



Fostering Feminine Genius

An Empowering Theology of Women
from Kuriakose Elias Chavara



Jossy Maria CMC

Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 7

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Jossy Maria CMC

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***Fostering Feminine Genius:
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from Kuriakose Elias Chavara***

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THEOLOGICAL STUDIES ON SAINT CHAVARA

Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871) - a Carmelite religious priest and professor of theology (*Malpan*) in the Syro-Malabar Church, who pioneered consecrated life in the Indian Church by founding the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI; in collaboration with Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, in 1831), the first indigenous religious congregation for men, and the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC; in collaboration with Leopold Beccaro OCD, in 1866) - is widely recognized for his pioneering efforts to reform the Church in Kerala and the society of the nineteenth century. His credible Christian witness, along with the leadership he offered to the Church of Saint Thomas Christians, at a time when it was passing through multiple jurisdictional crises, scripted a spiritual and disciplined growth in the Kerala Church.

Canonized on 23 November 2014, Saint Chavara's personal sanctity and Christian wisdom are identified to be unique. While secular society admires his contributions to pioneering a set of revolutionary changes in uplifting people existing on the margins and those who were socially ostracised through educational and social initiatives, the fundamental core of all his achievements is solidly established in his filial discipleship of Jesus Christ, whom he addressed '*ente nalla appa*' (my beloved father).

Saint Chavara had a firm foundation in Christian faith, which is clearly visible throughout his life and is testified by those who knew him. He articulated his views and perspectives primarily based on his personal encounter with Jesus and also based on his readings and theological reflections. They are available to us through his extant writings, which are published in four volumes in the *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*. Some of these works, recognized as efforts hitherto unprecedented in Indian literary genre, offer us a

goldmine of rich and sound theological insights. Although his access to scientific Christian literature was minimal (if not completely absent), his writings draw from the biblical as well as other Christian traditions, which he had faithfully and creatively interpreted for the enhancement of the faith of the Christian community that he had catered to throughout his life.

Theological Studies on Saint Chavara – a joint effort of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) and Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC) – attempts to promote and publish fruits of scientific investigation into the unique and varied theological insights of Saint Chavara in the form of monographs. These theological investigations will be instrumental in appreciating and popularising the sound and solid theological contributions he made to enhance Catholic faith in the nineteenth century, which, in turn, indicate that he deserves titles such as ‘Father of the Syro-Malabar Church’ and ‘Doctor of the Church’. As the publication of this series is undertaken with the blessings of the Synod of the Syro-Malabar Archiepiscopal Church, which had also benefitted from the eminent theological acumen, pastoral insights, and ecclesiastical leadership of Saint Chavara, these studies would, hopefully, bring to light the multifarious theological heritage that he had bequeathed to the Church and the subsequent generations of faithful in India.

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Foreword

**SAINT CHAVARA'S COMMITMENT
TO THE FULL HUMANITY OF WOMEN
AND THEIR EMPOWERMENT**

Dr. Thomas Kochuthara

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Numerous movements and ideologies have been emerging, fighting for the rights and equality of women even in the modern society. In the past, often they were excluded from any leadership position which could exercise social power and authority. But from the beginning of Christianity, women have been included in the New Community. They have found the Church more affirming and liberating than their surrounding cultures. Christianity taught a spiritual unity that at least potentially mitigated the harshness of the Roman law in which women were considered non-citizens with no legal rights. Inequality was everywhere in that system. Both Christian and secular writers of the time attest many times to the significant involvement of women in the early growth of Christianity.

Nonetheless, the potential equality embedded in Jesus' message often failed to go deep into the teachings and practice of the Church. It has also remained far from the Bible which sees both sexes having equal worth.

But there have been voices in the Church calling attention to the dignity of women and to the importance of their contribution to the development of society. Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a spiritual leader and social reformer of the nineteenth century, is one of such personalities who fought against discrimination and injustice towards women. The

book written by Sr. Jossy Maria CMC is a remarkable attempt to rediscover the theology implied in the teachings and pastoral endeavours of the poet saint for the spiritual and social uplift of women. The author has done this by examining the teachings of the Church which have taken a positive turn towards the role of women in the modern age. Chavara's attitude anticipated the changes found in the modern teachings. He was well aware of the importance of the role women had to play in the society for its own development. His teachings were giving proper motivation for women to become aware of their possibilities and to be the agents of change for the progress of society and the harmony of the people.

The thoughts emerging in the book lead us to an encounter with numerous current trends which focus on re-establishing the rights of women and opening up ways and means for their development. Feminist movements which arose in reaction to the male domination have been trying to provide women with opportunities for the growth of their personality.

Feminism is a range of movements and ideologies that aim to define, establish, and achieve the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. Feminism opposes male domination and the unfair treatment of women. Efforts to change that include fighting gender stereotypes and seeking to establish educational and professional opportunities for women that are equal to those for men. Numerous feminist movements and ideologies have developed over the years and include different viewpoints and aims. Some have been criticized for taking into account only white and western perspectives. Now it has become a global movement representing a multiplicity of cultural, political,

racial, and social perspectives with a wide range of women's concerns and experiences from all continents.

Throughout the history of most of the nations women were confined to the domestic sphere, while public life was reserved for men. In some places they were denied the right to own property, to study, or to participate in public life. In other places, they were still compelled to cover their heads in public, and were considered the property of the husbands and could be easily exploited and enslaved. Even as late as the early twentieth century, women could neither vote nor hold elective office in many countries. They were prevented from conducting business without a male representative, be it father, brother, husband, legal agent, or even son. Married women could not exercise control over their own children without the permission of their husbands. Moreover, women had little or no access to education and were barred from most professions. In some parts of the world, such restrictions on women continue even today.

Although feminism is being marginalized, ignored, or condemned by many Christians, its effects are felt across the whole spectrum of contemporary Christianity. It is also true that women have been doing theology since the early church, and today it is their task to retrieve the neglected voices of women of the past and to formulate new theological symbols and values for the present and the future, and to question the oppressions and exploitation of women.

The encounter between feminism and theology has taken place in course of time and it was given added impetus by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which encouraged Roman Catholics to enter into a positive engagement with the non-Catholic world. There were many Catholic women pioneers working in the initially optimistic climate that followed the Council. Some of them offered a hard-hitting

feminist critique of Christian misogyny, but still expressed hope that the Church could be transformed. Later, some went to the extent of rejecting Christianity as irredeemably patriarchal and came to the conclusion about the impossibility of reconciliation between feminism and the Christian tradition.

But many of them continue to hope that a corrective is possible to traditional theology which excluded women's voices and experiences and also developed practices that are sexist, patriarchal and androcentric. Contemporary feminist theology finds its historical roots with those who question authors of sacred texts and those who challenge theologians who defined what it meant to be a human being from the perspective of patriarchal, male experience. For centuries, male experience was the standard by which the worth and contribution of women were judged. In the 1960s, contemporary feminist theologians began to challenge and protest these fundamental doctrines and practices of institutional Christianity.

This theology now embraces a wide range of perspectives and methods and is known under a variety of names. There is the *dalit* women's theology which explores the situation of low-caste and poor Christian women in India, African women's theology, primarily focusing on the encounter between African culture and Christianity, *minjung* feminist theology, from the perspective of the poor and the marginalized in the Korean cultural context, etc. This plurality means that methods and sources extend far beyond those regarded as theological in the strictly academic sense, including, among others, oral traditions, literature, art, biography, which all reflect the diversity of experiences in different contexts.

This has become a global movement situated in many settings, and drawing on many different political, philosophical, and religious roots to express its concerns and convictions. It has as its most important goal the promotion of the full humanity of women.

The means for achieving this goal is the transformation of society and the empowerment of women. Theology is not to be isolated in the ivory tower of academia but must take root in the streets and the homes of ordinary women and men, and must be orientated to the transformation of society, and, particularly, to the liberation and empowerment of women. Theology which has, in the past, fuelled and legitimised women's oppression must now become a tool and resource for women's empowerment. What makes theology relevant for women according to this principle is not merely the subject matter or content, or the gender of the theologian, but the commitment to doing theology with the specific goal of empowering and liberating women.

In the book *Fostering Feminine Genius* there is no academic discussion on feminist theological topics. But a close look at the book shows that the author has clearly grasped how Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara had aimed at the goal of developing the full humanity of the women of his time. He was trying to reach the goal not by entering into any academic discussions, but by pursuing the means of empowering women. His high respect for women is analysed in the book based on his writings on his own mother, the biblical characters, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. He developed his theology of women on the basis of Christian anthropology according to which woman is created in the image and likeness of God. Living in the socio-religious context of the nineteenth century where women were denied equality with men, Saint Chavara

projected his vision of women sharing common humanity and common baptism with men and so capable of taking up leadership in the institutional Church and society.

But as patriarchal structures were predominant in the social fabric women were considered weak and were denied equal participation. The means Saint Chavara employed for empowering women are praiseworthy and relevant in today's world also. He started educational programmes and income generating projects for women in order to enable them realize their own worth in a society which discriminated against them and considered them weak and incapable and so could easily be exploited. It was with the intention of restoring their dignity that Chavara depicted in his writings several women who were witnesses to the power of Jesus. It was the sign of his appreciation for their capacity to be intelligent, apostolic, creative, courageous, and to lead a life of faith and freedom. He encouraged them to develop their talents, articulate their thoughts, clarify their ideas, and develop personal standpoints. He also helped them learn a profession to earn a living and to be self-reliant.

The establishment of a religious congregation for women was the most important step Chavara took to promote feminine genius and develop their skills. It became the source of reform for the Kerala Church of the nineteenth century and the transformation of women in the larger society. Through it the portals of the consecrated life were opened for women who, in turn, led a dedicated life for the uplift of the neglected and the weak. The members were given the opportunity to get educated, learn languages, both local and of the neighbouring states and also liturgical and biblical, and to develop their artistic talents and skills. The formation received by the members made them work for the

progress of the disadvantageded sections of women by giving them training in skilled jobs of embroidery, needle work, spinning, stitching, etc.

An important step in fostering feminine genius consists in retrieving the neglected voices of women of the past who were playing important role in human history. In formulating new theological symbols and values for the present and the future also an exploration of their experiences in various contexts will be necessary. Mary is accorded the place of primacy among these voices and experiences echoed in human history. For Chavara, Mary was a symbol of women's equality, exercising her leadership in the apostolic college. Initiated into the domestic life following traditional religious practices, she went beyond the patriarchal culture and made herself free for the Gospel. She became a role model for women and a paradigm of our universal quest for justice, equality, dignity, and wholeness. The author has very clearly presented the theology of Saint Chavara as an invitation to recognize Mary as the model of authentic femininity and to seek new ways of understanding our being created in divine image and likeness so that women will be freed from all forms of subjugation and come to an enlightened and active awareness of their dignity.

This is an insightful book written on theology for women based on the writings of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara who paid attention to promoting their cause. He did this as a social and religious reformer who had envisaged the development of his society, for which the growth and equality of women were indispensable. While feminist theologians may overlook what Chavara has done on the ground that it is androcentric and patriarchal, with extensive study and analysis, *Fostering Feminine Genius*

establishes that he was deeply committed to the full humanity of women and their empowerment. Capturing beautifully the vision and integrity in his writings as well as in the multiple activities he undertook for the advance and welfare of the people, Sr. Jossy Maria CMC has established her position with conviction and feeling, and has made a significant contribution to universal theology.

Presentation

**CHAVARA AND WOMEN
FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD
Empowered Womanhood
for an Empowered Humanity**

Saju Chackalackal CMI

General Editor, Theological Studies on Saint Chavara

Abba's Kingdom and Humanity of the Anawim

Jesus of Nazareth, through his life and ministry, brought to humanity a new vision of God as *Abba* and his Kingdom of unconditional love and mercy. Instead of imaging God as a powerful monarch, as it was usual for the age, Jesus presented the image of a loving father, whose ethos conspicuously differed from the intimidating God imageries of the time, including that of the Old Testament (i.e., of the Jewish religion in which Jesus himself was groomed), though some aspects of the novel compassionate vision of God could certainly be identified in them. Jesus revealed God to the world as the loving Father, the *Abba*, who not only created everyone – male and female – in his image and likeness (Gen 1:27),¹ but also offered a new set of values subverting the

¹In the creation narratives, whether it is the first instance of Genesis 1:1-2:4 where “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27), or the second instance in which Adam was provided with Eve, a *helpmate* or a vital partner (Gen 2:4-25), God ensured that human beings – be it man or woman, or those born with variant traits – were not left to oneself in isolation, but were made to be “a relational reality” (CDF, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church

ethos of the dominant (Mt 5:1-10) and accepted and cared for everyone irrespective of racial or cultural, sexual or gender¹ identities (Gal 3:26-28; Col 3:11), bestowed all the bounties upon the good and the evil, just and unjust alike (Mt 5:45), and could welcome and embrace even the worst (Lk 15:11-32; Jn 8:1-11; Lk 23:32-43), especially if they could possess the heart of little children (Mt 19:13-14). Instead of restricting to a geographically located kingdom or abode, Jesus presented the *Abba* as an omnipotent God, dwelling everywhere, especially in the human hearts that are permeated with the attitude or mind-set of Jesus himself, its most telling characteristic being mercy for the other, especially the oppressed, the persecuted, and those denied of their rights and human dignity. Jesus, thus, became a trailblazer for the Kingdom values, the practice of which was hoped to realize the original creative purpose of God for the humankind. Thus, in his Kingdom ministry that was primarily oriented to restore the “original blessing”² to the whole creation, Jesus not only transformed human perception about God (from that of a judgemental and punitive all-powerful Lord to that of a loving and merciful father, *Abba*), but also offered a novel understanding of human relationships in the context of being the offspring of the same *Abba* and, hence, siblings.

and in the World,” 2004, §6), fruitfully *encountering* the other in an all-encompassing relationship of companionship, sharing, mutual enhancement, and communion of the masculine and the feminine, fundamentally reflecting the dynamic relationship existing in the Triune God.

¹While biological identity constitutes one’s sex, it is the role identity in a social context that determines one’s gender identity.

²Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, New York: Tarcher, 2000.

Taking the *Abba's* Kingdom beyond the realm of spatial understanding, its extension and reach could be conceived as penetrating the entire created realm, transforming itself into an operational socio-spiritual sovereignty permeated with “the righteousness, peace, and joy of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17), which Jesus named heaven. This ‘already but not yet’ heaven, or the Kingdom community, interestingly, is characterised by its inclusivity and universality (universal inclusivity and inclusive universality), keeping itself open to an ever-evolving communion of those who consciously subscribe to and realize the *Abba* consciousness or the *Jesuan* attitude, as it is unveiled in the Gospel. Inbuilt into it is a call to overcome anything that is *exclusive* and *parochial*: Jesus’ call to “repent and believe in the good news” (Mk 1:15) is a pre-condition to be part of the ‘Kingdom of God’ that he began to proclaim. The resultant *liberation* was nothing but an insistent call to bring about a new heaven and earth where the *Jesuan* ethos, ethos of the Kingdom of God, would be practised and a new community with inclusive and universal outlook would be constituted: it includes instances of the poor receiving the good news, the captives attaining release, the blind recovering their sight, the oppressed going free, and proclaiming a favourable time of the *Abba* (Lk 4:18-19). It is essential to note here that the liberation attained pertains to those who are the victims of injustice, the powerless, the marginalized, and the outcast. *Abbas's* love does not make a preference between male and female; there is, however, a conspicuous preference for the *anawim*, the oppressed, the exploited, and the marginalized in the society. Indeed, there is no veil between *Abba* and the prayers of His *anawim*. Jesus’ Kingdom, thus, invites us to be part of a dynamically interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent whole – a community of disciples emerging from a web of relationships

that necessitates *agapeic* networking among all beings (i.e., unconditional love for the neighbour, as Jesus puts it). However, those who have been bypassed by the powerful (socially, culturally, economically, and religiously) and by the mainstream upholders of unjust systems clamour for restitution of their status as the children of God and for their re-integration into the Kingdom community, which is made possible through the twin processes of reinstating the denied humanity of the *anawim* of the Lord, on the one hand, and, positively, constituting a fellowship of Jesus' disciples on an equal footing, on the other. Against the backdrop of domination and injustice prevailing in a male chauvinistic social setup, Jesus invited everyone to participate in God's reign where just and right relationships would be consciously made to build up a holistic community (Jn 8:1-11; Jn 4:4-26) and every woman would be accorded her rightful personal as well as social space.

It is pertinent to recall here that John the Baptist, a precursor to Jesus, had insistently adjured people to prepare the way of the Lord (Mk 1:2-3), which is akin to the call to establish the Kingdom of God here on earth. The Lukan text, citing Prophet Isaiah, insisted on *making his paths straight ... thus facilitating all flesh see the salvation of God* (Lk 3:3-6), which echoes in our mind the necessity of setting our human relationships right: if anyone is not accorded his or her due, as per the principles God had decreed, then, correcting it without any delay and compromise was an imperative. Interestingly, the parallel Matthean text also announced that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand (Mt 3:1-3). Hence, setting our moral conduct right (which included a *turning away* from the sinful ways - Prov 28:13), especially in relation to every other human being, was a prerequisite to straighten the path, which, without doubt, meant *the coming* of the Kingdom.

Confession of the sins referred to in this context included (i) a series of consultations people made with John, and their consequent change of heart (*metanoia*), (ii) the creation of a favourable environment for a life in accordance with God’s principles soaked in mercy, and (iii) mending their ways to be eligible for the Kingdom. Taking John’s demanding call to repent and change to a higher level of holiness, we find Hebrews 12:14 insisting that no one can see the Lord without being holy themselves. However, to be holy in the biblical paradigm is to lead a life in tune with God’s nature (see 1 Pet 1:16; Lev 11:44), which does not discriminate among his people, but has a *preferential option* for the last, the least, and the lost.

The litmus test for any Christian is his or her successful induction into the Kingdom of God, through the readiness to offer himself to those who are preferred in the Kingdom, namely, the marginalized, the *anawim*. If their sufferings are to be addressed, all members of the organic body, including the *anawim*, should strive their best to fructify their God-given human capabilities, by following the footsteps of the first two stewards, who were entrusted with talents by their master (Mt 25:14-30). Our capacity to love, serve, and share should be employed in such a way that the downtrodden are taken along with us, and empowered within the communion of the Kingdom. Hence, we can affirm that a definitive denunciation of all forms of injustice, while simultaneously working together for the establishment of a just and equitable society is a necessary component in aspiring to be a member of the Kingdom of God.

A vital area of prevailing injustice that calls for our profound faith-response in our general society, as well as

within our ecclesial communion, is that of gender justice.¹ Indeed, for every Christian, gender justice should become a mission imperative, as it is anchored on the Kingdom justice that Jesus had revealed to the world. Unfortunately, although certain policies have been announced on various occasions and a number of platitudes have been coming forth from the higher ecclesial offices, the ground reality is that the injustice and inequality meted out to women remains the same, which very clearly goes against the fundamental principles of the Kingdom community enunciated by Jesus. This is a glaring instance of denying the largest section of humanity (namely, women) their due place in the society and the Church: if the disciples of Jesus (who profess to abide by an all-inclusive and holistic understanding of social relationship built on the Kingdom principles of freedom, fellowship, and justice),² do not act on these principles, then, who else on earth, triggered primarily by the Christian compassion for their neighbour and commitment to the *Abba's* Kingdom, would stand up for them?

¹“The broken relationship between man and woman (Gen 3:16, ‘he will rule over you’) is a sign of sin and not the intention of God in creation; it is not a decree, but a forecasted consequence of sin. The mission of people of the Kingdom is not to permanently establish the conditions of the fall, nor to live facing the past, but to restore all things in Christ. As our prime example, Jesus encouraged, valued and affirmed women in a society that did the opposite.” Bulus Galadima, et al., “A Biblical Basis for Social Justice,” SIM Justice Task Force at https://www.micahnetwork.org/sites/default/files/doc/page/a_biblical_basis_for_social_justice_fiona_hahn.pdf (accessed on 10 January 2020).

²George Soares-Prabhu, “The Kingdom of God: Jesus’ Vision of a New Society” in *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, ed. D. S. Amalorpavadass, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981, 601.

Kingdom discipleship that calls for treating every member of the human society with a sense of equity in relationships and transactions demands an uncompromising attitude on gender justice. If our attitudes and actions are not in tune with Jesus’ teachings in the Gospel, aspirations of becoming a Kingdom citizen, or practising a Christ-like approach to life, will call for personal and communal *metanoia* (meaning, a change of heart) that would include a process of involving ourselves in activities that thwart systemic injustices and change the unjust status quo, so that a truly Kingdom-based Christian view and way of life will be brought about. In other words, Kingdom discipleship impels every Christian to opt for a way of life that is fulfilling for everyone, including those who have been denied this fullness, as a result of their gender identity; this becomes an imperative, as examples of preferential treatments accorded to many, based exclusively on their gender identity, abound in the history of humankind, handicapping the humanity of at least half of its members, and, many a time, even reducing them to the status of inanimate objects (as if incapable of feeling and thinking on their own!). Against this backdrop, ethos of the Kingdom forces us to challenge and change every form of oppressive gender attitude, and related social systems so that the systemic injustices are abolished, and a society of equals, who are respected for the fact that they are created in the image and likeness of God is brought about.¹ If God’s character and

¹Here are two inspiring statements from two Church Fathers. Clement of Alexandria expressed his convictions about the equality that exists between woman and man in the following words: “Woman has the same spiritual dignity as man. Both of them have the same God, the same Teacher, the same Church. They breathe, see, hear, know, hope, and love in the same way.

intentions are not reflected and realized in the personal and communal lives of Christians, Kingdom discipleship will not be actualized here on the earth, but would only remain a distant dream and a far cry among them.

Jesus's Empowering Approach towards Women

There were instances of Jesus dialoguing with women, wherein at least some women of 'great faith' successfully persuaded him to let them receive the grace of healing (e.g., Mt 15:21-27; Mk 5:25-34); in some instances, we see women engaging Jesus in conversations (or, even, arguments) and, as a result, 'forcing' him to let them taste the fruits of the Kingdom (Mk 7:24-30). The revolutionary Kingdom values of Jesus made him address the woman with a stoop as "daughter of Abraham" (Lk 13:16), while in the entire Bible such a usage was restricted exclusively to men (e.g., "son of Abraham"). Indeed, he enabled each woman to be liberated, respected, and honoured as she was in the eyes of God himself; he went to the extent of revealing most profound mysteries of the Kingdom to some of these women such as the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:4-42) or Martha and Mary of Bethany (Lk 10:38-42; Jn 11:17-27). Some of these conversations with women disciples recorded in the Gospels are exceptionally insightful. Hence, we see women disciples accompanying Jesus (unto the crucifixion, even when almost

Beings who have the same life, grace, and salvation are called ... to the same manner of being." Clement of Alexandria, *Tutor*, I, 4 (PG 8, 260). Along similar lines, Gregory of Nyssa stated: "Woman is in the image of God equally with man. The sexes are of equal worth. Their virtues are equal, their struggles are equal..." Gregory of Nyssa, *Let Us Make Man in Our Image and Likeness*, 2nd Discourse (PG 44, 276). See Rastko Jovic, "Doing Gender Justice as a Mission Imperative," *International Mission Review*, 104, 1 (April 2015), 35.

all of his male disciples had fled! See, for example, Jn 19:25-27; Mt 27:55; Lk 23:27-31) as they could partake in the evangelical newness of life that Jesus and Jesus alone could offer.

The evangelical ‘newness of life’, explicit all through Jesus’ Kingdom ministry (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 12), especially in his unique interactions with women, bring to focus a novel way of recognizing the self-worth and respect for women, as a necessary component of his worldview. While the prevalent social setting of Jesus’s time insisted on according a lower status to women in general, various instances of interaction of Jesus with women – be it with his own mother (Jn 2:1-12; Mt 12:46-50; Lk 11:27-28), a stranger such as the Samaritan woman encountered at the well of Sychar (Jn 4:4-42), the Canaanite woman whose request was first rejected for her non-Jewish descent (Mt 15:21-27), the sinful woman in the house of the Pharisee (Lk 7:36-50), or the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:3-11) – clearly present before us his respectful, empowering, and redemptive attitude towards every woman who approached him in varied circumstances.

The ultimately salvific good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was first revealed to women (Mt 28:6, 9; Mk 16:9; Jn 20:16-18), thus, their becoming “the first to bear witness to him before the Apostles,” or “*the apostle of the apostles*” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 16); it is a natural outcome of their intense and passionate discipleship, which, for all of them, turned out to be costly as well as life-giving. It is interesting to see that in a society that downplayed the value of women’s testimony, and one in which she was treated as a second class citizen, women became the first witnesses of resurrection and its first heralds, thus, upsetting the prejudiced norms of a male chauvinistic society, on the one hand, and elevating women’s position in the Church and society as the primary witnesses of the greatest truth of Jesus Incarnation (in a

similar vein, we know that the first announcement of the birth of Jesus was made to another *ordinary* woman, Virgin Mary in Nazareth).

Unjustifiable Hegemonic Social Relationships and the Gospel Worldview

If, in the economy of salvation, there is neither male nor female (Gal 3:28), are we Christians not called upon to work towards establishing social relations, keeping our focus on the Kingdom of God? Can we excuse ourselves from complying with a society that is biased in favour of a patriarchal mind-set and operational style? If we are serious about our Christian vocation, and our vocation to be *alter Christus*, how can we wash our hands of from the injustices meted out to women and their treatment as unequal partners in our families, ecclesial and social units without remorse and the burden of sin?

In the Gospel, we see Jesus praying with earnestness “that all may be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you” (Jn 17:21); it is an aspiration for inter-related co-existence (1 Cor 11:11) and “active collaboration”¹ among Christians as they are “the joint heirs of the grace of life” (1 Pet 3:7). This quest for unity brings to our understanding another essential characteristic of the Kingdom of God: it is not a tendency of isolating each other for the sake of one’s own success and supremacy that constitutes the Christian ethos, but the readiness to promote unity, aiming at developing oneness among human beings, be it in the family or in the community.

¹CDF, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” 2004, 4.

Jesus’ cleansing of the temple (Jn 2:13-16) offers us a powerful insight into responding to any situation of defilement of the sacred, be it the temple structure or the human structure, or, more importantly, the divine milieu or the very plan of God in establishing a human community with members who share God’s *image and likeness*. Those Christians who succeed in enhancing their consciousness to the level of Jesus himself (in other words, becoming *alter Christus*), or, ideally, the ecclesia or the community of Christian disciples should be able to act like Jesus in dispelling the forces of evil from the sacred sphere where the reign of God shall be the exclusive norm and the only programme of action. This insight sheds light on the fact that the degradation and oppression of women, which have resulted from unjustifiable hegemonic social relationships enveloping the economic and social spheres, and dictated by the principles of various patriarchal systems in different parts of the globe, must be confronted head-on with the fundamental worldview of the Gospel, which prescribes that equitable justice must be practised against the manipulative preferences of the economically rich and socially powerful. In the Jesuan worldview, the only possible (or, better, a much sought after) exception would be *the preferential option* for the poor, the marginalized, the downtrodden (women being a significantly large group among all these). More than a mere common moral imperative, this offers us a specific ecclesial injunction, that we would constitute the Church of Christ only to the extent that we are committed to an inclusive and integral society where, through the instrumentality of Christian discipleship, there should be an incessant movement of those existing in the margins or the peripheries to the centre or the mainstream, where, ideally speaking, the margins would vanish through the insistent practice of

authentic mutual love, generous sharing, and unconditional mercy (Jn 13:34; Lk 10:37; Acts 2:44). In other words, attainment of gender justice, which is a call to the fullness of humanity in the Church realized through the acts of every Christian believer, becomes essential to living our Christian faith.

In fact, in our acts of overcoming hegemonic social practices and establishing gender justice, we seek to “love our neighbours as ourselves” (Mt 22:39). Pope Francis insists that “we cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice...” (*Gaudete et exultate*, 101). If this position is taken to its logical conclusion, how can any Christian or Christian community ignore the amount of injustice meted out to women, especially in the form of a ‘domesticated’ inequality that runs through most of our social relationships?

A closer observation of the situations of injustice, especially in the domain of gender relations in our society, brings to focus the freedom that all of us aspire to experience in our lives. Although we may mistakenly think that our freedom consists in being free from internal compulsions and external pressures as well as from our inordinate attachments and desires, actual freedom should enable us – individually and collectively – to grow inwardly and outwardly, to be ourselves and to allow everyone else to become what she or he aspires to be and, at the same time, to contribute towards the enhancement of the whole network of relationships that we are part of. Such freedom would facilitate the holistic growth of everyone, not in isolation or exclusion, but in mutual communion and integral networking. In other words, freedom, a fundamental human aspiration, blossoms when there is enhancement of growth, that is, the growth of oneself and the growth of everyone else, which will be mutual, simultaneous, and spontaneous, leading to the realization of

the common good in its full measure. In concrete terms, this would mean that both female and male members in our society would exist in mutual communion, enhancing the growth and wellbeing of each other, ensuring that no one is internally compelled or externally pressurized by the choices of the other; there will not be any coercion or collective enforcement of the decisions originating in inordinate attachments and desires of a particular group. Naturally, then, in such a culture, there will not be space for any chauvinistic attitudes or practices; personal or collective autonomy will be understood and realized within the choices to network and to offer care for the other, especially the downtrodden and the marginalized. It would lead to an unqualified commitment to stand up for justice for women and men, with a preferential support for girl children and women, who have been victimized for centuries (if not millennia) by the systemic injustice perpetrated with the collusion of vested interests and chauvinistic minds.

Pope John Paul II, after having expressed “sorry” for the extensive “conditioning” that the Church and the society had imposed upon women as a whole, made the following aspiration, calling the whole Church, into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision: “When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the *attitude of Jesus Christ himself*. Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance, and tenderness. In this way, he honoured the dignity which women have always possessed according to God’s plan, and in his love. As we look to Christ at the end of this Second Millennium, it is natural to ask ourselves: how much of his message has been heard and acted upon?” (John Paul II,

Letter to Women 1995, 3). By responding to this call, if we succeed in reinstating women to their *original* status (meaning, prior to the corruption of human nature due to the sin of the first parents), necessarily creating a society with gender justice with open and shared space for all players, our attempts would aim at the establishment of an inclusive Kingdom of God where both women and men would realize their potentials to the optimum, none blocking or bypassing the other for the exclusive, vested interests of oneself.

This calls for a process of discernment in the form of listening to one's innermost self, to one another, to the community, and, ultimately, to the Spirit. Though a spiritual exercise, it shall not bypass the basic human endowment of reason (as it is a God-given faculty), especially when it is applied within the context of human communion. As disciples of Christ who are striving to establish the Kingdom of God here on the earth, in this process of discernment, we should question ourselves and our traditions that seem to go against basic human understanding and the universal values enshrined in the Sacred Scripture; this process of critical enquiry may also strive to question and explore even what we consider essential and non-negotiable, so that our understanding of both the divine revelation as well as rational operations, and the ensuing traditions and practices could be better understood and renewed to address existential needs of the human race. Hence, anyone, who seriously embraces the Gospel teachings on the Kingdom and critically reviews the social structures and practices against the essential teachings of Jesus, will earn the credentials to take on the burden of leading a just and equitable life, not only in one's personal sphere but also within the societal structures. As our society seems to have largely ignored the issues connected with gender justice and has done very little

on the ground in favour of women empowerment, the majority of women continue to suffer from a range of negative social responses in the form of neglect and unjustifiably restricted access to opportunities, physical and mental torture, to abominable atrocities (especially from their male counterparts) without any perceivable geographical, cultural, social, or religious exception. In other words, as far as gender justice is concerned, systemic injustice seems to have been condoned extensively by almost every social system, including the Catholic Church, and a way out seems to be extremely difficult to come by.

It is obvious that humanity would not have thrived if not also for women, not only for their ability to conceive and give birth, but certainly for their intellectual and intuitive abilities as well as their sensitivity to the practical needs of humanity. Unfortunately, however, most of the recorded history (which is as chauvinistic as any other human science that has been groomed increasingly by men) has ignored their vital contributions. While the secular history at least has started mentioning and recognizing the vital role played by some women in the progress humanity has made so far, scriptures as well as religious ritual texts continue to glorify the contributions of male members to an almost complete exclusion of female members and their genius.¹ For example, the Syro-Malabar, the Latin, and Syro-Malankara Catholic Churches make repeated references to the patriarchs or holy fathers² – strictly following the literal text of the Bible – in

¹Many women saints have been honoured in the Catholic Church, and their contributions have been recognized; a few such women saints have also been declared Doctors of the Church.

²For example, see *The Order of the Syro-Malabar Qurbana* (2005): Dyptychs after the first *G'hantha* Prayer (“patriarchs, bishops, priests,

their liturgical celebrations, but almost always implying that this was an exclusive club of men, though certainly the matriarchs as well as prophetesses have been an integral part of the great vehicle of biblical tradition. Probably, this historical exclusion of feminine genius is exactly what is referred to by Pope John Paul II, in his *Letter to Women* (1995), though the paragraph as such refers only to secular contexts: "We need only think of how the gift of motherhood is often penalized rather than rewarded, even though humanity owes its very survival to this gift" (4). Indeed, the Church as well as every other religion owes a great deal to women and their human and religious genius; history testifies that, if not for our women, no religious genius would have survived the odds that they had faced in their existential contexts.

