

# SPIRITUAL COMPOSITIONS OF CHAVARA

## Poetry Powered with Hope

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**Abstract:** Sebastian Kalappura studies the spiritual compositions of Chavara as poetic pieces which highlight hope. Kalappura reflects over two of his minor poems and the collected notes on his meditations, all of which are of either spiritual or mystical in nature. *Dirge* is a poem that points to optimism at death. It enumerates the articles of faith and contains thoughts related to the grim reality of death which is overcome by the hopeful reality of resurrection. *The Martyrdom of Anastasia* is a poem on a courageous virgin who embraces martyrdom during the early Christian persecution. The background of the composition of the poem is the several schisms that threatened the unity and faith in Kerala. The chief aim of this work was to impart the value and importance of Christian suffering to the Catholic faithful of Kerala. *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father* contains the important mystical experiences of Chavara in two parts: the 'Colloquies in Meditations' (*dhyanasallapangal*) and 'a Collection of Prayers.' Together the works present the thought of Chavara on the concept of meditation. Intercession of the saints, God's merciful love, and sentiments of repentance and the overflowing of the virtue of humility as the poet meditates on mortal sins are the additional features of the work. In addition to these, there is a meditation on priesthood and holiness.

**Keywords:** Poetry, hope, mystic, prose, linguist, meditations, Dirge, death, family, faith, resurrection, bereavement, mercy, glory, vanity, watchfulness, vigilance, conversion, conversion, funeral, friends, purgatory, salvation, intercession, perfection, suffering, martyrdom, persecution, humility, *khandakavya*, dirge, zeal, charity, fortitude, virginity, vocation, disciple, evil, illusion, torments, colloquies, meditation, providence, repentance, mortal sins, priesthood.

### 1. Introduction

St Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a mystic who was able to give expression to his experiences both by means of verses and prose. A

linguist, Chavara expressed his thoughts in the finest language of the time, augmenting it with a few extra-linguistic references. In the following reflection we study two of his minor poems and the collected notes on his meditations, all of which are of either spiritual or mystical in nature.

## **2. Dirge: The Poem of Optimism at Death**

Hope is the virtue that helps Christians to tide over the human and mundane catastrophe of the death of the beloved ones in the family. The power of hope reaches beyond the grave and the fire that consume the mortal remains of the departed and enables those who are left behind to see the eternal life that lies beyond. It is this hope that instigated Chavara to pen a poem that would be helpful to the bereaved members of the family of the departed one. Chavara intended this to be sung before the funeral when a body lies in state and public homage is done. The poem enumerates the articles of faith and contains thoughts related to the grim reality of death which is overcome by the hopeful reality of resurrection. He beautifully illustrates stories and incidents to elicit prayers for the dead and to enlighten and enliven the hearts of the living.

### **2.1. The Style of Composition**

The dirge is a poem of 1162 lines in a popular chant style, which in Kerala, is called *pana*.<sup>1</sup> *Maranaveettil padanulla parvam* (the chant to be sung in a family bereaving the death of a loved one) is the original name given by Chavara, the composer.<sup>2</sup> Within the poem, he illustrates several didactic stories to attract the attention of the people and concludes each section with a solid message. There are no

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<sup>1</sup>*Pana* is originally a word designating a chant or song sung during the Lenten season by the Syrian Catholics of Kerala. The old custom was to sing these in preparation for Holy Week, during the final phase of Lent, which culminates on Holy Saturday. It is a set of songs recalling the suffering and death of Christ. In tune with this, Chavara prepared the Dirge to be used when a body is placed in the coffin for public homage. It is the Christian practice that as soon as someone dies, he or she is placed in a coffin. There are then continuous prayers with rosary and divine office until the body taken for the last rites. Apart from these prayers, Chavara thought to use Dirge for fruitful reflection on the meaning of Christian life and death.

<sup>2</sup>The *parvam* was called *pana* in 1939 by then publisher; see *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara: The Compunction of the Soul, Dirge, Anasthasia's Martyrdom*, Vol. II, trans. M. Leo. Mannanam: 1989, 131.

divisions within the poem rather, the entire poem is written in one stretch. The style of presentation and the language used leads the singer and the listener alike to meditate on the gift of life. The confrontation with the occasion of the death of another and the effects that it produces in the life of those who care for the dead affects deeply the spiritual life of each individual. It poses a personal thought of responsibility and an occasion for accountability.

## 2.2. The Theme of the Poem

In the poem, Chavara presents the Christian meaning of death in a practical form that can be understood by common faithful. He places theology in common man's language and enriches it with spiritual values and presents the meaning of Christian death. The poem also aims to reach those friends, neighbours and relatives who visits the house on the occasion to greet and console the bereaved family. To them, the poem imparts the Christian understanding of death to inspire them with salvific hope.

