

LIFE IN AND FOR THE COMMUNITY As Reflected in the Letters and the Chronicles of Saint Chavara

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Abstract: Acharya Thomas Kochumuttom makes a thorough reading of the Letters and the Chronicles of Chavara and extracts from them the saint's vision of the life in and for the community. Communitarian facet is the new dimension that was added to the life of Fr Chavara and the other founders of the CMI congregation as they opted for a religious life. A basic factor of the life in *Bes-rauma* was that it was communitarian. Chavara considered common life as the fullness of consecration and instructed his confreres to live as though they were born of and nursed by the same mother. In spite of the diversity in the communities, it is love without boundaries that leads one to enjoy religious life. By means of a practice of real Christian love, one can follow the evangelical instruction to be as perfect as your heavenly Father.

Keywords: Community, consecrated life, evangelical counsels, superiors, pastors, *Bes-rauma*, Porukara, brotherhood, Eucharist, Holy Family, parents, Palackal, Kaniyanthara, Dominican, monastery, seminarians, vocation, *malpān*, Protestants, Roccas, vows, coadjutor Prior, family, excommunication, Jacobites, Denha, Thondanat, Abdisho, Mannanam, testament, revenge, disciples, hierarchy, tradition, , Vicar Apostolic, Sisters, Leopold, Superior, confreres.

1. Introduction

In the process of the foundation of the CMI congregation, a new dimension that was added to the life of Fr Chavara and the other founders of the congregation was the communitarian one. For all practical purposes they were each already leading a consecrated life. With regard to the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience they were already practising them. As priests they were celibates, hardworking and satisfied with the minimum facilities and comforts of life, and obedient to the ecclesiastical superiors. They were also deeply prayerful and zealous pastors. Therefore, by the

establishment of the new congregation what was newly added to their life was the communitarian dimension. Becoming members of a community they now started living, praying and working together rather than as individuals. They are now members of a family, praying and working together, and as such 'they are now able to do many good things that were left undone' in the absence of a religious congregation.

A basic factor of the life in *Bes-rauma*—the house on the hilltop of Mannanam—was that it was communitarian. As members of a family they lived, prayed and worked together. In our effort to recapture and relive the spirit of *Bes-rauma* this should be considered a crucial point for reflection and exam of conscience. As a matter of fact we are well aware that this is one of the areas where the congregation has failed to a great extent in recent times. It should, therefore, be a matter of great concern for all us individually as well as collectively. In the last General Synaxis almost all the provincials in their reports on the respective provinces, after rather proudly enumerating the achievements and developments, had one negative observation in common, namely, that among the members there is a decline of community spirit, and that in its place there is an increasing phenomenon of individualism in which priority is given to personal projects and gains. Unless we urgently arrest this trend and adopt corrective measures the congregation's foundation is in danger. We would be neglecting the founder's instruction that "The strength of the monasteries does not consist in the thickness of their walls but in the religious zeal and virtues of the inmates."¹ He further deplores: "These monasteries have been established by God so that they shall be mirrors of virtues and abodes of virtuous people. But they have now turned out to be communities of executives and holes of selfishness!"²

2. Common Life as the Fullness of Consecration

For the young priest Chavara the fullness of religious consecration consisted in common life. We may recall how Archbishop Francis Xavier Pescetto had tested the obedience of the founding fathers by transferring Fr Thomas Porukara to Kollam and Fr Chavara to Pallipuram. Later pleased with their spirit of docility and cooperation

¹*Chavarayachante Sampoorana Krithikal: Kathukal*, Vol. IV, L. Vithuvattickal, ed., Mannanam, 1986, 94; *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara: The Letters*, Vol. IV, trans. M. Leo, Mannanam, 1990, 65.

²CSK IV (1986): 90; CWC IV (1990), 61-62.

the prelate let them return to Mannanam and resume the construction work of monastery. Arriving back in Mannanam Chavara wrote:

From that day considering myself a full-fledged monk I was determined to keep away from my blood relations, and to give myself up to the monastic pattern of life with all my income going to the common fund and all my needs met from the same.³

Here he thinks two things to be essential for the fullness of consecrated life: separation from the family relations, and common life in which one has nothing privately. The first among them was already realized when he left home for the seminary training and still more when, following the loss of his parents and the only brother, he gave up his family property in favour of his sister and brother-in-law. Now in fulfilment of the second condition he adopts the common life in Mannanam. That is, for the consecrated life to be flawless and perfect one should have no personal possessions or programmes or projects, but have everything in common and share in the common mission and undertakings. Personal interests give way to the common goals.

