

CHAVARA Mystic and Mystical Theologian

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Abstract: The author brings out the mystic and mystical theologian in Chavara by analysing the prayer life that he led. Prayer is not merely the formal acts of vocal or mental prayer. It has more to it than these. In order to delve deep into the spirit of prayer found in Chavara, the author first takes a look at the praying community that Chavara and his companions were part of. Chavara was heir to the prayer culture initiated by Palackal, an ascetic theologian and Porukara, a man with prayers in his heart. Chavara brought about a blending of prayerfulness and apostolate. However, the greatest influence in his life came from Teresa of Avila with her *Way of Perfection* and *Interior Castle*. He was a mystic, though he did not have many of the mystical phenomena like those in the life of St Mariam Thresia or St Alphonsa. The author enumerates 15 mystical phenomena and notes that Chavara had some of them. Mysticism is a life in relation with God in general including the practices of austerity, the supernatural motives in all our undertakings, our attitudes to the people and things around us, the faith-vision we maintain in our responses to all that happens to and around us, and the supernatural perspective in which we see and assess the events and experiences. As a man of essential mysticism, Chavara is a practical mystic.

Keywords: mysticism, prayer, austerity, experience, asceticism, Church, contemplation, seminary, apostolate, liturgy, Avila, detachment, Roccas, obedience, vision, locution, transverberation, stigmata, levitation, crucifixion, ecstasy, hermeneut, theologian.

1. Introduction

By prayer we must mean not merely the formal acts of vocal or mental prayer. It is rather the life in relation with God in general including the practices of austerity, the supernatural motives in all our undertakings, our attitudes to the people and things around us, the faith-vision we maintain in our responses to all that happens to and around us, and the supernatural perspective in which we see and

assess the events and experiences. Prayer or prayer life is an all-embracing factor in one's life. Again, while treating prayer one has to make a distinction between communitarian and personal prayer on the one hand, and prayer and prayerfulness on the other. St Chavara and the other founding fathers of the CMI congregation practised prayer at all these levels and in its most comprehensive sense.

2. A Praying Community

Let us first of all consider the prayer life of the founding fathers in community. Their active life did not hinder the spiritual exercises or stifle the spirit of prayer. Their daily time-table as presented by Chavara clearly shows that prayer was given the first place in their life. It briefly was as follows: Rising up at 5.00 am all say the Morning Prayer. The priests then say the canonical prayer. Then along with the religious candidates and seminarians they gather in the church and say the joyful mysteries of rosary, the prayers in honour of the five sacred wounds of Our Lord, and the dolours of Our Lady, and the prayer to St Joseph for help for celibate life and happy death. Then the priests go for offering Holy Mass. Thereafter they all together recite the Litany of All Saints. Then all engage in the study of spiritual books. At noon the priests gather to say the sorrowful mysteries of rosary, the prayer in honour of the sacred wounds of Our Lord, the devotion to the sorrows and joys of St Joseph, act of love, the prayer expressing desire for sufferings, and the prayer for help to do good works. Then they take lunch, the religious and seminarians in separate refectories. At the sun-set the bell goes for *angelus*. Then all gather and the assigned person announces the saint whose feast is held the next day. He then says: "God, create in me a pure heart! Renew an upright spirit in me!" To it the community responds: "Reject me not from your presence! Do not take away from me your Holy Spirit." Thereafter a passage from the book *Jñāna-muttu-māla* is read out, and all meditate on it. Following it the candles on the altar are lit, and all together say the Litany of Our Lady, *sdr-ālāha*, the glorious mysteries of rosary, and the devotions to the sacred wounds of Our Lord, the scapular, and in praise of St Joseph. Then the students and their masters go to their own places and spend time till 10.00 pm in prayer, meditation and study. During the Lent, however, after supper they would keep awake till midnight doing various devotions.¹

¹Bernard, *Malayālattile Ka. Ni. Mū. Sabhayuṭe Caritrasaṃkṣepam (Short History of TOCD in Kerala)*, Mannanam, 39-40.

3. Palackal: An Ascetic Theologian

The founding fathers prayed not only in community but also personally. They were first and foremost men of prayer. In his short biography of his *Malpān* Thoma Palackal, Chavara has portrayed him as a man of rigorous asceticism, discipline, hard work, love of knowledge, concern for the common good, pastoral-mindedness and prayerfulness, and all these in spite of poor health. He was a strong-willed ascetic but deeply interested and committed to the good of the Church.

The *malpān*, when we were staying with him and, it seemed, even from the time he said the First Mass, used to eat a full meal of rice only at noon. For supper he would take a little *kaññi* [rice gruel], but nothing for breakfast.

Moreover, while in Pallipuram he was getting meals from his family. They were in financial difficulties then, as mentioned above. A few days before the *malpān* said the First Mass, his mother had passed away. He had one elder brother and two sisters. The husband of the elder one of these ladies was ill-natured and improvident, and, therefore she had come back home. It was she who prepared and sent the food for the *malpān*. His brother also was not very capable. Hence, all these people were depending, although not fully, on the *malpān* from the day of his First Mass. Whether it was because of this hardship at home, or because he wanted it to be so, he had only one full meal a day – rice and a curry at noon, and that too the same every day. That is, ever since we began our studies under him, it is rice and a dry curry of boiled peas seasoned with chilli powder, and buttermilk. Though rarely there was a change, these continued to be brought almost every day for a long time. Then the peas were replaced by small prawns, which also was prepared in the same manner. This too went on for long. Then came the *vaidyan's* order. Even after that the *malpān* continued to eat only what his sister would prepare at home and send to him.²

In spite of such frugal food and poor health the *malpān* was ever so hard working and followed a strict discipline. He drew up a strict code of conduct and time table for the students, which he, too, meticulously kept. He regularly sat with them in the study-hall reading and writing for hours on end. At night, although the students would go to sleep by

²CWC I (1990), 59; CSK I (1981), 65-66.

eleven o'clock, he would continue staying up for reading. He joined the students also for all the community prayers. For example, he was there with them for canonical prayers at regular hours in the evening, night and morning. He would not combine them as many others used to do for the sake of convenience. In the morning, except on Christmas Day, he would start quite early before dawn with the recitation of the fixed set of 8 or 9 psalms, and end with the Morning Prayer before Holy Mass. During Lent the number of psalms on weekdays would be about 60, and on Sundays about 90!³

4. Porukara: A Man with Prayers in His Heart

Chavara's observation about Fr Porukara is that he was "with prayers in his heart."⁴ His biographer Kuriakose Porukara says:

It is practically impossible to describe the life and achievements of Fr [Thomas] Porukara. His blessed soul was aflame with God's love which flowed to the neighbours, and made him practise heroic virtues. For the glory of God and benefit of people he started the monastery, and for running it he went through enormous troubles and sufferings, made a number of difficult journeys and offered incessant prayers. From the day of his first Holy Mass he led an austere life. For example, early in the morning he would go to the church to attend Mass, say the prayers and then offer Mass. It will be noon when he takes breakfast! On Sundays and feast days after the Mass, sermon and prayers it will be 1 or 2 o'clock in the afternoon when he takes food... Whether attending a solemn High Mass or saying the 15 mysteries of rosary, he would stand on his knees from the beginning to the end. In the nights even after all have gone to sleep, he would be in prayer with his elbows on the table for a long time. Going to sleep very late in the night was his regular practice!⁵

5. Kuriakose Chavara: Heir of Prayer Culture

Chavara was the proud heir of a prayer culture, a culture in which prayer was considered a supreme value. In it prayer was an archetype, which he shared from the very birth and even from the conception, so to say. "His parents, who were of excellent virtues,"⁶ especially his

³CWC I (1990), 58; CSK I (1981), 64-65.