The central idea of the poem is that in death one becomes helpless and is left to the mercy of God and others. Chavara states that neither the world nor relations nor one's abilities can stand up to the hour of death, rather, only one's virtues and good works accompany one to eternal glory. Virtues are the only reliable things that linger with man once he meets with his death. It is death that liberates man from the vanity of creatures<sup>3</sup> and causes the living to think of the vanity that surround them.

### 2.2.1. Invitation to Watchfulness

The poem highlights and reconfirms the need of vigilance and reminds the readers that death is an unexpected reality to be expected at any moment. It is a reminder to the living that one's life is an invitation to conversion. In order to bring about this conversion, according to Chavara, it is better to go to a funeral function than to a wedding celebration.<sup>4</sup> The notion is similar to the thoughts found in the Book of Ecclesiastes (Eccl 7:2). A moment of frivolity rarely serves as a reminder to a conversion of life and still less to think about death. The attitude of the unfaithful and foolish is compared to the servant who

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<sup>3</sup>See G. Aranjaniyil, "Eschatological Perspectives in Dirge," in P. Kalluveetil, P. Kochappilly (eds.), *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2004, pp. 334-42.

<sup>4</sup>See *Dirge*, 129, lines 1-4.

thinks that his master will not return in the near future (Lk 12:45). Death approaches like a thief, and no one knows the hour as Jesus pointed out on several occasions. Through the poem, the departed one imparts the message, reminding the living:

We enjoyed each other's company  
But today, alas, I am far from you

.....  
Yesterday, I was as you are now  
And you'll be like me tomorrow.<sup>5</sup>

Chavara adapted Jesus' method of illustrating his messages with stories and parables found in the Gospels. The parable of ten virgins five of whom were vigilant at the arrival of the bridegroom, the parable of the talents, which inspires readers to be engaged in meritorious works and become rich in what God has granted to them. Moreover, these parables indicate the value of time. Hence every death of the loved ones calls for vigilance which will enable the readers to face it in time.

### **2.2.2. The Fair Weather Friends**

Chavara reminds the living of the need of distinguishing between true and untrue friends. He illustrates this lesson with a beautiful narration of a person who was condemned by an emperor to be beheaded. The condemned man approaches his friends whom he had considered to be very dear to him for help. However, no one could help him escape the wrath of the king's penalty.<sup>6</sup> Chavara compares these four friends to the world, relatives, one's own body and the virtues. The voice of a dead person is a stark lesson:

Bear you, this always in mind  
Friends are many, when we are alive  
When die, all will leave  
Companions several had I  
But who will now befriend me?<sup>7</sup>

By means of this illustration of four friends, Chavara imparts the message of recognizing the real friend in one's life, and this is nothing but the virtues one earns. The proverb "all that glitters is not gold" becomes true when we read the thoughts of Chavara. The notion of of

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<sup>5</sup>*Dirge*, pp. 129-130, lines 11, 12, 21, 22.

<sup>6</sup>*Dirge*, 131- 135.

<sup>7</sup>*Dirge*, 130, lines 26-30.

*maya* (illusion)<sup>8</sup> present in the thought of Sankara is also clearly present in the writings of Chavara. He viewed the human mind as always tending towards the evils of the world, body and self. The 'good works' are considered as the real friend who accompanies a person at the moment of his death. Death is really a moment of fear, but a person of virtuous life does not fear death as he is secure with his meritorious works, the real friend who accompanies him at his death. As we have already seen, Chavara himself was fearless on his death bed, for he considered that was very foolish to depend on the friends in the world.

### 2.2.3. The Purgative Stage of Life

Several stories and images in the poem reconfirm that belief of Chavara in the existence of purgatory. He shows that purification from every sin, even those we consider the slightest, is necessary. He clearly illustrates this by means of the story of a holy old woman.<sup>9</sup> Even though a man may be found very holy in the sight of God, he can enter heaven only after passing through the purifying stage of purgatory. Chavara frequently made acts of contrition for the slightest sins he committed and cautioned others to save themselves from even venial sins.

The poem invites the listeners to conversion and renewal of life. Metanoia or conversion of heart is a biblical expression denoting a real change in life. The actual practice of Christian life demands an interior conversion. On the occasion of the a death in the family, the poem touches the hearts of the listeners and makes them conscious of the salvation of souls and the means to attain this end. This song is a call to renewal and conversion of hearts of all lives.

### 2.2.4. Three Complementary Churches

The Church traditionally classifies the Church into three in the context of the doctrine of the Communion of saints. The Church seeks the

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<sup>8</sup>The term *maya*, (illusion) is pivotal in the Vedanta system of Sankara, where it signifies the world as a cosmic illusion and also the power that creates the world. Sankara (c. 700 AD), also known as Sankara or Sankaracarya, Hindu metaphysician, religious leader, and proponent of Advaita Vedanta, is generally acknowledged to be the most influential of all Hindu religious thinkers. See "Maya," The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition (Columbia: 2003).