This ideal is made still more official in 1840 when they began the community life in a more formal manner. Chavara writes:

On 18 June 1840, the feast of Corpus Christi, Frs Thomas Porukara, Geevarghese Thoppil and myself began living as a community in *Bes-rauma* [Mannanam]. We were already enjoying spiritual brotherhood; but we wanted to have unity in temporal matters as well. Therefore, following the example of [the early Christians led by] St Peter, we began to hold in common all our material goods and possessions, and to keep a common account [of incomes and expenses].⁴

Obviously, the early Christian community was their model:

These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to prayers. The many miracles and signs worked through the apostles made a deep impression on everyone. The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. They went as a body to the temple everyday but met in

³*Chavarayachante Sampoorana Krithikal: Nalagamangal*, Vol. I, Z. M. Moozhoor, ed., Mannanam, 1981, 32; *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara: The Chronicle*, Vol. I. Translated by P. J. Thomas. Mannanam, 1990, 27.

⁴This statement in Chavara's hand is found in the diary of Fr Kuriakose Elias Porukara, and is reproduced in CSK I (1981): 208-09 and CWC I (1990): 175-76.

their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved. (Acts 2:42-47; see also 4: 32-35)

These two texts from the Acts of the Apostles spell out the characteristics that distinguished the early Christian assembly which the founding community in Mannanam strived to make their own: United, heart and soul, they had not only spiritual brotherhood but also unity in temporal matters. Among them there were no a private possessions or projects; they were free of selfish interests. They enjoyed everything in common; none of them was in want, either. Their life was a powerful witness to the resurrection of Lord Jesus Christ. They remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, the word of God. They were regular in attending the community worship in the temple as well as the celebration of the Holy Eucharist in the houses. They shared the meals with joy and generosity. Their spirit-filled life and work made a deep impression on the people. They were respected and loved by all. And their number kept increasing day by day!

3. Born of and Nursed by the Same Mother

Chavara in his testament has a beautiful instruction to his confreres regarding the kind of love that should exist among them. He advises them to be like children of the same mother:

No matter how many monasteries there may be, they should be like a single family, and all the members should be like children born of the same mother and grown up by drinking her milk. This kind of genuine love among them should never diminish, but keep increasing. All should consider this as the greatest of my advices. In order to ensure that this love never decreases, the superiors of monasteries should take interest in responding to the requests of one another rather than merely meeting the needs of their own respective communities. Meeting together from time to time they must settle the accounts, and through frequent letters keep mutually informed of matters concerning the wellbeing of members, and take care of the needs of one another.⁵

Chavara considers an ideal religious community to be a family so that among its members there should be the family spirit. For him the model for all families is the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, which in turn is the Holy Trinity of God on earth. Therefore, according

⁵CSK IV (1986): 100; CWC IV (1990): 71.

to Chavara, the Holy Trinity is the prototype of all families and for that matter of the religious community as well. We may recall that this is the Church's teaching clearly stated in the apostolic exhortation of Pope John Paul II: "This particular way of 'following Christ', [namely, the consecrated life] ... expresses in a particularly vivid way the *Trinitarian* nature of the Christian life and it anticipates in a certain way that *eschatological* fulfilment towards which the whole Church is tending... The consecrated life thus becomes a confession and a sign of the Trinity, whose mystery is held up to the Church as the model of every form of Christian life."⁶

We may ask: What indeed is the characteristic mark of the Holy Trinity in heaven and the Holy Family on earth? In each of these cases one sees three persons in spite their differences remaining united. In other words, there is in them diversity and unity going hand in hand. In the Holy Trinity, the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit are three persons different from one another, but at the same they are one in all respects. Their personal differences do not come in the way of unity. Similarly in the Holy Family Jesus, Mary and Joseph had certainly personal differences in terms of age, gender, temperament, needs, likes and dislikes; but in spite of them they were perfectly united by love. This is the ideal that should be realized in every family and every religious community. Their members certainly have differences which should be respected and retained as God's gifts, and in spite of them they must be one, heart and soul. This is certainly a challenge!

In a family of parents and children, the challenge is comparatively less because the members are naturally inclined to love one another: between the parents as husband and wife, man and women, the love is natural, and so too between them and their children the love is spontaneous, and the children also have natural love mutually and for the parents. Hence it is rather easy for them to forget the differences in order to remain united. But when it comes to a religious community we must realistically admit that it is not a natural family, and hence for the members with personal, cultural, educational and temperamental differences to remain united and loving is not spontaneous. To do so they must in the light of faith as children of the same Parent God, rise above the differences and love one another without limit and conditions. The religious community thus is or rather becomes a supernatural family. What a family naturally is, the religious

⁶*Vita Consecrata*, nos. 14 and 21.

community in the light of faith must consciously become! This was the creditable achievement of the founding community of *Bes-rauma* in Mannanam.

4. The Founders' Unity in Diversity

Let us consider the first four members of *Bes-rauma*: Fathers Thomas Palackal, Thomas Porukara and Kuriakose Chavara, and Brother Jacob Kaniyanthara. They obviously had quite a few and considerable differences. Palackal was an ascetic theologian, more academic and disciplinarian, an ecclesiologist and a follower of the Dominican ideal of consecrated life: *contemplata praedicare*. Porukara was a practical man, a *karma-yogi*, an administrator, a committed pastor and much sought-after preacher, deeply prayerful and fond of popular devotions, and a devotee of St Joseph. Chavara was an inexperienced young priest, full of good will, zealous and docile. Kaniyanthara was a layman of simple faith, cooperative, hardworking and knowledgeable in secular matters. The admirable thing is that in spite of such diverse personality traits they lived like members of the same family and children of the parents, and successfully worked together for a common cause and accomplished their goals.

