

FOUNDER OF THE WOMEN TOCD (CMC AND CTC) IN KERALA: MOTHER ELISWA OR SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA?

Fr. Saju Chackalackal CMI

1. Introduction

There is a general perception that history does not consist exclusively of objective facts but *a reading* of the facts and events from the perspectives adopted by the one who casts or recasts historical events. A better perception of the development of any human initiative and project, therefore, would be facilitated by a comprehensive reading of different historical narratives offered by different historians and their varying sequencing and interpretations. Even then the selection of certain events at the conscious exclusion of some others would turn out to be a questionable practice. Moreover, if attempts are made to rewrite history by twisting the facts for the establishment of a subsequently perceived need of an individual or a community, it may engender falsification of historical truths, which, by any scientific standard, is to be out-rightly rejected. In such instances, it is a necessity that truth must be reinstated for the advantage of the larger society.

One such situation has come about in the recent past, especially in connection with the death centenary of the Servant of God Mother Eliswa, who is purported to be the foundress of the Women TOCD, the first indigenous religious congregation in Kerala, which later got bifurcated into CMC and CTC. Without denying the fact that Mother Eliswa was a devout religious person and the first religious sister to be formally accepted as the member of the Women TOCD, on 13 February 1866, and the first appointed superior of the newly constituted religious community of sisters, a series of recent claims made by some people, including the members of the CTC Congregation, especially spearheaded by Sr. Sucey Kinattungal CTC,¹ that Mother Eliswa, therefore, is the foundress of both the CMC and CTC congregations seem to be farfetched and untruthful. This article is an attempt to look at claims made by the CTC and place them against the available earliest documents in order to

¹Sr. Sucey Kinattungal CTC defended a doctoral dissertation in the Faculty of Church History at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, which was subsequently published with the title *Servant of God Mother Eliswa, the Foundress of TOCD (CTC and CMC) for Women: A Critical Study of the History of Foundation (1866-1913)*, Cochin: Kerala Latin History Association, 2010. As this text does not do justice to the documents available in the public domain, but endorses a totally different position, contrary to the positions hitherto held both by the CMC Congregation and CTC (in the latter case, at least till 2011, according to the then official website of the CTC), without substantiating it with historical facts or justifiable historical arguments, the truth of the claim that Mother Eliswa is the foundress of the Women TOCD in Kerala cannot be granted. As the above work seems to build up its invalid argument based on very late documents, but bypassing all the available documents, especially with regard to those facts related to the person and contributions of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a subsequent study was published in 2012, challenging the position of Sr. Sucey, by a team of experts, headed by Prof. Dr. Paul Kalluveetil CMI, titled *An Unscientific Scientific Work! A Critical Appraisal of Dr. Sr. Sucey Kinattungal's Work, Servant of God Mother Eliswa, the Foundress of TOCD (CTC and CMC) for Women*. The first volume focuses on the "unscientific factors in methodology and presentation" of Sr. Sucey's work; the second volume, consisting of xxxiv + 720 pages, titled *Women TOCD: Facts versus Fabrications*, authored by Paul Kalluveetil, Sophy Rose, Maria Anto and Mareena (Aluva: CMC Publications, 2013), offers a thorough and critical analysis of the documents about the foundation of the Women TOCD before the community was divided in 1890 along the lines of the Rites. In an attempt to clear the doubts concerning the sources cited by different authors, this book makes a praiseworthy attempt not only to offer original documents and their English translations, but also to objectively evaluate a number of false claims made by different individuals at various stages in propagating mistaken perceptions and judgements concerning the persons and events related to the foundation of the Women TOCD in Kerala.

facilitate a judgment as to whether Mother Eliswa could be qualified as the foundress of the Women TOCD. As the documentary evidence is completely against the affirmations of the CTC, the authors confirm that Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara is the founder of the Women TOCD.

2. Confusing Claims on the Foundation of Women TOCD

Although the new enthusiasm of some members of the Church in Kerala to project Mother Eliswa as the foundress is understandable from the alleged and unjustifiable interests of some people, the conspicuous absence of any mention of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara from all such documentations and publicity materials seems to be resulting from an un-Christian conspiracy attempting to establish untruth as *the* truth.² Such an attempt needs to be curbed at its inception; lest, it would do greater damage by spreading the untruthful version of the foundation of Women TOCD in Kerala instead of the facts and historically true records that are available and accessible to us in the authentic documents.

