



GUIDELINES FOR PRIESTS

IN THE WORDS OF BLESSED CHAVARA

FR. THOMAS PANTHAPLACKAL CMI



To Commemorate the Year for Priests

(19.06.2009 to 19.06.2010)

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In the Words of Blessed Chavara



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(A book of documentation)

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MESSAGE

In the Year for Priests, Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara is a role model for priests, especially for the priests of India. He lived and spent his priestly life for others with deep faith, fidelity and holiness. His contemporaries testify that he offered the Holy Mass and performed other priestly duties in a most responsible and exemplary manner. And he spent long hours before the tabernacle day in and day out praying for his flock.

He was a master, professor and examiner of candidates to priesthood for a long time. He tried to help the fellow priests lead a life of prayer. So, for their spiritual renewal he introduced annual retreats. With due permission he codified the liturgy and the canonical prayers according to the Syro-Malabar tradition. With the permission of Archbishop Bernardine in 1868, Blessed Chavara wrote down the order of the Mass and other liturgical celebrations of

the Syro-Malabar rite called *thukasa*, for daily observance, study and teaching; it contains the rubrics of the Mass starting from the entry of the priest into the sacristy to the exit of the priest from the altar and his return to the sacristy. The Missal he prepared (reprinted in 1926) was in use in the Church until 1962 when the restored liturgy was introduced. That means, almost for a century the priests were asked by my predecessors to follow the liturgical rubrics and guidelines provided by Blessed Chavara.

Blessed Chavara has enriched the Church in Kerala through his holiness and unique contributions. The best way to relish his esteem for and reflections on priesthood is to bring them alive in his own words. *Guidelines for Priests* is a booklet written by Fr. Thomas Panthaplackal reproducing Blessed Chavara's own meditation notes meant for priests. They can renew and revitalize the day-to-day life of a priest even after more than a century. Certainly, this is an authentic spiritual guide apt for the Year for Priests. I congratulate the author and wish God's blessings to all the readers.

Kakkanad

10-10-2009

Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil
Major Archbishop of Syro-Malabar Church



FOREWORD

Pope Benedict XVI announced the 'Year for Priests' for the universal church from 2009 June 19 to 2010 June 19. The chief objective of the declaration has been the spiritual renewal of the priests. Often it is the role model and message of great personalities that set off a renewal of life within us. Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara who was born and brought up in our own land and whose priestly life spanned forty-two years is certainly a role model for the Indian priests. He is an example par excellence of a life of purity and holiness of priesthood.

Colloquies in Meditation is an important spiritual treasure among the writings of Blessed Chavara. As the title indicates, the notes are his own meditations, mostly on the holiness needed in a priest, his glorious status and responsibilities. Blessed Chavara reminds the priests that they need to grow in holiness steadily by reading good books and meditating with their help.

In the Year for Priests, Fr.Thomas Panthaplackal has authored this booklet bringing to light the meditative notes of Blessed Chavara on priesthood. I congratulate him; it is a timely booklet in this Year for Priests. I must add that it would be a good checklist for all priests, especially when they are distracted with too much work or laziness, worldliness or material interests; it will help them renew their lives. My congratulations and thanks to Fr.Thomas and to all priests who will read this book.

Chavara Hills
25-9-2009

Fr. Jose Panthaplamthottiyil CMI
Prior General

PREFACE

John Vianney was ordained priest by the providence of God though he was not good at studies and was about to be sent out from the seminary. After his ordination he was appointed in a remote village parish, Aars, where other priests were reluctant to go.

Neither was Vianney eloquent nor was he erudite, nor endowed with spectacular skills. He spent his time in the Church, at the altar and in the confessional. His prayer life, holy mass with devotion, his soft sound at the confessional which gave a divine soothing touch - all attracted the people to Aars. The common people in Aars, who did not heed to their bishops or former pastors now started to listen to John Vianney. Many sinners became converted. People came with their heavy burden of sins from far and near to receive the blessing of the Vicar of Aars. Many experienced the soothing and healing touch of God. In his efforts to become a saint, he made others saintly. Though dead now, people still flock to his grave.

Years have rolled; Pope Benedict XVI declared him as the patron of all the priests who partake in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the one year from the feast day of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on 19 June 2009 to 19 June 2010 is declared as the Year for Priests in the universal Church.

The Church in India, especially the Church in Kerala, is looking for a role model in the Year for Priests. One such role model is Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a contemporary of Saint John Vianney. Blessed Chavara had great esteem and respect for priesthood; he was grateful to God for the generous gift of sharing in the priesthood of Jesus. He was convinced that he was a mediator between God and man. He was deeply aware of the call to holiness in priesthood; Blessed Chavara wanted to be close to God all the time; so he feared sins.

In this year for priests, it is fitting that the priests try to understand the different dimensions of priesthood from him and follow his path. Blessed Chavara's meditations on priesthood are the main theme of this booklet. How he became aware of his own self, how he discovered through his meditations who a priest is etc. are described here. Excerpts of Blessed Chavara's meditation notes from his book *Dhyana Sallapangal* are presented in the book under various headings with brief notes. The book, we hope, will help priests lead their life with responsibility and do their ministry with

devotion. It is published on the auspicious occasion of the 205th birthday of Blessed Chavara in the Year for Priests in the universal Church.

The main topics on which Blessed Chavara meditated were vocation, mercy of God, mortal sin, danger in serving two masters and the death of a mediocre priest. These short reflections are his interpretations of the Word of God. They are a panacea for any priest at any place or time. Blessed Chavara did ministerial priesthood for forty-two long years; he was the Vicar General of the whole Syro-Malabar Christians of Kerala; he was the Malpan and examiner of the candidates for priesthood of the Syro-Malabar church for twenty-six years; he was the first 'blessed' of the Syro-Malabar Church. He will be a great inspiration and example for the priests of the Church in India. My hearty thanks to all who have helped bringing out this volume, particularly Fr.Johnson Vadakkumcherry and Fr.Jose Kuriedath who translated from the original in Malayalam.

