

THE APOSTOLIC ZEAL OF CHAVARA A Reflection on His Writings

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Abstract: Making a reflection on the writings of Chavara, Thomas Valavananickal gauges the apostolic zeal of Chavara. He makes a journey through the writings of Chavara as they are important documents which provide vital information on his apostolic spirituality and activities. The chronicles that Chavara kept, serve the following purposes: It is a sourcebook of contemporary ecclesiastical activities; it is a window to the contemporary society; it highlights the personality of Chavara; it underscored his faith in the divine providence. The eye of a historian, the tongue of a prophet, the pen of a classical writer, the vision of a seer, the faith of a true son of the Church, and the heart of a loving father are found in the Chronicles. The 67 letters of Chavara preserved today are his correspondences with the ecclesiastical and state authorities, with the members of his community, with the Christians of the Malabar Church. Noteworthy among these are the two testaments that he left for the religious community as well as the Christian faithful of his home parish.

Keywords: Church, Chronicle, Letters, Testament, Syro-Malabar Church, family, Carmelite, leadership, spirituality, history, diary, manuscript, archives, monasteries, Rosary, convents, Avila, society, development, devotions, adoration, *pidiyari*, *kettuthengu*, women, indigenous, Vicar General, Roccas, Deneha, seminary, Pius IX, Cariyattil, Paremmakkal, Palackal, religious, Providence, death, Correspondence, prelate, Discalced, Prior, children, obedience, parents, wealth, drinking, friends, girls, Lisieux, vicariate, guidelines.

1. Introduction

Chavara is presented as the champion of faith of his times. His life and activities for the sake of the Church were so illustrious that he was recognised by the universal Church as well as the local Church. The readers come to know the depth of Chavara's apostolic zeal from two

of his works, namely, the Chronicle and the Letters.¹ The third source is known as *Nalla Appante Chavarul* (Testament of a Loving Father)² by which the ordinary faithful of the Syro-Malabar Church remember him as an apostle of Christian families. The Chronicle of Chavara records the activities of the Carmelite community in his leadership, which is a window to an era and the life of the Church of the time, in which he held a sway. The Letters, both official and informal, on the other hand, lets us know mainly his ecclesiastical concerns. In this reflection, we consider these writings as sources which tell us of his apostolic spirituality as they are important documents which provide vital information on his apostolic activities.

2. Chronicles: A Journal of the Contemporary Life

History is a record of past events. Since the journals that Chavara kept conscientiously throughout his life, these Chronicles also, most certainly, serves as history. Chavara was convinced of the fact that the tradition of recording chronicles would serve as great source for future generations to know about life in the past. He himself wrote the first few pages of the chronicle of the convent at Koonammavu. Gradually, Sr. Anna, one of the first members of the Carmelite community of women, was given instructions and training to continue the recording. In one of his informal letters, he writes to the sisters of CMC community: "I had urged Sr. Anna to note down every detail in the chronicle. I think she has realized it now. If she notes down everything ... I am sure you will enjoy it while reading it after some time."³

2.1. The Sourcebook of Ecclesiastical Activities

Wherever Chavara lived as a religious priest, he kept a chronicle. All these documents were collected and codified and were subjected to scientific analyses.⁴ In addition, he kept a handwritten diary for over a period of forty one years from 1829 to 1870. It is immensely useful not only to the members of the religious community he founded but also

¹*Complete Works of Chavara* Vol. I contains *The Chronicles* and Vol. IV has *The Letters*.

²See *Letters IX/6*, in *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara: The Letters*. Vol. IV, trans. M. Leo. Mannanam: 1990, 102.

³*Letters*, VII/1, 75. As quoted by Sr. Jossey, *CMC in the Shadow of the Most High*, Aluva: Mount Carmel Generalate, 1997, 54.

⁴This includes the Chronicles of Mannanam, Koonammavu and Ampazhakadu monasteries written by Chavara.

to the entire Church, particularly the Church in Kerala. The manuscript, preserved in the archives of Mannanam, was compiled by Jerome of St. Mary.⁵ In 1960, on the occasion of the initiation of the process of the cause of the saint, literary and linguistic experts certified the work as the authentic handwritten work of Chavara. These chronicles consist of various sections in which we find the historical narrations connected with the beginning of the two indigenous religious Congregations of CMI and CMC along with their important monasteries and convents. This section of the work is comparable to the Book of the Foundations by Teresa of Avila.⁶ In addition, Chavara has recorded some of the historical events of the 19th century pertaining to the Church and society of Kerala.⁷ It includes also important descriptions related to the history of the Malabar Church during Chavara's lifetime. The common language used in his Chronicle unveils an icon of Chavara's inner personality, namely, his transparency, openness, sincerity, and accuracy.⁸ The Chronicles also reveal the traits of thoroughness, honesty, humility and simplicity, which Chavara possessed in great measure. These chronicles were not only set as model before the religious communities that he founded, but also inspired his contemporaries and succeeding generations to record events of ecclesiastical and social importance and to preserve documents of historical and literary nature. What Chavara presents in these writings is not a sketchy account of facts and figures, but details of the events and facts as a keen observer. In the following pages we look at the importance of these writings in their ecclesial and social settings.

