

SAINT CHAVARA'S VISION ON CMC Its Fruition at Sesquicentennial Jubilee

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Abstract: On the occasion of the sesquicentennial jubilee, Mollykutty P. V. (Kripa Maria CMC) muses on the vision of Chavara on the Congregation of Mother of Carmel (CMC). Beginning with the foundation of the Women TOCD, she speaks of its division into the Syrian and Latin wings and the growth of the congregation in separate ways and the eventual unification under one superior general and the subsequent phenomenal growth. She expresses her gratitude towards God for the spiritual leadership that the community was able to give in the Church. Moreover, as agents of social change and heralds of mercy they were able to contribute immensely to the society in several parts of India and abroad.

Keywords: Vision, jubilee, congregation, Syro-Malabar, canonization, foundation, TOCD, Chronicles, convent, CTC, Oriental Churches, CMC, consecrated life, superiors, leadership, motto, contemplation, mansion, prayer, contemplative, asceticism, Blessed Sacrament, formation, family, testament, ministry, retreats, empowerment, social transformation, contemplation, educational institutions, mercy.

1. Introduction

Amidst two important ecclesiastical events, the year of the consecrated and the year of mercy, in the Catholic Church, the Congregation of Mother of Carmel (CMC), the first indigenous religious congregation for women in the Syro-Malabar Church, founded by St Kuriakose Elias Chavara celebrates its sesquicentennial (150th anniversary) jubilee of foundation. To the CMC, the beginning of the year of the consecrated and the sesquicentennial jubilee were marked with the twin-canonization¹ of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara, its founder, and Blessed Euphrasia, one of its elder members; and the year concludes with the commencement of the canonization process of Mother Mary

¹On 23 November, Bl. Chavara the founder of CMC and Bl. Euphrasia were canonized by Pope Francis.

Celine, the first Superior General. As the sesquicentennial jubilee year culminates on 13th February 2016, it is meaningful to turn back to the bygone years to derive strength to create a new community in conformity with God's dream for humanity, and to become new solutions to the new problems of the fast changing world.

2. Foundation and Growth

St Kuriakose Elias Chavara founded the first Indian Congregation for women on 13 February 1866 at Koonammavu² in Kerala with the help of Fr Leopold Beccaro OCD (Carmelite missionary delegate of Kerala) in view of empowering women who were marginalized in the Church and the society at that time. The Congregation was then named 'Women TOCD'.³ It was the fruition of a long cherished dream of Chavara who wanted to establish a convent for women in the land of Malayalam after the model of the first indigenous Congregation for men (CMI), which he along with Fr Thomas Palackal and Fr Thomas Porukkara, his mentors, had founded thirty-five years before (in 1831). Chavara records in the Chronicles, after the blessing of the first convent at Koonammavu: "It seems that God has willed to accomplish now the matter of a convent for nuns which was prayed for, for a long time and was not possible until recently."⁴ Chavara was saddened by the fact that the Church of Kerala which had received Christian faith in the first century had remained barren without spiritual vigour. It had produced neither saints nor good models of spiritual life.⁵ One of the important aims of founding the CMI and CMC congregations was to provide opportunities to people to lead a holy life - to be saints. Today, the divine providence has deigned to bless the Church of Malayalam with many holy souls and with three canonised saints including Chavara himself.

The Women TOCD founded in 1866, was divided into two (CMC, the Syrian wing - and CTC, the Latin wing) based on the rites according to the decree (*Quod jampridem praedecessoribus nostris*) of Pope Leo XIII,⁶ and grew up in different dioceses under the

²Koonammavu Madom Nalagamam (*Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent*), Vol.1, AVPH, Ernakulam: 1866-1870, 10.

³Third Order Carmelites Discaled.

⁴*Complete Works of Blessed Chavara: Vol. I. The Chronicle*, trans. P. J. Thomas, Mannanam: 1990, 124.

⁵*Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent*, Vol. 1, 1.