<sup>9</sup>See *Dirge*, 136-38.

intercession of the saints who form the triumphant Church (already in glory), the suffering Church consists of those who have departed but have not been able to join the triumphant one; they are in state called purgatory - we pray for them; the struggling Church consists of the living members on earth who are living out their life on earth. We see that Chavara shares a similar view as revealed in this poetic work. In the attainment of perfection, the triumphant Church helps the struggling one through the communion of saints. The suffering Church in purgatory is to be helped by the members of the Church on earth by their prayers, penance, and works of charity. By these meritorious acts both become beneficiaries.<sup>10</sup>

The work provides guidelines to the pilgrim Church on earth to help the suffering Church. His thoughts on the mutuality of the Church might have been influenced by Paul who describes the mystical body of Christ: "If one member suffers, all suffer together, if one member is honoured, all rejoice together" (1Cor 12:26). This principle is the basis of the spirituality of communion. At the dawn of the new millennium, John Paul II said: "The spirituality of communion indicates the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us. A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as 'those who are part of me'."<sup>11</sup> On account of this bond of the living and the dead based on the communion of saints, even small actions inspired by love benefit all.

### **3. The Martyrdom of Anastasia**

St Anastasia the Elder was a martyr along with Cirillose during the persecution unleashed by Emperor Valerian whose right hand was Proba, the Prefect.<sup>12</sup> She is believed to have been a young woman who lived with a group of Christian virgins in Rome. Anastasia was

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<sup>10</sup>*Dirge*, 158, lines 1065-1070.

<sup>11</sup>John Paul II, *Nuovo Millennio Ineunte*, Apostolic Letter, no. 43.

<sup>12</sup>There are different women martyr saints known as Anastasia. Chavara speaks of Anastasia, the elder martyred in 249 AD. See [http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=1353](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=1353); (accessed 15 September 2006). St. Anastasia mentioned in the Canon of Mass and commemorated by the Church on December 25 was martyred in 304 AD during the persecution of Emperor Diocletian.

arrested and cruelly tortured by Proba. When she asked for some water, a man named Cirillose assisted her, giving her some and, for this, he also was beheaded along with her.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.1. Background of the Composition

This is the third and final part in the second volume of Chavara's literary works. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Church of Kerala, was rocked by several schisms and other threats to its unity and faith. The important factors that inspired Chavara were his love for the Church and his ecclesial vision of the future of the Church in Kerala.<sup>14</sup> The chief aim of this work was to impart the value and importance of Christian suffering to the Catholic faithful of Kerala. Available sources suggest that this work was probably composed in 1861. We also find that Chavara imparts the true meaning of religious life. The life of Anastasia symbolizes the soul that makes the journey to God with a mind that is undaunted by the persecution. True Christian discipleship and holiness is drawn from the courageous person of Anastasia. Deep rooted faith, obedience and love for Christ strengthened her to die for Christ and the Christian faith. In presenting such heroic people's lives, Chavara was building the Christian community as well as the religious communities in the Syro-Malabar Church.

### 3.2. Structure of the Poem

The shortest poem of his writings consists of 182 lines<sup>15</sup> and has the status of an unknown classical epic poem in Kerala's literary field because Chavara followed the method and rules applied to the *khandakavya*.<sup>16</sup> It is written in simple language and set to the rhythm of

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<sup>13</sup>See CWC, vol. II: *Anasthasia's Martyrdom*, 165; see "St. Anastasia II," [http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=1353](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=1353) (accessed 15 September 2006).

<sup>14</sup>A. Thekkudan, "Anastasiayude Raktasakshitvam," *Chavara: Vyaktiyum Siddhiyum*, Ernakulam: 1994, 190.

<sup>15</sup>According to the original text, one may find only 182 lines. But the translated English version is cast in the ballad metre in a number of quatrains and so the numberings of the lines is different from the original although the ideas are strictly adhered to. Hence, the translated version has of 230 lines. See *Anasthasia's Martyrdom*, 165.

<sup>16</sup>It simply means 'short poem'. *Khandakavya* are short poems telling stories that are written in the language of Malayalam. There are different types of poems written using certain rules or following certain methods and styles to attract people's attention and thoughts.

a boat race song (*vanchippattu*) popular in Kerala.<sup>17</sup> He wrote in the poetical style and simple language in order to instil religious zeal and fortitude in the faithful. The work was intended to be committed to memory and sung by the people. Chavara has used several Italian words in its composition.