Although the Church had been trying to grapple with the issues of gender justice and a number of attempts have been made by its authorities at various levels to set these issues right, we realize that the pace as well as the impact of such processes is assessed to be minimal. When we look at the progress made by the Church as a whole, although there are certain praiseworthy attempts made by higher ecclesiastical offices, some of them certainly being ground-breaking in nature, the actual ground reality, especially at the lower levels of governance – admittedly in the families and in the

and deacons"), Intercessory Prayers after the third *G'hantha* Prayer ("just and holy fathers"), and the fourth *G'hantha* Prayer ("just and holy fathers"). It is hoped that an enhanced gender-sensitivity within the Church, especially among those who codify the liturgical texts and other precepts, will enable us to update our liturgical texts and other forms of ecclesial instructions with an *inclusive language*, which will, on the one hand, have greater appeal for the whole worshipping congregation and, on the other, better formative potential for eliciting a sense of gender-equality among its members.

parish and diocesan levels (that is, the grass-root levels) – paints a grim picture; we are forced to admit that the Church as an ecclesial communion has a long way to go in this direction. Yet, on an optimistic note, the Catholic Church, in comparison with any other organized religion or religious body, had been exceptionally forthcoming in admitting and repairing certain social evils committed by its members, or even if perpetrated by its own authorities at one time or the other,¹ when it realized without doubt that those practices were against the principles enshrined in the Gospel. Just as the younger son in the Parable of the Loving Father and Two Sons ‘came to his senses’ (Lk 15:17), we shall hope that the Church would realize the basic premise of ecclesial communion of equals and its contradictory policies and actions – at various levels of the pyramidal structure – that have vitiated its fundamental communion (or, has been burdened with unjustifiable conditions), also through the injustice meted out to women, who are not only numerically the largest group, but also those who have been consciously promoted and protected by Jesus himself, especially by including them as part of his preferred *anawim* (thus, each of them becoming his *preferential option*). Along this line of thought, my familiarity with the ecclesial ways instils in me greater hope that, before any other secular or ecclesial body, the Catholic Church would formally denounce and apologize for the scores of injustices meted out to women due to a

¹Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, for example, has issued a document, “*Vademecum* on Certain Points of Procedure in Treating Cases of Sexual Abuse of Minors Committed by Clerics” on 16 July 2020, detailing the procedures to deal with penal cases of sexual abuse committed by clerics and also to ensure that such cases are also reported to the civil authorities.

mistaken understanding of the gender difference; then, we could hope that, based on the Gospel injunction of the Kingdom, the Church would consciously bring about systemic changes within its own portals in such a way that there will be no discrimination between Jew and Greek, free and slave, male and female (Gal 3:28); indeed, the Church would, then, hopefully stop treating any one group, particularly its women, as 'second class' children of God; indeed, within the Kingdom of God, there cannot be a multiple tier system of treating God's children.¹ In Chavara's language, they all are the *koodapirapukal*, children of the one and the same *Abba*. This genuine Christian aspiration appears to be an impossible task from our human point of view; but, as we believe that that which is impossible with men is possible with God (Mk 10:27), we shall await another Pentecost in the Church, hoping that "the power of the Most High will overshadow" (Lk 1:35) the Church as a whole so that the Kingdom principles will be realized on earth (Mt 6:10) by reinstating every woman to her rightful place in all that is ecclesial and all that is human.

¹For example, here is a positive indication from Pope Francis' *Christus vivit* (2019): "... a living Church can react by being attentive to the legitimate claims of those women who seek greater justice and equality. A living Church can look back on history and acknowledge a fair share of male authoritarianism, domination, various forms of enslavement, abuse, and sexist violence. With this outlook, she can support the call to respect women's rights, and offer convinced support for greater reciprocity between males and females... Along these lines, the Synod sought to renew the Church's commitment 'against all discrimination and violence on sexual grounds'" (42). See also Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999), 34.

Chavara’s Holistic Formation and Outlook

Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871) cultivated a very mature approach towards women in his life and ministry; in fact, the cultured and dignified manner of relating to women stands out in his love for his own mother recalled and beautifully narrated in the *Atmanutapam*, his sincere devotion towards the holy women in the New Testament and in the subsequent Catholic tradition as seen in his various writings, and his concern for and communications with the Sisters of Koonammavu Convent¹ (being the first and only convent at that time). The first and the most basic nurturing instance of the loving relationship with his beloved mother had a lasting imprint on his character; many consider that this positive relationship with his mother during his childhood days was so foundational and formative that, in his subsequent life as an adult male, an ordained priest, and a consecrated religious, Chavara spontaneously cultivated a very mature and decent relationship with women with whom he had to interact on various counts; in the course of his life, he also developed a holy bond with other mothers, especially in his spiritual life, as they became a constant source of inspiration in his following of Jesus Christ. Further, in his recollections about the women in the family of his guru Malpan Thomas Palackal, we get a feel of the compassion that Chavara had cultivated towards widows and those who were forced to

¹With this convent in Koonammavu, the first (extant) indigenous religious congregation for women was founded on 13 February 1866 by Saint Chavara and Father Leopold Beccaro OCD, which at beginning was affiliated to the Carmelite Order Discalced as its third order; this religious community was later bifurcated into Congregation of Mother of Carmel (CMC) and Congregation of Teresian Carmelites (CTC).

remain within the four walls of their homes.¹ The most conspicuous expression of his positive outlook towards women, however, is available to us in the pages of the *Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent* as well as in the extant letters that he had written to the Sisters of the same convent. His concern about enhancing the status of the Church, especially by making provisions for women to lead a virtuous life in the form of consecrated life lived in community, and the relentless he undertook, along with Father Leopold Beccaro OCD, culminated, not only in the establishment of a convent, but also in the careful formation of those Sisters in their consecrated life; he accompanied them with the love of a father (or, more of a grandfather)² in their spiritual nurturing as well as in their communitarian grooming. Through his personal involvement, Chavara could elicit among them a sense of pride in being women and in being consecrated to the Lord so that they could, in turn, make themselves available to the empowerment of other women through various apostolates they had eventually undertaken.³

¹See Jossy Maria, *Fostering Feminine Genius*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2020, 118-120.

²One of the most moving statements from Chavara is found in a small note that he wrote to the Sisters at Koonammavu Convent during the Holy Week: "See, I have locked in the chest of Our Lord Jesus Christ my heart and yours together; until the feast of Resurrection, remain there!" Chavara, *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 9, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2020, 136.

³For example, among many other endeavours, the effort that Chavara took in initiating Sisters in the study of Latin language is praiseworthy and unique. See *CKC*, vol. 1, 152; also see Chavara, *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 1, 6, 11, 13 (2020); Jossy Maria, *Fostering Feminine Genius*, 157-158.

Observing the responses of Chavara towards women, I am also inclined to think that he was positively influenced by one or more mature male figures in his childhood (as it is affirmed by contemporary schools of psychology¹); although most of his autobiographical writings highlight and glorify his beloved mother, sometimes even giving an impression that he inadvertently avoided any reference to his father,² analysing the mature priest and religious, and a fine human being that Chavara eventually became, to my mind, owes a great deal to the person of his own father Kuriakose Chavara (senior) as well as to his mentor and guru Malpan Thomas Palackal. As any other farmer in the first half of the nineteenth century Kerala backwaters, his father might have been away in the paddy field most of the day, and sometimes even in the evenings; although this would have deprived baby Kuriakose opportunities to be physically close to his father (at least not as intimately as the time spent with his mother), the Christian upbringing, cordiality, collaboration, and mutual respect – especially between his father and mother – that would have filled the familial atmosphere of Chavara family in Kainakary, were certainly influential in the character formation of Chavara. Just as Saint Joseph scarcely appears in the Gospel narratives, where the presence and role of Mother Mary are glorified, almost to the exclusion of Joseph (except for the Matthean and Lukan narratives of the

¹For an understanding of the psychological influence of parent-offspring relationship, especially of the father, see K. Braun and F. A. Champagne, “Paternal Influences on Offspring Development: Behavioural and Epigenetic Pathways,” *Journal of Neuroendocrinology* 26, 10 (October 2014), 697-706 at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jne.12174> (accessed on 15 May 2020).

²See another reading in Jossy Maria, *Fostering Feminine Genius*, 68-69.

birth and the infancy of Jesus, and a passing reference in Jn 6:41-42), the importance of the father figure in the life of Chavara is disproportionately downplayed. However, I am inclined to think that both in the case of Jesus¹ and Chavara, these father-figures have played a pivotal role in the formation, and as a result of which both of them attained greater levels of maturity not only in being excellent human beings in general, but also in cultivating a decent and respectful relationship with every woman they came in contact with during their life and ministry.

Chavara valued every human being for his or her unique place in the plan of God. It is inspiring to note his revolutionary insistence on children being consulted before deciding upon their status of life, including their marriage; this prescription was given to the Christian community of the nineteenth century Kerala, which never bothered to seek their consent, particularly of girls and young women, before their marriage was finalized. Chavara was categorical in affirming the right of everyone: "When they come of age, children should be given full freedom to choose their state of life... It is the responsibility of the children to make the right choice... Their consent must be specially ascertained before marriages are arranged" (*Chavarul*, 2:14). According to him, every

¹The response of Jesus to the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1-11) is an explicit instance of his noble but just dealing with women; I am inclined to think that, during his scribbling on the ground, the images passed through Jesus' mind not only included his mother, who faced a seriously challenging moment during the time of her pregnancy, but certainly also of his foster father, whose noble and just response to his vulnerable mother ensured that her honour as well as her life and pregnancy was respected, upheld, and protected by a man, whose stature has been made unjustifiably diminutive.

individual is to be respected for the unique relationship he or she has with God. Similarly, Chavara also insisted on the need for mutual respect between the husband and wife in the family context, especially in the grooming of the children; each of them, according to Chavara, should share the responsibilities within the family. It was natural for him to recognize the equal status of man and woman within the family; for, he knew that a family where every person is groomed in human communion can be created only when all parties, particularly the wife and the husband, work in unison. In fact, in the understanding of Chavara, a Christian family arises in the mutual communion of respectful and responsible members, who realize their value not in isolation but in being placed within the ambit of the Trinitarian Kingdom.

Inclusive and Integral Mission of Chavara

Reflecting the perfect divine-human synergy realized in the person of Jesus Christ himself, a *divine-human synergy* was at play in the life of Chavara, which we find extended in his mystical musings as well as in his socio-religious commitments, especially in realizing the Kingdom-characteristics of justice and equity in favour of the deprived groups or classes in the society, the largest group of the sort being women themselves. In this integral synergy, though Chavara relied heavily on his *Appa* experience (the mystical core of his wholesome spirituality), he understood that it was his prerogative to evolve a new religious and social ethos through the change of mind-set (world vision) and transformation of lifestyles among his confreres and collaborators, on the one hand, and the people from different social strata and religious identities, on the other. In other words, instead of waiting passively for God to intervene, he assumed the role of His regent and acted as per the insights and inspirations he

had received from his mystical communion with the Lord and his understanding of their living conditions from his proximity with the people. Chavara was, thus, prompted to contribute his share in the building up of God's Kingdom in his surroundings, aspiring to rebuild the human society on a new basis, namely, the world vision of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus in the Gospel (Mt 4:23, 5:10, 25:34; Lk 9:2, 9:12-18; Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 6:9). For Chavara, as for Jesus himself, the Kingdom of God constituted a new dream, which projected the possibility of a new mode of all-encompassing, loving and compassionate relationship among human beings, where the poor are fed, the marginalized are welcomed and accepted, the women are treated with respect and equality, the sinners are pardoned, the sick are cured, and the dead are resurrected, through multifarious planned apostolic interventions (Mt 6:33a), leading to a new social dynamics of mutual love and respect, justice and equity, solidarity and peaceful coexistence.

When we recall Chavara's earnest attempts to establish a convent for women and his continued efforts to accompany them in their leading a consecrated religious life, with its explicit focus on their own devout life as well as the grooming of girls and supporting schemes for the women around them, we can easily understand the manner in which Chavara understood the complementary role of women in ecclesial life. Leading a consecrated life and being 'wedded' to the Lord, according to Chavara, gave greater scope for these Sisters to undertake a decisive role in the life of the Church and its mission by way of optimally utilizing their own feminine genius, which would not only accelerate the spiritual, cultural, socio-political, and economic growth of the society, but, "corresponding to the plan of God" (*Letter to Women*, 8), would also pave the way for being and becoming

more inclusively and integrally human. Interestingly, Chavara, in collaboration with Leopold Beccaro, took the initiative for this daring endeavour at a time when women were generally restricted to their homes, and mostly to their roles of begetting and rearing children and taking care of the affairs at home; women were considered second class citizens by many, including those who were in positions of authority. However, Chavara overcame these historical antecedents and set the stage for enlisting women as having a significant, unique, and complementary role in the development of the Church and society. Hence, as a charismatic and persuasive leader with an inclusive approach, Chavara successfully managed to garner the support of his confreres, ecclesiastical authorities, and influential lay associates, which eventually paved the way for the establishment of the first indigenous convent in Koonammavu as well as the creation of a group of enlightened religious women with a missional preference for the empowerment of women and children. This effort assumes greater proportions when we recall that, in the recorded history of the Marthoma Christians, women were not expected to participate in the *Palliyogam* or Synod, as it was an exclusive domain of male members (which might have also implied that, according to the prevailing norms of the day, women were either *incomplete* or *incompetent* members to partake in such formal bodies vested with the responsibilities of policy making and administration of the church affairs!).

Although Pope John Paul II insisted that “the Church’s two-thousand-year history, for all its historical conditioning, has truly experienced the ‘genius of woman’” (*Letter to Women*, 11), as far as the Church in India is concerned, despite its Christian presence from the first century onwards, its women believers hardly had any prominence accorded to them. Even

in its medieval and modern history, hardly do we come across any of our Indian Christian women having attained any noticeable stature, though their presence at home and their contributions in the transmission of Christian faith were irreplaceable. Similarly, we also do not find any leader of the Christian community in India taking steps to empower or accompany its women in attaining a prominent place in the society or any creative role other than what was traditionally their lot within the private domain of the family. A total break with this repressive and unhealthy tradition was made by Chavara in his earnest attempts to start communitarian religious life for women and to establish a convent for those who embrace the consecrated way of religious life in the Church; in fact, as far as the Indian Church was concerned, establishment of a convent at Koonammavu was not only the beginning of a new tradition, but also a new approach to women and an acknowledgement of their genius as well as shaping of a new way of ecclesial life in which the life of these consecrated women religious and their contributions “imbued with the spirit of the Gospel” were recognized for their inherent Christian value and social capital, not only “in not falling” (Second Vatican Council’s Message to Women, 13-14) but also in proactively promoting human persons and building up human communities, as both man and woman are fundamentally “called to exist mutually ‘one for the other’” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 7). Chavara’s efforts to support and accompany Sisters in Koonammavu attest not only to his credible ways of promoting women’s “personal dignity and vocation,” but also “to his own personal dignity and his own vocation” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 10) as a dignified male, a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ whose inclusive and integral approach to women in the Gospels offers us the paradigm par excellence in human empowerment for the whole human race.

Chavara took his fundamental Christian call seriously; for him, living his Christian call was *the* way to attain fullness of his human vocation, not in isolation, but primarily within the ecclesial communion (including the communion in his religious community), and, then, in the social communion of all peoples. Instead of segregating one group against another, Chavara’s inclusive and integral vision of human communion prompted him to make room for everyone. In this process, he did not appear as a revolutionary; instead, in his Christian charity, he could devise positive strategies to cater to the needs of different social groups, without offending and fighting with others. Although this may be perceived as an accommodative strategy, given the social taboos of the time, he was able to safely wade through the rigid social structures which were significantly influenced by the religious systems of the place, and their Sacred Scriptures. Chavara’s initiatives of human empowerment in the nineteenth century Kerala were unparalleled both in the ecclesial and secular spheres. For example, (1) starting the Sanskrit school at Mannanam, attended by an unconventional group of students, (2) admitting members of the marginalized communities into the Christian fold, though it was resisted by many traditional Christians, which, later, also unfortunately led to the creation of an ‘exclusive ecclesia’,¹ contradictory as it was, for this community, and (3) leading from the front in

¹Due to the social conditions, later, this Dalit Catholic community was formally constituted as a ‘personal’ parish, which is attached to the first CMI Monastery at Mannanam. Unfortunately, this community remains un-integrated with the rest of the Catholics, even after 150 years! Even recent reorganization made in the local church has not taken this ‘un-Christian’ situation into account, and the historical wrong has not yet been rectified.

establishing the first indigenous convent for Sisters along with a boarding house for the grooming and education of young girls, which together realized not only empowerment of themselves, but also became the herald of empowered womanhood across the country, especially within the Catholic community in Kerala, etc., and opened up the possibilities for the blossoming of humanity, particularly of women and other marginalized classes, in a manner unprecedented.

In designing communitarian religious life of the Sisters at Koonammavu Convent, Chavara offered them the ideal of a consecrated woman in the person of Mother Mary, whose commitment to the person of Jesus Christ and role in the accomplishment of the divine plan of human redemption were unparalleled in the salvation history. If Mary, the 'new Eve' could go "beyond the limit spoken of in the Book of Genesis (Gen 3:16)" and, thus, become that "'beginning' in which one finds the 'woman' as she was intended to be in *creation*, and therefore in the eternal mind of God, in the boson of the Most Holy Trinity," initiation of communitarian consecrated life was an invitation to these religious women to become active partners in "'the new beginning' of the *dignity and vocation of women*, of each and every woman" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 11); consequently, we see that these consecrated women religious were entrusted with the responsibility of *mothering* a new ethos solidly founded in the Gospel paradigm of the Kingdom of God. Just as the natural domain specially entrusts the nurturing of humanity with women, birthing of a new world order is naturally entrusted with them, provided they are ready *to gift* themselves for the integral wellbeing of all, especially the least, the last, and the lost, as per the preferential option unveiled in the Gospel. In this manner, by being part of restoring *the essentially humane*

in our society, through various ministries, these consecrated women religious rendered a unique manifestation of the genius of women, who were totally suppressed, in a conservative family or society. Thus, the plan of action for this ecclesial movement, in the mind of Chavara, was capable of nurturing as well as empowering these women, both in their spirit and in their uniquely feminine capabilities, so that they transform themselves into channels of God’s grace to empower the helpless women, into becoming instruments or catalysts of a new and enlightened humanity.

Aspirations of Women for New Horizons

Given the ennobling strides of women empowerment begun by Chavara in the nineteenth century Kerala, it is natural that we enquire about the status of the same in the twenty-first century. As his initiatives made an impact in the social settings, it is reasonable to expect that things have improved far and wide over a period of two centuries. Indeed, as far as the recognition of women and their capabilities, among the different states in India is concerned, Kerala ranks first: this is obvious in the fewer number of female foeticide and infanticide cases, greater presence and better performance of girl children in schools as well as in higher education, and the higher rate of employment of women, including competitive professional domains that insist on specialized training and better expertise. While the secular society has made significant progress in promoting women empowerment, given the fact that Chavara was a Catholic religious priest, whose primary domain was the inner recesses of the ecclesial structures, an assessment of the progress in women empowerment in the Kerala Church is important. Given the temporal and cultural progress the Kerala Catholics have attained during the last two centuries, it is convincing that in

most of the areas of human development index, the community stands in the forefront. As far as education and healthcare are concerned, the Catholic institutions claim an impressive track record; as far as the educational qualifications are concerned, girls of this community seem to outnumber boys, and perform quite well in comparison with their peers from other religions; this also has a bearing upon the number of women employed in various domains.¹

Against these significant progresses in education and professional placements facilitated among the lay women faithful of the Kerala Catholic Church, we must also enquire as to the progress made by women within the ecclesial bodies, both in terms of their increased numbers and their quality of performance as well as the recognition the Church as a whole accords to *women as women* (disregarding their qualifications and performance). It is a fact that, following the establishment of the first indigenous convent at Koonammavu (1866), many convents and religious congregations were founded in Kerala, which enabled the Kerala Catholic Church to offer quality mission services across Kerala and, in addition, to send out innumerable number of missionary Sisters to various parts of India and other continents. Indeed, as far as those who reach out to the missions across the globe, we know that their services are well recognized by the ecclesial bodies and leadership for their availability, particularly for their generous Christian commitment and quality services offered in remote locations. These consecrated women religious have made a mark in

¹As a disturbing corollary, it is obvious that an increasing number of professionally-placed women, strangely, find it difficult to identify fitting matches for their marriage, especially in terms of educational and professional status.

establishing and administering a number of institutions, particularly in the area of education and healthcare, that continue to contribute significantly to the enhancement of the common good of the society; naturally, they also receive better recognition for their services from the civic authorities. However, when we look at the way these consecrated women religious are treated within the institutional settings of the local churches, serious doubts are raised as to their enhanced status, especially among the ecclesiastical functionaries. Although nominal representation of women, including consecrated women religious, is made mandatory at parish and diocesan levels, the process of their selection (mostly through nomination), the opportunities for expressing their independent concerns and opinions (without fear of displeasure or reprimand), and making use of their feminine genius for the enhancement of the common good of the ecclesial community seem to be largely ignored. The culture of taking them for granted in serious deliberations is widely prevalent, especially among the clergy. According these Sisters due respect (at least for being another member of the ecclesial community, and for being women) seems to be extremely rare. Even consecrated women religious, including those who are at the helm of affairs of huge reputed institutions, are silenced (sometimes even by public rebuke made from the pulpits) and side-stepped on issues that directly concern those institutions or their expertise. It is surprising sometimes to see that even the major superiors of women religious congregations are ignored when it comes to policy decisions that concern them and their communities; the general trend is to dictate terms and conditions, which they are obliged to accept and abide by, even when it would amount to violating their personal and institutional dignity and just demands (Though very rare, sometimes, their silence

is enforced by the threat of a ban on the celebration of the Eucharist).

Recently, while participating in the vestition and first profession of a women religious congregation, I found it very odd to see that, while the solemn liturgy was presided over by the local hierarch, the major superior of the congregation was made to stand on the side of the sanctuary area as the new members pronounced their religious vows; she seemed to be accorded a place of no significance (as she was standing far apart, and 'spatially' disconnected, from the professing sisters). As she was the Major Superior and head of the religious community, it was her prerogative to formally receive the new members, and to mediate their public profession between themselves and the Triune God (as it cannot be taken over, even canonically, by the main celebrant of the liturgy); however, the place of insignificance accorded to a major superior of a women religious congregation during the liturgical services seemed to reflect the lack of ecclesial recognition to these consecrated women religious, who are said to be the frontrunners in most of the ecclesial services rendered to the society. If there are legislations in the domain of liturgy that restrict physical entry of women (in this instance, consecrated women religious) into the sanctuary area of the church, it is time that such legislations are reviewed for good; for, here we are dealing with members of a consecrated community in the Catholic Church, which holds that "consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church" (*Vita Consecrata*, 3); therefore, if those who are at the heart of the Church cannot enter the sanctuary of a church, who else is worthy of it? My contention is that, as much as the space permits, not only the major superior but also the professing sisters should have their place in the sanctuary of the church during the vestition and profession so that their vocation and

ecclesial commitment are duly recognized by the Church as a whole. If men religious communities can ensure that their religious candidates occupy the sanctuary during the public profession of their religious vows and can place the written text of their evangelical counsels on the Altar to affix their signature solemnly, what justification do we have to keep women religious off the sanctuary and make their professing members sign the document by squatting on the floor (though it may not be the case everywhere)? It not only looks partisan and demeaning, but the practice as such is certainly gender-biased that calls for immediate corrective measures. If there are cultural, social, or even religious practices that degrade and exploit women (e.g., demeaning rites of passage for girls, gender-based violence, denial of access to empowerment opportunities in the area of education, discrimination in professions and with regard to remuneration, inequitable access to food, healthcare, etc., and horrific abuse and commodification of women in the form of media productions and human trafficking), it is necessary that the Church, instead of merely condoning such activities, takes an explicit stand against these anti-social activities, and chalks out plans to replace them and re-establish the damaged or lost dignity of those human beings, particularly if they have been segregated due to unjustly imposed gender or racial social identities.

The process of empowerment of women, initiated by Chavara and his collaborators within the Church by founding a religious congregation for women along with educational facilities for girls, does not seem to have progressed reasonably over the last 150 and more years. Although many women religious have successfully carved out a place of respect and recognition in the civil society through their generous missional availability and committed services, its

corresponding progress within the ecclesial domains seems to be a distant dream, which impels us to take forward the process initiated by Chavara (who had great love for the Sisters and had made extensive plans for their apostolic involvement within the Church) and ensure that it is strengthened by generations of those saintly and bold women religious, who should be further redeemed at least within the corridors of ecclesial and religious administration, which is found to be almost exclusively animated and managed by ordained men. Indeed, to become genuinely Christian, our vibrant Church ought to recognize the women faithful in general, who constitute the greater majority of participants in any religious ceremony, and the smaller but vital group of consecrated women religious in particular; for, bypassing their genius and ignoring their invaluable ecclesial contributions in the making of the Christian community will certainly be detrimental, if not suicidal, to the Church as a whole. Moreover, as Christian disciples, every Christian disciple is called upon to be as merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful (Lk 6:36); no Christian shall forget the fact that *nothing short of being just will make anyone of us truly merciful and, hence, genuinely Christian!*

Outside the ecclesial realm, the demand for equal treatment of women has many dimensions that are usually ignored or bypassed by many, including those in policy making. In the context of discussions on equal pay for the same work by women and men, we are aware that the modern world is yet to make that 'gender-neutral leap'. For example, let us look at the plight of women 'home-makers', who are confined to the four walls of their homes, and whose concerns are never addressed by legislators or policy makers. We know that, across the globe, many women invest their lifetimes for the running of home and the rearing of children;

in the modern context, there are also many ‘employed’ women, who struggle to balance work at home and work outside (roughly equated with ‘work-life-balance’). Many women, without their own choice, find themselves within the confines of their homes as their ‘natural place’ and are largely destined to be totally cut off from the world of production and services. Although these women invest a lifetime at home, almost always working far beyond the framework of formal working hours, giving up most of their personal conveniences and preferences, their labour goes largely unrecognized, and is generally undervalued in terms of income generation;¹ for, they do not ‘draw’ any salary in relation to their daily work inside the family. As monetary earnings are quantified, those who bring home the larger share of money tend to occupy significant positions in decision making, and this indirectly leads to the lack of recognition of the non-monetary contributions of women working at home, and, consequently, their impact in policy decisions in the affairs of the home. Thus, although women are largely responsible for managing the home as well as the grooming of the subsequent generations, activities that require higher investment of time and human energies in comparison with the formal working hours of those who work outside the home, economic calculations ignore their contributions as they are not monetarily quantified. Although this phenomenon had been already recognized for decades,

¹Oxfam International, an NGO, reports: “Women and girls put in 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care work each and every day – a contribution to the global economy of at least \$10.8 trillion a year, more than three times the size of the global tech industry.” <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/worlds-billionaires-have-more-wealth-46-billion-people> (accessed on 2 May 2020).

no remedial action was initiated to resolve it in favour of the common good of the society and humanity at large. Discussion on the equality of partners in marriage and within families will not have any recognizable impact unless the contributions of these women partners are valued or assessed on the basis of common denominators. Surprisingly, even those countries with an advanced understanding of social security for their citizens recognize only the monetarily quantified contributions, thereby, conveniently ignoring the home-maker majority. For example, while those countries that have already worked out pension schemes for their citizens grade them in terms of their financial earnings during their active years of work, none of them have made provisions for the home-makers, implying that the latter are consciously relegated as if they do not make any recognizable and quantifiable contributions for the common good of the nation. If equity must prevail in our home context, then, legislation, though hitherto unheard of, is required to recognize and monetarily quantify the work done in the form of home-making and grooming of children. Insistence on this does not imply that non-quantified work is not recognized; what is to be brought home is that, as long as only quantified work is largely recognized, and plays a crucial role in the positioning and commanding power of the person in the families, remedial action is necessary in order to establish equity in human relationships both within the families and within our societal structures. Indeed, a just recognition and appreciation of the work of women – both at home and at the workplace – are necessary by society, which must accord them just and equal status.

Service of Church Ministers in the Animation of Women

As it was during the time of Chavara, within the contemporary Church too, the clergy assume almost exclusive control over the decision-making processes or policy decisions in the Church; it follows, then, that within the generally followed ecclesial paradigm, exercise of power unjustifiably tilts towards men. While this practice was continued in the Catholic Church for centuries (also due to the fact that clerical ordination is restricted to men), it was the ingenuity of Chavara that aspired for the establishment of a convent for consecrated women religious, who, along with their vowed life of devotion and contemplation centred on the person of Jesus Christ, were also involved in the promotion of humanity through various apostolic ministries. In this process, although some may perceive consecrated life as developing a parallel force within the Church, Chavara envisioned women empowering themselves by blissfully involving them in autonomous decision-making processes without the direct involvement of men.¹ Interestingly, as history testifies to it, in the long run, these consecrated women religious have not only become more empowered by charting the course of their own lives, but also have successfully empowered a large section of women, especially through their pastoral, social, educational, and healthcare endeavours, which particularly involved parishes, schools, colleges, and boarding houses as well as healthcare and social uplift centres. So, without directly abolishing the clerical

¹Of course, Chavara and his collaborator Leopold Beccaro had groomed them for this goal at the initial stages by directly involving in their animation process; they, however, had the sagacity to recognize the God-given powers and talents of women, just as any of their male counterparts was endowed with.

exercise of power (that too, without the slightest tint of targeting them in the process!), Chavara subtly circumvented the exclusion of women from decision-making within the Church by conceiving of a healthier or more humane mode of exercising power, which made humanity better through a process in which women's ability to decide for themselves was formally made possible within the precincts of a male-dominated ecclesial life. This also made available to women the much needed space for their own creative ministries in caring for the people of God, which, in turn, also raised their social and religious status both within the ecclesia and the civil society at large. They were no longer passive recipients of decisions made exclusively by a group of men, but decisive women, endowed with *feminine genius*, who could mould their destiny, and that of others through a process that involved meticulous planning, focused decision making, constructive action, and on-going critical review.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) had come up with a gender policy in 2009 (published in 2010), though, unfortunately, its existence and application are said to be known to very few Catholics in India. While this policy is a laudable achievement for the whole Catholic Church in India, we should not overlook the very slow pace of its actual realization: way back in 1974 the bishops of India had already "promised that they would stand for the dignity and rights of women," including "representation and even leadership roles in the Church organizations and helping to create proper conditions conducive to this in the Church and society."¹ However, serious work on the gender policy began only in 2007. Simply put, if it took about thirty-five years for the

¹CBCI, "Introduction," *Gender Policy 2009*, New Delhi: CBCI Commission for Women, 2010, xiv.

Catholic Church in India to at least formulate a gender policy (at least after having made a commitment along that line), how tough would it be to put this policy into practice, especially when we understand the hard-core patriarchal traditions and male chauvinistic attitudes commonly shared by the people of India (including a section of the ordained clergy of the Catholic Church), irrespective of their social and religious backgrounds? ¹ Moreover, the slow pace of formulating a gender policy also tells upon the lack of collective will the Church as a whole has when it tries to address issues of gender justice. In addition, as the practice of gender policy concerns the inner recesses of ecclesial bodies, which are mostly presided over by men (a predominant majority being the ordained clergy), expecting an enthusiastic or proactive response might have appeared to be too ambitious. Indeed, this would offer us an explanation for the very slow progress in, and the pathetic status of according respect to women, including consecrated women religious, within the ecclesial bodies and among the ecclesiastical functionaries.

Although we know that for Christians the only acceptable pattern of human relationship is the partnership of equals (as children of *Abba* and members of the Kingdom), the situation is different within the Catholic Church, where it is rather easy to claim that the male members (almost to the exclusion of female members) exercise enormous amount of temporal and sacramental power over the community and its affairs; it is also true that women are generally side-lined from the grass-roots, i.e., the local community level, to the topmost executive

¹In this context, a statement the *Amoris Laetitia* is worth recalling: “History is burdened by the excesses of patriarchal cultures that considered women inferior...” (54).

bodies, and are asked by male-dominated bodies, which are almost always chaired by ordained clergy, to abide by the directives issued for the 'common good'. Echoing this, the Indian Theological Association bluntly stated that "Women experience marginalization in the Church by the fact that they are excluded from *active* and *adult* participation in its life. While being appreciated for their compliant service and passive presence in the congregation, they are barred from ministerial roles and decision-making processes. Token representation of women at the parish, diocesan, and national levels adds a little to alter the subordinate status of women in the Church." ¹ In the context of women experiencing marginalization within the ecclesia, it must be recalled that the sacred ordination, imparted by the imposition of hands in the continued apostolic tradition of the Church, is not an instance of bestowing power to control and command (see Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 104), but confirmation of a *call to sacrificial service* for the community of believers and the whole humanity (Mk 10:43-45; Jn 13:4-15): *no one is ordained to power, but to service!* No ordained minister in the Catholic Church, therefore, is expected to claim, by virtue of the sacred ordination, any preferential treatment, position of power, or

¹Indian Theological Association (ITA) Statement, 2004, 9 at <http://www.itanet.in/ITA%20Statements2004.html> (accessed on 15 May 2020). To confirm this position, we refer to a portion of a 2008 statement from the CBCI: "... In 1992, the CBCI General Assembly stated, 'with a sense of sorrow we must admit that the women feel discriminated against, even in the Church.' In the decision-making and the consultative structures like the Parish Pastoral Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council, and Diocesan Finance Committee which are canonically advocated structures in the Church, the presence of women is inadequate." *Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India* 2010, 44 (Appendix 1).

promotion; instead, it imposes a prerogative upon every ordained member to offer himself for the service of the Church and society, even at a total loss for himself, following the example of Jesus Christ himself (exemplified also in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Lk 10:25-37), so that the redemptive mission inaugurated and accomplished by Jesus Christ is continued in the present-day society in line with His teachings enshrined in the Gospel, transmitted also through the Tradition. This makes it clear that neither male identity nor sacred ordination in the Catholic communion imparts any authority to exercise power over women, but to unconditionally serve and empower them to bring out the best of their abilities. If anyone happens to assume that his role engenders enormous power in women’s lives – or, in any one’s life – to that extent, such a position – granted either via one’s vocation or via professional appointment in the Church – would turn out to be a serious ecclesial aberration, clearly violating the biblical mandate of equality of those created in His image and likeness and the Gospel imperative of unconditional service, merciful justice, and equitable charity.