Fr.Thomas Panthaplackal CMI
Chavara Hills

**THE ORDER OF APPOINTMENT OF
FR. KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA
AS THE DOCTOR (*MALPAN*) AND
EXAMINER OF PRIESTS**

By the grace of God and with the apostolic blessing, Francis Xavier of St. Anna, the discalced Carmelite and Metropolitan of Sardia and Vicar Apostolic of Malabar, impart my greetings and blessings to Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the parish of Chennamkary.

Your virtuous life and dutifulness in everything compel me to appoint you as the examiner of all priests and Doctor (*Malpan*) of all Sacred Sciences in the Syro-Malabar rite. This appointment is made not only to grant permission for ordination to the candidates but also to give permissions to the priests to hear confession and to preach in the churches.

So I command all those who come under the jurisdiction of this law, to receive him as the doctor and examiner and obey him with due respects.

On 16th of February in the year 1844.

Officially given from Verapoly with my signature and seal.

Archbishop, Francis Xavier (sd/-)
Secretary, Fr. Michael Corea (sd/-)

(Original, Archives of Mannanam)

**THE ORDER OF APPOINTMENT OF
FR. KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA
AS THE VICAR GENERAL
OF THE SYRIAN CATHOLICS
OF MALABAR**

Bernardine of St. Theresa, Metropolitan of Pharsalia and Vicar Apostolic of Malabar.

To our dearly beloved Fr. Kuriakose Chavara, Prior of the Monastery of Mannanam and of other monasteries:

For a long time, for reason of my ill-health and bodily weakness resulting from my advanced age, I am experiencing serious difficulties in administering the churches under my jurisdiction and have found no sufficient spiritual good among the priests and faithful at large. Recently there are also some other problems.

So, in the light of the decision of the Council of Trent that a Vicar General may be appointed when it is found necessary, I appoint you as the Vicar General to rule over the priests and faithful of the Syrian Churches of Malabar under my administration and to look after their spiritual needs, and confer on you all the powers and rights

according to the law of the Holy Catholic Church and also those which I delegate to you through my special decree, as I am convinced of your ability, virtues, knowledge and courage so necessary to fulfill the responsibility of this office.

We pray God that He may give you His celestial blessings so that you may be able to administer to the spiritual needs of the priests and faithful of the Syrian churches under my jurisdiction and to govern them.

From Verapoly

Archbishop Bernardine of St. Theresa

June 8, 1861

Vicar Apostolic (sd/-)

Secretary, Fr. Peter Thomas Giuanar (sd/-)

(Original, Archives of Mannanam)

Priest's Daily Prayer

The Lord of all creation, in whose priesthood we participate, grant us sufficient grace to serve you properly in all holiness, virtue and devotion. We know that we are unable to fulfill our duties avoiding even small failures, according to the exalted position and responsibilities you have entrusted to us. Still we promise to serve you everyday with a humble heart and burning love. We beseech you the special grace to repent with tears over the sins we commit. Amen

-Blessed Chavara-

The Prayer of Priests to the Blessed Mother after Holy Mass

Oh! glorious and blessed virgin Mary, the queen of heaven and earth and the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, the creator of everything, whom you conceived and carried in your womb for nine months, pardon me, a great sinner, for my ignorance, carelessness, hastiness and omissions in celebrating the Holy Mass and for unworthily receiving your Divine Son's precious Body and Blood. I pray to you, O my Mother, may the sufferings of your beloved son and the humbleness of your life bring pardon for my sins. Amen

-Blessed Chavara-

I

The Greatness of Priesthood

A priest has to approach God with a humble heart, because he has received everything from God. How exalted is the gift of priesthood! A priest brings the invisible God to the people through the priestly ministry; he shares with them the divinity of God. Hence, a priest must lead a life of holiness. God is holy and the one who receives Him must not receive Him with tainted hands or unholy heart. Priesthood is thus a call to holiness; priesthood is the radiance of Jesus himself; and priest is another Christ.

1. Priest Is Called for Sanctifying Himself and Saving Others.

The vocation to priesthood is given as a gift from God to work for self-sanctification and for the salvation of others. A priest has to examine about his vocation from time to time. Blessed Chavara discovered the essence of the divine call as follows:

The essence of priestly vocation is in following closely the divine Master, who emptied himself and bought you through the shedding of his own precious blood so as to bring your soul and the souls of others together. A priest has to be free from sins and help others to atone for their sins; he must try to do good deeds and make others do the same.

(Chavara, Dhyanasallapangal, 1981, 50)

Hence the sum and substance of your call is self-sanctification and the salvation of others. If so, you have to examine whether you do follow Jesus as your Master and lead a life making Him as your role model and try with all your capabilities to follow Him closely.

2. Priest Must Set Aside the Self

It is only by constantly examining what he had to give up and what price he had to pay for responding to his call that a priest will find out if he is moving away from his mission or grow in holiness.

You have paid a high price by leaving the attractions of the world, house, property, parents, loved ones, worldly pleasures, adulations from others, the company of friends and dear ones. By leaving all the worldly pleasures you have chosen priestly life

filled with trials and tribulations. What was the need for it? Here there is an answer for you. It is because you wanted to dedicate yourself for God's service entirely and wanted to be in the dwelling place of God. Or was it for spending the rest of your life in a respectful and comfortable way? (*Ibid.* 50).