### 3.3. Content and Theme

Valerian, the Roman Emperor, insisted that Christians give up their faith and instead burn incense at the shrine of 'Jove'. In those days a nun named Sophia was superior of a convent of which Anastasia was a member. One of the imperial consuls, attracted by Anastasia's charms, summoned her to his presence and tempts her with gold and pleasures. He tried to compel her to renounce her Christian faith and her virginity and adore the pagan deity. Sophia had already instructed her how to be prepared to become the bride of Christ before she was captured. Through this theme the poet narrates how she bravely faced indescribable sufferings and death and merited a glorious martyrdom; 'either suffer or die'. Based on this narration we shall find the feelings and expressions of a close follower of Christ. As a real disciple of Christ, Anastasia sacrificed her precious life for the love of Jesus. The figure of Anastasia is the symbol of closely following of Christ.

#### 3.3.1. Fight between Good and Evil

The fight between good and evil is a common phenomenon in every religion. The basis of sin is the presence of evil. When one survives

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<sup>17</sup>Boat races are very popular even today in Kerala. During Chavara's period the Snake Boat (*Chundanvallam*) race was very popular. Snake Boat races festivals are held in connection with Onam, the harvest festival in August/September. Scores of long snake boats and other smaller crafts participate in these events. The largest team sport in the world, the snake boat races are preceded by colourful water parades. Usually, a snake boat is manned by four helmsmen, 25 singers and 100-125 oarsmen, who row in unison to the fast rhythm of *vanchippattu* (song of the boatman). It carries a cox, and leaders who maintain the rhythm of rowing through chants, songs and exclamations. Thousands of people crowd the water's edge to cheer the huge black crafts as they slice through the waters to a spectacular finish. The oldest of these events have curious legends and myths attached to their origin, myths closely linked to the rustic people and their beliefs. See "The Origin of The Snake Boat Races Festival in Alappuzha, Kerala," <http://www.keralabackwater.com/festivals-in-kerala-backwaters/snake-boat-races-inkerala.html> (accessed 18 September 2006).



evils by good thought and acts one really fights against evil. St. Paul presents the constant struggle in the life of a human being. Man is composed of body and soul and these are in a constant struggle. Soul and body represent good and evil powers. The story of Anastasia is also a fight against the powers of the world, namely, worldly pleasures, money and beauty for the closer following of Christ. As we have seen in Dirge, in this episode too Chavara gives importance to the fight against evil. Here we find the good is represented by Anastasia, Sophia and Chirillose, whereas evil by Emperor Valerian and the Minister Proba. Chavara advises people to distinguish between good and evil. The world of illusion (*maya*) ruled the minds of the king and his minister so that they strove after the happiness of the material world (lines 31-34).

But her strong friendship with the Lord enabled Anastasia to renounce this happiness. She considers bearing the name of Christ and becoming the real bride of Christ to be greater than everything in this world: "Bearing the name of Christ is greater than the name given by her parents."<sup>18</sup> As a bride of Christ she says:

My Saviour kind and Lord Supreme  
 Christian is a term of joy  
 A term of glory and in my life  
 Virgin am I, bride of Christ  
 Jesus is my Lord and groom<sup>19</sup>

Her bridegroom was great. He was not like the bridegrooms of the world. She sang the hymn of worship looking at the beautiful face of her bridegroom that was inscribed in her own heart. To be faithful to Christ she even sacrificed her life.

### 3.3.2. Process of Persecution

Anastasia's murder is committed in different stages of cruel persecution. We find people engaged in this brutal act, especially the King Valerian and the minister Proba. They have hard hearts, full of selfishness, and act only for worldly pleasures. The denial of wealth and money and unbroken faithfulness to the name of Christ is the initiation into the process of persecution. The process began with different torments of her body, after which various parts of her body were cut off. Until her tongue was plucked out she continued her

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<sup>18</sup>Christiana is the word used in the original work of Chavara. See "Anastasiayude Raktasakshitvam," CSK, vol. II: *Sahityakrutikal*, 177, line 71.

<sup>19</sup>*Anastasia's Martyrdom*, 169.

praising of her 'beloved groom'. She was wise and stored the oil of love in her heart so that her lamp of life would not fade out. Therefore, she was among the five virgins who entered the bridal chamber with the bridegroom (see Mt 25:10b).<sup>20</sup>

### **3.3.3. Defending of Faith and Praising of God**

The threats of torments or pains did not shake her faith in Christ. To the emperor's command that she adore Jove she replied with "Let God almighty be praised forever" (line 162). She praised the Lord immediately after drinking the water from Cirillose (line 186) and gave thanks and praise for the gift of faith. She recalled the salvific act of God for sinful mankind. She showed her readiness to offer herself as a holocaust for the Lord in return to God's grace (line 191-196).

### **3.3.4. Greatness of Charity**

Most of the story is about the martyrdom of Anastasia, but Chavara also presents an important figure of charity in the person of Cirillose. He is said to be the person who gave Anastasia a cup of water in her final moments. Ignoring the threats of persecutors Cirillose moved towards Anastasia and gave her water. This simple act of 'giving a glass of water' is highly valued and enlisted him as meritorious in the Christian virtue of Charity. Soon after he also was beheaded and lost his life on earth. He won his glory. Chavara beautifully narrates these events and teaches how the occasion for charity enters into the situations of one's life.

