

COMPUNCTION OF THE SOUL The Mystical Experience of Chavara

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Abstract: Leena P. Kuriakose (Amal Maria CMC) explores *The Compunction of the Soul*, the penitential poem of Chavara in order to assess the mystical experience of Chavara that is the underlying structure of the poem. The constant experience of God turned him into a person of profound interiority and helped him to live in a mystical union with God, enjoying the sweetness of being with 'Abba'. There, in the presence of the Lord, he sees himself and remorse fills his heart and the heart speaks the language of repentance. He was irresistibly drawn to the Eucharist where the Lord who revealed His merciful ways to him. In response to this grace, he sings hymns of gratitude. Before the Lord, he becomes aware of the transience of the world and the futility of the earthly pursuits. This makes him passionately long for the divine.

Keywords: Experience, passion, quest, truth, world, mysticism, religion, intellect, imagination, knowledge, renunciation, divine, reason, seekers, love, Avila, indwelling, service, sacrament, Eucharist, meditation, humility, Abba-consciousness, contrition, mercy, gratitude, repentance, lamentation, compunction, self-surrender, transience.

1. Introduction

In the history of humanity one finds a curious, passionate and definite type of personality, the owner of which refuses to be satisfied with that which the ordinary folk seek. These rare individuals are found in the East and the West, in the ancient, medieval and modern worlds. Their passion appears in the form of a certain other-worldly and intangible quest. Their constant effort is to find a way out or a way back through which they can quench their craving for a glimpse of the absolute truth. For them, this quest gives meaning to their life and becomes the

stimulating power in life. They live in the material world, but their search is only for “the immaterial and the final Being.”¹

Mysticism is considered as an experience that goes beyond religion, intellect, imagination and senses. Mystical experience is said to be the highest and purest form of knowledge and the mystics enjoy a fullness of life through their renunciation of worldly desires which is beyond the reach of the common people. One of the aims of all religions is the union of the soul with God, which is the highest form of mystical experience. It is said to begin in an encounter with the absolute that helps the self to understand the divine intervention. The self begins to flow like a stream to God until it attains the final union as one surrenders to a power of love that is greater than human and advances towards God in a darkness that goes beyond the light of reason.

The seekers are in search of God throughout their lives and many are the paths open before them to reach their goal. They choose the best way to attain their goal. Some treat the Absolute as their master while others hold Him as their friend. To some He is their beloved and others consider Him as their Father. As the mystics have experienced, union with God is the most intimate and highest ecstasy and the most exalted expression of pure transcendental love. This mystical engagement with the divine is evident in the experience of many saints like John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila and Catherine of Sienna. Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Euphrasia attained this ardent union with God in their spiritual sojourn.

Contemplation was the hallmark of the life of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. Having learnt and been touched by the life of the abovementioned saints, he wanted to have the experience for himself. To a very great extent, he succeeded in his spiritual pursuits. In the following pages, we make an attempt to bring the mysticism of Chavara as he experienced it, out of his writings, especially the first few chapters of *The Compunction of Soul*, one of his celebrated poems.

The strong and vibrant faith in Christ and deep love towards Him transformed Chavara as a man of divine graciousness. In his letter to religious as a loving father he wrote:

Abide in the love of Jesus Christ; always sit before His eyes;
Walk close to Him; always converse with Him (Letter VII/6).²

¹E. Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Mans Spiritual Consciousness*, London: Methuen and co Ltd, 1911-1977, 4.

²*Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: The Letters*, Vol. IV, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Chavara, 1989, 82.