The newly emerging literature projecting Mother Eliswa as the foundress of the Women TOCD and, subsequently of CMC and CTC, seems to be originating from a misunderstanding about foundation and founder. The facts that Mother Eliswa was the first member and the first appointed superior of the Women TOCD, which came into existence on 13 February 1866, are unquestionable. However, these facts do not warrant an automatic affirmation that, therefore, Mother Eliswa is the foundress of the Women TOCD.³ In order to clear the wood, we need clarity on who could be qualified as a founder. Although available canonical literature may not provide us with very specific directives in identifying a founder or foundress, various studies offer us clarity on the matter.

For example, experts like John M. Lozano, Guiseppa Damizia, and George Nedungatt indicate that foundation of a religious community involves, in many instances, a long, complex, and arduous process.⁴ Many dimensions and dynamics are to be taken into account in order to judiciously conclude about the person/s responsible for the foundation of a religious congregation. First of all, although there may be one specific historical event that could be identified as the juridical starting point of a community, in many instances, there involves a *historical process* in conceiving and shaping a new religious community, its

²Such an attempt could be found in an article in the *L'Osservatore Romano*, an official publication organ of the Catholic Church. See an unsigned article titled "Servant of God Mother Eliswa: Centenary of Death of the First Religious Sister from Kerala," Wednesday, 3 July 2013 (Number 27), page 10.

³The recent attempts to conceive and project Mother Eliswa as the foundress seem to have their origins in a meeting of the General Council of the CTC with Rev. Dr. Augustine Mulloor OCD in 1999. A first person narrative on this meeting is offered in a "Foreword" by Fr. Mulloor himself to an edited volume titled *Mother Eliswa: Foundress and Mystic* (edited by Dr. Sr. Gracious CTC, Edappally, Kerala: Teresian Carmel Publications, 2005). In spite of the hitherto (i.e., till 1999) untraceable status of foundress attributed to Mother Eliswa, the process for which seems to have begun at the suggestion of Fr. Mulloor, he offers an insight into the historical facts, although many associated with the CTC sisters seem to negate it in their recent concerted efforts to enthrone Mother Eliswa as the foundress of the Women TOCD. He wrote in the above-mentioned "Foreword": "The present realities should not be justified on the basis of convenient reinterpretations and manipulations of the past historical facts. We must accept the present, respect the past and love the future with hope and courage." The entire project of presenting Mother Eliswa as the foundress revolves around convenient reinterpretations and manipulations of the historical facts that are available in the public domain, as it would become clearer in the subsequent paragraphs of this article.

⁴See George Nedungatt, "Who Founded the Congregation of the Holy Family?" *Charity Blossoms* 18, 2 (December 1997), 5-48. This article was originally published under the title "Typology of Founders," *Commentarium pro Religiosis et Missionariis* 79 (1998), 95-119.

charism, lifestyle and mission. From this perspective, confusion about the basic role played by the founder or foundress might lead to the confused and confusing claim that Mother Eliswa is the foundress of the Women TOCD; naturally, as it is obvious from a set of recently published propaganda materials both in online space and print media, any attempt on the part of those who have such a vested interest would move in the direction of totally eclipsing the role played by Saint Chavara. However, as it is contrary to the truth, such claims made by any party must be purged and corrected and truth must be reinstated both in the private and public arena.

3. Sources on the Foundation of Women TOCD and the Role of Saint Chavara

In the case of the foundation of the Women TOCD in Kerala, the most reliable sources are the Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent and that of the Chronicles of Mannanam Monastery, both of which have rather elaborate narratives not only on 13 February 1866, but also of the process that led to this historical event and the subsequent constitution of the first TOCD religious community for women. In fact, we see the starting of this convent as an event in the life of the Catholic Church in Kerala, without ascribing it either to Latin Church or Syro-Malabar Church, as the cherished dream of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara was not to start a community in exclusivity, but a common community that would go beyond the boundaries of any *sui iuris* church. It is unfair if the present generation is intent on proving that the events on 13 February 1866 as the beginning of a Latin initiative to start indigenous religious life for women in India. If the latter is insisted upon, the intentions seem to be suspicious, especially when the available historical facts are kept away from the public perception, and unjustifiably selective or partial truths are taken as the source of *prejudiced* and *preconceived* conclusions.