### **3.3.5. Other Personalities in the Story**

Sophia is presented as the symbol of a spiritual mother, wisdom and guide to Anastasia. The poet describes her as "A nun of fame filled with the grace of love, joy and spirit of the Lord."<sup>21</sup> He continues with his narration of her role "She brought her up with tender heart, care and concern, love and joy, trained and taught her well" (lines 11-13). As spiritual guide and mother, she directs Anastasia, "Daughter dear, your blessed groom calls you with a longing love, go, be quick... it is the Lord, your holy groom" (lines 51-55). She continued with the advice that Jesus is great and mighty in whom you recognize your real friend, rather than yielding to the powers of evil on earth. (see lines 61-

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<sup>20</sup>See F. Vallapura, *Bl. Chavara: The Vibrant Educationalist and Spiritual Guide*, Kottayam: 2004, 80.

<sup>21</sup>*Anastasia's Martyrdom*, 166, lines 1-5.

66). In the Indian context a person with knowledge is a *jnani* or guru. One who is full of wisdom is a person with the knowledge of God who is thus able to guide others to God. Ignorance is a sign of a sinful state. One who is liberated from ignorance is a spiritual person. Sophia is modelled here as a spiritual guide to Anstasia in her hours of temptations of the world.

Cirillose, of whom mention was made in the previous section, is another ideal character in the poem. He is a young Christian; anointed in the name of Christ by the Holy Spirit. He stands by (line 149) Anastasia throughout her persecution, like St. John and the Virgin Mother at the Crucifixion of Christ. He has the special courage to quench the thirst of Anastasia, and this is the same power that Our Lord Jesus promised to his disciples when they are at the moment of persecution; a special power from God (line 151- 2). Cirillose is extremely fortunate to receive this special power when he risks his life for the sake of the Lord.

As Valerian and Proba are the two representatives of evil in the poem, Chavara describes the King as selfish, despotic, 'bad and cruel' (lines 13-15). The minister is the person who actually carries out the persecution. Though the king does not actively participate, his very silence is an expression of his internal characteristics mentioned above. He failed to be faithful to his first and foremost duty as a king. His authority is to serve and protect his people. He was supposed to be the guarantor of justice and mercy to his citizens who suffer. But here he is arbiter, selfish and cruel to his own people. He is led by the evils of the world and is careless of the dignity of kingship which is a gift from God. Following the path of the King, Proba also failed to honour his status as a minister.

In short, we find that Chavara expresses his thoughts on this event with a wonderful demonstration of his imagination. He enriches the virtues of faith and fortitude in the minds of those who are led by the evils of the world. Through his literary works, Chavara's intellectual and spiritual skills made a great contribution to both spirituality and literature. When we compare the literary status he enjoyed in the society of his day with the present it is a remarkable one. Today it is widely recognized and appreciated as a great work by many. Even non-Christian authors have praised his extraordinary skill in writing. A. Sreedharamenon, a famous Hindu literary writer in Kerala, has commented, "Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a holy light with the

memorable writings to the Malayalam literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>22</sup> S. Perumpadavam, another writer praises his writings and says that “Chavara is a mystic who imparts the God-experience to the readers.”<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. Colloquies with the Heavenly Father

Colloquies with the Heavenly Father contains the important mystical experiences of Chavara. It was written presumably between the years 1867-68. Chavara had not given a title to the manuscript that contained 83 pages.<sup>24</sup> It is in two parts: the ‘Colloquies in Meditations’ (*dhyanasallapangal*) and ‘a Collection of Prayers.’<sup>25</sup> The literature of Chavara in prose is found mainly in three works, namely, *The Chronicles*, *The Letters* and *The Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*. We consider the third of these writings along with the poetic works of Chavara as the subject matter that is considered there is spiritual. Since, by means of this literature, Chavara is relating his mystical experiences and his dialogue with the divine, we study them along with his poetic writings despite the fact that it is not written in meters and the words do not rhyme. The composition is an important source for his mystical teachings, whereas the former two provide glimpses of his apostolic activities.

The main content of this work are closely related to Chavara’s own daily meditation and prayer: Prayer before meditation, Prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Morning Prayer, Evening prayer, Prayer for

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<sup>22</sup>A. Sreedharamenon, “Renaissance Leader Who Walked ahead of his Time,” *Journal of St. Thomas Christians* 16 (January-March 2005): 56. In those days when most of the poets used to write Sanskrit, Chavara worked out a miracle by composing his poems in Malayalam. People of those times realized the beauty of folk songs in Sanskrit. Thus Chavara reformed not only the face but also the body of Malayalam poetry.

<sup>23</sup>S. Perumpadavam, “Marubhoomi Pookunna Anubhavam,” *Chavarayachan: a Deepika Special* (2004): 23-24, 23-24.

