

RELIGIOUS WOMEN IN THE TESTAMENT OF CHAVARA

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Abstract: The author discusses the concern of Chavara for the members of the congregations that he established, especially for women. The content of the testament includes the plan of Chavara for the growth and development of the institutes. He gives some guidelines for the future expansion and the nature of the ministry of the congregations both for men and for women and the relationship between them. His plan includes monasteries, convents and boarding houses. Moreover, it was his dream that there should be boarding houses for girls attached to all the convents. This combination of the boarding house and convent was so successful that Chavara wanted it to spread beyond the boundaries of Varapuzha. All these were the result of the dream of Chavara for creating a 'space' for women religious in the Church and bringing about the economic independence and financial security of women in the society in Kerala.

Keywords: Testament, community, convent, education, boarding house, congregation, monastery, Beccaro, rules, schools, women, complementarity, liberation, handicrafts.

1. Introduction

Saint Chavara prepared his testament in August 1870. It is a well thought out document that he prepared before he was bedridden. He called it his *chavarul*, which denotes the 'last exhortation of a dying person addressed to his/her children or descendants.' Chavara's testament is addressed to his sons in the religious community of which he was a member. In the document, he addresses the members of his religious community known today as the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), which was previously known as the Third Order of the Carmelite Discalced (TOCD).¹

¹The religious institutes of both men and of women were known by the common term TOCD. In 1959 the Syro-Malabar Carmelites assumed the name 'Carmelites of Mary Immaculate' (CMI). In this article, 'the Women TOCD'

2. The Content of the Testament

In the opening words of the testament, Chavara calls the testament his final instruction. He presents it in five paragraphs and the third paragraph presents his vision of the growth and expansion of the religious institutes he established. The convent and monasteries he had already built and others he had in mind were part of his plan for the growth and expansion, which is the topic of this study.

3. Plan for the Growth of the Institutes

Chavara believed that his responsibilities toward the religious institutes he established would not end with his death. Intending to continue the historical mediation created by the founder in establishing the institutes, he clearly designed the growth and development of the institutes and articulated it in the *Testament*.² In this final farewell message, which is addressed to his religious community of men, Chavara gives some guidelines for the future expansion and the nature of the ministry of the Congregations both for men and for women and the relationship between them. While looking at the needs of the Church and reflecting on the future growth of the convent, Chavara thoughtfully marked in the *Testament* the specific places where the convents were to be opened: "It is necessary and very useful to have convents, one at Mutholy and another at Mannanam with boarding houses attached."³

He conceived the monastery, convent, and boarding house together as one unit with one single goal to achieve. He encouraged the members of his community to put more effort and diligence into accomplishing the instructions given in the testament. He states:

stands for the religious institute for women, which was established on 13 February 1866 at Koonammavu.

²*Chavarayachante Kathukal* [Letters of Father Chavara], Thomas Panthaplackal and Jossy, eds., Kakkanaad: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2011, CK., VI, 5. The abbreviation CK is used hereafter.

³CK., VI, 5, para. 3. A note on Chavara as the founder of the religious congregation for women would be in place. The very fact of such details included in the *Testament* and entrusting the convent to the men TOCD, reveals that Chavara is the real founder of both the institutes. The question that arises is why would he speak about the convents and boarding houses at length in his Testament? Its answer points to one of the important norms to identify a person as the founder of a religious congregation, namely, 'the awareness of being called to be the founder of a religious institute.'

It is necessary that more monasteries and convents be opened in the south, that is, one monastery each to east and west of Mannanam and some convents with boarding houses. All these could be easily achieved and managed... There could be a monastery at Thathampally and another at Mavelikara and two others to the east and west of them. This will help very much to render necessary and useful spiritual ministry to the faithful of the two vicariates of Varapuzha and Kollam. It is necessary and very useful to have convents of the Sisters one at Mutholy and another at Mannanam with boarding houses attached. A little effort and diligence on your part would suffice to accomplish all these things.⁴

4. Monasteries, Convents and Boarding Houses

In the *Testament*, the phrase *monasteries, convents and boarding houses* has been repeated three times and *monasteries and convents* twice. There is a separate mention of *boarding houses* three times.⁵ There are repeated uses of these three establishments in varied combinations.