Although page 3 in the Chronicles of Koonammavu convent, written by Saint Chavara in his own handwriting, speaks about the decision of Eliswa and Anna to dedicate them completely and perpetually by their chaste living, which has been communicated to Fr. Leopold Beccaro, their confessor, nowhere in the available documents of the time or any of the contemporaries speak or conceive of Mother Eliswa as the source of inspiration or the person behind the conception of this first community of sisters leading a devout life under the banner of TOCD. However, the same document and other corroborating sources⁵ propose a long cherished dream and ardent desire of Saint Chavara to establish a community of religious women who would lead a devout religious life. The goal of establishing a convent was said to have motivated Saint Chavara after a monastery for men was established in 1831 in Mannanam, especially as there was no chance for women to lead a life of complete dedication through the practice of perfect chastity. According to Saint

⁵In the Chronicles of Mannanam Monastery, Saint Chavara wrote it in 1866-1867 in connection with the beginning of religious life for women at Koonammavu, when the construction of the *Bamboo-mat convent* was in progress: "Although it seemed to be an impossible dream, now it seems that God has willed to accomplish the project of a convent for nuns, for which I had deeply desired and intensely prayed" (volume 2, page 72 [126 in 1981 edition]). This statement reflects the ardent desire and long but patient waiting and, at the same time, his satisfaction in seeing that his long-awaited dream is about to be fulfilled. Fr. Leopold stated in his *Short Biography of Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (1871): "he so longed to establish for the girls of Malayalam an abode of virtues and a convent for learning religious matters..." Fr. Varkey Parappuram, in his *Chronicles* [manuscript, page 1424], recorded the words of Fr. Leopold, after the funeral of Saint Chavara, about the vital role the latter had played in founding the congregation for women: "Fr. Leopold also shared their feelings and extolled the good things the deceased had done. He specially recollected that it was because of him [Fr. Chavara] that the convent was established there."

Chavara, this was a “*pathetic situation*,” which led to deep sorrow within him (See *Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent* [CKC] 1:1) overcoming which was possible only by establishing a convent for women, for which he did his best by means of spiritual, administrative, and material support.

In a narration of an earlier attempt, Saint Chavara recalls (in CKC 1:1-2; see also CMM 1:126) the concrete measures that were already taken to build a convent in Varapuzha Puthenpally, although this attempt was aborted due to the necessity of facilitating a seminary to respond to the context of ecclesial disturbance caused by the arrival of a bishop from the Chaldean Church.⁶ Moreover and more importantly, Saint Chavara himself had directly made attempts to start a convent at Alangad in 1859 almost seven years before the four women started living together in the new convent in Koonammavu.⁷ It is pertinent here to note that Saint Chavara experienced deep sorrow and an intense heartache as they had to drop the plans and attempts to establish a convent for women. These texts very clearly indicate that Saint Chavara had not only an ardent desire to begin a convent to facilitate religious life for women, but had been seriously involved in the project and had made every possible effort to get it done.

This position is corroborated by Sister Anna (daughter of Mother Eliswa), who continued to regularly write the Chronicle of Koonammavu Convent, after the first 16 pages were written by Saint Chavara himself. As she narrates the death of Saint Chavara, she records as follows: “... this father of ours [Saint Chavara] was not only a bright lamp and a mirror for all the Christians of Kerala, burning with the zeal concerning faith and growth of the holy Catholic Church he was like a pillar that supported the Church. So too, he had been keenly interested in growth and the practice of perfect virtue in the convents; we deeply mourn his death, especially for all good and favours that he has done and was doing in order to *found this convent of ours* [*matam stapikunnathinum*] and to *guide us in the way of virtue* [*punnyavazhiyil njangale nadathunnathinum*]” (CKC 2:23).

Fr. Leopold Beccaro – who was a close associate and confessor of Saint Chavara – with whom Mother Eliswa had communicated her desire to lead a life of chastity, during her meetings with him for confession and spiritual direction, wrote in Italian in his personal diary on 3 January 1871, the day of the demise of Saint Chavara: “The founder and the first prior of the Tertiaries of the Discalced Carmelites in Malabar, who with extreme fatigue *has founded the monastery of the sisters* [*e fondato con somme fatiche il monastero delle Monache*]...”⁸ Again, in another important document, a short biography of Saint Chavara written by Fr. Leopold himself, we come across the following affirmative statements: “Among these, specially, [he] *earnestly desired to bring into existence an abode of virtues for the girls of Malayalam and a convent of sisters* for learning doctrines and traditions of the Catholic religion as well as

⁶See the *Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent*, vol. 1:1-2; Bernadine Baccinelli, “Letter to the Superiors of Men and women OCD in Rome,” 29 June 1860; *Alochanapusthakam*, 95 (the counsels that took place in Mannanam Monastery from 1864 to 1871 and other special events of that time).

