

## THE CHARITY HOME Human Dignity Perspectives of Chavara

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*Abstract:* The article focusses on the perspective of Chavara that caused the foundation of a Charity Home and its importance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century society of Kerala. Exploring the event of the foundation at Kainakary, the author analyses and assesses his perspectives on human dignity, which is considered as a value that normalises the actions of individuals. Chavara had a strong conviction that his life is not for himself, but for others. The other-oriented life prodded him on to work for the renewal of the society. A similar foundation that he initiated is the Confraternity of St Joseph for happy death, which he envisaged for the good hearted Christians to visit and assist the sick, help the poor with clothes, food, care and hospitality, which he considered the greatest act of mercy. By means of the Charity Home, he gave a new dimension to the representation of the Christian faith in Kerala. It was an endeavour to end misery not only in Kainakary but also in the whole of the land.

*Keywords:* Society, charity, care, mercy, altruism, sick, dignity, death, ethics, values, equality, vision, destitute, caste, love, untouchability, epidemics, culture.

### 1. Introduction

Dignity can be considered as a value that normalises the actions of individuals. It is a relative term with regulatory nature. It prescribes the norms and ethical standards that need to be followed and adopted. In the day to day inter-relationships, individuals are expected to behave with one another in a dignified and honest manner. This concept dictates that every one of us has to exercise due caution and care in our relationship without undermining the capacities of other persons. Further, it teaches us not to create a situation wherein others are made to undergo either emotional, psychological, physical stress, and not to harm them.

Since dignity plays a vital role in regulating human relationships and in the fostering of human rights (especially, the basic rights of

liberty, equality and freedom), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), in no uncertain terms declared that all individuals are equal in the eyes of law. All deserve to be treated with utmost respect without harming the dignity of others at all times. If people across the world follow the ethical norm of dignity without any deviance, the realisation of right would be easy. This fundamental norm applies to individuals and States to follow with strict adherence. In the modern context, a number of conventions, covenants and declarations have been adopted in the international arena, to promote human rights and human dignity. The lack of adherence by individuals and nation-states brought in untold sorrow and miseries. The non-adherence to ethical values, especially indecent behaviour of individuals at times, poses a number of problems in the contemporary era. This in turn, has an effect in the promotion and realisation of human rights.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara gave prime importance to human dignity. He believed that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. The basis for the theme of Human Dignity, the bedrock of Catholic Social Teaching, is this biblical teaching. Regardless of the reasons we can think of, individuals have an inherent and immeasurable worth and dignity and each human life is considered sacred. This points to our radical equality before God that leads us to think no less of others because they are from a different place or culture, because they believe something different to you, or because of their work or employment situation.

The dignity of a human person, who is endowed with both body and soul, was the basis for all social activities and humanitarian services of Chavara. The establishment of the Charity home at Kainakary in a special way emphasizes the concern of Chavara towards the sick and the suffering in society where the uncharitable practices were predominant because of the caste system and its numerous norms. This article mainly focusses on the perspective of Chavara behind the foundation of the charity home and its importance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century society of Kerala.

## **2. Other-Oriented Life**

Chavara had a strong conviction that his life is not for himself, but for others. The longer life that he was privileged to live than his ancestors was a clear base for this altruistic belief. The words written by St Chavara, in one of the letters to his nephew Fr. Joseph Chavara points to this fact. He wrote: "God the almighty granted more time to me than to my predecessors. This was granted to me not so much for me I

know, as for the benefit of others."<sup>1</sup> With this conviction he made his life profitable to the society. It gave wings to his actions and gave colour and enthusiasm to his visions. This other-orientedness in him led to find out new ways and means for the transformation of society. The charity home at Kainakary was a typical example for it.

### **3. Confraternity of St Joseph**

The empathetic heart of Chavara was always conscious of his duty to help others as his fellow humans. He believed that the purpose of a real religious is to serve God by serving humankind. Therefore he aimed at fullness by extending the deeds of kindness and benevolence to all. This is the eternal truth, which has been affirmed by all our prophets and saints through the ages. Chavara also reaffirmed this principle by his selfless service to the lowly and the lost. In the scope of the institution of the confraternity of St Joseph for happy death, he had incorporated in clear terms a programme in order to visit and assist the sick. Besides, the confraternity helped the poor with clothes, food, care and hospitality. He wanted charity to continue even after one's death by means of the suffrages for the dead. In a letter written from Mannanam in 1843, to the Catholics of the parishes around, Chavara invited people to join the confraternity. In the letter he advises them:

