

TOWARDS A PARADIGM SHIFT IN CONSECRATED LIFE

A Model Based on the Life and Vision of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara

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Abstract: Within the context of a positive ecclesiality of communion, an inclusive society and an interactive cultural context, the author makes an inquiry for a paradigm shift of consecrated life in the light of the life and vision of St Chavara. The existent structures no longer provide the answers as they did in the past because, at present, consecrated life is passing through a transition. The evangelical counsels are less appreciated and much less understood. In order to create fraternity and awaken hope, consecrated life is faced with an opportunity and a task of creating, enlivening and sustaining authentic fraternal communities that radiate friendship, support and reconciliation, humanizing the world in order to humanize. In this digital world, the religious need to keep abreast with the technology of the day in order to proclaim the kingdom of God. The total dedication of Chavara for God and humanity gives impetus to the required paradigm shift in consecrated life.

Keywords: Consecrated life, interiority, communion, evangelical counsels, authoritarianism, discipleship, charism, Eucharist, Mary, mystic, fraternity, formation, freedom, digital world, Roccas

1. Introduction

St Chavara was a zeitgeist of consecrated life in the historical background of India, especially of Kerala. We consider it a meaningful pursuit to look into the paradigm shift of consecrated life that is needed today in the context of his vision and life. The search for a new spirituality and a deep hunger for interiority are the signs of the present era. This search symbolises a deep felt need for something that would help individuals to cope with the situation in which they are

called to live. This is a widespread hunger today which is not satisfied with traditional acts of piety and external liturgical practices. The demand is for something that is deeper. Because of this urge for something more, many people are looking for places and persons who can guide them into it. Hence, yoga and meditations of all types have become very popular in recent times. Sometimes the paths the seekers choose in order to satisfy the deeper urge, lead them to wrong places and persons. Either they alienate themselves from anything that is spiritual and follow fully the material world and its trends, or they find the real truth they seek in spirituality and transform themselves to mystics. It is here that Christian consecrated life plays a major role. It is a way of life based on the Gospel values, chosen to lead the life of a true disciple of Christ and lead others to the truth that is Christ himself.

Today, consecrated life in the world must be seen within the context of a positive ecclesiality of communion, in an inclusive society and in an interactive cultural context. In this way, a community of consecrated persons can be transformed into a human and ecclesial group which is alive, fruitful and radically evangelical. This presupposes the newness dawning in the Church and in our society. In order to see this dawn, it is necessary to have a renewed awareness which is prophetic, wise and revolutionary that can lead consecrated persons to become witnesses of transparent lives rendering Jesus present.

At present, all over the world, consecrated life is going through a difficult moment of transition. Existent structures no longer provide the answers as they did in the past. They find it hard to offer to the current Christian life a new synthesis and an alternative that could touch and renew its identity and make a significant contribution to the Church and contemporary society. Hence, new structures must be born in a new spirit to point to a new paradigm, which presupposes imagination and decisiveness to achieve important changes of structure and lifestyle, which promotes a Church that is more laity oriented and less clerical; more from and with the poor and less materialistic; less immersed in administration and more centred on Jesus and in service, bringing about a mysticism of love, communion, and solidarity.¹ In this context, we look for a new paradigm of

¹Arnaiz, Jose, "The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today" in *10 Capitalo Generale FSP*, Arccia, 15 August - 15 September 2013, 3. <http://www.paoline.org/>

consecrated life in the life and teachings of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara as he was a *guru* and model of consecrated life as well as a trend setter in the history of consecrated life in India.

2. The Backdrop of Today's Consecrated Life

We live in a historical, cultural and social context in which the evangelical counsels are less appreciated and much less understood. They are considered inhuman and culpable of rendering human beings not truly mature or fulfilled and therefore, they are something from which one needs to free oneself. For example, obedience seems to attack the fundamental rights of the human person, the freedom to decide for oneself, to be self-determined and self-fulfilled. Chastity is seen as a deprivation of the good of marriage, and the renunciation of having a person with whom to share the beautiful as well as the ugly moments of life, its joys and sorrows, successes and failures; it is the renunciation of being parents, of tenderness, and of everyday intimacy, and the knowledge that someone is close to you; the renunciation of the sweetness of exchanging glances, and of hearing the words: "how wonderful that you exist!" Poverty is even less appreciated in a world that has made well-being and finances as supreme values making evangelical poverty an evil to be overcome, an evil from which to free oneself in order to become completely autonomous, without having to depend on anyone. To *have* is considered important in order to *be*.²

Undoubtedly, the present socio-cultural and ecclesial context influences consecrated life and ushers in a critical situation, which is manifested by various symptoms, some of which cause real concern: decrease in aspirants, increase in dropouts, the imbalance in the ratio of the number of aged members to the young ones, weighty institutions, excessive and stressful activism on the part of those involved in active ministries, the weakening of community life, fraternity and spiritual life, frequent financial problems, together with the preoccupation over an uncertain future. According to some observers, the actual fervour of consecrated life in the world is plummeting whereas for others, it is suffering from evangelical *anaemia* translated as diminished passion and weak conviction leading to frustration and disenchantment. The power of disenchantment is

paoline/allegati/15808/Arnaiz_LegrandiSfideVCoggi-eng.pdf, accessed on 20 December 2014.