⁴CWC I (1990), 15; CSK I (1981), 18.

⁵*Stāpaka Pitākanmār*, Mannanam (1995), 23.

⁶*Stāpaka Pitākanmār*, 24.

mother, who sowed in his tender mind the seed of the spirit of prayer, were the primary and the most powerful agents of this culture. Chavara's own testimony is as follows, in the form of a prayer to God:

You gave a mother to bring me up without any mishap in life as she brought me up suckling me with the love you gave her, she guided me to say my little prayers as well. And as I grew up she taught me more and more assuredly and made me learn all my prayers. Sitting at her feet I slowly began to know God. Even when she woke up to pray at midnight and prayed on her knees, I too was beside her on my knees and learned from her lips the name of Jesus and prayers to the Mother of God.⁷

By word and deed his mother initiated him to prayer, introduced him to the mysteries of Christian faith, and to the devotions to the Holy Family, the Holy Eucharist and Bl. Virgin Mary; and she brought him up as a disciplined child. As he himself says, under such a motherly care he grew up as a child pleasing to God.⁸ The event of his dedication during the childhood to the mother of God by his own mother, the latter's practice of daily prayer even at midnight on her knees, her motherly corrections not with stick or hand but by eloquent looks, and the parents' devotion to the Holy Family, have left in his mind lasting and deep impressions which gradually became the unconscious force in his life, inspiring him to a life of incessant prayer. Those impressions, containing all the ingredients of Christian prayer, in fact became the foundation stone of his prayer life, as a look at his later life would substantiate.

The seed of the spirit of prayer that had fallen in the good soul of Chavara's heart, duly sprouted, and was nurtured first by the priest in the presbytery where he was sent by the parents to stay for some time just before he entered the seminary at the age of thirteen. He recalls that "the priest there brought him up, and taught him to participate in and assist at the Mass, and to practise virtues and avoid whatever is evil."⁹ Another great and decisive influence on his prayer life was exerted by the ascetic theologian Fr Thomas Palackal, who was his Malpan (Rector) in the seminary, the spiritual director, and the main source of inspiration in the task of the founding of the two religious congregations. Chavara was the Malpan's favourite disciple, who had in turn great appreciation for the latter as well. About twelve years of

⁷CWC II (1989), 2-3; CSK II (1981), 2-3.

⁸CWC II (1989), 3; CSK (1981), 3.

⁹CWC II (1989), 5; CSK (1981), 5.

life under the personal guidance of Fr Palackal, a person of strict asceticism and discipline, deep spirituality and learning, gave a solid theological frame and intellectual content to Chavara's prayer life. It is remarkable that "in those days as a special matter he [Chavara] chose the Rector himself as the confessor."¹⁰ Even after the ordination he continued to be under the guidance of and in close association with Fr Palackal.

6. A Prayerful Seminarian

The biographer Fr Leopold OCD, who during the last ten or more years of Chavara's life was his confessor and spiritual director, writes about his seminary life:

As would be endorsed by many of his colleagues still alive, Fr Kuriakose was zealous in the service of God without any consideration for worldly achievements. He zealously attended his study. He was quite orderly and God fearing. He was pleased with and charitably disposed to fellow students. He depreciated the ill-temper and impatience that often characterised the youngsters.¹¹

Again, Kuriakose Porukara who succeeded Chavara as the Prior General of CMI Congregation writes:

His [Chavara's] life in the seminary is admitted to have been very exemplary by all his colleagues. His devotions, obedience, and charity were outstandingly impressive. The seminary was a new one, and the discipline enforced was particularly strict. Yet throughout the rather long period of training, there was no instance of his having been reprovved for even the slightest offence.¹²

True to the motto, "the Lord is my portion" (Ps 16:5), which he had adopted as he received the tonsure in 1818, "he was decided to follow the Lord's call accepting the sorrows with submission to the will of God as he had learned from his parents," says Joseph Kanjiramattathil, referring to Kuriakose Porukara's biography of Chavara.¹³

7. Blending of Prayerfulness and Apostolate

Immediately after the ordination under the guidance of his *Guru* Palackal the priest settled in Mannanam sharing the monastic

¹⁰K. Porukara, *Short Biography of Our Most Rev. Fr Prior of Monasteries*, Mannanam 1871, 33.

¹¹L. Beccaro, *A Biography of the Venerable Person* (Mal.), Koonammavu, 1871, 24.

¹²K. Porukara, op. cit., 33.

¹³K. Porukara, op. cit., 33.

inspiration and supervising the construction work. There too he had before him an impressive model of the harmonious blending of prayer and active ministry in the person of Fr Porukara. Chavara's life in his company for about fifteen years not only consolidated his prayerfulness but also taught him the rare art of combining deep prayerfulness and apostolic ministry. Fr Leopold has made remarkable observations about Chavara's prayer life in the midst of his hectic active life while at Mannanam and thereafter:

In April 1833, he was relieved from the office of the Vicar of Pallipuram. Then he could stay at Mannanam and devote himself more completely to the construction of the monastery. There he led a well-ordered and devout religious life, striving for his own spiritual progress through prayer and meditation without discarding his pastoral obligation outside.¹⁴

Besides the usual visits to the Blessed Sacrament enjoined by the Rule, he used to spend long hours on his knees, immersed in prayer before the Tabernacle.¹⁵

In order to find Chavara, people had to look for him in the chapel or some such other place of prayer. "Fr Chavara looked like an angel," says Fr Jacob Palakunnel, a senior priest. He relates the following incident: "It was the day before the titular feast in a parish. Fr Prior too was present. But even until late in the night the preacher did not turn up. So they decided to request Fr Prior to preach the homily and looked for him, but he was missing! Someone who knew him personally said: "Look for him either in front of the Blessed Sacrament in the church or in the cemetery." Indeed, they found him praying in the cemetery.