⁶J. Veliyan, *The Foundation of Women TOCD*, 2015, 38.

jurisdictions of the Local Ordinaries and leadership of separate Mother Generals. Even though separated into different dioceses, they kept up the spiritual thrust and the apostolic fervour inherited from Chavara, Fr Leopold and the first members and continued to live their religious life with increased vigour. In response to the clarion call of Vatican II, after a century's independent growth in different dioceses, the Syrian women's wing of TOCD was unified administratively into one Congregation on 16 November 1963, under the efficient direction of the papal delegate Msgr. Hippolytus Kunnumkal OFM Cap⁷ and Mother Mary Celine, the first Mother General of the unified community. The Congregation was raised to the Pontifical status by the Sacred Congregation for Oriental Churches on 2 March 1967 and was named the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC).⁸

Now CMC has 21 Provinces, 1 Vice-Province and 4 Regions (in India), as well as one Independent Region in Africa. Besides, the community serves in the developed countries like America, Italy, Germany and England. In this year of sesquicentennial jubilee, the congregation is blessed with 6182 professed members. 1519 of them are rendering their dedicated service outside Kerala in India. They are working actively in 216 parishes and 146 mission centres for the wellbeing of the Catholic Church and the expansion of the kingdom of God.⁹

3. Filled with Gratitude

On 30 November 2014, declaring the Year for Consecrated Life, Pope Francis exhorted all the consecrated people to look to the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion and to embrace the future with hope. The Pope continued: "During this year, it would be appropriate for each charismatic family to reflect on its origins and history, in order to thank God who grants the Church a variety of gifts, which embellish her and equip her for every good work."¹⁰ Now, on 13 February 2016, CMC completed 150 years of its existence and celebrates the sesquicentennial jubilee. On this occasion, CMC turns back to the past years gratefully, to identify the magnificent ways of

⁷*CMC in the Shadow of the Most High*, Aluva: Mount Carmel Generalate, 1997, 166.

⁸*CMC in the Shadow of the Most High*, 173.

⁹*The Report of the CMC from January 2013 to November 2015*, 114.

¹⁰*Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to all Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, No.1.

God, who guided the Congregation through Chavara, the ardent spiritual leader and founder and Fr. Leopold, the co-founder, followed by the effective and holy superiors. God granted innumerable blessings thought all the members of the community and countless people of good will. God has protected it all through these years of joys and sorrows, victories and failures, praises and insults. All the members of the community acknowledge gratefully the abundant graces of God, the various contributions, supports and guidance she received from and through the members of the hierarchy the Church, various religious congregations, institutes, families and individuals.

4. Spiritual Leadership

The motive of Chavara while he was in the process of founding the Congregation was not only the self-sanctification of the members but also the spiritual and material uplift of the society in general and women in particular. Hence, the invitation of Jesus became the motto of the congregation: "Be united to me in contemplation and consecrated to me in action."¹¹ Chavara being a man of profound God experience, used to exhort his daughters to reach at least up to fourth mansion of prayer,¹² and he himself reached seventh mansion and became a perfect example in the spiritual journey. He had envisaged the CMC community as an abode of *veda* and virtues.

Imbibing the spirit of the founders, the congregation has been giving training in prayer to women and children as well as its members since its inception. Training in contemplative prayer has led many of CMC sisters to enter into full time contemplative life. Many more have gained spiritual awakening through asceticism, spirit of sacrifice and practice of abstinence in their lives. Tabor at Pala, Carmel Mount at Chethipuzha, St. Euphrasia Centre at Ollur, Sanjos at Ramalloor and Vimal Jyothi at Ernakulam are five large retreat centres of the Congregation, where thousands receive spiritual awakening. Almost all the provinces have at least one house for perpetual adoration,¹³ where the members sit before the Blessed Sacrament throughout the day and people from the locality join them, interceding for the whole world and the Church. According to the decisions of the

¹¹CMC Constitutions, 1998, no. 8.

¹²Complete Works of Chavara, Vol. IV, Letter, vii/8.

¹³The Report of the CMC from January 2013 to November 2015, 15.

General Synaxis, almost 10% of the sisters are set apart for activities of faith formation.¹⁴

Family uplift was another important area in which Chavara worked with earnestness. His pastoral works had a special focus on the spiritual and material development of families. His apostolic zeal was directed to the overall growth of the people of God and he founded the congregation with the aim of wiping away the weakness in faith, spiritual laxity, darkness of ignorance and thus to build up stable families.¹⁵ His testament to families is the first ever family code¹⁶ given by any ecclesiastical authority. Following the vision of Chavara his daughters try to respond to the modern challenges modern women and the families are facing. To actualise this vision, the congregation is conducting regular home missions, awareness programmes, retreats, seminars, family counselling, youth ministry, Christeen retreats, Bible study groups and related programmes that deepen the conviction of the faithful in the Gospel values.