²Jose, "The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today."

quite strong. Becoming aware of its presence and responding properly will lead consecrated life to be re-born in a way that is more alive and stronger than ever.

The present situation in our globalized world is perhaps the most profound crisis of meaning in the history of humanity. People are disoriented and are suffering for the lack of meaning, which can be described as the breakdown of Christianity's historical incarnation. However, this is a new invitation for revitalization and reform in the Church. It is obvious that we need conversion and growth to resolve those distortions that have weakened the life and witness of the Church, including religious life. We have become too accustomed to privileges, considering our call an "office," or worst yet, a "dignity." We have become insensitive to our lack of austerity and infrequently do we question whether our life is coherent with the "image" of the servant who gives his life so that others can have life.

It is evident that a life centred on God and self-giving to others is clearly countercultural in the present scenario. It appears as a sign counter to the absolute value of money and materialism, counter to hedonism and body worship, counter to individualism and any form of authoritarianism.

In the Catholic perspective, religious consecration makes one commit oneself to God without conditions. More concretely, it makes one 'living memories of Jesus' way of being and acting,' of his obedience, poverty and chastity. It transforms one into a sign of God's love for humanity. This is the first contribution that one can and should make as a religious. Unfortunately, it is not recognized because a reductive anthropological model, very frequent today, robs from life its religious dimension, building it on short-term life projects. This is what happens with the myth of science, technology and economics and the illusion that progress is unlimited, condemning existence to the immanence of this world without horizons of definitive transcendence since everything ends with death. To a world centred on efficiency and production, on economy and well-being, the religious presents himself or herself as a sign of God and his grace and love. Jesus came to give us God and his love. This is God's good news! It is God whom, first and foremost, we can give to humanity. This is the great hope that we can offer. It is our first prophecy.

3. The Meaning of Vocation, a Revisit

For a Christian, the experience of God is the experience of Jesus, the resurrected one in whom God is revealed and manifested. One can see

the meaning of religious identity in the very existential personal relationship of a person with Jesus in whom God is revealed in His fullness. In the Gospels, "the call of the disciples appears as a two-stage process of leaving and following, (Come and see: Jn 1:37-39) the second of which constitutes discipleship." Following meant technically "walking behind." As we read in Mk 3:13-15, the disciples were always in the company of Jesus observing all that he did, hearing all that he spoke. There were several occasions when they received special instructions too (Mk 4:10-20; 7:17; 9:28). The only time they were away was when Jesus himself sent them two by two for a trial mission (Mk 6:7-12). And on their return, Jesus was very particular that they should go back to his company in all earnestness (6:31). Jesus did not seem to consider their achievements during their mission more important than their company with him. Logically, priority was given to being with him (Lk 24:29). The following of Jesus introduces the disciple to a certain kind of open communal life. No one is a follower in isolation; but is supported and challenged by others with a similar commitment.³ To be a disciple of Jesus one has to follow him along the way that he walks from Galilee to Jerusalem and ultimately to God.⁴

Chavara was very much aware of the precious call of God. For him, the call he had received from God was incomparable to any other privilege one can receive in life. Therefore, he writes: "Remember what the Lord has done for you. He chose you from out of thousands. There were many who more worthy than you were. Yet, wonder of wonders, he chose you, called you to his home, endowed you with many gifts of body and spirit."⁵ The deep conviction of Chavara that God's call for him was to remain with God is reflected throughout his writings. For example, in his letters to the sisters in the convent at Koonammavu he wrote: "Abide in the love of Jesus Christ; always sit before his face; walk along with him; converse with him unceasingly."⁶ In some other context he exclaimed: "O Lord, do not separate from us until we are one with you."⁷ Both of the above quotes reveal that he knew that the true meaning of one's vocation is to remain in the company of Jesus.

³See the webpage <http://www.aopsl.org/art/art-jeyaraj1.htm> for details.

⁴Dennis M. Sweetland, "Following Jesus: Discipleship in Luke-Acts" in Earl Richard (ed.), *New Views on Luke and Acts*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1990, 109.

⁵Chavara, *Complete Works of Chavara*, Vol. III, *Adhyathmika Kruthikal*, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1986, 27.

⁶Chavara, *CWC*, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/6, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 2011.

⁷Chavara, *CWC*, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/6.

Living with Jesus in itself encompasses the duty of bearing witness to him. This can be accomplished only through a vital and deep relationship with the Lord. Hence, Chavara emphasises: 'Abide in the love of Jesus Christ'.⁸ Being with Jesus, one follows a style of life and mission to which one dedicates one's time and heart. This "offering" is possible, authentic and fruitful only if it comes from a profound evangelical spirituality that helps people to mature in all the dimensions of their lives; a strong spirituality, incarnated, committed and nourished with the Eucharist, prayer and communitarian life, flowing into a profoundly mystical experience both in daily life and in the mission.