3. Holiness of a Priest

Blessed Chavara recalls that the priests of the Old Testament had to face the wrath of God for their lack of devotion in offering animals; they were punished then and there. If so, Chavara wonders, how high should be the sanctity of the priests of the New Testament, who receive on the altar of God, the creator of the world.

Our Lord has said: you who approach me should be holy since I am holy. So my dear brother, we are holding a divine and holy mystery: blessing, consecrating, dividing, and distributing the sacred body of Christ to others. Do you not know that in this church and around this altar filled with His presence, the Seraphim and Cherubim stand in fear and trembling, adoring and praising God? Examine very carefully how you approach the altar, where the angels even do not dare to raise their eyes and look at Him (*Ibid.* 51).

4. Priest Calls Down God

Kneeling before the tabernacle in meditation, Blessed Chavara recalls what great authority and how exalted a position the priest in the New Testament is given though he does not deserve them. In his meditative reflections, he discovers a God entirely different from the one in the Old Testament. The God of Old Testament, who punished Uzzah with death frightens Blessed Chavara; when the ark of the covenant that was kept open on a chariot for the procession tilted suddenly, Uzzah, forgetting that only the chief priest was allowed to touch the open ark, inadvertently extended his hand and touched it for supporting it. But he fell down and died on the spot. Now, it is not the tablets of Commandments, but the one who gave the Commandments is here in the hands of the priest at the altar with His heavenly and earthly glory.

Oh! Lord you descend from the heavens into his hands, when even an ordinary priest utters the words of consecration. You receive all who come to you. You go to all who call upon you. You go wherever the priest takes you. Oh merciful Lord, how many times you, the Almighty, have come into my sinful and unholy hands, tongue and heart (*Ibid 38,39*).

A few hours before his death, Blessed Chavara claimed in his death bed that he had never spoiled the grace received in baptism. If such a holy person confesses his lack of devotion and zeal at the altar with so much compunction and repentance, how much a priest who approaches the altar with diminished grace should repent over his sinfulness?

5. Priest Touches God

There are marked differences in the roles of the priest in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Though their mission is the same, what they handle is different. In the Old Testament they handled God's creation, while in the New Testament they accept God himself in their hands and hearts. During the Old Testament times, when mere goats and oxen were sacrificed, the priests who approached the sacrificial altar without proper devotion and respect, died on the spot and fire from above burnt them up

But at the altar you approach, it is not goat or ox that is sacrificed, nor is it the flesh of dove or pigeon; it is the only begotten Son of God, who uttered, 'let it be' and created everything and who has the power to annihilate all by just uttering 'let them not be'. It is Him you are holding everyday in your hands

and receiving in your heart. So, how holy and pure must be your hands, tongue and heart!

Oh my Lord! Who will dare to enter your altar now if you carry out justice as you did in the Old Testament times? But, You shower your blessing instead of manifesting your justice. Oh my dear brother, even if you and I go to the altar of the Lord in whatever state, He obeys us. Lord, You show no anger or ill-will even if we take You with tainted hands or place You on any type of tongue or in any impure heart and You still obey us, the priests! (*Ibid 51,52*).

6. Priest's Authority and Worthiness

Every priest must reflect on whether he became a priest on his merit and by his right. In your own family or among your friends, there were several better skilled and more talented persons. Leaving them all out, God has chosen you; it is a gift given to you. God has given his own position and authority to you. Therefore when the people see you, they say with folded hands, 'praise be to Jesus'. Even if you are quite young, the elderly people get up with respect and even hesitate to sit along with you. Is it not because they see another Christ in you? It is not because of your qualification that you get a residence close to the church but because people

recognize another Christ in you that you get a lot of privilege and respect in the society.

O Priest, what kinds of graces God fills you with! He gives spiritual insights and wisdom to deal with various situations, events and people. He saves you from many an impending danger. Still, O brother, when your life is considered, it seems as if you are going against His wishes or competing with Him. As God forgives you more and more, do you show more ungratefulness and increase the number of sins? If you remember the graces God has showered in your life and also the greatness of your call to serve God, how vigilant you should be to walk always in holiness and do good to all! (*Ibid* 52,53).

7. Everything in Priest's Life, the Gift of God

A priest should stand before God only with a humble and grateful heart. For, he has nothing but sins; everything else is God's gift for him. Such an awareness will make every priest humble, grateful and responsible. Blessed Chavara did a lot of things for the betterment of the society; but he made no personal claim on them. He firmly believed and confessed that it was through God's grace and mercy that he was born a human being. It is this attitude of gratitude that every priest should have. Chavara asks himself:

Was it due to my abilities that God has done all these through me? It is all His works. How did you come here? Who called you from home? How were you raised to priesthood? How did you enter the monastery? How did you become an instrument in forming the congregation? How were you made the Prior? How did you reach up to all these? Were you worthy of any of these? No, surely it was all God's will; his will was done and will be done (*Ibid 13*).

II

The true face of a Priest

A priest who is the representative of Christ cannot have two different faces. A priest should try not to commit even small sins as he represents Christ who sacrificed himself for the reparation of sins. It should be his unique trait that though he is in the world, he is never of the world. Therefore, he should be an example in facing death boldly as Jesus did and entered into unending life through death. As he administers the sacraments for others, he also needs to be sanctified by the same sacraments. Thus a priest shall not have a face different from Jesus Christ. Only then can a priest fully respond to his special call without reconciling to sin and worldliness.

1. A Priest Must Fear Even the Venial Sins

In Blessed Chavara's *Meditation Notes on Mortal sin* he says that there should be no distinction between mortal and venial sin for a priest. He is afraid that the distinction is a big trap.

If a priest who is chosen to represent Jesus Christ on earth, loves God sincerely, how can he make a distinction between mortal and venial sins and act against Him? He should not commit even a small sin; that is the spirit of true love (*ibid* 57,58).