<sup>24</sup>It was collected and printed as *Adhyadmika Krutical* (the Spiritual writings). It is not a well codified work but a collection of manuscripts consisting of a series of meditations and prayers that Chavara used. The present form of the work, the Colloquies with Heavenly Father, is a modified name given to the text by its translator. See CSK, vol. III, Prologue, 11; see D. Manickathan, *Kerala Sabhadeepam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Ernakulam: 1985, 56.

<sup>25</sup>These prayers were found after his death and now are preserved in the monastery of Mannanam, Kerala. Originally there were 218 pages but many are now missing and the text begins on page 138 and ends on page 225.

custody of eyes, and Prayers to be said by priests, etc. The prayer section consists of the act of contrition, act of humility, prayer to St. Joseph, and preparatory prayer for meditation. The 'Colloquies in Meditations' are the living expressions of Chavara's inner God experiences. Here we find his constant filial conversations with God while, at the same time, he expresses grief for his shortcomings with a repentant heart. Jesus was abba, Father, for Chavara. Besides his filial devotion and company with St Joseph, and Bl. Mother, the Carmelite Saints are also invoked here. 'The Colloquies in Meditations' bears testimony to his sanctity and mysticism<sup>26</sup> in which Chavara is depicted as a *dhyanyogi* (one who has reached higher levels of spiritual enlightenment).<sup>27</sup> Observing his life of prayer, people used to call him a '*daivikamanushyan*' (a man of God). From a closer analysis of his spiritual writings we find the following particular aspects to be the main features of this work.

#### 4.1. Praising the Providence of God

In all of his writings his consciousness of divine providence fills his heart with a continuous feeling of gratitude towards God. Chavara was convinced of his own being and his unworthiness before God. He describes his vocation, the greatest gift of God, as the result of God's unlimited mercifulness and unconditional love for everyone whom He chooses. His work begins with a hymn of praise to God and appreciation of God's gift to him. Thus he writes:

I deem not myself worthy to reach high degree of prayer and sanctity. As I am a greater sinner with a heart impure and opaque without virtues of cleanliness and modesty, I realize that I am not worthy to receive the spirit of contemplation and to attain to perfection... For is it because of my power and skill that I did things whatsoever? How is it that you came hither? Who called me from home? How did I become a priest? How could I join the community and became a member of the congregation? Why should anyone address me as Prior? Do you think I deserve any one of these

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<sup>26</sup>T. Panthaplackal, *A Pearl Truly Indian*, Ernakulam: 2004, 32.

<sup>27</sup>Generally we say everyone who believes in God is in some way or other oriented to a life of prayer. A *dhyanyogi* is an Indian concept which profoundly expresses a person who is fully dedicated to a life of prayer.

favours? Not at all, to be sure. If so, remember it is God's will that is being accomplished.<sup>28</sup>

People fail to understand the continuous grace of God in their vocation. This passage is followed by another instance of the story of a man without a wedding garment who was cast into the darkness. Chavara imagines this in a beautiful way and writes, "even without a proper dress on, had he asked for one in all humility, he would have certainly granted it by the divine generosity."<sup>29</sup> Here Chavara emphasizes the necessity of prayer; one must ask the Lord. According to him the guest, in the story, would not have been denied at the banqueting hall if he had asked before! It was his self-reliance and self-complacency that threw him to the torturer.

#### **4.2. Concept of Meditation**

Chavara describes real meditation as "a free and friendly colloquy with God."<sup>30</sup> He responds in a simple and easy way to ordinary minds. It is a thought similar to another Carmelite saint, St. Therese of Lisieux. Meditation is a conversation which presupposes a friendship with God. "For, when friends sit close to each other, they find enough topics to talk about without cessation. If there is love, conversation goes unlimited. No one needs teach either of the two friends how to go on talking. For, the heart has a language of its own."<sup>31</sup> A genuine love can bring these two people nearer in conversation and unite them in unlimited conversation.

#### **4.3. Intercession of the Saints**

The work reveals Chavara's great confidence in the intercession of the saints. He regularly prayed to St. Joseph and Bl. Mother and the Carmelites saints, especially St. Teresa of Avila, whom he considered his teacher of meditation. He was also greatly influenced by the penitent saints like Mary Magdalene, who was converted by Jesus himself; Margaret of Cortona,<sup>32</sup> Mary of Egypt,<sup>33</sup> and Mary Magdalene

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<sup>28</sup>*Complete Works of Blessed Chavara: Colloquies with Heavenly Father*, Vol. III. J. Chittilappilly (trans.), Mannanam: 1990, 1.

<sup>29</sup>*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 1.

<sup>30</sup>*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 2.

<sup>31</sup>*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 2.

<sup>32</sup>She was a penitent of the Third Order of St. Francis, born at Laviano in Tuscany in 1247; died at Cortona, 22 February 1297; see "The Lives of the

of Pazzi,<sup>34</sup> about whom probably he came to know through the Italian missionaries. His special filial devotion to these saints can be seen as we go through his prayers and meditations.