4. To Deepen the Meaning of Evangelical Counsels

According to Pope Francis, Obedience is the listening to God's will, in the interior motion of the Holy Spirit authenticated by the Church, accepting that obedience also passes through human mediations. Poverty teaches solidarity, sharing and charity and which is also expressed in a soberness and joy of the essential, to put us on guard against the material idols that obscure the true meaning of life. Poverty is learned with the humble, the poor, the sick, and all those who are at the existential margins of life. Theoretical poverty does not do anything. Poverty is learned by touching the flesh of the poor Christ in the humble, the poor, the sick, and in children. And then chastity, as a precious charism, that enlarges the freedom of one's gift to God and others with Christ's tenderness, mercy, and closeness. Chastity for the Kingdom of Heaven shows how affection has its place in mature freedom and becomes a sign of the future world, to make God's primacy shine forever.⁹ The vows of evangelical counsels lead to the realisation of the free capacity of a person to give himself/herself fully to God in response to his call as a human person and as a Christian. These vows provide the framework of consecrated life for an individual.

4.1. Evangelical Obedience

In today's context, in terms of the understanding of obedience, the pendulum has swung from total self-sacrifice to personal self-

⁸Chavara, *CWC*, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/6.

⁹From the speech of Pope Francis on the Evangelical Counsels given in Vatican Radio on 3 May 2013. See the Web page <http://rcommentary2.blogspot.in/2013/05/pope-francis-on-evangelical-counsels.html>. Accessed on 22 December 2014.

fulfilment wrongly understood as one must have and do whatever one desires. According to this understanding, religious obedience is subject to whatever aids one's own personal enhancement, thus making a mockery of the evangelical counsel. The present world's outlook on poverty is that it has no more meaning and witnessing value in the way religious life is being lived out today. The wealth, comforts, power and positions alienate religious from the poor to whom they are called to be the "Good News". Even those who initially succeeded in re-orienting themselves towards the poor have experienced difficulties in sustaining this commitment. While many religious continue to acknowledge the value of the vow of chastity, due to the changed conditions in which most of us are called to live today, without the traditional safeguards, more and more cases of scandalous behaviour on the part of religious has led to the loss of trust of the people.

The life of Chavara reveals his ever readiness to obey God through his superiors. Generally, the letters he wrote to the authorities end with the words: "on me who is ready to obey and serve" or "ready to obey" or "willing to obey" etc.¹⁰ In this regard, his spiritual daughters of Koonammavu convent observe:

"... This Father was obeying all like a little child. The good example which he showed us till his death is something that everyone marvels at. Is it not right and lawful then that all of us learn from his good example and live accordingly? As he was the prior and the head of all the monasteries (only Fr Delegate was superior to him, whose command he had to obey, Fr Leopold was out of the country) all were bound to obey his command. Still he obeyed all like a child. This he did in order to give up his will completely and thus set a good example for all."¹¹

In matters of obedience, Chavara followed his Master who was obedient unto death. He achieved such heroic heights since he had fully abandoned his own will. He became a model for obedience to all the consecrated people.¹² While narrating the last moments of Chavara's life, the Chronicler of Koonammavu convent, quoting the words of Fr Leopold, reports the following incident which divulges his spirit of obedience:

¹⁰See Chavara, *CWC*, Vol. IV, *Letters*, III/7, III/8 & III/9.

¹¹*Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent (CKC)*, Vol. II, 13. Original manuscript is preserved in the Archives of CMC Vimala Province, Ernakulam.

¹²Paul Kalluveetil, Sophy Rose, Maria Anto and Mareena, *Women TOCD Facts versus Fabrications*, Aluva: CMC Publications, 2013, 276.

Yesterday night I administered the last sacraments as well as the remission of sins. Before I administered the Holy Communion, the patient (Fr Chavara) spontaneously burst out into a speech about the passion of Jesus Christ and the glories of the Mother of God. One will be astonished at hearing his words... I asked thus, 'father, are you happy now, and enjoy the peace of mind?' Then by folding both his hands he replied, 'father, now there is great peace and happiness.' Then he intimated to me one thing: 'father, I did not participate in the Holy Mass last Sunday.' I thus replied, 'it was not because of your unwillingness. Was it not because of the holy obedience that prohibited you? Why should you be disturbed about it?' At this, he was satisfied and said: 'yes, it is true. It was indeed because of the holy obedience. This is enough for me.'¹³

The life of Chavara was indeed a life of *cholvil* (obedience) which remains as a true witness and challenge to the people who embrace religious life today.¹⁴

The exhortations of Chavara on obedience bear witness to the vow he lived in all the moments of his consecrated life. He says: "The sole mark of a religious is blind obedience, abandoning one's own will completely. One who has obedience is a religious. It is not an easy task. Nevertheless, recognising that our obedience is not yet perfect, we have to try to make it so."¹⁵ 'God's will in everything' was his motto. It made obedience easy for him in difficult situations as he mentioned in one of the letters to Fr Kuriakose Porukara. He writes: "everything is God's will. As the Book of Proverbs says, 'the will of the Lord is my fortune'. Bear this in mind always." The same sentiments are reflected in his spiritual reflections also. In *The Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, he notes: "May the holy, supreme and true will of God be praised now and forever."¹⁶ Similarly, the prayer that was dear to his heart expressed his desire to be obedient: "Do with me whatever you wish. I am fully resigned to your holy will. Lord, grant me the grace never to waver from this resolution until my death."¹⁷ Doing the will of God always, everywhere and in everything was the life of Chavara. In this manner, he turned a true model of obedience which is the essence of consecrated life.

