monastic life into apostolic religious life had a powerful impact on women monastics who wished to take part in the Church's expanding apostolate. But a number of efforts by male as well as female founders to give rise to apostolic orders of women met with severe opposition from the hierarchical Church, and the Council of Trent reiterated that all women religious should observe cloister under pain of excommunication. Briefly, monasticism was the only recognized legitimate form of religious life for women. The requirement of enclosure seriously impeded the development of non-cloistered apostolic religious life among women.[6] It appears that there are stories of extraordinary pioneers of women's ministerial religious life who were denounced for immorality, imprisoned, placed under interdict and even excommunicated; some orders were suppressed while some others were deflected from their founding charisms by re-imposition of cloister. And, despite unrelenting ecclesiastical opposition, they continued to live religious life of their apostolates, and to be accepted and appreciated as religious by the people they served.[7]

It was only in 1900, after its first appearance 400 years before, that Pope Leo XIII by his apostolic constitution *Conditae a Christo,* formally acknowledged the non-cloistered apostolic congregations as an authentic form of religious life. However, because of the struggle over cloister and its attendant customs like habit and *horarium,* women's religious life had developed into a hybrid phenomenon, especially between 1900 and 1950, when Pope Pius XII launched the process of renewal that eventually led to the changes following Vatican II. In short, these women congregations carried all the burdens of the monastic life with no leisure for personal prayer, genuine community life, or ordinary recreation of monks, with all the additional burdens of

---

[5]S. Schneiders, 2; see also Jacob Parappilly, "Formation of the Religious: Challenges of Vatican II and Post-Conciliar Times" in Kurien Kunnumpuram (ed.), *Shaping Tomorrow's Church*, Mumbai: St. Paul's, 175-199.

[6]Nevertheless, some founders, like Vincent de Paul and Louise de Mariallac (founders of the Daughters of Charity), declared their Sisters "not Religious" so that they could minister to the sick and poor outside of cloister. Similarly, many others lived as and struggled to be recognized as Religious even while refusing to renounce their vocations to ministry. See S. Schneiders, "Discerning Ministerial Religious Life," 3; see also Jacob Parappally, "Formation of the Religious," 180ff.

[7]S. Schneiders, "Discerning Ministerial Religious Life," 3.

the apostolate without the professional preparation or privileges enjoyed by the clergy. Thus after a period of intensified double life of "monks at home" and "apostles abroad", in the 1950s Pope Pius XII urged religious superiors to begin modernization of the lifestyle, increased attention to professional and cultural education of their sisters, and modification of practices which were unhealthy for sisters or which alienated them from their contemporaries. In particular, he encouraged the modification of habits to suit the contexts and conditions of their new ministerial religious life.

Finally, during the Council of Vatican II, the Council fathers like Cardinal Leon Suenens of Belgium vigorously promoted the agenda of renewal of women's religious life. The Council directed congregations to return to the biblical roots of their life and to the founding charisms. These charisms often included the apostolic visions and ministerial intentions of the founders.

3. Religious Life in the Third Millennium

As "mission is the reason for the Church to exist," and as "religious life is an integral part of the Church's life," ever since Vatican II, there is an increasing emphasis on the intimate connection between mission and religious life, apostolate and monastic life, action and contemplation. For the same reason a Conciliar vision of religious life cannot but be part of its vision of the Church in the new millennium. That is why the Council fathers thought of inserting a chapter on religious life in the Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), and we may say, the Council reformulated religious life as a call to symbolize the prophetic dimension of the Church in the light of the Constitution on Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). This prophetic thrust which, according to the Council, has to be the cutting edge of religious life in the new millennium comprises the following aspects.[8]

3.1. The Merging of the Horizons

The religious life and ministry, whatever be its shape and format, has to point to the coming of the Reign of God even as it remains fully within the Church. The religious shall take their place on the threshold of the Church, as it opens towards the world with all its uncertainties and ambiguities. As world is the arena of the struggle between good and evil, the religious have to further the realization of the Kingdom

---

[8]See Paul Puthanangady, *Chosen for the World*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 2003, 31-34.

by giving faith-assurance in the midst of worldly ambiguities and right direction in the chaos of conflicting interests.