In all his needs Chavara invariably would take recourse to prayer, even as he would certainly be doing all that was within his power. Once in Mannanam Monastery there was no means even to pay the daily wages. Fr Prior in great distress went to pray in the church. Suddenly a certain Itty Nellipuzha from the parish of Cherpunkal arrived, and said that he had brought with him 500 *cakrams* (about Rs 18.00, which was a big amount those days). He added that if someone would go with him he would send 500 *cakrams* more. On hearing it Chavara naturally heaved a sigh of relief and thanked God. Another time Chavara and Leopold were struggling with some knotty problem. They requested the Sisters to pray for it saying in honour of Mother

¹⁴Beccaro, Leopold, op. cit., 8.

¹⁵Beccaro, Leopold, op. cit., 13.

Mary three times each *Salve Regina* and *Memorare*, and they did so. The result: “The mountain-like problem turned out as light as a flower!” says Chavara. His experience always was: “Having cast the net in the name of Our Lady, I never had to draw it empty!” About his filial love and trust in Mother Mary Fr Leopold testifies:

His devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary was characterized by a genuine filial love. He spoke eloquently of her glories to others and tried to inculcate in them the true devotion to her. Very often, when the thought of death came to his mind, he would recall the kindness and mercy of the Blessed Virgin, whom he used to call her Mother, to overcome the fears and temptations associated with that fateful moment.

8. Setting Up of the Game

In her book *Way of Perfection*, while answering the question, “How to pray,” Teresa [of Avila] does not straight away start speaking about prayer as such. Instead, she devotes half the book for what she calls “the setting up of the game.” Prayer is to be seen as an integral part of life so that its quality will depend on that of one’s life, and vice versa. One’s life is the background and context of one’s prayer. To be able to pray properly one should organize one’s life as a whole based on such values as would dispose one to pray. Of course, it works also the other way round: if you pray well you will find it easy and spontaneous to organize your life based on values. This is why Teresa as an introduction to her treatise on prayer deals extensively with “the setting up of the game,” namely, the values and virtues one should cultivate in life. She calls them the “foundation for prayer.” “Now realize that anyone who doesn’t know how to set the pieces for the game of chess won’t know how to play well. And if he doesn’t know how to check his opponent’s king, he won’t know how to checkmate it either” (W 16.1).¹⁶

In the process of ‘the setting up of the game’ of prayer there are three virtues that Teresa considers to be foundational: love of neighbour, detachment of heart from creatures, and humility. In the case of Chavara it is obvious that he practised all the three of them and all other related virtues as well. For example we may mention a few of them. First of all he was a man of austerity and detachment of heart. Concerning his food habit we are told:

¹⁶Thomas Kochumuttom, *Carmelite Spirituality*, Rajkot: Deepti Publications, 2011, 132-33.

He would take only the common food, nothing special: For breakfast there would be rice gruel with one curry; for lunch, rice and two dishes; then a little rice gruel at 4.00 pm; and for supper, rice with two dishes. During Lent: for breakfast there would be a little rice gruel (of *ozhak* rice) with salt but no curry; for lunch, rice (of *naazhuri-rice*) with three vegetable dishes, and for supper, rice gruel (of *ozhak* rice) with pickle. On Good Friday the only meal is lunch consisting of rice gruel with salt but no curry.

The room that Chavara used was ever so ordinary with minimum furniture: a simple table, a plain chair, and a wooden box; a cot with very thin country mat and a single pillow; no bed-sheet or provision for mosquito net; there was a clay mug with water, and a few books of the table, and nothing else. The archbishop once came to visit his vicar general in his room in Koonammavu. Seeing there just one chair he was surprised, and making the Prior sit in it he sat on the box!

Chavara's love for the neighbour was unparalleled. In his testament he advises the members of his community: "How many in number may be the monasteries, the entire congregation should be like a single family of members born of the same mother, and grown up drinking her milk. This sincere love between you should never diminish but keep becoming ever stronger day by day. You must consider this to be the most important of my advices." This is the kind of love that Chavara had not only for his confreres but for the entire humanity. He literally put into practice Jesus' words: "The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them." While he was the vicar of Pallipuram parish, one day as Chavara was getting ready to visit a parishioner, severely affected by small pox, the people tried to dissuade him for fear of contagion. But he said to them: "This is my duty, and God will be at my side," and boldly he went to the sick man's house. He administered to him the last Sacraments and with appropriate counsels prepared him for a peaceful death! He indeed practised charity in its really Christian form, namely the forgiving love, love extended to all including enemies, *agape*. In his testament he directs his community at Mannanam to render all possible help to Mathan Kalapurackal of Muttuchira parish, and thus to become the best examples of Christian disciples. This man, once a steward of Mannanam Monastery, had unjustly appropriated a part of the Monastery's property for which the civil court punished him. Later he filed a case against Chavara in the civil court in Alapuzha. The judge, a Hindu, having heard the Prior, dismissed the case as fraud, and remarked, "This priest indeed is a man of God. Those who complain

against so great a man must be grossly wicked and deserve God's anger." But Chavara sincerely forgave Mathan, and tried his best but in vain to have him reconciled with the Monastery. While alive he would go out of his way to help him in his financial needs! And now in the testament he is entrusting the community to continue the help for the family!

Many indeed are the instances illustrating Chavara's deep sense and practice of humility. He was appointed the vicar general for the Syrian community of the entire vicariate of Varapuzha. To make him accept the post the archbishop had to give him an order under obedience. It was indeed the highest position a Syrian of that time could think of. Thereby Chavara became the first among the Syrians to be officially in the Church's administration, and in those troubled days of the Roccas episode he did his duties very well to the satisfaction of all including the Holy See. Pope Pius IX sent to him a personal letter of appreciation in this regard. However, one may be surprised to note that Chavara neither mentions nor signs any of the documents with the title of vicar general. It is from other sources that we come to know of his appointment to that post.

He clearly said to the intruder Bp Roccas that he would not kiss his ring because it was symbol of illegally gained authority. But he added that as an act of humility he was ready to kiss his hands and feet! While Fr Palackal was strongly in favour of setting up a seminary attached to the monastery at Mannanam, Fr Porukara with equal force opposed the idea. Of course each had his own strong reasons. Chavara then in all simplicity and humility says: "Thus they were divided in opinion. For stupid me, however, both the views were agreeable; inwardly as well as outwardly I happily agreed with Porukara as well as the Malpan." When the Roccas' supporters tried to win him over to their side by offering episcopacy his spontaneous reply was: "I would rather save my soul than be made a bishop!"