Man, the crown of creation, is created by God of infinite goodness. The moment he was born, death too was born. To cross over this sea of death, the voyage is really difficult and perilous. Therefore in order to cross over this sea, we need a sailor who is really an expert, familiar with the route and who, at the same time, is capable of withstanding every obstacle on the route ... the sailor who is familiar with the route and who would safely bring the passengers to safety landing, is St Joseph, the patron of happy death.<sup>2</sup>

The instructions to the members of the confraternity were:

the invocation of the holy names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph... besides, on the feast of St Joseph, on 19 March, remembering and

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<sup>1</sup>CWC IV, V, 14 - CWC IV is the Complete Works of Chavara. Volume IV includes the collection of the letters written by him. In the article the quoted letters are taken from the translation of Sr. Mary Leo CMC, and published by the Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, published from Mannanam in the year 1990. V/14 shows the section of the letters and the order the letter in that particular section respectively.

<sup>2</sup>CWC IV, IX, 1.

meditating on the holy names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, give food and clothing to a poor man (the husband), a woman (the wife) and a child and renew your dedication to the Holy Family... in order that such a pious practice may be continued without break and the team action will be more propitious, ... contribute 5 *cakrams* every month for 20 months consecutively, so that from the interest accruing from the collection, we may accomplish the above pious practice in common.<sup>3</sup>

*Muthiyoottu* is a practice of giving food to a poor family in association with the feast of St Joseph on 19 March is still a living practice in the Kerala Church. This shows that the light given by Chavara in the practice of charity towards the poor is still imprinted in the minds of the faithful and thus testifies the Saint's prime role to invoke the minds of them towards charity.

#### **4. Vision behind the Charity Home**

Chavara believed and taught that the great help one can give others is the help given at the time of one's death. In December 1869, the second letter written by him to the parishioners of Kainakary affirms this belief. In it he wrote:

... of all the helps given to a man, the greatest is that given at the moment of death. This is again, the greatest act of mercy. This is also the act of charity. One cannot measure the greatness of such a deed.<sup>4</sup>

This letter is a call to the people of Kainakary to start a house of Charity attached to their chapel. The members of the 'Confraternity of Happy Death' in their parish were advised to collect alms from the people and to establish a house of charity in a modest way where they can give free hospice to the poor and the destitute and take care of all their material and spiritual needs. The instruction given by Chavara regarding how to render their services to the sick and suffering can be considered as a manual for such a new venture. He motivates them to do this act of kindness with utmost care and conviction.

Of all benefits we can render to a man the greatest is what we render to him at the time of his departure from this world. Hence, the important function of this confraternity and of all who take membership in this association will be to render this particular help

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<sup>3</sup>CWC IV, IX/1.

<sup>4</sup>CWC IV, IX/7.

at the time of death. Every member should go alone or in company with others to the sick person who is reported to be nearing his or her last breath and see that the last sacraments are administered to him or her, by take turns and set a time-table for them that the sick might be visited at intervals. The infirmarian and his helpers will be responsible for this and all the members are bound to obey him. This act of mercy is the primary duty of the members... Many saints reached the height of sanctity by nursing the sick. The nursing of the sick may be the most difficult, unpleasant, detestable and degrading service before the fellowmen. But it is the most meritorious service before God.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the running of the institution, Chavara gave them the following instructions:

Keep a charity box with the label "Happy Death Charity Box", unashamedly beg of others and raise a fund yourselves: build a modest bungalow-like house of bamboo and other cheap materials, with just two rooms on either side of a veranda near your small chapel. You may call it an *upavi-śāla* or *dharma-śāla* [Charity Home] and shelter there orphans or the aged or the sick or beggars who have no one to take care of them. By God's grace in the course of time, it will be the first of the charity homes in Malabar.<sup>6</sup>

By means of the institution of this Charity Home, Chavara gave a new dimension to the representation of the Christian faith in the land of Kerala. The services of the institution reached out to a level to include the people outside of the margins of the Church to the caste-ridden wider society. This act clearly outlines concerns Chavara had for the dignity of all human beings. First of all, it was firmly rooted in his faith in the dignity of all the members of the society. Secondly, it motivated the laity to come out of their closed mental frame and establish a charity institution for extending the hands of kindness to the members most of whom did not belong to their faith community.