Listen to the words of St. Anslem. What is small sin according to you? When you turn against your creator and the almighty God, will it be a small or venial sin? St. Teresa of Avila says: It would have been more beneficial for a priest to fear a venial sin rather than a Satan. For, a priest's venial sin causes more harm to him than the harm done by all the Satans in the hell. In her vision of the hell she saw a few priests there. There were worms on their foreheads. When she enquired about it, she was told: 'Some of us started with the venial sins of the priests; some others made it a habit for them; still some others were instrumental in draining their spiritual power through these venial sins; and the rest really ruined them.

Oh priestly soul, don't you understand the seriousness of the venial sins that you do willingly and without fear? Oh dear loving friend, you are living in the house of God enjoying the privileges given by God; you owe your well-being to Him. You are chosen by the blood of Christ. Will it be right

to think that your venial sin and that of an uneducated lay person will be punished in the same measure? (*Ibid.* 59)

Listen to what St. Gregory the Great says: Think of a great king; will he ever consider the stain on the dress of a servant who looks after his horse and that on the dress of his wife or children in the same way?. Is there not a difference between the lapses of a layman and the shortcomings of a priest? So, you should consider as a grave matter even a small decline in the love of God, which is the ornamental dress of a priest.

St. Chrysostom, the great spiritual master, writes thus: A priest must fear the venial sin more than the mortal sin. For, if he commits a mortal sin, he will deeply repent on it with fear and confess it immediately. But since you may not consider the smaller sins as serious, you may unknowingly lose the grace of God.

Along with St. Dionysius, Blessed Chavara recalls: God, showing anger on even the small sins of the ministers in the Old Testament, who were offering mere goats and bulls, sent fire from above and destroyed some and let others be devoured by the earth ripped apart. Respected brother, remember, how noble is the altar you approach to offer the daily mass and what you offer on the altar is the

precious body of Jesus Christ himself! Oh priest, what else does it remind you but your exalted position and the total purity you need to maintain? As a priest, pastor of souls and minister of God, you have a responsibility to pray and offer holy sacrifice so that God's anger is slowed down and his displeasure is removed from the sinners. So, respected brother, remember that even small sins and habitual failures do not befit your priestly life (*Ibid.* 60).

2. To be Close to God or to the World?

Blessed Chavara through his meditation entitled the 'Works of Two Priests' reflects on two different attitudes in priestly life regarding God and World. As Jesus has instructed, one cannot love them both. He asks the priests:

For whom do you work? Whose service are you doing? Your state is really pitiable. Oh brother, do you think that you can lead a life neither virtuous nor sinless, serving both God and the world? Are you thinking of a mediocre life? Is there a third way of neither doing good work nor leading to sinful ways? One day you lead a virtuous life and the next day you get involved in worldly pleasures? Both cannot go together. You cannot serve two masters at the same time.

In the morning you offered mass devoutly and received communion and praised Jesus. When you come out of the church do you seek the worldly respect and pleasures? Oh my dear priest, is this the true life intended for you? Why do you involve in worldly talk without giving importance to your responsibilities, your status in life and nobility? You do not think about the lives of others entrusted to you; you spent time without due respect for priestly life. Do you divide your heart, one half for God and the other half for the world? (*Ibid 61*).

3. Death of an Impious Priest

Blessed Chavara was aware of the verse, 'what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose one's own soul'. Hence, preparing a person for a happy death was considered a very important priestly duty. When Blessed Chavara felt that his bodily health was deteriorating he himself started to prepare for his imminent death. He believed that even the sinners could get a peaceful death, if they get an opportunity for repentance. So, he formed a voluntary organization called 'Association for Happy Death' (*Nanmarana Sabha*), to prepare the old, the abandoned and the sick for a happy death. He wrote a dirge for singing at home at the death of a person; its main theme is that though the world, body and false pride are ever with us from

birth to death, they do not accompany a dead person. The only thing that accompanies you after death is the good deeds you have done on earth. With that visa you can go to eternity with joy and courage. Through this dirge Blessed Chavara is reminding everyone on how to prepare for a happy death.

Blessed Chavara has visualized the fearful scene of the death of a priest devoid of devotion and zeal for the soul. To understand its seriousness he exhorts that every priest must meditate on the final moments of death seriously in order to come out of spiritual lethargy and indifference.

Oh my dear soul who is doing the priestly ministry, reflect and meditate on death! When you hear that the last moments are approaching, you look around with fearful eyes; you become utterly uncomfortable by headache, vomiting, anxiety and sorrow; your eyes become swollen and you sweat all over the body. You do not get any relief by turning to one side or to the other. The sorrow, fear and anxiety that emerge from inside is far greater than the external discomforts. As a flash all the bad things you have done come before your very eyes; the evil thoughts that came to your mind from childhood up to the present, the eyes that were looking at immodest sights, the thoughts that

provoked greed, the evil talk that you made, the scandals that were caused by your talk and the sins that you did knowingly will crop up with all their strength and cruelty. Besides, the laziness you have shown in not saying the canonical prayers and other devotional prayers, the masses you said without due preparation and devotion - all these create a fearful atmosphere before the just throne of the Almighty. **Death is really fearful!** (*Ibid 64, 65*)

The priest is given a lot of privileges: he is saved by the precious blood of Christ; he is chosen without looking into his merits or worthiness. He is given a lot of graces; he is sheltered in the church compound away from the ordinary sinful situations; he is given the special help of the saints, angels and the Blessed Virgin Mary; he is given all authority to purify his own and others' souls; how can such a priest be fearful at the time of his own death? Is it not quite strange?

