

BOOK REVIEW

Fr Thomas Kochumuttom CMI, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, St Pauls Publications: Mumbai, 2014, pp. 372. ISBN 978-93-5015-204-1. Price: Rs 210.00.

The author, an Acharya who leads a contemplative life in Jeevandhara Ashram at Jaiharikhal in the Himalayas, is the most apt person to write on Kuriakose Elias Chavara (henceforth KEC), a *jñāna-bhakti-karma-yogi*, who was canonized on 23 November 2014. The author has succeeded in unfolding his inspiring personality who co-founded the congregation of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI). As George Thanchan, the former Vicar General of CMI Congregation, says in the "Foreword," "The author has done an extensive study of the writings of KEC and has been trying to relive his spirituality" (p. 15).

Thomas Kochumuttom (henceforth TK) begins the preface by a citation from *The Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent* in which the Sisters wrote on 3 January 1871, the day of the death of KEC: "This Father of ours was a model and guiding light to all Christians in Kerala. Moreover, he was a pillar that supported the Catholic Church because of the zeal he evinced in its expansion and in the protection of faith." He reproduces some of the testimonies of the contemporaries such as Fr Jacob Palakkunnel, Mariam Powath, Ouseph Ittiyavirah Poriyanvely, both belonging to Kainakari Parish, Mani Kurian Madathikunnel of Muttuchira Parish, Fr Varkey Muttathupadathu, Bp Mathew Athanasius, Abp Bernardine, Fr Louis of Manjummel Monastery and Fr Leopold, his spiritual father. They all have sweet memories of the Saint to cherish.

The author makes clear the purpose of his work: "This book intends to present in some detail the life and work of KEC so that he may continue to be a guide and support for people of all times and places ... it proposes to provide a compact volume, describing the story of the Blessed in a readable as well as scientific manner... The book is a documented history of the Church in Kerala in the 19th century, indeed, a crucial period for the Church" (p. 20).

The book is divided into three parts: "Ascent of Mount Mannanam," "In the Plains with the People," and "Empowerment of Women." The first part has 11 chapters. Chapter 1 is entitled "With the Parents at Home" (pp. 23-29). Chapter 2, "Call and Response" speaks

about Chavara's divine call, life in the seminary and the time of test at the death of his parents and brother (pp. 31-41). Chapter 3, "At the Feet of the Guru," mainly draws a portrait of Malpan Thomas Palackal (pp. 43-55). In chapter 4, "An Ecclesiologist with a Difference," continues to present the unique personality of the Guru in the context of his time (pp. 57-63). The author finds that "while remaining sincerely committed to the Chaldean heritage, he [Malpan Palackal] wanted to adapt it to the needs of his people and make it perfect and relevant by creatively assimilating into it helpful elements from other sources like the Indian and Latin traditions" (p. 63).

Chapter 5, "Monastic Inspiration," begins with the priestly ordination of KEC and his first Mass, in which he prayed for God's blessing to realize the dream of his Guru and Fr Thomas Porukara to start a monastery. They had already got the ecclesiastical permission for it. The religious life, which the founding fathers had in mind, was contemplative and prophetic. Next TK narrates the efforts for constructing a monastery. Mannanam was chosen, which they named *bes-rauma*, a Syriac word meaning "house on hill-top" (pp. 65-75).

Under the title "Chavara Shares the Inspiration" (chapter 6) TK studies the role played by KEC in the construction of the Mannanam Monastery (pp. 77-92). Here the author sheds light on the inner sufferings, which the Saint had to undergo. In chapter 7, titled "The Community Takes Shape" (pp. 93- 105) the author looks at the stages of the construction works, and concludes with the Guru Samadhi, the death of Malpan Palackal on 16 January 1841. However, the spirit lived on, and the work progressed (pp. 107-116). Chapter 9, "Graceful Exit of a Hero," deals with the death of Malpan Porukara on 8 February 1846 (pp. 117-122). Then on Chavara was at the helm (pp. 123-132). Abp Bernardine compelled KEC to accept the strict rules of the Order of the Carmelites Discalced (OCD) with little consideration for the new community's feelings and proposals. Some of them found it too severe and hard to follow, and with a heavy heart left religious life, which broke the heart of the Saint.