The founding of the charity home was a crucial step taken in order to awaken the people and to make them fight against the practices of caste system which was still existing in the Syrian catholic community in a strong manner at the time. Thirdly, this attempt was to establish a pattern of charitable work for all the parishes of the Syrian community. With this aim, Chavara advised the leaders of this

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<sup>5</sup>CWC IV, IX, 7.

<sup>6</sup>CWC IV, IX, 7.

movement to convey the news regarding the *upavi-śāla* to other parishes, receive their help, and act as a model for them in this new field of the representation of Christian love. The most important aspect of this attempt of Chavara was his respect towards the unprivileged people who happened to be the victims of unfortunate practices of the society and thus were condemned to live and die in misery. The endeavour of Chavara was an attempt to end that situation not only in Kainakary but also in the whole of the land of Malayalam.

### **5. A Bold Venture**

Chavara lived at a time in the nineteenth century, when the society was experiencing intense depression and gloom. Life in Kerala society until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was not based on the principles of social freedom and equality. Its chief characteristic feature was a deep chasm which separated the people who belonged to the high castes from those of the low castes. The people who belonged to the high castes enjoyed all the privileges and a high social status. In this period, untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability were at their peak. Chavara was aware of the practices of the society and predicament of the poor at the time. Epidemics were a common occurrence. In his *Chronicles* and *Compunction of the Soul* he has narrated the misery of the people during these epidemics. Moreover, he lost his beloved parents and brother to an epidemic around 1820.

The following narration shows the miserable situation of the poor people during the epidemics. In 1833, because of an epidemic (*nadappudeenam*) people who belonged to the low caste began to fall dead along the streets. On account of the practice of untouchability, they were not allowed to seek treatment from the doctors. Instead of controlling the epidemic or providing treatment for the victims, the concern of the authorities was to protect the Savarnas. The following circular promulgated by the government during the spread of an epidemic underlines this truth:

Because of the epidemic, many people are dying ... along the road, market and residential areas and the dead bodies are left there for days. They get distorted by the attack of dogs and foxes. As this situation prevails, it is difficult for the Brahmins to walk along the roads and this fact has come to the perusal of the king. It is deemed that the situation is unfortunate and degrading for the country. Hence, the situation should be remedied. The dead bodies should be removed and be buried by the surviving relatives of the

deceased, if any, or be removed by the initiative of the government offices. They need to ensure that they were not attacked by dogs or foxes.<sup>7</sup>

This circular clearly shows that the concern of the government was to safeguard the privileges of the savarnas rather than to give the deserving respect to the poor people as human beings who were dying in this most unfortunate manner. Some human beings who were created in the image and likeness of God came to be considered lower than animals. This kind of situations might have greatly influenced his perspectives on human dignity. The mind of Chavara always turned towards the unprivileged people of the society. The venture of Chavara to establish the charity home where people have a place to die peacefully and respectfully and receive a proper burial afterwards was the result of this concern.

## **6. Conclusion**

Today the church of Kerala runs with many charity homes for the unprivileged people. The religious Congregations founded by Chavara for men and women (CMI and CMC) contribute a great deal in this area. The education and wellbeing of the disabled people, the wellbeing of the destitute and the poor are the main concerns of the social service departments of these congregations. The spirit of this kind of work is imbibed from the teaching and model of Chavara who remains as a torch bearer in the charitable activities of the Church. Saint Chavara has been undoubtedly one of the great spiritual and social leaders that Kerala has ever seen. He was a spiritual man and at the same time, he was not devoid of anything human. He knew that God's glory was somehow human glory too.

Chavara's success in all his many undertakings was undoubtedly due to the intense charity and prayer, which characterised his daily life, his close communication with Christ and his love for the Church as the visible body of Christ on earth. His spiritual vision led him to be an innovator of many socio-pastoral, cultural, educational and social reforms. While he most scrupulously lived the life of a religious, dedicated to the love and service of God, the same divine love in him inspired him to devote himself, as much as he could, to the love and service of people. Long and most praiseworthy is the record of his varied enterprises and activities undertaken for the religious, social,

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<sup>7</sup>P. Bhaskaranunni, *Panthonpatham Noottandile Keralam* (Mal.), Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Academi, 2012, 140-141(translation by the author).

cultural and educational advancement of his people. As a man of contemplation, he conversed with God as an intimate friend, seeking his presence in the deepest realm of his heart. At the same time, he was a man for others. He proved that divinity and humanity were two sides of the same coin.