3.2. Involved in the World, but Not Conformed to It

As the Reign of God is constantly being worked out in the world, even as it transcends it, the religious ought to find themselves in the midst of the world, establishing their identity through authentic involvement in the process of building it up. However, the prophetic call of the religious does not allow them to become conformed to its values and principles. The Reign of God will emerge unnoticed by human eyes from within through the action of the Spirit; we need only to collaborate with him.

In this mission of the religious, the idea of cloister as isolation needs to be got rid of; instead it may be understood as an effort to discover the inner meaning of our own life and that of the world. In this perspective, religious asceticism becomes a journey towards the heart of the world, and not a flight from it. And then religious life and its varied expressions in communities will be conditioned by the kind of our involvement in the world.

3.3. The Religious to Reveal the Divine Dimension of Creation

It is when the religious experiences God as a God of unconditional love and tries to translate it into loving kindness, that the divine dimension of creation will be revealed. Love is the energy source of God's Reign, which is to be made operative through human love. Through the radicalism of their life-commitment for others, especially the poor and the marginalized, the religious would show that each one is a specific and unrepeatable expression of the love of God. In this way, the religious are called to affirm the entire creation, humans in particular, as the sacrament of God. They have to be the prophetic voice of God, who would destroy everything that would appear claiming to be images of God.

3.4. The Religious to Realize the Pluralistic Nature of the Church

The Church is at once institutional and charismatic, even as it is apostolic and inspirational at its very origin, and the religious belong very much to the latter aspect of the Church, namely charismatic and inspirational. At this level there is great scope for them to be the mouth piece of the Church through inter-faith, inter-religious and

inter-cultural dialogue of various kinds. In India, some new patterns of religious life in the ashram model provide the suitable platform for this kind of dialogue. Pluralism in the life of the religious shall manifest the vitality of their consecration. Committed to the love of God they have to become visible expressions of his loving kindness to meet the needs of his own people. This pluralism shall be manifested not only in the plurality of religious congregations, but even in the variety of life-expressions within the same congregation, provided a basic unity of charism can be maintained.

4. Indian Scenario of Religious Life Before Chavara Enters the Scene

Christians living in a country, which had long been venerating the *rishis* and *munis*, and which had for some time cherished the Buddhist monasticism, might have been attracted to monastic life. However, it is most likely that organized religious life among them started only after the 4th or 5th century, when they came in contact with the Persian Church, which had witnessed a great era of missionary expansion from the 5th to the 8th century.[9] Tradition has it that there was a monastery attached to the tomb of St. Thomas the Apostle at Mylapore.[10] Although there had been attempts to revive monastic life by Archdeacon George in 1624 and later Archbishop Stephen de Britto founded a monastery at Edapalli in 1625, this did not last long.[11]

In the course of later history, Christians of India came in contact with many European religious orders like the Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Carmelites and others. People had cordial relations with the Franciscans and the Dominicans, whereas somewhat strained relations they had with the Jesuits and the Carmelites.[12] In spite of such extensive relationship of the people with the great European religious Orders, "When Frs Palackal, Porukara and Chavara started at Mannanam in 1831 a religious community they had scarcely any specific religious tradition to rely on."[13] At the same time, it is possible that some kind of inspiration was drawn from the western religious orders, as it is clear from the writings of Chavara.

---

[9]Cf. A. M. Mundadan, *The Arrival of the Portuguese in India, and Thomas Christians under Mar Jacob, 1498-1552.*

[10]Cf. Mundadan, *History and Beyond*, Aluva: Jeevas, 1997, 157f.

[11]Mundadan, *History and Beyond*, 158-161.

[12]Cf. Mundadan, *Indian Christians: Search for Identity and Struggle for Autonomy*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2003, 39ff.

[13]M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2008, 67.

When we consider the Council's renewed vision of the life and legacy of religious/consecrated life in the above paragraphs and compare it with that of Chavara, as we are going to see below, we would be tempted to hold that he had, to a great extent, foreseen the Council's vision and mission for them.