Many indeed are the instances in which we see them rising above the differences even making sacrifices of personal views and interests, and working in unison with mutual respects, understanding and appreciation. For example, on the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone for the monastery on 11 May 1831, Bishop Maurilius Stabilini, though present, was too ill to officiate the ceremony. So he suggested that Palackal the senior-most and leader of the group would do it. The latter, however, probably in appreciation of the greater role played by Porukara in acquiring the land and the government's permission for the monastery, readily expressed his desire that he must lay the foundation stone. But Porukara was only too happy to honour Palackal for his seniority and leadership, and insisted that he must conduct the function. For a while it was a test of the two priests' humility, mutual love and respect.⁷ Finally Fr Porukara was persuaded to be the celebrant. How smoothly they resolved the differences and came to an agreement!

Then arose the question regarding who should be the patron of the foundation. Again there were different opinions. The bishop suggested St John the Baptist. In Fr Palackal's mind they were already

⁷CSK I (1981): 24; CWC I (1990): 20-21.

Dominicans, and as such he was also particularly devoted to St Dominic. So he wanted the new foundation to be in this saint's name. Fr Porukara, a great devotee of St Joseph, naturally proposed him to be the patron. If it were today such differences of opinion would easily stall the entire project of monastery! But there the issue was instantly settled. The bishop and Fr Palackal respected Fr Porukara's desire, and St Joseph's name was unanimously adopted. What a beautiful example of great people working together without letting their differences come in the way of achieving the goal.

We may recall one more commendable incident of the founders' exemplary spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation even at the cost of personal interests. Fr Palackal expressed his pet desire to start a seminary attached to the monastery. He thought that it would be an ideal arrangement as the presence and study programmes of the seminarians would, on the one hand, make the monastery more appealing to the people, and, on the other, enhance the solemnity of liturgical services. He also hoped that, if the monastery and seminary existed side by side, the former would eventually get more and more vocations from the latter. In fact he sincerely believed that under the prevalent circumstances of the place there was no other way of making the monastery viable. According to him, therefore, a seminary was indispensable.⁸

However, Fr Porukara's thoughts were different. He observed that their primary concern was to have a monastery. For that they must put the trust in God. On the contrary, if they relied on human helps and traditions, they would be inviting hindrances. Moreover, he said, the past experiences are such that places with seminaries put up for the purpose of teaching, have in the course of time ended in ruins; and that training the seminarians is a difficult task, indeed!⁹

When the two elderly Fathers had thus different views, Fr Chavara in his naivety, as he himself admits, found both of them to be in the right. He was equally happy either way. The following are his own innocent words: "Thus they were divided in opinion. For stupid me, however, both the views were agreeable. Both inwardly as well as outwardly I happily agreed with Fr Porukara as well as the *malpān*."¹⁰

However, the differences were easily got over, as it always happens when they are between really great people. Previously on the occasion

⁸CSK I (1981): 32-33; CWC I (1990): 27-28.

⁹CSK I (1981): 33; CWC I (1990): 28.

¹⁰CSK I (1981): 33; WC I (1990): 28.

of the laying of the foundation stone Fr Palackal sacrificed his desire to name the monastery after St Dominic, and accepted Fr. Porukara's suggestion to name it after St Joseph. The latter also was ever so considerate of Fr Palackal, whom, according to Fr Chavara, he loved and followed even more than his own *malpān*, and whose opinions and feelings he was resolved to respect. Thus this time it was Fr Porukara who made a sacrifice by giving in to Fr Palackal's views about the seminary.¹¹ Thus, rising above the personal differences and remaining "one in mind and heart" (Acts 5:132), they inaugurated, unceremoniously though, the seminary at Mannanam in 1833, with Fr Chavara and others looking on in admiration.

5. Love without Boundaries

The founding members practised love without boundaries. Their love and concern were not confined to their community. It extended also to the people at large irrespective of caste and creed. They put human relations and communal harmony with everybody above material consideration and comforts. For example in their search for a site for the monastery they first came across a hillock called Pullarikunnu in the village of Kumaranalloor in Ettumanoor Taluk on the river side and to the east of the church of Kudamaloor. They climbed it up and looking about decided that it was more suitable. They made arrangements to get it registered for putting up a church and monastery. In response to their application for permission the government issued a public notice enquiring whether anybody had any objection to it. The landlords after discussing the matter informed that they were unable to permit the erection of a church in Pullarikunnu as, it being the resort of the goddess of Kumaranalloor, the trustees would not consent to it. The Fathers felt disappointed. Then a big merchant at Ettumanoor called Ojanar Methar and several others promised that they would get the land provided the Fathers would be ready to face the challenges. But the latter said that they would not quarrel with anybody, but would rather be content with a less convenient place.¹² For them peace and harmony with the people were more important than the land and such other temporalities.