Jesus said: "If anyone loves me he will keep my word. My Father will love him. We shall come to him and make our home with him" (Jn 14:24). By being with Jesus and imbued with a dynamic faith, Chavara reflected the light of God-experience. Out of his blissful mystical experience, he would write:

Oh joy of joys! Oh Lord, we are mere worms incapable of understanding anything. Like unto the mother who nourishes her children with milk even while they are asleep, or are unable to express in words their hunger and thirst, you are looking after our needs every day (Letter VII/10).³

The utter confidence of a little child when it is in its father's arms is comparable to the strong feeling that filled the life of Chavara despite many disappointments in various ventures. Being a man of the Spirit he had a foresight and a vision to transcend time. Deeply immersed in the Almighty and constantly strengthened by the word of God, he had the courage and confidence to take extraordinary steps for his people. According to Archbishop Mathew Kavukatt, "The life of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a monk of extraordinary sanctity, a man of dynamic personality with a broad vision and powerful push and unbaiting pluck, ever remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration to all who care to look at it."⁴

The constant experience of the indwelling presence of the Father not only turned him into a person of profound interiority and helped him to live in continuous mystical union but also to dedicate his life and activities to His service. This union was also seen in his great devotion towards the Blessed Sacrament as he knelt down before the Eucharistic Lord for long hours. It often seemed that his life flowed and merged into the presence of the Lord as a little stream into a great ocean. "He remained on his knees as though in an ecstasy for as much as one hour of his meditation."⁵ V. Plathottam, quoting an eye witness makes this significant note: "He passed before the Blessed Sacrament every moment he could snatch from the various charges with which he was entrusted."⁶

³*Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: The Letters*, 86.

⁴P. Kalluveetil and P. Kachappilly (eds), *The Lord of Heaven and Earth: Chavara Studies in Honour of Lucas Vithuvattickal CMI*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 96.

⁵Valerian Plathottam, *Malankara Sabha Mathavinte Oru Veera Santhanam*, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 1939, 7.

⁶Plathottam, *Malankara Sabha Mathavinte Oru Veera Santhanam*, 7.

Experiencing a great union with God, John of the Cross wrote in his *Spiritual Canticle*:

Now I occupy my soul
 And all my energy in His service;
 I no longer tend the herd, then
 Nor have I any other work
 Now that my every act is love (Canticle 28).⁷

Chavara gave vent to his ardent devotion, unfailing love and immense gratitude that were pent up in his heart through his writings, especially through *The Compunction of the Soul*, an epic poem in twelve parts with a total of 3923 lines. This mystic strain is intermingled with deep meditations, intense aspirations of great devotion and passionate longing to see the Divine. The spiritual journey of Chavara is illustrated in this writing through the elegance of the song and its great divine touch. It shows the mystical heights of union of his soul with God. Chavara unveils the innermost chambers of his soul in this spiritual writing. By revealing the deepest and holiest thoughts, he pours out the feelings of the compunction of his heart. Taking into consideration the present impracticality of studying the entire poem elaborately, we make a humble attempt to follow the divine experience of Chavara by means of a reading of the first three cantos of the poem.

2. The Sweetness of Being with 'Abba'

Chavara was a man who experienced the indwelling presence of God in complete contemplation. He experienced God as his love and joy, as food and drink and as essential to his life as his breath. In spite of the sufferings and hardships that he faced as he went around animating his communities, he rejoiced in his heart only because of the awareness of this divine presence within. Of the experience of this the presence he sang:

Severed from you, my God my only good
 What joy, peace, or wellbeing can be mine?
 You my love, my joy, and all my good fortune
 If not with you, how could I live my life
 My very breath, my food, my drink
 What a solace have I save in you! (Canto ii/141-146).⁸

⁷John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* by St. John of the Cross, E.A. Peers (trans and ed.), New York: Image books edition, 1961, canto, 28.