His humility was proved beyond doubt in the practice of obedience as a sure means of discerning the will of God as well as the only mark of consecrated life. In the testament he unambiguously states: "The only mark of a religious is obedience surrendering totally one's will and as if one does not have one's own eyes and ears. One who has it is a religious." Chavara and the other founding fathers practised this kind of obedience. Their avowed position was: "An order from the local ordinary is God's will, which therefore should unconditionally be obeyed." Being unexpectedly and in a distressing manner transferred from Mannanam to Pallipuram the young priest Chavara approached

the archbishop and humbly explained the matter and begged to reconsider the order of transfer, but the archbishop refused to oblige. Without any further hesitation Chavara obeyed. Similarly, being transferred to Kollam side Porukara unconditionally obeyed and went there in tears! Again, Chavara was once severely reprimanded by the archbishop for no fault of his own. Still he did not protest; instead he accused himself of indiscriminate behaviour, and was grateful to the prelate for not punishing him with suspension! Indeed, he graciously accepted the reproof as a paternal correction.

Similarly the many events that followed thoroughly tested and proved the spirit of obedience and humility of Chavara and all the founding fathers. We may recall some of them: almost 25 years of patient waiting for the canonical approval of the congregation, the archbishop's refusal to mitigate and adapt the Rule to the local conditions and needs, the honoured Syrian traditions and the founders' ideals, the last minute withdrawal of 11 candidates from making the profession of religious vows, the high-handed affiliation of the congregation as a Third Order of the Carmelites Discalced, the humiliations and insults at the hands of the supporters of Bp Roccas, Chavara's transfer to Koonammavu from Mannanam where he had been for almost 35 years, certain occasions when his close associate and spiritual director Fr Leopold at least apparently disregarded him, the severely painful old age difficulties and illness and equally painful medical treatment and isolation in a house outside the enclosure!

9. Mystic Chavara

Was Chavara a mystic? If the extraordinary gifts called mystical phenomena like those in the life of St Mariam Thresia or St Alphonsa are considered essential for one to be called a mystic, we must realistically admit that Chavara did not have many of them. But we cannot totally rule out the possibility of his being a mystic. There are hints that he had a few mystical phenomena at least to some degree. Let us see. Sr Ruby Therese CHF in her doctoral thesis on the mystic Mariam Thresia has identified the following mystical phenomena:

(i) *Visions*: They are the supernatural perception of an object naturally invisible to human eyes. They may be *corporeal* (apparitions), or *imaginative* (representations of images supernaturally produced in the imagination), or *intellectual* (a simple intuitive knowledge supernaturally effected and directly perceived by the intellect without the aid of any sensible image in the internal or external senses). (ii) *Locutions*: They are words spoken by the Lord or any heavenly source

and heard either from the innermost depth of the soul or from the outside. They are heard with the bodily ears as if they are uttered by a human voice. (iii) *Reading of Hearts*: This phenomenon consists in the knowledge of the secrets of others' hearts. (iv) *Gift of Prophecy*: Foreknowledge of events and gift of forecasting death. (v) *Transverberation*: Experience of the soul being wounded in the heart as if it is pierced by an arrow. (vi) *Stigmata*: Experience in one's own body wounds of the crucified Christ, visible. (vii) *Levitation*: The raising of the body above the ground without any visible support to overcome the force of gravity of the earth. (viii) *Bilocation/Multilocation*: One's presence at two or more places at the same time. (ix) *Crucifixion*: Experience of being painfully scourged and crowned with thorns, carrying the cross, and crucified as one's Spouse Jesus Christ was. (x) *Exchange of Hearts*: experience of one's heart being exchanged for that of Jesus, similar to the exchange of rings in marriage. (xi) *Spiritual Espousal*: Jesus' promise that He would lead the soul to the spiritual marriage. It usually takes place during ineffable ecstasies, and is accompanied by a vision of heart, bestowal of a symbolic ring, exchange of hearts or a locution in the Lord formally espouses Himself to the soul. (xii) *Mystical Aureoles*: A resplendent light radiating from the mystic's body, especially while he/she is in contemplation or ecstasy. (xiii) *Supernatural Fragrance*: A sweet fragrance, incomparable to any known perfume, emitted from the saint's body or tomb. (xiv) *Gift of Tears*: The sorrow or joy that makes the mystic uncontrollably shed tears either at the thought of Jesus' suffering caused by the sins of humans or at the experience His glory and majesty. (xv) The frequently mentioned phenomena, besides the above described ones, in the writings of St Theresa of Avila, are: *Ecstasy, trance, and rapture*, all meaning almost the same. Accompanying them there may be also the experience of the *suspension* of the senses and other faculties. The word ecstasy etymologically means standing (*stare*) out (*ex*). One feels that one's spirit aflame with the love of God and unable to be contained in the body goes out it. The body looking dead goes cold and would be devoid of sensation. St Paul refers to this experience: "I know a man in Christ who, fourteen years ago, was caught up – whether still in the body or out of the body, I do not know: God knows – right into the third heaven. I do know, however, that this same person – whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows – was caught up into paradise and heard things which must and cannot be put into human language" (2Cor 12:2-4). At times accompanying the ecstasy there is the experience of the *Transport* of

the soul by the Lord wherever he desires, and the *Flight of the Spirit*, namely the experience of something like the flame of fire rising from the intimate part of the soul and going wherever the lord wills!

Did Chavara have any such experiences? There is reason to believe that he had some of them. For example, Fr Louis of Manjummel, who was with Fr Prior for many years in Koonammavu monastery and had him as the confessor and spiritual director, says: "According to the first constitution [of 1863] the duration of the evening meditation was one full hour. Fr Prior spent the whole time on knees, absorbed in ecstasy, continually shedding tears. Those who went to him during the meditation for getting permission had to be satisfied with merely kissing his scapular. At the end of the meditation he had to be reminded by others that time was up. Then having said the concluding prayer he would return to his room still shedding tears. During the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament it was a delight for others to watch him lost in contemplation." From these words of Fr Louis, the eye-witness, we can reasonably say that Chavara enjoyed mystical ecstasies and gift of tears.

A former prior general of the congregation Fr Maurus Valiamparampil reports what he heard from a contemporary of Chavara: "One day a priest went to visit the Prior and knocked at his door. There was no audible response. Believing that the permission was granted, the priest entered the room. He found the saint absorbed in deep contemplation, with his face beaming with extraordinary light. So the priest not wanting to disturb him rushed out of the room, and waited for some time. Then he again knocked and the Prior responded. Entering the room the priest saw his face still brightly shining! And the saint said: What a bliss it is for us humans that God allows us to converse with Him." Is it not an instance of trance, mystical aureole, and locution?

Fr Gerald OCD, the younger brother of Fr Leopold, who too was very close to the Prior, testifies to an incident during the last illness of the latter: "While I was giving the Prior Holy Communion, I saw an extraordinarily bright glow and joyous expression on his face, the kind I have never seen!" This too may be considered the mystical phenomenon of aureole.