There are CMC associates and Carmel Buds organised for women and children respectively so that they can have a closer experience of the CMC charism and lifestyle.¹⁷ These associates participate in adoration, intercessory prayer, visits to the sick people and parish services. They join sisters in prayer, liturgy and agape on important feast days. Carmel Buds/Blossoms come together every week/month for prayer, evaluation and planning for further activities. It is a welcome sign that some of these children who act as a leaven amidst their fellow students get vocation to join the community.

5. Agents of Social Change

As a man of holistic vision, Chavara visualised many programmes for the growth of the Church and the society. His vision for the lay people, priests and religious were broad and practical. Chavara's views and activities in the social sphere made great transformation in the society. He became a catalyst of the growth both of the church and society. Sreedhara Menon rightly noted: "Chavara could be called a polestar of

¹⁴The Report of the CMC from January 2013 to November 2015, 52.

¹⁵N. Maria, *Empowered Womanhood: Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara's Socio-Pastoral Vision for Women and the Legacy of the Congregation of Mother of Carmel*, 2014, 304.

¹⁶A. Mary, "Unveiling the testament of a Loving Father" in *Herald of the East*, Vol.11/1, 138.

¹⁷The Report of the CMC from January 2013 to November 2015, 55.

cultural renaissance..."¹⁸ In fact, faith in God was Chavara's greatest tool to redress social problems. "He translated his unfailing faith to fearless action."¹⁹ From Chavara, her founder, CMC has inherited the charism of meeting the needs of the times, by sanctifying herself and helping the people, especially women and children, to grow into fullness of life enriched by prayer and apostolic action. Being faithful to this charism, CMC offers social uplift programmes as well, and thus becomes an agent of social change. All the apostolic activities of CMC has a special thrust on women empowerment, which is the continuation of the creative vision of Chavara.

Chavara had considered education as the light of the society and as the best means of personal social transformation. Hence, education was the first apostolic activity that CMC undertook and has been involved since 1868.²⁰ CMC Education Ratio notes in this regard: "Strengthened by divine love in contemplation, and motivated to share this love, we dedicate ourselves to foster individuals intellectually, spiritually and physically so that they may have a mature vision of life."²¹ At present 1988 sisters are working in 518 educational institutions (colleges, teachers' training institutions, nursing schools, technical institutes and schools, apart from pre-schools) aiming at the holistic development of about 2.8 lakh students. Other apostolic endeavours are healing ministry, social work programmes and media and publication. Following the compassionate love of the Father in Jesus as he healed the sick and the exhortations of Chavara who started not only care homes for the needy, but also an association in order to assist people for a peaceful death, CMC sisters continue the healing and caring ministry. Chavara had said: "The nursing of the sick may be the most difficult, unpleasant, detestable and degrading service before the fellowmen. But it is the most meritorious service before God."²²

In preparation for the Sesquicentennial Jubilee, CMC focussed more on the spiritual renewal of its members as well as on the social uplift of the poor and the marginalised. Very special attempts were made to

¹⁸Sreedhara Menon, "Renaissance Leader Who Walked Ahead of His Time," in *JSTC 16/1*, 59.

¹⁹D. Chatterjee, "Foreword" in J. Mannarathara (ed.), *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Delhi: Viva Books, 2015.

²⁰*Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent*, Vol.1, 84-85.

²¹*CMC Education Ratio*, 2009, 15.

²²*Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Vol. IV, Letter, ix/7.

make the field of social work more effective based on the social work policy, as per the decisions of General Synaxis 2013 related to the 150 Jubilee of CMC, and in connection with the Canonization Programme of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara and St. Euphrasia. According to the decision of General Synaxis 2012, 12% of the total income of each province is utilised for social work.²³ Some of the important social work schemes are: Educational Aid, Self-Employment, Housing Scheme, Health Care Programmes, Marriage Scheme, Environmental Protection Initiatives, Food Security, Initiatives to address social evils, Prison Ministry, HIV/Aids Centres, City Based Evangelization, Service to Mental Patients and the Mentally Challenged, Integral Growth Programmes for Dalit Christians and Support & Relief Works during Natural Calamities. Grater thrust was given to solid contributions through revolving schemes aiming at making the beneficiaries self-sufficient, responsible and self-confident. This programme helps sisters to maintain good relationship with the people and improve the status of the families through the regular contact.