⁷Varkey Parappuram, *Chronicles*, 656-657. The project was later dropped, the reason being the long distance between Koonammavu (where Saint Chavara was residing from 1861 onwards) and Alangad; he, along with Bishop Canus who came to visit Koonammavu Monastery, felt that the distance would come in the way of meeting the spiritual needs of the community of sisters.

⁸Refer *Diary of Fr. Leopold*, volume 3:25 (CMC Archives, Aluva). A notable problem posed by some is that the crucial phrase “*e fondato con somme fatiche il monastero delle Monache*” is written in between the lines, and it would have been added later by someone. However, it must also be noted that not only this one phrase, but four other such superscriptions are made, including a grammatical correction in the same text.

to make them grow as good Christian children...⁹ It is a fact known to all that even after the starting of the convent, he showed great fervour and interest to conduct everything in order and with virtues..." These two statements made by Fr. Leopold give uncompromising credence to the fact that Saint Chavara had not only a deep and long-lasting desire to establish a convent for sisters, but had also made every effort, including the spiritual and administrative guidance in the realization of the project. It is revealing to note that Fr. Leopold, a person who was closely accompanying the project and the first members of the convent, categorically stated that Saint Chavara had founded the monastery of the sisters.

As the above documents, coming from the time of the foundation of TOCD community for women and from those persons who were either closely associated with the project or the first beneficiaries of the foundation of the convent, speak obviously about the role of Saint Chavara in the foundation of the convent for the TOCD in Kerala, his role is justifiably unique and unquestionably true. Moreover, his long-lasting desire for the establishment of such a facility for the religious life of women in Kerala and his involvement not only in the construction of the convent and its administrative structure and lifestyle, but also his farsightedness in conceiving the scope of the newly founded community give him an unchallengeable position as the founder of this community of religious women in Kerala under the banner of TOCD, which later got bifurcated into CMC and CTC congregations, along the Syro-Malabar and Latin Rites within the Catholic Church, after the establishment of the Syro-Malabar vicariates in Kerala, the administration of which was entrusted with the Latin Hierarchy for a long time.

4. Refutation of the CTC Claims

Although the above documents come from the time of the foundation of the TOCD convent, the Congregation of Teresian Carmelites (CTC) has recently begun claiming that the founder of the Women TOCD is Mother Eliswa. However, this is contrary to the documentary evidence available and cited above. It is strange to note that a new position has been developed in which the foundation of the new religious community for women seems to have happened all on a sudden, as if it was dropped from the heavens. While not even a single valid documentary evidence is available to show that Mother Eliswa is the foundress

⁹In a book titled *The Founding Fathers of the TOCD in Kerala* (originally written in Malayalam, in 1871, soon after the death of Saint Chavara, but published in 1905), the author Kuriakose Elias Porukkara, the second Prior of TOCD for men, deals with the long cherished dream of Saint Chavara to found a convent for women and how he had set the scope of this new community of religious women: "Being there [Koonammavu], [he] specially wished to make a convent of sisters as an abode of virtues for the girls of Malayalam, for learning doctrines and traditions of the Catholic religion and to grow as good Christian children. Trusting in the Lord Almighty, accepted the persons who were prepared as its foundation and made a convent temporarily with bamboo mat for them to stay. In a miraculous way, within eight months, collecting Rs. 8000 as alms by different means, built the convent and arranged all the necessary things and made the sisters stay there and he felt happy seeing their modest life and virtues; allowed them to make their profession and finally established the Blessed Sacrament in their chapel. Just as Patriarch Jacob loved most his youngest son Benjamin, he loved them most deeply, and took care of them as a mother takes care of her own children" (page 35).

of the Women TOCD, almost all of the CTC cited documents and public affirmations¹⁰ either ignore or consciously avoid all the documentary evidence shown above.¹¹

