

HOLISTIC INTEGRATION OF MYSTICAL ASPIRATIONS AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT

Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Nineteenth Century India

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1. Introduction

It is said that Christianity can be better understood in the life of its great personalities than in its theories and dogmas; indeed, every dogmatic formulation and magisterial pronouncement within the Church gains primary credence from the person of Jesus Christ. Even when we deal with the vibrant and transforming mystical phenomena, it is better captured in the lives of those mystics who have been touched by the divine spark of Jesus Christ facilitated within the Christian community. Moreover, a Christian mystic is not someone who exists in an isolated ivory tower of Christ consciousness. Christ consciousness in itself is fundamentally other-oriented, as in Jesus Christ we encounter a person who was ready to let his own self go for the other so that the other will have life in abundance (John 10:10). From this perspective, a Christian mystic is one whose consciousness is deeply and fundamentally transformed by the Christ consciousness, and continues to remain in such an abiding consciousness of the Divine, bringing about transformation within one's own life as well as in the lives of others.

As the Church continues its odyssey in realizing the Christ consciousness in various cultures and traditions, it is a comforting truth that there come forth individuals at various junctures in human history, who are imbued with such Christ consciousness. One such person is Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara,¹ a Catholic priest and Carmelite religious belonging to the Syro-Malabar Rite, which originated in Kerala, India. While he is acclaimed for a number of great ecclesial and social achievements, the primary reason for his saintly status is justified by the abiding Christ consciousness that he was bestowed with, and in his readiness to avail himself for the service of the members of the Church and the society at large. It is believed that his mystical experiences (glimpses of which are available to us in his writings and statements made by his contemporaries) received their credibility by his conscientious investment of time and resources for eliminating unjust structures and practices prevailing in

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¹Born on 10 February 1805 in Kainakari village in the backwaters of Kerala, Kuriakose Elias Chavara was ordained a priest in the Catholic Church (Syro-Malabar Rite) on 29 November 1829. He initially collaborated with Fathers Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara in establishing the first indigenous religious community for men, the foundation stone for which was laid on 11 May 1831. Although a seminary for the formation of both the community members and the local clergy was started attached to the monastery in 1833, the formal establishment of the religious community, with the pronouncement of religious vows, took place only on 8 December 1855. He has pioneered many transformative steps in the Kerala Catholic community such as starting of schools attached to parish churches, printing press, preaching of homilies on Sundays, renewal of the faithful through annual retreats in parishes, foundation of the first indigenous religious community for women (TOCD), and establishment of the first charity home for the sick and aged. He has authored many literary and spiritual works, some of which are adjudged to be the first of its kind in his native tongue Malayalam. Although achievements by secular standards are said to be monumental, he was a highly spiritual person, who spent hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament, and developed a very personal relationship with God, especially through his loving colloquies with Jesus Christ. Having guided the religious communities he founded in their transformative involvement in the society, he died on 3 January 1871. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 8 February 1986 and canonized on 23 November 2014 by Pope Francis.

the society of his time, on the one side, and the promotion of many other positive ecclesial and social initiatives that set the Church and society in the nineteenth century India on the right track. In his integral approach, the thrust on acquiring mystical aspirations were proportionately matched by his unwavering commitment to the renewal and enrichment of the social life of the people with whom he conducted his life and for whom he had completely dedicated himself in the name of Jesus Christ.

2. Mysticism as an All-Integrating Experience

It is regrettable that, while the uninitiated, especially with an empirical or 'scientific' bent of mind, may go to the extreme extent of even denying the existence of a mystical realm or experience by associating the idea of mysticism with that of irrationality, many initiated miserably fail in clearly defining, or intelligibly communicating the core of mystical experience as one that can be a tangible actuality, in a cogent, convincing or commendable manner. Be it the feeling of "absolute dependence," as Friedrich Schleiermacher puts it,² or the "numinous experience" of an incomprehensible mystery, as Rudolf Otto describes it,³ when dealing with the 'mystical', as the etymology of the very word indicates, there seems to be an aspect of incredibility that surrounds the idea of 'mystical' as a consequence of which, its reality that tends to elude us, the reality, thus, turning out to be unfathomable from a mystical point of view. Although both the apophatic and the kataphatic approaches in mysticism, in their own unique ways, have contributed to understand the mystical reality as well as the mystical experience of many in diverse traditions, even in contemporary times, the task of apprehending the mystical and understanding the mystical experience seem to be beyond us.⁴

The core of mystical experience seems to be the emergence of an abiding consciousness of the Ultimate within a person or a group of persons, leading towards the holistic integration of everything, including even those seemingly contrary or contradictory dimensions of created existence or human-made conceptions and realities. From a Christian point of view, this abiding consciousness of the Ultimate emerges from and leads towards a Christ consciousness, as a result of which, a person grounded in mysticism will primarily believe in that which is founded upon, and functioning from the Word of God. Emergence of a Christic consciousness is said to have its source in an intimate and abiding *presencing*⁵ between the mystic and the person of Jesus Christ, the dynamics of which may be personally experienced, but cannot be fully comprehended, as it goes beyond the dialectics of rationality.

Along with this tendency to relegate mysticism to irrationality, there is a misconception that mystics are concerned only about other-worldly realities. Although

²Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, vol. 1, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, New York: Harper and Row, 1963, 17.

³Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, London: Oxford University Press, 1977, 7, 11, 32-35.

⁴The admission of ineffability of the mystical reality apprehended does not amount to relegating mysticism to irrationality, excluding it from the intelligent pursuits of human beings. It is true that when we apply the rules of deductive or inductive logic the realities apprehended by a mystic do not seem to make much sense. The failure to reasonably articulate or communicate the content of mystical experience seems to be resulting from the fact that human powers, especially the intellect, have not evolved to cater to the dimensions dealt within mysticism. As our ordinary logic fails to capture it, many including scientists seem to deny any intelligibility to it; analogically, it amounts to a short-sighted person ridiculously insisting that there is nothing beyond the reach of his or her eye-sight. If we were to develop our human powers to capture that which surpasses us at the mystical realms, humanity would largely relish and benefit from these untapped resources, which are essential for holistic human existence.