6. CMC beyond the Territories

CMC extended its committed service to the people outside Kerala since 1958, and now it has spread to almost all the Indian states. CMC has 8 Provinces, 1 Vice-Province and 3 Regions (in India, outside Kerala); and one in Africa,²⁴ which bears the name of Chavara. CMC continues her apostolic activities in India and abroad through direct proclamation, faith formation activities, education, healing ministry, social uplift programmes, media and publication, and new ventures as per the need of the time. CMC has to sharpen her collective mind in discerning the will of God and the mind of her founder father to address new challenges of the era. The fact that the daughters of other local Churches are also growing in the charism of the congregation is a matter of great joy. At present CMC has 184 sisters hailing from the local churches from different states of India apart from Kerala.²⁵

CMC expanded her mission in 1965. About 220 sisters are working outside the country in various apostolates, but mostly in the medical field. However, in a few African countries and in two American states (Louisiana and Indiana) the members are also engaged in educational

²³*The Report of the CMC from January 2013 to November 2015*, 95.

²⁴*The Report of the CMC from January 2013 to November 2015*, 7.

²⁵*The Report of the CMC from January 2013 to November 2015*, 114.

apostolate since 1977.²⁶ In USA the sisters teach catechism and Christian values apart from regular subjects. 84 sisters are working in different African countries; among them 19 sisters hail from African soil itself.²⁷ The fertile soil of Africa is awaiting for more CMC missionaries to spread the good news in their land.

7. Heralds of Mercy

On 8 December 2015, Pope Francis declared the Year of Mercy before the conclusion of the Year of the Consecrated to remind that these two realities - renewal of consecration and witness to mercy- are not separate entities but the continuation of the same truth to encounter Christ as the face of the Father's mercy (MV 1) and to reflect same face of mercy in the present life situations. Mercy is not only an attribute of God, but is also a fundamental quality of human hearts due to the divine presence in human beings, and is therefore a bridge between God and man (MV 2). Jesus himself declared that he was the reflection of God's mercy, saying he came in search of sinners. St. Chrysostom complements: "Christ has descended on this earth not as a judge, but as a physician."²⁸ The words of Pope Francis from *Evangelii Gaudium* resound in our ears: "let us go to forth to offer every one the life of Christ" (EG 46).

In this Year of Mercy, CMC with a renewed commitment and vigour enters into a new era to make its communities more merciful and apostolic by becoming channels of Mercy. The words of Pope Francis offer greater challenge to CMC in her onward journey: "A poor Church for the poor begins by reaching out to the flesh of Christ. If we reach out to the flesh of Christ, we begin to understand something, to understand what this poverty, the Lord's poverty actually is" (Rejoice, 11). This Year, CMC all over the world observes its 150th anniversary day - 13th February 2016 - as Divine Mercy Day and Blood Donation Day. The consecrated ones, more than ever today, is called to become a fire that ignites other fires and lights up the heart.

²⁶CMC Holy Queen's Province through the Corridors of History, 2003, 319.

²⁷The Report of the CMC from January 2013 to November 2015, 146.

²⁸As cited by Abraham Mar Julios, during the Inaugural address 'Biblical Typology of "Casta Meretrix"' in International Conference on Consecrated Life in the Globalized Era, 7-9 January, 2016, at PKM Auditorium, DVK Research Centre, Bengaluru.

8. Conclusion

It is a matter of great joy and enthusiasm that CMC founded by St. Chavara and Fr. Leopold has completed 150 years of her journey in the shadow of the Most High. The powerful hands of the Almighty led her through moments of ups and downs, joys and sorrows, gains and pains, without falling. In all the struggles she learned from St. Chavara, and Fr. Leopold to surrender to the will of God and to rise above problems looking for solutions. When he was surrounded by problems, "... St. Chavara visualized only solutions. Over time, these solutions grew into missions of humanity across the globe."²⁹ So also through the tribulations CMC gets purified and strengthened. May the Almighty shower down His choicest blessings upon CMC so that it may be ignited from within and become a messenger of Divine Mercy in the years to come. May St. Chavara, Fr. Leopold, St. Euphasia, Mother Mary Celine and many other holy souls who had lived in CMC may lead her to greater heights of holiness and dedicated service to humanity.

²⁹T. Chathamparampil, *The Life and Legacy of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 2015, Back Cover.