¹³CKC, Vol. II, 21-22.

¹⁴Kalluveetil et al, *Women TOCD Facts versus Fabrications*, 275-277.

¹⁵CWC, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VI/4. See also Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV, *Letters*, V/2.

¹⁶Chavara, CWC, Vol. III, *Adhyathmika Kruthikal*, 68.

¹⁷Chavara, CWC, Vol. III, *Adhyathmika Kruthikal*, 62.

4.2. Evangelical Poverty

According to Chavara, Poverty is the complete trust and dependency in the divine providence. A sublime simplicity in attitude towards the Lord is found in one of his letters to the Sisters at Koonammavu, as he wrote: "Let us get the work done; the Almighty will give us the money. This is not our property, rather this is the patrimony of Jesus Christ."¹⁸ God, the inexhaustible source of riches, is ever ready to pay the labourers on our behalf. We surmise that the first community of sisters at Koonammavu convent, thus were trained by Chavara had evolved a spirituality of trust in their religious life.

To be a non-having and non-being person was not a negative concept according to Chavara, but a very positive and creative relationship. God can fill a person who becomes a true destitute (*agathi*) who is forced to cling to the Lord of resources for survival. As the salvation history teaches us, the Almighty then blesses him/her with His infinite riches and transforms that soul into a being rich in divinity. Chavara was endowed with biblical and mystical vision concerning the concept of poverty. Hence, he considers the life in the first bamboo mat convent as a life of true *agathivoam* (poverty).¹⁹ He clung to God for the completion of the project by saying, "I trusted in the Lord with the hope that He would complete everything."²⁰ An authentic *agathi* naturally learns to trust since he/she is fully convinced that only the Lord could make his/her survival possible and He is the only *segulla*, treasured possession (Ex 19:5) in religious life. In his letters to the Sisters, he repeated the following words of trust: "May the Lord protect you."²¹

By practicing *agathivoam* the religious enjoy perfect trust and confidence and do most daring works and accomplish seemingly impossible feats by the divine help of which they have absolute guarantee. His own personal life of an utter destitute is an example for religious to evolve a lifestyle of *agathivoam*. They become, to borrow the terminology of Chavara, "more fortunate in comforts proper to the world and heaven than all of the people in the world."²² Moreover, they recall the care and diligence with which the Lord looks after their

¹⁸Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/5.

¹⁹Chavara, CWC, Vol. I, *Chronicles*, Mannanam: CMI Prasadaka Committee, 2000, 126.

²⁰Chavara, CWC, Vol. I, *Chronicles*, 127.

²¹Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/1; Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/2.

²²Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/7.

day-to-day affairs.”²³ These words reveal the deep conviction of the saint that the Lord provides for his people.²⁴

4.3. Evangelical Chastity

The concept of Chavara regarding the vow of chastity is based on the sublime status of a consecrated Sister as a spouse of Christ. This is reflected in the exhortations given to the Sisters. In his written reflections on the status of the consecrated ones, Chavara eulogizes the spousal dignity of the Sisters. His reflections begin with a citation from St Augustine: “Oh consecrated, Oh blessed Sister! You have a Bridegroom who is the most sublime above the glories of heaven and earth. He has chosen you from among the virgins, in order to make you his own and to elevate you as His bride. Don’t you know that you are granted the pledge of love? It is then proper that you should have the greatest love for him.”²⁵

Further, Chavara is inspired by the words of St Bernard:

No more then, you should have any relationship with the world. Oh bride of Jesus, forsake yourself and the world, since you do not belong to yourself, you also do not belong to the world. Rather, you have given yourself to Him and you belong to the Lord. It is not you who have chosen Him but God has chosen you and separated you as His spouse. There were many virgins in this world who are not granted this great favour with which you are blessed. It is not because you are better than they are. The only reason is that He had loved you more than others.²⁶

Chavara resumes his thought in the Augustinian manner: “You draw me to yourself in love. It is enough. I do not love anything other than my Lord, since He loves me more.”²⁷

In a consecrated person, Chavara finds the bride of the Song of Songs: “I have found the one my heart loves. I held him and would not let him go” (Song of Songs 3:4). It is love that binds the soul to God. Chavara speaks on behalf of the bride of Christ: “He has made me wear his ring on my finger and has made me His bride. He has

²³Chavara, *CWC*, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/11.

²⁴Kalluveetil et al, *Women TOCD Facts versus Fabrications*, 258.

²⁵Chavara, *Chavarayachante Kathukal*, Kakkannadu: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2011, VII/12.

²⁶Chavara, *Chavarayachante Kathukal*, VII/12.