6. Love at the Cost of Life

¹¹CSK I (1981): 33; CWC I (1990): 28.

¹²CSK I (1981): 12-16; CWC I (1990): 9-13.

Following the footsteps of Jesus Christ, Chavara was a good shepherd committed to the care of his sheep even at the cost of his life. While serving as the vicar of Pallipuram one night he was informed that a critically ill parishioner was asking for the anointing of the sick. The Prior immediately got ready to go to him. But the people tried to stop him saying that it was a case of contagious small pox. But the Prior would not care. "It is my duty! God will take care of me," he said. Courageously reaching the patient's home he joyfully administered the last sacraments. Chavara followed to the letter his Master's instruction: "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15: 13).

7. Be as Perfect as Your Heavenly Father

Jesus' teaching on love, which in fact is the only Christian rule of life, is comprehensively presented in Mt 5: 38-48. This passage concludes with a very challenging statement: "You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5: 48). We may wonder: Can one be as perfect as God Himself? Our natural tendency is not to take these words of the Lord seriously, let alone literally. But a little thought would urge us to take it at the face value. What could be the perfection of God that the Lord had in my mind in this context? He has explained it a little earlier: "Your Father in heaven causes His sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and His rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike" (Mt 5: 45). That means, while dealing with His children He does not make any distinction between good and bad, or saints and sinners. All are equally His children, and He treats all of them equally with no trace of partiality or discrimination against anybody. This is the heavenly Father's perfection which the Lord wants us to realize, which is certainly possible as well.

This does not mean that we have naturally the same level of feelings to all members of the community or society at large. In my community with some of them I naturally feel free and spontaneous so that I am perfectly at ease and happy while dealing with them; even their presence is a matter of joy for me. With some others I am not that free and spontaneous. I can just tolerate and adjust with them with some effort. There are still a few others: even their presence is disgusting for me; when one of them approaches me I feel like running away! He has not done anything wrong to me, nor have I to him. For no fault on either side, I have this natural dislike or even aversion for him, of which perhaps he is not aware at all. I think this kind variation in the level of feelings towards others is our common experience,

which as a matter of fact we cannot help. I think we need not worry about it. Let us realistically accept and admit it. But in my dealing I should not act according to the natural feelings, but rising above them in the light of faith I must treat all the members of the community equally and impartially. My faith tells me that they are all equally my brothers! I should not discriminate against any of them. Then I am as perfect as my heavenly Father.

There is no doubt that Chavara aimed at the heavenly Father's perfection. There is no reason for us to think that he excluded anybody from his world of love. He loved and treated with respect and compassion even those towards whom he could naturally have negative feelings. For example in his dealings with the intruder Bishop Thomas Roccas the Prior was very careful not to hurt his feelings. While seeking an appointment with him Chavara expressed his preference to meet him within closed doors, because he would not be kissing his ring which was a symbol of authority he had illegally gained. Kissing it would mean that he was party to the Bishop's wrongdoings. All the same, Chavara did not want to humiliate him by refusing in public to kiss the ring!

Bishop Roccas and his supporters had first plotted to take over Mannanam monastery by force and make it his residence. Some people suggested that the Prior should seek police protection. But he did not think it necessary. He put his trust in St Joseph, and believed that God would guard them, and that even the government authorities, non-Christians as they were, would give them the right of possession against encroachment. Later the rebels officially decided to capture the monasteries of Mannanam and Elthuruth and make them Roccas' residences, each for six months of the year. Still Chavara would not take any step against them.

Roccas wrote a letter, dated 24 June 1861, full of abuses at the Prior, and threatening him with excommunication and expulsion from the monastery.¹³ He then published a notice in the churches, saying: "As the Prior and the inmates of the monastery have insulted me and our patriarch who has sent me, their salvation is in danger. I feel it is my duty to inform you of this so that by following their evil counsel you may not fall into eternal perdition." Because of this notice many more people turned against the Prior. They included, writes Chavara in anguish, "priests and deacons who had grown up drinking the spiritual milk of the Word of God from our monastery and seminary.

¹³A copy of the letter is in ASJM, and its Latin translation in *Positio*: 220f.

From them as well as the Jacobites and Protestants we had to suffer much humiliation and oppression. They threatened to force us out of the monastery and install Bp Roccas there."¹⁴ Even so Chavara did not hate or entertain any ill-feeling for Bp Roccas or anybody. His only wish and prayer was that all should come to realize and accept the truth about the situation, and return to the right path and the Catholic fold. Finally when Bp Roccas admitted that he had come without the Holy See's permission and expressed willingness to leave the country, it was Fr Prior as directed by Archbishop Baccinelli that painstakingly made all the arrangements for his safe return journey, and even patiently waited for hours in the harbour till the ship left.