⁵According to Underhill, "*Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment.*" Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, 7.

conceptual differences may continue to exist, a true mystic is not someone who draws lines demarcating the sacred from the profane; they perceive the mystical realm of experience, across the traditions, to be more of an integrating attitude, resulting from a holistic perception of reality facilitated in the abiding consciousness of the Ultimate. As George A. Maloney puts it, “the mystics surrender themselves in their own unique energies to those of God. A new communion of love is reached as we seek to ‘do,’ not according to our inner words and desires, but according to God’s Word. Our impulsiveness and self-centredness, which isolate and insulate us, change to active receptivity in our openness to cooperate with the graceful energies of God, operating at each moment in each event.”⁶

Such mystics, established in the Christic consciousness and equipped to be in communion with everything and everyone, experience an inner freedom that many others are deprived of. This freedom emerges from being unattached to anything as per the human standards; mystics, in the course of their lives, reach a state of self-transcendence. According to Raymond Panikkar, such persons “realize the rhythm of the universe and discover inside their beings a constant call to surpass the self and possess a certain universal prophetic awareness, not so much in the concrete and particular, as in the totality of the Mystical Body of Christ, which is none other than the Universe – insofar as it is on the way up – and I am not saying returning – to the bosom of the Father.”⁷ Positively put, what takes place within a mystic is not merely shedding of the ties with the world, but a more intense and intimate relationship between the mystic and the rest of the world, a relationship that will enhance every other, by the selfless and self-giving participation on the part of the mystic. Instead of claiming anything or anyone to oneself in an exclusive manner, he or she would let go of oneself so that the other will have life in abundance. This leads to an inner freedom on the part of the mystic to contribute his or her best, even if that would take away the materialistic comforts in one’s life. When a situation or person is found to be deprived of the wholeness that should be accessible to all, especially if it results from an injustice perpetrated by other persons or institutions, the catholic consciousness of the mystic would empower him or her to take upon oneself the challenging task of setting it right by empowering the other, and to make others partake in the wholeness. In other words, the experience of the abiding consciousness empowers a mystic, not only to remain in such an experience, by exclusively limiting it to oneself, but also to extend that holistic experience to everyone who associates with him or her, even if that would amount to accepting the responsibility for the other, especially for those whom experience of the wholeness is denied as a result of their being denied fundamental justice. As Thomas Merton holds, “It is only in assuming full responsibility for our world, for our lives and for ourselves that we can be said to live really for God. The whole human reality ... interpenetrates the world of nature ... and the world of history...”⁸ Thus, a genuine mystic is said to be someone who is established in the Ultimate Reality to such an extent that he or she will be able to channelize the power of the Ultimate for the good of the rest of the world; to that extent, his consciousness as well as his conscience is fine-tuned to the being of the Ultimate; hence, the very being as well as the voice of a mystic should be directly proportionate to the consciousness of the Ultimate, and should become the voice of conscience for the rest of the world.

Therefore, in a true sense, a contemplative cannot be completely detached from the world of daily experience, nor is it expected that such a person should disassociate with everything mundane. This is typical of Jesus Christ himself; even though he relished the

⁶George A. Maloney, *Mysticism and the New Age: Christic Consciousness in the New Creation*, New York: Alba House, 1991, 55.

⁷Raymond Panikkar, “The Theandric Vocation,” *Monastic Studies* 8 (Spring 1972), 71.

⁸Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1971, 154.

intense communion with the Father, his days were filled with incessant attempts to reach out to the concrete world, addressing and resolving the issues that his fellow beings faced, be it their physical or mental health, their temporal or spiritual welfare: in the Jesus of the Gospels, we encounter a healthy synthesis of various dimensions that a (Christian) mystic must take into account. Hence, the attempt to dichotomize spiritual life and active involvement in the life of humanity seems to go against an integral Christian approach to life. Raymond Bailey states that “Those who insist on a dichotomy between the spiritual life and the life of active works of charity demonstrate an ignorance of Church history. The pioneers of the mystical way were not idle dreamers or ivory-tower meditators; they were public men, preachers, administrators, and writers, who left their imprint on the history of the Church and the world. Consider Augustine, Gregory, Bernard, and Catherine of Genoa, who utilized their spiritual resources in attacking political, social, and ecclesiastical problems of their respective periods.”⁹ Indeed, mystics open up the avenues for social transformation and involve fully in the agonies and ecstasies that people encounter in their attempts to overcome the constraining factors in personal as well as societal existence. Their genuine involvement in the lives of the people around will ensure that all see “the walls and ghettos come crashing down, that our fearful, anxious selves have constructed because we were living in darkness and ignorance, and did not realize God was present in all things.”¹⁰

For genuine mystics, mysticism becomes “a way of life,”¹¹ a way that inspires them to ensure that everything in personal as well as in societal life is attuned to the holistic and integrating vision received in mystical experience. True mystics, therefore, shall be instrumental in establishing the Kingdom of God within this world by availing of all possible resources. The institutional, the intellectual, the social, and the mystical all will merge into one stream of transforming consciousness for oneself and for all. While the institutional, the intellectual, and the social may deviate from the holistic patterns, the mystical experience will enable the mystic to hold all other aspects together and to ensure that they remain as expressions of the unitive consciousness. In the words of St. Paul, as our God “... is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live and move and exist...” (Acts 17:28), mystics assume the role of ‘ambassadors’ or ‘reconcilers’ of God (2 Cor 5:18-20) so that whatever is brought about is in tune with the Divine will. Along this line of thinking, Maloney holds that “... such enlightened persons pierce through the illusory values that pamper the senses, that exalt the independence of a self-centred existence, in order to arrive at a faith-vision that actively allows themselves to ‘suffer’ with God suffering in the world. They see God’s loving hand in the ‘pruning’ of the vine branch in order to bring forth more fruit. By total death to self, there is effected gradually a more perfect union with God and with each creature, especially with other human beings. Rather than running away from the world, the modern mystic is now totally at God’s disposition to work in oneness with His Logos to bring the world into its greater spiritual, conscious existence, into a greater unity of love.”¹²

In Christian mystical traditions, those who have attained the abiding Christic consciousness share their transformed consciousness, not only through their own direct actions, but also through the gradual initiation of others into the same stream of holistic consciousness. Although, in most of the instances, formation of mystics results from a disposition generated within oneself, the initiated are equipped to lead others into similar experiences and awaken an abiding Christic consciousness within them more so by the

⁹Raymond Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism*, Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1976, 26.

¹⁰Maloney, *Mysticism and the New Age*, 73.

¹¹Underhill, *Mysticism*, 455.

¹²Maloney, *Mysticism and the New Age*, 56.

formers' creditable life example and spontaneous outpouring of the transformed consciousness in the realms of religious and social existence. This has greater amplitude, especially in aiming at the transformation of the larger world, as, instead of one person, a group of persons with transformed Christic consciousness and unquestionable commitment are formed to involve in facilitating the integral wellbeing of the whole world.

3. Christ (*Appa*) Experience: The Mystical Core of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara

Canonized by Pope Francis on 23 November 2014, Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, hailing from the nineteenth century Kerala, India, was a Christian to the core as well as a revolutionary social reformer in every sense. He is known in the Indian Church for his absolute trust in God and unreserved commitment to the overall welfare of the people. During his lifetime itself, he was referred to as a man with the signature of God (*Deivathinte kaiyyoppulla manushyan*); indeed, history attests to the fact that he himself was a signature of God.

Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a charismatic person, who could break the traditional mould of what a priest is all about. Although, traditionally, a priest is primarily perceived to have a cultic role, Kuriakose Elias Chavara could dismantle such an exclusive misunderstanding by his innate critical approach and creative outlook. It is said that, instead of criticising what was at fault with priesthood, he looked for creative alternatives based on the message of the Gospel, and his personal encounter with Jesus Christ. In fact, in and through his life and mission, he could create a set of new moulds, which helped the larger society to slowly transform itself.