5. Chavara's Vision of a Mission-Oriented Prophetic Community

The aspiration for religious life among the St Thomas Christians, which was dormant for some time, was re-awakened in the early decades of the 19th century, when the saintly trio, Frs Thomas Palackal, Thomas Porukara and Kuriakose Chavara were called by God to found a religious community of their choice, guided at the same time, by ecclesiastical authorities. This was the beginning of the men congregation in 1855 (CMIs) and that of the women congregation in 1866 (CMCs). Ever since, there have a revolution in the emergence of newer and newer religious communities for the Church in India. Of the three mentioned, Frs. Palackal and Porukara were quite senior to Chavara, but all were united in mind and heart in working out the divinely inspired project of founding the "house of God" (*darsanaveedu*) and "house of prayer" (*tapasu-bhavanam*), namely a religious community. Therefore, "Even before the pioneers passed away – Palackal in 1841 and Porukara in 1846 – Chavara took several initiatives on his own in consultation with the seniors. However, it is after the death of Thomas Porukara, the full responsibility of leading the newly founded religious community fell on his shoulders.

A study made on the origin and growth of this first religious community, mainly based on the life, activities and writings of St. Chavara, brings out certain characteristics that stand out as constitutive elements of consecrated life. They may be broadly divided into a) Community Dimension, b) Ecclesial Dimension, c) Missionary Dimension and d) Contemplation-Action Dimension.

5.1. Community Dimension of Consecrated Life

At the beginning of the CMI foundation we find a confluence of several streams of inspiration to produce the 'Ganga' of religious life in India. Leaving aside the thorny question of who is the first, second, third etc. of these inspirational streams, if we consider them in their unique identities – Palackal with a strong bent for contemplative life, Porukara with a similar bent for active pastoral life and Chavara as a unique blend of both – we can attribute a 'Trinitarian' community

dimension as integral part of consecrated life. Although age wise they were quite far apart, in 'substance' they shared every thought and concern about the 'dream project' of a *darsanaveedu* so intimately and thoroughly that they could tide over a series of internal and external oppositions that had sprung up now and then in the realization of this project. This spirit of unity and community continued to play its role through several stages and steps of its foundation, be it in the search for a suitable place for the first monastery, or in the event of laying its foundation stone, in the choice of the patron of the first house being built, and so on.

Now, we introspect about the quality of this community charism, as it is being lived today. We have the funny definition of religious community by Voltaire.[14] It is not the number or numerical strength that makes a group community. Group of a number of individuals will make only a crowd; but that of persons will make a community. As Raymond Panikkar would say, "person is a bundle of relationships"; he is open to communication, which can lead to communion of hearts and minds, eventually leading to the creation of community. Sociologists speak of two kinds of groups – society (*Gesellschaft*) and community (*Gemeinschaft*). The former is a well-structured organization, with its own laws and goals to be achieved. A typical example is any firm or company in the corporate sector, like Birla, Tata, Reliance, etc. The latter is an informal group bound more by affective relationship than legal and rationally structured relationships; it is comparatively small, having the growth of its members themselves its goal. And its best example is family.

A religious community is both - society and community, company and family. As community, it is a way of life, like family, its main goal is all-round growth and welfare of its own members. At the same time, it has to function as a *Gesellschaft*, society, because it takes up several tasks which we call apostolates or ministries. Should the religious community give more importance to the members and their welfare or to the goals to be achieved even at the expense of the members' welfare? No doubt, fundamentally, a religious community is a way of life like a family, and it is the *agapeic* love (giving-descending-emptying love of God) that should bind the members together; it is a reflection of Trinitarian love (Jn 17:23). What is Trinity or Triune

---

[14]Religious are those who come together without knowing each other, who live together without loving each other and who depart from the world without mourning each other.

Family (*Tritva Kudumba*), but a perfect equality of persons (substances) with distinct functions. What is transparent in the Father is the Son; what is transcendent in the Son is the Father and what is immanent between them is the Spirit. And since each human person is created in the image-likeness of this Triune God, each one of us has inherited this triple dimension – transcendence-transparency-immanence. And the quality of our unity and community depends on the quality of our openness and self-surrender to the other. In this respect, the Holy Family (*Tiru-Kudumba*) presents a perfect human image of the Trinitarian Divine Family. The Biblical ideal of "assembly of God" (Qahal Yahweh) and the great Vedic ideal of "whole humanity/entire creation as one family" (*vasudhaiva kudumbakam*) are parallel images of the same lofty ideal community.