5. Convents with Boarding Houses for Girls

It was the dream of Chavara that there should be schools attached to every church, convents attached to monasteries and boarding houses (*educandato*⁶) attached to all the convents. He dreamt of a time in which many girls would be enjoying the art of writing as the expression of their self-affirmation. Writing was a sphere into which the nineteenth century women had no entry. Therefore, on the first day of the blessing and inauguration of the Bamboo-mat convent at Koonammavu, Chavara began to give training to the Sisters in the art of reading and writing. He records his satisfaction in seeing that Anna and Theresa, two of the first members of the convent, were fast in learning: "The two young Sisters Anna and Theresa took to writing on paper, playing on instruments and needle work..."⁷ Encouraging Anna to write the *Chronicles* regularly and giving details of the daily events, he instructed the Mother Superior on 29 April 1867: "Persuade

⁴CK., VI, 5.

⁵See CK., VI, 5.

⁶*Educandato* is an Italian word derived from the verb *educare* which means to educate. The term *educandato* referring to 'boarding house' is seen very often in the writings of Saint Chavara, 'the *Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent*,' and other writings of that period.

⁷CMM, 129.

Anna to write down all the matters. If you note down regularly, even those insignificant events, on a later occasion, you yourself will feel happy about the exercise.”⁸ Initiated and guided by both Chavara and Fr Leopold Beccaro, Anna wrote the chronicles. The Chronicle of the Koonammavu Convent (CKC) written by Anna is a clear expression of empowered womanhood. Her ability to express her ideas, her mastery of language and beauty of her handwriting are praised by others. The Sisters initiated the girls who joined the boarding house, to the art of writing. Chavara wanted to have many boarding houses in different parts of the country so that many more girls can be empowered. It was on 2 January 1868 that the first boarding house for girls was opened along with the convent at Koonammavu.

6. The Boarding House in the Original Plan

A look at the process of the construction of the new building for the convent will show that the original plan for the institute was to build the boarding house for girls and school along with the convent - all three together as one single unit. The text from CKC given below tells how Providence arranged all three together:

... on Saturday 13 June, the foundation was laid for a single-storey building which was narrow, as they [Chavara and Beccaro] thought it was enough for the purpose. The expense was met with the amount that was collected.⁹ After 8 September, the feast of the Nativity of our Holy Mother, seeing that God was directing and blessing them abundantly through all the ways and means that the Fathers had adopted and through all whom they had approached, they decided to construct the convent as a double-storey building... Again since our Delegate was not quite satisfied and felt that the foundation laid for the school and boarding house was not strong

⁸CK., VII, 1. Letter of Chavara to the Mother Superior of the convent on 29 April 1867.

⁹*The Chronicles of Mannanam Monastery*, which was published in 1981 with the title *Nalagamangal* [Chronicles] is referred to as *CMM*. *CMM*, 132-134. During their journey to places such as Mannanam, Arthumkal, Kallorkadu, and Muttam they collected Rupees 1,200 from the places they visited. Chavara has specified the names of the parishes and persons who donated the money (Kallorkadu - Rupees 100, Arthunkal - Rupees 500, Muttom - Rupees 340, Pulinkunnu - Rupees 160, Kunjanna Pathil - Rupees 100, thus a total of Rupees 1200). Chavara writes in *CMM*, 134: “Thus with a total of Rupees 1,200, we started the work.”

enough, he made them erect some pillars ... for all three buildings together as one single unit.¹⁰

This text clearly shows that the idea of having a school and a boarding house attached to the convent was there from the beginning when the two priests designed the convent and accordingly Chavara and Leopold Beccaro planned and constructed the three together. The text also states the reason for laying the foundation for a single-storey building first and then changing their plan to build a double-storey building - they received donations beyond their expectations from "all whom they approached." *Alochana*¹¹ and *the Chronicle of the Mannanam Monastery*, Volume 3 (1864-1872) also speak of the generous donations from the local churches and the faithful for the construction of the convent.