Just before the arrival of Roccas in Kerala, another Chaldean priest called Denha Bar Jonah had come here without authorization and pretending to be a duly consecrated bishop began to alienate the faithful from the Varapuzha administration. Eager to win over Fr Prior and his community to his side, he one evening came to Mannanam. Fr Prior, although he was well aware of his evil intentions, respectfully received him, and patiently listened to him. Of course the Prior made his disapproval of Denha's scheming, and declined to support him. However, he and the community treated the visitor politely and hospitably. As it was too late to let him leave, as a matter of courtesy they served him a good supper and accommodated him for the night. But next morning they refused to permit him to say Mass in the monastery as he did not have the patent letter from the vicar apostolic. Denha shouted at them and left! Very soon Fr Prior received a letter from the Archbishop's office severely scolding him for letting Denha stay in the monastery. To the edification of all Chavara accepted it positively saying that although he and his community were well-intentioned, the matter could confuse and scandalize the people.

We may mention one more incident illustrating Chavara's good will and concern for the rivals and the lost sheep. Just when Roccas left for his country, the leader of his supporters here, Fr Antony Thondanat, went to Mesopotamia, got consecrated by the Nestorian Patriarch Simon Ruben XVIII in Kurdistan, and returned to Kerala as Archbishop Abdisho. But hardly anybody cared for him. He felt abandoned and was even without means to live. Adding to the misery he fell ill. He desperately appealed to Chavara expressing repentance and willingness to live as a loyal Catholic priest. With the archbishop's permission the Prior arranged to meet him in a church in Fort Kochi.

¹⁴CSK I (1981): 100; CWC I (1990): 86.

On the appointed day Chavara reached there at 11.00 am and patiently waited till 5.00 pm when Thondanat arrived! Chavara listened to him with sympathy, negotiated for him with the archbishop, accommodated him in Mannanam monastery where he made a retreat, confessed, was duly accepted by the archbishop as a member of the diocesan clergy and was appointed vicar, first in Edamattam and then in Vilakumadam. Indeed, Chavara the good shepherd went out of his way in search of a lost sheep and rescued it!

8. Really Christian Love

The love among us should be *really* Christian. When does it become really Christian? In Greek language there are four words, each meaning 'love' in a different sense: *storge* refers to a parent's love for his/her child, *philia* to the love between friends, *eros* to that between man and woman, or husband and wife, while *agape* means the love extended to all people including enemies. Among them the first four - *storge*, *philia* and *eros* - are obviously natural love in the sense that instinctively experiences them. For example, it is quite natural for a mother to love her child; people are friends only if there is love between them, not otherwise; and the love between man and woman, or husband and wife is built into their nature. But when it comes to *agape*, it is certainly not natural love, because one's naturally tendency towards an enemy to hate him/her, not to love! To love the enemy one should certainly rise above the natural feelings and love him/her from the supernatural perspective of faith that all are equally the children of the same heavenly Father, and, therefore, own brothers and sisters! It is supernatural love. In the Gospel the term used for love is *agape*, the supernatural love extended even to the enemies, if any. This, therefore, is the *really* Christian love, namely, *forgiving* love. Jesus said: "For if you love those who love you, what right have you to claim any credit? Even the tax collectors do as much, do they not? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? Even the pagans do as much, do they not?" (Mt 5:46-47).

This is certainly the kind of love Chavara practised, and wants his fellows to practise: *forgiving* love, the *really* Christian. In his testament to the fellow religious he says "The Mannanam community should render as much help as possible to the family of Mathan Manjooran Kalapurackal of the parish of Muttuchira. In so doing they will be setting the best example of Christian disciples."¹⁵ This Mathan, once

¹⁵CSK IV (1986): 102; CWC IV (1990):73.

the steward of Mannanam monastery, had unjustly appropriated some property of the monastery for which he was punished by the civil court. Later he filed a complaint against Chavara in the criminal court of Alapuzha. The court met the Prior in the church of Holy Cross at Alapuzha and heard him. Dismissing the case as a fraud the Hindu judge was greatly impressed by Chavara's personality. Later, on his own initiative he had a long personal conversation with the Prior on spiritual and religious matters, after which he remarked "Fr Prior indeed is a man of God. Those who complain against so great a man should be grossly wicked and deserves God's anger!" However, Chavara sincerely forgave Mathan, and made vain efforts to have him reconciled with the monastery. He continued generously to help Mathan in his financial needs. Finally, how edifying indeed is the above quoted advice of the Prior in his testament!

9. No Place for Revenge

The *really* Christian love, *forgiving* love, knows no revenge. That is what Jesus explains in the former part of the Gospel text under reference. He opens it by recalling the then prevalent Jewish practice: "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth" (Ex 21:24). This was the accepted norm of justice in the Old Testament time. The hurt you receive at the hands of another, you can return to him/her without feeling guilty. We would now say it is too bad! It was already a reform that the prophets had brought about among the Israelites. The people around them had a still worse practice. For example, if someone in village-A would kill another in village-B, the latter villagers were permitted to destroy the entire village-A! The prophets feeling it too much gave the people of God another rule that sounds equitable: "Eye for eye and tooth." But now Jesus says that in His new testament even that must go. His disciples should not retaliate at all.