It is important here to remember that growth in spiritual life of members of a religious community depends very much on their community life.[15] Whether the community is made up of 2 or 20 or 200, and more, what would make it really a 'community' as a legacy of St Chavara, is not the number/quantity of the individuals, but quality of the persons through their constant communication and consequent communion of hearts and minds in every plan, program and performance of it for the glory of God and good of the people.[16] Besides, he strongly recommended the Confraternity of Happy Death to be continued as a community activity, because "a spiritual exercise in community has better chance of survival than individual spiritual exercise, because the former is stronger than the latter."[17]

---

[15]There are two theological reasons for this. First, communitarian experience of salvation in Christianity as well as Judaism; religious community is the foretaste of the Kingdom of God, ushered in by Jesus. Second, religious life is a call to follow Jesus closely, and it is through prayer and community life that a religious assimilates to himself/herself the personality of Jesus. In fact, our community life is the laboratory where we experiment and build up our christification. That is why Karl Rahner, while explaining how other religions can be facilitators in human encounter of salvation in Christ, says: "If God is really reaching out to everyone with saving Grace, God can do this only in a human and social way, given the social nature of human beings. This can happen only through the religions through which the humans-in-society reach out to God in their prayers and rituals." See *Theological Investigations*, DLT: London, 1969, vol. v, 128.

[16]See no.2 of the Testament of Blessed Chavara to the members of his community (Malayalam), in Chavara Central Secretariat (ed.) *Letters of Fr. Chavara* (Malayalam), 143 for a beautiful description of such a family life.

[17]*Letters of Fr. Chavara*, 188.

The community dimension of consecrated life is part and parcel of our family life, as his commitment to the welfare of families is evident from the life and writings of St. Chavara.

The above reflections on the communitarian charism naturally lead to a discussion of a renewed commitment to the welfare of human families. Chavara's "vision and mission" of Christian family has been immortalized to a great extent by his two letters written to the members of Kainakari parish and through them to all the families of the world,[18] of which the first one is in the form of his last will (*chavarul*) and the second one is on the *upavishala*: its purpose and need; establishment and maintenance. The source of his great devotion to the Holy Family and to the Trinitarian Family was his own family life experience. He was particularly fortunate to have a very pious and devout Catholic family, a father well grounded and firm in faith, and a mother exceptionally pious. Full of gratitude to God, he sings for the gift of a loving and caring mother.[19] In his letter to the Kainakari parish, he defines Christian family in this way: "A good Christian family is the image of heaven. Those bound by ties of blood and affection, living together, duly respecting and obeying the parents and thus ensuring their salvation, each according to his/her vocation, constitute a rightful family."[20]In his reflections on the role of parents in the family, Chavara has amazingly anticipated to a great extent, Pope John II's *Familiaris Consortio*, and Vat II's *Lumen Gentium's* statement on family as the Domestic Church (see LG 11).

In the *chavarul*, Chavara gives 24 instructions in which a number of principles and practical aspects are elaborated. To mention a few, first comes the Lord's principle to "love one another as I have loved you", which is followed by the lofty virtue of forgiveness, illustrated by an episode from the life of Emperor Constantine.[21]Chavara mentions humility as the hallmark of a Christian family and advises to avoid showing off one's wealth or power, reminding them of how God punished David for ordering a census of his people as an act of pride. These are followed by 16 rules for bringing up children in the proper

[18]Cf. M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2008, 262.

[19]Cf. *Atmanutapam* I:71-77; Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 45ff.

[20]*Collected Works of Chavara*, IV, 102.

[21]A man from the street came up and dealt a blow on the king's cheek. The whole army sought his permission to kill the offender. But the king replied, "Even the lowest officer can do that. That is not a big thing. But I forgive him. That is the sign of my strength." (Quoted in Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 263).

way, which is a grave duty of the parents. He instructed them through biblical stories, anecdotes, comparisons, etc., which are quite appealing. They reveal the depth of his wisdom and knowledge. For example, the story of a Japanese mother and three children,[22] with which he concludes these instructions, is very interesting and enlightening. How true is Mahatma Gandhi's saying that "There is no school equal to a decent home and no teacher equal to a virtuous parent."