The Christian faith life of Chavara was solidly founded upon the faith transmitted to him by his devout parents, which was further nurtured by his mentor Thomas Palackal in the ambience of a loving and respectful relationship that developed between them during his formation days in the traditional *gurukula* style seminary. Although there were a number of instances that might have shook his person and vocation to priesthood, especially the totally unexpected death of his parents and his only brother, Chavara remained unperturbed in his decision in favour of his vocation to priesthood, and surrendered himself to the inscrutable Providence of God. From the early stages of his vocation to the last moment of his life, he held unto his motto, "the Lord is my portion," and let everything evolve with the firm conviction that the Lord will set everything for the good of his beloved. His life of Christian holiness does not require any extrinsic attestation than his own statement at the deathbed; with a deep sense of humility and unconditional reliance on God's providence, he admitted to his confreres who assembled around him, that he had never lost the baptismal innocence.

When the project of starting a community of religious life was taken up with ardent desire, the initial quest of the trio (namely, Father Thomas Palackal, Father Thomas Porukara, and Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara) was the attainment of Christian perfection, which, according to them, was impossible if they lived the way they all lived their lives. Hence, they came to the conclusion that keeping off from this world and its worldly affairs (including their life as priests with their special involvement in the ecclesial administration, seminary formation, etc.) would be the only solution. Although they approached the Bishop Marselius Stabilini for his approval of their plan to go into the wilderness (*vanavāsam*), the reply from the bishop¹³ not only dissuaded them from their pre-determined course of action, but also imparted to them an inner call to design a form of religious life by taking up the challenge of living amidst the "corrupt and corrupting" world. The readiness to listen to the bishop, and

¹³The bishop's telling reply was as follows: "We have only a handful of priests like you to guide the people of God in the proper way and if you go for contemplative monastic life who will, then, take care of them? *If you prefer going for monastic life to teaching the people, start a monastery that may benefit all.*" Kanianthara, *History of the Foundation of Mannanam Monastery* (Malayalam), 6; emphasis added.

their disposition to trust in the Divine Providence, caused them to alter their earlier plans, which, in turn, became conducive to realizing their goal of perfection, which now included both sanctification of oneself and the integral salvation of all.

As he lived through the thick and thin of the initial days of founding the first religious community of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) and its formal constitution in 1855, Father Chavara was undergoing an inimitable spiritual growth by which his already firm belief in God's Providence was made further deeper and firmer. Although he was busily engaged in various affairs of construction of the house and many other missions, including teaching in the seminary, preaching in different parishes, and being a consulter to the bishop, he was also steadily growing in his spiritual life. Despite his hectic daily schedule, he spent long hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament; the time spent in prayer and adoration became his favourite pastime, and many who watched him have attested to his undivided attention and total dedication in matters of his spiritual life. Meditation, for him, was not merely an exercise to be fulfilled as part of routine, but the prime time of the day, as it was the time for intimate conversation with the Lord. As he has later put it,

Meditation is a conversation with God. As you would with a friend, you sit close to God, moved by love, intimately communicating with Him. Meditation then is speaking with your beloved spouse Jesus Christ, sitting very close to Him... You converse with God as you would with a friend. It is a common experience for two friends to speak non-stop with one another till they part. They are never short of matter to talk about. That means, where there is love, there is always something to talk about. Nobody has to teach you this kind of conversation. Two friends, even if they do not know each other's language, can communicate better than two individuals who are not friends though they may speak and understand each other's language. Even sitting in silence very close to your friend is a matter of satisfaction!¹⁴

Thus, the time spent in meditation or adoration opened up the possibility for an intimate relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, as he grew in this personal relationship with Jesus, his quest to encounter Jesus in person became more intense, which is expressed in one of his famous poems. With an ardent desire to see Jesus from the moment of his birth to death, based on the biblical narratives, Father Chavara wrote:

Radiance of the merciful Prince of God
My heart longs to behold!
Highest God born of the Virgin Mary
My heart longs to behold!
Emmanuel, God being united with us
My heart longs to behold!¹⁵

These verses offer an outpouring of the inner quest of a beloved friend, who being already in an intimate relationship, wishes to capture those moments of the life of his beloved in which he could not be part. Moreover, "*Kanakenam...*" (meaning, longing to behold) as this poem has been traditionally identified, crystallizes an intense desire that Chavara had to have a look and feel of the abiding presence of Jesus.

Although the Carmelite tradition in which the new community members were initiated and Father Chavara's own closer association with the missionaries, mostly Carmelites priests, would have had their influence upon his spiritual formation, the intense loving relationship with the person of Jesus that became the characteristic feature of his life is unique to Father Chavara. One aspect of this intimate relationship is also worthy of our special attention. Father Chavara developed a filial relationship with Jesus and addressed

¹⁴Chavara, "Colloquies" in CSK III:14-15.

¹⁵Chavara, *Ātmānuthāpam*, Part 3.

Him as “*ente appa*” (my beloved father). Unlike many other spiritually realized persons, for whom the relationship with Jesus is experienced as one between the bride and the bridegroom,¹⁶ Father Chavara, deeply inspired by the parable of the Loving Father (Luke 15:11-32), identified himself as the son who has returned to the all-embracing arms of the father who is Jesus himself. His *appa*-experience, therefore, is seen as the culmination of an intimate filial relationship that he developed all through his life.

Having been established in an intense experience of the person of Jesus, Father Chavara was found to have acquired a meta-consciousness, a consciousness that was capable of going beyond the ordinary human consciousness inspired by the Divine, experienced in the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, a closer look at the life and spiritual writings, especially his celebrated spiritual work *Ātmānuthāpam* (Compunction of Heart) in which he beautifully narrated his ardent desire to have the vision (*darśan*) and the touch (*sparsan*) – i.e., the personal experience of the person of Jesus – offers us an understanding that his *appa*-experience originated from and culminated in the meta-consciousness of a mystic, originating from and firmly founded in the divine consciousness of Jesus Christ. This consciousness enabled him to constantly approach God, wholeheartedly embrace his beloved father (*ente appan*), and to happily remain within the comforting ambience of His loving presence. Thus, in his unique experience of Jesus Christ as his *own* father, God was intensely present to Father Chavara and he was present in God with an equal intensity so that he could remain forever in Divine consciousness.

The personal relationship of Father Chavara with the person of Jesus Christ, filial as it was, had a transformative effect upon his person. While he could continue to relate with Jesus as his most loving father, Father Chavara, in turn, became a loving father to most of his confreres and all those who associated with him. He could guide his confreres as well as the members of the women TOCD community that he founded in collaboration with Father Leopold Beccaro, an Italian Carmelite, into experiencing this loving communion with the Lord. Accordingly, whether it be the programme of the day or the missions undertaken outside the community (only by men religious at that stage), everything was designed to ensure that others were gradually invited to participate in this loving communion with the person of Jesus Christ.