In many countries, including India, there is no equitable participation of women in policy making bodies, including the state legislature. Due to over domination of men for long, the presence of women is practically nominal, if not decorative. This should change in view of establishing an equitable society as well as a society that practises universal fraternity embedded in the Kingdom of God. If women are not represented in such decisive bodies, I seriously doubt whether those bodies would constitute democracies as such, or whether their functioning would be democratic at all. Further, in such conditions of under-representation or zero representation of women in democratic bodies, the whole of humanity will be adversely impacted, especially as their

ingenious assessments and solutions may not be available for practice to humanity. Hence, the Church and its machinery should be utilized to spearhead an equitable representation of women and men in various bodies in our religious, social, and political settings. For example, in India, a move was begun decades ago to ensure at least 33% representation of women in the legislative bodies (this, I believe, is only a nominal starting step; the ideal goal should be a minimum of 50%); many politicians have vouched for its passage in public, though, in practice, nothing significant has taken place so far. Although theoretically many are in agreement, the legislation is still pending (the reason being obvious!). However, if the Church is seriously committed to the establishment of the Kingdom of God here and now, and is inspired by the pioneering leaders such as Chavara, in the area of women empowerment, then it should take a definitive stand in favour of equitable representation of women in decision making bodies in the society; of course, this should begin, first, within the Church itself by ensuring due representation of women in all ecclesial and administrative bodies at the parish and diocesan levels.¹ If the Church and

¹Pope Francis affirms it in *Evangelii gaudium* (2013): "... But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because 'the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace' and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures" (103). "This presents a great challenge for pastors and theologians, who are in a position to recognize more fully what this entails with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church's life" (104). See also CDF, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the

the Christians committed to the Kingdom are not in the forefront to dispense justice, who else can be expected to stand up for the just demands of women? Indeed, the Church must show the way, first, by executing a minimum of 50% representation of women in all ecclesial bodies.

If this would call for revision of canonical provisions, responsible ecclesial bodies would be called upon to initiate the required processes to allow it to happen consciously, so that the biblical paradigm of creation as well as the Jesuan attitude of mercy (steeped in justice) and commitment to the Kingdom in the form of promoting ‘feminine genius’ could be tangibly and conscientiously realized, and the Church could be a shining beacon to the rest of the world in the domain of humane justice. Generally, within most of the Christian worshipping communities, women outnumber men; however, when it comes to ecclesial administrative bodies and public representation, these numbers are reversed in the form of either a complete absence of women or their nominal presence. If Christians are committed to bring about justice in an unqualified manner, attaining gender justice in the ecclesiastical offices is a minimum requirement (the only exception being ordained ministries in the Catholic Church¹). Along this line of practical orientation, the Amazon Synod of 2020 came out with the following statement: “In a synodal Church, ... women ... should have access to positions, including ecclesial services ... that can better signify the role that is theirs... This would also allow women to have a real and effective impact on the organization, the most important

Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World” (2004), 12.

¹See *Codex Iruis Canonici*, canon 1024; see also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1577.

decisions and the direction of communities, while continuing to do so in a way that reflects their womanhood” (*Querida Amazonia*, 103).

Empowering Humanity by Empowering Women

Looking at the way Chavara initiated processes to equip women to become creative partners in social uplift processes and the type of interventions he prepared for them in the second half of the nineteenth century Kerala, we must conceive of all possible avenues for partnership among women and men as a basic social capital. The best process to trigger such a process in our society is education, especially of women, which Chavara made possible by opening an *Educandat* at Koonammavu Convent. For, he knew that education can play a vital role in promoting social harmony among children. At a time when education of girls was far too difficult, Chavara made pioneering efforts to establish a boarding house that catered exclusively to girls; co-education was impossible in the traditional society of the nineteenth century. Yet, at that stage, along with the Sisters of Koonammavu Convent, he made a revolutionary forward move in empowering women.¹ Having already come a long way, today, at the level of school and university education, students must be initiated in the value of partnership in social existence; this could be imparted practically to the children while they are taught to engage themselves in various projects either within or outside the classroom. As they pick up a sense of partnership across the board, the value of

¹In his *Letter to Women* (1995), Pope John Paul II has affirmed: “In this work [of education] they exhibit a kind of *affective, cultural and spiritual motherhood* which has inestimable value for the development of individuals and the future of society” (9).

equality of genders will also be imparted spontaneously; this will gradually enhance their readiness and capabilities for partnering with everyone, including children of the opposite sex, and thus they will also learn to respect each other and to consider each other as equal partners in all aspects of familial and social existence. Introduction of self-help groups among children may also enable them to identify their own strengths and the value of mutual relationship and trust, offering them a formal ambience for collaboration and inclusive growth. Once initiated into a sense of equality and partnership, especially at the young age, they will naturally continue the same vision and practice when they grow up.

Education is expected to develop in an individual the capacity for critical thinking, for interrogation of the existing structures of society, for resistance against evils perpetrated, and for the generation of positive alternatives. To participate in such a process, education should become a catalyst for social change. This view must be cultivated by the educators as well as other stakeholders in education. For, only if the young minds are trained in critical thinking and to cultivate a sense of healthy curiosity and interrogation, will humanity be able to see the reality squarely and, if needed, effect changes. As the present-day education largely caters to the market forces, inculcation of values seems to take a backseat. This can be changed only if we train our children in critical and creative thinking, which, along with the thrust on career training, should be the focus of our educational programmes. In the light of this, we could affirm that education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development processes as well as humanizing processes in the society. This is true not only because education is an entry point to other opportunities,

but also because the educational achievements of women can have ripple effects within the family and across generations. Education helps women know their rights, gain confidence, and nurture capabilities, realise their innate sense of insight and ingenuity, and find out ways to claim their rights, and put their capabilities into practice. Unfortunately, universal examples prove that women's literacy rates are significantly lower than men's in most countries. Commitment to universal education, with a special focus on girl children and women, will help in increasing the already increasing enrolment - a heartening bit of information - and improve the retention rates, which will have a salutary effect upon the gender gap in education. Thus, providing access to education will result in the economic, social, and cultural empowerment of those groups, hitherto denied of the opportunities to participate constructively in personal as well as social development.

Within the Church, the number of consecrated women religious engaged in education is quite impressive; they have built up educational institutions to nurture young minds; their initiatives have been successful to a great extent in reaching out to remote villages as well as to groups of women who are condemned to believe that education is not part of their fate. Personal animation by a number of these consecrated women religious in village contexts - facilitated through their family visits and constant accompaniment - has enabled a lot of women to come out of their restricted and, sometimes, forbidden corners, to the public space, where they understand the dynamics and their potential to contribute to the better status of the society, though recognizing their contributions as mainstream may take longer. The intuitive approach of women, if incorporated into the policy making in education, will certainly make a significant paradigm shift; as

humanity has not successfully employed its powers in nurturing an integrated social existence, in the twenty-first century, it is important that we redeem our human society by integrating the intuitive powers of women, especially in formulating our education policies so that a more effective method of inclusive and integral education can be practised, which would benefit the entire humanity, that is, both women and men. Education, which remains almost exclusively oriented towards the market forces, can reboot itself on the path of collaborative and complementary value-oriented schemes so that the educated – along with their focus on career and monetary gains – will nurture humanity and build up systems and institutions that would cater to the growth of an integral and inclusive society across the globe.

Although there is greater recognition given to women in general and consecrated women religious in particular wider acceptance and celebration of women and their contributions within the Church should be taken to still greater heights. The contributions of consecrated women religious in the Church, particularly in the fields of education and healthcare offer us the best examples in the recent decades, for their all-pervasive influence and effectiveness. In the new era, more and more young consecrated women religious are offered opportunities for professional education, and many in the course of time assume more responsible roles in imparting value education along with their professional calling; so is the case with many dedicated women who are engaged in healthcare, even sometimes endangering their own lives. This is a very positive development, which brings back rich dividends to the Church, especially with regard to its commitment to education of humanity in inclusive and universal outlook. Although these consecrated women religious cater to a quite impressive number of children,

youth, and women involved in formal and informal education as well as in quality healthcare in villages where no corporates would ever make inroads, when it comes to ecclesial policy making and higher levels of Church administration, their visibility and influence are undervalued and largely ignored. This must change through the conscious efforts of those in positions of power.

In religious conversations, it is high time women are redeemed from their 'special' status to the 'basic' status of human beings. Many official promulgations of the Church (as well as the scriptural assertions of other religions too) accord women a special status, according her a special place within the cultic space and theological vocabulary. For example, the highest praises accorded to Blessed Virgin Mary as a woman in the teachings of the Catholic Church are unparalleled; many women saints also are honoured in the Church and their life achievements glorified.¹ Similarly, many other religions carve out a very special status for women, some of them even transposing them to the status of gods or goddesses. However, such exalted status accorded to one or the other woman in the religious milieu does not get transferred on to the general perception of women in the families or the social groupings of the same community. While one woman (or a group of women) got elevated to the spiritual realm, many other women in the ordinary living space continue to be objectified and treated on par with those things that can be bought and manipulated; seldom are they treated on par with their male counterparts. Sometimes it appears that the attempts at divinization of women in the religious sphere is a bogus mechanism adopted to cover up

¹For example, Pope John Paul II has categorically affirmed: "*Mary is the highest expression of feminine genius*" (*Letter to Women*, 10).

the injustice meted out to women in general, which, in one’s conscience, is perceived as wrong, inhuman, and, therefore, unjustifiable. Hence, it becomes necessary for Christians to convert the religious fervour with which the feminine elements are sanctified and venerated, on to their just and truly Christian behaviour so that every woman will be respected for her femininity and her unique personality and contributions to the society.

Fostering Feminine Genius: An Empowering Theology of Women

Christian discipleship is a collective and earnest effort to reclaim ‘the original blessing’ for the whole humanity in the form of the Kingdom of God. Various enlightened individual Christians as well as communities have been making persistent efforts in this regard. Although we may be forced to admit that there were a number of counterproductive events in the history of the Church,¹ as a faith-based institution that has survived two millennia, Christian discipleship has contributed significantly towards the humanization process as well as in instilling a positive value consciousness in human minds across the globe. One of such pioneering efforts from the Indian Church is seen in the life and ministry of Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family, the first indigenously consecrated religious person, who not only founded two indigenous religious congregations² but

¹Some of them were so massive that their negative impact continues to haunt the Church even during the contemporary era.

²The first indigenous religious congregation for men, Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), was founded in 1831, though its canonical erection took place only in 1855. Similarly, in 1866, Chavara, along with Leopold Beccaro, founded the indigenous religious congregation for women at Koonammavu (Vicariate of

also spearheaded a series of programmes to uplift the ordinary and marginalized people in his capacities as the Prior of the monasteries and the Vicar General of the Marthoma Christians in the Vicariate of Varapuzha during the nineteenth century. Along with many accomplishments of great pioneering merit, Chavara is also credited, first, with realizing and acknowledging the genius of the women faithful and, later, with developing programmes as well as the required infrastructure to support the blossoming of their feminine genius in such a way that not only the Christian community, but the entire society benefited out of their life of consecration and innovative and creative ministries. As these ground-breaking contributions of Chavara have not been systematically explored so far, it is unfortunate to state that even the Catholic Church in India does not recognize his ennobling vision and action plans that have paved the way for a positive transformation of the socio-cultural landscape of India in general, and Kerala in particular. It is against this backdrop that the present study, *Fostering Feminine Genius: An Empowering Theology of Women from Kuriakose Elias Chavara* by Jossy Maria CMC, becomes very significant and forward looking. As the author has observed, this exhaustive work convincingly reveals “how Saint Chavara valued, celebrated, and promoted the greatness of womanhood and motherhood in his life, writings, and ministry.”

Jossy Maria’s *Fostering Feminine Genius* succinctly navigates through the innovative vision of Chavara and arrives at the noble position that he was “a woman-friendly

Varapuzha), which was later bifurcated into two separate congregations based on their ritual identities. They are Congregation of Mother of Carmel (CMC) and Congregation of Teresian Carmelites (CTC).

man, a Gospel-based feminist, and a liberator who empowered women through women.” As a young boy at home, or as an ordained priest who subsequently embraced religious life during his adult life, Chavara’s life was led in close spiritual proximity with women. The impact of his mother’s personality upon him was so unique that her image and impressions repeatedly occur in his writings; his unique devotion to Mother Mary could be seen as an extension of his love for his own mother, though Chavara’s Marian devotion scaled greater heights in his spiritual life and set a model for later generations. Further, his growth in spiritual life was inspired and sustained by women characters in the Bible as well as a number of Christian saints, particularly Saint Teresa of Avila, whom he addressed as ‘my mother’. Indeed, the feminine genius has a special affinity for spirituality, and Chavara spontaneously identified it among his own faithful, accompanied and animated them as a pastor, and cherished it as a seeker and as Christ’s disciple, and led others to its full blossoming as the founder, superior, and spiritual guide of religious communities.

As it is pointed out very clearly in this pioneering research study, Chavara made a consistent and deliberate use of women characters in his poetical works, chronicles, and letters also to make important theological points on the spirit of self-sacrifice of mothers and other women. It is significant to note that at no place in his writings were women depicted as inferior; instead, in Chavara’s inimitable style, he accorded women significant roles in the plots that he had constructed in his writings, especially in his plays and poems. It is important to note that he did not let any woman assume a demeaning, diminutive, or self-belittling position. As he was positively influenced by women in his own personal life, it was impossible for him to conceive that women could be

treated without proper dignity. Hence, we find his actions and instructions consciously moving towards an imperative in the form of an on-going transformative process, both among women and men so that everybody would be awakened to the full humanity of women, as they were certainly created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:28). Chavara, through his positive involvement, wanted to inculcate a new consciousness among the people so that "without succumbing to the temptations of domination of woman on the part of man and of servitude to man on the part of woman," a culture of mutual respect and equality could be cultivated, especially among Christians. Certainly for Chavara, his stature as an ordained priest, a consecrated religious, or a spiritual animator never meant that he could enforce and exercise his (male) authority upon the women faithful under his care, including the Sisters; instead of making them submissive to his authority, he loved and cared for them, and offered them the best of his services (and harnessed the support of as many as possible) to facilitate their humane and spiritual blossoming whether they lived in their homes, or in the convent.

In *Fostering Feminine Genius*, Jossy Maria has brilliantly pooled together Chavara's extensive contributions for the empowerment of women in a coherent whole. She has successfully explored the theme, aiming it at the theological landscape within which Chavara's inspiring Christian insights and practical intelligence were blended together to create a new ethos of respecting women and according them their rightful place in the Church and the society. Long years of close proximity with Chavara and his writings have enabled the author to make a beautiful but logically-laid out matrix of the viewpoints and activities of Chavara that facilitated his unique pastoral outreach especially focusing on

an integral and all-inclusive blossoming of women within the portals of the Church, which, in turn, made it possible for them to claim their own merit-based space in the civil society. In fact, his staunch faith in women and their inherent capabilities came from his conviction that they share the same creative DNA, cultural patrimony, civilizational benefits, and potential for establishing the Kingdom of God, as possessed by men; in addition, he was also convinced of the power of the feminine genius that each of them is uniquely blessed with. Hence, it was natural for Chavara not to “regard women as impure or powerless. Instead, he depicted them as models of great faith and dignity and launched a civilization of equality.”

Chavara, imbued with his deep spirituality of *Appa* experience, opened up the avenues for women to stand up in the social sphere and to stamp their own unique signature in strengthening the spiritual and cultural fabric of the society. Jossy Maria captures it in substance: “According to Chavara, women are not a sub-species of men. They share a common humanity and common baptism with men, and should, therefore, share the opportunity in decision-making processes and take up leadership roles in the institutional Church. Chavara saw and recognized women as qualified, independent, capable, and worthy persons, who should be integrated into the Church and society as equal partners, overcoming the prejudices of their traditionally assigned gender roles.” Supported by various pieces of evidence, the author affirms her conviction: “When the society kept women inside their homes, Chavara encouraged them to extend their presence and services unto unfamiliar and faraway places.” At least a century prior to the Vatican Council II, we find that one of its forward-looking statements had already come true in the life and ministry of Chavara: “The hour is coming, in

fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling.”¹

Although Jossy Maria’s project involves a lot of historical research, the output made available to us in the form of *Fostering Feminine Genius* puts up a challenge to everyone, a challenge which becomes so significant in the twenty-first century, as the Church as a whole and the humanity at large seem to be still faltering in positively according women their legitimate place in the Church and the society. She agrees with Pope Francis in admitting that “the role of service of woman slides towards a role of servitude”² and insists that such a position contradicts the Gospel paradigm. Infused with biblical wisdom and armed with the practical steps prescribed by Chavara for the empowerment of women, the author brilliantly poses the challenge that both women and men should face squarely: “... for women, it challenges them to live up to their God-given dignity and equality with men; for men, it calls upon them to take the side of the ‘vulnerable human beings’ in the periphery and to shed their hard-heartedness and arrogance in the treatment of women. For Chavara, taking the side of God meant simply taking the side of the defenceless human beings, to empower them, and bring them to the mainstream of the society.”

¹The Council’s Message to Women on 8 December 1965: AAS 58 (1966), 13-14.

²Stefania Falasca, “Francis and Women,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 29 December 2019, 1.

The ecclesial communion faces serious hurdles in the chauvinistic attitude traditionally adopted by our male-dominated society, in which the Church finds herself existing and operating. Chavara, modelling himself along the attitude of Jesus Christ himself (*Mulieris dignitatem*, 25), made room for women within the ministry of the Church, offered them opportunities to reclaim their God-given dignity and autonomy, worked on a strategy to heal the wounds that humanity has bequeathed from the time of ‘original sin’ (that which distorted the equilibrium of human community and the whole creation), and instilled in everyone the hope that the ‘original blessing’ can be redeemed provided those who have been subjugated could be brought back to their original status of equity by walking the ‘Kingdom way’.

Having known that “... without women, the Church [would] break down...” (*Querida Amazonia*, 101), Chavara inspired the Church to give leadership in shedding the chauvinistic attitude among the faithful and, in turn, to cultivate an integral and holistic social outlook where all members are accepted and treated with equality. Indeed, it is a call for a paradigm shift among the Christian faithful to ensure that, in a true sense of Christian communion (Jn 13:35), all disciples of Jesus should join hands together to re-establish the Kingdom of God. In the original blessing of creation, as we believe, God made both men and women equal partners, and they were created to co-exist and collaborate in active reciprocity, generous solidarity, and responsible partnership;¹ hence, in the process of reclaiming the original blessing or, overcoming the original sin (as popularly perceived) through the redemptive act of Jesus

¹Mutuality is identified as the hallmark of thriving relationships in the body of Christ (see 1 Cor 9:6-8, Eph 4:11-13).

Christ and the establishment of God's Kingdom, the genius of women (along with that of men) must also be acknowledged and creatively availed for the maximum advantage of the whole human race. For, through his life and ministry, especially through his ennobling writings, Chavara has made us understand that every step forward for women is, indeed, a step forward for humanity as a whole towards the attainment of the original blessing in the Kingdom of God in which we all shall partake of.

PREFACE

The cry for gender equality, empowerment of women, etc., concerning women has been in discussion for decades. The key factors behind the diminutive status of women are the unhealthy social mind-set, patriarchal culture, economic dependence, biased religious precepts, and the unjustifiably prejudiced media. Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, who is renowned for his vision and painstaking efforts in bringing about reforms in the functioning of the church in Kerala, had also delved deeply into issues concerning women empowerment, a century and half ago, and he had shown the way for the uplift of the status of women. He had never considered women the 'weaker sex'. He was of the opinion that, until and unless women, on the basis of their education and knowledge, do find their proper place in social and economic fields, it is impossible for them, either to achieve self-respect for themselves, or to be self-reliant in any walks of life. It is heartening to note that, in the recent times, there is heightened sensitivity to the rights of every human person and an increased momentum to ensure that everyone has access to resources that facilitate a life befitting a human being.

But in the nineteenth century the awareness of the rights of women, their equality, and dignity were not given much thought. In order to understand Chavara's vision on women we analyse his thoughts, writings, instructions, and ministry in which we see his deep reflections upon the role and place of women in the whole Christian economy. He examined the sources of our faith and tradition, and shaped a theology of women. Though nineteenth century Kerala church was thoroughly male-dominated, male-led, and male-celebrated,

the presence of numerous women characters in the writings of Chavara and his attitude and approach towards women can be seen as an important testimony of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

An attempt is made in this work to look at Chavara's theology of women by analyzing the theological use of women characters in his writings and the powerful influence of 'the image of mother' in his life. This book is centred upon the biblical thought that both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:27-28). Consequently, they are capable of loving and are equipped with reason, free will, and conscience. In the order of redemption men and women belong to the Kingdom of God, and are heirs of eternal life and are called to Christian discipleship.

It is amazing to see that the strength and gift of womanhood understood by Chavara hundred and fifty years ago remain unique in the Indian Church. He had a positive view on women, which was theologically sound, and practically necessary for the Malabar Church as well as the larger Indian society. It is interesting to note that some of the recent Popes have almost same thoughts on women as that of Chavara that they have expressed in their encyclicals and other documents which prove that Chavara was an original thinker, especially with regard to the theology of women. Accordingly, the first chapter of this work explains the understanding of the dignity and vocation of women as stated by a few recent Popes. In the document *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II highlights that the dignity of every human being and the vocation corresponding to that dignity find their definitive measure in union with God. Mary, the woman of the Bible, is the most complete expression of this dignity and vocation. For, no human

being, male or female, created in the image of God, can in any way attain fulfilment apart from this divine image and likeness. Many a time, Pope Francis made statements enumerating objectives, affirming that the Church herself cannot exist without woman and her role, and that woman is essential for the Church. In his Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (Beloved Amazon), Pope Francis instructs that the clericalism which is prevalent in the Church and one that responds to the logics of power understood as domination must also be healed by the Gospel. What he desires is an effective collaboration between women and men in the Church in reciprocity and service, which is a fundamental need to which all, men and women, are called to make so that the Church can go forward in the spirit of Christ.

The second chapter is titled 'Feminine characters in the writings of Chavara'. This chapter presents and analyzes the women characters in the writings of Chavara. There was a tremendous influence of his mother in his life. He penned hundreds of lines about her manner of bringing up children, in his autobiographical poem *Atmanutapam*. In addition, we come across a number of other great women characters in his writings, namely, many biblical women who stood courageously at the foot of the cross at Calvary, several 'mother saints', a group of saints whom he called 'penitent mothers', certain widows, etc. The powerful presence of these women fostered a universal opening to his spirituality. For example, in his short epic poem *Anastasiayude Rakthasakshyam*, there is a powerful character, a girl martyr Anastasia, and another character Sophia, the mother superior of the convent.

The third chapter focuses on the specific means that Chavara adopted to foster feminine genius. It is through a

group of consecrated and empowered women that Chavara attempted women empowerment in his society. This he did mainly through nurturing the consecrated lifestyle of the sisters and developing the artistic talents, the art of writing, etc. of the sisters. Chavara saw great importance in feminine attributes and their potential to build a culture of life, and he offered women practical ways to apply their feminine prowess to the world around them. His intention was to provide transformative education and vocational training to the women through the dedicated service of the sisters by which women could become economically independent. He worked for the integral growth of women and his main thrust was their spiritual empowerment. He believed that woman possess power to change the world, to speak up, to stand out, to leap forward and to bring about transformation. He sought to provide space for feminine presence in the service of the Church.

Karl Rahner, a very prominent twentieth century Catholic theologian, was right in saying that in every age the image of Mary reflects dominant cultural expectations about women. The fourth chapter reflects Chavara's portrayal of Mother Mary as the icon of enlightened feminine genius and guide in our pilgrimage of faith. Chavara has developed a unique theology of Mary. As a mother, Mary of Nazareth exercised her maternal authority on the person of Jesus, an influence she continued after his death and subsequent resurrection, on the life of the group of Jesus' disciples and on the early Church.

Chapter five underlines the fact that Chavara wholeheartedly promoted dignity and equality of women, thoroughly based on a Christian anthropology. Here we see the emergence of a 'Chavara model of empowering women' in his writings, relationships, and throughout his life, which

can be rightly named a 'Koonammavu model of empowerment'.

If this study, despite its limitations and imperfections, would help women grow and evolve in their feminine identity, it will have served its purpose. This book is intended both as a token of gratitude to Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, our founder, whose 150th death anniversary we celebrate this year, and as a homage to the Servant of God Mother Mary Celine CMC whose life reveals so clearly the beauty of empowered womanhood.

With immense joy, I express my whole-hearted gratitude to Sr. Vandana CMC, my Provincial Superior, and Sr. Shalini, Superior of Pushpasadan, Aluva. I place on record my deep sentiments of love and gratitude to the sisters of CMC Pushpasadan, who accompanied me in this study. I express my sincere thanks to the following individuals who, in a special way, have made the completion of this book possible: Bishop Gratian Mundadan CMI, Fr. James Madathikandam CMI, Ritu Sharma (Shimla), and Devipriya G. (Thiruvananthapuram), who offered valuable comments, which helped me clarify my writing. They generously assisted in refining my text and furthered my interest in academic endeavors. I acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Thomas Kochuthara, Director of John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for Marriage and Family Sciences, CANA, Changanacherry, Kerala, who patiently went through the text and blessed it with a fitting foreword.

Finally, I highly appreciate and sincerely thank Fr. Saju Chackalackal CMI, General Editor of the project for publishing the series, for his constant encouragement and competent editorial work of this book. His commitment and hard work for the publication of "Theological Series on Saint Chavara" constituted a strong source of inspiration and

motivation for me throughout this work. The women of India, particularly, of Kerala are indebted to Saint Chavara for their uplift and they look forward to that day when he will be declared a 'Doctor of the Church'. The pages of this book reveal to the world how Saint Chavara valued, celebrated, and promoted the greatness of womanhood and motherhood in his life, writings, and ministry.

Feast of Mother of Carmel
16 July 2020

Sr. Jossy Maria CMC
Dehradun

Chapter 1

FEMININE GENIUS

IN THE WRITINGS OF RECENT POPES

The phrase ‘feminine genius’ or ‘the genius of women’ appears frequently in the writings of Pope John Paul II. The Pope uses ‘femine genius’ to connote an essential nature of women. Here, John Paul II refers to a concrete aspect of women’s gifts connected to their vocation as women. For example, he held that women possess a specific sensitivity for the human person, and for all that benefits her or him, or that she is called to safeguard the moral dimension of culture.¹

Although the term is attributed to John Paul II, the concept is outlined in some exhortations of Pope Pius XII and, in particular, to the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (1957). The ‘feminine genius’ is a popular phrase in theological parlance but it is rarely given much content. John Paul II has managed not only to give it recognition, but has also explained the basic themes in Catholic theology with reference to the contributions of renowned female saints and theologians. This subject came up frequently during the Marian Year, and the Pope himself dwelt on it at length in his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988) and his *Letter to Women* (1995).

According to Pope John Paul II, “woman has a genius all her own, which is vitally essential to both society and the Church.” Thus, “situations where women are prevented

¹“Pope John Paul II on Women,” <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/p/pope-john-paul-ii-on-women.php>, accessed on 12 May 2020.

from developing their full potential and from offering the wealth of their gifts should therefore be considered profoundly unjust, not only to women themselves but to society as a whole.”¹ This feminine genius includes qualities such as those of receptivity, emphasis on the person, empathy, protection of life, and sanctity and modesty, among others. Each of these qualities serves to strengthen and enliven the feminine character, and should serve to be inspirational and uplifting, and should in no way be hidden or repressed. It is precisely the ‘feminine genius’ that the Pope calls on to defend the rights and dignity of women today, and sees as the answer to the ‘culture of death’ inherent in society’s penchant for abortion, euthanasia, and war.² He highlighted the great value of what women have already accomplished.

In this chapter, we shall focus on the teachings of recent popes on feminine genius to learn of the vision of the Church regarding the dignity of women. The Magisterium has the advantage of observing and studying the social and cultural changes taking place in society today, and its positive and negative repercussions. In recent times, there has been a lot of reflection on the dignity of women and to women’s rights and duties in the different areas of civil society and the Church.

In the concluding section of this chapter, we shall explore one of the most powerful documents released by the CBCI, titled “CBCI Gender Policy of India” (2010), which endeav-

¹John Paul II, “The Feminine Genius” (23 July 1995), *Angelus Reflection in the United States Catholic Conference*, ed., *Pope John Paul II on the Genius of Women*, Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1997, 27.

²John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), 4.

ours to promote gender equality and gender justice within the Church. For our study, I shall focus on some of the recommendations of the document for the promotion of equality of partners in marriage.

The history of Christianity shows ambivalence on the part of the Church towards women. On the one hand, women have been included, called, graced, inspired, and canonized by Christianity throughout the centuries. On the other, women have not always been appreciated within the Christian tradition and, indeed, have often felt excluded and oppressed by Church leaders. It is this ambivalence towards women that characterizes the whole of Christian history.

Human persons are called to love, to communicate, and to enter into mutual relationships. The Christian understanding of gender equality is based on the biblical account of creation. Man and woman are both created in the image and likeness of God, expressing a “unity of the two” in a common humanity. In fact, our dignity as human person is based on this concept. The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that this dignity of the human person is rooted in his/her creation in the image and likeness of God.¹

1. Feminine Genius in the Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council generated intense interest in many aspects of Church life, including the situation of women. Major Church documents began to appear that took note of the emerging pastoral concerns around women. “The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” reaffirmed the basic equality of all people: “All women and men are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God’s image... There is here a basic equality between all

¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1700.

and it must be accorded ever greater recognition... Any kind of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design. It is deeply to be deplored that these basic personal rights are not yet being respected everywhere, as is the case with many women who are denied the chance to freely choose a husband, or a state of life, or to have access to the same educational and cultural benefits as are available to men."¹ Later, the document further elaborates on the timeliness of the definitively feminine contributions to society: "At present, women are involved in nearly all spheres of life; they ought to be permitted to play their part fully in ways suited to their nature. It is up to everyone to see to it that women's specific and necessary participation in cultural life be acknowledged and developed."² The concluding message of the Second Vatican Council regarding women offered a hopeful future to them: "The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling."³

Pope Paul VI was the first Pope who conferred the title 'Doctor of the Church' to two women: Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Catherine of Siena in 1974. He declared that he did

¹*Gaudium et Spes*, 29.

²*Gaudium et Spes*, 60.

³Paul VI, "To Women" (8 December 1965): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966), 13-14.

this in response to the “Signs of the times.” He set up a Special Commission for the study of contemporary problems concerning the “Effective Promotion of the Dignity and the Responsibility of Women.” He said: “Within Christianity, more than any other religion, and since its very beginning, women have had a special dignity, of which the New Testament shows us many important aspects... It is evident that women are meant to form part of the living and working structure of Christianity in so prominent manner that perhaps not all their potentialities have yet been made clear.”¹

2. Pope John Paul II

Gender equality is a much-discussed topic in this century. Realizing the importance of this theme, John Paul II authored two important documents dedicated to women: (1) Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* on the Dignity and Vocation of Women² (1988); (2) *Letter to Women* (1995). From his very first catechesis, he focused specifically on that ‘principle’ from which the identity of women and men is derived. In the Magisterium of recent Popes, the question of women has been repeatedly addressed, but until the Pontificate of John Paul II, they related mostly to problems regarding women’s work outside home, and their entry into social and political life.

There has been, within the Church, a growing recognition of the importance of women’s issues as evidenced by the discourses of Popes Pius XII and John

¹Paul VI, “To Women” (8 December 1965): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966), 13-14.

²John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (15 August 1988): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 80 (1988), 1653-1729.

XXIII, the Second Vatican Council, and other magisterial pronouncements. During the time between Vatican II and the publication of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 'women issues' exploded to the forefront in western countries as the feminist movement grew in strength. Women entered job markets, universities, professions, and politics in unprecedented numbers. Birth control information and devices became readily available, and powerful women's organizations arose. As these movements gained momentum, they had their victories and setbacks and women were divided in their opinions regarding these changes. The Church needed to respond not just to the faithful, but also to the people of God.

2.1. *Mulieris Dignitatem*: Equality of Man and Woman

The most comprehensive summation of the meaning of womanhood is *Mulieris Dignitatem*, which proclaims the greatness of women. Promulgated on the feast of the Assumption in the Marian Year of 1988, *Mulieris* is a reflection on the original truth about the human person—woman and the spiritual and moral strength of the woman. This document, also known as "Dignity of Women," endeavours to restore the dignity due to all women, which has been denied to them down the centuries. It calls for the equality of man and woman and their equal creation in the image and likeness of God.