#### 4.4. Hymns of God's Merciful Love

Another feature of this third work is a series of praising God's merciful love for sinners. Chavara compares the room or cell of meditation to Mount Sinai.<sup>35</sup> He presents the experience of Moses and the Israelites with a terrible God in OT. "Whoever ventures to look at the splendor of his face deceases immediately. Except Moses none of the Israelites that thronged at the foot of the Mount Sinai mustered enough courage to ascend the mount where he appeared".<sup>36</sup> He is described as "a natural fire accompanied by thunder and lightening."<sup>37</sup>

But God is no longer a frightening factor in the life of Chavara. He describes God who, with his majestic presence in the chapel, is "not a frightening judge but a loving and friendly Father who is generous, kind, and affectionate."<sup>38</sup> Even when we continue to commit sins and become enemies, God continues to love us with "the depth of His patience"<sup>39</sup> Chavara admires and praises God's unconditional love and goodness. This continues with his repentance for his sins. Chavara always identifies the passion and sufferings of Christ with his sinfulness.

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saints: St. Margaret of Crotona <http://www.sspxasia.com/Documents/Saints/StMargaret.htm> (accessed 9 November 2006).

<sup>33</sup>Mary of Egypt (ca. 344-ca. 421) is revered as the patron saint of penitent women most particularly in the Orthodox and Oriental churches, but also in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. She was born in Egypt, and at the age of twelve ran away to Alexandria where she lived an extremely dissolute life from approximately 356 to 373. For details see, "Mary of Egypt," in <http://www.newadvent.org>, (accessed 11 November 2006).

<sup>34</sup>Carmelite Virgin, born 2 April 1566; died 25 May 1607. When Chavara speaks of Mary Magdalene he speaks also of the saint Magdalene De Pazzi (1566-1607). She was born into a noble family and baptised as "Atrina." Her life was similar to that of other women who have become great mystics; an early love of prayer and penance, charity to the poor, and an evangelical spirit.

<sup>35</sup>Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, 25.

<sup>36</sup>See Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, 9.

<sup>37</sup>Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, 9.

<sup>38</sup>Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, 10.

<sup>39</sup>See Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, 11.

#### 4.5. Laments and Repentance

Chavara depicts himself as the son described in the parable of the prodigal son who returns after despoiling his father's wealth. The 'father' is so generous and patient upon the return of his 'son'. The 'abba-consciousness' of Chavara flows in addressing Jesus as 'appan' (Father, abba) throughout the work. Chavara trusted in Jesus' generosity and mercifulness in his life. This faith aspect is doubled when he trusts in the help of other saints.<sup>40</sup> The 'act of father kissing the son' in the story highlights God's 'much love, forgiveness, full restoration, strong assurance, overflowing comfort, intimate communion, exceeding joy'. These elements guide Chavara in picturing this story in his contemplation. Also when he meditates on the passion of Jesus, he calls Him 'abba': "Oh merciful Father, I am unable to raise my eyes and look at your face."<sup>41</sup> The episode of Zacheaus is also included in this chain of conversion of the soul. This event also remarkably shows the depth of God's mercy and love for mankind.

#### 4.6. Overflowing of the Virtue of Humility

The acts of men are the reflection of their hearts. The acts of Chavara were truly reflected in his life and writings. The virtue of humility can be seen very clearly in his writings, especially, the *atmanutapam* and *dhyanasallapangal* which also reveal to us Chavara's views regarding this virtue. He does not hesitate to confess his own faults, shortcomings and unworthiness. "O my God! a greater sinner as I am, I am struck with fear to enter this chapel, the abode of your presence."<sup>42</sup> There is a special discourse in *dhyanasallapangal* set apart for the virtue of humility, probably the longest discourse we find in this work.<sup>43</sup> When we turn to events that occurred in his life we find

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<sup>40</sup>Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, 32.

<sup>41</sup>Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, 8.

<sup>42</sup>Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, 9.

<sup>43</sup>See *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 24-44. Chavara's original work consisted of about twenty one pages under the title of humility, whereas only fourteen pages are found in the translated version. The reasons could be the omissions of many words as it is not a direct translation. And also we find a new title of 'prayer to St. Joseph' is added. In the original work Chavara had not given a separate title to the prayer to St. Joseph, so readers may confusedly think that the translated version is one long discourse. See *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 9-22



several examples of his humility. Monsignor<sup>44</sup> himself writes on this point: I only wish to note that the said subject, who is called Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, prior of the Tertiaries of the Immaculate conception of Mary of Mount Carmel has the simple vow of humility and so he will not, at any cost, accept such a title or dignity without a precept, as I have had to give to make him accept the dignity of the Vicar general.<sup>45</sup> In the words of Fr. Leopold Beccaro OCD: "All those who knew him, had no doubt about his profound humility."<sup>46</sup>