His intense religious experience stemming from the mystical union with Jesus himself was so transformative that he could not stop appropriating it for himself. He was a Christian to the core, who believed that he should share with others whatever one attains. So, his own God-experience, or Jesus-experience, what we otherwise capture as the ‘*appa*-experience’ was so transformative that he wished to enable all his brethren (of the religious community as well as the people from the Church community and the larger society) to attain the same. In fact, we could state that Chavara transformed his own life and his daily programme so that he wished that the same deeper God-experience could be made available to all. All his activities and his leadership in establishing missions and institutions could be seen from his intense quest to share his vision of God and humanity with everyone.

The first religious house established in Mannanam, referred to as *besrauma* (a Syriac term literally meaning ‘a house on the hilltop’) by Father Chavara, turned out to be the instrument to share or transmit the new consciousness that he could attain from his filial encounter with and devotion towards Lord Jesus, who was his beloved *Appa* (Father). As more members joined the newly established religious community, they were inducted into a

¹⁶Bridal mysticism is not completely absent in Father Chavara’s spiritual life. In his conversations with the religious sisters of the first indigenous religious congregation that he (along with Father Leopold Beccaro) had founded, Father Chavara repeatedly uses the imageries usually employed by mystical writers who subscribed to bridal mysticism. For example, his letters to the sisters as well as entries referring to his discourses to them, as they are recorded in the Chronicles of Koonammavu convent attest to this fact.

pattern of life that was conducive to the realization of the new vision of life stemming from his filial relationship with Jesus. As this religious community (*Besrauma*) was accepted as an abode of virtuous life (*Puṇyasanketam*), it was seen to be an abode of committed and high-powered transformative action (*Tapasubhavanam*) to establish the Kingdom of God amidst humanity through the intense involvement of all those who became part of the new movement. Hence, the active involvement of Father Chavara in the life of the religious community as well as the larger Church that we see throughout his life was an earnest attempt on his part to ensure that a transformation was effected for the good of the Church and the society, despite the difficulties he encountered in realizing a number of projects that took shape in his divinely inspired mind, strongly and devotedly attached to the consciousness of the father, in the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, in the animation and management of the religious community, he attempted to facilitate the emergence of the divinely altered consciousness, rooted in the experience of the person of Jesus Christ, among all those who joined and, then, to share this altered consciousness with the larger society, through the multifarious ministries that he was instrumental to pioneer in his society of the nineteenth century.

Unusually for his times, Father Chavara was a blessed author, who wrote extensively in his mother tongue, Malayalam; apart from his diaries and letters, which are considered to be vital sources on the history of the Church and society of the nineteenth century Kerala, he has three major poems and a few dramas to his credit. In this context, his poems have a special relevance in terms of their spiritual content. They are *Ātmānuthāpam* (Compunction of the Soul), *Maraṇaveetil Pāduvānulla Pāna* (Dirge), and *Anasthāsyāyude Rekthasākṣyam* (Anasthasia's Martyrdom). These poems, extensive in content and novel in style, are rich in spiritual content and human inspiration. These literary productions were primarily Christian in content; in them we find an attempt to crystallize the author's deeper Christ experience for posterity and to transfer the same for the benefit of his fellow beings. C. P. Sreedharan, in his review of the literary compositions of Chavara, opined that Chavara's primary goal in all these writings was not to bring people to the religion of Christianity; instead, his sole intent was to bring Jesus Christ to the people and into their lives.¹⁷

Father Chavara led a transformed life anchored in the person of Jesus Christ and facilitated the establishment of a transformed consciousness among his confreres in religious life. With the support and involvement of the newly constituted community of religious men and women, he could pave the way for a transformed society. Thus, he himself proved to be a catalyst in evoking and establishing the Christic consciousness within himself and among the people to whom he reached out during his life and ministry, and became instrumental in "waking the world up."

4. Mission of the Church: Avenues to Share the Christic Consciousness

In the vision of the Church, a true mystic would adopt a prophetic and practical approach in ensuring the transference of the divinely altered consciousness among the members of society. His perception of the ills prevailing in the society in contrast to the all-embracing Christic consciousness enabled Father Chavara to challenge the status quo of the society, especially in setting right the unjust social stratification (especially the caste system). Instead of initiating a head-on collision, his inspired mind adopted positive actions, such as education of individuals and empowerment of the communities. At a time when Sanskrit (then the language of the upper castes) education was reserved exclusively for the elite, which was technically not accessible even to the Christians in spite of their higher status in the civil society, he dared to

¹⁷C. P. Sreedharan, "Kraisthava Chaitanyam Malayālavalkaricha Kavi" (Malayalam) in Z. M. Moozhoor, ed., *Chavarayachan Vividha Veekshanangalil*, Thevara: Janatha Services, 1989, (72-77) 76.

start a Sanskrit school attached to the first religious house. Within the Church also, his involvement was prophetic. This is especially seen in his daring move to persuade the bishop to issue a circular insisting that if each parish church (*palli*) does not begin a school (*pallikutam*) attached to it, the parish community will have to face restrictions on their functioning, even to the extreme of suppressing all sacramental celebrations. The prophetic impact of this instruction could be better understood by the fact that, at that time members of the Catholic community severely lagged behind in education. Thus, in every sense Father Chavara's initiatives for the renovation of the larger society are said to be "revolutionary in concept and application."

It is interesting to note that the original intention of the founding fathers (Palackal, Porukara, and Chavara) was to withdraw from the world so that they could ensure their own salvation. However, the evolution of the new religious community, inspired by the suggestion of the then bishop, turned out to be a vital force in effecting spiritual and social renewal not only in the lives of the in-group members but also the whole society amidst which they were now placed. K. C. Chacko, a biographer, captures it succinctly as follows: "... [Chavara] withdrew from the world so as to permeate it more forcibly."¹⁸ A. M. Mundadan, a renowned Indian Church historian, elaborates it further: "He retired from the world, not because he was afraid of it, or tired of it, or disliked it, or belittled it, but because he wanted to leaven the dough, to educate and to reform the sons and daughters of God, so that they became really His children. With a singleness of purpose he tried all through his life to equip himself with knowledge, wisdom and virtue and disseminate them to his fellow religious, priests, nuns and the laity at large."¹⁹ A renowned cultural activist Sukumar Azhikode, who is known for his social critique of the Kerala society, opined as follows: "Chavara did not renounce his family when he became a priest. The general concept is that a person who receives *sannyāsa* renounces his worldly pleasures and breaks all ties with his family. Those who break ties with their family are actually the 'prodigal sons'. But, Chavara was a devout son; he did not renounce his family, rather, he transcended the normal familial relations. Nothing is lost in transcending. In *sannyāsa*, the periphery of a family extends to embrace the whole of humankind, to the whole world, including orphans, the downtrodden and the disabled. This vision belongs to the concept of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is a family). This large family, which belongs to the world does not exclude anyone. *Sannyāsis* are those who vow to merge their own family with the universal one. They are the engines of God. It is through them that God soothes the leper, bandages the bruised, and comforts the miserable..."²⁰

One of the earliest concerns of Father Chavara was to bring about a spiritual renewal within his own faith community, to the care of which he was ordained. To this goal he decided to reach out to the members through the pulpit and press. At a period when liturgical celebrations were more attuned to be ritualistic, and in which there was no place for preaching homilies, Father Chavara started regular sermons during Sunday liturgy, and also initiated annual retreats in parishes with a view to instructing the faithful in religious and social value consciousness, and matters of faith and Christian responsibilities. For him, the time of liturgical celebration was the best opportunity to instruct the faithful and to guide them to a transformed consciousness and a new way of life. History attests to the fact that Father Chavara was a much sought after powerful and effective preacher. An effective sermon is not only one which is rich in biblical or theological content, but one which is capable of effecting a new consciousness among the listeners and to move them into a better

¹⁸K. C. Chacko, *Blessed Father Kuriackos Elias Chavara*, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1986, 61.