5.2. Ecclesial Dimensions of the Consecrated Life

As Chavara's knowledge of family life is the key to understand his vision of community life for the religious in their pursuit of holiness of life, so also his vision of the ecclesial dimension of consecrated life stems from his own experience in founding the first religious community and in his strenuous defence of the Church against the onslaughts of schismatics. What makes the life of religious/ consecrated persons a communitarian one, is the atmosphere of family, which is therefore rightly called 'the domestic church'. Briefly, where there is true family life experience, there is genuine community experience, which is an essential note of the Church, as the 'community of God's people' (Qahal Yahweh).

This ecclesial dimension of consecrated life is so well revealed in the budding religious community under the leadership of Chavara, first in the discernment of its charism in its final form as guided by Bishop Stabilini, next in his providential submission to the seemingly unreasonable directives of Bishop Francis Xavier and finally in the manner in which he fought tooth and nail to save the Kerala Church from the Roccos schism that was threatening to shake the Church to its

---

[22]Briefly this is the story: Once upon a time in Japan lived a mother with three children who were too poor to support their mother as she deserved. In those days it was a law in Japan that if anybody captured and surrendered a thief to the government authorities, he would be rewarded with a large amounted of money. In order to get money to support their mother, one of the children pretended to be a thief and other two handed him over to the authorities and received their reward. Later when the authorities of the jail saw the other two frequently coming to visit the 'thief' and encouraging him to be brave enough in facing death for the sake of his mother, they thought there would be something fishy about it. But on enquiry when they discovered that the boy was facing death in order to make funds to support his mother, they felt great admiration for them and they informed the king about this fact. The king then not only ordered to release the youth from the jail, but also decreed to arrange a pension for the support of the mother (see Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 265).

roots. This ecclesial dimension is also evident from the fact that religious life 'is a sign of the Church' and as such is 'at the very heart of the Church' as a decisive element for her mission.[23]

5.3. Missionary Dimension of the Consecrated Life

Since "Consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church, as a decisive element of its mission,"[24] and since mission is the very reason for the existence of the Church, it follows that consecrated life has a necessary dimension of mission. Thanks to Vatican II this has been re-discovered and explicitly taught in its important documents like GS, LG and AG. However, long before the Council, Chavara had discovered this dimension of religious life, and through his writings and action-programmes has immortalized it for all times. We may broadly divide this dimension into 1) religio-cultural and 2) socio-pastoral aspects of religious life and see how Chavara helps us to understand and practice them in our actual life context.

5.3.1. Religious Tolerance in a Multi-Religious Context

Chavara's attitude to other religions was not hateful or negative, but of tolerance. Of course, we have to remember here that he lived in a Christian era of Pre-Vatican II attitude of intolerance towards non-Christian religions. People of at least 70+ age will remember how it was a taboo for Christians in Kerala to watch a dance with '*kavadi*' or to go to temple festivals or even the premises of the temple before Vatican II. This attitude continued till the eve of the Council. Therefore we have to appreciate the approach of Chavara situating it in this climate. One particular incident from the life of Chavara and his companions is very enlightening here. Right from the beginning of the search for an appropriate location to start the first monastery, a Hindu gentleman named Ettan was their constant companion. An influential merchant from Ettumanur, named Oshanaru Methar was at the forefront for clearing the land for the construction of the monastery. All this shows the atmosphere of religious harmony that Chavara maintained. In their protracted search for many months, they came upon a plot of land known as Pullarikunnu, near Kumaranellur at Ettumanur. When permission to build a monastery was sought, the local government authority enquired if there was any objection to it from the local residents. As Pullari hill was supposed to be the

---

[23]*Vita Consecrata* (VC) 62.
[24]VC 3.

pratishta-peeth (abode) of the local Kumaranellur Bhagavati (a Hindu goddess), the tenants objected to it. Hence Chavara and companions left that place, saying that, "We do not want to build any monastery or church here, without taking into account the religious sentiments of the local Hindu brethren," even though Oshanaru Methar promised to get rid of the objections for the purpose. He was even ready to fight for it.