The documents that are produced by the CTC (all in Italian, written by Italian missionaries) to claim the role of foundress to Mother Eliswa do not corroborate the thesis that the latter is *the* foundress (in a definitive sense). For example, one of the documents, a letter of Msgr. Leonardo Mellano, dated 28 November 1888, was sent to the Propaganda Fide during the time of dispute over the division of the TOCD (1890). Although this latter (compared to earlier cited documents) document does not make any mention of Fr. Leopold or Saint Chavara, it claims that the convent in Koonammavu was *founded by four natives* (“*fondato da quattro Native*”). This makes it obvious that even this letter of 1888 does not ascribe any unique role to Mother Eliswa in the foundation of Women TOCD. In another letter, dated 15 March 1889, it is held the TOCD community was founded in 1866 by Fr. Leopold, the provincial delegate, by the order of Msgr. Bernardine. In yet another letter, dated 2 April 1889, the reference is not to one foundress, but to *foundresses*. In deliberating about the ownership of the convent, and to whom it should rightfully belong, the Vicar Apostolic affirmatively (though not necessarily logically) states that “the convent must remain to the *foundresses*...” Later, in 1890 (14 June), the Vicar Apostolic mentions that there are three foundresses. He wrote: “... the Latin nuns among whom the first *two foundresses* (*the third one died*) have started the convent at Koonammavu...” More or less, the same text is repeated in another letter, dated 27 September 1890: “... there are two foundresses of the Koonammavu convent. The third one, daughter of one of the two, is dead...”¹² Thus, the documentary evidence recently harnessed by the CTC to claim that Mother Eliswa is the foundress of the Women TOCD seem to be a bit too farfetched, especially as none of them could conclusively prove that she is the sole responsible person for the origin and

¹⁰A recent unsigned article, published in the *L'Osservatore Romano*, to which reference was made earlier, makes the following claim: “The Centenary of the Death of the Servant of God Mother Eliswa, Foundress of the first religious Congregation TOCD (CTC & CMC) is an important milestone in the history of women religious in Kerala.” “Servant of God Mother Eliswa: Centenary of Death of the First Religious Sister from Kerala,” Wednesday, 3 July 2013 (Number 27), page 10.

¹¹Two years ago, the website of the CTC had listed Fr. Leopold Beccaro and Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara as the founders of the Congregation (<http://ctccongregation.org/history.asp>, accessed on 20 April 2011; at present, as on 1 August 2013, this page is not available for public access); however, now, all those pages have been conveniently removed and replaced by a page stating that Mother Eliswa is the foundress of the CTC community. The new claim is that Mother Eliswa is the foundress of the first indigenous women religious community in India, meaning that she was the foundress of the Women TOCD, which began to exist on 13 February 1866, although she had taken her religious vows only on 16 July 1868. It is agreeable to claim that she is the first indigenous religious woman in the Catholic Church in Kerala; however, to claim that she is, therefore, the foundress of the first religious community is a tall claim, totally divorced from the truth enunciated by the documentary evidence already available to us. If at all such a claim is to be substantiated, it is the responsibility of the CTC community to provide heretofore unaccessed documentary evidence, without ignoring the documents available in the public domain (to which references have been made in this essay).

¹²It is interesting to note the context and timing of these letters. As both of them were sent in the context of the imminent division of the Women TOCD into two communities along the line of the Syro-Malabar Rite and Latin Rite, they seem to be consciously avoiding a mention of the role of Saint Chavara. As a mention of his name would have adversely affected their claims, his role in the foundation is consciously eclipsed. Moreover, as the years went by, especially after the death of Saint Chavara in 1871 and the subsequent developments in the communities, and as the historical events and involvement of the persons in founding the community being remote, it was probably easy (but certainly wrong) for them to deny the role of Saint Chavara; the subsequent generation of ecclesiastical authorities did not even hesitate (inconsistently though) to propose new names as responsible for the foundation, as their sole intent was to get the best deal during the bifurcation of the two religious communities.

foundation of the first religious community of sisters in Kerala. At the same time, it is beyond any dispute that Mother Eliswa was the first indigenous religious woman to begin her committed religious life within an officially established religious community. However, most of the claims made in the above cited letters (written by Italian missionaries who were in positions of authority, particularly by the Vicar Apostolic of Varapuzha) must be seen from the angle of the imminent issue of division of the properties of the Koonammavu convent, which could have been turned to their advantage only by affirming that the convent was started by the sisters belonging to the Latin Church; the ultimate intent of these letters, certainly, was not to affirm the role of the founder or foundress or foundresses of the women TOCD. Moreover, as they have a later origin, their value should not be escalated to unnecessary proportions.