¹⁹A. Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 345.

²⁰Sukumar Azhikode, "A Man of Millennial Fusion," in John Mannarathara, ed., *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kochi: Viva Books, 2015, (242-248) 247-248.

Christian living. Being a person intensely established in Jesus consciousness, Father Chavara's sermons enabled him to transfer this heightened consciousness to his audience by which he could invite the latter to be connected to his consciousness as well as to be established in the same Jesus consciousness. His preaching was known to be founded in the message of the Gospel, and could penetrate into the inner recesses of the daily life of the Christian faithful, whom he knew closely. The homilies he preached were well appreciated for their Christian content and the sense of practical application in the daily life of the people. As this practice was found to be very fruitful, other priests, in the course of time, also started to preach homilies. Thus, the Sunday services in the churches were no longer an instance of mere ritualistic experience, but the ideal setting to offer instruction in religious and social value consciousness. Later, after the establishment of the monasteries, Chavara also initiated retreat preaching in parishes on an annual basis. The transformed consciousness that emerged from his intense and all-permeating experience of the person of Jesus Christ who was so much at the foreground of his sermons, that they compellingly initiated the transformation of the consciousness of his followers.

While the pulpit focused primarily on reaching out to the in-group members, Father Chavara's pioneering initiative in establishing a press had the intention of reaching out to the entire society. At a time when printed books, especially in his native tongue Malayalam, were scarce to access – the available books were either in Tamil, Syriac, or European languages – Father Chavara's aspiration to facilitate transformation of the consciousness of the people led him to facilitate the printing of books in Malayalam for the benefit of all. As he had no finances to import a press from Europe and was also denied access to the already established presses,²¹ with the benefit of one visit to one of these two presses, Father Chavara made a prototype of the press in plantain pith with his own hands and the wooden press was fabricated by a carpenter under his supervision. As he was convinced of the necessity of a press for the Catholic community, he accepted the humiliation and the physical hardships, and employed his ingenuity and artisanship in establishing the press and began the printing. Of course, the first set of books printed in his press was in the area of Christian prayers, spirituality, and liturgical texts; however, in the course of time, from the same press came out a number of works (including a vernacular daily, *Deepika*) which have significantly contributed to the cultural as well as religious enhancement of the people around the religious community. After having assessed the religious and cultural impact of the press of Father Chavara in the Kerala society, K. C. Chacko wrote: "The most far-reaching, illuminating, edifying and even sanctifying field of activity initiated by Fr. Kuriakose through the monasteries in general and primarily from Mannanam was that of printing."²²

An important initiative and a major institution that Father Chavara was instrumental in beginning within the Kerala Catholic Church was the school, which is identified by civil society as paradigmatic. As indicated earlier, not only did he start a Sanskrit school attached to the first religious community, but in his capacity as the Vicar General of the Syro-Malabar Christians, Father Chavara was instrumental in making the bishop issue a circular to start schools attached to all parishes. In course of time, all the CMI institutions established by Father Chavara and the subsequent generations, following his insight on the central importance of education for the transformation of society, started schools attached to each

²¹At that time only two presses existed in Kerala, the first owned by the government and the second established by the CMS Missionaries.

²²Chacko, *Blessed Father Kuriackos Elias Chavara*, 97. Mathew Ulakamthara has opined along the same line: "If you ask me, what is Chavara's most valuable service to the Kerala Church, I will say that it is the establishment of St. Joseph's Press of Mannanam" ("The First Kerala Apostle of the Press" in *Chavara Charamasadabdi 1871-1971*, 44).

monastery; so also was the case with the first convent he founded with the collaboration of Father Leopold Beccaro. Thus, the educational institutions that sprung up from the educational vision of Father Chavara, namely, the schools attached to the CMI and CMC religious congregations and various Catholic parish communities contributed significantly to enhance the educational status of the people in Kerala.

Establishment of the seminary attached to the first religious house (the first ministry that the newly constituted community had adopted) had the primary intention of forming the members of the new religious community as well as the diocesan clergy. All the three founding fathers of the CMI religious community were well recognized seminary professors, whose training was acclaimed to be professional as per the then standards. Looking at the seminary formation imparted by Father Chavara and other members of the CMI religious community, we can easily understand that this was one of the most effective means to impart a transformative consciousness in the Church and the larger society, as each candidate who came out of the seminary was expected to be playing a unique role in instilling Christic consciousness among the faithful whom they would reach out through their ministry. Thus, it could be stated that while religious education was more attuned to the creation of a set of committed leaders of society, public education imparted through schools and colleges were focused on the integral development of individuals who would become responsible members of a family and the nation at large.

Father Chavara was actively involved in the liturgical renewal of the Syro-Malabar Church to which he belonged. Although his liturgical tradition was deeply influenced by the Syriac tradition, due to various reasons, the Church till the nineteenth century did not have proper canonically valid guides to facilitate the orderly conduct of liturgical celebrations. As liturgy for Chavara was expected to facilitate moments of intense Christ experience, he was pained to see that lack of proper and orderly conduct deprived priests as well as the faithful of a deeper faith experience. Hence, with a view to bringing about order in the liturgical celebrations within the Syro-Malabar Church, Father Chavara took pains to locate the Syriac sources of liturgical celebrations, including liturgy of the hours, and to compile them in an order conducive to thematic progression of the celebration of the salvation history through the liturgical seasons. Moreover, his closer proximity with the practices of the Latin tradition inspired him to adapt some of its liturgical and spiritual practices such as forty hours adoration, way of the cross, recitation of rosary and other Marian devotions, etc. Although this was not a prominent institutionalized mission in the life of Father Chavara, the positive impact that his personal initiative could bring about is praiseworthy. While the mystical experiences of Father Chavara created within him the ability to go beyond the canonical forms of prayer and liturgical celebrations, he was convinced that proper patterns in community liturgical celebrations, ensured to reflect and celebrate the rich liturgical heritage of the Syro-Malabar tradition, was a necessity in the life of the community of faithful. Hence, his contributions in this regard have had a lasting impact.