Under the leadership of Chavara, the Congregation was actively involved in an integral development of the society without any

⁵Fr. Jerome of St. Mary was a close friend of Chavara. He was 19 when Chavara died. He was in charge of the Library of Mannanam from 1902 to 1917. See *Chavarayachante Sampoorana Kruthikal* (CSK), Vol. I: *Nalagamangal*, Edited by Z. M. Moozhoor. Mannanam: 1981, Introduction, ii.

⁶The Book of Foundation tells the story of each of the houses St. Teresa founded. Similarly, the Chronicle of Chavara provides ample historical details of the religious communities he founded: the house at Mannanam, the monastery at Ambazhakadu and the convent at Koonammavu.

⁷The historical events of the struggle over the Roccas Schism, appointment of Chavara as the first Vicar General of the Syrian Christian Church of Malabar and the safeguarding of the Church from divisions.

⁸See S. Poonoly, "Writings of Chavara," P. Kalluveetil and P. Kochappilly (eds), *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*. Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2004, 117-118.

distinction of religion, caste or group. The members of his community were motivated towards people-oriented activities. A number of pious practices and devotions of the people that have enlivened the Syro-Malabar Church today came into existence on account of the hard work of Chavara and his confreres. These include the forty-hour adoration, the way of the cross and the Rosary, the social welfare activities like *pidiyari* (a Handful of Rice), *kettuthengu* (coconut trees set apart) and *noottikanchu* (the five percent set apart).⁹

2.2. A Window to the Contemporary Society

The Chronicle of Chavara is a valuable source on different historical events of the society of his time. The history of the religious Congregations of CMI and CMC and the history of the Syro-Malabar Church have extensively contributed to the discipline of Church History. As he relates these events in a social context, the narratives also give us a glimpse into the socio-political and cultural history of society of his time. In addition, these works have helped the spread of his spiritual outlook and have contributed to the development of the language.¹⁰ Hence, his works are recognized as a great contribution to the literary field.

Dealing with the history of the religious Congregations that he founded, Chavara gives more detailed accounts about the foundation of the CMI and related events.¹¹ It is an important source of the history of the Congregation between 1855 and 1870. The first part of the Chronicle gives importance to the foundation of its first house at Mannanam. The writings bear witness to the zealous and hard work of its founders for the realization of their dream of a religious community. Gradually, the newly founded community began to

⁹The various charitable activities pioneered by Chavara in order to bring financial security are the following: 1. *Pidiyari*, a Malayalam word, literally means setting apart a "handful of rice" to be collected every month by people assigned from the parish. This provided good income to the church. 2. *Kettuthengu* are 'a number of Coconut trees set apart'. The same objectives were laid down as in the case of a handful rice. See *Chronicles*, 131-32. *Nuttikanchu* is a scheme initiated by Chavara in which five percent of the produce of the parishioners became a source of income for the Vicariate. See B. T. Bernard, *Short History of the TOCD Congregation*, Mutholy: 1908, 154-155.

¹⁰See B. Puthur, "Nalagamangal, Kathukal," in D. Manickathan (ed.), *Kerala Sabhadeepam*, Cochin: 1985, 93.

¹¹See *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara: The Chronicle*, Vol. I, P. J. Thomas (trans.). Mannanam: 1990, 1.

establish different branches in different zones of Kerala - Koonammavu (1857), Elthuruthu (1858), Vazhakulam (1859), Pulincunnu (1861), Ampazhakadu (1868) and Mutholy (1870). The Chronicle gives authentic information on the change of the name of the congregation from *Servants of Mary Immaculate* to the *Third Order of Carmelites* on 1st October¹² and its rules which were approved on 3rd April, 1860.¹³ The General Synaxis on 28th October 1867 elected new office bearers for the community.

The Chronicles also give details of the CMC Congregation for women. It attests to the fact that Chavara and Fr. Leopold collectively decided to begin a Congregation for women,¹⁴ and Prelate Bernadine approved their suggestion and named it the *Third Order of Carmelites*. With a lot of prayer for and reflection on this project, both of them executed their plan. Hence, on 13th February, 1866 their long cherished dream came to be fulfilled. Chavara is very keen to describe the initiation ceremony for the new members in a detailed manner.¹⁵

In his historical accounts of the Syro-Malabar Church, Chavara records the foreign missionary ecclesiastical authorities who gave leadership and nourished the Malabar Church in the 19th century. They are Bp. Maurelius Stabilini, (1828-1831), Bp. Francis Xavier (1832-1844), Ludovic Martini (1845-1853), Bp. Bernardine Baccinelli (1853-1868) and Leonard Mellano. He also provides a record of Carmelite missionaries like Marceline, Leopold Beccaro, Philipose, Gerard and Nicholas.