5. Who Is the Founder of Women TOCD?

Although there seems to exist a fluid situation as to the criteria to decide upon the founder of a religious community, as there are no definite official documents of the Church stating it in a straight-forward manner, we have access to a number of scientific studies which give us a clear idea as to what is/are the basic element/s that would be crucial in determining the founder or foundress of a religious community. One such excellent study is offered by George Nedungatt in his article titled "Who Founded the Congregation of the Holy Family?" Realistically assessing the uncertainty that prevails in this domain, Nedungatt offers to clear the confusion. According to his conclusions, drawn from the positions already articulated by a number of other experts and supported by documentary evidence, foundation of a religious congregation needs to be distinguished from (1) the spiritual guidance given by one or other individuals who would involve in the process as, for example, confessor or spiritual director, or material support extended either for the construction of the house where the members would stay or for the mission that would be carried out, (2) juridical act by which a Church official would legally erect a community, and (3) the first individual/s who would officially become member/s of the community by taking the vows or by assuming the office of the superior of the community.¹³ Instead, positively approached, the foundation is said to involve (1) a historical process involving several events, with an emphasis on the original causal act/s that set the process rolling,¹⁴ (2) a Charismatic event/s¹⁵ that slowly but definitively sets the tone and texture of the newly constituted religious community, and (3) identifying and fixing "the specific scope"¹⁶ for the institute. According to John M. Lozano, "there are two essential requisites in a foundress or founder: a) God's call to start a new religious family, and b) determining its ends and lifestyle and shaping its spirit."¹⁷ Taking the above positions into account, we see another succinct statement of Giuseppe Damizia: "A founder is the person who sets the specific scope of an institute."¹⁸ Critically analysing the above positions and drawing cue from them, Nedungatt holds that "for a person to become a founder or foundress it is not necessary to

¹³Nedungatt, "Who Founded the Congregation of the Holy Family?" 11-15.

¹⁴Nedungatt, "Who Founded the Congregation of the Holy Family?" 7.

¹⁵Nedungatt, "Who Founded the Congregation of the Holy Family?" 13.

¹⁶Nedungatt, "Who Founded the Congregation of the Holy Family?" 8.

¹⁷John M. Lozano, *Foundresses, Founders, and Their Religious Families*, trans. Joseph Daries, page 5, cited in Nedungatt, "Who Founded the Congregation of the Holy Family?" 8.

¹⁸Damizia, "Fondatore," *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, vol. 5, cols. 1474-1475, cited in Nedungatt, "Who Founded the Congregation of the Holy Family?" 8.

gather a group of followers, or to give the group a name, or frame its Rule or constitutions: these are all accidental to foundation..."¹⁹ Positively put, drawing on an analogy, Nedungatt proposes that "foundation traces a line beyond the birth of the child through the period of gestation to the first moment of conception."²⁰ In this context, it is worth recalling a direction given by the Congregation of Rites (1947, issued based on Pope Pius XI's *Unigenitus*, referring to Father and Lawgiver) in identifying two basic requisites for someone to be considered a founder: (1) He or she must have conceived the idea and end of the institute, and (2) he or she must have given the group its norms of life and government at least along its fundamental lines.²¹

Taking cue from the above analysis, we are inclined to hold that the most important elements in deciding upon the founder or foundress of a religious community shall consist of the following: (1) conceiving the idea of a religious community originating from a divine inspiration and based on an understanding of the needs of an ecclesial community and the larger society and (2) unique and significant contributions in setting "the specific scope of an institute" as the community gets established in its lifestyle and mission. Although there may be a number of other aspects that we should take into account in deciding on the founder or foundress, we reasonably believe that they all could be reduced to these two elements, as they form the kernel of crucial processes or events involved in the foundation of a religious community.

With regard to the first aspect, i.e., conceiving the idea of a religious community originating from a divine inspiration and based on an understanding of the needs of an ecclesial community and the larger society, we have both internal and external sources that attest to the fact that Saint Chavara cherished the goal of establishing a religious community for women, especially after he had experienced the good of having such a set up for men in Kerala through the foundation of the TOCD for men (started in 1831, which was later rechristened as 'Carmelites of Mary Immaculate'). The Chronicles of the both the TOCD for men and women (as cited above) clearly show that Saint Chavara not only cherished this noble goal of having a religious community for women, but took every possible step to realize it. When women like Eliswa, Anna, Thresia, and Clara wished to lead a chaste life,²² it was the intense desire, strong will, and unrelenting initiatives of Saint Chavara that actually made it a reality in the form of a convent; of course, the role of Fr. Leopold as the confessor and spiritual director and that of Bishop Bernardine²³ had contributed to the cause, although both of them do not merit to be qualified as founders of this new religious community. Likewise, it must also be stated that although Mother Eliswa and others had the desire to lead a chaste life, which was first communicated to Fr. Leopold and, subsequently, through him, to Saint Chavara, we do not find any documentary evidence to corroborate the claim that Mother Eliswa had planned either for a community life or the beginning of a convent, or

¹⁹Nedungatt, "Who Founded the Congregation of the Holy Family?" 8.