10. In the Interior Castle

Teresa of Avila, with whose mystical theology, Chavara was familiar, presents the soul as a beautiful castle made of a single diamond, with seven sets of mansions, one inside the other. God the Divine Spouse

dwells in the innermost of the mansions. Spiritual life which is the same as prayer life is a journey inward, passing through the mansions until the soul reaches the innermost one where it is united with its Beloved Spouse. Chavara's advice to his followers is that they must reach at least the fourth set of mansions: "It is enough that we reach the fourth set of mansions. Our Mother Teresa indeed reached the seventh set of them, and some of her spiritual daughters of those days the fifth and sixth ones. Let us strive to reach at least the fourth one."¹⁷

It should be remembered that the fourth set of mansions, at least where Chavara wants his followers to reach, is already the realm of mystical prayer. Prayer in general is ascetical or mystical. In ascetical prayer the human is active, employing all his/her physical and mental powers and faculties - the senses, intellect, memory and will - and therefore it is mostly a matter of human effort, of course, assisted by God. In the mystical prayer the human role is much less while God does most of the work. As one enters and proceeds in the mystical stage of prayer, one's own effort becomes more and more irrelevant, while God's role increases until the soul becomes totally passive except that it lets God act on it as he wants. In the ascetical level of prayer one's knowledge or experience of God is said to be acquired by oneself, one with God's help, while that in the mystical level is infused by God.

In Teresa's scheme of the inward journey of spiritual/prayer life, the first three sets of mansions represent the ascetical stage. In the first and second sets of mansions one's prayer is vocal, and in the third one it is mental (discursive meditation). In the fourth set of mansions in which the mystical prayer begins, one experiences prayer of recollection and that of quiet, and even that of sleep, which means one's senses and the spiritual faculties of reason and memory spontaneously are recollected and quiet so that one very effortlessly enjoys the Lord's presence and love as something supernaturally granted. In the fifth set of mansions, the prayer of union, the supernatural union of the wills of the soul and God, begins, and the soul goes through a radical transformation like the silk worm changes beyond recognition into a butterfly. In the sixth set of mansions the prayer of union deepens and most of the mystical phenomena like ecstasy, trance, rapture, transport, levitation vision, locution and transverberation are experienced, and in the midst of them the spiritual betrothal between the soul and its Beloved Lord takes place. Finally, in the seventh mansion, the journey successfully ends

¹⁷CWC IV (1990), 85; CSK IV (1980), 115.

with the spiritual marriage of the soul with the Divine Spouse, and in it the phenomenal experiences give way to unassailable calm and ineffable delight!

It would not be too much to infer that Chavara who advises and expects his followers to enter at least the fourth set of mansions, where one already enjoys mystical prayer, must have himself gone still ahead through the fifth, sixth and even the seventh sets of them! Again, does he mean to say that his followers may remain satisfied with the attainment of the fourth set of mansions? Possibly not! His hope should be that having reached and enjoyed the bliss of the fourth one, they are not likely to refuse to proceed still further. Instead, they will experience an irresistible urge to keep moving until the Ultimate in the seventh one, the bridal chamber.

11. Mystically Inspired Prayers

The prayers that Chavara used to say and recommended to others are full of mystical insights and mystical in character: spontaneous, personal and intimate. He relates himself to God as a child to the parent, or a lover to the Beloved, and is overwhelmed with sentiments of trust, confidence, love repentance, gratitude and wonder.

As the great mystic Moses did, so Chavara feels free to ask God for what is, humanly speaking, impossible. For example, one of the distinctive marks of Chavara's spirituality is the intense desire to see God, the longing for the *darśan* (vision) of God. Included in his *Compunction of Soul* is a long poem of 168 lines giving full vent to his deep-rooted yearning for seeing the Lord in every stage of His life and in all His glory, beauty and magnanimity, the refrain with which every other line ends being: *kāṇākeṇam* ("I long to see you!"). Given below is a section of it:

The Lord of mercy, the Son of God
His glorious splendour, I long to see!

How he stayed for nine months
In the womb of His mother, I long to see!
Born in her womb, how to Bethlehem he came
To obey mighty Caesar, I long to see!

How Jesus, Anna's grand son
Was hunger-smitten, I long to see
And with the Phrases discussed law
In his twelfth year, I long to see!

The Good Shepherd, seeking his flock
 That had gone astray, I long to see;
 The lord of goodness, proclaiming Himself
 As our loving friend, I long to see!¹⁸

The Prior fondly addresses God as ‘my Father,’ *ente appan*, just as every now and then Jesus would cry to God: *Abba! Abba!* We may recall St Paul’s words: “The Spirit makes you God’s children, and by the Spirit’s power we cry out to God, ‘Father, my Father’ (Rom 8:15). The thought of being God’s darling child gave Chavara confidence to return to Him as the prodigal son did. Making his own the latter’s sentiments Chavara prays:

Oh, it is a long time since I saw *ente appan’s* divine face. I squandered all He gave me. Now I am working for an unjust employer, feeding his pigs. I am so famished that I wish I could feed on the food the pigs eat... Further delay is suicidal. So here I am on my feet to return home with my jungle-stick and country cap (*toppi-pāḷa*)... O my soul! Your *appan* is so bounteous as to forgive and forget every act of the ingratitude of yours... Would He not be furious with me, would He even deign to look at me? Can I go into His presence without permission?... How can I approach such an august presence and seek forgiveness? ... Still, *ente appan* is so generous and full of love that I needn’t entertain any fear... Behold, the doors are wide open! There, *ente appan* is coming out!... O *ente appā!*, I have sinned against heaven and before You... I am not worthy to be called Your son... My heart, however, tells me to call You by no other name than *ente appan*... Therefore, *ente appā*... forgive me... O *ente appā*, I cast myself on my knees before Your throne of mercy...¹⁹

Chavara’s approach to the Blessed Virgin Mary whom he used to call “my Mother” (*ente amma*), was equally filial and spontaneous. Here he offers a very interesting insight. Not satisfied with merely being in the Lord’s presence, no matter how reassuring, he wants Him to take a seat in his heart, but is conscious of his unworthiness. As a remedy, he entreats Mother Mary to be seated in his heart so that Jesus would be more than pleased to sit in her lap. He then says:

O Lord, behold, I have opened the door of my heart and set there the holy lap of your Divine Mother, most dear to you... A child in

¹⁸CWC II (1989), 17-19; CSK II (1981), 17-20.