The Lord has illustrated his point with four powerful examples. "If anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well" (Mt 5:39). Here it is taken for granted that people are right-handed. Then for me to hit another one standing face to face with me on the right check, I must use the back of my palm. In the Jewish society to be hit with the back of the palm was conventionally a double insult! Therefore, the Lord meant to say that even if you are doubly insulted, you should not retaliate, but tolerate, forgive and be generous. This indeed is how He behaved even when people spat on Him, mocked at Him and made all kinds of false accusations against Him! He, therefore, rightly wants his followers also to do so.

Secondly, "If a man takes you to law and would have your tunic, let him have your cloak as well" (Mt 5:40). Again, another convention among the Jews was that to have both the tunic and the cloak was everybody's fundamental right. One needs both of them against the scorching heat during the day and the biting cold during the night. The Lord then says that his disciples even if their fundamental rights are denied, should not retaliate but tolerate, forgive and be generous! This is how He behaved when He was denied even the most basic right to have at least a piece of cloth on! Of course he would always defend and fight for the rights of the poor people. But when it came to His own rights, he was tolerant and forgiving. This is how His disciples should be.

A third example is: "And if anyone orders you to go one mile, go two miles with him" (Mt 5:41). This has reference to the postal system in Palestine those days. It was the Roman soldiers on horseback that carried the post from place to place. At the appointed places they were to be provided with food and drink taking which they would continue the journey. If at one or another place the provisions for some reason are missing, they were permitted to force any native Jew coming that way to carry the post further. The poor man hasn't done anything wrong except that he is a helpless native! May be he was urgently going somewhere else! So it is obviously injustice to order him to carry the post. But the Christian disciples, even if injustice is done to them, should not retaliate, but tolerate, forgive and be generous. The cross, which was the biggest punishment given to the criminals those days, imposed on Jesus who the most innocent of all was certainly gross injustice from the human point of view. But, fully aware that it was His Father's will, Jesus did not resist it, but joyfully accepted it. However, He always stood for His people's justice and resisted any injustice done to them. His disciples should certainly emulate Him.

Finally, "Give to anyone who asks, and if any wants to borrow, do not turn away" (Mt 5:42). In the Jewish society the jubilee year is declared from time to time, when all the debts are cancelled. Therefore, even good people who are willing to help others would hesitate to lend money, for if the borrower delays the payment until the jubilee year, they would lose the money. But Jesus says: When someone in need approaches you to borrow some money, and if you have enough money to spare, you must help him even if you see the possibility of loss. Help the poor even at your own coast!

Chavara and the other founding Fathers are shining examples of love that knows no revenge or conditions. Many were the instances

when they were insulted, humiliated, unjustly treated, and had their rights denied; they were, however, invariably tolerant and forgiving, and ever at the service of the Church and the society without counting the cost. The young seminarian Chavara after the reception of tonsure paid the customary visit to his home parish but was denied the ritual welcome. It was certainly an instance of insult. But Chavara did not nurse any grudge against anybody, instead all his life he treated the parish and the parishioners with love and concern. Again, his *Malpan* Fr Palackal having made all the necessary arrangements sent him and two other fellow seminarians to Varapuzha to attend the Latin course in the seminary there; but they were denied permission to sit in the same class with the Latin Rite students! It whole incident was painful for all concerned, as Chavara later recalls. It caused disgrace, waste of time and money, and made the three students forget even the little Syriac they had already learnt!¹⁶ But the *Malpan* and his students tolerated and forgave. Still again, Fr Palackal with all the preparations took his deacons including Chavara to Varapuzha for their priestly ordination on the date that was already announced. It was on their arrival there that they were told that the function was indefinitely postponed. One can imagine how disappointing an experience it must have been for the *Malpan* and the deacons! But they would not protest or refuse to cooperate.¹⁷

Some priests and others, mostly of the Latin Rite, were opposed to the monastery project and Bishop Maurilius Stabilini. Ten Latin Rite parishes decided not to support or invite Fathers Palackal and Pourukara and their disciples for any ministry in their churches. They complained to the next vicar apostolic Archbishop Francis Xavier about the monastery, and reported that Fr Porukara was going about collecting donations and giving the money to his family! Misguided by them the archbishop eventually developed misgivings and questioned Fathers Palackal and Porukara whether they had permission to establish the monastery and whether they had it in writing. They produced the letters of Bishop Stabilini. As if not satisfied with them the archbishop first transferred Fr Chavara as vicar in Pallipuram, and then Fr Porukara as vicar in Kollam side. These transfers for all practical purposes were punishment that the Fathers did not deserve, and therefore unjust. Moreover, their absence from Mannanam meant that the construction work of the monastery had to be stopped, which

¹⁶CSK I (1981): 74-75; CWC I (1990): 65.