The history of the birth of the first two indigenous religious Congregations for men and women are as much part of the history of the Syro-Malabar Church as it is part of these congregations. They are viewed as signs of growth of the Syro-Malabar Church as well as the universal Church. Chavara records many events of the period between 1861 and 1870 when he was its Vicar General of the Church in Malabar. The Roccas episode¹⁶ and its consequences were important events in the history of the Kerala Church. As the Roccas' episode progressed, Chavara succeeded in convincing the people of the truth.¹⁷

¹²See *Chronicles*, 143.

¹³See *Chronicles*, 141.

¹⁴See *Chronicles*, 104.

¹⁵See *Chronicles*, 106.

¹⁶See the details of the whole episode in *Chronicles*, 161-169.

¹⁷*Chronicles*, 79.

The intervention of Fr. Deneha Baryona,¹⁸ and Thomas Roccas caused disturbances and their moves badly affected the peaceful life of the Syrian Christians in Kerala. Chavara played a vital role in containing the aftermath of these interferences. In addition to these, the Malabar Church witnessed the schism from within. Chavara's narration about the activities Kuriappu Panamkuzha,¹⁹ Anthony Kudakkachira²⁰ and Anthony Thondanattu are examples for the internal struggle. They shared certain common features: none of them were satisfied with their past life and all were led by selfish motives, personal grudges and revenge. They had no genuine authorization from the official ecclesiastical authorities.

The description of Chavara of the manner in which the investiture of bishops was carried out in those times gives us a glimpse into the ceremony.²¹ The details from the moment of announcement to the Episcopal ordination of Bp. Leonard are narrated in detail.²² In addition, the priestly ordination,²³ the clerical dress of Latin and Syrians, time table of the seminary,²⁴ the customs and practices of the Syrian Christians²⁵ and the prevailing practice of abstinence among the Christian community are well described.²⁶

We also find some historical notes concerning the Universal Church. Chavara gives an account of a piece of important news of Vatican Council I convened by Pius IX. It describes a list of the

¹⁸Deneha Baryona is a Chaldean priest from Persia who came to Kerala. See *Chronicles*, 150-152.

¹⁹Bishop Pandari was an unauthorised prelate whose activities became controversial and he had to leave the area. He ordained nine candidates. See *Chronicles*, 147-150.

²⁰For a few years Kudakkachira studied under Thomas Palackal. He protested against certain rules and regulations of the monastery and sometime later left. Later he went to the diocese of Palai and was ordained. See *Chronicles*, 154-155.

²¹See *Chronicles*, 69-70.

²²See *Chronicles*, 124-125.

²³See *Chronicles*, 55-56. Here Chavara presents the rite of ordination used by the Latin prelates when they ordained Syrian candidates. He also narrates the manner in which Thomas Roccas, the Chaldean Bishop, ordained some priests during his short time in the region. See *Chronicles*, 85-86.

²⁴*Chronicles*, 57.

²⁵For instance, the commemoration of the 7th day of the death of Bishop Francis Xavier. See *Chronicles*, 41-43.

²⁶See *Chronicles*, 69.

participants²⁷ and the reactions to and impact of the agreement between the Vatican and Portugal. He notes also a miracle experienced by Pope Pius IX.²⁸ Since the Syro-Malabar Church was under Latin jurisdiction, Chavara's account also includes flashbacks of historical events related to Joseph Cariyattil and Thomas Paremmakkal, and Bp. Pandari which he came to know through Fr. Palackal.²⁹ Hence, his Chronicle is a great treasure for the modern historians.

The Chronicle sheds light on the political, social and cultural history of his period. He gives an account of the administrative leaders who belonged to the traditional royal families which ruled country. We learn of India's relations with Baghdad, Babel and other Persian lands. His writings provide us with an account of the local calendar, currencies and measurements of his time that are useful to today's historians, although very few people would be able to understand them today. The prevailing currencies were known as *chakram*³⁰ and *kalian*³¹ and certain measures are often mentioned in his writings.³² The local Malayalam calendar was a sidereal solar calendar used in the South Indian state since 825 AD. It has also 12 months, closely matching the Roman calendar, and begins with *Chingam*³³ (September) as the first month. This was the time of rule by kings who made frequent visits to people in the villages in a royal procession. During this time people offered them gifts to show their loyalty. Chavara mentions a petition that he placed before the Prince Ilyaraja of Travancore³⁴ and an offering of a decorated candle to the Maharaja of Travancore³⁵ on behalf of the diocese of Varapoly.

The chief means of travel that he mentions are by boats and canoes. They were used for common purposes to escort officials as well as to

²⁷See *Chronicles*, 135.