²⁷Chavara, *Chavarayachante Kathukal*, VII/12.

adorned me with a crown. The one who is my Creator, my Bridegroom and the King and Lord of everything has crowned me queen."²⁸

Following the mystical fathers of the Church, Chavara finds the call of a consecrated religious person as entering into a spiritual marriage with Christ. The articulation *consecrated* seems to be Chavara's original terminology, which has a very profound and highly mystical overtone. He considers the religious as the 'Eucharistic bread' in which transubstantiation has taken place after consecration.²⁹

A religious is a blessed person, as Mary is designated blessed, since she bore in her womb the Word made flesh (Lk 1:42). Chavara was not comparing a consecrated person to a bride; rather she *is* the bride in reality. This leads the religious into a mystical world. The expression, 'the pledge of love' reminds us of the words of the bride in the Song of Songs: "Set me like a seal over your heart, like a seal over your arm; love burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame" (Song of Songs 8:6). The phrase 'pledge of love' which is given to a religious, has another further elevated meaning. It is a guarantee and foretaste of the fullness of love with which a religious is recompensed during the eschatological times.³⁰

A religious belongs to Christ. Hence Chavara would exhort the members of his community: 'You are not the one that is within you.'³¹ The statement seems to refer to one's interiority. According to the secular thinking, the self is the centre of one's personality. In religious life, Christ becomes the indwelling One of the soul (*Antaryamin*). A religious has given herself/himself to Christ the Bridegroom. Referring to Jn 15:16, Chavara reminds the Sisters that they are totally the possession of the divine Bridegroom.

In *Letter VII/2*, the saintly father articulates his inner feelings when he reads about the lofty status of the consecrated virgins. He candidly confesses that he felt holy jealousy about the sisters whom he designates the great queens and spouses of Christ. His words seem to disclose his own mystical experience of the graces of consecrated life. His address: 'Oh the great queens, the brides of my God'³² is noteworthy in this context.

²⁸Chavara, *Chavarayachante Kathukal*, VII/12.

²⁹Kalluveetil et al, *Women TOCD Facts versus Fabrications*, 233.

³⁰Kalluveetil et al, *Women TOCD Facts versus Fabrications*, 234.

³¹Chavara, *Chavarayachante Kathukal*, VII/12.

³²Chavara, *Chavarayachante Kathukal*, VII/12.

Chavara, the mystic, considers the cell of a religious as the bridal chamber of Christ. This is indeed a very sublime and celestial vision. A consecrated person is called to live a delightful, charming and loving life. In *Letter VII/7*, the saint asks his spiritual daughters to experience the sweetness of the voice of their loving spouse. Literally, he was demanding them to *remember*³³ the sweet voice of Christ. Although, peripherally the phrase 'to remember' the voice does not make sense, in a deep sense, it implies a mystical nourishing by the voice ever reverberating in the inner soul. The divine Bridegroom is ever with them and would not suffer any other love in the hearts of His beloved spouses.

In *Letter VII/6*, Chavara borrows the words of Christ the Bridegroom who has fixed His gaze on His beloved brides who are attracted to the worldly joys and things. However, they need not be worried and sad since the heavenly Bridegroom is ever compassionate and is ready to claim them. He is constantly beside them and has given Himself to them. Chavara trained the early members of the community of sisters to live in the ever abiding and loving presence of the divine Bridegroom and to keep constant communion and communication.

These examples shed light on the mystical personality of Chavara and his concept of vowed life. The evangelical counsels are the core of a life in intimate union with Christ. It is a life based on faith and trust in God's providence in one's life, a life of total surrender and total abandonment. The consecrated life of Chavara is a guiding star for all the consecrated people to live a productive and meaningful consecrated life.

5. Listening to God in the Needy

The call to consecrated life is the ecclesial answer of all life that is threatened, and the response to the call is to form a world that is possible and necessary. Few things arouse as much admiration, surprise and attraction as to see religious who give themselves in favour of the impoverished and of those who, in one way or another, are considered the least of society.³⁴ The religious are there where others do not want to be. Undoubtedly, it was the preferential option for the poor that configured the life and mission of Jesus (Lk 14:18). And it was the same option that configured the ministries and life of

³³Chavara, *Chavarayachante Kathukal*, VII/12.

³⁴Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 82.

religious congregations. All of them were born at the threshold of some type of inhumanity. Therefore the mission priorities set by the religious cannot be for those who exclude others, but with those excluded ones.

The history of the option for the needy merges with the history of the consecrated life. It involves a commitment to a systemic change as a response to the cry of the poor and a supporting role played in the construction of more just societies. It involves processes of awareness, formation and action that encourage and produce changes in mentality, culture and activities. It involves a spirituality and consistency of faith that react to the progressive deterioration of the living conditions of human beings, and that can contribute effectively to the elimination of hunger, eradication of poverty, environmental sustainability, gender equality and recognition of women, reduction of infant mortality and promotion of health. Further, it helps recover the *sense of the poor*, which is very different from charity given merely as assistance. This is to be considered as a resonance of the current movement of the *indignados*.³⁵

The life and mission of Chavara clearly was a response to many of the above mentioned realities. He whole heartedly stood for the deprived, the poor and the sick of his time. He proposed new ways and means for their empowerment and painstakingly accomplished them. He gave a new dimension to the role of religious in India. Sharing the pain and thirst of the deprived, he was with them and worked hard for their uplift and comfort. Whatever he had done for the society was an expression of his compassion for his people in pain and poverty. In that sense, he was really able to listen to the cry of the people of God in this land.