The first ever mention of opening a boarding house for girls that we see in the *Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent*¹² is complete with meticulous details:

It was decided that an *Educandato* (boarding house) was to be opened soon after the Nativity of Christ as it was the command of the Archbishop to do so and that the children would be arriving the following day. Therefore, the three rooms that were separated with wooden rafters were to be covered, on all the three sides with yellow cloth and we were entrusted with the task. We made six rooms, the mistress' room, the multipurpose room and a chapel. All these were furnished with the yellow cloth as instructed. Above the altar we made a canopy too, with the yellow cloth, arranged everything and placed the candlesticks that were made for the purpose."¹³

Another text of the chronicle narrates the details of the children who came to join the convent and the Sister who was given the charge of their formation:

The boarding house should be opened on the second day of the New Year [1868]. He [Fr. Leopold Beccaro] consulted us regarding

¹⁰CKC 1, 46-47.

¹¹*Alochana*, [The consultation and decisions of the Mannanam Monastery] (1864-1871), 139.

¹²Jossy (ed.), *The Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent (1866-1910)*, 2 Volumes, (CMC Publications Alwaye, 2015), Volume 1 (1866-1870), Volume II (1870-1910). The abbreviation CKC is used hereafter for *the Chronicle of the Koonammavu Convent*.

¹³CKC 1, 83. In this study, the page numbers refer to that of the original manuscript of the Chronicles which are given in brackets in the edited texts.

who would be the most suitable among the sisters to be appointed as the boarding mistress. At the end of the discussion, *Moopachan* appointed Sr Clara the boarding mistress. He also wrote out a few rules for the boarding house. On 1 January, 1868, a girl from Muttom by name Thresia Ozhuvil was brought to the convent. Desiring to join the convent, she had come earlier and had met Father and told him about her intentions. She was immediately sent to us... and inaugurated the boarding house on 2 January itself.¹⁴

On the following day, after the inauguration of the boarding house, two more girls were received in to the boarding house. The idea of the boarding house opened at Koonammavu along with the Convent resonates with what Chavara had expressed in his circular letter written on 25 March 1850 which discussed the foundation of a study centre for boys. He speaks of two stages of study:

In the first stage, languages like Malayalam, Tamil, Syriac, and Latin will be taught by special teachers appointed for the purpose. If any of the boys who study there when they come to maturity, desire for priesthood and if the superiors find that they have a real vocation, they will be selected and taught theology and other matters connected with priestly life...¹⁵

In the boarding house that was established at Koonammavu, the girls were given training in catechism, meditation, handicrafts, different languages, mathematics, science, music and cooking. Later, those girls who expressed their intention to become religious Sisters were received for religious formation. The selection of the candidates was made after the consultation and the voting among the Sisters. In this way, the boarding house was an effective means for fostering good vocations to religious life. However, from the names of those girls who were admitted in the boarding house, it is clear that the institute was not meant only for the aspirants for religious life. After their studies all the girls used to go home. However, those girls who had a real vocation to religious life returned to the boarding house and others remained at home, got married and became house wives and mothers. The fire that was kindled in their hearts and the formation they received while they were in the boarding house enabled them to

¹⁴CKC, 1, 84. Sr Clara Puthanangady continued to be the boarding mistress till she left for Mutholy in 1888 after the bifurcation of the vicariate of Varapuzha and when two separate vicariates were formed for the Syrians, namely, Thrissur and Kottayam. She belonged to the vicariate of Kottayam.

¹⁵CK, IX, 2.

spread the light of the Gospel in their families and in the upbringing of their children.