Chavara experienced God in a special way as his loving father. This Abba-consciousness was the most sublime and unique aspect of his spiritual life. Even when life was passing through many problems, his ardent faith in and intense love for his heavenly father enabled him to exercise his unfailing love towards his people. Even on these occasions, he used to spend long hours in prayer and meditation and used to shed tears recalling the fatherly love of God and his filial relationship with Him. This love for the father and his people led him to render maximum service to both the society and the Church. In meditation he became one with God and in action he became one with the poor and the underprivileged. True to his name, Chavara was another Elijah, burning with the zeal for the living God. He sings:

Through Baptism you raised me to sublime sonship

Ignorance drove me far from grace divine (II/136-137).⁹

Chavara believed that it was the infinite mercy of God that filled him with the insatiable thirst for God and lifted him up to be one with Him. In the presence of the Lord, he adorned his humble life with virtues and deep passion for God. He spent his time with the Lord, with a spontaneous outpouring of heart's desire and sentiments as of a loving son.

3. Remembering God's Mercy

Chavara was a man who enjoyed the merciful love of God and in turn, this made him amiable, compassionate and available to all. He was irresistibly drawn towards the Eucharistic Lord who revealed His merciful ways to him. Being in the presence of God he remembers the merciful love of God:

God almighty, who was in the beginning

You created me, a son of Adam

O God, wherefore this grace, reveal to me

O Lord eternal, your infinite mercy

Were I but a common brute of the earth

What right would have I, to ask you why (I/1-6).¹⁰

Here Chavara expresses his deep gratitude to the Almighty for granting him the grace of his existence as a human being in this world.

⁸*Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: Compunction of the Soul, Dirge, Anasthasia's Martyrdom*, Vol. II, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Chavara, 1989, 10.

⁹*Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: Compunction of the Soul*, 10.

¹⁰*Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: Compunction of the Soul*, 1.

The greatness of the mercy of God and unworthiness of man always came to his thoughts and meditations.

4. Hymns of Gratitude

The feeling of gratitude that welled up in the heart of the Psalmist was expressed by him in the following words: "Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright. Praise the Lord with the lyre; make melody to Him with the harp of ten strings. Sing to him a new song; play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts." (Ps 33:1-3). Like the Psalmist, in the *Compunction of the Soul* Chavara expresses the depth of his gratitude. He is grateful towards God for each and everything that he has received in his life. Like St Therese of Lissieux he humbly states and acknowledges the gift of God and sings the mercies of the Lord. He writes:

God of unbounded kindness, Holy Lord,
 O sea of mercy, of mighty depth unfathomed
 You did look on me with tender care
 And tended me with unstinted love.
 O fount of mercy, in your crystal streams of grace
 Was my soul once cleansed and made spotless fair
 Beauteous, bright, bedecked in gems of virtue
 Through my Baptism, a boon, a day of days !
 What shall I render you, my Lord, my God,
 For all your wondrous gifts of mercy and love
 For cleansing my soul, so holy, spotless and fair
 At the very start of my journey of life? (I/29-40).¹¹

5. Repentance the Language of the Heart

Compunction is another disposition of Chavara that is expressed in *Compunction of the Soul*. Chavara did not commit any mortal or grave sins in his life. However, his great intimacy with the Lord gives him the awareness of his own utter unworthiness. The lamentation of the soul that is produced by the compunction reflects in every page of this writings:

The spotless garment, Baptism bestowed on me
 That I, beacon light would shine for those
 In my wake, who walked, a sot that I am
 I rudely sailed and turned all virtue to vice
 And oh, the pity of it! the older I grew

¹¹*Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: Compunction of the Soul*, 2.

My lamp, its oil consumed held a smoking wick!
Who else so unfortunate as worthless me
Its flame extinguished, ere I was aware! (II/349-356).¹²

Despite his inner purity, Chavara's soul is wailing over his incompetence to receive the Lord into his heart. The elements of contrition, humility, and self-surrender in Chavara are rooted in his firm conviction that he is a mere trifle before the Lord. Like the prodigal son he begins his journey towards his loving Father. The ruminations of the prodigal son is found in the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*:

Here, I come before you, Oh my Heavenly Father, with heart full of repentance and firm purpose of amendment to feel your peace in my heart... As my sorrow bears no proportion to my multitudinous sins, I take heart to go to my Heavenly Father by offering to Him, with my sorrow and grief the penance and penitence of the great penitents like Mary Magdalene, Mary of Cortona who have always been helpful to me in evoking repentance for my sins.¹³