The listening of the cry of the people of God also involves setting up religious life in frontier areas, as its prophetic and mystical expression. For a religious person, it involves making the courage of the Founders one's own, making the evangelical response when life calls - the commitment to migrants/refugees, human trafficking, the poor, the elderly, the indigenous people and the women. It further calls for a response to integral and sustainable human development, and a systemic change that can humanize and unite. This response leads to prophecy in the face of runaway corruption, both in the world of economics as in the world of politics at all levels. It implies a culture of honesty, transparency and solidarity, as an alternative to the culture

³⁵Jose, "The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today," 9.

of corruption and selfishness, founded on a vision of the human person called to a transparent relationship with God, with all our brothers and sisters and with the creation.³⁶

As the founder of religious congregations for both men and women Chavara responded to these needs of the society. With these communities, he founded monasteries in various places and established schools and boarding houses for girls along with the convents in geographically suitable areas. The testament bears witness to his further plans in this regard: "It is necessary that more monasteries and convents be opened in the South. Also one monastery each to east and West of Mannanam and some convents with boarding houses are needed... It is necessary and very useful to have a few convents of the sisters, one at Mutholy and another at Mannanam with boarding houses attached."³⁷

A glance at the initiatives that Chavara made for the sake of the society of Kerala, reveals his futuristic vision and goal oriented practical action. His inclusive and universal outlook, inspired by the Christian vision and mission, motivated him to invest whatever was at his disposal for the good of the people, especially of those who were excluded by the inhuman socio-religious systems of the time.³⁸

The consecrated life should continue to offer the path and the reality of an effective and relevant option for the poor. Religious life is meaningful and attractive not when it becomes alarmed in the face of difficult socio-cultural realities, but when it becomes leaven and energy in the history so that there will be new heavens and a new earth and God, who is absolute newness (Rev 21:1-7), will live in our limitations, overcome them and fulfil his dream for all humankind. The mission of religious is accomplished when their action, reflection and praxis converge in the engagement with the poor and the promotion of justice.³⁹ When Chavara opted for the monastic life, his aim was to enrich the society around him with more vigour and clarity. A.M. Mundadan emphasises this fact: "He retired from the world not because he was afraid of it, or tired of it, or disliked it, or belittled it, but because he wanted to leaven the dough, to educate and to reform the sons and daughters of God, so that they became really

³⁶Jose, "The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today," 9.

³⁷Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VI/4.

³⁸Chackalackal, *Igniting Minds to Transform the Society: "Legacy of K.E. Chavara for Innovative and Inclusive Education" and Other Essays on Education*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2013, 21.

³⁹Jose, "The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today," 9.

his children. With a singleness of purpose he tried all through his life to equip himself with knowledge, wisdom and virtue and disseminate them to his fellow religious, priests and nuns and the laity at large."⁴⁰

6. To Create Fraternity and Awaken Hope

Nowadays, consecrated life is faced with an opportunity and a very special task of creating, inspiring, enlivening and sustaining everywhere authentic fraternal communities that radiate friendship, incentive, support and reconciliation. Consecrated life must strengthen community life, to which new generations are very sensitive. It must accommodate the cultural and spiritual diversity of its members, knowing that a living community is a mission. It ought to be open *ad extra*, towards all those excluded from history. In order to achieve the reality of a community, which can transmit the message of the appeal of living together, united in diversity, creating heartfelt and humanizing spaces that are open and joyful for each person and for others, according to Arnaiz, Jose, the following pattern of progress is required:

1. A life in a community which is rich in personal relationships, welcome, dialogue, discernment, responsible freedom and concern for the other and for what is diverse, where more than mere physical presence, what is required is the melding of spirit and the union of hearts.
2. Turning structures that make individuals childish into supports that can form people in freedom. It is not uncommon that, even with good will, certain structural supports have been multiplied making people childish, without creativity or imagination; they are agents more loyal to executing orders than people able to discern, from their own responsibility and their own loyal knowledge and understanding to live the mission assigned to them. We do not help people to grow in maturity and responsibility by forcing them, but by encouraging them.
3. Turning an impossible uniformity to a communion in diversity. Every Christian and religious community is a pale image of the Trinitarian community. And the Trinitarian community is realized in differences, not in uniformity: each divine Person is different and works differently. The unity of the Holy Trinity is made up of the oppositions and differences of the three distinct Persons, co-sharers in love.

⁴⁰Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 345.

4. Turning a fortified trench to an open field where we battle for the Kingdom. An introverted community is a neurotic community. Our communities would live in a healthier and more airy manner if they opened up their doors and windows to the world; or if they came down to the streets and accompanied the caravans of men and women, listening with their hearts to how much people suffer, struggle and love. The place where we stand is not the convenient tail end without risks, but the line of fire where we fight for justice, solidarity and peace.⁴¹

Chavara's ideal of fraternity was grounded on his foundation in the spirituality of love. It is two dimensional in nature with the love for God and love for neighbour as represented in the Scripture. He was a true promoter of the spirit of commonness and sharing in the first Christian Community. As an introduction to the account of Mannanam Monastery he wrote: "As there existed a deep spiritual brotherhood among us and likewise we wanted to have a fellowship in material things similar to the spiritual fellowship, we decided to put together all our physical earnings and the fruits thereof belonging to us, following the model showed by St Peter in the beginning as a summary of the whole and a foundation stone."⁴² This description pinpoints the fraternity that existed in the community of Chavara, which was based on the spiritual brotherhood, spiritual and physical fellowship among the members of the community. This is the model of consecrated life that he envisioned to flourish in the Church of Kerala in order to produce saints in the land.