In this document, the Pope has set out the prevailing Roman Catholic attitude towards women by meditating on the history of women within the history of salvation. He considers issues such as the use of language with regard to God, the story of Genesis, Jesus' attitude towards women, the role of Mary, and the place and role of women in the Christian community today. It honours the womanhood of

our world. It considers the restlessness of our times, the eagerness of women to be counted equal to men, and their desire for justice to be meted out to all women.

The document reflects the Catholic view that men and women are created 'equal but different', that is, equally valuable, but playing different roles; it invites one to study the rich and deep anthropology of the sexes in Catholicism in order to find solutions to the pressing problems in the areas of family and policies concerning women. John Paul II suggests that one must begin from proper anthropological and theological foundations. He critically and creatively engages with the concerns of the Church and society, presenting a new concept, namely, 'Christian feminism'.

It is clear that the attitude of the Church is one of surprise at the importance given to feminine attributes and their potential to build a culture of life. In this context, *Mulieris Dignitatem* offers women some practical ways to apply their feminine strengths to the world around them. Four aspects of those strengths are keys to the feminine role in the Church and society: receptivity, sensitivity, generosity, and maternity.

When the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith issued *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), reaffirming that priestly ordination be restricted to men, the bishops' pastoral reflections became strong and they responded positively to the leadership role of women. The document they issued on *Strengthening the Bonds of Peace* (1995) discusses women's leadership, the equality of women and men, and the diversity of women's gifts and talents. *Strengthening the Bonds of Peace* calls for an ongoing dialogue between men and women in the Church and exhorts the bishops to continue the dialogue "in a spirit of partnership and mutual trust."

By the end of 1994, the stage had been set for the Church to focus even more intensely on women. The foundations had been laid, the broad themes enunciated, and the Church's 'Year of the Woman' was about to begin. 1995 was, thus, a memorable year for women in the Catholic Church in which major papal statements were issued during the course of the Year of the Woman. Pope John Paul II dedicated many of his Sunday Angelus reflections to the role of women in the Church and in society.¹ Several recurrent themes emerge in these short talks: the dignity of women and their equality with men, the role of women as peacemakers, and the contributions of women to the Church and to society, etc. These statements follow in a line of Church documents that highlight women and their concerns. One consistent theme unites these papal statements: they all invite committed action on behalf of women. Reflecting on the Holy Father's words, we can indeed answer his challenge "to move from words to deeds" as we stand on the threshold of the new millennium.² With global attention focused on women, Pope John Paul II took the opportunity to speak out on women's behalf in 1995. Beginning with his World Day of Peace Message on 1 January 1995 and continuing with a series of Angelus

¹John Paul II's writings, which reflect on the issues of women, include the following: Post-Synodal Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981); Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (15 August 1988); *Letter to Families* (2 February 1994); *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995); *Catechesi sull'amore umano* (1979-1984; its English translation, *The Theology of the Body, Human Love in the Divine Plan*, 1997); Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family* (8 December 1995).

²John Paul II, World Day of Peace Message (1 January 1995).

reflections and his *'Letter to Women*, the Holy Father repeatedly affirmed the inherent gifts, including leadership qualities of women, and praised the "genius of women."

2.2. John Paul II's *Letter to Women*

Pope John Paul II laid a solid foundation regarding women, especially in his *Letter to Women*, where he affirms women in their roles as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, workers, and the consecrated. In this Letter, he acknowledges that "women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity."¹ He asks: "Who could show compassion for others better than a woman? By her physical and psychological nature, woman is built for nurturing and has maternal characteristics." The Pope develops the concept of 'uni-duality' in the Letter that refers to the fact that God confides to the unity of the two, man and woman, not only in the task of procreation, but also in the very construction of history. This Letter, more than any other writing, emphasizes the importance of the contribution of women in professional work and world governance.² He shares the anguish of the Church over "the many obstacles which, in various parts of the world, still prevent women from being acknowledged, respected, and appreciated in their own special dignity" and urges the International community to make every effort (i) to ensure that women regain full respect for their dignity and role, (ii) to make effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion

¹John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (25 June 1995), 3.

²John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (25 June 1995), 4.

of women, concentrating on all areas of women's life, (iii) to examine the past with courage, and (iv) to work in a convincing manner so that the widest possible space be opened to women in the economy, politics, and in the life of the Church.¹

In his letter to priests on Holy Thursday (7 April 1995), Pope John Paul II reminded them of the necessity of a healthy attitude towards women as sisters: "In order to live as a celibate in a mature and untroubled way it seems particularly important that the priest should develop deep within himself the image of women as sisters. In Christ, men and women are brothers and sisters independent of any bonds of family relationship.² He invited them to reread *Mulieris Dignitatem* and reflect on the important roles which women have played in their lives as mothers, sisters, and co-workers in the apostolate. This is another aspect - different from the conjugal aspect, but also as important - of that 'help' which women, according to the Book of Genesis, are called to give to men, the Pope said.

The Pontiff told women to understand the specific gifts God has bestowed upon them. "It is thus my hope, dear sisters, that you will reflect carefully on what it means to speak of the '*genius of women*', not only in order to be able to see in this phrase a specific part of God's plan, which needs to be accepted and appreciated, but also in order to let this genius be more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole, as well as in the life of the Church."³

¹John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), 4.

²John Paul II, *Holy Thursday Letter to Priests* (7 April 1995), 4.

³John Paul II, "Culture of Equality Is Urgently Needed Today" (25 June 1995), 22.

Very often women let themselves become convinced that femininity implied weakness. They started to look down upon their virtues – such as patience, selflessness, self-giving, tenderness – and aimed at becoming like men in all things... Each sex has its strengths; each sex has its weaknesses. According to God's admirable plan, the husband is to help his wife overcome these weaknesses so that all the treasures of her femininity will come to full bloom, and vice versa. How many men truly become 'themselves' thanks to the love of their wives? How many wives are transformed by their husband's confidence in their strength and courage?

Unfortunately, even today there are situations in which women live, *de facto* if not legally, in conditions of inferiority. It is urgently necessary to cultivate everywhere, a culture of equality, which will be lasting and constructive to the extent that it reflects God's plan.¹ Equality between man and woman is a fact asserted from the first page of the Bible in the stupendous narrative of creation. The letter refers to negative attitudes as the main obstacle to achieving the right kind of cooperation between men and women in contemporary society. This is an important point: trends, mentalities, common assumptions dictate much, also in terms of policies.

3. Christian Anthropology

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II sets out the anthropological and theological foundation regarding the dignity and significance of women and men. It is, therefore, a key document to understanding his subsequent writings on women. Man and woman are equal in human dignity

¹John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (25 June 1995), 12.

and personhood, yet different in a much more profound sense than merely biological; their equality as persons is realized as a physical, psychological, and ontological complementarity. Their equality is, therefore, fundamental as persons, but their difference is also fundamental. The Holy Father wrote that "Womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological. It is only through the duality of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' that the 'human' finds full realization."¹ It has been rightly said that we are born male and female, but become men and women.

The document underlines the equality in human dignity while also highlighting the fundamental difference between the sexes. While commenting on "The Letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the World Episcopate on the *Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*," Janne Haaland Matlary notes that this Christian anthropology of the sexes is far more profound than simply biological.² The implications of its anthropology are radical.

In Catholic anthropology, the sexes complement each other, not only in a biological sense, but in the totality of life. Thus, parents are not only biologically father and mother, but are different and complementary in a profound sense for their children. This point is missed completely by those who are only able to point to biology as the difference; it is also denied by the social constructivists who would argue that motherhood and fatherhood are merely social roles that can be deconstructed and, for this reason, have no

¹John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (1988), 50.

²Matlary, "Men and Women in Family, Society and Politics," 6.

importance in the life of the child. This latter argument is used by homosexual lobbies in order to redefine the family; they are often successful because, these days, fewer and fewer people seem to care how and why the sexes differ.

Even more fundamentally, the relationship between the sexes and, indeed, Christian life itself, is aimed at one thing only: the imitation of Christ through self-giving and service to others. This ideal, of course, may not be realized much of the time. In actual fact, relationships are often marked by power struggles and conflicts, and yet the Church teaches that these can be overcome and the ideal, therefore, remains the norm. There are serious implications of this anthropology for the family, work life, and politics.

3.1. Identity and Vocation of Men and Women

A meaningful discussion on the identity of women and men from a Christian point of view must obviously begin with carefully reading and deeply meditating on the account of the creation of man and woman (Genesis 1-3 chapters) where we find the foundational truths on the human being. It is in the act of creation that the Creator's plan is revealed, and the truth of God's creature is what God thought about His creature. Then, God said: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So, God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:26-28). These words revealed the truth concerning the human person as the "image and likeness of God," which constitute the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology.

3.2. Man and Woman in God's Image and Likeness

According to the first account of creation (Gen 1:26-31), the original plan and design of God for humanity was one of equality: they are to be images of God (Gen 1:26); bring forth posterity (1:27); and be masters over the earth (1:28); they deliberate in a comfortable, informal atmosphere; they relate to one another with mutual respect. In this first creation story, the creation of the human being as male and female, in the image and likeness of God, is closely linked to the dominion over all other creatures. There is no specification of time, namely, who was created first and second, etc.; the command to have dominion over all creatures was given to both man and woman together; God blessed them, and said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it..." (1:28).

The second account of creation (Gen 2:7, 15-24) provides an anthropomorphic description that God formed Adam from the dust of the ground, placed him in the Garden of Eden and made him name all other living things; and it was only after noting that he had "no helper suitable for him" that God created woman, "called woman (*ishsha*) because out of the man (*ish'*) she was taken." Referring to both accounts of the creation narratives (Gen 1-2), John Paul II affirms that the human person is the apex of God's creation, and that the personal character is that they are created 'man and woman'; in the image and likeness of God they are created.

But, it is the second account of creation which, until recent times, had influenced the formation of the dominant theological anthropology in the Church's teaching. Paul explicitly states that man is made in the image and for the glory of God (1 Cor 11:7-10), while woman is made in the image of man, coming from him and being created for him. He even interpreted the text of creation account in these

words: "Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man" (1 Cor 11:8). "Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man" (v.9). Some Fathers, referring to this text, therefore, denied that woman was created in the image of God.¹ Theological images of the feminine in God, in the relation between Christ and the Church (or the soul), and in the anthropology of the self have an important role to play.

We ponder a while here on the biblical account of woman (Gen 2:16-25) to get the reason that led God to create woman and explain a few key terms such as 'helper', 'fit for him', 'partner', 'rib', etc.

3.3. Creation of Woman

In the second creation story, the creation of woman is introduced in the context of a sense of loneliness that man felt in the midst of other created beings. Then the Lord God said: "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (v. 18); "... but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner" (v. 20). According to Carlo Caffarra, the solitude of which the Bible speaks must not be thought of primarily as loneliness, as something negative. It signifies the absolute originality of the human person in the created universe. When the human person came into contact with the animals (vv. 19-20), he realized that he was completely different from them and was truly and wholly superior to them. Seeing the animals, the human person became aware of his superiority, in the sense that he could not be placed on par with any other species of living

¹Bellenzier, "The Identity of Women and Men according to the Teaching of the Church" in *Men and Women: Diversity and Mutual Complementarity*, ed. Thomas D'Sa, 83-107, Bangalore: NBCLC 2006.

beings on the planet. His solitude marked out his supreme dignity.¹ In woman, man finds a partner with whom he can dialogue in complete equality. This desire for dialogue, which was not satisfied by any other living creature, explains the man's spontaneous cry of joy and wonder when the woman was created from one of his ribs: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). This was the first cry of love to resound on the earth!

The Creator willed that there should be a relationship of profound communion between man and woman, in a perfect reciprocity of knowledge and of giving of the self,² as the human person needed to communicate with another human person and this need could only be met in the presence of meeting another person. It was by overcoming loneliness that man affirms the unique dignity of another person. The creation of woman was the response to this need: she was created to make it possible to establish communion between persons. Man can exist only as a unity of the two and, hence, in relation to another human person. Men and women are called to live in a communion of love and, in this way, to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God the Trinity, through which the Three persons love one another in the intimate mystery of the one divine life.

Caffarra enlists two fundamental statements regarding the truth of the creation of woman and the very reason and significance of her existence: (1) Woman is a human person, equal in dignity to the human person-man, because she is similar to man in nature. She is a created being like himself,

¹Caffarra, "Benchmarks, Problem Areas and Issues for Debate" in *Men and Woman: Diversity and Mutual Complementarity*, 109-124.

²See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 371.

a being “fit for him.” (2) Woman is also a human person who differs from man, and it is because of this diversity that the communion of persons was formed. In essence, humanity was created in two ways, each having equal dignity, but differing in their internal configuration of masculinity and femininity. Their vocation is to be with the other and, ultimately to bring about communion among persons.

3.4. The Traditional Interpretation

The existence of two accounts of creation makes the interpretation more complex, but explains the historical differences between them.¹ The theological strands that form the basis of the dignity of a woman and a man are: our great dignity rooted theologically in our creation in the image and likeness of God and our Redemption through Jesus the Son of God. All the early interpretations offered by the Fathers of the Church, and until Saint Augustine, were based on these chapters, but more particularly on Saint Paul’s interpretation of the creation of man and woman. Certain aspects of the Fall help us by shedding light on the manner in which these accounts of creation have been interpreted within the Christian theology.

The prevalent idea, however, was to deny the theomorphic nature of women, partly because the image of woman was always linked to dominion over creation, which was, unanimously, considered to be the prerogative of man. But, in reality, with regard to dominion over creation, God entrusted the dominion to both sexes (Gen 1:28). Saint Paul

¹Bellenzier, “The Identity of Women and Men according to the Teaching of the Church” in *Men and Women: Diversity and Mutual Complementarity*, 83-108, at 84.

was once again the main authority they relied on,¹ with a text that still forms part of the liturgy of the sacrament of matrimony, reiterating dutiful submission of the wife to the husband as her head, just as Christ is the head of the Church. However, this resulted in male domination, which has led to a patriarchal exegesis of the Genesis' creation accounts to legitimize women's secondary status within the Christian tradition.²

When male theologians interpreted the creation story, they gave preeminent position to man assuming that man was created first and woman second. Sexist interpretations of the Fall have led them to write that woman is created second and is thus inferior to man. Female theologians interpreted that the creation story is to be seen as a procession; first, minor creatures were created, then a beautiful garden was prepared and, at last, man was created from the dust and was placed in the garden. He was given authority over all creatures but, gradually, he began to feel lonely and incomplete. Finally, the most beautiful and important person, the woman, was created as the final product, the crown and culmination of creation. Woman is the completion of creation, without whom even Adam, the first human being, felt inadequate. Male theologians sought to interpret the creation of man and woman in terms of superiority and inferiority. According to them, that which was created first implied superiority and, consequently, that which was created second was considered apparently inferior.

¹See Eph 5:22-24: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, as the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands" (reiterated in Col 3:18).

²Stein, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, vol. 2: *Essays on Woman*, 62.

The question here is not one of dominion of man over woman. Instead, here, she is named as companion and helpmate, and it is said of man that he will cling to her and that both are to become one flesh. This signifies that we are to consider the initial life of the human pair before the Fall, to be the most intimate community of love, and that their faculties were in perfect harmony as within one single being; their senses and spirits were in right relation with no possibility of conflict. For this reason, they were also incapable of inordinate desire for one another. This is revealed in the words "They were naked and were not ashamed."

The theologians attributed an inferior connotation to the term 'helper': woman is to be man's helper. Here the term 'helper' is used in the same context as the 'Holy Spirit the Helper'; it does not imply that the Holy Spirit is inferior to humans but is considered to be an essential person to help, to complement, to complete, and to fulfil. The significance of the term 'helper' (*ezer*) used to describe woman is not one of subordination or inferiority of woman but that women share equal rank and position with men. Just as God is seen as a helper of Israel, which does not in any way make Him inferior, so is with woman as helper and assumes greater significance.

Another term employed in the narrative is 'rib': because she has emerged from man's rib, woman is assumed to be dependent on man and, thus, needs him for her survival; male theologians use this context to justify man's superiority over woman. The significance of the 'rib' is not to show woman as being inferior to man, but that woman is a part of man and, hence, shares in the same nature and being of man. Female theologians opine that since man is created from dust, he is morally weak and fragile; woman is created out of bone ('rib'), which is stronger compared to dust.

Therefore, woman has power of perseverance, endurance, and other strong qualities. Men, for example, on the face of difficulties, usually take to alcohol, drugs, etc., as they are afraid of confronting challenges. Women, on the other hand, have the mental strength to endure both physical and mental pain with equanimity.

Some of the Church Fathers had portrayed Eve as responsible for sin to enter the world, as she was accused of bringing about the world's misfortunes. Woman was labelled as temptress of man, responsible for the evil in the world, responsible for the fall of man, etc. Wisdom books contain repeated warnings against woman as temptress (Prov 7:6-27; Sir 9:1-9). Some women theologians have brought to our notice the fact that woman was not on the scene when the instruction – given by God, prohibiting him from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – was given to Adam (Gen 2:17). It was Adam who directly heard from God the instructions regarding the prohibition; they were God's words spoken in true seriousness. So, he is more responsible for the sin of the humanity; not the woman. Of course, she came to know of it from Adam. Therefore, God first asks Adam about the sin he has committed. Thus, with regard to the original Fall both have equal responsibility, without any excuse for Adam. This excludes the view of woman as the source of deception and temptation. In the pages of the Bible, men's sins, hard-heartedness, and acts of cruelty are recorded clearly. Male-dominated society deals with woman's sin with extra severity. Jesus condemns the system in which man's lust is lightly treated, while woman's seduction, whatever the circumstances, is harshly punished. Sin is not the exclusive burden of woman. Man has

developed the habit of settling the problem of evil by throwing the mud on woman alone.¹

Being created in the image of the Trinity, man and woman are created for a mutual relationship. She is named the companion and the helpmate, and it is said of man that he would cling to her and that both are to become one flesh (Gen 2:24): the man for the woman and the woman for the man, i.e., they are called to exist mutually “one for the other.” God created them to be a communion of persons, in which each can be a ‘helpmate’ to the other, for they are made equal persons (‘bone of my bones’) and complementary as masculine and feminine. Reciprocity and complementarity are the two fundamental characteristics of the human couple.²

By examining the keywords used in the theological debate and the Magisterium regarding the identity of male and female in God’s plan for creation, we have a clearer picture of the developments that have occurred in Christian anthropology. The vocation of man and woman is not exactly the same in the original order, the order of fallen nature, and the redemptive order. Originally, man and woman were both made responsible to preserve their own likeness to God, their lordship over the earth, and the reproduction of the human race. Sadly, a long history of sin has disturbed, and continues to disturb, God’s original plan for the couple. It is this act of sinning that stands in the way of its complete fulfilment.

¹George Mangatt, *Jesus the Good News*, Kottayam: Pontifical Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1998, 146.

²*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 372.

3.4.1. The First Sin and the Rupture of Relationship (Gen 3:1-21)

God's original plan and design seem essentially altered after the first Fall of Adam and Eve in respect to humanity and the human vocation. After their Fall, the relationship between them is transformed from a pure partnership of love to a relationship of sovereignty and subordination and is distorted by concupiscence. Generally, it is considered that the Fall brought in submission, subjugation, and oppression of woman and the domination of man. There was rupture in the fourfold relationship of humans: with God, with one another, with oneself, and with nature or environment. The difficult struggle for existence is allocated primarily to man and the hardship of childbirth to woman. But a promise of redemption is present inasmuch as the woman is charged with the battle against evil. At the same time, the male sex is to be exalted by the coming of the Son of God. The redemption will restore the original order. The pre-eminence of man is disclosed by the Saviour's coming to earth in the form of man.

3.4.2. The Consequences of Sin on Woman

The commission of sin spoiled and damaged the relationship between men and women. The punishment levelled at woman damaged 'the unity of the two' that God had originally intended. This is damaging to the relationship between man and woman, but it is more damaging for the woman.¹ Sin brought about a disfigurement of the human person, as well as of femininity, by incurring the curse of God upon woman. God's curse against woman was directed at motherhood. It was a curse that implied physical pain,

¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 9.

namely, pain in childbearing and relationship: “your desire shall be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16). This was not the original plan and design of God when he fashioned man and woman in his own image and likeness. All believers are called to recapture the original design of God, which was one of equal dignity of man and woman. It is a fundamental affirmation of the woman as a person against the teaching “husband is the head of the wife” as Christ is the head of the Church. In Christ, woman has been redeemed and transfigured. Redeemed from what had disfigured her original truth; transfigured, because He fully revealed the very essence of femininity in Mary, His mother. Through the *proto-evangelium* (Gen 3:15), the feminine sex is ennobled by virtue of the Saviour being born of a human mother; a woman was the gateway through which God found entrance to humankind.

4. Song of Songs

Song of Songs re-establishes God’s original plan and design for humanity, which was one of equality of partners in marriage. There are those who treat this book as a song of human love. There are also those who consider its only value to be that of its mystical suggestiveness, because God deliberately uses the relationship of marriage as an illustration of the relationship that He has with His people. Thus, we find that this great *Song of Songs* illustrates the love, the intensity, and the beauty of the relationship that should exist between God and the believer. This, however, is clearly a secondary meaning, sublimated to the plain literal meaning, nevertheless, valid and important. This “greatest of all songs” focuses on romance; marital love shows us what a high regard God has for the institution of marriage and the partnership between husband and wife. We might

assume that the *Song of Songs* is a song that only praises God instead of one that celebrates love and sensuality within marriage. This idea is decidedly contrary to the rather narrow and orthodox perception of marriage that prevailed early in the history of the Church.

It is the first book which portrays the woman as being free of the existing patriarchal structures of its time. The Song liberates woman and envisions equality of man and woman. In the Song, it is the woman who takes the initiative. The book opens up with the expression of the woman's desire to be kissed: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." The best way to see this book is as a literal, powerful description of the romantic and sensual love between a man and a woman, observing both their courtship and their marriage. This woman is not weak and passive, and the young man is a leader and respected as such. She is, undeniably, a strong woman, who happens to do most of the talking through the Song of Solomon. Nearly twice as many verses emerge from her lips than from his. There is nothing here of the aggressive male and the reluctant or victimized female. They are one in their desires because their desires are God-given.

Another fact seen in the Song is that it is the man who enters the mother's house. Now, this custom is a huge transition from the predominantly patriarchal culture. Though at the time of creation the Lord intended man to 'abandon' his parents and 'cleave to' his wife, man seldom leaves his house. In that aspect the Song suggests a paradigm shift from a patriarchal structure. It portrays the equality of partners in marriage. The command 'to leave' invites us to seriously look into our current patriarchal system and questions the unequal practices and customs that oppress and subjugate women.

Therefore, biblical scholars express the hope that not all is lost in the Hebrew Scriptures. We see glimpses of recapturing the lost image and glory of woman in the Scriptures. *Song of Songs* is one of the most prominent of such books. It portrays a more accurate, balanced, and interesting image of woman; it is also a critique of scripture and the way they see and portray women in other books of the Bible. Man and woman share an equality of role and a mutuality of relationship or equality of responsibility, freedom, and accountability in marriage.

5. Jesus' Attitude towards Women

Jesus Christ is the promoter of woman's true dignity. It was observed that although Jesus chose only men as his apostles, he also involved women in the cause of his kingdom; indeed, he wanted them to be the first witnesses and heralds of his resurrection. Thus, the Gospels present a ministry and message of inclusion. Women and men were called to discipleship and even to apostleship. In all of Jesus' teaching, as well as in his behaviour, one can find nothing which points to the discrimination against women prevalent in his day. On the contrary, his words and works always express the respect and honor due to women.¹ There was discipleship of equals in Jesus' Group. The highly positive attitude and approach of Jesus toward women can be seen in the parables he used, the miracles he performed, and, above all, in his personal relationship with women.

The anointing of Jesus in Bethany (Mk 14:3-9) can be seen as a beautiful example of how Jesus appreciated women and their outpouring of love and affection. The event took place in the presence of male disciples/pharisees. The super-

¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 13.

abundance of both the quality and the quantity of the oil used is an indication of Mary's affection, trust, and abandon to the person of Jesus. Jesus allowed himself to be touched by a woman. The whole event creates difficulty for the 'righteous ones': "Why was the ointment wasted in this way?" (Mk 9:4). Turning their criticism upside down, Jesus insists upon her 'beautiful deed'. From the beginning of Christ's mission, women exhibit to him and to his enigma, a special sensitivity and acceptance, characteristic of their femininity. In other words, women were particularly intuitive and good at understanding who Jesus was.

We see some emerging themes such as, the superlative quality of the faith of a woman, over the well-measured reactions of male disciples, Jesus' extraordinary internal freedom and the complete absence of ambiguity in the intimacy of touch. The woman is clearly presented as a model of deep faith and affection, and a challenge to male disciples of all times: "Wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mk 14:9). What Jesus appreciates in the uniqueness of women is their enormous capacity to care for others. Therefore, they are encouraged to increase their caring quotient (CQ).

5.1. Liberation from Male Dominance in Marriage

"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" (Mt 19:3), a Pharisee asked Jesus. Here the Pharisee wanted to know only one thing, whether there is any limit to the power of the husband over his wife, when he wants to divorce her. The right of the husband to divorce his wife was never disputed in the Jewish tradition. For them wife was the property of her husband and so he had property-rights over her; she existed only to give him descendents

and to satisfy his needs. Jesus' revolutionary teaching on marriage and divorce was a declaration of independence of woman from the unlimited power of the husband over his wife (Mt 19:2-10; Mk 10:2-12).¹ He said: "At the beginning God created man as couple, a male and a female (Gen 1:27), because he wanted to unite them in one flesh (Gen 2:24). The bodily sexual union of the couple is here highly placed in the light of God's plan. Obviously, it is expected to foster personal bond and spiritual communion between the couple.

Jesus took the issue to the original plan of the creator: "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Mk 10:9). Moses' permission of divorce is rejected as merely a concession to man's hard-heartedness and insensitivity, produced through continued disobedience to God's original will. Jesus' categorical prohibition of divorce teaches that women are not sexual objects which men can discard at will after use; they are as much human persons as men, who enter into a divinely established partnership of equals.² These original teachings of Jesus created a completely new attitude to social contact between the sexes among his disciples. Having been liberated from sexual preoccupations and fears, men and women began to mix freely in his company. A large group of women, together with the twelve, formed the Jesus' group in Galilee (Lk 8:1-3). Jesus accepted women into the group of disciples because he expected his disciples to control their desires.³

¹B. Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, Cambridge: University Press, 1987, 18-28.

²Mangatt, *Jesus the Good News*, 142.

³J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, New York: Scriber's, 1971, 227.

5.2. 'Jesus Model' of Loving Women

John recorded that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister" (Jn 11:5) and the scene in Lk 10:38-44 and Jn 11:1-44 confirms it. We see Jesus occasionally visiting them, dining with them, and enjoying their friendship and hospitality. He was totally free from any embarrassment about this relationship. Against the prevailing culture of His times, Jesus courageously accepted and recognised women's equality, dignity, and giftedness. This sort of relationship is revolutionary in the context of the socio-religious traditions of Jesus' times. His approach went totally against the prevalent understanding of the Law and the social and religious codes and practices. Those women whom Jesus encountered resisted the powers of domination and oppression and they proved themselves courageous in relating with him even in public, including their presence at the foot of the cross. Jesus' mind-set in handling the scenes of the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:3-11) and the woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Lk 7:36-50) defined the value he gave to women in the Kingdom of God. The women in the life and ministry of Jesus are seen as channels of transformation by challenging the patriarchal structures and by retrieving their dignity. Jesus is the definitive model for a new way of mission for and with women.

5.3. Jesus' Concern for the Widows

In Jewish society, widows were looked down upon as bad omen. It was due to the belief that 'husbands die young because their wives are evil'; hence, many widows were seen as curse in their families. Jesus had a deep sensitivity towards women in general, and towards widows in particular, so as to help them live the fullness of life that He had come to give all people, especially those who were poor,

weak, and burdened. Jesus showed esteem for them and manifested concern for widows in his teachings (Lk 4:25; 18:2-8). He proved his compassion for their suffering, especially for the widow who lost her only son, the sole means of support (Lk 7:11-17) and he took the initiative to help them in their need. Another example is his high appreciation for the poor widow (Mk 12:41-44) who possessed nothing but two copper coins and offered everything to God. Jesus presented her as a model for generosity in discipleship. In all the Gospels, especially in Luke, the quality of faith of the women disciples is powerfully testified by the resurrection stories, where women are the first to come to the empty tomb, the first to experience the risen Lord, and the first to proclaim the Easter faith.¹

Jesus' great sensitivity and respect for women offer an invitation for a deep conversion for the Church and society. We can see immediately the great esteem in which Jesus held women. Pope John Paul II observes: "It is universally admitted - even by people with a critical attitude towards the Christian message - that in the eyes of his contemporaries, Christ became a promoter of women's true dignity and of the vocation corresponding to this dignity. At times this caused wonder, surprise, often to the point of scandal: 'They marveled that he was talking with a woman' (Jn 4:27), because this behaviour differed from that of his contemporaries."² The idea that women are especially sensitive to others obviously reflects the idea that men and women are created with different abilities and talents suited to their own particular vocation in life.

¹Moloney, *Woman First Among the Faithful*, 93.

²John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 12.

6. Saint Paul and Women

While depicting the high calling of Christian life, Saint Paul said: "... There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for, all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Across the patriarchal pattern of the 'world', Christians understood themselves as a new community, in which all members shared equally in the freedom of the children of God and in which the privileged religious, class, and gender roles were abolished. The patriarchal cultural paradigm was replaced by the vision of a community where people lived together in love and service. Not only Gentiles and slaves, but also women, could be full and equal members of this community.

Biblical scholars affirm that Paul, the earliest interpreter of the significance and message of Jesus, has correctly understood the attitude of Jesus towards women, and has begun to work out his own theological synthesis in perfect accord with that attitude.¹ Although Paul accepted this theological principle he had pastoral difficulties in its practical application. According to Fiorenza, this "theological self-understanding" was not invented by Paul but it began in Jesus' own attitude towards women and in his teaching.² She explained that Galatians 3:28 is not a Pauline "peak formulation" or a theological breakthrough achieved by Paul that is outnumbered by the subordination passages.³

Paul not only admits the possibility of women remaining unmarried, but even encourages them to do so (1 Cor 7:7-8, 25-26). Thus, he is implicitly saying that the worth of a person is determined not by some social demand, such as

¹Moloney, *Woman First among the Faithful*, 32.

²Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 208-218.

³Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 198-199.

marriage, much less by biological fertility, but by their inner disposition to receive and live in love: the highest gift given by God (1 Cor 13:13). He advises Christians, especially women, to remain free from the bond of marriage, for, virginity is “the higher calling.” Despite his preference for celibacy, Paul maintains that both marriage and freedom from marriage are callings and charisms from God and both husbands and wives have equal conjugal obligations and equal sexual rights (1 Cor 7:1-5). He encourages the capacity of women for “undivided devotion to the Lord.” Moreover, by dismissing circumcision as irrelevant, he asserts the equality of man and woman in the Church as both are equally able to keep God’s commandments and are able to equally express their faith through love. We have no reason to assume that women were excluded from the leadership of the house churches or from presiding at worship. Paul explicitly mentions women as his missionary co-workers (Rom 16:3-8). The texts give no indication that these women were dependent on, or subordinate to, Paul. He affirms that women have worked with him on an equal basis.

At the same time, there are a few statements in the Pauline writings regarding women, such as 1 Cor 11:3-16; 1 Cor 14:33b-35; 1 Tim 2:9-12, which produced a very negative effect in the service of women in the Church throughout the centuries.

6.1. Negative Remarks on Women in Pauline Writings

To the believers of Corinth, in the context of Christian worship, Paul tells: “For a man ought not to have his head veiled,¹ since he is the image and reflection of God; but

¹Although in 1 Cor 11:4 Paul teaches that any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, how

woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man..." (1 Cor 11:7-12). By interpreting the creation of woman as "for the sake of man," Paul perpetuated the subordination of woman in society, an interpretation that has done much harm to women and humanity as well.

In the context of sacramental marriage in Eph 5:23, Paul repeats: "For the husband is the head of the wife..." In 1 Tim 2:9-12, Paul speaks more emphatically concerning woman's place in the community (1 Tim 2:9). She should be dressed simply and modestly and display her piety through good work. The woman must learn in silence, in total humility. But I do not permit a woman to instruct,¹ nor to exalt herself over the man; rather she should keep quiet (1 Tim 2:12). For, Adam was created first, then Eve; and Adam was not seduced but the woman was and this initiated transgression. But "she will attain salvation through childbearing, provided she perseveres in faith, love, and holy reticence" (1 Tim 2:15).

did the tradition develop in the Church that the Pope and Bishops cover their head while officiating the Holy Mass, the supreme form of prayer?

¹Against this instruction of Saint Paul in the first century, another Paul, Pope Paul VI, in the twentieth century, declared two women as 'Doctors of the Church' (namely, Saint Catherine of Siena on 4 October 1970 and Saint Teresa of Avila on 27 September 1970), affirming that women have authority in the Church to teach. Subsequently, two more women were made Doctors of the Church (Saint Therese of Lisieux on 19 October 1997 and Saint Hildegard of Bingen on 7 October 2012) and, again, more women are awaiting the completion of the ecclesiastical processes to be declared Doctors.