¹⁷CSK I (1981): 4ff.; CWC I (1990): 3ff.

was deeply painful! But in all these unfortunate developments we see the Fathers never complaining or disobeying. Instead they gracefully accepted the humiliations, forgave and tolerated the opponents and generously cooperated with the hierarchy.¹⁸

The foundation stone for the monastery was laid on 11 May 1831. Gradually a very well organized community took shape with a good number of members, prayerful, zealous and disciplined, committed to the pastoral ministries and other apostolic activities. All including the vicars apostolic, priests and the laity were happy about them, and highly appreciated their presence and service. Even the society at large admired their way of life and ideals. In short there was all that was required for consecrated life in the tradition of the Church. But the most crucial factor, namely, the canonical approval was indefinitely delayed. The Fathers made repeated requests for it to the vicars apostolic that came and went one after another: Maurilius Stabilini, Francis Xavier, Ludovic Martini, and Bernardine Baccinelli. They all were happy with the community. But they would not readily give the canonical approval, probably because they were prejudiced against the Syrian Rite people's rootedness in matters related to faith and morals. It could certainly hurt the feelings of the community, and they could rightly feel that their basic rights as equal members of the Church were denied. But trusting in God's providence and in a spirit of tolerance and respect for the ecclesiastical authorities they patiently waited for God's time to come for their rights to be granted and dreams to be realized. In the meantime two of the elders, Fr Palackal and Porukara died, the former in 1841 and the latter in 1846, with seeing fruition of their hard work just as Moses and Aaron were not permitted to enter the promised land!¹⁹

Finally it was in 1855, after almost a quarter of a century long waiting on the part of the Fathers, that Archbishop Baccinelli granted them permission to make the profession of religious vows. He imposed on them the rule of the contemplative Order of the Carmelites Discalced (OCD). He rejected the Fathers' request to adjust the rule to *their Syrian traditions, the local conditions and needs, and the original spirit and charism of the new congregation that combined the contemplative and apostolic dimensions of religious life*. This was again a denial of their basic rights and disregard of their ecclesial identity. But they under the guidance of St Chavara tolerated, forgave and

¹⁸CSK I (1981): 27ff.; CWC I (1990): 22ff.

¹⁹SP: 26-27.

generously cooperated. Eleven out of the twelve candidates fearing that they might not be able to stand the demands of the unduly strict rule at the last minute decided against making the profession. Chavara informed the archbishop of this unfortunate development, but his response was disgustingly cold: "Only those of good will and determination need to be admitted. Don't worry about the dropouts. I shall pray for the remaining few!" Fr Chavara gracefully bore the pain of the loss of so many members and the lack of understanding on the part of the ordinary!²⁰

Still later the OCD Superior General with the connivance of the Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli highhandedly affiliated the new congregation as their Third Order. Thereby the congregation lost its identity as an autonomous indigenous institute, and Fr Chavara stopped being its Prior General, to say the least! It was clearly an unjust interference of the western missionaries and a questionable appropriation of what did not belong to them. There must have been many of the members of the congregation who rightly objected to the entire episode. But Chavara trusting that God will in the course of time will put things right kept his calm and cool and pacified the disturbed members. He was tolerant, forgiving and generous!²¹

In the context of the Roccas incident the archbishop, convinced of his inability to contain the agitation, was all praise for Fr Chavara and appointed him vicar general. In his letter dated 15 June 1861 to Rome informing of Chavara's appointment as vicar general, the archbishop suggested that the Prior could even be consecrated as the coadjutor bishop for the Syrians. But after the Roccas event, when there was an enquiry from Rome regarding the possibility of the Prior's consecration as bishop, the archbishop and the missionaries strongly objected to it. Fr Marceline wrote: "Where do you find one who has the qualities necessary for a bishop? There are in the monasteries many good, upright priests. But where is the prudence, where the courage, where the knowledge and other qualities required of a bishop?" He does not make any mention of Chavara particularly. Fr Leopold not only agrees with Marceline's position in its entirety, but also makes negative remarks about Chavara's nomination as bishop, namely, that he lacks knowledge of moral theology and experience in

²⁰Bernard 1989: 41-42; Valerian 1939: 104.

²¹See T. Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mumbai: St Pauls, 2014, 159-65.

matters of administration, being already 63 years old²² is too advanced in age, and has bodily indispositions and health problems. The Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli sent to Rome his reply dated 24 September 1865. In it he still holds that the Prior is a good man and the best among the Syrian priests, but endorses Leopold's views that he had little knowledge of moral theology and experience in administration, and was too old!²³

Perhaps Chavara was not aware of the correspondence between Varapuzha and Rome concerning his nomination for episcopacy, and, therefore, was spared of the embarrassment. However, there were occasions when the missionaries openly failed to treat him with due respect and recognition. For example we may mention one incident. 13 February 1866 was fixed for the inauguration of the first community of Sisters in Koonammavu. As directed by Chavara a widow called Eliswa (later her name was changed as Clara), aged 37, from the parish of Vaikom with all the necessary preparations and accompanied by her uncle arrived on 11 February to join them. But Fr Leopold said that he would not accept her without first interviewing and personally getting to know her. Thus being asked to wait, she and her uncle stayed in a house outside. The young priest Leopold certainly could have trusted the experience of the Prior and respected his judgement. But he would not! "This caused much sorrow and disturbance. Yet they stayed and waited holding firmly on to obedience,"²⁴ writes Chavara. It was obviously a humiliating experience for him; but he accepted it without any complaint in a spirit of dignified obedience. The day after the inauguration of the convent Fr Leopold called the lady to the confessional, interviewed and heard her confession, and then admitted her to the community.