5. Concerted Efforts to Disseminate the Transformed Vision

Father Chavara relished the Christic consciousness he had acquired through his ongoing religious life and commitment. Being a Christian to the core, he was not ready to settle down with this new spiritual experience as an exclusive endowment; instead his Christian conviction inspired him to avail himself and all that was at his disposal to ensure that the advantages of the Christic consciousness become available to the others. Hence, during his lifetime, everything that he did ultimately led to the beginning of programmes and institutions to disseminate this transformed and transforming vision, stemming from his intense consciousness enkindled by the consciousness of Jesus.

5.1. Foundation of Religious Communities

Although we cannot attribute the pioneering inspiration behind the setting up of the religious community to Father Chavara, he shared their aspirations and was instrumental in collaborating with his senior mentors, and leading it to its proper and canonical establishment. Moreover, the concrete shape given to the life and activities of the religious community, its identity and charisma, were significantly formulated and enhanced by the unique contributions of Chavara. His reliance on the inscrutable Providence of God was his primary armour whenever he encountered problems associated with the establishment of the religious communities for both men and women. The first letter that was submitted to the bishop for permission to begin the construction of the first community in Mannanam succinctly states the motive behind the project: “It is necessary that in this territory there are persons who are continuously engaged in prayer and good works for the greater glory of God and the edification of the Church.” A similar motive is visible in the intention of starting the first indigenous convent for women religious, which Father Chavara did in collaboration with the Italian Carmelite missionary, Leopold Beccaro. In the Chronicles of the first convent in Koonammavu, in which the first few pages were written by Father Chavara himself, we come across the following pertinent statement: “Besides striving for their own spiritual realization, the members of the Congregation have to teach other girls, and train them in some handicrafts.” These statements explicitly state the twofold essential purposes of founding communities of religious life in India: to facilitate an intense and unconditional following of the person of Jesus within the context of common living and to be unconditionally available to serve the people of God.

With this twofold purposes in mind, Father Chavara, later, in one his circulars to his CMI confreres, wrote: “He [God] wants it [i.e., establishing this congregation] to be a mirror of virtuous life, and its monasteries to be resorts of virtuous persons (*punyasanketam*). It should not be reduced to an association of self-willed stewards and business administrators.”²³ In the same Circular, he stated categorically: “The strength of monasteries does not consist in the thickness of their walls but in the religious zeal and virtue of their members. In many places there have been monasteries that were greater in number and strength than ours. However, they have been transformed into woods and habitats of animals. We are progenitors of the monasteries here. We are the cornerstones.” In his final Testament to the community, he exhorts the members to practice virtues of religious life with the intention of attaining perfection. “One mark of a religious is total surrender of one’s will, and obedience as if one does not have one’s own eyes and ears. One who practices it is a true religious. This is not a difficult task; still, we must admit that we have not yet practised it to perfection or made a strenuous effort in its practice.”²⁴ These statements indicate the special care that Father Chavara took in ensuring that the communities stemming from the original foundation in Mannanam would lead a virtuous life, without sacrificing the two essential aspects of the foundation, as stated above.

Moreover, the fact that Father Chavara was instrumental in establishing two indigenous religious communities (for men and women), his personal involvement in nurturing both these communities in their initial stages, and carefully guiding them through their canonical foundation, clearly attest to the fact that his spiritual vision was transmitted to those members whom he groomed in these two communities. His personal involvement in the formation and animation of the members of these communities successfully enabled him to develop them into a team that would transmit the message of the Gospel through various means and ensure the gradual transformation of the consciousness of the society at large. In

²³Circular 1, 61-62, Cited in Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 273.

²⁴Testament 70, 100, cited in Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 274.

fact, the greatness of an innovator does not lie only in his being personally innovative, but also in his ability to continue the strategy of innovation in and through those who succeed him; the successors need to be not only innovative, but also capable of continuing the founding legacies to their full stature. The fact that these two religious communities (CMI, CMC and CTC; at present, the total number of members have crossed 12,000) founded by Father Chavara, continue to contribute significantly to the transformation of society through their multifarious involvement in the lives of the people vouch for the lasting effectiveness of the religious movement that Father Chavara had initiated and established.

5.2. Seminary for the Formation of Devoted and Integral Pastors

The first ministry that the newly established religious community of men started was the seminary formation. Starting a seminary would have been their natural choice (especially at the inspiration of Father Thomas Palackal, the senior-most member among the foundering fathers), as they were already familiar with priestly formation (themselves being *Malpans* or professors of theology appointed by the bishop) and due to the realization that the Church in Kerala was badly in need of properly trained priests. The decision to offer seminary formation for priestly and religious candidates attached to the first religious community in Mannanam was itself a paradigm shift in the formation of priestly candidates in the Syro-Malabar Church. For, until this time, candidates for priesthood were usually trained under the care and supervision of one priest, who would be usually identified and appointed by the bishop from among the best in terms of erudition and spiritual orientation; however, this system, which followed the *gurukula* model prevalent in the Hindu community, had its own inbuilt weakness, especially as the training process was exclusively restricted to one person. The seminary, attached to the new monastery, had the advantage of engaging more eligible members of the new community in the formation of seminarians. Involvement of more instructors, it was expected, would offer a better and more effective ambience for the formation and transformation of the candidates; it is naturally understood that their spiritual and ministerial perspectives would also be made broader through the involvement of more qualified and committed instructors, as it had taken place in this pioneering mission of the CMI religious community under the leadership of Father Chavara.

According to Leopold Beccaro, the author of his first biography, Father Chavara, even as a young cleric, realized that “an uneducated priest was not only inefficient to do anything worthwhile in his pastoral work, but may be even detrimental to the salvation of souls.”²⁵ When he was at the helm of affairs in imparting formation to the seminarians, Father Chavara made sure that they were offered opportunities to prepare themselves for the responsible mission that awaited them. Thus, as the seminary started functioning, Chavara, along with his senior mentors, was also instrumental in designing and conducting the programme of formation in such a way that at the end of the training, each candidate was expected to become more effective in realizing not only the salvation of souls, but also the renewal of the society and the uplift of those people who were segregated against in the social and religious structures in the nineteenth century Kerala. From this perspective it could be stated that the new paradigm of seminary formation started in Mannanam under the leadership of Father Chavara had the ideal goal of instilling in them the heart of Jesus understood from the Gospels, and the mind of Jesus that would understand the existential necessities of the people and would stand up against injustice, and avail for themselves the establishment of the

²⁵Leopold Beccaro, *A Short Biography of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (originally written in Malayalam in 1871), trans. Postulation of the Cause of Bl. Chavara, Mannanam: St. Joseph Monastery, 2003, 6. According to Joseph M. O. Nedumkunnam, “realizing that the good future of the Kerala Church lies in well-disciplined priests, the founding fathers established a seminary at Mannanam.” “Chavara and the Religious Congregation of Mary Immaculate” (Malayalam) in *Chavara Charamasadabdi 1871-1971*, 6.

Kingdom of God. Although all these ideals were not fully realized in the lives of many pastors who came out of this seminary, the faithful of the Church perceived the conspicuous difference as they were better equipped to deal with the needs of the people by way of their involvement in matters spiritual as well as material, both being essential for the integral welfare of humanity.