Here, even more strongly than in 1 Cor 11, one gets the impression that the original order and the redemptive order are subordinated by the order of fallen nature or the disfigured state, and that the Apostle still expresses himself distinctly as a Jew in the spirit of the law. The evangelical concept of virginity appears to have been forgotten completely. What is mentioned here and what may have been feasible concerning certain improprieties in the Greek community, are not to be considered binding for the principal teaching on the relationship of the sexes. It contradicts too strongly the words and the whole custom of the Lord who had women among his closest companions, and who showed at every turn in his redemptive work that He was as concerned about the soul of woman, just as He was about the soul of man. It even contradicts that passage of Paul himself, which possibly expresses most purely the spirit of the Gospel (Gal 3:28).

One may notice the description of resurrection stories in Paul which lacks the testimony of women who had the apparition of the Risen Lord. Cardinal Ratzinger says that Paul did not give the testimony of women because of the Jewish tradition that only men could be admitted as witnesses in court; for, the testimony of women was considered unreliable.¹

6.2. The Subordination of Women

Subordination of women is deeply rooted in the consciousness of both men and women and is reinforced through religious beliefs, cultural practices, and educational systems

¹Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth, Part 2: From Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011, 168.

that assign lesser power and lower status to women. It is visible in the following statements, if they are taken in isolation: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord" (Eph 5:22). "For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church..." (Eph 5:23). "Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, subject to their husbands" (Eph 5:24). In Eph 5:21-24, wives are asked to be subject to their husbands, and the term 'be subject to' has been repeated more than three times. In chapter seven of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II opens up a radically new dimension of sacramental marriage with great implications for the nature and dignity of women. For many generations before this, a woman's subordination to her husband was often described as her punishment because of Eve's sin, namely, that because woman misused her free will in the Garden of Eden, God punished her by placing her under the authority of a man, her husband. However, according to John Paul II, a man and a woman are called to mutual self-giving that is not distorted either by the desire of the man to become the 'master' of his wife ("he shall rule over you") or by the woman remaining closed within her own instincts ("your desire shall be for your husband" Gen 3:16).¹

Based on Eph 5:21-24, which is the fundamental text that powerfully emphasizes the submission of wives to their husbands, John Paul II offered a new interpretation which he called "The Gospel innovation" or "mutual subjection" that in marriage there is to be 'a new way': as "a mutual subjugation out of reverence for Christ."² He differentiates between the relation of husband and wife and the analogous

¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 18.

²John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 24.

relation of Christ and the Church discussed in Eph 5:25-33. The Pope makes the point clearer: "Whereas in the relationship between Christ and the Church the subjection is only on the part of the Church, in the relationship between husband and wife the "subjection is not one-sided but mutual." He adds: "In relation to the 'old' this is evidently something 'new': It is an innovation of the Gospel."¹ "The matrimonial union requires respect for, and a perfecting of, the true personal subjectivity of both of them. The woman cannot become the 'object' of domination." The Holy Father remarks: "In this love there is a fundamental affirmation of the woman as a person. This affirmation makes it possible for the female personality to develop fully and be enriched." Before this innovation, women were often thought of by philosophers and theologians to be subject to men because of a weakness of their nature.² "The awareness that in marriage there is mutual subjugation out of reverence for Christ, and not just that of wife for husband, must gradually establish itself in the heart, consciences, behaviour and customs. This is a call which ... does not cease to challenge future generations."³

The Pope observes that many forms of degrading discrimination still persist today extensively in our society that affect and seriously harm particular categories of women, as, for example, childless wives, separated or divorced women, and unmarried mothers. The Synod Fathers deplored these and other forms of discrimination as strongly as possible: "I, therefore, ask that vigorous and incisive pastoral action be taken by all to overcome them

¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 24.

²Allen, "MD Twenty Years Later," 36.

³John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 24.

definitely so that the image of God that shines in all human beings without exception may be fully respected.”¹ In the face of continued subjugation and violence against women, and the cultural elements that further such oppression, we need a transformation of culture in the form of attitudes, both at the level of beliefs and that of praxis.

7. Complementarity in Spousal Love

The typology of Christ and the Church as a nuptial image appears in the New Testament and continually reappears in Christian symbolism. The soul may be seen as female in relation to God but male (rational) in relation to the body. These symbolic typologies of the self and God are generally constructed on complementary lines such that the male stands for the more active side of the relationship, and the female for the more passive or receptive. However, we should not, therefore, suppose that this symbolism always socially reinforced patriarchal subjugation of women. It is important to see in what context these symbols operate.

John Paul II emphasizes the symbolic meaning of spousal love as the image of Christ’s love for the Church, and even prior to that, the love of the Creator for his creatures. It is in this background that he defined his concept of masculinity and femininity. Woman can only discover who she is, by loving God and others. God, therefore, entrusts the human being to women in a special way and this particular way determines their vocation,² which confers upon them that “sensitivity for what is essentially human,” which is “characteristic of their femininity.” To live the complementarity in spousal love in marriage, it must be underlined that,

¹John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), 24.

²John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 30.

in the Pope's powerful appeal, there is mutual subjection of the spouses out of reverence for Christ, and not just that of the wife to the husband. This awareness must gradually establish itself in hearts, consciences, behaviour, and customs. This is a call, which, from that time onwards, does not cease to challenge succeeding generations; it is a call which people have to accept ever anew. But, he sets all those previous claims to rest with his definitive view: "But the challenge presented by the 'ethos' of the Redemption is clear and definitive. All the reasons in favour of the 'subjection' of woman to man in marriage must be understood in the sense of a 'mutual subjection' of both 'out of reverence for Christ'."¹

John Paul II taught us in depth that the real symbol of the whole body of the Church, women and men, is woman: "We can say that the analogy of spousal love found in Eph 5:22-33 links what is 'masculine' to what is 'feminine', since, as members of the Church, men too are included in the concept of 'bride'. In the Church every human being - male or female - becomes the 'bride', in that he or she "accepts the gift of the love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person."²

The spousal bond of husband and wife becomes a living sign for other vocations in the church. As a living sign of the love between the bridegroom and bride, it communicates to everyone the love that God revealed through Hosea, God's faithful love for his people of Israel, and the love of the Son Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom, for his Bride, the Church.³ The term 'bride' in this context implies a collective term including men, women, and children, but the term 'bridegroom'

¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 24.

²John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 25.

³John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 23-25, 27.

represents an individual Divine Person. The spousal dimension of vocations to sacramental marriage, consecrated virginity, and priesthood has been revealed through faith as living signs of the spousal dimension of reality. These complementary vocations serve as living signs to one another of different aspects of this reality. Thus, the married couple acts as a living sign of the love between God and his people, between Christ and the Church; the consecrated woman as a living sign of the response of human love to Divine love; and the priest as the living sign of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, who loves first with his saving love and all this involves total self-gift and love.¹

Being created in the image of the Trinity, man and woman are created for a mutual relationship – the man for the woman and the woman for the man, i.e., they are called to exist mutually “one for the other” (MD 7). In the context of mutual self-gift, we are given the “indispensable condition for the transmission of life to new generations.” Although we were created in the image of God, there is also the ‘non-likeness’, namely, that which separates us from God, for God is also the complete ‘Other’.

7.1. What Is True Femininity?

Some qualities most unique to women are receptivity, generosity, and the ability to nurture. Men can have these characteristics too, but women are best able to embody them. While both sexes share in the Christian capacity for self-giving love, the Church emphasizes that women have this ability in a specific way because of motherhood, which is not just a physical capacity. When a woman truly lives her

¹Allen, “MD Twenty Years Later: An Overview of the Document and Challenges,” 37.

Christian vocation, this will mean that she occupies a privileged place in the Church, in the family, and in the society. It is, in fact, a woman, Mary, who is the supreme model of Christian life.

The Pope prayerfully considers the consequences of the Creator's decision that the human being should always exist as a woman or man. He takes us to the first chapters of Genesis, where we find the foundational truths on the human being, what he calls "the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology."¹ The Bible is replete with language that we as humans can understand. God reveals himself both as the Lover always in search of His estranged wife but also as a Mother who cares deeply for her child. It also represents God as Father; yet, we need to keep in mind that God is Spirit. When we attribute to God the characteristics of Father or Mother, we must not perceive them in a physical sense but in a deeper divine sense.²

7.2. Women and Self-Giving Love

Pope John Paul II upholds the great honour of women as being the only ones who could ever bear life, and he further developed the ultimate meaning of the body-soul unity by way of a distinctive theology of the body and suggests that each person is made for love, for self-giving love. Everyone is called to give oneself to others in a selfless relationship. This capacity for self-giving love is distinctly human. It is the way we 'image' the self-giving Creator God, for each of us is, by divine creation, a gift. He continues: "people reach their transcendent and definitive destiny by fidelity to his or her own vocation; this goal provides meaning and direction

¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 6.

²John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 8.

for the earthly labours of men and women alike.”¹ This theology of the body has particular value in reshaping our understanding of marriage, sexuality, vocation, and service of others.

“In this perspective of ‘service’ – which, when it is carried out with freedom, reciprocity, and love, expresses the truly ‘royal’ nature of humankind – one can also appreciate that the presence of a certain diversity of roles is no way prejudicial to women, provided that this diversity is not the result of an arbitrary imposition, but is rather an expression of what is specific to being male and female.”²

In this vast domain of service, the Church’s two thousand year history, for all its historical conditioning, has truly experienced the ‘genius of women’; from the heart of the Church there have emerged women of the highest calibre who have left impressive and beneficial footprints in history. I think of the great line of women martyrs, saints, and famous mystics. In particular, I think of Saint Catherine of Siena and of Saint Teresa of Avila, to whom Pope Paul VI granted the title of Doctors of the Church. Also we cannot overlook the many women, inspired by faith, who were responsible for initiatives of extraordinary social importance, especially in serving the poorest of the poor. Thus, there is hope that the life of the Church in the third millennium will certainly not be lacking in new and surprising manifestations of “the feminine genius.”³

Women reveal the gift of their womanhood by placing themselves at the service of others in their everyday lives. For, in doing so, each day women fulfil their deepest

¹John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (25 June 1995), 10.

²John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (25 June 1995), 11.

³John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (25 June 1995), 11.

vocation. Perhaps more than men, women acknowledge persons, because they perceive them with their hearts. They see them independently of various ideological or political systems. They see others in their greatness and limitations; they try to reach out to them and help them. In this way the basic plan of the Creator takes flesh in the history of humanity and there is constantly revealed, in the variety of vocations, that beauty – not merely physical, but, above all, spiritual – which God bestowed from the very beginning on all and, in a particular way, on women.¹

To serve others is nobler and more Christian than to serve one's own interests. In this respect, the selfless services of mothers are appreciated as truly Christian service. It is also clear that approach to work as service by members of the family transforms their attitude towards work. They begin to regard it as extremely valuable and important. Seen thus, work is more than just the tasks undertaken; it is also cooperation and association with others.²

Moreover, woman's natural capacity to give of herself with regard to pregnancy, childbirth, and care for the infant is considered in high esteem, and is an indication of the essence of the feminine itself. It is also the exemplar of true Christian behaviour. Therefore, the persistent and revealing implication of Catholic teaching on the feminine is that women have a special ability to 'humanize' the family, and society, and politics as well, provided such self-giving actually takes place. If a woman is able to live this way, which looks to the good of the other, she will influence society to the maximum extent, and men should look to her in order to imitate her way of 'other-regarding' love.

¹John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (25 June 1995), 12.

²Matlary, "Men and Women in Family, Society and Politics," 6.

The difficulty and challenge for a Catholic is precisely in accepting and living out the demand for self-giving love, and to understand that this is the kind of power Our Lord spoke of and taught. The Pope makes clear that women are at a particular advantage in doing this, being naturally privileged to give life through birth and to care for the completely helpless child.

Encouraging a new feminism, John Paul II says: "In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a 'new feminism' which rejects the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination', in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence, and exploitation."¹

7.3. Redemption in Jesus

In offending a woman's personal dignity and vocation, man acts contrary to his own personal dignity and his own vocation. Pope John Paul II points out that both recognizing gender-specific inheritances of the original sin and acting to absolve ourselves of it are part of our universal call to holiness. He states: "The inheritance of sin suggested by the words of the Bible can be conquered only by following the path of holiness. The overcoming of this evil inheritance is, generation after generation, the task of every human being, whether woman or man."²

Pope Benedict XVI lavished his praises on the spirit of perseverance of women by opining that woman, by nature, is a protector of life. He (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger) notes

¹John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), 99.

²John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), 10.

elsewhere: "It is women, in the end, who even in very desperate situations, as attested by history, past and present, possess a singular capacity to persevere in adversity, to keep life going even in extreme situations, to hold tenaciously to the future, and finally to remember with tears the value of every human life."¹ Let her praises be not written only on paper but in the soul of every man so that he remembers that his mother is a woman, that his sister is a woman, and that his friend too is a woman.

8. Pope Francis

Pope Francis has made some powerful pro-woman statements during his papacy. "Since his election, Pope Francis has dedicated himself to the question of women, their role and their access to ecclesial responsibilities," and this "stresses the urgency to face a reality that concerns the vision of the Church herself and strikes her hierarchical and communitarian nature."² About the need to have a profound theology of women, the Holy Father said: "We have not yet made a profound theology of women in the Church. She can only do this or that: Now she is an altar server, then she does the reading, and she is president of the Caritas. But there is more. A profound theology must be made of woman."³ In his New Year's Day address (2020), Pope Francis denounced violence against women and spoke about gender

¹Joseph Ratzinger, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World" (2004), 13.

²Stefania Falasca, "Francis and Women," *L'Osservatore Romano* (Supplement on "Women, Church, World"), 28 December 2019, 2.

³During Pope Francis' Interview with *America Magazine* in August 2013.

equality, telling the congregation that women should be fully included in decision-making processes. If we want a better world, that is, a house of peace and not a courtyard of war, we must take to heart the dignity of every woman. Women are givers and mediators of peace and should be fully included in decision making processes. For, when women share their gifts in the society, the world finds itself more united and peaceful. Hence, a victory for women is a victory for all humanity. In other words, according to him, every step forward for women is a step forward for humanity as a whole.¹ Pope Francis made an important statement to foster women's journey towards a dignified and decent life. He said: "The feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures."² Again, he cautioned women not to depart from the riches of their feminine nature.

Pope Francis, in his document *Christus Vivit*, goes on to mention several key issues the Church needs to take cognizance of seriously: the need to treat women with justice and equality and to reject male domination, and sexual violence.³ Indeed, the Church has called women to be the stealth weapon of the twenty-first century. It urgently needs and seeks the particular, active participation of its daughters. On another occasion, Pope Francis said: "We are all aware of the countless good women working in the

¹<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/01/europe/> Accessed on 3 January 2020.

²Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), 103.

³Francis, *Christus Vivit* (2018), 16.

Church and priests admit that without them the parish or diocesan life would not function well.”

8.1. *Querida Amazonia* (Beloved Amazon)

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, on the theme “*Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*,” released on 12 February 2020, is the fruit of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region. The regional Synod took place in the Vatican, during 6-27 October 2019, bringing together the Roman Curia and the region’s Church leadership and the superiors of various religious orders. In the document, Pope Francis appreciated the strength and gift of women in preserving the faith in their families and in the Church. Offering the historical example of some women from the interior villages of Amazon, he says: “In the Amazon region, there are communities that have long preserved and handed on the faith even though no priest has come their way, even for decades. This could happen because of the presence of strong and generous women who, undoubtedly called and prompted by the Holy Spirit, baptized, catechized, prayed, and acted as missionaries. For centuries, women have kept the Church alive in those places through their remarkable devotion and deep faith. Some of them, speaking at the Synod, moved us profoundly by their testimony.”¹ Though the Church did not introduce women to ministerial priesthood, the document clearly valued that women make their contribution to the Church in a way that is properly theirs, by making present the tender strength of Mary, the Mother. As a result, we do not limit ourselves to a functional approach, but enter instead into the inmost structure of the

¹Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (2020), 99.

Church. In this way, we will fundamentally realize why, without women, the Church breaks down, and how many communities in the Amazon would have collapsed, had women not been there to sustain them, keep them together and care for them. This shows the kind of power that is typically theirs.”¹

One thing the Pope made clear: “those women who in fact have a central part to play in Amazonian communities should have access to positions, including ecclesial services, that do not entail Holy Orders and that can better signify the role that is theirs. Here it should be noted that these services entail stability, public recognition, and a commission from the bishop. This would also allow women to have a real and effective impact on the organization, the most important decisions, and the direction of communities, while continuing to do so in a way that reflects their womanhood.”²

8.2. Spirituality of Women

We are called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. Our very parents become living saints with all their self-emptying concern and care for us.³ Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus.⁴ Pope Francis contemplates the holiness present in the patience of God’s people in their ordinary living. He lists several examples: holiness present “in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those men and women who work hard to support

¹Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (2020), 101.

²Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (2020), 103.

³Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018), 6, 14.

⁴Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018), 14.

their families, in the sick, in the elderly religious, who never lost their smile." In the Pope's eyes, "their holiness is the holiness of the church militant." This is the holiness which we often find in our "next-door neighbours" who live amidst us and "reflect God's presence."¹ Indeed, in times when women tended to be most ignored or overlooked, the Holy Spirit raised up saints whose quiet strength produced new spiritual vigour and important reforms in the Church. He then mentions the names of saints Hildegard, Bridget, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, and Therese of Lisieux as some examples. But the Pope also affirms: "All those unknown or forgotten women who, each in her own way, sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness."² Time and again, Pope Francis has striven to highlight the importance of feminine genius in every area of the church's life. What we saw in this example is yet another illustration of his commitment to the cause of highlighting feminine style of spirituality in the context of their family and motherhood. When a woman truly lives her Christian vocation, this will mean that she occupies a privileged place in the Church, in family and in society. According to the analysis of *Gaudete et Exultate*, feminine style of holiness is an encouragement for women to live their unique style of holiness. It is, in fact, a woman, Mary, who is the supreme model of Christian life.³

9. CBCI Gender Policy for India (2010)

This is a landmark document in the Indian Church, released on 24 February 2010. Recommended by 163 Indian bishops,

¹Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate* (2018), 7.

²Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate* (2018), 12.

³Matlary, "Men and Women in Family, Society and Politics," 6.

it is a first, not only in the Indian Church, but also in the Universal Church. It records the bishops' concern about the situation of Indian women, and their willingness to take affirmative action on behalf of women. It endeavours towards creating "discipleship of equals" and a "gender-just Church." It stands as a testimony of the Indian bishops' readiness to open spaces for women in the Church.

Many pastoral activities include the new forms of participation in the care of parishes when there is shortage of clergy, except for those tasks that belong properly to ordained priesthood. It provides a Christian understanding of gender equality and draws attention to the situation of women in India. It asserts that discrimination against women is a sin and, as followers of Christ, we must overcome this sin. It makes clear that gender inequality is not just a "woman's issue," but should "concern and engage men as well as women." One of the main areas identified for implementation was 'Women and Family'. It is one of the strongest sections that upholds mutual respect and equal partnership in marriage relationship, equal rights of daughters and sons including over property, denouncement of dowry, zero tolerance of all forms of domestic violence (physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, and economic), etc.

Unfortunately, in spite of this clearly-worded document, even after ten years of its publication, even persons in responsible ecclesial positions are not aware of the existence of this document or implementation of any of the decisions taken based on this CBCI Policy. A few years ago, in the Synod on the Laity, many policies were adopted and concrete deliberations were made. In fact, there are many women who have distinguished themselves in the Church's history by their holiness, hardwork, and ingenuity. The Church is increasingly aware of the need to enhance their

role. Within the great variety of different and complementary gifts that enrich ecclesial life, many important possibilities are open to them. The 1987 Synod on the Laity expressed precisely this need and proposed that “without discrimination, women should be participants in the life of the Church, and also in consultation and the process of coming to decisions.”¹ Although the Church has advanced officially in initiating dialogue, the Church in India has a long way to go in giving women their rightful place in the Church.

The Pope appealed to the whole Church community to be willing to foster feminine participation in every way in its internal life. He instructed the people: “This is the way to be courageously taken. To a large extent, it is a question of making full use of the ample room for a lay and feminine presence recognized by the Church’s law. I am thinking, for example, of the theological teaching, the forms of liturgical ministry permitted, including service of the altar, pastoral and administrative councils, diocesan synods, and particular councils, various ecclesial institutions, curias, and ecclesiastical tribunals, many pastoral activities, including the new forms of participation in the care of parishes when there is shortage of clergy, except for those tasks that belong properly to the priest. Who can imagine the great advantages to pastoral care and the new beauty that the Church’s face will assume, when the feminine genius is fully involved in the various areas of her life?²

¹See John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (1988), 51.

²John Paul II, “Woman’s Role in the Church” (3 September 1995) in *Pope John Paul II on the Genius of Women*, 35-36.

10. Women in Today's Church

On the question of Church ministries open to women, the debate is heated. In the past, women were ordained deaconesses both in the East and in the West. However, in the Middle Ages, the institution of the deaconess came to an end, although it has been revived recently in some Christian communities. Several Protestant communities revived the order of deaconesses in the nineteenth century. In the Lutheran World Federation, 115 Churches have a total of 145 ordained women as priests. There are also women bishops in the Anglican Communion. The possibility that women can play important roles in the institutional and ordained leadership in the Church today is becoming a reality. However, in many Christian Churches women do not enjoy equal rights with men even among the laity.¹

With regard to women ordination to ministerial priesthood, Pope John Paul II has this to say: Jesus chose only men as his Apostles which is a choice that remains normative for their successors.² Much before this question was dealt with, in 1994, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith issued *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, reaffirming that priestly ordination shall be restricted to men. Yet, recurrent requests to review the possibility of conferring diaconate on women have not so far found the ear of the official Magisterium. The question of ministerial priesthood, from which women have always been excluded, is much clearer.

People looked up to the Amazonian Synod with much expectation with regard to the diaconate of women. However, after much anticipation, they were thoroughly disappointed when the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation

¹Nedungatt, "Feminine Genius," 598-618.

²See John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (1988), 51.

Querida Amazonia (Beloved Amazon) came out on 12 February 2020. In the text, Pope Francis does not affirm the idea proposed by bishops during the Synod on the ordination of married priests and women deacons in the Latin Rite in that region, where faithful may go many months without receiving the Eucharist due to lack of priests. In order to combat the shortage of priests in the Amazon, Pope Francis has stated this “urgent need” requires prayer for priestly vocations and more encouragement and promotion of the missionary vocation... This was the Holy Father’s conclusion in *Querida Amazonia*.¹ It led the women theologians to conclude that this is a male Church with its foundational documents, doctrine, traditions, and dogma all formed without the benefit of women, thus creating only a half vision of Jesus’ Church.

While many have argued in the past that the Genesis suggests subordination or inequality of woman in relation to man, Pope John Paul II emphasised the fundamental equality and dignity of woman and man. *Mulieris Dignitatem* provided a good doctrinal and theological foundation for our outlook on women. His statements about women and men as human beings, as persons, implies sharing a common humanity and calls them an “integral gender complementarity,” namely, the fundamental equality of dignity of work of the two complement beings. Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights, befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life. The Church has decided that the women issues of injustice must be abhorred and the values, which ensure their equality must be upheld at any

¹Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (2020), 103.

cost. About sixty years ago, Saint John XXIII wrote in his Encyclical Letter: "Women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons."¹

When we go through the documents of recent Popes, we see a positive evolution in the past century regarding woman's identity and role in the Church. There is a strong affirmation not only of the original equality of women and men but also of woman's equality in every field. There is the rejection of the arguments claiming that the woman had a greater responsibility for the Fall. The Magisterium accepts the duty of woman to play a part in every area of human activity, thereby moving beyond the identification of woman with her family duties.

On Easter Sunday (2019), Pope Francis made some statements affirming that "the Church herself cannot be without woman and her role" and that "woman is essential for the Church."² Realizing God's original design for women, Pope Francis stressed that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, which present the Church with profound and challenging questions that cannot be lightly evaded.³

Today the Church teaches that man and woman are equal in human dignity and personhood, yet different in a much more profound sense than merely biological; their

¹John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), 41.

²Falasca, "Francis and Women," 1.

³Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), 104.

equal dignity as persons is realized as a physical, psychological, and ontological complementarity. Both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God's image. Like men, women are created in the image and likeness of God. Consequently, they are capable of loving and are equipped with reason, free will, and conscience.¹ Both men and women are called to God's covenant which culminates in the new covenant with Mary. In the order of redemption men and women belong to God's kingdom, and are heirs of eternal life and are called to discipleship of equals in Jesus' group. Man and woman are created as two persons in order to reach the full potential of what it means to be human. The communion within the Trinity is reflected in the union of man and woman: absolute unity through freedom and distinctive differences, which can be only accomplished through mutual love.

¹See, *Gaudium et Spes*, 24, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 29; 6.

Chapter 2

FEMININE GENIUS IN THE WRITINGS OF CHAVARA

Chavara's understanding of *the gift of femininity* is based on the biblical portrayal of women and their rightful place in society as human beings and, above all, his personal experience with his own mother. Not even during a quick reading of his writings can one miss the powerful presence of biblical women who played great role in the ministry of Jesus. We meet a glorious array of women in Chavara's writings, women who seemed to accompany him in his faith journey as closely as his best friends. Through his life and writings Chavara set an example for appreciating and promoting feminine genius. One can easily discern that it sprouted from the integral formation he got from his mother and the powerful image of his mother, which was deeply rooted in him that enabled him to see God as Mother – a strong and influential feminine source of energy.

1. Chavara's Perception of Motherhood

When we track Chavara's presentation of motherhood, we get the picture of an attitude of reverence that he attached to the person of mother. We search here to see how he portrays motherhood in his poems, and other writings. In his work *Atmanutapam*, we can often discern his reflections on the *proto-evangelium*, the promise God made after cursing the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15). In the last book of the Bible there is a repetition of the same scene. The woman

reappears as a sign of salvation and in combat against serpent (Rev 12:1-6). Chavara followed the traditional theology that depicts Jesus as the seed of the woman who will crush the serpent's head and Mary as that woman. This theme repeatedly appears in his writings. After the curse, Adam named his wife 'Eve', for she was the mother of all the living (Gen 3:20). If the woman does not become a mother, the serpent will not have his head crushed. Therefore, motherhood makes salvation possible. Indeed, he believed that the salvation of the world will come only through motherhood. Motherhood is a sacred privilege granted by God's good pleasure. The great importance Chavara attached to maternal concerns in his writings has to be understood in this line. Also, his meditations on the fallen nature of humanity, in which male domination is the norm, led him to see the redeemed nature and the dignity of woman, created in the image and likeness of God. One often wonders at the presence of many 'mother saints' and a good number of Marys in his writings; Chavara seems to believe that in the heart of every Christian, there dwells the heart of Mary.

In his early childhood, young Kuriakose was very much attached to Thoppil Mariam, his mother, and his life was pivoted around her. He remained within her vicinity, and he was fascinated and awe-struck by her movements. As he grew up, his appreciation for her also grew immensely. Her prayers became the rhythm of his life. Even at midnight, he was intuitively tuned into the vibrations of the recitation of prayers by her and, later, he also got up to pray with her.¹ The manner in which she recited her prayers became his own; the biblical stories narrated by her were deeply

¹Chavara, *Complete Works of Chavara (CWC)*, vol. 2: *Atmanutapam*, Cantos I: 53-65.

inscribed in his mind; the principles of life she enshrined got embedded in his heart. He was proud that she had raised him in front of the pictures of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and had encouraged him to venerate them. Holding on to her fingers, he walked through lush green paddy fields to the church for Holy Mass. She offered him at the feet of the Holy Mother at Vechoor church. How vividly he remembered the words uttered by the priest during that religious ceremony! She prepared him to receive Jesus into his heart. Sitting on her lap reminded little Chavara of Jesus in Mother Mary's bosom. In his tender years, the religious practices introduced by her were deeply imbibed into the innermost self of Kuriakose and, as he grew up, they became an integral part of his persona.

Chavara lost his mother when he was a teenager. He was naturally devastated, but, as he recalls, he was fortunate to receive great motherly love, support, and care from 'many mothers'. It is the promise of Jesus that if one leaves one's mother and father, brothers and sisters he will receive a hundredfold (Mt 19:29). He was always surrounded by many 'mother saints' and he used to address them as 'my dearly loved ever-supporting mothers'. He saw motherhood in every woman and, therefore, all biblical women were mothers to him; he addressed all mother saints as 'my mothers'. He was enveloped by a mothers' mantle; a protective presence of these mothers encircled him throughout his life. He trusted it, and that trust can be called faith. He felt more protected when he offered prayers to Jesus, inviting Him to look at the lips of Mother Mary that kissed him, the lap in which He sat and relaxed in His

childhood days.¹ Moreover, in those formative years, he projected God in the image of mother.

1.1. God as a Caring Mother

Chavara believed strongly in the importance of mother in one's life, and regarded mother as an epitome of care, sensitivity, sacrifice, and selflessness. A mother's love for her child does not have parallels and, hence, cannot be compared with any other love in this world. With regard to the bonding between mother and child, he seemed to believe that the role of a mother is much superior to that of a father. She is our first love, our first teacher, and our first friend in this world. As infants, we are completely dependent on our mothers, and it is she who nurtures us. She helps us understand this world. Thus, the special bond that exists between mother and her child can never end. A mother's love and concern for her children will never diminish, and she will always love all her children equally.

The Book of Genesis makes it perfectly clear that the image of God is a combination of the masculine and feminine elements; our response to such a totality of love must be, and can only be, of absolute trust: "As a child rests on its mother's breast, so I place my soul in your loving care" (Ps 130). The psalmist sings that God is tender to the despised, the sorrowful - slow to anger, good to all, compassionate to all his creatures, and raises those who are bowed down. In these and similar words, we see the feminine attributes of God as mother, caressing, and caring for her beloved people: "Like a son comforted by his mother will I comfort you" (Is 66:13). One can notice that the examples of female imagery that are listed here are symbolic of motherhood.

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 45 (1981).

In the *Dhyanasallapangal*, Chavara repeatedly calls God 'Appa', 'Ente Appa' (father, my father), but we understand that, in his heart, the picture of God is that of a caring mother. In one of his letters to sisters, he calls their attention to see the life experiences as signs of a compassionate and loving mother-God. A mother's love for her child is beyond measure and any one's expectations. A mother is always available for her child and nurtures it like God. She can easily identify every desire of her child even when he or she is not able to speak properly or cannot express his or her needs. A Jewish proverb rightly affirms what Chavara had experienced: "A mother understands what a child does not say." Indeed, there exists a dynamic bonding between mother and children. Mothers have the uncanny ability to tune into the minds of their children. God has given mothers the special gift of intuition and it gives her a strong sense of what is right for her children, what they are good at, how they may excel in the future, what gifts and abilities she ensures to be developed in their lives as God intended them to be. He prays:

O joy of joys! O! Lord! ... Like unto the mother who nourishes her children with milk even while they are asleep, or are unable to express in words their hunger and thirst, You are looking after our needs every day.¹

It was his experience that God is a compassionate and caring mother and a loving father throughout his life. When his mother puts him to sleep, a sleepless and vigilant angel guards her darling.² He believed that during his childhood this was how he was protected from all sickness and other dangers. In the *Atmanutapam*, Chavara pictures a compas-

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 10 (2020).

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos I: 25-28.

sionate God who never abandoned him even when he went away from him, and lovingly brought him back like a prodigal son to his love. Chavara confesses that whenever he went astray from God, and followed ways of sin and was steeped in great sorrow, God, like a loving father and a caring mother, whispered in his heart: "My son, you are my love; I am a good father and a loving mother to you."¹ It was his testimony that God himself inspired these thoughts in his mind.

In most of his invocations to God, we can sense a quest for a feminine or gender-transcendent divine being, namely, God, who was his good fortune, his love, his joy, peace, wellbeing, his only good, his source of comfort, etc. For example,

You my love, my joy and all my good fortune
 If not with you, how could I live my life
 My very breath, my food, my drink
 What solace have I save in you!²

Impersonal attributes or nouns such as *Karunamayan* (Merciful), *Sarvamangaladeva* (All Good), etc., are very common in his *Atmanutapam*:

Fount of virtue, God of all creation
 Wedded to kindness Eternal, Giver of Peace
 You, through your Benevolence Infinite
 A Being Immortal, Infinite Great!³

He came to believe that a Christian in the state of grace possessed the risen and glorified Jesus Christ, whom he addresses as "my father, my mother, my joy, my food and

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VII: 341-346.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos II: 143-146.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos II: 155-158.

drink and everything in life.”¹ Another notable characteristic of Chavara was his humility: he often referred to himself as a maid servant (*dasi*, feminine gender of servant). In this mystical experience, he sees himself as feminine,² as many of the Christian mystics did. Sometimes, we see how the poet puts words in Saint Peter’s mouth as a result of which, Saint Peter calls himself *dasi*.³ Chavara, as a consequence of associating qualities of caring, nurturing, kindness, mercifulness with that of a mother, and also seeing himself in a feminine role, acquired these qualities.