¹⁹“Colloquies” in CWC III (1990), 4-5; CSK III (1981), 16-18.

its Mother's lap readily does whatever she asks it to do. Likewise, my Lord! Sitting in Your Mother's lap, kindly grant her intercessions for me. Please listen to her words: 'Ah! My dearest Son, You are my Creator and Master! I am Your servant and mother! I recall Your words from the cross, Your death-bed on mount Calvary. I was standing at its foot, immersed in the sea of suffering. Looking at me You said: "This is your son!" By those words You gave me this poor Kuriakose as my son. Behold, he is now standing at my feet, shedding tears of sincere repentance for all his sins! You please forgive all his sins and cancel all his debts. Still more, kindly grant him the grace never in life to lose his baptismal innocence, and ever to keep growing in his love for You! May he ever be aware of Your loving presence. You were kind enough to give a happy death to Your foster father and my husband Joseph. Remembering that favour please grant this little Kuriakose as well the joy of breathing his last in Your, my husband's and my presence, and let us instantly take his soul into heaven. As a sign that You grant me these requests, kindly stretch Your divine feet towards him!²⁰

To be so childlike in one's relation with Lord Jesus and His Mother Mary, and so innovative while praying to them one should certainly be a mystic, and that is what St Chavara was!

12. Mystical Hermeneut

A renowned biblical scholar Fr Paul Kalluveetil in a scientific study of *Dhyāna-sallāpangal* has qualified Chavara as a "dynamic hermeneut of the Word."²¹ Complementing his observation we may say that Chavara is not only a dynamic but also a mystical hermeneut. His approach to the word of God far from being academic is deeply spiritual and personal. In a spirit of faith and attitude of reverence he attentively listens to the Word, and zealously responds. It is a personal communion with a mystical tone.

Kalluveetil observes that the work *Dhyāna-sallāpangal* is thoroughly biblical because its themes as well as the style of presentation are inspired by the Bible. There are 43 explicit citations from the Bible, and

²⁰CWC III (1990), 22; CSK III (1981), 44.

²¹P. Kalluveetil, CMI, "Chavara the Dynamic Hermeneut of the Word" in P. Kalluveetil and P. Kochappilly, ed., *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, Bangalore: 2004, 294-311. We draw on this article for the present section of the study.

70 implicit or allusive ones. Then there are seven texts which Chavara interprets in a very creative and personal style. He interprets them by way of expressing, explaining and translating them, which according to Kalluveetil, is the threefold process of a true interpretation. "His [Chavara's] whole personality was an *expression* of the word of God ... he could explain the Bible in his own life situation... He 'translated' the Bible; the word of God became his own word."²²

Chavara adapted or applied the Bible themes to his personal situations. For example, in the parable of wedding banquet (Mt 22:11-13) the man did not care to ask for a marriage garment while Chavara did and got it.²³ In the biblical events and characters Chavara finds not only comparisons and similes but metaphors so that he would identify himself and his situations with them. For instance, he does not merely compare but identifies the chapel with mounts Sinai and Zion (Ex 19:24-30, 34; 40:34-38), himself with Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10), the lost sheep (Lk 15:1-7), the prodigal son returning home (Lk 15:11-24), Mary Magdalene embracing the foot of the cross, one of the nursing babies shouting "Hosanna to the son of David," and the good thief.²⁴

Chavara further imagines himself as the son in Jesus' statement from the cross to His mother: "Behold your son," and as one of the brides accompanying the Lord in the solemn procession to the nuptial *pandal*, Calvary.²⁵ Entering the bridal chamber he engages in intimate conversation with Him, indeed.

Identifying himself with the lost sheep, Chavara makes Jesus say to him: "In search of you I wandered along forests and hill-tops, seas and mountains, because I loved you and had resolved to take you to my royal house."²⁶ Similarly, contemplating on the birth of Jesus, the author makes the latter say: "*To find you out* I stepped down from my throne ... that *you may have no fear of me*... I was born as a baby for your sake..."²⁷ Thus, Chavara interprets the event of incarnation as intimately related to himself, indeed.

Again, even as Chavara identifies mounts Sinai and Zion with the chapel, he says that unlike those mountains, the chapel with the

²²*Ibid.*, 295.

²³CWC III (1990), 1; CSK III (1981), 13.

²⁴For these identifications see respectively: CWC III (1990), 99ff., 15ff., 18f., 10-11, 4ff., 13, 20, 8; CSK III (1981), 24ff., 34ff., 39f., 27, 16ff., 32, 41, 23.

²⁵CWC III (1990), 22, 8; CSK III (1981), 44, 22-23.

²⁶CWC III (199), 10; CSK III (1981), 27.

²⁷CWC III (1990), 10; CSK III (1981), 26.

Blessed Sacrament is a place of divine mercy, grace, blessing and love. The chapel is indeed the new Sinai and Zion. Already on mount Calvary the frightening God of Sinai and Zion had transfigured into the compassionate Saviour in the person Jesus Christ.²⁸ Calvary is also the nuptial *pandal*,²⁹ and the cross the bridal chamber.

13. Essential Mysticism

Whether Chavara was a mystic with phenomenal experiences of union with God may be disputed. However, it is beyond doubt that he was a man of essential mysticism. As a matter of fact the phenomenal experiences or the mystical phenomena such as ecstasy, stigmata, transverberation, visions, etc., are not essential for one to be a mystic. They are the gifts the Lord grants to a few for certain purposes, and those receiving them must gratefully and humbly use them for the same purposes. Even if there are no such experiences one can be a mystic in the sense that one is habitually in personal union with the Lord. This is the universal call of every Christian which he/she realizes in different degrees while alive on earth, and in the fullest degree with the beatific vision in heaven. This is the call implied in Jesus' instruction "to pray always without ever becoming discouraged" (Lk 18:1) and St Paul's advice "to pray at all times" (1Thes 5:16). For the Carmelites, "incessant prayer" is said to be their special charism. Referring to the Primitive Rule of Carmelites, St Theresa of Avila says, "We must pray without ceasing... For unceasing prayer is the most important aspect of the Rule..."³⁰ St Chavara practised such 'incessant prayer' in a heroic and extraordinary manner and that too all his life. As a result, at the death bed with utter sincerity he was able to state: "With God's help I have never in life lost the baptismal grace."

Chavara's personal union with God kept ever deepening, never diminishing, and this is what qualifies him for the title of a mystic. Towards the end of his life he instructed his spiritual daughters in Koonammavu Convent: "Ah! Abide in the love of Jesus Christ. Remain constantly before His eyes. Walk side by side with Him. And continually converse with Him!"³¹ This certainly is what the Prior practised himself, and while scribbling these lines in his good old age

²⁸CWC III (1990), 9-11, 15; CSK III (1981), 24-25, 34.

²⁹CWC III (1990), 8; CSK III (1981), 22-23.

³⁰St Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, Chapter 4, no. 2.