The CKC has recorded many details regarding the girls' entry to the boarding house, the date of their going home for holidays, their return to the boarding house, and their entrance into religious formation and so on. It shows that the reception of the girls from the boarding house to the convent was an important event in the life of the convent. Both the priests took great interest in their formation. The references to the girls of the boarding house are seen in almost all the letters that Chavara wrote to the sisters in the convent.¹⁶ The boarding house became place sought after by the community that girls from faraway places took admission there and as the report of Msgr Marceline Berardi from Varapuzha to the Propaganda Fide, Rome, shows. According to him, in 1883, the number had reached thirty.¹⁷

In the days of Chavara, most people in Kerala were not aware of the need or importance of giving education to girls. Even after opening convents, schools and boarding houses it took time for the parents of the girl children to decide whether to send their daughters to school or not. However, Chavara kept instructing the parents of their responsibility of giving education to all their children. He noted: "As soon as children come to the age of reason they must be sent to school. Besides, parents should be enquiring whether and how the children study and behave, and who their companions are. Their studies should be tested every Sunday."¹⁸

One notices the gradual impact of the letter of Chavara in the villages that in the initial stages of the boarding house at Koonammavu, many girls from Kainakary, Pulinkunnu, Alappuzha and nearby places of 'Kuttanadu' joined the boarding house to pursue their dream of education. However, regarding girls' education, another fact we observe is that although the school building was ready at Koonammavu along with the convent in 1866, the day-school¹⁹ started functioning only on 16 October 1872. The delay is due to the

¹⁶See CK, VII, 1,2,3,

¹⁷Archives of the Congregation for Oriental Churches (ACO), *Scritture riferite nei Congressi Malabaresi* (1878-1889) ff. 1158-1178. Report of Msgr Marcelline Berardi in 1883 (f.1170): "In questo hanno un educandato di circa 30 educande, ed una scuola giornaliera di circa 100 ragazze: attendono pure all'orfanotrofio, ospedale di femmine unito allo stesso monastero."

¹⁸CK, IX, 6.

¹⁹CKC, II, 60.

fact that the girls from the locality were slow to register their names and join the school.

7. The Rules for Girls at the Convent's Day School

A document titled 'The Rules for girls attending the Convent's Day School'²⁰ that we see in the personal diary of Fr Leopold Beccaro gives the impression of the systematic development of the school education. The 'rule' speaks of an entrance test to the girls before admitting them to schools. It also speaks in detail on many aspects of school education, such as the timetable, the daily lessons to be taught, the co-curricular activities, the responsibility of the teachers toward the students, the role of the parents in the education of the girls, the days of vacation of the students, the relationship of the 'day students' with the girls at the boarding house, daily attendance register, assessment of the studies by means of examinations, declaring the results, and the spiritual atmosphere to be kept in the school. Thus, the establishment of the boarding house and the school along with the convent at Koonammavu worked as the medium for the empowerment of women.

8. Feminine Presence beyond the Boundaries

The presentation of the 'monasteries and convents with boarding houses for girls' as one single unit with the purpose of catering to the spiritual needs of the two existing vicariates of Kollam and Varapuzha, points to an important ecclesial vision of Chavara. Chavara dreamt of a Church where religious men and women work hand in hand without any discrimination of Latins or Syrians. When he prepared his testament, in the vicariate of Kollam there were no Syrians and in the vicariate of Varapuzha there were both Syrians and Latins. He expected the religious women to cross the boundaries of their own Rite, diocese and geographical areas and go spreading the Kingdom of God. By stating specifically that this would help to render necessary and useful spiritual ministry to the faithful of the two vicariates of Varapuzha and Kollam, he emphasized that the Sisters were meant to work toward the coming of the Reign of God. He was a man who lived beyond his own Rite and religion and encouraged all to do the same.