#### 4.7. Meditation on Mortal Sins

The meditation on mortal sin focuses very much on the holy life of priests. Even the slightest sins will become a cause for the damnation of the souls of priests, if one is careless regarding venial sins. In order to clarify his view, Chavara recollects the words of various saints who received special revelations on sin: St Alphonse Ligouri, St Teresa of Avila, St. Bridget, and St. Chrysostom.<sup>47</sup> Chavara points out few striking words from them which seem to be more valuable. St. Bridget shares her experience on what Jesus inspired her to say: "My daughter, do not think that venial sin is a slight sin"<sup>48</sup> St Chrysostom speaks on the dignity of priesthood as follows, "a priest must be more afraid of venial sin than mortal sin, for if he happens to fall into mortal sin, he will be frightened and make reconciliation with God. But in the case of venial sins he may not be concerned. And this will lead him to commit venial sins without any qualm of conscience. This habit will eventually lead him to be less afraid of mortal sins."<sup>49</sup> Here we find the same attitude of a wealthy person whose carelessness leads to a great deal of money being lost through simple expenses, whereas he always takes the greatest care over spending large amounts. Recalling the word of St Gregory the Great Chavara says "a little scratch (venial sin) on the body of a priest is more fatal than a deep wound or a carbuncle on the body of a lay man."<sup>50</sup> Hence, in this section Chavara wanted to

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<sup>44</sup>He was the Vicar Apostolic at Verapoli Vicariate (presently known as the Diocese of Varapuzha) during Chavara's time.

<sup>45</sup>L. Vithuvattickal, *Perspective of a Heroic Christian Life*, Mannanam: 1988, 41.

<sup>46</sup>*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 42.

<sup>47</sup>*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 30.

<sup>48</sup>*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 30.

<sup>49</sup>*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 31.

<sup>50</sup>*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 31.

specify the utmost care that priests should take in dealing with venial sins.

#### **4.8. Meditation on Priesthood and Holiness**

There are three meditations in which Chavara highlights the value and importance of priestly life: the meditation on vocation, on the worth of two priests, and the death of an impious priest. To avoid repetition let us analyse all three together. The first one is a personal level of query in each of us, the second is a query put to us by another person for us to think about personally and the third is an allegory to help priests live a better life. Chavara's instructions were always aimed at the overall well-being of priestly life. Vocation is a great gift for every priest's life, and the 'meditation on vocation' starts from the very beginning of one's life. Chavara enumerates how God is active with his plan for each one of us in a different manner.

Many in the world are ignorant of God and loving Him, instead he has inscribed in you the knowledge of God and not allowed to be born from 'ignorant' parents. Saved you from the threat of death in the womb of your mother, and privileged to be baptized and liberated from the original sin. It is not your mother but the almighty God through your mother protected and grown you from your childhood until you became a priest. It is a time to reflect back on how we responded to God's gifts.<sup>51</sup>

In the second meditation, Chavara points out two aspects of the theme. One is in accordance with the saying of Jesus in the Gospel that, "no one can serve two masters" (see Mt 6:24). God and wealth are two options before us to choose from. Choosing the former and living an authentic life is vitally important for the success of priestly life. Constant prayer, sincerity and permanency in thoughts and living make the priestly life an ideal one. With this in mind, he points out that certain persons are zealous for a day to fulfil the daily prayers, service and charity works. In fact, the next day or moment they become careless of their duties and status of life as consecrated people. Their life, according to Chavara, will find a very horrible end as he described in the story of the death of an impious priest in the third meditation.<sup>52</sup> Unfaithfulness, repetition of sins, and scandalous thoughts led him to the wrath of God.<sup>53</sup> God is merciful, loving and

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<sup>51</sup>Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, 27-28.

<sup>52</sup>See Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, 34.

<sup>53</sup>See Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, 34.

patient, but the non-cooperation on the part of man ruins him, even if he is good before the world.

## **5. Conclusion**

We have tried to have a comprehensive picture of Chavara's mystical spirituality from the above sources. Chavara's works, especially, his poetries and his notes on his meditations, bear testimony to his deep God-experiences and, at the same time, are valid contributions to the literary world. These works stand as profound means of transforming a literary world into a world of spiritual experiences. They are not merely an intellectual exploration from his 'self'; rather, they are a means of sharing his experience with God. These compositions deal with different themes and the stories and events are drawn from his personal readings and insights.

As a hardworking and committed person, Chavara made a rich contribution to the field of spirituality, inspiring his readers to profit from their wisdom, received from God, into their own practical life. In short, on the basis of all that has been discussed, we can legitimately affirm that Chavara was a mystic. These are the best expression of Chavara's spirituality. Today when we look back on these works, we can see that they are truly great treasures. Although these writings originated 150 years ago, they still inspire the readers very powerfully even in the modern times.