4. Priest Offers and Receives the Sacraments

Christians participate in the life of Christ by receiving the sacraments. It is through the priestly ministry this sharing takes place in the Church. So the priest is not merely the one who offers sacraments to the people of God but also the one who receives the sacraments to get identified with Jesus Christ. Thus the priest has two duties: he has to become another Christ to offer

the sacraments; he has to become like the people of God to receive the sacraments. Blessed Chavara reminds the priests that these two roles are important for a priest.

God has entrusted you with the responsibility of ministering the sacraments. At the same time you should think about how responsible you are in going for confession and in receiving communion with due devotion and sanctity; then only you will be able to make others come prepared and receive them worthily. What results do you get from your sacramental life? You reflect about this: Jesus is ready to help you always; ready to set you free from the spiritual fetters on you , he is ever ready to comfort you in sorrow; he is residing in your heart day and night and he is waiting for you. To cure your wounds and to cleanse you he gives you chance through the sacrament of reconciliation. He provides you with the strengthening food of holy Eucharist so as not to fall again, to give you enough strength to fight the enemies. Yet, you have received these sacraments without enthusiasm; even when you receive, you were doing it without due preparation, without going for confession, devoid of divine love. Oh my priest, what have you gained from the confessions and communions you received so far? (*Ibid.* 56)

III

Priest's sources of spiritual power

Blessed Chavara presents eight items as empowering resources of a priest. They are: meditation, inspirational books, spiritual guide, graceful moments, examination of conscience, Word of God, Church and the Blessed Virgin Mary. He is sure that if all these resources are used, every priest will be a saint.

1. Meditation That Reflects Real Life

Meditation is conversation with God; it is the inner call given by God and man's response to it. This response is nothing but the decisions one takes as one looks at the face of the incarnate Word and the changes one makes as they are evoked in him. Daily meditation and annual retreat are the main opportunities for such conversations with God. God is calling us in each meditation; it is a precious time to talk to him.

Meditation is a means for the priest to give shape to one's life, to evaluate the past, to discern the right and wrong, to find out manifestations of one's selfishness, to discover what God wants him to do now, to reflect on the nobility of the vocation and its pitfalls, to move towards the union with God and thus to grow in holiness. A priest must know that if he is not meditating, it will be almost impossible for him to lead a faithful life. Each priest is another Christ in front of the people of God; he has to follow Jesus who took time to pray alone even in the midst of the crowd. The praying Jesus must inspire the priest to be prayerful.

Meditation is a time of call by God. At this time God the Father comes to the priest extending His loving hands to embrace him. How great it will be if you immerse yourself in the solitude and silence of the meditation! If you can express your love towards God, how great will it be! Then you will be receiving great gifts from Him. If you now waste the precious moments in which God was ready to come to your heart, who knows whether it was the last chance you had to talk to Him? (Ibid 53).

2. Inspirational Books

Blessed Chavara got the inspiration for collecting and reading good books from his seminary Rector. At a time when there were no printed books in Malayalam, his *Guru*, Fr. Thomas Palackal, was collecting Malayalam manuscripts and also translating Tamil books into Malayalam; and Bro. Chavara used to help him in this. So, he knew that only knowledgeable priests would be able to guide others well. Therefore he insisted that priests should be interested in reading good books and growing in knowledge.

Chavara used to instruct the ordinary people that reading bad books is like keeping fire near a stack of hay; and its meaning should be clear to the priests too. He directed that they should read good books and get enlightened and empowered to take the right path in life. This would also help the priest to prepare his sermon and enlighten the people of God. Instead if he spends his time in useless matters, it would be as if keeping the hay of vocation and the fire of temptations together. So, he exhorts:

The following lesson should be kept in mind by all. Reading of good books is the best means of growing in holiness and maintaining the spiritual heights without falling down. Hence a priest should find some time to read good books; there is no point in spending time in useless conversations. There are two types of reading; one, to know the new trends and get fresh news from the society; second, the reading of spiritual books, to know the history of salvation, lives of saints and so on. The first type seeks temporary knowledge and joy. The second is the best means to grow in holiness. Thus if one is interested in reading, he will be led to meditation in solitude. And then Jesus will come and speak to him during the meditation (*Chavarā, Letters, 1982, 116*).

3. The Spiritual Masters

Spiritual Masters are sources of spiritual power for priestly life. They have a major role to play in helping the individuals become saints. The voice of the Spiritual Master is the voice of God placed in front of us. Those who seek their guidance will not go astray. The spiritual guides are the best judges to know the

tendencies of the mind, especially to discern the power of the dark forces and the challenges to vocation; you should approach them regularly and at the critical junctures of life. It is very risky if a priest does not have a Spiritual Master to open up his personal life and seek expert guidance. During Chavara's seminary life, his rector himself was his Spiritual Master. Till the death of Fr. Palackal, Chavara was seeking spiritual guidance from him. When Chavara was fifty-five years old, it was in his presence that the Italian missionary, Fr. Leopold, was ordained priest; Fr. Leopold was just twenty-four years old; such a junior priest was chosen as the Spiritual Master by Blessed Chavara during his final years, while he was residing in the same house. Today people look for anonymity and unknown persons to make a confession; Blessed Chavara's example is a challenge for us. If the lives of saints are examined, it would be discovered that all of them had Spiritual Masters to lead them and guide them in holiness. A Spiritual Master is essential in every priest's life.

4. Examination of Conscience for Discernment

Blessed Chavara's meditative examination of conscience helped him immensely in his growth in spiritual life, gave him firm foundation in spiritual life, helped him do the best in his priestly ministry and grow in holiness and simplicity. He always measured his performance on what he is and what he is expected to be. With this norm, he always reflected upon what he was doing. In such reflections, for him, the prodigal son was always a symbol of going back to the beloved father at all times.