²⁸See *Chronicles*, 51.

²⁹See *Chronicles*, 146-147.

³⁰Twenty-eight *chakram* is equal to 1 rupee of Indian currency. Chavara notes down the receipt of the amount. See *CSK*, Vol. I, 4.

³¹See *Nalagamangal*, 16, 51. According to G. S. Padmanabhapillai, *Sabdatharavali: Malayalam Dictionary* (10th edition), Kottayam: National Bookstall, 1983, 16, one *kalian* is equal to ten *chakram*.

³²See *Chronicles*, 119. *Para* is a large measuring bowl used to measure the paddy crops. For various kinds of measures, see *Nalagamangal*, 4, 80, 48, 51.

³³Chingom is the first month according to the calendar used by the people of the area.

³⁴*Chronicles*, 36.

³⁵*Chronicles*, 114.

transport materials. He mentions that the canoes and boats of the monastery at Mannanam were used on several occasions.³⁶ He narrates the arrangements made for the Episcopal ordination of the new Archbishop after the death of Bp. Bernadine. Chavara and his people had to make great efforts to arrange travel for the bishops who came from other parts of India to participate in the ordination.³⁷

2.3. Highlights of Chavara's Personality

The language and style of the work enable the reader to see a number of qualities possessed by Chavara: deep humility, love for enemies, prudence in acts, love for the Church, openness, transparency, farsightedness, hard work and adherence to truth. Humility was the foundation and guiding virtue of Chavara's soul. On one occasion he commented on the authenticity of the work and noted that his work consisted of "only the things that I have come to know and have been able to remember."³⁸ This is an example showing his truthfulness or inner transparency. The word *kurayapettavan* (the least one)³⁹ used to denote himself is a profound expression of his virtue of humility, which enabled him to speak about his ignorance, defects or weakness in his religious life. The Chronicle of Chavara describes several of his personal experiences.⁴⁰

The chronicles also bear witness to those several occasions on which Chavara showed his generosity and won the hearts of people. When Thomas Roccas, having been excommunicated, decided to return to his country, he was greatly in need of financial help for his return journey. Chavara's generous heart reached out to him in this moment of helplessness. He treated him in a very friendly manner. We see this also in the manner in which he dealt with the cases of Fathers Antony Kudakkachira and Antony Thondanattu (Audiso). Chavara was very generous towards them, interceding on behalf of them and relieving them from their punishments imposed by the bishop. He had high regard for the parishioners, diocesan priests and several lay people who helped the monasteries in simple ways.⁴¹

³⁶*Chronicles*, 114.

³⁷See *Chronicles*, 123.

³⁸*Chronicles*, 53.

³⁹See *Chronicles*, 15.

⁴⁰*Positio*, 35.

⁴¹The parishes that helped with the funeral of Fr. Palackal and later with the rites for the 41st day from his death are Pallippuram, Muttom, Vechur,

The acknowledgement of the favours and contributions that he received from the benefactors is remarkable. He regarded them very highly and remembered them by name. In the chronicles he notes the favour accorded by Nellipuzha Itty of Cherpunkal parish, which is considered by him to be a miraculous help brought to him to meet a pressing need in answer to his prayers.⁴²

2.4. Faith in the Divine Providence

Chavara took keen interest in sharing his God-experiences with others. He acknowledges the help of Our Lady and other saints in several events. The choice of Mannanam as a proper place to construct the first monastery over Pullarikunnu is seen by him as providence of God.⁴³ He notes that it is the intercession of St Teresa of Avila that bore fruits through the sons of the Carmelites.⁴⁴ The foundation the Congregation for women, is seen as the result of the guidance from Teresa of Avila. Chavara gives thanks and praise to God almighty for making him one of the instruments in this great event: "Almighty God, I believe that you allowed me to live so long so that I may be able to see this and feel all the more obliged to you. Greater praise be to you and now and forever."⁴⁵

In his narration of the accident of a certain Mr. Ittoop Kanichai, a benefactor of Ambazhakadu Monastery, Chavara sees the miraculous help and grace of Our Lady given to the victim.⁴⁶ He reflects how the Providence of God worked in Mr. Kanichai enabling to embrace a 'happy death', receiving the last rites perfectly. In connection to this

Thathampally, Paravur, Kaduthuruthy, Muttuchira, and Kudamaloor. Chavara made a special mention of the enthusiastic co-operation of Pazhayakadavil, John of Muttom and Kunjacko who were priests of the diocese. The lay people were often the families of Perumalil, Thayil and Chennakkattu. See *Chronicles*, 36-40.

⁴²See *Chronicles*, 39.

⁴³It was decided to purchase land at Pullarikunnu, but this idea was abandoned when some people of the locality opposed the construction of any monasteries or churches.

⁴⁴See *Chronicles*, 116.

⁴⁵*Chronicles*, 117.