Chapter 10, "The First of Its Kind," (pp. 133-141) speaks of the profession of KEC and 10 companions on 8 December 1855, the first anniversary of the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady. The name of the congregation then was "Society of the Servants of Mary Immaculate of Mount Carmel." Its inclusion in the Carmelite spiritual tradition was a good result of the influence of the missionaries. Then TK takes up the question of the founder of the congregation. According to him "It was a collective

inspiration shared by so many people like Frs Palackal, Porukara and Chavara, Br Kaniyanthara, Fr Paschal, Bp Maurilius Stabilini, Bp Bernardine Baccinelli and many more priests and lay persons" (pp. 138-141).

Part II has 13 chapters. In chapter 12, "In Leaps and Bounds," the author narrates the story of the growth of the congregation, which established monasteries at Koonammavu, Elthuruth, Plasanal and Vazhakulam (pp. 145-157). Under the title, "Affiliation out of the Blue" (chapter 13) TK gives an objective evaluation of the change in the name of the congregation into Third Order of Carmelites Discalced (TOCD). He finds the high-handed interference of the OCD superiors in it. KEC, whose greatest concern was to keep the community united in a spirit of love and trust in divine providence, had to accept that decision. This affiliation had great implications. For example, the OCD Superior General became the supreme head of the congregation and he nominated the vicar apostolic as his vicar provincial with vast faculties.

Chapter 14 looks at KEC as the prudent and unrivalled leader (pp. 169-181). TK focuses on the decisive role played by *Valiya Priyorachan* (Fr Prior of Priors - an affectionate name given by the faithful, which indicates the greatness and nobility of KEC). He makes a very brief survey of the history of the Syrian Church of Kerala, in which the demand for bishops of its own Rite was creating divisions and schisms. Among them the name of Mar Roccas, a Chaldean bishop, stands in the forefront. Most of the parishes followed Mar Roccas. The next two chapters are devoted to the narration of how KEC, who was elevated to the post of the Vicar General of Syrian Catholics, confronted Mar Roccas even at the peril of his life (pp. 183-188, 189-197). At the end the ex-communicated Roccas was forced to leave Kerala. KEC with heroic charity helped him during his last days of stay in Kerala. Still there was some hangover from the Roccas episode left in the Church of Kerala (Chapter 17, pp. 199-203).

KEC was pained at the pitiable situation of Kerala Church. Chapter 18 (pp. 205-215) describes his efforts to sustain the Catholic unity and bring about the reunion of the Jacobite community. The Saint was aware of the people's fondness for the Chaldeans and dislike for the European missionaries. At this juncture, he brought forward a considered solution, which evaluated the problems from every side. He proposed that the European missionaries should study Syriac language and adopt the Syro-Malabar Rite for the liturgical services. He knew that the time was not ripe for native bishops. TK speaks about Rome's proposal to appoint KEC as a bishop without any

personal jurisdiction and fully dependant on Archbishop Baccinelli. The missionaries, however, rejected that suggestion. Still the Propaganda Congregation wrote to Archbishop Mellano on 4 August 1874 recommending KEC for the post of bishop. Rome was then unaware of the Saint's death in 1871. As a conclusion to this chapter, the author presents KEC as an ardent devotee of the Mother Church: "He loved the Church as his mother and shared in her joys and sorrows equally" (pp. 214-215).