1.2. Women in Chavara’s Pilgrimage of Faith

We do not find terms such as gender discrimination, gender sensitivity, gender equality, gender justice, etc., in Chavara’s writings; he, however, was sensitive to the feminine singularity and the discriminations they faced in society. His *Dhyanasallapangal* and *Atmanutapam* demonstrate the decisive role played by women in his life. He believed that God is on the side of women and they are close to God. All the women whom he regards as mothers are the beloved of God; they are God-realized persons and, therefore, they are able to assist others to remain close to God. Chavara’s presentation of his meditation room is evidence of the fact that he is surrounded and helped by many ‘mother saints’ in approaching God. See, how he paints the scene of his meditation:

Behold! My bounteous Father in heaven is seated on His Throne of mercy. On his right and left respectively the Blessed Mother and our patron Saint Joseph are seated. Close to them is mother Teresa in genuflection to

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos II: 144-147.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: Final Prayer: 1, 3, 53, 73, 75.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 337, 338.

intercede for her children, particularly for me, a sinner. I come to my Father offering to Him the penance and sacrifices of my ever-supportive penitent mothers, Saint Mary Magdalene, Saint Mary of Egypt, and Saint Mary Cortona. As my sorrow bears no proportion to my multitudinous sins, I offer their spirit of repentance and virtues as my own.¹

One may notice that except Saint Joseph, no male saints are present on the scene, whereas the number of mother saints is many. His special affection for his favorite mother saints is evident here as well, and his conviction and experience are similar to those of Jesus, who also kept women close to him and enjoyed their presence.

2. Women in Chavara's Writings

As we search Chavara's writings, and texts on women, we come across with instances where he has given visibility to the presence of women and the emergence of his growing consciousness of the greatness of women. It is remarkable that there is a wealth of material on women in his writings. The texts can be grouped as follows.

1. Woman, the main theme of the book: *Anastasiayude Raktha Sakshyam*
2. Women characters in *Atmanutapam*
 - i. Mariam Thoppil
 - ii. Role of mother in upbringing of children
 - iii. Mothering experience
 - iv. Mary, Mother of Jesus
3. 'Mother Saints' in *Dhyanasallapangal* and other writings
 - i. Galilean women disciples of Jesus or women around Jesus

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: 16 (1981); 3 (2000).

- ii. Three Marys
- iii. Mary of Magdala
- iv. Martha and Mary
- v. Saint Teresa of Avila
- vi. 'Penitent Mothers'
4. Women in Chavara's 'Testament to the Members of His Congregation'
5. Stories on women
6. Women who contributed to his projects
7. Widows honoured
8. Motherhood gratefully remembered

The present work does not intend to make a study of all the women characters who appear in the pages of his writings. Rather, I shall make an attempt to trace some predominant themes that touch upon 'woman' as such. Chavara's consistent use of women characters in narratives seems to be deliberately constructed to make some important theological points. Hence, my concentration in this chapter will be on the theological use of women characters in his writings.

2.1. Women in the Poem '*Anastasiayude Rakthasakshyam*'

Among the 'women texts' of Chavara, the short epic poem *Anastasiayude Rakthasakshyam* (Martyrdom of Anastasia) is listed here as the first due to many reasons. The powerful story of Anastasia is targeted towards the transformation of Kerala society; it demands profound changes in the heart of the people who regarded women as frail and weak.

- This poem celebrates the courage and faith commitment of a young woman Anastasia and it is named after her.
- Its subject matter is the martyrdom of Anastasia which sings of the steadfastness of feminine love for the loved

one. Even in the face of immense torture and death, Anastasia remained steady and strong in love, and committed to Jesus. Anastasia was a consecrated virgin, who lived in a convent in Rome in the third century. While there were innumerable male martyrs in the Roman martyriology, Chavara was greatly impressed by this young woman's firm faith.

- A girl martyr Anastasia was presented as a powerful model for stable faith and heroic suffering for the Kerala church, whose faith was shaken by the Roccas schism.
- Both Anastasia and Mother Sophia are pictured as women who had discovered their own inner worth and resources, namely, their dedication and perseverance for Jesus. Chavara wrote this poem in 1862, at a time when many women of Kerala, as a result of social and cultural conditioning, had, unfortunately, not become fully aware of their dignity and self-worth. Consequently, they lived in a culture that did not respect or welcome 'femininity'; theirs was a condition of inferiority and slavery. Kerala was not free from the shock of '*Melmundu prakshobham*'¹ (Uproar over the upper cloth), which is also known as '*Channar Lahala*' (Agitation of the Channars). This uproar was against a prevailing practice that was a typical example of the total disregard the society had for women, especially women of the lower castes, in the nineteenth century. This was the result of certain dehumanizing practices due to which the lower caste women were not permitted to wear any cloth above their waist. Women had to pay tax, known as *mulakkaram* or breast tax, if they

¹See Gopalakrishnan, "Samoohya Parishkarana Prasthanangal" [Social Reform Movements], *Kerala Charithram*, vol. 1, 1193-1316; see also Iyer, *The Cochin Tribes and Castes*, vol. 1, 340.

wanted to cover up. Women suffered the most due to the rigid, inhumane practices of caste hierarchy during this period. In his poem, Chavara praises the freedom and bravery of women. Therefore, the poet motivates women to help other women find support and to make valuable and effective contributions towards their faith-building role to effect positive changes in the society.

Anastasiayude Rakthasakshyam is the story of a nun, who “came to join the brides of Christ and longed to live a life of service filled with love.” It was, thus, Chavara who introduced Anastasia. In the poem, he seems to dream of the day when women will be able to live consecrated lives, and share their strengths with the whole community. This poem is a strong invitation to girls to embrace such a way of life. He seems to say that women have a right to take decisions about their lives and they have the inner capacity for the same; thus, according to him, this right must be affirmed and guaranteed.

Many terms related to religious life of women appear in this poem, such as എടുക്കംദാത്ത് (boarding house), ഗുരുത്തി (mistress), ശ്രേഷ്ഠ (superior), പുണ്യസങ്കേതം (*punyasanketham* or spiritual resort), etc., which portray a clear picture of a convent which was in his dreams. When he wrote this poem in 1862, there were no convents in Kerala. Moreover, the idea of girls staying away from their homes, away from the protection of men, together in a boarding house or convent under a mistress, was something unthinkable in Kerala at that time. The life of a woman was largely confined to the role of a daughter, wife, or mother. She could not think of opting out of the institution of family to lead a consecrated life. In the words of introduction of *CKC*, which Chavara titled as “Beginning of Religious Life for Women,” he

mentioned the long-awaited desire of women to lead a chaste life, and regretted the fact that they were forced to opt for married life since there were no convents. They continued to live in such a sad plight.¹ Chavara realized that he had to bring about a change in their thoughts and lives. He gradually began to introduce courageous women or brides of Christ who were capable of leading consecrated lives. He also began to take more decisive steps in order to recognize and promote this very important reality, namely, the public role of women for the betterment of the society.

Chavara's poetic work *Anastasiayude Rakthasakshyam* presents his progressive and optimistic vision for the women of his society. The poem begins and concludes with a saintly and courageous Mother Superior of that convent whom the poet addresses, "Abbess Sophia, nun of fame." It was to her convent that Anastasia, who is the joy of the Lord and the shining star, came to become a bride of Christ. Even after knowing that the Roman Emperor Valerian was attracted by the beauty of Anastasia, the poet pictures the firmness and serenity of that young virgin in the following lines:

The nun so bold, the virgin so pure
 Bright with godly beauty so fine,
 Got the knowledge, got the guts...

Sophia, the mother superior of the convent, is another character, depicted as a woman who possessed extraordinary emotional maturity and reasoning ability. Though she knew that her favorite disciple, young Anastasia, would be tortured and killed, she sent her to the emperor's palace with calm. Her faith in God was unwavering.

Daughter dear, your blessed groom,
 Calls you, with a longing love

¹*Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent (CKC)*, vol. 1: 1.

Go, be quick...
 She kissed her with love and
 Filled her with valour.¹

In the midst of the cruelty of the persecutors the poet denotes Anastasia's inner freedom and mental disposition in these words: "She was joyful, she was lovely; bondage outside, freedom inward... Tools of torture tore her body; Earth was wet with pools of blood..."²

At the close of the poem, the poet highlights the reward saved for her, namely, the heavenly bliss: "the crown of glory was placed on her by Christ the King, her heavenly groom, who welcomed her into the bliss with him. The divine Lord heaped on her jewels of marvel and pearls of price. He held her in His close embrace and she loved him deep with warmth sublime."³

Through the story of this brave girl, Chavara encouraged the girls of Kerala to risk their lives and offer themselves to God in firm faith. This poem instills courage in the hearts of young girls to embrace the consecrated life. Anastasia is a portrait of incessant courage and free will to live for Christ, even in the face of persecution. Mother Sophia is an icon for parents to encourage their daughters to choose their call to committed life. This dream of Chavara - to set up a convent for girls in Kerala - was materialized four or five years later in Koonammavu.

The use of women in this poem as models of the possibility of a faith commitment, to which all Christians have been called, shows his consciousness of the fact that women are not only strong in faith, but they are also to be

¹Chavara, CWC, vol. 2: *Anastasiayude Rakthasakshyam*, 51-67.

²Chavara, CWC, vol. 2: *Anastasiayude Rakthasakshyam*, 131-138.

³Chavara, CWC, vol. 2: *Anastasiayude Rakthasakshyam*, 223-230.

followed. This means that, in the order of faith, women assume the role of leaders.

2.2. Women Characters in the *Atmanutapam*

A unique feature of Chavara's poems is his maternal concern. The greatness of motherhood and expressions of 'mothering experiences' or the joy of parenting are central to his writings. He records the life-cycle of women: conception, pregnancy, childbirth, joy and delight of giving the first kiss to the baby, embracing of the new born, joyfulness and ecstasy of the mother in breastfeeding, the pleasures of child rearing, and such other 'feminine experiences' are favorite topics in the poems of Chavara. In Malayalam poetry, such themes are common in poems of Balamani Amma, Madhavikkutty, Sugathakumari, and other women writers. But, such descriptions and experiences are very rare in the writings of male poets. Chavara dared to meditate on these events and incorporated the recurring female experiences in his writings. This has affected the cultural and language pattern of Malayalam literature.

One general observation with regard to his writings is that they were not written from a male perspective. In his upbringing or childhood experiences, he has given importance to his mother, whereas he has remained absolutely silent about his father. Even in the evening of his life, his reflection on 'who I think I am' inevitably includes his nostalgia for his mother's formative influences in his life, which was understood to be the most powerful during the impressionable years of his childhood; however, it should be noted that there is no mention of the role of his father. Many lines in the *Atmanutapam* shed light on the fact that he had longed for home and those events that formed him. His mother was the centre of his family who took care of the individual

needs of every member of the family to the extent of forgetting her own needs and individuality. Chavara's family was a 'little church' for Kuriakose because it transmitted God; it transmitted love of Christ and the spirit of self-sacrifice.

The formative experience of family was at the core of his identity and it made him aware of the meaning of his name - Kuriakose (meaning, 'one who belongs to God'). Sitting on his mother's lap he learned to speak; holding her hand he took his first baby steps; he even learned the prayers from her. One may notice that in the *Atmanutapam*, he pens more than 100 lines directly on his mother and more than 300 lines on 'mothering experiences'. When we think of the persons who moulded Chavara to form a noble vision on women, we focus our attention mainly on his family. A person's attitude and approach towards any reality is formed in his infancy or childhood. In this period, the babe is in constant contact with its parents, siblings, and other family members who live with it. Here, we look at the importance he gives to his childhood experiences and the lessons he received from his mother.

2.2.1. Thoppil Mariam

I shall begin this section with Chavara's words of high appreciation for his mother, Thoppil Mariam, who moulded his attitude and approach towards women. He highlights the role of his mother, in his life - in his upbringing, in the formation of his character, the promotion of his vocation to priesthood, and so on. She could infuse in him a great love for Mother Mary and other 'Mother Saints', who later influenced him in his pilgrimage of faith.

Mother's Role in Upbringing of Children

A recent Harvard study reveals that children who had a religious upbringing are likely to be healthier and have a higher degree of wellbeing in early adulthood than those who did not.¹ Chavara presents his own mother (Thoppil Mariam) as a prominent and shining figure who had influenced his life. In his autobiographical poem Chavara appreciates his mother's method of bringing up her youngest child, namely, Kuriakose. What he treasures most is the religious grounding and training he received from her. We find an echo of Chavara's words of appreciation and gratitude towards his mother in bringing him up in Pope John Paul II's *Letter to Women*. The Pope thanked all mothers in these words: "Thank you, women who are mothers! You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God's own smile upon the newborn child, the one who guides your child's first steps, who helps it to grow, and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life."²

It is a difficult question for all the parents as to how to discipline their children. Could a child be disciplined without being beaten, shouted at, and scolded? Thoppil Mariam had proved it affirmatively, for which Kuriakose was full of pride. We may call her style of upbringing, "Thoppil Mariam Method." He tells us that his mother never beat him:

Never once did she use the rod to chastise me
Nor with a harsh touch did she smite me

¹Tristan Justice, "Harvard Study Reveals Religious Upbringing Better for Kid's Health and Wellbeing" (11 June 2019).

²John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (25 June 1995), 2.

Her eyes, they wielded the mighty power to hit me
Or need be, to fondle me, in approval.¹

She disciplined him with her eyes; there was no shouting, no beating, and no scolding. By looking into the eyes of his mother he could know whether what he did was right or wrong. She had different kinds of looks – angry look, look of appreciation or disapproval. Her approval or disapproval for his behaviour was conveyed in her gaze or gestures. He learned how to read the body language of his mother. During his early infancy, there was an intimate interchange of signals and responses between his mother and Kuriakose. She was able to guess and fulfil the baby's needs; she encouraged the child through words and gestures. Those were the early spiritual signals that Kuriakose received, which enabled him, later, to receive messages from God and to discern the will of God. Sometimes a mother would become strict with her child, but it was only for its welfare, which reveals the hidden love behind her anger. This is another sweetness of mother's love. Hence, through a firm, but loving upbringing, Kuriakose believed that he became a favorite of God.

While being nurtured in body and mind
Was I beloved too of God, my Father.²

These words reflect Luke's concluding words of the infancy narrative of Jesus: "the boy Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man" (Lk 2:52). He gives wings for his indebtedness for his mother's method of upbringing the children and her great personality. He elucidates that (1) she was a praying mother, (2) she taught him how to pray and instilled faith in him, (3) she instilled

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos I: 81-84.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos I: 85-86.

proper discipline in his life, and (4) she introduced to him other great mothers such as Mother Mary of Nazareth, three other Marys and three other saints (Saint Mary of Egypt, Saint Mary of Cortona, and Saint Mary Magdalene), whom he called penitent mothers.

Mother, the First Teacher and Guide of a Child

Thoppil Mariam was his first teacher. The initial formation of the child begins in the family with the mother becoming the teacher. The 'educational' effect on the child, which begins when it is still in its mother's womb, continues during infancy and childhood. A good upbringing ensures a better future for the person, and a mother does an excellent job when she tries to provide better future for her child. Chavara acknowledges the fact that his mother taught him the lessons of life.

She accompanied him in his faith journey and had decided to feed the flame of his vocation to priesthood. Kuriakose had developed such a close relationship with his mother that he could confide everything in her and she was his unfailing guide. Therefore, the moment he felt a kind of assurance of his priestly vocation he ran to his mother and shared the glad news with her, because he knew that she was very much concerned about his future. He has beautifully recorded her response as well stating that she was overjoyed that one of her two sons had become God's anointed. She had a unique capacity to understand his aspirations, with a special maternal insight. Parenting was not accidental for Thoppil Mariam; she did it with a purpose.

Responding to His Vocation to Priesthood

Chavara's mother taught him how to be in God's ways always. She exemplified in herself that a mother is the finest builder of God in a child. Chavara held that his mother had

practised it in her life daily, especially in the case of his discerning and choosing his vocation to priesthood. He also presented her as a mother who had submitted herself to the will of God, and had encouraged him to live his vocation. He paints the scene of his mother's joy when she came to know of her youngest son's vocation to priesthood.¹ A mother would help guide her child to figure out his/her goals and values in life as well as teach him/her the importance of sacrifice and more.

My mother's heart leaped with exultation
That God did ear-mark me to His possession
Tear-dimmed eyes gleamed as sun amid clouds
Could a heart maternal brave such parting?²

His mother was a brave woman to part with her dear child at such a tender age of ten. Although it was painful, it was glad news for her: "My mother's heart leaped with exultation." She found her joy in the fact that he would become "God's possession" or "God's own." These are the two terms she used to indicate the meaning of priestly vocation. Being a knowledgeable woman, she knew the meaning of the name 'Kuriakose', namely, 'one who belongs to the Lord'. Such a consecrated person could live his mission fully only when he becomes the Lord's priest and, thus, God's possession. Recalling the prized moments and the preciousness of his vocation, he wrote:

And on that day of days, He called me back
Sowed in me a sacred seed of wisdom
A firm resolve, else what my fate had been

¹Chavara is absolutely silent about his father's response to his younger son's vocation to priesthood. He is concerned about his mother's joy and exultation.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos I: 119-122.

No priest ordained among kinsfolk until then

Welcome tidings it came to all and sundry.¹

There was an added reason for this grateful rejoicing. Until the day there had been no priests from the Chavara family; there were, however, many from the Thoppil family. There had been an atmosphere of respect and longing for priesthood in their family and, therefore, it sent forth welcome tidings to all, that one of the two sons of Chavara family was going to become a priest.

The poet goes on to describe his mother's feelings and emotions in detail. Although the parting was painful, Mariam Thoppil was a woman, whose heart was firmly fixed on God and she was ready to renounce her youngest son for the sake of the Kingdom. Thus, she paid the price of discipleship (see Lk 14:26). His mother considers the vocation of her son to priesthood as a "grace supreme." Her son becoming 'God's own' is a "wonder of wonders!" It was an occasion to sing the mercies of the Lord. The term 'peace superb' denotes the state of her mind: "And forthwith to the seminary her son she sent." She was at peace only when the doors of the seminary were open wide for her son, which meant that she had followed him till the end. How painful then, would it have been for Kuriakose that she was not alive to see him a priest; to kiss the hand of her newly ordained priest-son, and welcome him home and to the parish after being ordained to priesthood.

"Though a sinner, my unworthiness He redeemed
O! Wonder of Wonders!" she cried "Grace Supreme"
"Your mercies will I sing forever and ever"
And forthwith to the seminary her son she sent,

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos I: 113-120.

The church of Saint Joseph opened its portals wide
And peace superb filled her noble heart!¹

Mother's Accompaniment

The mother of young Kuriakose had always been there for him and he could discuss the dreams of his life with her. The fact that she was proud of what Kuriakose had accomplished was the main reason for his success until then. He was glad that, with her help, he was more confident of his abilities and potential. Kuriakose's greatest strength was his mother, who was a true disciple of Christ and his Mother Mary.² Chavara described in detail the event of his dedication in the Vechoor church at the feet of Mother Mary. He told of how his mother accompanied him to continue that spirit of dedication and his relationship with his Heavenly Mother. He let us know that he used to visit the Vechoor church every year with his mother.³

Thus, she facilitated his faith commitment. She is seen as the 'keeper of the memory' of the past experiences, especially his dedication in the Vechoor church. She supported him unconditionally when he made his discernment with regard to his priestly vocation. He received from her a life of prayer and Marian devotion, which remained a permanent influence on his spiritual life.

Chavara's *Chavarul* clearly speaks of the responsibility of parents to provide proper education to their children and to accompany them during the course of their schooling: "As soon as the children come to the age of reason they must be

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos I: 129-134.

²The significance of this event of dedication at the feet of Mother Mary will be explained in detail in chapter four of this book and hence not explained here.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos II: 19-22.

sent to school. Besides, parents should be enquiring how the children study and behave, and who their companions are. Their studies should be tested every Sunday.”¹ He seems to be aware of the influences of children outside the family, such as peers, adults other than parents, and how media affect children in healthy or unhealthy ways. We see many psychological insights in the upbringing of children in the *Chavarul*. For example, he wrote: “Do not send your children to stay with your relatives, for, very often they leave your house as angels and return as devils.”²

Parents’ Mutual Love and Respect in the Family

While praising the qualities of his mother, Chavara also places much emphasis on mutual respect of the father and mother in the family. He says: “Seeing the father respecting the mother, children must respect their mother. The mother should set an example to the children in honoring and loving their father. So also, the father should show love and respect for the mother. If the parents do not respect each other, neither will their children respect them.”³ It means that if the father does not respect the mother, the children also will not respect their mother; sons will not respect their wives; boys will not respect girls; brothers will not respect their sisters; and priests will not respect ladies or religious women.

A father’s first responsibility to his child is to love his wife. Parents who are poor, and who fight with each other, raise poor and unhappy children. Rich parents, between whom there is no love and unity, raise rich and unhappy children. The gift that parents can bequeath to their children

¹Chavara, *Chavarul*, 2: 6.

²Chavara, *Chavarul*, 2: 7.

³Chavara, *Chavarul*, 2: 9.

is a happy married life. Your child will become what you are, so be what you want them to be, Chavara preaches. The most favoured children in the world are those whose parents love each other.

Mothering Experiences

Many lines in the *Atmanutapam* express maternal sentiments, and evoke an intrinsic emotion, which a woman feels for her children (see Ps 25:6; 116:5). Chavara tries to discover the spirituality of caring and nurturing that is part of being created in the image and likeness of God. One could see his effort to break the taboos and myths of uncleanness attached to a woman's body and its processes, which would enable a woman to see her body as good and holy. The female body and sexuality were considered threats to man's salvation. For centuries the term 'body' in general (and woman's body in particular) was associated with sin, lust, temptation, and pleasure. Women themselves were seen as mere bodies: bodies to be taken in sex, bodies to bear children, bodies to work in households, fields, and sweetshops. Mortifying, punishing and inflicting pain were the normal means of keeping the body under the control of the spirit.¹ While body-denying spirituality was praised in the Catholic tradition Chavara has full praise for pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and other bodily functions of woman and, thus, he developed a theology of women's body. He was sensitive to the needs of women and worked to restore their dignity. See, for example, the *Atmanutapam* where he contemplates deeply on the experience of the parents of Jesus in embracing the new born baby:

¹D'Souza, "Mary and Women Theology of Women's Body" in *Mary in Our Search for Fullness of Life*, ed. R. K. Samy, 207-221.

The child of her womb, in her arms received
 Hailed him King of Kings, His mother
 His infant eyes he then opened
 At His mother Beautiful, He gazed.¹

Loving Kisses

Seeing the new born baby for the first time the mother of Jesus venerated and worshiped him. Then she kissed each part of his body; first his feet, hands, cheeks, and the whole body. With hugs and kisses she showed her child how much she loved him. The poet contemplated the gestures of Mother Mary which gave meaning to each kiss. Like the parents, baby Jesus too experienced joy and delight of the first kissing, opened his eyes, and gazed upon his mother. Chavara did not merely give us a sketchy account of the scene, but as a contemplative and keen observer of humans and matters, he gave interesting details very meditatively.

Reverently kissed His beloved feet
 And his hand as the King of Kings.²
 Her cherished Son, offspring longed for
 With delight she kissed his cheeks
 And then pressed him to her breast
 And fed him full with her milk so pure.³

Breastfeeding, a Spiritual Practice

Breastfeeding an infant was the act of imprinting lessons of love on the child's heart. From a spiritual perspective, the mother could really transfer something of herself and her vibrations to her child when she feeds him the living substance from her body. She made her moments of

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos V: 74-78.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos V: 84 -86.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos V: 87-91.

feeding her holy baby by performing them with love. This carried blessings for both mother and child. For Mariam Thoppil, pre-natal parenting was a spiritual act and breastfeeding was the divine nourishment of love itself, and not simply nutrition. Surely, love was being fed to the child, as she held the baby close to her heart.¹ Chavara has narrated the spiritual aspects of breastfeeding; it was sacred, and a nurturing experience for both the mother and infant. While breastfeeding, his mother instilled in him the divine virtues and narrated the stories of the heroes and heroines of the Bible and, thus, those characters in the stories became his close friends in life and an integral part of his personality.

The poet delved deeply on the delight and ecstasy of the mother in breastfeeding and presents it as a spiritual exercise. During breastfeeding, while accepting and enjoying the life-blood of the mother, there develops an intimate and strong bonding between the mother and child. The sweet milk fills its stomach as well as its mind; it nurtures the body and soul.

The mother fondly feeding her child
 With milk at her breast I long to see
 The holy awe, the mother enjoyed
 While feeding him, I long to see.²

Chavara became a promoter of women's true dignity and of the vocation corresponding to this dignity. He never spoke of women's biological processes as if they were handicaps. He wanted to break the taboos and myths of uncleanness attached to a woman's body and its processes, which helped women to see their body and its developments as good and holy.

¹See Wirth, *Prenatal Parenting*, 41-42.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos III: 37-40.

Motherhood, an Important Vocation of a Woman

A good mother has been expected to contribute her whole life to her family. Mothers have been the glue that holds a family together because it is up to them to provide the loving care and support needed by growing children. The nurturing a mother provides is unparalleled, and is a vital part of a child's care. The ideal living environment that a mother can provide for her children is a warm and caring home. A mother plays the most vital role in a child's life because she is the most important role model for the child. In addition, it is up to the mothers to teach the children through love so that they will grow up into caring well-rounded persons.¹

Transmission of Faith

"Parents, Your Task Is to Transmit the Faith to Your Children, with Your Example," urged Pope Francis on the Mothers' Day 2019. He reminded parents of their task: transmit the faith to their children. He stressed that they must do so with their own example, with their own life of faith, not just through later studies at catechesis, but at the home, making their children sense the presence of Jesus there, and to know Him personally. During the homily, he reminded the parents of the importance of passing on the faith to their children and the great responsibility it entails.

Chavara's mother had succeeded in transmitting faith and even at his deathbed he gratefully remembered how his parents brought him up in faith and devotion for the Holy Family. These are the touching words in his autobiography:

Mixed in her sweet milk, she regaled me
With thought of heaven, and words of grace so pure!

¹<https://www.megaessays.com/signup.html>, accessed on 25 October 2018.

And when reason grew strong, my little mind
 Patiently, informed, to lisp holy names.¹

The poet encourages the whole of society to express every possible form of gratitude and active closeness to mothers.

2.2.2. Mary, Mother of Jesus

As a separate chapter of this book is dedicated for an elaborate discussion on the importance of Mother Mary in the life of Chavara and in his writings, we shall deal with it later.²

2.3. 'Mother Saints' in *Dhyanasallapangal* and Other Writings

Chavara's writings give us an idea of his respect and high estimation of women. We find an "astonishing variety of women" in the *Atmanutapam* and the *Dhyanasallapangal*. Chavara has great respect for 'many mothers' accompanying Christ in his Galilean ministry, in his journey to Jerusalem, and the events that unfolded there. He calls all women saints 'mothers', 'my mothers' (*Ente Ammamar*), who are his constant supporters.³ In his picturization of the scene of his meditation, he presents all these women saints as being around him. Chavara enjoyed their company during his hour of meditation and all other places and times of his faith journey. In a way, he acknowledges that they were courageous women who passionately loved Jesus after having experienced his merciful touch in their lives. His

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos I: 49-52.

²See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion on Mother Mary and her influence on Saint Chavara.

³We see their presence mainly in his *Dhyanasallapangal*, *Atmanutapam*, and *Letters*, especially letters written to the Sisters of Koonammavu Convent.

devotion to these mother saints also enabled him to form a dignified vision of women.

He sees motherhood in every woman and he has many favourite 'mother saints', such as Saint Teresa of Avila, Mary Magdalene, and other Galilean women disciples of Jesus, Saint Mary of Egypt and Saint Mary of Cortona; all these saints are 'mothers' to him. He sometimes includes his own mother in this list of mothers who are mediators for him in the presence of God. Prophetess Anna of Jerusalem temple is also mother to him.¹ He identified Prophetess Anna as the mother who looked after Mary while she was living in the temple as a virgin, whereas the Evangelist did not reveal her identity; Luke calls her very old prophetess, Anna (Lk 2:36-37).

2.3.1. Galilean Women Disciples of Jesus

Chavara had a special love for the Galilean women who followed Jesus on his way through towns and villages preaching, proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom of God (Lk 8:1-3).

Pope John Paul II speaks of these women who are seen in the passion narrative. "Is it not an incontestable fact that women were the ones closest to Christ along the way of the cross and at the hour of his death? A man, Simon of Cyrene, was forced to carry the cross (Mt 27:32); but many women of Jerusalem spontaneously showed him compassion along *via crucis* (Lk 23:27). The figure of Veronica, albeit not biblical, expresses well the feelings of the women of Jerusalem along the *via dolorosa*." He continues: "Beneath the cross there is only one apostle, John, the son of Zebedee, whereas there are several women (Mt 27:55-56)... All these women were

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VII: 21-22.

fearless witnesses of Jesus' agony; all were present at the anointing and the laying of his body in the tomb. After his burial, as the day before the Sabbath draws to a close, they depart, but with the intention of returning as soon as they are allowed to. And it is they who will be the first to go to the tomb early in the morning on the day after the feast."¹

There is a friendly conversation with Mary Magdalene and other Marys whom the poet calls "my specially supportive beloved mothers." Chavara names these women: Mary Magdalena, Mary Cleopas, and Mary Salomi. He sees another Mary whom he calls "Mary Joachim who is the mother of God."² These women were busy with the following deeds according to Chavara:

- These women were journeying with Jesus and his disciples;
- They were ministering Jesus and his disciples;
- They constantly remained with Jesus;
- They were privileged to be with Jesus at the moment of his death;
- They were fortunate to see the risen Jesus;
- Whereby they could get united with Jesus.³

In this sense, these women were following Jesus as his travelling companions, listeners of his teachings; they were also healed by him and were the creators of a new image of women in their society. They were not confined to the space allotted by the patriarchal culture but dared to go beyond their restricted domestic space. The unique feature of the women disciples of Jesus is that the traditional roles of hospitality and service are seen by them as a way to serve

¹John Paul II, *Holy Thursday Letter to Priests* (7 April 1995), 4.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 40 (1981); 20 (200).

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 40-41 (1981); 20 (2000).

not only the physical family but also the family of faith.¹ In Chavara's focus on women and his original and new interpretation of the discipleship of women, we can see glimpses of a creative feminist approach rooted in the biblical scholarship.

Pope John Paul II discussed the significance of the women at the foot of the cross. He said: "The Gospels highlight the fact that women were in the forefront at the foot of the cross, at the decisive moment in Jesus of Nazareth's whole messianic mission... As we see, in this most arduous test of faith and fidelity the women proved stronger than the Apostles... In this moment of danger, those who love much succeed in overcoming their fear."² He pointed out that women were the first witnesses of the resurrection. From the beginning of Christ's mission, women showed him and his mystery a special sensitivity which is characteristic of their femininity. It is understood that women were particularly intuitive and good at understanding who Jesus was. The idea that women are especially sensitive to others obviously reflects the idea that men and women are created with different abilities and talents suited to their own particular vocation in life.

These 'mother saints' were the ones who left their homes with a passion for Jesus. They were enlightened to opt for a new lifestyle, which was not commonly accepted in those times. They were, according to Chavara, privileged to share the messianic abundance of table fellowship; the heavenly Father is lavish enough to satisfy them. Chavara looks at these mothers, like the children (Israel), who are fed and are in an exalted position.

¹Conzelmann, *The Theology of Saint Luke*, 158.

²John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 15.

Borrowing the words of the Syrophenician woman, Chavara considers himself a dog feeding on the crumbs falling from their dining table (Mt 15:21-26; Mk 7:24-30). When that gentile woman expressed her strong faith calling herself a dog, Jesus appreciated her great faith and offered healing to her daughter. Here Chavara, with his humble attitude, “longs for the privilege of going to heaven in their company with the Lord.”¹

All the four gospels picture the presence of ‘many women’ at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion among whom the Evangelists name three. In the gospels, their names vary. Luke presents them in Jesus’ Galilean ministry, at the foot of the cross (Lk 23:49, 55-56), in the resurrection narrative (24:1-11), and in the beginning of the Church (Acts 1:14). We read:

With him went the twelve as well as certain women who had been cured of evil spirits and ailments: Mary surnamed the Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, Susanna, and several others who provided for them out of their own resources (Lk 8:1-3).

When Luke speaks about the presence of these women at the foot of the cross and at the resurrection scene, he repeats the phrases, “the women who had accompanied him from Galilee” (23:49) and “the women who had come from Galilee with Jesus” (23:55). Mark presents these women in the following words:

There were some women watching from a distance. Among them were Mary of Magdala, Mary who was the mother of James the younger and Joset, and Salome. They used to follow him and look after him when he was in

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 40-41 (1981); 20 (2000).

Galilee. And there were many other women there who had come up to Jerusalem with him (Mk 15:40-41). Mark uses three verbs to characterize the discipleship of the women under the cross: They *followed* him in Galilee, they *ministered* to him, and they *came up with him* to Jerusalem (15:41).¹ He makes it clear that these women are not the ones who came with Jesus to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage, but they followed him in his public ministry, namely, during his Galilean ministry, his journey to Jerusalem, and during the events that took place in Jerusalem - his passion, death, burial, and resurrection. Elizabeth Fiorenza gives the name of four women disciples at the foot of the cross, namely, Mary of Magdala, Mary, the daughter or wife of James the younger, the mother of Joses, and Salome; these are pre-eminent among the women disciples who have followed Jesus, just as Peter, Andrew, James, and John are pre-eminent among the twelve.² Though the twelve have forsaken Jesus, betrayed and denied him, the women disciples, in contrast, are found under the cross, risking their own lives and safety. They were well aware of the danger of being arrested and executed as followers of a political insurrectionist crucified by the Romans. In the synoptic gospels, no male disciple or chosen apostle was present at the time of Jesus' death. Only the fourth gospel says that the beloved disciple was there among those who witnessed the 'hour' of Jesus. Chavara meditates on the freedom and courage of these women disciples who stood by Jesus in his suffering, sought to honour him in his death, and became the proclaimers of his resurrection.