⁴⁶He donated his land for the construction of a monastery. As a part of the legal formalities in handing over possession of the land, he had to travel to Trivandrum to meet government officials. While returning, he was accidentally wounded by his own gun. See *Chronicles*, 119.

event, he remembers a similar incident in the life of Teresa of Avila.⁴⁷ The gift sent to him by a lady from Europe⁴⁸ and the conversion of the Konkani woman by the intercession of Our Lady, in 1868, are considered miraculous favours he witnessed in crucial moments.⁴⁹

Even the negative experiences that he had from time to time were seen as times of providence. Chavara narrates some events that hurt his feelings when he was humiliated by the authorities. When Msgr Francis Xavier succeeded Bp. Aurelius Stabilini there were some difficult moments that he had to face from the new bishop. The Bishop was not in favour of the activities of Chavara and his companions related to the plan for a religious community as he was misled by some jealous elements within the Church. The Bishop assigned to them new responsibilities that adversely affected their progress in the foundation of a religious house. In response to the unfavourable decision, Chavara requested that the Bishop might relieve him so that he could continue his work at Mannanam. The reprimand that he received from the Bishop and the related events are described very candidly by Chavara in the chronicles.⁵⁰

The chronicle of Chavara is a reminder to the modern people to foster the ability to share their thoughts on what happens today so that the future generations might benefit from these records. Chavara inspires them to preserve a record even of the simple incidents that occur in day to day life. The eye of a historian, the tongue of a true person, the pen of a classical writer, the vision of a seer, the faith of a true son of the Church, and the heart of a loving father illuminate the entire Chronicle of Chavara.

3. Letters: The Correspondence of Chavara

Letters are a powerful means of sharing, among other things, one's inner thoughts. St Paul communicated his Christian experiences to various communities through his letters. These thoughts are guidelines of Christian living today. Similarly, the heights of Chavara's apostolic zeal is found in almost all his letters. As the Vicar General of the Syrian Church, the prior of a Congregation and a pastor of many, Chavara had great contact with a large number of people.

⁴⁷See *Chronicles*, 120.

⁴⁸*Chronicles*, 125.

⁴⁹*Chronicles*, 126.

⁵⁰See *Nalagamangal*, 28-30.

His letters and circulars that are available to us affirm his cordial relationship with different kinds of people.

There are 67 letters of Chavara in various categories preserved today. As the Vicar General, Prior General and cofounder and spiritual animator of the CMI and CMC Congregations, his letters are invaluable today. They reveal his commitment and dedication to the development of the Christian community in Kerala. The salient features of these letters can be enumerated in the following points.

3.1. With Ecclesiastical and State Authorities

Chavara wrote some important letters to the ecclesiastical authorities in the wake of a schism in the Kerala Church. In this regard there are two important letters written by Chavara to Pope Pius IX.⁵¹ In addition, there are seven letters written to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith. The first four letters show that Chavara was in constant touch with the heads of Congregations in Rome regarding the activities of the schismatics.⁵² He had a healthy relationship with all the prelates of his time and the majority of them depended on Chavara in commissioning enquiries and settling diocesan issues. Most of his correspondence to the bishops concern such matters.

There are two important letters written to the superiors of the Order of Discalced Carmelites by Chavara in his capacity as the Prior of his Carmelite community.⁵³ Other letters are mostly seeking instructions for the liturgical celebrations and the request⁵⁴ for a bishop of his own rite.⁵⁵ All of these letters reflect Chavara's simplicity, loyalty to the Holy See, ardent zeal and love for the Church and eagerness to know the truth. Even during the bitter experiences he had had with the schismatic groups, in his letters to the authorities, Chavara never used any language that might hurt his rivals. However, he strongly condemned their activities so that the ecclesiastical authorities might recognize the dangers and intervene in time.

⁵¹Letters, I/1, 2.

⁵²See Letters, I/1, II/1, 2.

⁵³See Letters, I, 2: Formerly, CMI Congregation was known as TOCD.

⁵⁴See Letters, II/3, II/4, 22-25.

⁵⁵See Letters, II/5, 23.

3.2. With the Members of his Community

Chavara was known as *valiyapriyorachan* (Great Prior) to everyone. There are seventeen extant letters written by Chavara when he was the Prior General. He conveyed all kinds of useful messages to the members of his community through his letters. By addressing the confreres frequently as *snehikkappetta/priyamulla koodapirapukale* (beloved siblings), he showed a profound expression of his love for them.⁵⁶ He was respected also by the sisters of CMC Congregation, which he co-founded. They addressed him *Priorachan* (Fr. Prior) and considered him spiritual guide and instructor. There are ten letters that he wrote to them on different occasions in which Chavara also gave them special instructions.⁵⁷

3.3. Pastoral Letters

As the Vicar General of the Syro-Malabar Church, Chavara had a healthy relationship with the diocesan priests and the Christian faithful. Through his letters he directed the faithful in various ways. Since the faithful had experienced his love for the Church and respected his views, his letters were received well.