10. A Concerned Superior

The unity and well-functioning of the community will depend very much on the superior. He/she should be a model for all to look at and feel inspired, and a point of unity. Chavara had a clear picture of what it means to be an ideal superior, and in this regard he was indeed ahead of his time. In a letter to Kuriakose Porukara, the vicar of

²²Leopold considers 63 years for a man in India as equal to 80 in Europe. In fact, at that time Chavara was only 60.

²³See Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 210-214.

²⁴CSK I (1981): 237; CWC I (1990): 107; CKC (2002): 26-27.

Mannanam Monastery,²⁵ he says that the superior of the community is called to be a partner with God in tending His sheep, and that as such he should love the sheep and be concerned about their wellbeing. He then gives a list of qualities expected of an ideal superior:

1. A good superior should consider himself as a servant of all others in the community. He must have as his model Jesus Christ who washed his disciples' feet. The monastery and the community are not for the sake of the superior, but he is for their sake. Therefore, he must love them as his own children. As a loving mother is, so he must be more concerned about meeting their spiritual and bodily needs than his own. He should not let any of his religious to be sad even for a moment. God is not pleased with a service rendered in sadness. During the allotted times all must together recreate with religious moderation.
2. The superior is appointed by God to observe the rules as well as to enforce them among the members. He should not relax them. Many great religious congregations have perished because of the superiors' carelessness in this regard. On the contrary, the continuance of a congregation in its spiritual vigour and vitality will invariably depend on its superiors' care and vigilance.
3. The superior should not wait for the members to approach him with their needs. Instead, he should anticipate their needs and meet them. If so, they will be ever so happy and seek permission only for genuine needs.
4. While giving an order to the subjects, the superior must do so as if he is lovingly making a request of them. However, in case they refuse to respect such sweet and gentle words, he should not hesitate sternly to exercise his authority.
5. As the rules demand, the superior should be an example for others in all matters. His task is not a pleasant one, indeed. However, when one does it in a spirit of charity in accordance with God's will, He will render it a matter of delight.

Chavara was himself a very concerned and understanding superior, loved and respected by all. Fr Scaria Kalathil's uncle priest while on his deathbed wanted to see him. Fr Leopold's opinion was that Fr Scaria should not make a visit to his dying uncle. Fr Prior, however, felt the other way round. It was the time when all the superiors were having a meeting at Koonammavu. Fr Leopold suggested that the superiors might take a decision by secret vote. Accordingly they were

²⁵Valerian (1939): 373-374.

about to cast votes. Then Fr Leopold held a black (negative) pellet between his fingers and raised it for all to see. Fr Prior held between his fingers a white pellet and showed it up. The superiors were in a predicament! They pleaded that the two major superiors take an appropriate decision in the matter. But Fr Leopold was insistent on voting. Reluctantly all obliged. Alas! When the ballot box was opened, all votes except one were white! Fr Leopold's displeasure reflected on his face.²⁶

11. Conclusion

Chavara's love and concern was obvious for the community of Sisters that he founded in Koonammavu with the help of Fr Leopold. Fr Kuriakose Porukara says: "Just as the Patriarch Jacob had a greater love for his younger son Benjamin, so he [Chavara] loved them [the Sisters] most deeply, and brought them up most carefully, providing for all their needs, even as a mother takes care of her children."²⁷ His love for them indeed was both paternal and maternal, the former symbolized by the love of Patriarch Jacob and the latter by that of a mother. In fact especially as he advanced in age his parental feelings were deeper and deeper. His usual way of addressing his confreres was *sahodarankal* or *kūṭappirappukal* (those born of the same womb/mother). But in his testament he calls them *priyamullā-kuñjukaḷ* (beloved little children)!²⁸ In many of his letters to the Sisters he addresses them, too, likewise.²⁹ In the letter to his parishioners of Kainakari he fondly calls them as *sahodarankal* and *makkal* (those born of the same womb as well as children)!³⁰

²⁶Varkey Parappuram, *Nālāgamangal* (Diary): 1430-1432.

²⁷SP (1995): 29.

²⁸CSK IV (1986): 99; CWC IV (1990): 70.

²⁹Letters VII/2, VII/6, VII/7, and VII/11 in CSK IV (1986) and CWC IV 1990).

³⁰Letter IX/7 in CSK IV (1986):150, and CWC IV (1990): 117.