It is enlightening to note that this concern of Chavara and his confreres for the religious feelings of our Hindu brethren, was later fittingly responded to from the other side during the construction of the first monastery in Mannanam. Chavara's chronicles carry references to the cooperation extended by one Chittezeth Icharchar and family.[25]

5.3.2. Social Commitment for Reconciliation, Justice and Peace

One of the essential characteristics of Chavara's personality is his sincere efforts for bringing peace and harmony in whatever field he worked. He was ready to suffer any sacrifice for unity in the Church. His letters bear eloquent testimony to his contribution in keeping the Church united, to maintain harmony between the Latin and Syrian Rite Catholics and to avoid factions within the Syrian Catholics. Knowing very well that without true justice there cannot be lasting peace in any situation, he wrote to Rome that sending Carmelite missionaries as bishops to Malabar was not a lasting solution for peace among the Malabarians. To have their own bishops is their just demand, and that has to be fulfilled at the earliest for establishing peace in Malabar. Only as a via media, taking the whole situation into account, he also suggested, probably inspired by Fr Leopold, the creation of two (foreign) bishops: one for the Latin Church and the other for the Syrian Church.[26]

5.3.3. Option for the Poor and Dignity of Human Person

Chavara wanted to inculcate in the low-caste people a healthy awareness of self-worth. He wished that they would not be ostracized from the society; but for this they must develop self-confidence and

---

[25]Thomas Panthaplackal, "Religious Harmony: A Paradigm" in John Mannarathara (ed.), *The Life and Legacy St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, New Delhi: Viva Books, 2015, 197.

[26]See *Collected Works of Chavara* (CWC), 1982, 84f; 58f; 26-29; 13f. For a critical assessment of Chavara's position in this regard, see, Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 440-444.

live a sound moral life. With these objectives he opened schools at Mannanam and Arpookara, and later at Edathua, Pulinkunnu and Kainakari, which were all accessible to the deprived classes. He was very sensitive to the basic needs as well as dignity of human person. Introducing 'noon feeding' in schools he assured their regular attendance of classes in the schools. By insisting on paying decent wages to workers at the right time without having them to wait for long, he respected the dignity of human person, who has been created in the image of God. The two pious associations he established, namely Confraternity for Happy Death and Association for Charities (*upavishala*) were meant to help, especially those of the lowest rung of the society to have a peaceful and happy death, for which every human being, created in the image of God has a right, he held. Everybody born in this world has an inalienable right to live a decent human life and all, especially the resourceful ones, are obliged to help him/her to fulfil this right, he believed. We get a personal appeal of Chavara in this regard in his circular letter to his confreres and in his *chavarul*.

5.3.4. The First Steps for Women Empowerment

Chavara realized that the condition of women, especially the widows were very pathetic. A number of questions disturbed him: Why does not a widow get the same kind of respect as a widower in society? Why does a woman have to be always dependent on men for her basic needs in life? Why was it that women did not have the right to choose a life other than that of marriage? Does she not deserve the freedom to choose the life of a celibate so as to give her time for meditation, prayer and social involvement?

It was as an answer to these and similar questions that he established the first native religious congregation for women. By doing so, he also delved deep into the task of social reformation, because this option would encourage women (religious sisters) to extend the network of their services to people outside their convent. As a first step he introduced education facilities for women as one of the most important service schemes. But he knew that education alone would not be sufficient to solve the burning social issues. Hence, so he introduced as a second step vocational training into the system, which was open also to the weak and destitute women of the neighbouring

places. The story of women empowerment through the twin process of emancipation and education begins here.[27]

6. Contemplative-Active Dimension of Religious Life

The history of the Church is witness to the fact that contemplation and action are not only mutually complementary, but that great mystics like St Francis of Assisi, St Theresa of Avila have been responsible for launching lasting and prophetic changes in the Church. In the 19th century, great Benedictine abbeys of prayer and contemplation were the cradle and seed-bed of the great Liturgical Movement in the west. In India Gandhi-ashrams like Sabarmati, Sevagram, etc., were the ideal ground for the germination of the seed of the Freedom Movement.