Chavara had a genuine love for the Church and was always at the disposal of the Church for various pastoral ministries. On several occasions he took the initiative to write significant letters to the ecclesiastical authorities in Rome. In his letters to the Pope he presented himself and other faithful as true sons and servants of the Church.⁵⁸ His loyalty and obedience to the See of Rome as well as his courage is visible in the inquiry that request that he made directly of Pope Pius IX: "Whom one should obey in the scrupulous situation of schism - Archbishop Bernardine or Thomas Roccas?"⁵⁹ At the time of the Ecumenical Council of Vatican I, Chavara sent a special letter which was dispatched to Fr. Kuriakose Eliseus, the superior at Mannanam monastery, instructing the members to pray for the Mother Church and further encouraging them to help the Church materially too. These correspondences bear witness to the fact that even when hard pressed with the upbringing of the new religious community still in its infancy, he set apart a good amount of money

⁵⁶Letters, VI/ 1, 4.

⁵⁷Letters, VII/1-10, 75-86.

⁵⁸See Letters, I/1, 2.

⁵⁹Letters, I/1, 2.

for the cause of the Ecumenical Council as a sign of his loyalty and love towards the Church.⁶⁰

4. The Testaments: The Legacy of Chavara

Chavara's Letters contain two testaments that he left for future generations of the religious community as well as the Christian faithful of his home parish, Kainakary. They are generally known as the *Chavarul* (Testament) of Chavara.⁶¹ The testament to the religious, which is in fact a Will for its members, consists of his personal instructions and his dreams for the religious community.

4.1. Testament One: Instruction to the Christian Families

The Testament of a Loving Father (*nalla appante chavarul*), popularly known as *Chavarul*, is a letter of Chavara written to the members of his parish in his efforts to renew Christian families. The letter was written in two parts, namely, a rule for Christian families and an instruction to begin a charitable association of the confraternity of St Joseph for a happy death.

The concerns of the first letter made Chavara an apostle of Christian families. It is a set of spiritual commandments and family directives (*kudumbachattangal*) in the language of ordinary people. Although the letter proved very useful for the entire Christian faithful of Kerala, it was formulated originally for the faithful of his home parish, Kainakary.⁶² The long discourse on forty instructions was written in two sections, the first dealing with rules for an ideal Christian family while the second section emphasizes the responsibilities of parents in bringing up their children. The title *nalla appante Chavarul* (the Testament of a Father) shows he was respected and loved as a father to all.

The *Chavarul* covers all aspects of life in the family from birth to death, and indicates the possible dangers when affection, peace, justice, charity and order are not maintained in families. It covers all important facets of an ideal Christian life such as: love of neighbour, humility, contact with others, industriousness, fear of God, days of obligation, daily routine, upbringing of children, children's responsibility towards parents and so on. The following is an extract

⁶⁰See *Letters*, V/8, 45.

⁶¹See *Letters*, 6-74, 117-128.

⁶²Chavara wrote two letters to his parishioners at Kainakary: the first in February 1868 and the second in October 1869. See *Letters*, X/6, 102.

but summarized rendering of the *Chavarul* which contains the important message of each number.

In the first section (T 1 a) he describes the rules for a family:

- A good family is like the heaven above, when we live in mutual love, obedience to parents and forgiving one another.
- Civil suits destroy families.
- Sundays and other days of obligation are our Lord's days which must be followed with strict discipline.
- Do not borrow money except in the case of essential needs. If you have borrowed, pay it back as soon as possible.
- Do not make a show of your wealth. If one makes a show of his glories and achievements, one belittles oneself and soon becomes a beggar.
- A small lamp that would render light steadily and long is better than a light coming from a heap of straw which is soon extinguished. Had you not lit the lamp during the day, you could have lit it at night.
- Do not wander into people's houses, hunting after news and gossip.
- Do not seek relations with families that are not founded on fear of God.
- Do not admit all sorts of people to your home as friends. The proverb goes: "Tell me who your friend is and I will tell you who you are."
- Make it clear to others that your home is not a place for indulging in profane conversation ill-befitting a Christian family.
- Wealth of family consists not of the quantity of properties, but of their quality.
- To remain idle is not the habit of honourable people. Idleness is the mother of all vices and would induce one to the habit of drinking.
- Unethical trading is harmful as unjust merchants have never attained an honourable status in life. It should be carried out with great care and with a sense of justice.
- Do good (virtue of charity) to one another. The day in which you have not done good to your fellowmen is not counted in your book of life.
- Stinginess and extravagance, both are equally sinful. The wealth of a stingy man will be eaten away by worms, and the wealth of an extravagant one will disappear like smoke.
- Do not choose many friends indiscriminately. Select one carefully from a thousand. He/she who doesn't love God will not love you.