¹Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 320.

²Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 320.

Joseph Ratzinger has observed the compassion of women disciples, which was a consolation for Jesus at the crucial moment of his life: while up to the moment of Jesus' death, the suffering Lord had been surrounded by nothing but mockery and cruelty, the Passion narratives end on a conciliatory note, which leads into the burial and the Resurrection. The faithful women and their compassion and love are held out to the dead Savior.¹ The characteristics of this small group of people, who are at the foot of the cross, offer us a new reality: "We now encounter the other Israel: people who are awaiting, people who trust God's promises and await their fulfilment, people who recognize in the words and deeds of Jesus the in-breaking of God's kingdom, the incipient fulfilment of the promises."²

These women, who were immediately close to Christ during his life, death, and resurrection, had an important role in the continuation of the Jesus movement, especially after Jesus' arrest and execution. They did not flee after his arrest but stayed back in Jerusalem for his execution and burial. The early Christian confession that "Jesus the Nazarene who was executed on the cross was raised" is, according to a Marcan resurrection story (Mk 16:1-6, 8a), revealed in a vision first to the Galilean women disciples of Jesus.³

They were outstanding women who have demonstrated sufficient competence in being with their master by even risking their lives. They were not pictured as dependent on men; they were neither dominated nor exploited by men. Chavara never presented relationship of rivalry or conflict between sexes. We seldom see instances of negative man-

¹Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 142.

²Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 146.

³Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 138.

woman relationship in his writings; instead, there are references to positive man-woman relationships and shared decision-making by men and women. There is a good number of material promoting a positive self-image of women and a harmonious relationship between the sexes. His meditation on the heroism of these biblical women and their self-sacrificing spirit inspired him to develop a strong bond of relationship with women.

Saint Pope John Paul II had the same line of thought and presented these women as those who were very active in spreading the Kingdom. He says:

After his departure, together with the Apostles, they “devoted themselves” in the Upper Room in Jerusalem until the day of Pentecost. On that day the Holy Spirit spoke through “the sons and daughters” of the people of God, thus fulfilling the words of the prophet Joel (see Acts 2:17). These women, and others afterwards, played an active and important role in the life of the early church, in building up from its foundations the first Christian community and subsequent communities – through their own charisms and their varied service.¹

The gospel traditions reflect on the fact that women were, on the one hand, instrumental in continuing the movement initiated by Jesus after his execution and resurrection and, on the other, involved in expanding this movement to the gentiles in the adjacent regions.²

Single-Minded Devotion of the Women Disciples

The unique characteristic of these women disciples was that they were fully absorbed in the thought of Jesus, their

¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 27.

²Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 162.

beloved Lord and master. Their whole attention was on the Lord; they returned from Calvary in order to obey the strict Sabbath law; on the Sabbath day they prepared spices to anoint the body of Jesus, their Lord (Lk 23:56); they were there at the tomb “on the first day of the week, at the first sign of dawn, they went to the tomb with the spices they had prepared” (Lk 24:1). Mark says that on the way they were worried about the big stone that had been placed over the tomb: “They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” (Mk 16:3). They were totally immersed in their love for Jesus. They considered it their duty to be fully engaged in the matters related to the Lord. These women do not seem to be chosen by Jesus; instead, they chose Jesus as their Lord and master of their lives and they followed him and his disciples in all the towns and villages wherever He went preaching the Kingdom of God. It was their firmness and fortitude that differentiated them from others. They were married women, but they had left their husbands and families to be with Jesus. The gospels and even Chavara were silent about their husbands. These women were awakened to see the inner glory of Jesus at the time of his death, burial, and even beyond the Good Friday. Death was a door for these loving women; their love no bounds. It may have been because of the enormous capacity of these women to endure sufferings and risk their lives for the sake of Jesus that Chavara developed great devotion to these mother saints. According to Bible scholars, these women are not just paradigms of faithful discipleship to be imitated by women but by all those who belong to Jesus’ very own familial community.¹

¹Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 333.

2.3.2. 'Three Marys'

In Chavara's writings, very often we come across the phrase 'Three Marys', who followed Jesus, and there were other Marys among his mother saints. One may wonder why he was devoted to or surrounded by so many Marys? The answer is simple. He believed that in every Mary there existed Mother Mary or that, in them, there are the qualities of Mother Mary. It is an attitude, a vision, a *darsan*. In the goodness of each and every woman, he envisions the charisma of Mother Mary. According to G. H. Thaward, every woman who bears the name of Mary is the small dwellings of Virgin Mary.¹ The same faith unites them all with each other.

He often instructed the sisters of Koonammavu convent to have love for these Galilean women disciples of Jesus. In one of his letters, he instructed them to contemplate on the joy of resurrection along with Mother Mary and the three other Marys. According to him, they are the best guides to the sisters to prepare for and to welcome the risen Jesus on the day of his resurrection:

Invite Jesus Christ to come to your hearts in spirit. Until He rises from the dead and re-appears afresh, remain with the Mother of God and the three Marys. Be united with them awaiting the joy of the resurrection.²

These three Marys appear often in different writings. One characteristic of their presentation is that they are always in the company of Mother Mary. For example, in *Pana*, he says that Mother Mary and other three Marys were present when the body of Jesus was kept in the tomb. Along with John, they remained at the foot of the cross. He assures that if we meditate on the passion and death of Jesus along with these

¹Thaward, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 17.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 4 (2020).

mothers, we will attain great progress in virtue and special grace on the day of resurrection of Jesus;¹ on his way to Calvary carrying the cross they are there constantly with Mother Mary.²

2.3.3. Mary of Magdala

Chavara presents Mary of Magdala as a person who fell in love with Jesus; she could not depart from her lover even after his death. Jesus had shown her his love by healing her of a serious illness, which was believed to be the work of demons. She reciprocated her gratitude until the end. When love came calling, she left everything and followed Jesus closely. Her falling in love with Jesus was a process of breaking away from her wayward life, and placing her vessel of life at the feet of her Lord, without keeping aside anything for herself. The deepest feminine yearning is to achieve a loving union. Such yearning is an essential aspect of the eternal destiny of woman. It is not simply a human longing, but is specifically feminine and opposed to the specifically masculine nature.³ She surrendered her whole being to Jesus. Finally, she gave company to Jesus while he was hanged on the cross; because of her passionate love for Jesus she stood there throughout and yet was always united with him. According to Chavara, she was standing there even in the hot sun.⁴ She could not be plucked out of Jesus, her lover. She could not leave Jesus even when he was arrested; or, on his way to Calvary; when he was being

¹Chavara, CWC, vol. 2: *Maranaveetil Padanulla Pana*, 1149-1161.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VIII: 133; IX: 3, 94.

³Stein, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, vol. 2: *Essays on Woman*, 84.

⁴Chavara, CWC, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 31 (1981).

hanged on the cross, or even after his death. When Jesus was taken down from the cross she was holding his legs.¹

She was among the women who stood at the foot of the cross. But it was not enough for her to be beside him at the moment of his death. She had prepared very expensive spices and perfumes for his body; she also wanted to take care of his interred body, and, so, she reached the tomb very early in the morning. Not finding the body inside the tomb, she went to inform Peter, but she did not resign herself to his disappearance. She returned to the tomb and desperately continued her search.

Thus, in this way, she became an icon of single-minded devotion to the Lord. It is with this kind of intense love ('*ekanthapremam*') that Chavara, too, longed for Jesus.² Poet Kumaran Asan of Kerala, a contemporary of Chavara, describes the nature, power and strength of feminine love in these words:

പഴകിയ തരുവല്ലി മാറ്റിടാം
 പുഴയൊഴുകും വഴി വേറെയാക്കിടാം
 കഴിയുമവ - മനസിമാർ മന-
 സ്സൊഴിവതശക്യമൊരാളിലൂന്നിയാൽ.³

Mary Magdalene is mentioned in all four canonical Gospels as the primary witness to the resurrection of Jesus. In John's presentation of the resurrection scene, one can see the expressions of the passionate love of Mary Magdalene for Jesus (Jn 20:1-20). In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene alone came to the tomb, and it was she who saw the empty tomb. She called Peter and the beloved disciple to the empty tomb. She was sent by Jesus to tell them that Jesus would be

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 106.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos III: Appendix, 55-56.

³കുമാരനാശാൻ, *ലീല*, 20-24.

ascending: "to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." She was the one who received resurrection appearance. She reached the apostles and proclaimed: "I have seen the Lord." Thus, she is the primary apostolic witness to the resurrection. Mary is presented as the 'great lover' of Jesus who is upset about the death of Jesus. Her great sorrow is turned into joy as Jesus had promised in the farewell discourse when she met him. She, in fact, held Jesus close to her. This behaviour is typical of the women in the Gospel. They felt the need for tangible contact with Jesus. The apostles, on the other hand, were as though 'paralyzed' before the Risen one, and Jesus had to ask them to touch him, to feel the reality of his incarnation, present even after the resurrection. Mary Magdalene did not need this invitation and just as the other women spontaneously kissed the feet of the Risen Lord, she embraced him and held him close.

Another characteristic of Mary Magdalene is that she was the first to proclaim the Good News that Christ had risen from the dead, and was alive! Hers was not an abstract proclamation of pure doctrine; her testimony was direct and personal. The authentic announcement implies the experience of the person behind the announcement. Mary Magdalene is known as the "apostle of the apostles,"¹ because she was commissioned and sent by Jesus to convey to the apostles what she had experienced and seen with her eyes: her encounter with the Risen Jesus. This episode of Mary Magdalene and the behaviour of the women in the Gospels remind us that Jesus is not an idea or a doctrine, but a real

¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 16.

person, a loving man, created by God, who entered our history, taking the human form, with all its weaknesses.¹

Mary Magdalene is the disciple, who, despite her sorrow, 'seeks' Jesus and finds him. She recognizes Jesus the moment he calls her by name. In the discourse on the good shepherd, Jesus asserts: The good shepherd "calls his sheep by name and leads them out..." (Jn 10:4-5). Jesus calls her by name and Mary Magdalene recognizes his voice. She loved Jesus with an undivided heart, and recognized him as her teacher. Thus, she became the primary apostolic witness to the resurrection.

Although Jesus' disciples Peter and John arrived at the tomb, they did not see the body; so they went back to their own comfort zones. However, Mary did not, and could not go, because she was passionately in love with Jesus. So, she stood by the tomb, looking for her beloved. Since her love was a force, stronger than death, Jesus, whom she loved, was pleased with her perseverance and he rewarded her by appearing before her. Chavara meditates on this good fortune of Mary Magdalene to have been the first to meet the risen Jesus. The fact that our Lord chose to manifest himself in all his glory for the first time not to an apostle but to a woman, is something that amazed him. Mary Magdalene epitomises the sinful humanity that is called to intimacy with the Bridegroom. It was in the sinful woman, now called to union with the Lord in glory, that the most profound truth about woman was reaffirmed, and this reaffirmation signified redeemed humanity. The apostles as

¹Angelo Becciu, "Recognize and Encourage the Invaluable Work of Women," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 4 August 2017, 6.

such were not called to this union: they were to minister to it.¹

Chavara marvelled at the strong love of Mary Magdalene and he, too, wanted to imitate her in loving Jesus passionately, for which he invoked her through the following prayer to her:

O! My dear mother Mary Magdalene, bring the Lord and His mother to dwell in my heart. Dear mother, you know how strong is my desire to invite them so that they come to stay in my heart. At the same time, you must not forget the fact that my home (heart) is ill-furnished and that I am unable to give them a fitting welcome suiting their status.²

It was his belief that because of the great love that Jesus bore her, He would oblige her and would certainly come to his heart, however inadequate it was... He says: "for there are many others who as well love me, Mary of Egypt, Mary of Cortona are also greatly loved by God, they will spare no pains to enrich me with grace to the effect that I am a worthy seat for the Lord."³

He presented Mary Magdalene as a model for the sisters of Koonammavu convent, and told them to offer the virtues and penances of Mary Magdalene as theirs to God.⁴ He believed that Mary Magdalene is the symbol of an unfaithful bride that God brought back to himself in love. Being parts of the mystical body of Christ, the qualities or virtues of one

¹See Carlo Caffarra, "Benchmarks, Problem Areas and Issues for Debate" in *Men and Women Diversity and Mutual Complementarity*, 109-124.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 41 (1981); 20 (2000).

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 20-21 (2000).

⁴Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 3 (2020).

member adds beauty and strength to the whole body, which can be shared by all other members.

2.3.4. Martha and Mary

As Jesus and his disciples were travelling, they sought hospitality in homes and villages. Sometimes they were welcomed, sometimes not. The house of Martha and Mary offered hospitality (Lk 10:38). Chavara speaks about a particular occasion when Jesus was rejected by the people of Jerusalem, and he went out of the city to *his mothers'* Martha and Mary's house in Bethany.¹ Jesus kept a close friendship with them. The gospels do not mention about Jesus going to Mary and Martha; they simply say that he went to Bethany. Chavara retells the story (Mk 11:11 and Mt 21:17) of Jesus going to Bethany.² Jesus' solemn entry into Jerusalem is the context of both gospels. While in Mathew, Jesus, after cleansing the temple, had had a dispute with the chief priests and the teachers of the Law before he left for Bethany, in Mark, the cleansing of the temple took place the following day. After his triumphant entry into the city, he went into the Temple and saw everything. The reason for going to Bethany, according to Mark, was that "... it was now late." But, the reason Chavara gives for Jesus' going to Bethany is that Jerusalem did not acknowledge Jesus and his disciples:

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 41 (1981); 20 (2000).

²"With that [after disputing with the chief priests and the teachers of the Law] Jesus left them and went out of the city to Bethany where he spent the night" (Mt 21:17); "He entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple, he looked all around him, but as it was now late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve" (Mk 11:11).

Struck by the spontaneous jubilant eruption of the town, many adored you: but hours later, the jubilation subsided, the emotion died, the crowd dispersed, and the city ignored Jesus and his dear ones. Therefore, he went out of the Jerusalem city and went and stayed in the house of *my mothers* Martha and Mary... The Lord is remembered and received only on solemn feast days. He is forgotten in the absence of festivity.¹

Chavara looked upon these mothers as the ones who received Jesus with their inherently generous nature even when all the people of Jerusalem city ignored or rejected him. Jesus, on his part, treasured the love of these women because of which he had a high regard for them, and so went to their house. According to Chavara, Martha and Mary created a new image of women; they received a new face and new life in the presence of Jesus. Theirs was an intimate relationship of love towards Jesus, based on freedom, equality, and justice. He believed that the generous hospitality and deep friendship of Martha and Mary has universal appeal to all who yearn for the warmth of human communion. Jesus exhibited a keen interest in the lives of women and their surroundings, and he invited them to participate in his work. His desire for human communion was met not only by the apostles but also by women such as Martha and Mary. This was demonstrated in his deep spiritual and intellectual exchange with Martha (Jn 11:21-27). Jesus trusted women's generous hearts with his own human need for hospitality, support, and the understanding of his mission.

In response to the complaint by Martha, Jesus defended Mary's right to leave the job of serving the meal in order to

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 41 (1981).

listen to Jesus. Mary is seated at Jesus' feet, like a disciple with a teacher. Mary is silent as she listens to Jesus. But she is not passive, for she has taken a bold action in leaving her regular, expected role of serving dinner, in order to listen to Jesus. Through her objection of what she perceives as a deviant act, Martha is trying to force her sister back into the expected role of a woman at home. By welcoming Jesus and his disciples to her home, Martha represented those people who played an important role in the early spread of the Gospel. Those who offered hospitality to travelling missionaries enabled the Word to take root in a new location, and they often became patrons or patronesses of the church in their locality. By choosing to attend to Jesus' teachings while laying aside everything else, Mary exemplifies what it means to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind" (Mk 12:30). As if to affirm Mary's radical violation of Palestinian social roles, Jesus adds that what she has chosen "will not be taken away from her" (Lk 10:42).

Seeing the rejection Jesus experienced from the people of Jerusalem, Chavara requests his loving mother Mary Magdalene to bring Jesus and his mother to his heart which is always open for them; above all, he longs for their presence in him. Once again, he challenges the male disciples for their rejection of Jesus and contrasts this with, and highlighted the openness or generosity of women disciples towards Jesus and his disciples. What Chavara appreciates in these mothers is their motherliness or feminine genius of receptivity, compassion, concern, and understanding. Also, he sees in this episode Jesus' freedom to enter the house of Martha and Mary at any time which he knew was wide open for him, in times of jubilation or rejection. They had already become collaborators of Jesus'

projects. The house of Martha and Mary is a place of solace and warmth for Jesus.

2.3.5. Jesus in the Lap of Chavara's Mother

Jesus' joy in being in his mothers' lap is a favourite image Chavara used to portray motherhood; Jesus, the Incarnate Word, who left the bosom of the Heavenly Father, now prefers to be in the lap of the mothers. There is one scene in his *Dhyanasallapangal* that attracts our attention, namely, Chavara's preparation for receiving Holy Communion. Thinking that he is not worthy to entertain Jesus in his heart, he invites Mother Mary and tells Jesus: "Reside in my soul, as you sat on the lap of your mother."¹ He also invites his much loved 'mother saints': Mary Magdalene, mother Teresa of Avila, and also his own mother ("എന്റെ അമ്മ, എന്തെ പെറ്റവൾ") to arrive beforehand and be seated in his heart to welcome Jesus. He requests them to decorate his heart with all the ornaments with which their houses are adorned. Here is a beautiful expression of his experience of the communion of saints. These mother saints were active in the faith journey of Chavara. He believed that he would imbibe some of their virtues and holiness when he was united with them. He trusts that Jesus will be happy to abide in them, as women were, around Jesus, in His lifetime, or, as Jesus enjoyed being in his mother's lap.² His only concern was to make Jesus happy at all times. Saint John the evangelist presents Jesus as one who remained in the bosom of the Heavenly Father (Jn 1:18). That same joy he would experience, Chavara contemplates, in the laps of these mothers. There is another scene in which Chavara invites

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 43 (1981); 22 (2000).

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 41 (1981).

Jesus and his mother into his heart. This was while he was meditating on Jesus' solemn entry to Jerusalem and his rejection by the people of Jerusalem.¹

2.3.6. Saint Teresa of Avila

Chavara's love for, and devotion to, Saint Teresa of Avila, a renowned Spanish mystic and a spiritual giant, was well-known to the Carmelite missionaries in Kerala. Therefore, when a Carmelite missionary printed and published Saint Teresa's biography, it was dedicated to Chavara.² The great expression of Chavara's love for Saint Teresa can be seen in the opening verses of his *Dhyanasallapangal*, which speaks of his persistent thirst for attaining higher levels of meditation and heroic sanctity. Since he has always been overtaken a sense of unworthiness and sinfulness, he accepts the unpalatable fact that he has not reached the exalted stage of sanctity. He thus, seeks help from Saint Teresa whom he calls 'Mother Teresa' (*Amma Thressia*). Trusting the maternal support of mother Teresa, he held that a mother always wants the best for her child, and never compromises on anything with regard to her child. Parents protect their child from any difficult situation and provide him/her with every comfort they can afford to. If mothers provide everything for their children towards their physical wellbeing, how much more would mother Teresa grant his spiritual need, namely, his desire to grow in mystical prayer. There is a long intimate conversation with this mystic saint in the first

¹Chavara, CWC, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 41 (1981).

²Book written by a Carmelite Missionary Father Marcelinos OCD, dated 22 February 1866.

pages of *Dhyanasallapangal*.¹ Sometimes, he even longed to die, in order to meet this mother Teresa:

I am gladdened to think that I have been accepted as the younger son of mother Teresa and that when I reach there I could enjoy her favors and that she, along with my other heavenly brothers and sisters, is waiting for my union with them.²

Chavara's Love for Teresian Method of Prayer

Chavara's definition of meditation is very much in line with that of Saint Teresa. Mental prayer consists in a "heart to heart" talk with God, not using prepared or memorized formulae, but speaking spontaneously. In his letters to the sisters we see a method of prayer when he teaches them, which is very similar to the Teresian method of prayer. He distinguished four stages of prayer: reading, solitude, meditative prayer or a loving colloquy, and meditation. The importance he gave to reading is echoed in the words of mother Teresa in her autobiography, where she says how reading helped her in the ways of meditation; she felt dryness when she was without a book.³ One thing special about Chavara's presentation of meditation is that he believed that it is God who takes the initiative. Jesus comes to the soul which has reached a stage of solitude and speaks to the soul. In the beginning when the soul finds it difficult to follow Jesus' conversation he himself speaks clearly and

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 16-17 (1981). His familiarity and love for mother Teresa was so deep and intimate that it would be difficult to make out whom he addressed 'mother', his own mother, Mother Mary or Mother Teresa of Avila.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 31.

³Teresa of Avila, *The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Avila*, Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, trans., vol. 1, 44.

attracts the soul towards himself. He takes His bride to the wine cellar; He adorns her with ornaments, etc.¹ He pointed to mother Teresa, who reached the seventh mansion of mystical union with God, and exhorted the sisters to follow her method of meditation and to try to reach at least the fourth mansion.²

We come across another Carmelite saint in his writings by the name of Mary Magdalene de Pazzi, in the *Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent*.³ Her relic was given to the sisters along with its patent and they were told to keep it in the chapel.⁴ She was presented as a model before the sisters for the respectful observance of the Constitution.⁵

2.3.7. 'Penitent Mothers'

In Chavara's writings we see a particular group of saints – Saint Mary of Egypt, Saint Mary of Cortona, and Mary Magdalene – whom he calls 'Penitent Mothers', who always offered their penances and tears on his behalf to Jesus.⁶ It was his conviction that placing oneself at the foot of the cross and meditating on Jesus' suffering is an effective way to get the remission of one's sins. Therefore, Mary Magdalene is seen embracing the cross of Jesus at Calvary even under the hot sun at midday. Chavara wished he could exchange places with her for some time.⁷ Chavara was inspired by the courage and heroic asceticism of Mary of

¹Chavara, CWC, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 8 (2020).

²Chavara, CWC, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 8 (2020).

³CKC, vol. 1: 63, 70, 170; Chavara, CWC, vol. 4: *Letters*, IX: 11 (2020).

⁴CKC, vol. 1, 63.

⁵CKC, vol. 1, 70.

⁶Chavara, CWC, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 31 (1981).

⁷Chavara, CWC, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 31 (1981).

Egypt, and energized by the passionate love of Mary Magdalene.

All the women characters in Chavara's writings show much openness to God; they are united with Him. They are women who have already attained their goal, and are now in a position to support others who approach them. Their houses are beautifully adorned and they can now adorn the houses of others. Thus, Chavara's penitent saints are also his ever-supporting mothers and constant companions.

2.3.8. The Hidden Powers of Women

Chavara's description of the Galilean women disciples, their pattern of behaviour, their purpose of following Jesus, etc., tells us that they were resolute, firm and unyielding. Jesus rewarded their boldness, and accused the male disciples for not believing those who saw Jesus after his resurrection, namely, the women disciples. The women characters in his writings are meant to show that women are endowed with power within. They do not seem to depend on or expect any human or this-worldly powers. Their whole strength was from the recess of their heart which God has deposited in them. They were totally free. Who can be totally free except those who do not expect any power from this earth? They knew that if they were not free from the created world they can never be fully engaged in divine things; also, they teach us that God is always closest to us when we are close to him and are committed to him, which is the most basic truth in Christian discipleship. His meditations on biblical women and his love for Mother Mary, penitent mothers, and other mother saints have naturally inspired the people of Kerala to continue their great love for their mothers and mother saints.

3. Women in Chavara's 'Testament to the Members of His Congregation'

In the thoughtfully prepared text of his 'Testament' a new dream of women's role in society can be seen. This was written before Chavara became seriously ill, and thereafter confined to bed, in August 1870, namely, five months before his death. When he designed the future growth of the convent and suggested new places to open convents, he used the phrase "convent with boarding house."¹ With an intention to continue after his death, the historical mediation created by the founder in establishing the institutes, Chavara envisioned the future expansion, and the type of ministry for the convent, along with that of the monastery of men TOCD. He conceived that "the monastery, the convent, and the boarding house" would function together with a purpose to achieve a single goal. In his 'Testament', the phrase "monasteries, convents, and boarding houses" has been repeated twice and "monasteries and convents" thrice.² He wrote:

It is necessary that more *monasteries and convents* be opened in the South, that is, one monastery each to East and West of Mannanam and some *convents with boarding houses*... This will help very much to render necessary and useful spiritual ministry to the faithful of the two vicariates of Varapuzha and Kollam... A little effort and diligence on your part would suffice to accomplish all these things.³

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VI: 5 (2020) ("Testament of Chavara," paragraph 3).

²See Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VI: 5 (2020).

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VI: 5 (2020).

By using the phrase “monasteries, convents, and boarding houses for girls” in the ‘Testament’, Chavara encouraged the TOCD men to consider TOCD women as co-workers, or equal partners in the ministry of the Church. He motivated them to ensure the participation and co-operation of women with the gift of their femininity in the life and mission of the church. He advocated a spirituality of collaboration for women TOCD, that both men and women religious work hand-in-hand for the growth and unity of the Church. He visualized that the sisters, too, can work for the spiritual growth and renewal of other vicariates.

When he wrote these lines in 1870, there were only two Vicariates in Kerala – Kollam and Varapuzha. The Vicariate of Kollam was exclusively for the Latin Rite and the one at Varapuzha, for both Syrians and Latins. He hoped that the sisters would render their spiritual ministry in areas unknown, or to people and in cultures unfamiliar to them, by going beyond their rite-based identity and geographical limitations. It was an invitation to go beyond their narrow identity from the status of a religious congregation of a particular place and from the individualistic identity to the collective ecclesial identity and from there to the union with God, which insistently invited them to serve the Universal Church.

In his ‘Testament’, Chavara invited the sisters to have an intercultural mindset, to go beyond their own places and liturgical practices. Thus, he envisioned that sisters should have their rightful place in the society, namely, spiritual animation of the people which may include giving spiritual direction, counselling, attending to people in distress, animating the Liturgy of the Word wherever required, conducting meaningful prayer services, spending time with the elderly and sick members, encouraging the young

members, helping school-going students to study well and motivating them, etc. On various occasions, Pope Francis also spoke along these lines, and asked the women of today to enter more deeply into their vocation: "A woman's role in the Church must not end only as mother, as worker... Women are challenged to contribute to their communities and the Church through formation, prayer, active service, and ... gathering strength from their essential role to the body of the Church for the greater glory of God."¹

Chavara's vision for the society was empowerment of women through women. Chavara trusted women's generous hearts and gave recognition for their rightful place in the church. He envisioned a church where women's charisms and gifts were acknowledged and the depth and breadth of God's call to women were recognized in actuality.

4. Mother's Love: A Model for Community Life

It is within the family (and, perhaps, only there) that one is loved unconditionally. It is, therefore, within the family that love is taught. In his 'Testament', Chavara showed a mother's love for her children as the model for the kind of relationship and bond of unity that should prevail in the monasteries. He wrote: "However numerous the monasteries be, all must be like the members of one family, children born to, nursed, and brought up by the same mother."² He testified to the fact that he always experienced this kind of love-relationship in all the monasteries. He affirmed: "I left my home and parents for the sake of God. Now I am writing this from Elthuruth. I have my brethren

¹Falasca, "Francis and Women," 1.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VI: 5 (2020) ("Testament of Chavara," paragraph 2).

here who love me more than my own brothers and sisters. Tomorrow if I go to Koonammavu, I will have the same experience there as well; so also, if I go to Mannanam or to Vazhakulam.”¹

5. Stories on Women

Chavara is a good story teller. We find many stories on women in his writings in order to illustrate his teaching. These stories are meant for the transformation of the society and to change the attitude and approach of the people towards women and to inspire women themselves to encourage their self-image and self-worth.

5.1. *Maranaveetil Padamulla Pana*

Due to the spread of some epidemics, many people died in Kerala in the nineteenth century. Chavara consoled those who were mourning for the dead by reassuring them that the prayers of their dear ones would be helpful for the departed souls. One has to go through the process of purification, before meeting the all-holy and pure God. The souls in purgatory cannot help themselves; they can be saved only by the prayers, sacrifices, and deeds of charity of their relatives or loved ones. The poet used many anecdotes in which the souls in purgatory appear to their dear ones, revealing to them the suffering they undergo, and entreated the living for their prayer support. He shared his deep insights and profound philosophy of death through these women’s stories, and taught them that life is not snatched away from them, but it is transformed.

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, IX: 7 (2020), Second Letter to the Parishioners of Kainakary.

In his poem *Maranaveetil Padanulla Pana*, he has used many stories. Out of ten stories in this poetical work four concern women. All the women characters in these stories are presented as leading virtuous lives; they are committed to saving others with their prayers and penance. The terms '*punya sthree*', '*punya kanya*', etc., are often repeated to denote the nature of these women. The four women stories are those of a poor and saintly old widow (251-350), Monica, who prays for souls in purgatory (661-722), the queen of King John of Elion (551-598), and an ideal Christian wife (814-950). These stories enable us to comprehend Chavara's attitude toward women better. Except in the story of the poor widow, it was the men, namely, the husbands or fathers who approach these women and express their state of helplessness to be saved from the place of suffering through the holy sacrifices and supplications of their wives or daughters. These stories throw much light on Chavara's mind-set that women are more devoted and their husbands are saved because of the virtuous lives, invocations, almsgiving, and sacrifices of their wives.

Thus, these stories highlight positive roles of women and equal and reciprocal relationship between sexes. Moreover, these men are desperately dependent on women after their death, while women remain faithful in their devotion and Christian obligation, always remembering their departed ones in prayer, and doing deeds of charity. The poet shares the impression that women are closer to God and their prayers are promptly heard.

*A Sainly Widow*¹

Chavara brings the story of a 'lowly virtuous lady' (*punya stree*), who was a widow and lived in a dilapidated hut and whose two daughters were nuns. She had a friend, a living saint, who visited her in her hut and saw a 'wondrous sight' that the Virgin Mother, several virgins/nuns, a number of celestial beings, and Saint Peter were present at the time of her death. The description of her holy death echoes the death of Lazarus in the gospel (Lk 16:22).

The Mother of God at her head

Wiping away drops of sweat

Several nuns stood around her cot

As guards of honor serving her.²

The poet narrates that her death was a 'grand celebration' amidst which the Heavenly Mother grasped her by hand and suddenly disappeared. The living saint shared with the two daughters that the Heavenly Mother carried the soul of their mother to heaven, and on hearing this, they greatly rejoiced over it. Again, the poet presents the living saint as a holy soul meditating on her knees, during which she gets visions of souls in purgatory, who discloses things about heaven. In *Pana*, some great truths are communicated through women.

*Queen of King John of Ilion*³

King John of Ilion died suddenly, soon after which, queen Margerie engaged herself in fervent prayer, severe fasting,

¹Chavara, CWC, vol. 2: *MaranaVeetil Padanulla Pana*, 251-350; 142-145 (1986).

²Chavara, CWC, vol. 2: *MaranaVeetil Padanulla Pana*, 267-270; 143 (1986).

³Chavara, CWC, vol. 2: *MaranaVeetil Padanulla Pana*, 551-598; 152-153 (1986).

penance, and almsgiving for her husband. Knowing that all these were not enough to save the soul of her husband from purgatory, she fasted for forty days and engaged in many other deeds of charity after which the king was received to heaven. Thus, Chavara presents queen Margerie as a loving, faithful, and devoted Christian disciple. Even after the death of her husband, she remained faithful and committed in prayer. She could communicate with her dead husband through visions. Here too, woman was depicted as a helper to her husband when he was in a helpless condition.

*A Reputed Virgin Monica*¹

While staying in a convent, Monica directed all her prayers and merits for the salvation of the souls in purgatory and the poet says that, through her prayers and penance, innumerable souls fled daily to heaven. After the death of her father, he appeared to Monica from purgatory to request for her fervent prayers to save him from the place of fire and suffering.

In our traditional patriarchal family set up, the father is the head of the family; he takes decisions, earns and handles money; he enjoys all kinds of freedom. Women are away from all these; they are voiceless; but, in the presence of the Lord, they pour out their hearts. Now, in this story, the father is in a helpless condition and he is at the mercy of his daughter. She, a winning woman of matchless resoluteness, stands high with her fervent love for Christ. In the same way, King John had ruled the country and his house; he was powerful. After his death he became powerless and pleaded

¹Chavara, CWC, vol. 2: *Marana Veetil Padanulla Pana*, 661-722; 155-157 (1986).

with his wife to rescue him; he admitted that he deserved the sufferings that he was undergoing in the place of fire.

*An Ideal Christian Wife*¹

The story of an ideal wife tells how a husband's suspicious nature brought calamity into her life. The poet specifies that the wife was chaste; she did not love anyone except her husband. But, her suspicious husband was jealous and doubted that she had an illicit relationship with a neighbour. Desiring to test the chastity of his wife, he forced her to write a letter to that man inviting him to come and meet her that night. The letter explained the manner in which he should meet her, and the time. The husband then hid himself, and lay in wait to kill him if and when he came. On receiving the letter, the man set out to meet the woman. Fortunately, through the merciful intercession of Mother Mary, he miraculously escaped the danger of death and in thanking the Heavenly Mother, he renounced all worldly pleasures and joined a monastery and led an ascetic life. The purity of the woman's chastity and her faithfulness were powerfully protected.