6.1. Chavara: Mystic, Contemplative, Prophetic and Active–Rolled into One

There is a gap of at least 100 years between Chavara's vision of religious life and that of the Vatican II. We have mentioned above that only in the year 1900, Pope Leo XIII by his apostolic constitution *Conditae a Christo*, formally acknowledged the non-cloistered apostolic congregations, women congregations in particular, as an authentic form of religious life. It must be for this reason, among others, that the rule of life imposed on the fledgling religious community under Chavara by the Italian Carmelite Order was not suited to a non-cloistered apostolic community. Chavara had to plead for some 'radical changes' to make it suitable to the place, time and vision of consecrated life he had envisaged, anticipating the Council's vision of the same. To a great extent, the Council's vision of religious life as a 'sign of the Church', which is missionary/apostolic by nature was present in his thoughts. As he had internalized the twin character of contemplation-action of the duo – Palackal and Porukara, Chavara bequeathed to the community a heritage of deep prayer and committed pastoral/missionary involvement for the good of the Church.

6.2. Contemplative Personality Visible in Chavara's Writings

Chavara's contemplative personality is visible in his writings, especially in his poems. His *Atmanutapam* (Compunction of the Heart),

---

[27]John Paul, "The First Steps to Women Emancipation" in John Mannarathara (ed.), *The Life and Legacy St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, New Delhi: Viva Books, 2015, 185f.

Anastasyayude Raktasakshyam (Martyrdom of Anastasya), *Maranaveettil Padunnathinulla Pana* (Dirge), *Dhyanasallapangal* (Meditation Colloquies) and Letters reflect the outpourings of his soul. E. Underhill says: "The divine discontent, the hunger for reality, the unwillingness to be satisfied with the purely animal or purely social level of consciousness is the essential stage in the development of mystical consciousness."[28] In this ecstatic union, he addressed God as "Father, my dear Father" (*appa, ente priya appa*).

As for his active personality, it is enough to cast a glimpse on the manifold and mindboggling projects and programmes he got accomplished within a short span of 40 years (1829 -1869 – ordination to the bed-ridden stage). Like Theresa of Avila, the source of energy for his ministries, social and pastoral, developmental and spiritual in the vineyard of the Lord was indeed his deep experience of divine presence in him. His active involvement in secular as well as religious realm was really prophetic, initiating programmes much ahead of his time. It is not for nothing that Dr C. Radhakrishnan, writer, scientist and media person, after having assessed Chavara as a trailblazer in education-campaign, print-media, literary carrier, societal reform etc., of his time.[29]

7. Conclusion

The legacy of Chavara, as he pioneered Indian Catholic *sannyasa* is obvious. It consists of Community dimension, Church dimension, Mission dimension and Mystic-Prophetic dimension/Contemplative-Active dimension. Chavara envisaged and practiced such a life more than 150 years ago and at least 100 years before Vatican II. And still it remains relevant and indeed challenging for us in many ways, if not in all. In the Council's view of religious life, our identity as religious/societies of apostolic life is not to be tied to our institutions, but to our mission. Our institutions in the past began with good intentions as alternative services to the poor; but once they are too

---

[28] E. Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, quoted by Sebastian Mulluparambil, "Divine Confluence" in John Mannarathara, *op.cit*., 227.

[29] "If one closely watches the life, thoughts, deeds and writings of great men like Chavara, one can easily find the reasons why Kerala became the first state to have total literacy, evolved as a model for social development, nurtured an egalitarian ideology, enough to produce the world's first communist government and also became the first place in the world to unseat communist rule (long before the Prague spring, Perestroika and the fall of the Berlin Wall)." (C. Radhakrishnan, "Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Poet of Prophetic Vision" in John Mannarathara, *op.cit*, 3.

much institutionalized, they did not serve the original purpose. This means that a serious evaluation of the existing institutional ministries has to be made. But, apart from the need of the hour, they may also require vision, creativity, commitment and ability to take risk with prudence. If we carefully study and take to heart the various prophetic tasks launched by Chavara, we will not only appreciate his legacy, but be inspired to carry it forward, *mutatis mutandis.*