In chapter 19, "More Foundations," TK narrates the foundations of new monasteries at Pulinkunnu, Ambazhakadu, Mutholy and Chethipuzha (pp. 217-225). Then the author calls our attention to the pastoral and missionary zeal of the Saint (pp. 227-237). He took radical steps in promoting the ministry of preaching, formation of priests, evangelization of *Dalits* and ecclesiastical management and administration. Chapter 21 is devoted to KEC's efforts for liturgical renewal (pp. 239- 248). In chapter 22 the author depicts the Saint as a socio-religious reformer (pp. 249-257) in the fields of education, uplift of scheduled castes and family apostolate. Chapter 23 presents KEC as a prolific writer (pp. 259-269). "He [Chavara] was a person of intellectual acumen and wide knowledge of life. His powers of discernment and correct judgment were well appreciated" (p. 259). In writing *The Chronicles (Nālāgamankal)*, he proves to be a responsible and objective historian. He wrote the spiritual lyrics: *Ātmānutāpam*, *Anastāsyaṃyute Rakta-sākṣyam* and *Maraṇavittil Pāṭuvānuḷla Pāna*. *Dhyāna-sallāpankal*, *Dhyāna-kurippukal* and *Prārthanakal* also are his writings. His liturgical works include: *Rubrics of Mass*, *Liturgical Calendar*, *Divine Office*, *Office for the Dead*, *Holy Saturday Service*, and *Forty Hour Adoration*. Seventy of his letters have already been published.

In chapter 24, "Parting Message to Confreres" (pp. 271-281) the Saint speaks from the heart to the Congregation, asking the members to make obedience as their identity mark, how a superior has to govern, how to foster the family spirit and disciplined life in community. He spoke about farsighted planning and the sense of indebtedness to the benefactors.

Part III is titled "Empowerment of Women" and has 9 chapters, of which 8 are set aside for the narration of the foundation of the TOCD Congregation for women, the Saint being its founder. The author has beautifully explained the charism that KEC instilled into the first members. In the last chapter of the book, "A Holy and Beautiful Soul" (pp. 355-367) TK draws our attention to the last three months of the life of the Saint on earth. During this period the sick KEC paid three

touching visits to the convent. At his deathbed he bade farewell to the community gathered around him in tears. After receiving the last sacraments *Valiya Priorachan* breathed his last on 3 January 1871. The funeral oration preached by Fr Mathai Kappil began thus: "Today the flag of Kerala has fallen!" The Saint was buried on 4 January 1871 near the sanctuary of the Church of St Philomena, Koonammavu. In the last sub-title, "Guiding Light and Supporting Pillar" TK speaks mainly about the impressions of the Saint's spiritual daughters. At the end of the book the author gives a "Guide to Footnotes and Source Works" (pp. 369-372).

Until now, there was no readable and at the same time a compact English biography of KEC. By means of this work, TK has done a wonderful and commendable service to the global Church, and to the whole humanity. It is well researched and documented. The names given to Part I and Part II reveal to us the mystical and poetic heart of the Acharya who leads a contemplative life in the Himalayas. For him the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* of St. John of the Cross, the Carmelite mystical saint, has become the *Ascent of Mount Mannanam*, which is both Biblical and Indian. The title "In the Plains with the People" reminds us of Luke's version of the mission of Jesus. The designation "Empowerment of Women" testifies that this hermit is well aware of the modern sociological trends. His presentation of Malpan Palackal as guru and the narrative of his life are very attractive. Also, the author's focus on the Catholic unity and Jacobite reunion is very relevant to the present situation.

While recording once more my sincere appreciation about this study, I would like to point out a few of my reservations. In evaluating the issue of the founder of the Congregation for men, TK says that it was a collective inspiration. It seems that he gives equal importance to very many people. Does such a suggestion give justice to the historical facts? This reviewer has nothing against attributing more importance to Malpan Palackal, but he feels that the role of KEC is watered down in the process. He also thinks that too many pages are devoted to the foundation of the TOCD Congregation for women (pp. 235-353). It would have been better if the author had discussed the spirituality of the Saint in a more detailed way, which would have helped the readers to delve deeper into its Biblical, Oriental, and Indian aspects.

Paul Kalluveetil CMI