In his last testament, Chavara proposed a life-style of mutual love and concern as a pattern for the monasteries to follow:

My dear brethren, let the vicars of each of our monasteries foster real charity among themselves and maintain a true bond. However, numerous the monasteries are, all must be like the members of one, show greater interest in meeting family, children born to, nursed and brought up by the same mother. Never let this love weaken, but let it grow stronger from day to day. Bear this in mind as an important piece of advice, in order that this love may not weaken. Let the vicars of the monasteries vie with one another and show greater interest in meeting the needs and request coming from the other monasteries rather than those of one's own. When you assemble periodically to discuss different matters, settle your

⁴¹Jose, "The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today," 9-10.

⁴²Chavara, *CWC*, Vol. I, *Chronicles*, 208.

mutual financial account till that date. Lest this love weaken in course of time, let the Vicars of the Monasteries, though not compelled by necessity or circumstances exchange letters among themselves communicating the good news here and inquiring about the needs of others and render any help that might be required.⁴³

The advice of Chavara is very relevant in this period of compartmentalisation. Each monastery, which he considered as his true home, is a fragment of the whole which should be interconnected by constant communication, help and support. In a similar vein, he wrote to the people of Kainakari encouraging them to promote charity: "I left my home and parents for the sake of God. Now I am writing this from Elthuruthu. I have my brethren here who love me more than my brothers and sisters. Tomorrow, if I go to Koonammavu, I will have the same experience there as well; so also if I go to Mannanam or to Vazhakulam."⁴⁴ The fraternal sentiment expressed here should be the hallmark of consecrated life as this great sage of Kerala taught us.

The hardships faced by Chavara in the process of the foundation of the monasteries, seminary, convent, printing press, etc. and the way he met them clearly signify his spirituality of hope. He accomplished all these feats only by the deep trust he had in God's providential care. He wrote: "Our task is only to arrange for the work to be done. God will give us the money for it, because all this is God's work. Our competence here is only to work."⁴⁵ His life testifies to the fact that he truly lived in this conviction. He did his share of work and God rewarded him with the rest. Today's world needs this spirituality of trust.

7. Humanising in order to Humanize

Offering the contemporary society and culture an alternative way of living is not a minor challenge. In the past, the consecrated people effected great social and cultural changes, by presenting an alternative project of human achievement and a cultural proposal that turned out to be the indispensable response to the need for values, attitudes and practices of the society of those times. The contributions of Chavara to the society of Kerala were made by opening new pathways for change and development. Education is the most important means for

⁴³Chavara, *CWC*, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VI/4.

⁴⁴Chavara, *CWC*, Vol. IV, *Letters*, IX/7.

⁴⁵Chavara, *CWC*, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/5.

initiating the humanizing process in the life of an individual.⁴⁶ Chavara imbibed this understanding and emphasized the importance of the education of priests as well as the public. Hence, we consider him as an initiator of humanizing process, as an upholder of human dignity and as a prophet of deep vision and conviction for the development of the society.

Today we need to move towards a revitalized consecrated life that responds to the new paradigms that stir us, making sure that our fraternity and union are more humane and humanizing. We recognize that at this time there is a dearth of adequate human maturity in religious. They face a “precarious physical and mental health” exacerbated by a significant decrease in the number of members. Bearing this reality in mind, we face the urgent challenge to support every initiative that leads to overcoming immaturity and lack of personal knowledge manifested in attachments, relationships of superiority or inferiority, and in not knowing how to value or learn from various ways or degrees of each one’s formation. In addition to using what the human sciences offer, it is essential to have an authentic spiritual experience, a welcome meeting with grace capable of transforming our human inconsistencies.⁴⁷

Concerning the topic of humanizing in our current socio-cultural context, we need to highlight three strong sensibilities of our times – freedom, compassion and communion. As finite human beings, open to infinity, we can choose freedom, a freedom that is at the origin of being human, as the author of the Book of Genesis intuited. We choose freedom to search and find new faces and new names for God in the following of Jesus of the Gospel. We choose freedom to empty ourselves of power, privileges and honours given by our ecclesial and social position, and place ourselves really and effectively with the most marginalized, impoverished and excluded. The epochal crisis offers us the opportunity of freedom to live new experiences to say our word, to make our search visible, to move from fearful obedience to fidelity out of love. This freedom blends well with docility. Freedom continues to be a key topic and, in a certain way, a “turbulent” one in the processes of revitalization of the consecrated life, and in the cultural moment in which we find ourselves today. Chavara was

⁴⁶Chackalackal, *Igniting Minds to Transform the Society*, 60.