6. Awareness of the Transience of the World

The peace and joy of the heart is a very prominent subject treated in the context of the spiritual warfare. Every action connected to this world and all endeavours of our daily life should be directed towards achieving this peace. When one achieves detachment and inner freedom while keeping harmony with this nature, it leads one to the highest level of spirituality. Chavara was a man of great interiority and he was aware of the danger of vanity of human nature and worldly achievements. The song that he sings from the depth of his heart gives vent to this thought:

Thought you not, all things that move are
Transient like the swift lightnings flash!
Avidly I drank in all that pleased my sight
Glued to them my mind, tough they are dust...
The fresh green grass of today, by morrow
Shrivels, turns seer in the heat of the sun
Blossoms bright of various hues and scents

¹²Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: *Compunction of the Soul*, 16.

¹³Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Vol. III: *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 16. See also Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood: Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara's Socio-Pastoral Vision for Woman and the Legacy of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 177-183.

Lose their shades and fragrance in the air
 Momently they change and faded fall on the ground,
 How transient its wealth of beauty and form! (II/304-316).¹⁴

Here, the only sentiment that the soul has is gratitude towards the endless mercy of God as it meditates over the beauty of heaven. With the help of this experience of the mercy of God, Chavara moulded a heart for himself brimming with joy and heavenly praises.

7. The Passionate Longing for the Divine

The life and writings of Chavara also reflect a passionate longing to see God and a desire to hide in the presence of the indwelling One. In the third canto of the *Compunction of the Soul*, he expresses the great desire of his heart that throbs with an ardent longing to experience the heavenly closeness. This desire was the fruit of his deep meditative prayer and the awareness of the abiding Presence. The most sublime and mystical sense of religious life is this wish to see the heavenly presence.

Chavara defines the art of being one with God in the following terms: "Meditation means conversing with God: its work is to be in the company of God sitting together with Him in love and conversing like bosom friends... Even if they remain without uttering a word they will find satisfaction in sitting close to the beloved."¹⁵ His incessant presence before the Lord gives birth to a passionate longing to see the events that transpired in the earthly life of Jesus. His heart throbs in a great passion and he sings:

The Lord of mercy, the son of God
 His glorious splendour, I long to see
 The fountain of mercy, God incarnate
 Who, the ugly form of man assumed
 To uproot him from the slush of sin
 The redeemer of human kind, I long to see (III/1-6).¹⁶

The ardent desire to see God transforms the life a person; and once the desire has been fulfilled in the divine encounter, the beholder, considers nothing else worthwhile. Craving for the divine, longing for the vision and experience of the Presence transforms a seeker into a mystic like Chavara.

¹⁴*Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: Compunction of the Soul*, 304-306.

¹⁵*Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 14.

¹⁶*Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: Compunction of the Soul*, 17.

8. Conclusion

Mysticism is a resolute journey from being to the beyond where it ends in a surrender to everlasting joy. God invites human beings to be in union with Him. The rapid changes that the world constantly undergoes notwithstanding, this invitation and response go on without any obstruction. The modern people encounter a world of rat race and engaging with it, they are tired and tensed as the pressure of life mounts. Often they lack the time to be with the Divine and to enjoy the Presence; sometimes they even forget the higher power at work within the world. Gradually, their hearts become restless and dissatisfied; and complaints and woes abound.

For those who care, in the Divine, there are always openings to the oceans of grace ahead for them to embark on a mystical voyage. Chavara Kuriakose Elias was an individual of our times who enjoyed the beauty and sweetness of such a fascinating voyage in the vast ocean of mystical experiences despite the storms and whirlpools seemed to upset and overturn his life. The life and activities of this outstanding man of God inspires us to lead a Christian life with greater earnestness and dedication.