5.3. People Participation in Transformative Projects

Although Father Chavara, along with the other two founders, had an initial inclination to run away from society in view of realizing their own salvation, after the providential intervention from the bishop who asked them to start a religious community by continuing to live amidst the people, his perception of the role of the ordinary people in every project underwent tremendous transformation. In every project that he started, he devised a decisive role to be fulfilled by the ordinary people. Most of the institutions, either in the secular or religious sphere, started by Father Chavara, relied on the financial and political support of the people in the locality. This is found verified in the completion of the first house in Mannanam, the foundation of the seminary in different locations, the setting up of schools in Mannanam and Arpookkara, the printing press, and the starting of the convent in Koonammavu.

As all these institutions were directly or indirectly contributing towards the uplift of the people and the transformation of the society, Chavara had no reservation in tapping the resources from those who could afford, and had the goodwill to contribute towards such noble causes. This is yet another instance of informal education imparted by Father Chavara whereby he could not only pool the resources from the public for the realization of various projects, but also could conscientize them with regard to their responsibility for the common good, especially for the good of the marginalized and the less-privileged.

It is interesting to note that Father Chavara had designed programmes to ensure the participation of everyone in various projects. While the wealthy made significant contributions at various stages of the projects mentioned above, such interventions were impossible for ordinary people who struggled to meet both ends. However, Father Chavara's ingenious mind planned for easy and non-coercive methods such as contributing a handful of rice (*pidiyari*),²⁶ dedicating a coconut palm (*kettuthengu*),²⁷ etc., to ensure the participation of ordinary people in the new missions. His ingenuity in ensuring the participation of the ordinary faithful becomes conspicuous in his proposal to the members of his home parish Kainakary, to begin a house of charity (*upavisāla* or *dharmasāla*) planned to house the old and sick, who had no means to tend to their daily needs. A passage from his letter to the parishioners is quite revealing of his mind: "Now my intense desire and earnest request to you is to begin such a confraternity... Keep a charity box with the label "Happy Death Charity Box," unashamedly beg of others and raise a fund yourselves; build a modest bungalow-like house of bamboo and other cheap materials, with just two rooms on either side of the veranda near your small chapel. You may call it an *upavisāla* or *dharmasāla* (charity home), and shelter there orphans or the aged or sick or beggars who have no one to take care of them. By God's grace, in course of time, it will be the first of the charity homes in the Malabar. In following my advice you must be prepared to become shameless for the sake of the Lord! Initially, people may even call you fools! But, once started, it will easily be done."

²⁶By *pidiyari* he meant that a family will set apart a handful of rice for a common cause every time it cooked. Although the portion set aside in each instance will be an insignificant quantity, when pooled together within a family and, then, from the entire parish, it turned out to be a sizeable quantity the proceedings from which could contribute significantly to any project.

²⁷*Kettuthengu* was a project in which the yield of one coconut palm will be set apart for the common cause, most associated with the Church.

This is a clear indication of the fact that not only did Father Chavara insist on starting schools attached to churches, but he also wanted this type of *upavisalas* to be attached to the churches, as the best expression of our Christian existence and commitment. In fact, experience gained from spiritual experiences and liturgical observances must be effectively communicated by every Christian by involving himself in socially transformative projects, which are capable of alleviating the pain and helplessness of the ordinary people living next to us. Father Chavara's insightful involvement in projects and his unique ways of involving ordinary people in them, especially in spreading the light of learning and light of charitable action, gave expression to our Christian commitment and became a catalyst in social transformation.

5.4. Inclusive Approach

Another strategically important approach that Father Chavara initiated within his mission was the inclusive approach. Strictly speaking, he was ordained for the members of the Syro-Malabar community; in the normal course of events, there was no need for him to look beyond those members or families directly entrusted to his care. However, the spiritual experiences that Father Chavara acquired enabled him to grow beyond the narrow boundaries and to offer his services to everyone. Indeed, his Jesus experience (*appa* experience) transformed his perspective to make room for everyone and to include even those who were otherwise segregated against by the rest of the society. Thus, it is worth noting that Father Chavara had developed a universal outlook be it in matters of Christian religious observances within the Church (his mind was more inter-ritual, ecumenical, and interreligious) or social uplift. In every sphere, therefore, his open attitude enabled him to keep the spectrum of his mission as wide as possible.

Thus, neither his prophetic vision for a better morrow, nor the innovative practical action needed for realizing the vision, was restricted to the members of his own religious community, i.e., the Syro-Malabar Catholics of Kerala. Whether it is in the starting of schools, convents, or the press, the inclusive approach was a necessary character of Father Chavara's involvement in social uplift; his insightful invitation extended to others also ensured that such participatory projects would be effectively carried out by ordinary people, even if either Father Chavara or the other members of the religious community was not around to animate them; it was indeed a formation in effective Christian witness. Moreover, as children from the socially and culturally marginalized communities were offered a chance to be educated, Chavara facilitated not only their socio-cultural and financial betterment but also their re-integration into the mainstream of society.

A paradigm shift can be seen in the emphasis that Chavara laid on the uplift of the Dalit (a group mainly consisting of members belonging to the lower strata of the society, or those who were technically identified as outside the inhuman caste structure) and women. Usually, a person in authority would have been more attuned to look after the welfare of those who were close to the establishment, and to maintain the status quo; he would prefer to cater to their needs as that would, in turn, safeguard and perpetuate his status in authority. However, Father Chavara had a totally different approach and developed a more inclusive and integral perspective in dealing with the needs of the people around him. Without disregarding the welfare of the mainstream society, but at the same time without succumbing to the dominating and exclusive approaches prevailing among the higher castes and the well-to-do ruling class of the society, Chavara designed different strategies in the arena of education that would not only enlighten the world to the plight of the marginalized, but would also put in place provisions and institutions to take care of their needs and pave the way for the emergence of a totally new perspective that was more inclusive of and beneficial to the people of the marginalized classes.

Father Chavara wrote a “Testament of a Good Father” (*Nalla Appante Chāvarul*) to the members of his home parish in which he instructed members of Kainakari parish to be owners of a life imbued with a sense of social justice and equality. This was a clarion call from a prophet who was intent on setting things right in a society that was unjustifiably and almost irredeemably divided along caste and class lines. Most of his writings are, thus, imbued with a fundamental Christian vision, which has nothing to do with conversion of people into Christianity, but offered a solid foundation for a lasting social life inspired by the message of the Gospel. In fact, his inclusive vision of society, based on fundamental Christian values, enabled him to usher in social reforms within a society that had had no history of social reform to bridge the gaps in society.