²⁰Jossey, ed., *Leopold Missionariyude Kathukal* [Letters of Leopold Missionary] Always: Mount Carmel Generalate, 2010, V, 3: 14, pages 117-119. The date of preparing the document is not given.

9. The 'Space' of Women Religious in the Church

Chavara also dreamt of women religious giving spiritual leadership in the Church. It was a time when women were not allowed to attend the retreat preached in their own parishes. However, according to his Testament, they were meant not only to learn matters concerning their religion but also work for the spiritual enrichment of the people of God. The beauty of the Testament of Chavara is that he supports a spirituality of complementarity, which is based on the fact that both institutes of men and women are complementary agents working together for the progress and development of the people and their mission is to promote the Reign of God. Chavara envisioned it 150 years before Pope Francis who expressed it in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

10. Economic Independence and Financial Security of Women

When Chavara and Beccaro envisioned the activities of the convent, they included many empowerment programmes similar to the training in handicrafts for girls. The purpose of founding the institute, as recorded in the chronicles reads: "... besides striving for their spiritual wellbeing, [we] could teach young girls prayers and virtuous practices and train them in various handicrafts."²¹ The term *empowerment* presupposes powerlessness, and *liberation* implies an existing situation of bondage. The nineteenth century women of Kerala were economically dependent. Syrian women had no right to property, no right to inherit, and they could not earn money. Economic freedom and financial security remained elusive in the case of women. However, they were not able to support the family with the income of their spouses alone. Hence, women also had to work for their livelihood. Owing to the seasonal nature of agriculture in this area, women remained idle at home most of the days. The daily labourers were hit hard. The poor income and the fewer number of working days for women inspired Chavara to initiate them various handicrafts, so that the women of the locality could earn something for their families.²² Moreover, he believed that economic freedom of women would enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence.

²¹CKC 1, 5.

²²See Archives of St Teresa's Convent Koonammavu, (AST), Letter written on 8 April 1882 by some women of Koonammavu, thanking Signora Marchioness Fanny Anguissola Viscouti for providing materials for their handicrafts. This letter speaks of the development of this apostolate and the

Chavara and Beccaro thoughtfully collected materials and arranged various tools needed for the training in handicrafts. Both of them were united in mind in this regard. They journeyed together in search of experienced persons to give the Sisters training in the art.²³ Chavara records that on their way back from Thiruvananthapuram they met a senior lady who knew the art of crape-net, thread-work, etc., and got her to come to the convent. Eventually, she came taught the Sisters different kinds of needlework.²⁴ Even when the Sisters were in the bamboo-mat convent, the Fathers brought a woman named Francisca who knew some needlework.²⁵

The Sisters had many inconveniences in the bamboo-mat convent – lack of space and the leaking roof are some of them. Francisca, who had come to instruct them in crafts, was not a person who could easily be accommodated. She found the facilities of the convent inadequate. On a daily basis, special food was brought for her from the monastery nearby. In spite of all these practical difficulties, the priests decided to initiate the Sisters to this apostolate soon after the opening of the bamboo-mat convent.

Chavara himself notes down his attempts to search for someone to give training in handicrafts to the Sisters:

When we were looking for some persons to teach embroidery and sewing, we came to know that the sisters of Padre Jaseentha of Thankassery were good at needlework and were making vestments. On writing to Fr. Geevarghese, the Vicar, we received the reply that they were not willing to come. We trusted that God would now complete what we started.²⁶

The *Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent* records Chavara's concern in giving training to the Sisters in various handicrafts. When Beccaro was away in Europe in 1870 for fourteen months (9 September 1869 - 20 November 1870) Chavara took special interest in bringing two European Sisters from Fort Kochi to the convent at Koonammavu to give training to the Sisters in needlework, stitching, flower making, etc. He arranged special food to be brought from the monastery for

attitude of the beneficiaries toward it. A copy of the letter is kept in the archives of the Koonammavu convent.

²³CKC 1, 60, 64; CMM, 139-140; CK., V/12.