In order to discover the meaning of his vocation, Blessed Chavara internalized the traits of the son in his father's house. As son, he inherited a share in the patrimony of God the Father and he was a minister of the same. But, if he did not do what God expected from him, he felt like the prodigal son, walking away from God and wasting the wealth of the Father. He saw within himself the tendencies of the prodigal son, wasting the time and energy given by the Father. But, a prodigal son has to return to the home of the Father.

For this, one should become aware of his present condition and should have a repentant heart. In order to have this great gift of repentance, Chavara used to seek the help of Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, St. Teresa of Avila, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Egypt, Margaret of Cortona and others.

By analysing the condition of the prodigal son Blessed Chavara leads us into two kinds of discernments: first, the realization is that he cannot demean the priesthood to the level of the servants of the house; second, even if one is down and depressed, the Father is merciful and generous. Hence one can always return to God just as to a loving Father.

Quoting St. Bernard, Chavara inspires us to keep the very purpose of priesthood before our eyes. St. Bernard used to ask very often 'Bernard, Bernard, what has God called you for? What are you doing now?' If the priests make this return to the very original purpose of their vocation periodically at least, they will not fall into pits of temptations and lose their vocation.

Blessed Chavara recalls the ample opportunities a priest gets for renewal and revitalization of life.

How many times God has called you through the words of your spiritual guide and superiors to renew your life! Oh dear priest, the Lord residing in your heart reminds you to go for confession once in a week, and meditate daily for some time and make the daily examination of conscience. You have promised to read good books in order to grow in holiness. How can you be a good priest if you do not take care of these from time to time? When you get a sound thought you do not listen to the inner voice but you are taken up by the voice of the world; to you the Holy Spirit says: you are neither cold or hot, so I will vomit you from my mouth

(Chavara, Dhyana Sallapangal, 62).

Oh my great soul what are you doing now? Where do you go now? What will you be by this life? Where will you reach? One who walks to reach a destination will always check whether he is heading towards the right direction? So too you have to examine whether you are heading to the eternity or not, and take necessary steps for correcting the deviations *(Ibid 49, 50).*

5. The Life-giving Word of God

Probably, the most important book written by Blessed Chavara is the *Compunction of the Soul*. It is the story of the pilgrimage of his own soul. In it, he narrates the life of Christ and Blessed Virgin Mary and portrays the place of God in his personal life. For Chavara, the Word of God was spiritual food and drink just like the holy Eucharist.

Oh my Lord what do I have except what you have given me? You are the source of goodness and bliss. Without you how can I live; you are the source of my existence, my love. You are my breath, my food and drink. Where else shall I find comfort?

(Chavara, Atmanutapam, 1981, 10).

For Blessed Chavara the Word of God and the Bread of God were the same. The church was the source of spiritual power for Chavara; because it is from the altar the Word is given and on the altar through the words of consecration, the Bread is transformed into the body of Christ. The priest gives the Lord to the people through word and holy Eucharist and also keeps him

in his heart. Blessed Chavara's spirituality and its message, which he gave others were based not merely on the thoughts that came to his mind, but on the thoughts blended with the Word which was his very food and drink. Since they were integrated with the Word, they gave solid hope and comfort to the listeners.

As there was no Bible in Malayalam at that time, Chavara was using the Syriac Bible. He read the Bible daily and his sermons, instructions, meditation notes, letters and chronicle were laced with the Word of God. Hence he could really say that the Word of God was his food and drink, comfort and hope.

A faithful minister of the Word should be wedded to the Word of God. A priest who depends on other stories and gives less of the Word of God may not have deeper impact in the listeners. One of the positive effects of today's charismatic renewal is the realization that the Word of God is very active and is capable of bringing all people to Jesus. As we know, the practice of breaking the Word of God through sermon after the reading of the Gospel was, from the beginning of the

Church, a source for the common people to know the Word. At a time when the annual retreats were not common in Kerala, it was through the breaking of the Word that the people were deepened in faith and guided in spirituality. The priest has a bounden duty to break the Word of God for the spiritual welfare of the souls just as he breaks the bread and distributes in holy communion. A priest seriously errs if he lapses in this duty.

6. Favourable Time to Grow

Chavara reminds us that if one meditates upon the favourable situation God has provided for a priest, one will not lose the call to vocation.

Do not think that the call to priesthood is a decision you took alone. There are a lot of people connected with it. For instance, who gave you the special skills like the memory power, intelligence and good will? God has showered all these to you freely and generously through the cooperation of others..

God has brought you from sinful situations and given residence to you close to the church. Having no family and its concerns, you are getting more

opportunity for a life of devotion. You are blessed with companions who have received the same vocation and also the spiritual masters. Good spiritual books are at your disposal from the seminary time onwards. Enough opportunities are provided for you to receive the sacraments. These facilities are given to you not due to your birth in a Christian family; it is a sign of the special love of Jesus towards you, his concern and protection giving you a sense of security to follow the divine path (*Chavara, Dhyana Sallapangal, 56*).

7. The Mother Church

Chavara recalls the attention of a mother towards her baby: a mother gives milk to the baby even by awakening it from sleep, since it is incapable of showing hunger and thirst. Chavara was convinced that the mother church takes care of her children in the same way. The children are obliged to love and serve such a selfless mother church. They are also obliged to make known the mission of the mother church to everyone. Blessed Chavara obeys the church and shows his faithfulness at all times. He prays in the following way:

I bow to you God the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Whatever the church believes and teaches, I do believe; Deepen and increase my faith (*Ibid 70, 71*).

8. Blessed Virgin Mary

Chavara was dedicated to Blessed Virgin Mary at a tender age. His own mother had offered him to the blessed Mother and made him completely belonging to her. He offered not only himself but also his congregation to the immaculate Mother Mary. He took Blessed Virgin Mary as the mother and protector of priests. Chavara makes a prayer for priests in front of Blessed Virgin Mary pleading to her to do the same to every priest as she did to Jesus. A priest's great resource is to rely in the Mother and offer himself through her to Jesus Christ.