The inclusive and integral vision of Father Chavara also inspired him to do his best to empower women, especially by founding a convent with the earnest hope that women themselves will be the hope for their own renewal and social uplift. Starting the convent for women, according to Chavara, had a twofold purpose, as is evident from 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.” As stated earlier, the original goal of founding the convent, along with the spiritual realization of the members, included education, social uplift, and the wellbeing of womenfolk in the society. Hence, Jossy and Kochumuttom wrote: “The establishment of a religious congregation for women was certainly an antidote to those socio-cultural evils affecting women, as its subsequent history has already proved.”²⁸ Generally speaking, while some male chauvinistic seers of the past made room for the institutionalization and maintenance of subjugation of women in the Indian society, there were some other liberated and liberating enlightened seers who adopted an all-liberating perspective in their vision and mission. Father Chavara was determined to put an end to the oppression and subjugation of women perpetrated by the male dominated religious and secular society. The best way to set things right, as he had understood, was to provide them the opportunities for education. Given the context of Father Chavara’s initiatives, most of which were channelized through the religious setup of the Catholic Church in which he was also an ordained minister. As a consequence, he spontaneously planned for the establishment of a convent, and history attests to the fact that this was a need of the time.

5.5. Strategies for Self-Respect and Self-Reliance

As a spiritually realized person, Father Chavara’s mind was ignited by the Lord; then, he became an instrument to transform the society, especially through the corrective and constructive programmes and institutions that he had initiated for the welfare of all in the society. It is interesting to note that, in turn, he could also inspire others (both members of his religious community and the lay collaborators) to participate in the same source of inner spiritual strength, and to become powerful instruments to continue the social renewal that Father Chavara had initiated. The most effective of the steps for social transformation that Father Chavara initiated could be seen in his insistent involvement in education. Education imparted through the portals of Church institutions brought about social and economic uplift among the people. While the caste system had made a lasting damage to a large section of humanity in the Indian society, the remedial measure, according to Father Chavara, was to positively empower them by way of education. While education enables people to move up the social ladder by way of attaining better economic independence and social respectability, their reintegration in the mainstream society takes place as a consequence. From such a

²⁸Jossy and Thomas Kochumuttom, *Dream Fulfilled: Blessed Chavara and the Foundation of CMC*, Gazhiabad: CMC Pushparam Province, 2005, 4 (style of the text is slightly modified).

perspective, the inclusive approach that Father Chavara insisted upon and his initiative to start schools attached to every school, which admitted candidates from all strata of the society, played a significant role in changing the social perception and reintegration of the outcaste and the marginalized, thus, resulting in the gaining of economic self-reliance and self-respect. Such a progressive orientation was a ground-breaking one, especially when we know the dehumanizing understanding of human polluting human, as it was practised within the caste segregation. When the members of the upper caste believed that even the shadow of a person from among the sudras (lowest caste) or the panchamas (outcastes) could pollute them, it was impossible to break the social barrier and to reinstate the self-respect among these people. However, slowly, the strategy of education penetrated within the thick walls of caste segregation,²⁹ and the project of Father Chavara realized its goal to a great extent.

Spiritually realized Father Chavara could develop within himself a sense of equality and equity which propelled him to design programmes and institutions to eliminate such evils and to form a new generation that would overcome such evils in their consciousness as well as in their daily living. It is believed that his social penetration through religious and secular education, though was not perceived to be revolutionary at that time, became effective due to the solid spiritual foundation or the new spiritual consciousness that Father Chavara gained from his incessant contact with the person of Jesus Christ. For him Jesus was the beloved father (*nalla appan*) and everybody else the children of the same father. Being the one closer to the heart of Jesus, and having known the mind of the Lord, especially through his insightful learning of the message of the Gospel, Father Chavara, as the elder brother responsible for the younger ones, spent his life to set a new social fabric in which all could be children of the same father, and brothers and sisters in the same family.

Many a time, when institutions become stronger and better established, we run the risk of losing sight of the original vision and thrust, and may begin to slip into a more self-centred existence. If a Christian – be it an individual or an institution – begins to function for the sake of self-interest or begins to exist exclusively for oneself, Father Chavara knew that it was the beginning of losing one's *Christianness*. For, when a Christian ceases to exist for others, he or she would cease to be a *Christian*! Hence, without looking at the cost he had to pay, he worked incessantly to establish a just society, primarily by working to reinstate self-reliance and self-respect through education imparted through the portals of the institutions that Father Chavara established and animated during his lifetime. In fact, the inner freedom that he could experience from his closer association with Jesus Christ, inspired him to ensure that the same freedom (including the deliverance from all types of unfreedoms) was available and accessible to everyone.

6. Conclusion

As a mystic who got established in the consciousness of Jesus Christ, Father Chavara had an intense aspiration to create a new world order grounded on the oneness of reality (originating from his personal experience of Jesus as his beloved father) and unity of humanity (as brothers and sisters or children of the same father). His realization that the society was already divided along various evil designs and structures perpetuated by the vested interests instilled in him the ingenuity and courage to commit himself to the social uplift of the people beyond the narrow boundaries of caste and creed. While the Catholic Church celebrates the memory of Kuriakose Elias Chavara for the holiness that he was bestowed with, it also celebrates the social commitment that ensued from his Christic consciousness. Thus, armed

²⁹A much later pronouncement in the Mandal Commission Report (1980) expresses the atrocities perpetuated by the caste practices: "The social ranks and their respective duties, ordained by God for humanity, were intended to remain fixed and immutable, like the limbs of the body that cannot be exchanged or replaced."

with his deeper love for God and his people, Father Chavara could oppose and eliminate, in his own ways, structures that perpetrated systemic injustice and divisive strategies that enslaved people for many centuries.

The task of establishing a renewed society along the lines of the Kingdom of God is not only the task of any one individual. However, those individuals who have been intensely touched by the message of the Gospel and have understood the positive traits of a Kingdom community have a responsibility to animate the rest of the faith community as well as the larger society to dedicate themselves to the Kingdom values. As Christ consciousness is a unitive consciousness, it impelled him to bring about a synergistic approach in attaining spiritual and social transformation of the whole society. Indeed, these Christian dynamics, aligned through the ingenuity of Father Chavara, ultimately fructified in the form of a new Christian consciousness instilling in the minds of people a sense of unity and equality, justice and peace. These monumental achievements, otherwise unimaginable and unachievable by human standards, especially within his historical context, was made possible by his ultimate self-surrender that enables a mystic to see the Divine power welling up within him, providing him with otherwise unknown creative powers, empowering him to tackle the issues of the world that are otherwise mountainous for his reach and solution.

Thus, subscribing to the all-inclusive and integrating approach, mystics such as Father Chavara tend to open up their life's horizon, extending the experience of divine presence as well as communion with the Divine, to every realm of creation. Not only do they harness the divine power to challenge and overthrow the limiting structures and debilitating practices perpetuated in the name of God and traditions, but also employ their creative powers to design novel outlooks and holistic practices to transform the lives of the contemporaries and future generations. As higher plateaus of divine experience stretch us out into infinity, and a clearer vision for a better humanity becomes accessible in the emerging and established consciousness of the mystics, they spontaneously give shape to more just and humane structures and practices, so that the same vision and conviction, sustained in the Christic consciousness, could be shared by everyone else, leading to the ongoing establishment of the Kingdom of God amidst the whole creation.