²⁰Nedungatt, "Who Founded the Congregation of the Holy Family?" 10.

²¹Lozano, *Foundresses, Founders, and Their Religious Families*, page 2.

²²Thresia arrived on 10 February and Clara on 11 February 1866 and the former started living together along with Eliswa and Anna; initially, Clara lived in a house outside. Only Eliswa, Anna, and Thresia were given the small brown scapular on 13 February 1866, as they moved into the new house (*panambumadom*). In fact, they took vows only after two years, i.e., on 16 July 1868. See *Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent*, vol. 1:90.

²³There is a difference between foundation and erection of a religious institute. Please see Nedungatt, "Who Founded the Congregation of the Holy Family?" 11-14; refer page 14 for a statement on spiritual directors. See page 30 for a distinction between hierarchical gift and charismatic gift; the latter, it seems, is more crucial in the foundation of a religious community.

even to start any specific mission as an expression of their resolve. However, all these are clearly seen in the planning and execution of a series of events under the determined leadership of Saint Chavara, in which his acumen and resolve to start a formal community life for the sisters and their mission.

Secondly, another significant criterion in identifying a founder or foundress is the unique and significant contributions in setting “the specific scope of an institute” as the community gets established in its lifestyle and mission. Saint Chavara was not merely a visionary, but someone who was determined to get things done in a concrete fashion. So, his desire and resolve to establish a religious community for women in Kerala was accompanied by his meticulous planning and a series of definite measures to realize the goal. Be it finding a suitable place, or harnessing the support of the Catholic community, or gathering financial and material support for the establishment of the convent, Saint Chavara was in the forefront. So, his role was not only of conceiving this community in terms of its vision and mission, but made every right step to get it established with a sense of benefaction and leadership.

Moreover, all the above steps also attest to the fact that, in and through them, Saint Chavara also set the specific scope of this new religious community of sisters. The way the new community adopted its lifestyle and its mission had been greatly influenced by Saint Chavara, which he did, of course, in consultation with Fr. Leopold. In addition, starting the religious congregation for women, according to Chavara, had a twofold purpose, as is evident from the *Collected Works of Chavara* and the *Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent*: “Besides striving for their own spiritual realization, the members of the Congregation have to teach other girls, and train them in some handicrafts.”²⁴ It is clear from the original goal of founding the convent that its primary thrust included, along with the spiritual realization of the sisters, education, social uplift, and the wellbeing of womenfolk in the larger society. Indeed, the starting of the convent was a powerful instrument to empower women in a multi-dimensional manner, and such a vision was imparted to the TOCD community of women by Saint Chavara, along the line that the TOCD for men had already opened up and found to be quite effective in the transformation of both the Christian community and the society at large.

In a recent online entry, posted on the official website of Conference of Religious of India (CRI), there is a statement as follows: “Mother Eliswa is not only the Foundress of a Religious Congregation but also path finder of the first school for girls in Kerala, first boarding house and orphanage attached to the school for girl students and poor uncared children respectively.”²⁵ This is a statement which is not backed up by any data or documentary evidence but wishful thinking and late-arrived religious and political aspirations. As far as the evidence is concerned, the documents quoted in the above paragraphs would amply testify to the fact that Saint Chavara could not only rightfully claim the role of the founder of the first religious congregation for women (including the later bifurcated CTC) but also for starting the first school for girls in Kerala along with the first boarding house and orphanage, and for initiating projects to support and empower the

²⁴Chavara, *Collected Works of Chavara*, vol. 1, 195; see also *Chronicle of Koonammavu Convent* (1866-1870) (Malayalam), Aluva: CMC Publications, 2009, page 5. The *Positio* also affirms that the scope of starting the religious community for women was to train and educate girls. *Positio*, 131.