Prayer of Blessed Chavara to Jesus through Blessed Virgin Mary

Oh my Jesus, bless me and be kind to me. You are angry with me and your anger is just indeed. Now do not look upon our sins but turn your eyes to

your Mother Mary. Have mercy on us in memory of the tears she shed for us, the lips that heaved a sigh for us, and the heart that was pierced for our sake. It is on this immaculate heart of Mary that you leaned as a babe and it is the heart that fondled you in death. Her lips planted many a kiss to wipe away the blood of your wounds. Her holy eyes thrilled you in your infancy. Her tears washed away your blood-stained body. Bearing in mind those blessed eyes, tender heart and lips of your Mother, O my Jesus, be kind to us. Oh my Jesus, Mary's heart is beating for us. Her lips are moving with her incessant prayers for us. She turns those blessed eyes towards you and towards us. Oh Jesus, bless us through your beloved Mother

(original at Mannanam Archives).

IV

Priest: Replica of the good shepherd

Priesthood is full of challenges. One has to swim against the currents to hold fast to the noble values in priestly life. One cannot make compromises with the love of God or of neighbour and work for selfish goals. Priest has to make sacrifices and undergo sufferings for holding on to the values of priesthood. In this, the priest's supreme model is Jesus, the Good Shepherd. He should know his own sheep, go after those sheep who wander around without a shepherd, go in search of the lost sheep and finally sacrifice his life for them. The Good Shepherd is always vigilant about the dangerous enemies who may try to defeat him and take away his sheep.

A priest must have the generosity to love even the enemies; only then will he be able to serve others. He must be merciful too as Jesus was. He is chosen to be all for all. Chavara was convinced of this belongingness

to all. Hence he tried to internalize the attitude of the Good Shepherd in his life. Below are given some instances from the life of Blessed Chavara, which manifest the good shepherd in him:

1. A Priest Who Showers the Forgiving Love on Others

According to the tradition in the Syrian Church, it was the parish *yogam* (parish council) that used to issue a letter of nomination (*desakkuri*), if someone wanted to enter the seminary. It indicated that the parish community was satisfied with candidate and was ready to support him. In case there was a need, the parish supported the candidate, giving a portion of the parish collection. There were also customs like reception at home and in the parish after the first minor order and the priestly ordination. It was usually the family members who took leadership in such celebrations. All others in the parish joined in the ceremonies and made them very solemn.

After receiving the first minor order, Chavara came to his parish and got ready for the reception at home and in the parish church. The relatives had invited the parish priest, the members of the *yogam* and relatives. But only a few relatives and parish council members turned

up to take part in the ceremonies and dinner. The family members felt that there was something wrong somewhere. All those who came to the family proceeded with Chavara to the parish church. But at the boat-jetty of the parish, mud had been heaped along the bank making it impossible for them to get out. Moreover, the parish priest had locked the church and disappeared. The relatives were disappointed and confused. The mother-church of Chennamkari (local parish church) was the Kallurkad church, which was quite far away; hence it was practically impossible to hold the reception there. The relatives were at a loss to save the shameful situation. Finally, the parish priest of Mar Sleeva Church at Alleppey received Chavara solemnly and not only showed his generosity but also solved the problem for all.

The reason for the non-cooperation of the parish council and the vicar was later found out by the family. When Kuriakose had joined the seminary, the letter of the parish council had not been sought by the family; he was admitted by the Rector, Fr. Thomas Palackal, directly and personally. It was not a deliberate omission on the part of the family; they just forgot about the letter of nomination from the *yogam*, since Kuriakose was admitted directly by Fr. Palackal. At the time of the reception, the parish council wanted to assert its

authority and teach a lesson. And Chavara had to pass through very painful time due to this, but he accepted this humiliation. Not only that; after the reception at Mar Sleeva Church, Chavara came back to the parish church, met the Vicar and spent the night in the parish rectory. Chavara believed that the anger and anguish that may rise in the heart of a priest must not last long even up to the sunset. A priest should forgive others and get reconciled with everyone. Later, when the bishop of Verapoly gave a statue as a present to Chavara, he gave it to the Chennamkari parish as a sign of his love for the parish. Even today it remains in the middle of the Chennamkari church. A priest must always forgive and love others; that is the lesson we get from this incident in the life of Blessed Chavara.

2. A Priest, Merciful to Others

Confessional is an important place for exercising the priestly ministry. Here the priest manifests the mercy of Jesus, his patience, generosity and love. The sinners get reconciled with God and change the course of their lives through the sacrament of reconciliation. Fr. Varkey Parappurath narrates an incident in his book on the history of the congregation. There was a mentally unstable scholastic in the Koonammavu novitiate. His name was Jacob Palakunnel. Once he went to Fr.

Chavara for confession. The scholastic knelt down before Fr. Chavara and wanted to clear a doubt before making the confession. Mentally unstable as he was, he asked Chavara whether the latter was baptized or not. Chavara kept his cool and lovingly exhorted him. As Chavara was the superior of the scholastic, he also showed his love and understanding towards him. Later, because of Chavara's continued patience and exhortations, the scholastic became quite normal after some time, was ordained priest and led a very zealous life in the Congregation. A priest at the confessional is not merely the one who absolves sins, he should also be a good spiritual guide showing the right direction in life.

Fr. Louis OCD of Manjummel has written the following account about Blessed Chavara: 'He was my confessor for many years. At the confessional he used to give very good exhortations; they were really valuable and guided my life'.