³¹CSK IV (1986), 112.

it had become the irreversible trait of his personality: the deep and constant awareness of being in love with Jesus Christ, being lovingly gazed at by Him, being in His most enjoyable company, and sweetly speaking and listening to Him! This indeed was Chavara's mystical experience. This is essential mysticism. In *Ātmānutāpam*, the mystic in Chavara sings: "Oh, Lord! I gaze at Your most beautiful lotus-face with single-minded love!"³² Another lovely piece of advice he gave the Sisters is: "I have locked up your hearts with the Lord in His tabernacle. I have done the same with my heart as well! Let us remain there till the day of the Resurrection"³³ This reminds us of Jesus' saying: "Where your treasure is, there your heart, too" (Mt 6:21). For the Christian disciples their treasure is the Eucharistic Lord in the tabernacle, and, therefore, their hearts too should be there. This was the constant mystical experience of Chavara. Again, in *Ātmānutāpam*, he sings to Mother Mary: "O my Mother, there is constantly in this my heart your thought!" At the death bed he said: "All my life I had Jesus, Mary and Joseph installed with reverence in my heart and mind!" Yes, indeed, the mystic Chavara lived constantly and consciously with God and His kingdom inside and outside him, and that is essential mysticism.

14. Practical Mysticism

St Chavara can rightly be called a man of God's thoughts. Looking at everything through God's eyes he easily saw His provident hands at work in all that happened to and around him, and, therefore, every experience, pleasant as well as unpleasant, was equally acceptable for him. St Peter with the best of intentions tried to dissuade Jesus from carrying the cross. Scolding him sternly Jesus instructed that he should look at the cross "with thoughts from God, not from himself" (Mt 16:23). Those days the cross was the greatest punishment that a criminal could be given. To impose it on Jesus who was the most innocent of all, was then humanly speaking the grossest injustice. But from God's side it was a necessary part of the work of the redemption of mankind, and, therefore, not something to be rejected but welcomed. In a similar way Chavara looked at everything from God's side and gracefully accepted it. That indeed is the key to explain his spirituality. This we may call *practical mysticism* which enabled Chavara to understand everything that happened in his life as God's

³²*Ātmānutāpam*.

³³CSK IV (1986), 115.

will and nothing else. This realization on the one hand kept him humble and realistic, and on the other grateful to and confident in God. In his good old age looking back upon his life, he thought to himself:

Are all those things that God made me do,
 within my power?...
 How come you were ordained a priest?
 How did you join the monastery?
 Where did the religious congregation come from?
 Who appointed you as prior?
 How have you reached here?
 Are you worthy of anything of these?
 Not, certainly not! So what?
 God's will is done. It will always be done!³⁴

Indeed, in everything Chavara saw God's will being done, and he was sure that it was so. In our search for the Chavara spirituality we should not be looking for unusually mystical experiences such as those in the lives of St Teresa of Avila or St Alphonsa; nor should we expect highly theological thoughts as in the writings of St Thomas Aquinas or St John of the Cross. Even his initiatives, great as they were in his socio-cultural milieu, are not in themselves the yardstick of his spirituality. Generally speaking he was not an intellectual or highly talented in many things. His asset on the one hand was the simple faith which endowed him with a spiritual perception of people, things and events. His faith was not merely theoretical but practical that enabled him to see the loving hands of the provident God in all that happened to him and around him, pleasant as well as unpleasant, positive and as well as negative. That indeed made him different in his responses and dealings with the people and their affairs.

For Chavara faith is the "heart's eye," an expression used by St Paul in Eph 1:18: "May he open the eyes of your hearts so that you can see what hope his call holds for you..." Chavara's advice is: "Falling prostrate before the tabernacle you must look at the Lord with *the eye of your heart* and worship Him." In fact the Prior had his *eye of the heart* always wide open so that in every event of life - small or big, delightful or painful - he would easily see God's hands, and thus he enjoyed uninterrupted vision of God, *Īśvara-darśan*. This is essential as well as practical mysticism.

³⁴Colloquies in CWC III (1990), 1; CSK III (1981), 1.

As a result, Chavara was ever a man of peace, ever calm and cool. He was able to keep his cool in all places, at all times and under all circumstances, because he knew for sure that everything was all right in provident hands of God in whom his life was grounded. The foundation, on which his life was built, namely, Jesus Christ, is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Why should then he shake and feel disturbed or worried? This made him a *sthita-prajña* – a steady minded person or a person of stable consciousness – in Indian terminology. The description of a *sthita-prajña* in *Bhadavad-gita* (2:55-72) certainly applies to mystic Chavara. The following lines contain a few of the series of examples:

2:55 He, who gives up all cravings of mind,
and is happy in and through the spirit,
is called a man of stable consciousness.

2:56 He, whose mind remains unperturbed
in the midst of sorrows,
and who has no desires for pleasures,
and is free of infatuations, fear and anger,
is called a sage of stable consciousness.

15. Mystical Theologian

A last point to consider is Chavara's teaching on mysticism. Even if one is not a mystic, one can teach mysticism and thus be a mystical theologian. But Chavara's case was that he would not teach or preach what he did not himself practise or experience. For one thing he did not have much academic or scientific training in theology or any other branch of knowledge. He learned things mostly by doing and meditating. When it comes to divine sciences, he learned mostly by meditating on the word of God under the guidance of the Spirit. And what he thus learned and experienced or what the Spirit taught or infused into him, he shared with the fellow humans. Hence whatever mystical theology he taught was his own mystical experience, to say the least. It should be with this in mind that we look into his teaching.

Naturally, Chavara is more in the Carmelite line of mystics. And they mostly follow the tradition of spousal mysticism in which the relation between God and the human being is understood and experienced in terms of a spiritual but real marriage, meaning the mutual commitment of love between them. This way of thinking is rooted in the Old Testament where Yahweh and the His people are presented as husband and wife. *The Song of Songs* is the love story between God and the human spirit presented in so raw a language

that reading it purely from the natural perspective one can get scandalized. One should read it in the light of faith from the mystical point of view. St John of the Cross has his own beautiful version of it in his *Spiritual Canticle*, which is believed to be a lyrical presentation of his own personal experience of the love relation with Jesus Christ. Both these books present the love affair between God and the human spirit, developing stage by stage: the initial longing and relentless search for one another, their delightful meeting for a while, then the pain of separation, long waiting in hope, tests and trials in the meantime, a game of hide and seek, later on the ecstatic spiritual betrothal, and at long last the glorious end in spiritual marriage. St Teresa's experience of relation with God too was not different, and she has presented it in her autobiography called *Life*, and systematic treatise called *Interior Castle*.

Among the Carmelite mystics, the one with whose ideals and teachings Chavara was most familiar is St Theresa of Avila. It is rather surprising that nowhere in his writings or instructions St John of the Cross is explicitly mentioned. However, his mystical theology is essentially the same as that of the latter: one's complete detachment from all that is not God, on the one hand, and the consummate union of one's spirit with God on the other. This understanding of spiritual life is unambiguously described by Chavara, not in the characteristically Jeannine language of *dark night*, *ascent of the mount*, *living flame of love* and *the spiritual canticle*, but in his own simple but convincing term and style. We shall present a few instances in Chavara's writings that point to his experience and understanding of the issue under reference.