- Have no place for stolen articles in your house even for a moment, for it destroys the house.
- Don't deny just wages to labourers; do not delay them; it is a sin before the Lord.
- Be modest and chaste in your walking, sitting and lying down.
- Abandon yourself to the holy will of God in all sufferings, trials and your sickness. If you maintain patience only when you are happy you are a feeble person.
- Provide children with spiritual and philosophical books that strengthen devotion to God as well as nourish their thinking. To keep bad books in your house is like a fire that you hide beneath a heap of straw.
- Besides the usual practices on Sundays, spend a large portion of the day in reading good books and serving the poor.
- The employees in your household must be God-fearing. Special care must be taken of their conduct in the family as well as their spiritual welfare.
- Be careful to go to bed at a fixed hour and to awake at a proper time. Pray the angelus and related morning prayers before proceeding to other engagements.

After these instructions, Chavara addresses the parents. In this second section, we find his instructions regarding the responsibilities of the parents in bringing up their children (T I b).

- Parents, understand your great responsibility in bringing up your children. They are treasures that the good God had entrusted to you. Offer them to God; commit them to the care of Jesus, Mary and Joseph of the Holy Family.
- As soon as the children are able to learn, teach them to repeat the names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph along with other prayers.
- Young children should not be allowed to walk about naked, even inside the house. Do not utter vulgar words and abusive terms in their presence.
- In order that children may respect the parents, they should not be allowed to sleep in their parents' bed room. Boys and girls shouldn't be put in the same room to sleep. What they do not naturally know, the devil will teach them.
- Little children should not play with their companions out of the sight of their parents. Do not entrust them to the servants either. Usually it is such people who corrupt the children.
- As soon as the children come of the age of reason, they must be sent to school. Besides, parents should enquire about their studies,

behaviour and their companions. Their studies should be tested every Sunday.

- Children should not be allowed to stay in the homes of relatives, because very often they leave the homes as angels and return home as devils.
- When they are eight years of age, they are to be taught all about confession and they should make their first confession. They should be brought up especially devoted to our Mother.
- One should be neither too stern nor too lenient to one's children. Avoid too much of indulgence and severe punishments. Let the mother teach the children to respect and honour the father by her exemplary behaviour; in the same way, the father also.
- The children should be immediately corrected when they tell lies and use cunning means. They must be induced with love, respect and a sense of justice.
- At dusk, when the bell for the Angelus is rung, make it a rule that the children should be at home. After the night prayers, teach them to say "Praise be to Jesus" to the parents and to kiss their hands in respect.
- To let girls dress up in finery and to let them go about on the pretext of human respect, wealth, and family prestige and to make them wear clothes and ornaments beyond one's ability and status, will promote vanity in them and kindle hellfire in many souls.
- Parents must take utmost care to avoid quarrels among children.
- When the children come of age, give them complete freedom to choose their state of life. For marriage the likes and dislikes of the individual must be considered. When forming marriage alliances, give more importance to character and conduct rather than to wealth and prestige relations, lest both parents and the children will come to grief.
- Even when the children have attained their full growth, as far as possible, do not exhibit your blind admiration of them or your weakness.
- Even before the parents die let the children live in separate establishments. Write out the will or partition deed in time. Or else, after your death, you will be responsible for the sins caused by their disputes.

At the end of this discourse, he the Children: My dear children, by the law of God, you are obliged to obey your parents and avoid giving them any pain. Remember therefore, that those who violate the fourth

divine commandment will be punished by the good God in this world itself.⁶³

In the first part of the long discourse, Chavara underlines the following core values as a code of conduct of Christian families: Love of one another, respectful distance from pride and boasting, fear of God and discipline in the families, an aptitude for hard work, charity, justice, the real wealth of family which are devotion to and the fear of God, reading good books, integrity of prayer and life, celebration of the Sunday, timetable for the day, duties and responsibilities of the parents and discipline of the children in the family.

In the second part of the *Chavarul*, he narrates the objectives of the charitable association of the Confraternity of St Joseph.⁶⁴ It was established mainly to prepare people for the moment of death. He was convinced of the value of prayerful support of people at the moment of death as a supreme charity. It was also a means of converting the hearts of grave sinners,⁶⁵ as St Therese of Lisieux who prayed for the conversion of Pranzini.⁶⁶ Chavara notes: "However great a sinner may be, if he repents over his sins at the moment of death, like the good thief... the gates of heaven will be automatically open to him."⁶⁷ *Chavarul* is a well-meditated, practical theology for the family with spiritual, moral, psychological and sociological characteristics, very relevant even in our times.