Blessed Chavara inspires us with the good qualities a priest needs to have at the confessional. Many priests find it difficult to go to the confessional; some have difficulty in understanding the sinners and giving them necessary direction in life; so, they just give the absolution and dismiss them. Do we have the attitude of the Good Shepherd who went about searching for the lost sheep?

3. A Priest with Words of Authority

The Jews commented about Jesus that he was speaking as one having authority. They felt his authority because Jesus lived his life according to his word. There was no gap between his word and deed. When we look into the life of Blessed Chavara we see the authenticity of his words matched with the deed. Because of this authenticity and personal authority, his was the last word to solve many a problem of priests, laity or even members of other religions. Consider this incident: the parish at Aanakkal had fallen into the Roccas schism and later returned to the Catholic fold. But, the parishioners were split due to the support of Padroado fathers. It was through the good efforts of Chavara they all came back to the Catholic Church and became united. The groups, unable to solve the issues of contention, had agreed to call Fr. Chavara and accepted that his would be the final decision, binding on them all. Chavara came from Koonammavu to the Aanakkal church and listened to both sides keenly. His decision was accepted by both parties and thus both the Padroados and schismatics came back to the Church. Incidentally, this was Chavara's last long journey before his death in 1871.

The bishop of Verapoly entrusted Fr. Chavara with the responsibility of settling the contentious issues in the

parishes. Generally the bishop used to abide by the suggestions and recommendations given by Fr. Chavara.

Fr. Louis of Manjummel has described an event in the following way: “The priests had very high respect for Fr. Chavara like that towards a bishop. He was constantly in touch with the Syrian priests. One day he was going to a church near south Pallipuram. I was accompanying him. On the way in a house the parish priest was speaking aloud scolding the family members. Fr. Chavara heard it and realized that it was the vicar’s own house. Then Chavara called out saying: “Hello Father, let the members settle their matters, you come along”. The vicar realized that it was the voice of Fr. Chavara, and he came out immediately and joined with Fr. Chavara without any word of explanation. He was in the church until our departure” (original at Mannanam archives).

The incident shows the authority, Chavara’s words had. How does a priest get this authority? The priest should give high priority and value to his own vocation. If his life is an authentic manifestation of his vocation, his priestly authority will be widely recognized by others. Though a priest is from a family, if he interferes too much in the activities or financial transactions of his family, the priest’s authority will be ignored even in his own family and among his relatives.

Conclusion

In this small booklet, *Guidelines for Priests*, I have drawn the qualities of an ideal priest through the words of Blessed Chavara under the headings: the Greatness of Priesthood, The True Face of a Priest, Priest's Sources of Spiritual Power and Priest: A Replica of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. I hope that in this book every priest and every candidate for priesthood can find enough guidelines for their spiritual renewal especially in this year for priests.

I believe that even though Blessed Chavara was a priest of the nineteenth century India, he can even now enrich the spiritual renewal of the priests of the twenty-first century through his exemplary life and contributions. I do not find anyone else equal to Blessed Chavara in India, who could be placed before the priests in India as an ideal in priestly life.

BLESSED CHAVARA'S PIONEERING SERVICES

1. With Fathers Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, founded the First Indian Religious Congregation for Men (CMI) - 1831
2. Popularized the Sunday Homilies and Retreats for Priests and Laity in the Kerala Church - 1831
3. Established the First Syro-Malabar Common Seminary at Mannanam (which continued up to 1894 and then got amalgamated to Puthenpally Seminary) - 1833
4. Introduced 'the Way of the Cross' in the Kerala Church from Mannanam - 1838
5. Served as the appointed *Malpan* and examiner of Seminarians and was authorized to give patents to the newly ordained to hear confessions and to preach in the Churches - 1844
6. Founded the First Press and Publishing House of the Syro-Malabar Church at Mannanam - 1846
7. Founded the First Sanskrit School in the Kerala Church at Mannanam - 1846
8. Started the First Syro-Malabar Catechumenate at Mannanam - 1853
9. He was the first to give the name 'Servants of Mary Immaculate' for his Congregation in the Church after the proclamation of Bl. V. Mary's Immaculate Conception as a doctrine of the Church - 1855
10. The First Vicar General after the time of Archdeacons in the Syro-Malabar Church - 1861
11. Took the leadership in protecting the Syro-Malabar Church from the intruder Bishop Roccas - 1861

12. The author of the First Malayalam Narrative Poem-*Anasthasyaude Rakthasakshyam* - 1862
13. With the help of Bishop Bernardin OCD, popularized the Month of May devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary - 1864
14. Implemented the idea 'A School for a Church', in the Kerala Church while he was the Vicar General - 1864
15. Reformer of the Divine Office, Liturgical Rubrics, Calendar etc; in the Malabar Church - 1862-1869
16. With Fr. Leopold OCD, an Italian Missionary, founded the First Indian Religious Congregation for Women at Koonammavu in the Kerala Church - 1866
17. Started the 40 Hours' Adoration in the Kerala Church - 1866
18. With Fr. Leopold OCD started the first boarding house and school for girls at Koonammavu in the Kerala Church - 1868
19. Prepared the first instruction manual, 'A Testament of a Good Father' for the Christian families of Kerala, may be first of its kind in the whole Church - 1868
20. Founded the first lay organization the 'Confraternity of St. Joseph for a Happy Death' - 1869
21. Founded the First Home of Charity, *Upavisala*, for the sick, old and destitute of Kerala - 1869
22. Initiated the Catholic re-union movement of the 19th century - 1869
23. The Church historian of the Kerala Church of the 19th century - 1805 - 1871
24. The First Indian declared as the Blessed in the Church - 1986
25. Considering his unique services for the country, Government of India released a postal stamp in honour of Blessed Chavara - 1987



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(A book of documentation)

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