In his *Ātmānutāpam*, Chavara presents Jesus' journey up mount Calvary carrying the cross as a marriage procession. The description runs more or less like: Jesus is the Divine Groom; His wedding robe is studded with diamonds and pearls (the drops and stains of blood). He wears a diadem of rare beauty (the crown of thorns), the weeping women are the bridesmaids, the soldiers and others are dancers and singers, the spears and other weapons are the musical accompaniment, the hilltop is wedding *pandal*, and cross is the bridal chamber!³⁵

Anastasia's Martyrdom is a call for commitment on the part of the human being to his/her Beloved Spouse Jesus Christ even to the point of death and even beyond death. It was the time of the Roman Emperor Valerian in the third century. He forced the Christians to

³⁵*Ātmānutāpam* VIII, 65ff.

worship the pagan god called Yov. There was a convent founded by Mother Sophia. She was its superior and the novice mistress. Anastasia was a novice under her. Probus was the Emperor's prime minister. He came with his army to arrest and take by force Anastasia to the Emperor's palace. Reaching there she was cruelly persecuted. She resisted to the immoral plans and designs of the Emperor and his minister. She was put in jail from where she sang praises of her Beloved. They cut off her tongue. She was at the point of death. A young Christian called Cyril offered her a glass of water. He was killed and attained martyrdom. Eventually Anastasia also was martyred.

In this work, Chavara beautifully and touchingly presents Mother Sophia's parting message to her novice Anastasia as she was being taken to the Emperor. Embracing and kissing her Sophia says:

Oh dearest daughter, Your most Blessed Spouse Jesus Christ, thirsting for your love, is calling you tenderly. Hurry up! Remember, He has once before, holding you in His hand, embraced you, when you consecrated yourself to Him. For your love He came into this world; carrying the cross, his beautiful flag, He climbed up mount Calvary. There He died for you, and redeemed you from the slavery of sin... He sacrificed Himself on the cross for your sake, and proved His love for you. Today you must prove your love for Him, and display your superhuman beauty. Hurry up, my child! He is not a spouse of this world. He is the glorious God of immense beauty. Go in haste, my child, and get lost in His embrace of love!³⁶

After Anastasia's martyrdom, while narrating the welcome she was accorded by her Divine Spouse, the poet Chavara's imagination takes wing:

Holy Anastasia's soul was instantly bathed in heavenly beauty. While her body underwent the cruel torture, her soul was adorned with a glittering crown! And she was in unspeakable bliss! Her beloved Groom Jesus welcomed her into His royal palace, and heaping on her jewels of marvel and pearls of price, with a thirst of love enthroned her in the bridal chamber!³⁷

In his letters to the Sisters, Chavara frequently reminds them of their spousal relations with the Lord, how tenderly He loves them, how conscientiously they must remain faithful to Him, and so on. First

³⁶*Anastasia's Martyrdom*: verses 45-60.

³⁷*Anastasia's Martyrdom*: verses 173-180.

of all he depicts Jesus Christ as a demanding lover who wants His beloved to love Him more than everything else:

Above all, learn the art of loving Jesus Christ... When you feel inclined or attached to any other object, this loving Lord turns His gaze on you, and says: "Look at Me! Does this little thing give you more delight than I? Or, is it not pain and affliction that it causes you? If so, why should you be worried? I shall make you really happy. Is that not enough for you?" Thus your Beloved Spouse is constantly at your side. His sole desire is to make you happy.³⁸

The Sisters must realize and treasure their privileged position as the brides of the Divine Spouse. He is a jealous lover, tolerating no one else trying to steal His beloved one's attention. Interestingly Chavara himself is envious of them! He advises them to love the solitude of their cells where they can enjoy the warmth of their Divine Spouse's love.

Is there anyone in the world more fortunate than you? ... Consider how sweet the voice of your loving Spouse is. He is vigilantly watching in your hearts, jealously, lest you love any one more than Him, lovingly looking after all your needs.³⁹ I feel a holy envy at your immense good fortune! It is very true. Oh queens and spouses of our Lord and King Jesus Christ, the state of life you have embraced is indeed great and praiseworthy. The terrestrial empresses will feel jealous of you.⁴⁰ The adoration you give to your divine spouse Jesus Christ from the corner of your convent is most pleasing to Him. I have seen with my own eyes that the palanquin, in which the queen was travelling, was covered on all sides with a thick curtain to hide her from human gaze. If, so how more demanding would be your divine spouse?⁴¹

Finally, the mystic saint in Chavara portrays a scene of divine love in a style and language very similar to that of *Song of Songs* and *Spiritual Canticle*:

When the human spirit is in the delightful solitude, the Lord Jesus Christ comes to meet His beloved in that lovely solitude. He begins to speak with her sweetly. At first she does not clearly understand His language and intentions. Then He takes her to the wine cellar and pours her some wine, initially a little. Having enjoyed it she

³⁸CWC IV (1990), 82; CSK IV (1986), 112.

³⁹CWC IV (1990), 83; CSK IV (1986), 113.

⁴⁰CWC IV (1990), 77; CSK (1986), 107.

⁴¹CWC IV (1990), 77; CSK (1986), 106.

begins to understand His language; yes, she understands His love! Then this Lover of hers begins to speak more distinctly, and opens His heart so as she realizes how great His love is for her. Her love too increases! He becomes pleased with her, adorns her with precious ornaments! This is how the affair begins, and then it doesn't ever stop! ⁴²

It is while speaking about meditation that the Doctor of Prayer St Theresa of Avila's influence on St Chavara is conspicuous, as he has himself acknowledged in his *Dhyāna-sallāpangal*. Given bellow is his marvellous description of meditation as an intimate conversation between lovers:

Meditation is a conversation with God. As you would do with a friend, so moved by love you sit close to God, intimately communicating with Him. Meditation then is to speak with your beloved spouse Jesus Christ, sitting very close to Him... You converse with God as you do with a friend... Two friends, even if they do not know one another's language, will mutually speak and understand. To converse with a friend, who does not understand your language, is easier than speaking with another, who, though he/she can understand your language, is not a friend. Even to sit in silence very close to your friend is a matter of satisfaction!⁴³

We may compare the description with Theresa of Avila's statement: "Meditation in my opinion nothing but falling in love with Jesus Christ, frequently conversing with Him who we know loves us."⁴⁴ For both the saints meditation is an intimate communion between the human spirit and its Divine Spouse!

⁴²CWC IV (1990), 85; CSK (1986), 113-14.

⁴³*Colloquies in CWC III, 2; CSK III, 14-15.*

⁴⁴*Life*, 8:5.