²⁴CMM 139-140.

²⁵CKC 1 35-41.

²⁶CMM 1, 129.

these Sisters everyday as they stayed in the convent for nine days.²⁷ On those days, in a letter to Fr Chandy Kattakayam, Chavara instructed him to bring to Koonammavu some materials needed for handicrafts:

Sisters have arrived from Kochi to teach in the convent. Good printed pictures for scapulars are not available here. Therefore, send all the big and small blocks of the scapular available there. Its printing can be done here in the hand press.²⁸

In the same letter, Chavara speaks of the ten rosaries made by the Superior of the Koonammavu convent, which he had blessed in order to distribute to certain individuals.²⁹ This is an example of the collaboration between the men and women TOCD as they were developing the cottage industry of rosary making, which was initiated along with the Koonammavu convent and which flourished later. On some occasions, in view of encouraging the Sisters in this apostolate, when some dignitaries of the Church visited the convent, Chavara instructs the Sisters beforehand to offer them some articles such as scapulars, rosaries, flowers and alb.³⁰ The CKC records: "On 25 October, *Priorachan* informed us: "Today Elias *Moopachan* will come there to visit your convent. It will be a good to gesture to give him some rosaries and scapulars as a gift." ... When they were about to go, we gave Elias *Moopachan* some rosaries and scapulars."³¹

Another incident recorded in the CKC throws much light on Chavara's personal interest in the Sisters' training in handicrafts. In the month of October 1870, Chavara was seriously ill and could not walk by himself. Even in such a condition as this, he visited the convent twice on 15 October. In the afternoon when he visited the Sisters, he brought with him some kind of threads, dye, and instructed the Sisters how to dye the threads. The Sisters were deeply touched by the gesture of Chavara as recorded in their Chronicle: "He taught us what thread to use for sewing, how to dye the thread, the process to be

²⁷CKC 1, 178.

²⁸CK V, 12. Chavara's letter to Fr Chandy Kattakayam dated 30 March 1870.

²⁹Chavara named ten persons to whom the rosaries are to be distributed; it may be that he is offering these rosaries to them as a token of his gratitude for the donations he received from them or encouraging them in Marian devotion by praying the rosary.

³⁰Cf., CKC 1, 84.

³¹CK. 1, 155.

followed, and the colours to be used.”³² Chavara always thought of introducing new ways for the Sisters to grow in their relationship with God and others.

11. Conclusion

By means of the last will, one hands over one’s treasured property to others. If Chavara had thought of the convent as founded by Fr Leopold Beccaro or by someone else, there was no relevance for him to provide plans in his Testament for its future expansion nor would he have entrusted the institute of women to his sons in religion. He was convinced that he was the founder of both the institutes and was led by a sense of commitment for their growth. That he had entrusted the convent and its affairs to his own Congregation is a proof that both the Carmelite communities are his children, and he felt responsible for their wellbeing even after his death.

Chavara prepared the *Testament* when Beccaro was the Delegate Provincial of both the institutes of men and of women and he had great expectations of Beccaro. Chavara told his religious Brothers about Beccaro: “You are yet to see numerous other benefits accomplished by them [Beccaro Brothers: Leopold and Gerard].”³³ Even though Chavara was preparing for his impending death and while writing his last will in which he expressed his expectation of the great contribution that Beccaro can offer to the TOCD, he did not entrust the future growth and expansion of the convent either to Beccaro or to the Carmelite missionaries of Beccaro’s religious Order. At the same time, Chavara clearly assigned the roles of formator and administrator to Beccaro and that of the ecclesiastical Superior to Baccinelli. According to Chavara, it was the responsibility of his religious community to work for the growth of the convent because both institutes had the same purpose of foundation, the same charism and the same founder.

³²CKC II, 12. He expressed this special interest while visiting the Sisters the second time in the evening hours on 15 October 1870.

³³CK VI,5, para. 3.