



St. Chavara: An Indian Saint Who Was Ahead of His Time

February 17, 2019 Team ICM Uncategorized

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By Fr. Benny Sebastian Tharakunnel, CMI –



St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the first Indian male saint who lived only for a short span of 66 years from 10 February 1805 to 3 January 1871 could do what many people together cannot achieve even during the course of many centuries. He was able to do this because as he himself preached he was guided by the conviction that "Days on which you have not rendered any good to others, will not be reckoned in the book of your life". As a poet and a truly pious man, he reiterated that the love of God should translate itself as service to the poor, the illiterate and the destitute. It was precisely because of this reason that he was acknowledged by his contemporaries as a living saint during his life time. Even his own testimony at deathbed revealed his inner innocence and sanctity: "I have never lost the baptismal grace". Immediately after his death, Rev. Fr. Leopold exhorted the members of the religious

congregation founded by him to preserve all things used by St. Chavara. He himself made copies of Chavara's testament and distributed a few things that belonged to Chavara to all the other monasteries as sacred relic.

Personal Tragedy at a Young Age

Now let us come to the life of St. Chavara and see how he overcame a major crisis in his life. It was with a lot of zeal and enthusiasm that young Kuriakose entered the Pallipuram seminary with the dream of becoming a priest. Shattering all his dreams, a few years after he joined the seminary, a major tragedy occurred in his life.

His father, mother and his only brother died in a small pox epidemic that devastated his village. Kuriakose who was just 13 years of age at that time came to know about the death of his near and dear ones only three weeks after the incident and because of this reason he was not even able to attend their funeral. He was heart- broken.

He prayed and wept at the tomb of his near ones. But the faith he received from his parents especially from his mother helped him to withstand this crisis of enormous proportion at the tender age of 13. He strongly believed that God was his portion.

The death of the dear ones also posed a major challenge to him. Since he was the only male member in the family he was advised by all- his siblings, relatives, neighbours and well-wishers to discontinue his studies at the seminary and take up the responsibility of the family. One of his uncles who did not favour Kuriakose going back to the seminary even locked him up in a room. Notwithstanding the opposition of his relatives God had definite plans for him. Another relative by name Thoppil, whom none in the family dared to oppose intervened and young Kuriakose was allowed to follow his wish of returning to the seminary. Later on in life when St. Chavara had to face challenges he firmly believed that with the help of the Lord who has called him to be his priest he would be able to overcome all these challenges. He was never heart- broken because he believed that nothing is impossible for God.

Took the Road Less Travelled

St. Chavara had the courage to take initiatives and contribute a lot to the Church and to the society because of his strong faith in the providence God. He was a man who took the road less travelled. He made initiatives where it was necessary. No obstacle could stop St. Chavara who strongly believed that however mighty the obstacles were, they were nothing before the all-powerful Lord. He had the strong conviction that if he did his part the Lord would take care of the rest. His profound trust in the providence of God and the ardent desire to lead a more radical way of living Christian discipleship led him to found Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), first indigenous Indian religious congregation along with Fr. Thomas Palackal and Fr. Thomas Porukara.

His ability to be a trend setter is evident from the founding of the first Indian religious congregation for women, the first Sanskrit School, the first Catholic printing press and the preparation of the first liturgical calendar for the Malabar Church.

For the spiritual renewal of the people of God he started several seminaries, introduced annual retreats for priests and people, started forty-hour adoration and gave special attention to the catechumens. Taking into account the needs of the people of that time, he also established a house for the dying and destitute and schools for general education. It was only because of St. Chavara who was appointed the first Vicar General of all the Syro-Malabar Catholics in 1861 that the Church could withstand the many threats to ecclesial unity caused by various schisms.

How good a pastor he was, can be seen from a concrete incident in his life. Once when St. Chavara came to know that a person suffering from the contagious disease small pox wanted to receive the

last sacrament, he immediately got ready to go to him. Even though many warned him against going to that person, St. Chavara did not change his mind. He said, "now it is my duty to take of this person. God will take care of me". An incident that speaks of his ability to be an instrument of peace in the hands of the Lord is worth mentioning. The year before his death he was taking rest and treatment in the monastery at Koonammavu. Disputes and quarrels were going on in the parish of Anackal relating to the Portuguese Patronage. All efforts to reconcile the rival groups having failed, the parish chiefs approached the prior and said: "It is enough if you just come for peace to be restored." He went with them and peace was restored.

Had Time and Space for Everyone

St. Chavara had space in his heart for every one- for the rich, for the poor, for the downtrodden and for the members of other caste and religion. He had space in his heart even for those who tried to harass him. This is well illustrated in his last testament. There was a man called Mathen who unjustly appropriated the land of Mannanam monastery and filed cases against St. Chavara in the court. In spite of all the troubles this man created St. Chavara still loved him and in his last testament instructed the members of his religious community to do all good to him.

St. Chavara who was beatified by Saint Pope John Paul II during his historic visit to India on 8 February 1986 and was canonized by Pope Francis at St. Peter's Square on 23 November 2014 is an inspiration for generations to come. The miracle approved by Vatican for his canonization was the healing of the squint eye of a girl, Mary Jose. The only cure for the defect prescribed by medical doctors was a surgical operation; but within a week's intense intercessory prayer to Chavara, the girl got instantaneous cure which is beyond scientific explanation. If God did a lot of miracles through St. Chavara during and after his lifetime, it was because he was a man filled with the spirit of God. Let us ask the Lord so that may receive the spirit of God and overcome all the negative feelings so that we can become effective instruments in the hands of the Lord. May God bless us all through the intercession of our founder St. Chavara.

Fr. Benny Sebastian Tharakunnel, CMI, is an assistant professor at the Institute of Oriental Canon Law, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (DVK), Bengaluru, and director of family apostolate for the diocese of Mandya, Karnataka and he also serves as a defender of bond at the eparchial tribunal of Mandya. He has a Doctorate in Oriental Canon Law from Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome. He also holds Master's degree in Physics from Bengaluru University and a Licentiate degree in Oriental Canon Law from DVK.