⁴⁷Jose, “The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today,” 10-11.

keenly aware of the freedom of choice of an individual. His testament to families witnesses this fact.⁴⁸

Conscious of our finiteness and that of all creation, we experience compassion as a visceral love that unites us in our common identity, illness, impotence, and death. Compassion puts passion in our proceedings and gives our existence an essential quality for human development. The compassion that we want to live, and which finds its source in the Gospel, requires a lucid and loving option for those who suffer as a result of acts of inhumanity in our present times. We must suffer "together with." This signifies making a strong decision to manifest the love of God and to heal the deep wounds of humanity, of others and our own. Our concern, like that of God, should be for suffering humanity, and our love, like that of Jesus, should be the love which seeks life for everyone and for all things. Chavara's ideologies regarding compassion and care for the unprivileged human beings are explicitly revealed in the foundation of a charity home at Kainakari. In a caste-blinded society, the initiative was a tremendous and innovative step to care for the less fortunate people and protect their dignity as human beings. His concerns in this aspect were evident in the letter he sent to the parishioners of Kainakari.⁴⁹

We share the wound of the finite, and the openness to the infinite. We suffer the rupture that conflicts cause in us. These common realities call for communion between us and with God to give rise to new relations and new realities. In addition to community understood in a limited way as sharing the same roof, we must choose to create communion daily by embracing our differences, allowing the wisdom of God to stir us and direct us, lovingly, including even what disturbs us. Humanity today asks us to practice the aspect of meeting each other and "connect" with one another. A truly fraternal community is one of the most eagerly awaited signs from our culture. The sentiments of Chavara revealed in his writings on various occasions promote the message of true communion and communication. He is recognised as a man who inculcated communion and communication⁵⁰ in the monasteries, convents, church and in the society around him.

The triad – freedom, compassion and communion – can lead us to live in a manner that fulfils our desire for the infinite out of our own finite existence which is open to eternity. It can also challenge us to

⁴⁸Chavara, *CWC*, Vol. IV, *Letters*, IX/6.

⁴⁹Chavara, *CWC*, Vol. IV, *Letters*, IX/7.

⁵⁰Kalluveetil et al, *Women TOCD Facts versus Fabrications*, 196.

live intensely the deep aspirations of humanity present in the human beings of all times and accentuated in our days; it can help us give a human and evangelical face to men and women religious. Liberty, interiority and creativity are ways to bring about a radical renewal in our following of Christ in an unprecedented and clearly poetic vein, which is even mystical and prophetic.⁵¹

8. Consecrated Life: A Revisit from the Digital World

We are present in this “new technological culture that every day expands with the rapid development of science, technology and communications.”⁵² This digital world, also called the sixth continent, can accentuate the “light culture,” which favours the new anthropological findings and ways of thinking already mentioned above. It leads us to listen to what refers to the contemporaneity of relations, openness to the diverse and the breadth of horizons.⁵³ At the time of Chavara, printing and publication was the most productive way to reach out to people. Painstakingly, he explored the potential of the media for the benefit of the society. He kept himself abreast with the technology of the day in order to proclaim the kingdom of God and to promote the holistic development of human beings.

It is necessary to deepen and promote global thinking beyond specific, contextual, local practices. It is urgent to understand in depth, not only the knowledge and appropriate use of new information and communication technologies for “evangelizing oneself and evangelizing others,” but also the anthropological, cultural and religious implications of this great digital scenario. It is also important to integrate the digital culture in relationships and in the fulfilment of people. This implies that the new information and communication technologies will have to find its place in consecrated life and become instruments of evangelization in our mission and lifestyle, helping to achieve solidarity, avoid immediacy and overcome distances.⁵⁴ Imbibing the prophetic vision and intuition of Chavara, consecrated people today are required to enhance the horizons of evangelization. It is the primary duty of all the Christians, especially the consecrated ones.

⁵¹Jose, “The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today,” 11.

⁵²Jose, “The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today,” 13.

⁵³Jose, “The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today,” 13

⁵⁴Jose, “The Great Challenges of Consecrated Life Today,” 13-14.

9. Conclusion

Consecrated life is necessary in today's world only in the measure that it makes people capable of looking with hope at the horizon before them; that they commit themselves to understand the dynamics of today's global and diversified world; that they become men and women of depth so that they can be faithful to the charismatic spirit of foundation, instead of the centuries-old structures that were established for other times. It is important to know how to dedicate themselves to seeking a new sanctity open to the future that permits the consecrated people to revive the foundational intuitions and make them new; and so that they can launch into new adventures, even in the midst of uncertainty and running the risk of possible failure.

The pertinent thing today is to be relevant in our particular missions – seen as a contribution to society and a possible means of favouring its transformation; it means being significant to the poor, getting involved with them and "burning our bridges." This is where our future lies and the opportunity of becoming evangelizing leaven. It could be that young religious are finding a new way of being so, and those more advanced in age are not able to see it or interpret it.

The contribution of Chavara to humanity can be summarised in the following words. "Three crippling social perils: epidemic deaths, untouchability and illiteracy. Three impediments that threatened Malabar church unity: the Roccas schism, blind westernisation and extreme extremism. There were problems all around, but St. Chavara visualised only solutions. Over time, these solutions grew into missions of humanity across the globe. They became schools, colleges, universities and spiritual and cultural centres. Here is the saga of Kuriakose Elias, a Kalari-bred boy from Kerala, the southernmost tip of India, who became St. Chavara and transformed the society in which he lived into a powerhouse."⁵⁵ This total and complete dedication of Chavara for God and humanity gives impetus to the required Paradigm Shift of Consecrated Life, which is the need of the time to live our call meaningfully.

⁵⁵Thomas C. Mathew, on the cover page of *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, John Mannarathara (ed.), New Delhi: Viva Books, for Christ University Bangalore, 2015.