4.2. Testament Two: Code of Conduct for the Religious

In his last days, in August 1870 to be exact, Chavara prepared a will. In October, sealed in an envelope, he handed it over to a novice who was taking care of him as he was bedridden to be given to Fr Leopold. After the death of Chavara, Fr Leopold read it, made several copies of it and sent them to all of the CMI monasteries. It is Chavara's testament to his own community members expressing his vision about the future of the Congregation, the genuine values that an ideal religious was to follow. He also dedicates a section on the dignity of religious life. The five points that he is raising in this testament are the following:

⁶³See *Letters X/6*, 103-17.

⁶⁴See *Letters X/7*, 117.

⁶⁵*Letters X/7*, 119.

⁶⁶See J. Clarke, *Story of a Soul* (3rd edition), Washington: 1996, 99.

⁶⁷*Letters X/7*, 119.

- Firstly, he lays down the vision behind the founding of the religious community emphasising that it was by the special grace of God that the community was named Carmelites. He notes that the significant mark of a true religious is total negation of self-will and perfect obedience which turns the monastery into a mini-heaven.
- Secondly, he invites the members of the community to maintain the life of charity and love of one another as *koodepirappukal* (siblings) and enjoins the vicar (superior) of the monastery never to let this love weaken. To strengthen this bond, he instructs them to maintain a regular correspondence among themselves enquiring about the needs and rendering any help required.
- Thirdly, he reminds them that the community is founded for the service of the Christian brethren and their salvation. In order to avail this opportunity of religious life to more people in the Congregation, a good number of formation houses are to be opened with the permission of the Arch-bishop. He gratefully places on record the service of Carmelite missionaries, and Archbishop Bernardine who supported Chavara and led the Church to the right path and instructs his confreres to maintain the cordial relationship with the vicariate (diocese) in the coming days.
- Fourthly, he instructs the community to take particular care to refrain from interfering in the affairs of the convent (CMC community), or the boarding house attached to it unless one is assigned to them.
- Fifthly, he advises them to continue the prayers and render help as much as possible to the families who donated the land for the monasteries.⁶⁸

The testament ends with a series of apologies by Chavara for his shortcomings and lapses in the performance of duty as the Prior of the Congregation, and for not being a goods model to the community.⁶⁹

Though the testament is very small in structure, it contains many important values that strengthen the dignity of religious and consecrated life. At the same time, he also has highlighted the dangers that can ruin our religious life, which meant for him an ascent through various spiritual stages to be united with Jesus the Lord. He exhorted

⁶⁸There were several families who helped the Congregation either by the donation of land for monasteries or money. The family of Mathan Kalapurackal, Thayil and Perumalil, Parayee, Tharakan and Kallookaran are a few of them. See *Letters*, 73.

⁶⁹*Letters*, 74.

the sisters that he himself dwelt in the love of Jesus Christ, sat always before His eyes, walked by His side and conversed with Him. Jesus is the bridegroom of every consecrated person. Such thoughts kept recurring especially when he addressed the sisters as the brides of Christ, whom a consecrated person assiduously invites to come and live in his/her heart. In this sense the religious state is the most sublime and glorious calling. At the same time, he stated that carelessness and negligence towards the sacred duties of our state, or towards humility, charity, religious modesty and genuine devotion can destroy life.⁷⁰

Chavara was convinced of the danger of an unexamined life. The lack of a sense of guilt concerning the conducts that are contrary to one's state of life causes the rapid fall of the monasteries in which one resides.⁷¹ The practice of virtues are the real guarantee for perseverance in religious life. He was convinced of this fact, as can be seen from his own words to the community: "the strength of monastery does not consist in the thickness of its walls, but in the virtue and the religious zeal of the monks who dwell in them."⁷² He wanted his confreres to possess certain self-discipline in conversation and inter-personal relationship. One must be disciplined in such a way that one is not curious about matters outside of the monastery. He also reminds his brethren that their vocation is the greatest gift of God and that they have and it is of their own will that renounced everything in the world. Now, if they neglect their religious obligations, it will be a great foolishness or madness!⁷³

5. Conclusion

The peculiarity of Chavara as a religious is that he was unwilling to be tied down to any one of the aspects of the contemporary society that he was part of. He would render his services if his involvement in a given exigency is called for. Hence, the various kinds of literature that he produced bear witness to his contributions towards many aspects of life and society. In general, by means of the Chronicles Chavara would keep a Journal of his society and the religious community. As a window to the contemporary society and the Church, it is not only an ecclesiastical sourcebook but also a document on the personality of

⁷⁰See *Letters* VI/1, 61.

⁷¹See *Letters* VI/1, 61.

⁷²*Letters* VI/1, 65.

⁷³See *Letters* VI/1, 66.

Chavara and his faith in the divine providence. The correspondence that he made on various occasions with various ecclesiastical and state authorities, with the members of his community and the parishes gives a glimpse into his person and his concern for the Church of his time. The most significant of his correspondences are the testaments that he left for the Church in the instruction to the Christian families and a code of conduct for the religious of his own community. These correspondences will ever remain guidelines for the posterity.