²⁵Sr. Jaya CTC (Provincial Superior, Jhansi), “Servant of God Mother Eliswa and Social Renaissance” at <http://www.religiousindia.org/church-in-india/servant-of-god-mother-eliswa-and-social-renaissance>, accessed on 1 August 2013.

poor and uncared children. Interestingly, instead of Mother Eliswa having been attributed to be the champion of women empowerment in the nineteenth century Kerala, it must be borne in mind that herself and her other three companions were empowered by Saint Chavara, especially at a time when they were hopelessly desperate to have some provision to lead a *chaste* life, as they had desired; if not for the innovative, strong-willed, and generous-hearted approach of Saint Chavara, the starting and blessing of the convent on 13 February 1866 and the subsequent religious commitment of the sisters would not have been a reality.

Given the above analysis and facts, it could be stated without any doubt that Saint Chavara had played a unique role in conceiving and establishing a convent for religious women under the banner of TOCD, and we do not find any other person/s who has assumed such an important role in the whole process of its foundation.²⁶ Certainly, the role of Mother Eliswa as the first one who had made the religious vows and who was first appointed superior of the community for three years (only up to 16 July 1871 – see CKC 1:32-33; she was never appointed again as superior) is important; however, those two factors alone do not merit her the title of the foundress of the Women TOCD. For, both in conceiving and realizing a formalized structure of religious life for women in Kerala and setting the scope for this new community in terms of its vision and mission are the unique and exclusive contributions of Saint Chavara. If not for him, the establishment of the convent for women in Kerala under the banner of TOCD would not have been a reality in 1866. Moreover, the subsequent development, especially in the earlier years, is attributed to the intense and loving care of Saint Chavara, the testimonies of which abound in the Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent and other sources such as the Chronicles of Mannanam Monastery and the writings of his contemporaries such as Fr. Leopold (personal diary and a short biography on Chavara) and Fr. Kuriakose Elisha Porukkara (in 1871).

6. Conclusion

The above reading of the available facts clearly establishes the fact that Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara is the founder of the first indigenous religious congregation for women, i.e., Women TOCD, which began to exist on 13 February 1866 through the community life of its first members. The role of Mother Eliswa, the senior-most and, hence, the first woman to be accepted into the community and the first appointed superior of this new community, though of prominence as the first indigenous religious woman of Kerala, does not amount to the status of the foundress. In fact, taking into account the significant elements that are to be assessed for the role of a founder or foundress, there is no one else than Saint Chavara who would merit the title of the founder of the first indigenous religious congregation for women in India. Those who make counter claims either abuse the available facts or immerse themselves in wishful thinking. If, however, valid documentary evidence would prove

²⁶Till recently, all, including the CTC members, had formally recognized the unique contributions that Saint Chavara had made both in the foundation and in the subsequent growth of this community. Elsewhere in this article, we have referred to the fact that Saint Chavara was formally declared to be one of the founders of the CTC along with Fr. Leopold Beccaro OCD. In a souvenir released during the 150th anniversary of the parish church in Koonammavu (in 1987), we see a number of entries, some of them written by CTC sisters themselves (e.g., Sr. Lucina CTC, “The First Indigenous Carmelite Congregation for Women in Kerala” [Malayalam], see pages 22ff.), offering moving tribute to Saint Chavara and acknowledging the historical fact that he had played the crucial role in the foundation of the first religious congregation for women. While Sr. Lucina CTC wrote that Saint Chavara is one of the founding fathers of the Carmelite congregation for women that started in 1866, nowhere in this souvenir we come across with a mention even remotely meaning that Mother Eliswa could be considered as the foundress of this religious community.

otherwise, such evidence should be made available in the public domain to be accessed by both historians and all other interested parties. Instead, if available historical facts are ignored and twisted to the advantage of someone's biased judgments, they must be rejected both by the authorities and the knowledgeable Christian public.

The discussion on the question as to who is the founder of the first indigenous religious congregation for women in Kerala, we hope, would not minimize the unique places adorned by the holy persons who were associated with the long process of foundation. There is no doubt that God's grace was channelized through a number of individuals, including Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Fr. Leopold, and Mother Eliswa and many other committed women who came with/after her. However, the role of Saint Chavara is certainly unique, especially as he was a person who cherished his dreams beyond the boundaries of narrow-minded divisions existing in the then society of Kerala, be it caste or creed, culture or rite. Any attempt to wrongly appropriate the credits due to another person, certainly, goes against the very understanding of Christian charity itself. As the present generation tries to carry on the great missionary avenues opened up by the path-breaking vision of Saint Chavara, we shall not belittle his importance by approaching his person and contributions from the narrow perspectives of a particular rite or the vested interests of a religious community.