Thus, these stories throw much light on Chavara's mind that women are more devoted and their husbands are saved because of the virtuous lives, invocations, almsgiving, and sacrifices of their wives. These women were never portrayed as helpless or dumb victims; instead, they were portrayed as being proactive in solving problems. Such stories of heroic women mould the psyche of Indian women and men; they construct a positive image of womanhood.

¹Chavara, CWC, vol. 2: *MaranaVeetil Padanulla Pana*, 814-950; 160-165 (1986).

5.2. Stories in the *Chavarul*

In his *Chavarul*, Chavara often includes inspirational stories of widows. He tells the story of the powerful prayer of a widow, who was troubled by the mistreatment of her landlord. Hers is a testimony that God hears the cries of widows in their dire necessity and wipes away their tears. Chavara says that when this widow prayed in tears, immersed in deep sorrow, God answered her.¹ By such stories he clearly shows that God is inclined towards a woman who is helpless and underprivileged.

A Heroic Act of Looking after the Mother

In the section on 'Upbringing of Children' in his *Chavarul*, after instructing children to look after their parents in their old age, Chavara shares a motivating story of three sons' heroic sense of responsibility to care for their parents. After imparting the instruction on the greatness and importance of looking after parents, he concludes the letter with a story of two sons' heroic love for their mother; their readiness even to die for the sole purpose of protecting their mother. At last, this extraordinary love for one's mother was rewarded plentifully.²

These 'women stories' praise the refined life of women who are free from sins and full of prayers and deeds of charity. Chavara prized the commitment of these women, and wanted to communicate that it is women who make religion alive and active. Through these stories Chavara exhorts people to reconsider their traditional, patriarchal outlook towards women, which, according to him, was not in accordance with the attitude of Jesus. He corrects the

¹Chavara, *Chavarul*, 1: 18.

²Chavara, *Chavarul*, 2: 16.

negative perceptions of his people, especially their attitude and approach towards women, and even questions the existing value system of the society.

6. Women Who Contributed to His Projects

The nineteenth century Kerala church demanded that a woman remain unseen in the kitchen. She was expected only to work and discharge her duty as wife and mother. She had no rights, no voice, either in the family or in the society. She was not expected to make any significant contribution to the society. But, Chavara presented women as active participants in his life and in his projects for the society. He valued their contributions and recorded them with their names for posterity; thus, he honoured them, their generous contributions and their altruistic personalities. There are many examples, though only two or three have been identified here.

6.1. The *Pidiyari* Project

As a fund-raising project for the construction of the Koonammavu convent, the *pidiyari* system (sparing a handful of rice) was introduced. Every family had to deposit a handful of rice into a bag each time they prepared the day's meal. As rice was the staple food of the people of Kerala, they cooked rice three times a day. Selected Procurators were entrusted with the task of collecting the rice from each family. The success of this program depended upon the house-wives or mothers who cooked rice for their families. Thus, the contribution from the rice deposited by each woman became a great help in constructing the Koonammavu monastery, Vazhakulam monastery chapel, Elthuruth seminary, Puthenpally seminary, Koonammavu convent, and other projects of the

Vicariate of Varapuzha.¹ People saw in it a unique public distribution system and resource mobilization mechanism.² Chavara could muster the co-operation of the women of the parishes for the developmental projects he introduced, and was able to collect a good amount out of the *pidiyari* project. The generous donations of women for the projects of Chavara show that his pure and selfless appeal itself could change any heart. This enabled women to approach him openly, and contribute liberally. Chavara generously and scrupulously recorded the amount received from them. Through the system of *pidiyari*, he enhanced the spirit of self-sacrifice of women, which contributed significantly towards various activities and new initiatives taken up by the church of that time.

6.2. Construction of the Convent for Women

Chavara approached different parishes and priests to collect alms for the construction of the convent for women at Koonammavu. People donated generously and he recorded the donations received from each one. In those records, we find the names of individual women who contributed such as Pathil Kunjanna Rs. 100.³ As Jesus noticed and appreciated a widow's offering in the Jerusalem Temple, Chavara celebrated this Kuttanadan woman's name and her large-heartedness.

¹Bernard Thoma, *Kaldaya Suriani Reethil Chernna Malayalathile Carmalita Munnam Sabhayude Charithram* [The History of the Syrians of Third Order Carmelites], Mutholy, 1908, 146-148.

²Debashis Chatterjee, "Foreword," *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mannarathara, ed., iii.

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 132.

6.3. Initial Expense of the Printing Press

Although he was seriously thinking of opening the work of the printing press, Chavara lacked money to start it. It was at that moment that Kappamavumoottil Mariyathumma donated a good amount of rice as offering for Holy Mass to the Mannanam Monastery¹ on 27 November 1843. He has acknowledged that the first major contribution to begin the work of the press was this money received from Mariayathumma, a benevolent and generous woman.

In the nineteenth century, though women were economically dependent, Chavara recorded the donations in cash and kind, of a few women, through which he highlighted the economic freedom and financial independence these women enjoyed at that time. He gave a face to these women by recording their names. In this way, women came to be included in the list of contributors for his projects.

6.4. A Reversal of Patriarchy

When Chavara was faced with the sharp thorns of the belief system that a son is needed to ensure continuance of the family line, he went against this age-old patriarchal family system by giving away his own family property to his elder sister, who was married in Edathwa. Thus, he proved that women can also continue the family line. His relatives accused him of initiating a reversal of patriarchy in Kainakary. Misogynists of the time regarded it as an attack against the male belief system that prevailed in the society. Later, with his canonization, his family name – Chavara – came to be known all over the world, and the sacrifice he made in giving up his family lineage.

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 42.

6.5. Giving Visibility to the Presence of Women

Chavara mentions the presence of women among the people who gathered to bid farewell to Monsignor Leonard and Father Leopold Beccaro at Koonammavu, when they left for Europe on 7 September 1869.¹ In the *Atmanutapam*, the poet gives visibility to certain women characters who were not known otherwise; for example, even virgins "ബ്രഹ്മചാരിണിമാരാം സുന്ദരാംഗികൾ" (beautiful celibate women)² came to worship the new born babe in the crib with various gifts along with "young and old, children and mighty men." They came to adore their spouse's feet with floral wreaths and they were privileged to get the blessing from their spouse.³

Sweet-limbed damsels, avowed virgins
 Adore their spouse's feet with floral wreaths
 And borne aloft in His gentle mother's arms
 He with His soft hands benediction gives.⁴

He presents Shanthi, an aged shepherdess, who instantly recognized the new born baby as the Son of God. The poet says Shanti and her kinsmen came day after day to worship the Lord. She discusses with mother Mary, the mysteries of his self-emptying love. She wants to know the reason for his "leaving his mighty sire and sorrow embraced" and Mary meditatively explained to her the mystery of incarnation.⁵

6.6. Prayer of a Protestant Girl

In the collection of Chavara's daily prayers, we see a prayer titled as 'The Prayer Composed by a Converted Girl for a

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 151.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VI: 29.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VI: 21-22, 29.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VI: 29-32.

⁵Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VI: 37-40.

Happy Death'. This Protestant girl converted at the age of 15, and died at 18 in her sanctity. She composed and daily prayed a particular prayer for attaining a happy death. Chavara chose it as one of his favourite prayers. Though she was not a Catholic, nor a canonized saint, he allowed himself to be touched by the prayer of a teenage girl.¹

7. Celebrating Motherhood

Chavara highlights the qualities of motherhood in his writings; he provides several roles that mothers generally perform, namely, roles that shape the life of a child to become a contributing member of society. A child's development demands unrewarded devotion, love, and ability to care, all of which have always been characterized as the woman's role. He presents some strong women capable of looking after themselves and at times even their husbands and families, enduring stress, resisting parental authority, bringing up children, and taking decisions still upholding the ideal of a Christian disciple. They are courageous women, who have the ability to risk their lives for the sake of others. Whenever he writes about some great persons or important projects, he specifically lavishes his words of indebtedness on the mother of the person.

7.1. Struggles of a Single Parent

At present, unfortunately, the unity of the family seems to be breaking down. Many are the challenges faced by families: divorce is becoming frequent; fathers seem to be abandoning their families more easily than do the mothers; people speak of one-parent families; and, in many instances, the one parent tends to be the mother. Then the mother

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 70-71 (1981); 38-39 (2000).

becomes the pillar of the family, and the breadwinner. Studies show that households headed by women are increasing.¹ For the major part, women's contributions to the economy are unnoticed, unrecorded, and unrecognized. They toil as cultivators, agricultural labourers, peddlers, hawkers, bonded labourers, or as family labour in home-based production, without being formally listed as earners.

Chavara was aware of many problems that arise when one discharges the role of a mother. Traditional beliefs are being tested because many mothers are now single parents and have to take on an even bigger role in the life of their children. Not only must they care and support their children's needs but they must also provide enough income for the family to live on. This is a huge task for anybody to take on. Such an example of a mother's struggle is described in the biography of Palackal Thoma Malpan, which Chavara authored. Palackal's mother was a heroic woman, a single parent, who struggled to look after the family after the death of his father. Chavara was much indebted to his *guru*, Thoma Malpan, and his family because it was his *guru* who met all the expenses of his stay and study during his priestly formation period² and, therefore, he had firsthand knowledge of the troubles that the great mother of his *guru* endured. He specifically speaks of her as a devout woman, and presents her as a model for everyone:

He [Thomas Palackal] had one elder brother and two sisters. As the former was too young and incapable, the mother suffered a lot to bring up her four children. But, she did not lose her patience because she was one of the

¹Frances Maria Yayas and Vera Metha, ed., *Exploring Feminist Visions Case Studies on Social Justice Issues*, 13.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 57.

most pious women of the time and had a younger sister to help her in her struggles.¹

He has not named Palackal's mother; but he specifically says that she is from the parish of Kalloorkad from Puthenpurackal family in the street south of the church. He clearly understood the struggles of this single parent. Her virtue is found in her enduring spirit and her ability to persevere despite the almost insurmountable odds she had faced. Her troubles were more because her husband died suddenly in the epidemic that had spread in the area. She became the breadwinner and nurturer. To add to her woes, the orthodox society in which she lived had its share of traditions and attitudes, which compounded her burden of living as a widow. She, however, found the courage to love herself and then offered that gift to her children and other family members; she picked up the threads of her life and began to live as happy as possible. It is for this reason that Chavara praised her as a woman of virtue. In a sympathetic tone, Chavara wrote that she did not live to see her son as a priest, because she died a few days before the priestly ordination of her son.²

In spite of the financial stress and strain and other troubles in his house, Chavara mentioned in different places that his *guru* had food prepared from his house.³ He also pointed out the inabilities of the male members of the family, especially his elder brother, who was an incapable person, and could not look after the family. His elder sister was separated from her husband who was a characterless

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 59.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 65.

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 59, 65, 66.

person.¹ In a report sent to Rome by Monsignor Baccinelli on 20 February 1867, while answering the question regarding separated couples among the Saint Thomas Christians, the bishop clearly said that the separation became necessary because of the cruelty of husbands.² It is in this same line that Chavara also spoke about the husband of Palackal's sister. While picturing the struggles of the family mainly because of the incapability or the cruelty of the male members, he portrayed two brave women, Palackal's mother and her sister; both were devout Christians and they underwent sufferings in faith vision as ideal disciples of Jesus.

7.2. Sister Anna's Aunt

Another example is the aunt of Sister Anna Vakayil, one of the first members of the Koonammavu Convent (Anna's paternal uncle Thomman's wife). Chavara lavished his appreciation for this woman by recording that "his wife who was very devout, took interest in the work."³ In the context of the preparation for a temporary residence for sisters, Anna's uncles were non-cooperative. Not only because of the financial stress of the family but they were not interested in, and even ridiculed those who cared to make this project a success. At last, her uncle Thomman and

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 65.

²APF, *Scri. Rif.nei Congressi Indie Orientali (1865-1867)*, vol. 19, ff. 1130-1152. *Relazione del Vicariato di Verapuzha Redatta li 20 Febbraio 1867*; see also ACO, *Scri. Rif.nei Congressi Malabaressi (1862-1877)*, *Report*, 20 February 1867, in response to Q. no. 38. See also Paul Pallath, trans., *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly and the Saint Thomas Christians in 1867 Kuriakose Elias Chavara Unworthy of Episcopate?* Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2018, Q. No. 88, 80.

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 125.

his wife supported the cause. The reason Chavara gave for their support was that his wife was a devout lady. He understood the strength of this woman, the value of her supreme maternal sacrifice and her selfless dedication for the welfare of the children and of the family. In his view, the housewife or mother keeps up the religious culture of the family. It is their sense of commitment in Christian suffering and renunciation that enables them to stand for a noble cause. Ultimately, feminine genius is centred on the redemptive act of Jesus Christ. Alice von Hildebrand remarked that when piety dies out in women, society is threatened in its very fabric, for a woman's relationship with the sacred keeps the Church and society on an even keel. When this link is severed, both are threatened by total moral chaos.¹

8. Widows Honoured

As explained earlier, Chavara has used some 'stories of widows' to depict the widows as prayerful and committed persons. His concern for that category of women, namely, widows is remarkable. We appreciate the greatness of his decision to admit widows into the convent when we understand the situation of widows in the nineteenth century Kerala society. Double standards prevailed in society with regard to men and women who are widowed. While there were no restrictions for men there seemed to be a lot of restrictions placed on women. When a woman became a widow, she faced several problems. Widows had to face instances of discrimination and isolation in the society. There were many ways of imposing psychological *sati* on widows such as restricting their freedom to dress the way they wanted to, the ornaments they were permitted to

¹Alice von Hildebrand, *First Things*, 37.

use, the social occasions they were not allowed to attend and so on – a kind of reminder in general, that they have ‘died’ with their husbands. Society mercilessly added to the woes of a widow whose life was already in deep sorrow. Since widows have nobody to support them, they encounter many financial problems. A widow was a typical case of misfortune, and her costume was a sign of double mourning, barring a new marriage, she has lost the hope of fruitfulness; ultimately, she is made to be even defenceless.¹ Having a deep compassion for, and acceptance of genuine concern for their unfortunate condition, Chavara stood up as a strong advocate of the oppressed or abused widows. Chavara’s attitude and approach towards widows foreshadowed the words of Pope John Paul II, who held the widows up as an example of faith and trust in God. He added by saying that she lives more by faith, who through sorrow has won access to a more serene and supernatural world.²

8.1. Eliswa Vakayil

From a letter Chavara wrote to Father Kuriakose Porukara we get a glimpse of the life situation and the economic condition of widow Eliswa and her daughter Anna, the first members of Koonammavu Convent, before they joined the convent: “This poor old woman who is now the superior along with her daughter, had all along led a strenuous and hard life, making coir ropes and mats, pounding paddy, washing the clothes herself, eating very frugal food such as bran and rice-washed water...³ A unique thing regarding the establishment of the first religious institute for women in

¹Pinto, *Indian Widow from Victim to Victor*, 95.

²John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 15.

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, V: 3 (2020).

Kerala was that among the first four members two were widows and Chavara had recognized the value of consecrated widowhood. He had words of high appreciation of the two widows: the first one Elishwa Vakayil, though materially poor, was spiritually very rich. He recorded her words expressing her inclination to lead a consecrated life which echoes her firm determination and strong desire.¹

8.2. Clara Puthenangady

Elishwa Puthenangady (her name was changed to Clara in the convent), from Vaikom, was the fourth member of the Koonammavu Convent. Chavara knew her parents, her family situation and her innermost desire for committed life. She was leading a very devout life in her widowhood. He also knew that the moment he sent her a small note, she would reach Koonammavu to join the convent. She responded exactly as had Chavara expected. She was a brave woman to travel the long distance, crossing her own territory and carrying all the things needed for her life in the convent.² This instance of a woman leaving her home and hometown and traveling by herself a long distance to an unknown or unfamiliar place with a burning love for Jesus, in order to lead consecrated life, was something new in the nineteenth century Kerala church. This was what Elishwa Puthenangady, a widow from Vaikom, did on 9 February 1866, in response to a written note from Chavara.

8.3. A Konkani Widow

Chavara has written elaborately about the story of the struggles of a Konkani widow at Mala, to escape from the

¹CKC, vol. 1: 3.

²CKC, vol. 1: 8-9.

miseries of widowhood. The Chronicles of both Mannanam¹ and Koonammavu Convent² give a detailed description of the manner in which she accepted Christian faith, especially due to the protection of Mother Mary. When she came to know about Mother Mary and Christian faith, she was attracted to it. In spite of severe objections from her family members, she joined the Koonammavu Convent. Chavara's interest was to give her a new life with human dignity, for in the socio-juridical system of the time, widows were totally defenceless and were meted out with inhuman treatment. Otherwise, the custom of that community was that the widow had to shave her head or she had to go and stay in the streets of Kochi and engage in prostitution.

8.4. Elizabeth Clerk

In the Chronicles of Mannanam³ and Koonammavu Convent,⁴ we get another interesting description about an elderly woman, a widow from Bombay, popularly known as Elizabeth Clerk. Both documents record her arrival in Koonammavu, and the things that she brought for the church and the monastery. Chavara took the trouble to paint the earnest desire of this woman to lead a devout life in her old age. She offered all her wealth and property for religious purposes, especially for the growth of the Christian community.

In a report by Monsignor Baccinelli sent to Rome on 20 February 1867, to the question, "with what frequency do the people approach the sacraments, and who are accustomed

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 146-149.

²*CKC*, vol. 1, 112-115.

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 146.

⁴*CKC*, vol. 1, 115-117.

to be the first," he openly replied: "In women generally there is more firm and stable devotion, and they attend the sacraments more than men, who are more prone to instability, and to note a little hypocrisy."¹ It is a well-known fact that among families and in the church, women were more faithful and regular in religious practices and spirituality, a fact that Chavara also admired very much.

It is argued that all women characters in Chavara's writings broke some kind of boundary, whether social, educational, or interpretative, due to which they have been included in his meditations, poems, etc. The women's boundary-breaking activities were diverse: Anastasia was brave in her faith and boldness; Galilean women disciples of Jesus were courageous and committed to Jesus; Mary Magdalene was a passionate lover, and so on. All of them were pioneers, whether by virtue of going into male-dominated social arenas and following a rabbi where no woman had gone before, or by virtue of their generous contributions to his project, or both.

9. Church as Mother

The Church is considered primarily to be a feminine entity that grants high value to women. Chavara loved the Church as he did his mother, and acknowledged the universal motherhood of the Church, which has to be exercised by her children as "giving life," that is, as maternal generosity, which can be partaken by all. Similarly, we should perceive the Church in a similar manner - as one that is generous and all-giving. But, Chavara lamented that the Malabar Church was not fruitful, because she has not produced any

¹Report of Monsignor Baccinelli to Rome on 20 February 1867, Q. No. 98, page 83.

canonized saint in her nineteen centuries of life; also, the Church did not establish any convent, nor any monasteries, the presence of which, according to Chavara, would constitute signs of fruitfulness.¹

In the *Atmanutapam*, the poet pictures a scene where Mother Mary bid farewell to the Church before her departure from this earth, and affirmed: "I am a daughter of the Church on earth."² Chavara puts words in the mouth of Mary and tells that the Church will be known as the Roman Catholic Church. He lavished his praises on the Mother Church. Mary continued:

The fullness of time shall see this
 Hailed the 'Roman Catholic Church'
 You, forsooth my Mother, my haven
 My glory and prize, by you I'll reach
 You, their solace in joy and pain
 Your chief my Head shall be
 All my wealth shall your Treasure
 Be - this for certain we shall see.³

10. Two Political Leaders

During Chavara's childhood days, the Indian State of Travancore was ruled by two Maharanis. In the list of women, who inspired Chavara, we can include these two political leaders, namely, Maharani Gowri Lakshmi Bayi who reigned Travancore from 1810-1813 and her sister Maharani Gowri Parvati Bayi who became Regent Maharani (1815-1829) on behalf of her nephew, the heir, Maharajah Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma. At that point in history,

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 172 (2000).

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 399.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 404-412.

he might have learned from these two women who were respected. Their feminine genius stood forth in the fact that both of them had introduced certain social reforms in favour of the downtrodden, especially slaves and women. In the words of V. Nagam Aiya, the author of the Travancore State Manual,

Her Highness was an enlightened and thoughtful ruler who illumined her reign by humane acts of good government... [S]he used to refer with pride and satisfaction to her various acts of administration for the amelioration of her people... [F]or many acts of redress of public wrongs had been either carried out or inaugurated during her reign. This was no small achievement for a Travancore queen, when we remember that in the early years of the reign of Queen Victoria of England, the condition of women in England was far worse than in Travancore.¹

11. Faith-Building Role of Women in the Church

In the traditional patriarchal set up in Kerala, the social status of women denied them many civil, cultural, and social rights and opportunities. Women lived in captivity within their own families in which they were denied any active role. She remained a mere shadow under her father/husband/sons/grandsons. Women were considered *abala* (frail or feeble). But, we never get to see this kind of a fragile picture of women characters in Chavara's writings or even in his own life-experiences. He believed that the innate power of the feminine genius would come into focus only when the vocation of women is comprehended in its integral nature. In his writings and teachings, Chavara

¹Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, vol. 1, 402.

presented women who lived their vocation and mission bravely.

Chavara painted his own mother as one who realized her vocation to motherhood; she was self-directed, self-confident, and capable of taking decisions for herself and her family. He was full of appreciation and admiration for his mother and for her commendable work in bringing up her children and in guarding them with genuine values of the family; he was also grateful to her for the continuous encouragement and accompaniment she offered in his vocational discernment. Her words and gestures of encouragement echoed the voice of Jesus who called him to serve in the holy priesthood as a good and faithful servant. In fact, she could be singled out for the greatest influence on his life.

Chavara's reflections on parenting experiences are very unique. He deliberately made room for the loving openness of women characters in his writings. He developed a strong love for Mother Mary and other women who had been close to Christ during his life, death, and resurrection. They spiritually guided him in all stages of his life, reassuring his thirst for the divine. He acknowledged their ever-supporting presence on some important occasions such as his hour of meditation, receiving Holy Communion, and other such moments.

He allowed himself to be influenced by many mother saints. He freely accepted the contributions of women in completing his projects, and recorded those instances in detail even with their names. He allowed them to co-operate with his projects and made them his collaborators. He was aware of what constitutes women's essential richness, and their own feminine genius. While he maintained that men and women are equally valuable, he also believed that they are created to be different with a separate male and female

essence. He valued the innate wisdom of women; he cherished their spirit of self-sacrifice; he loved their spiritual attainment. The portrait of women in his writings weaved together a beautifully coherent whole that shed considerable light on what he considered to be the gift of femininity and authentic feminine nature.

When Chavara presented these mother saints, he was in touch with the sources of our faith which indicate that we must emulate in our time what Jesus of Nazareth and the early church seem to have done, namely, allowing women to enjoy the 'discipleship of equals'. By projecting the Galilean women disciples of Jesus at the foot of the cross, their continuous presence with the group of disciples in the early church, Chavara invites today's Church to become conscious that when it comes to faith, it is regularly women, and not men, who lead the way. Chavara had visualized women's faith-building role in the Church and the possibility of women assuming prominent roles as leaders in the arena of faith formation and proclamation. Those women whom Chavara had presented in his writings have been endowed with openness, softness, courage, intuition, and exercising power that was needed to have the leadership in the order of faith. God made women 'receptive', and that is what gives them their primacy in the Kingdom.

Chapter 3

MEANS FOR FOSTERING FEMININE GENIUS

Instances of fostering feminine genius are many in Chavara's life and activities throughout his life. This chapter will focus primarily on how his attention was focused on the important and urgent questions regarding the dignity, the role, and the rights of women and how far he succeeded in achieving equality, development, and peace in Kerala. In this connection, we shall discuss the steps he took to encourage women to develop their skills and to foster feminine genius. Of course, he did it mostly through the religious community of Koonammavu with an intention to extend it to women in other places. What he intended was a root and branch reform of the nineteenth century Kerala Church, which he achieved through a group of consecrated women, and their dedicated service towards empowering womanhood. We shall, therefore, undertake a short analysis and reflection on matters concerning the foundation of the first religious institute for women in Kerala, and how the status of women was transformed through the presence and activities of this community.

1. Religious Institute for Women

Conceiving and instituting a religious congregation for women, that too without any precursors, was the climax of Chavara's contribution in fostering feminine genius. It was Chavara, who opened the portals of consecrated life for women in Kerala, with the support and hard work of Father Leopold Beccaro OCD, an Italian missionary, through which

he created a respectable space for women in the Kerala society.

The rise of female monasticism led to the subsequent development of the whole new reality of virginity and, in this case, as a permanent state of life, in parallel with the male virginity to which the monks were vowed. The consideration of virginity, however, involved the interplay of many elements of a higher level of spirituality, on the one hand, and cultural and social conditioning, on the other. The nineteenth century was an important watershed in the history of these traditional models of women's leadership, derived from personal charism and holiness, and often expressed in monastic form. Religious orders gave an institutional space to women's spiritual gifts as seekers of sanctity, mystics and teachers of holiness. Consecrated virginity, however, acquired a spiritual value and, in reference to Mary, mother of Jesus Christ as the epitome of virginity itself, had a great influence in this regard. As both spouse and mother, Mary became the model of woman par excellence, at least until Paul VI made it clear in *Marialis Cultus* (1974) that Mary "has always been proposed to the faithful by the Church as an example to be imitated, not precisely in the type of life she led, and much less for the socio-cultural background in which she lived, but for the way in which, in her own particular life, she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God."¹ She is, therefore, the model for all believers, and not only for women. Obviously, this is a question that deserves much more detailed examination, which will be undertaken in the next chapter.

There are two texts in the *Chronicles of Mannanam Monastery (CMM)*, the first of which speaks of Chavara's

¹Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* (1974), 35.

yearning and prayers for the establishment of a convent for women and, the second, expressing his joy coupled with a sense of fulfilment, when the convent was finally established in Koonammavu and the sisters started living there. Both texts amply testify to the intensity of Chavara's desire to have a religious institute for women. He wrote the first while the preparation for the bamboo-mat convent was in progress at Koonammavu: "For years¹ I have been praying for the establishment of a convent, but for so long it was not possible. Behold! Now it seems that 'God has willed' to bring about the establishment of a convent."² When some immediate and concrete steps had been taken in founding the convent, such as obtaining the permission of the Bishop, discerning the vocation of the candidates, and fixing the site of the convent, he noted down in the Chronicle of Mannanam that God had willed him to accomplish the matter of a convent for nuns for which he had prayed for a long time.

The *CMM* introduced the story of the foundation of the convent in the above quoted words of Chavara. Then, in the following five pages, he gave a detailed description of how the event took place, connecting it with an earlier attempt at Puthenpally. In a very modest way, he stated how God came down to answer his prayers and to fulfil his earnest desire: It appears that God has willed to accomplish now, the matter of a convent for nuns, for which he had prayed for a long time. These words also echo his earlier unsuccessful attempts. As a humble instrument in the hands of God, Chavara acknowledged that the foundation of the

¹The expression 'long years' (ഏറിയ കാലം) is noted in both the *CMM* and the *CKC* while explaining the origin of the institute.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 126.

convent was the work of God. The Lord made the seemingly impossible and difficult endeavour possible at Koonammavu. He did not only desire, but had also persistently pleaded before God for the cause. In the *Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent (CKC)*, he also spoke about the long years of waiting for the establishment of the convent for women and, in fact, the description began with the phrase “from a long time.” He stated: “In this land of Malayalam, where the true Christian religion was in practice for many years, there had not existed monasteries and convents. The people had heard of men and women who practised religious virtues, but there were no living examples of religious virginity.”¹ His craving for a convent was also evident in phrases like “there were no existing monasteries or convents,” “even though there were many [women] who desired to lead a chaste life,” and “remained in this plight for a long time.” These words speak of his aching heart that women were not treated equally in the Church. The cries of women were not heard; their needs were neither understood nor met. In 1859-1861, at Puthenpally, a two-storied building was ready for the convent. Bishop Bernardine wrote to Rome on 29 June 1860 that the convent building at Puthenpally was intended to accommodate 33 members, who longed to see this foundation.² This dream was not fulfilled. With a sad note Chavara wrote the reason for changing this plan: “കന്യാസ്ത്രീകളെക്കാൾ പട്ടക്കാർക്കാവശ്യം” (priests are more needed than nuns).³

¹See *CKC*, vol. 1: 1, “ഏറിയനാൾ മുൻപിനാലെ.”

²AG OCD, Bernardine Baccinelli, *Letter to the Superiors of Men and Women OCD in Rome*, 29 June 1860, 3-4.

³*CWC*, vol. 1 *Chronicles*, 124.

Here also women's needs did not get priority, but were pushed back. Chavara wrote in *CKC*: "incurring great expenses a 13 feet high compound wall was being constructed."¹ In *CKC*, Chavara noted the reason for changing the plan: "... on account of the turmoil created by the arrival of Roccas, the construction of the convent was stopped. By God's grace the strife ceased and on seeing that many souls were being lost for want of good priests, a decision was taken to change the convent into a seminary. Accordingly, it was changed into a study house (scholasticate)."² Chavara describes his (as well as of the women) feeling of disappointment in these words: "With this we lost all hope that we had and again were plunged into the same sad state of helplessness. We were thus pulling on our life..."³

Some contemporary documents testify to the urgency in Chavara's steps to construct a new building for the sisters. We read in the book of *Alochana* that, in those days, for the sisters who were put to stay in *panambumadham* with much difficulty during the previous Lenten season, both the Delegate and Chavara aspired in their good will to construct a convent as in Europe.⁴ The reason for this urgency and earnestness was that "since the precious flower of chastity is planted in the bamboo mat [house], our Delegate Father Leopold and *Priorachan* vigilantly and enthusiastically

¹*CKC*, vol. 1: 1.

²*CKC*, vol. 1: 2; Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 124.

³*CKC*, vol. 1: 2. He might have sensed a dirty church politics at work in changing this decision. Because, though the decision was taken regarding the seminary in 1861, the seminary was opened only on 15 August 1866. The building was ready, students were ready, but, then the question arises 'why was it delayed'?

⁴*Alochana*, 139.

worked to finish the construction of that convent.”¹ Chavara wrote in *Mannanam Chronicle* the rationale for the urgency in completing a proper convent building: “our sisters living in bamboo mat [convent] suffer from various kinds of illness.”² He also mentioned the practical necessity: “now, their staying (in *Panambumadham*) is in great difficulty; that is, since it [the roof] was made by undried bamboo and *panambu* [bamboo mat] and coconut logs without seasoning it in water, [it is] attacked by termites and eaten by moths...”³ Chavara, hence, took the initiative for constructing a new convent building; the added reason was that nobody else took interest in the matter. While the bishop, for example, was interested “in building a very well furnished monastery for the Latin men religious at Manjummel,”⁴ the cause of convent was again bypassed.

Beccaro, in his *Short Biography of Chavara*, written in 1871, also referred to the earnest desire of Chavara to found a convent for women: “He longed to establish for the girls of Malayalam [Kerala], an abode of virtues and a convent for learning scriptural matters and growing up as good Christian children...”⁵ As Saint Paul has stated, “It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). The founders of religious Congregations were endowed with the two fundamental gifts, namely, earnest desire and incessant prayer for fulfilling the plan of God. One could say that these two elements were the authentic traits, which should

¹*Alochana*, 130.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 132.

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 130.

⁴*Alochana*, 131.

⁵Beccaro, *A Short Biography*, 12.

have consumed the heart of a genuine founder. In this sense, Chavara received the inspiration to found the convent, and fulfilled the primary norm to be the founder of the first religious institute for women in Kerala.¹

The second text is in the form of a prayer: "God, Almighty! I believe that it is to make me more indebted to You that You gave me a longer life so that I could live to see this event, too; let Your name be glorified forever and ever. Amen."² Chavara recorded this prayer at the end of his description of the concluding ceremony of the blessing of the new building for the convent on 27 March 1867. These words echo the ecstatic outpouring of the holy man named Simeon in the Jerusalem Temple as he took the Baby Jesus into his hands and gave thanks to God: "Now, Master, You can let Your servant go in peace, just as You have promised; because my eyes have seen the salvation which You have prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of Your people Israel" (Lk 2:29-32). Chavara firmly believed that God increased his span of life in order that he lived to see his dream come true - the blessed event of the foundation of the convent. The foundation of a convent for women was the big dream of his life. He wrote to his grandnephew Father Joseph Chavara:

¹According to J. M. Lozano, "The founder is the one who discovers that it is God's will that he or she should found this new religious family in the Church" (*Foundresses, Founders, and Their Religious Families*, 7). Antonio Romano puts in more clear words: "The feeling which the founder has that he or she, and no other, has been called by God to give life to a new religious family, or - more broadly - to a new form of evangelical life" (*The Charism of the Founders: The Person and Charism of Founders in Contemporary Theological Reflection*, 1994, 42).

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 139.

“The Almighty God granted to me a longer period than my predecessors. It is only now that I realize fully that a longer life was granted to me by the mercy of God not so much for me, as for the benefit of others.”¹ He looked at the well-furnished convent as a saving gift from the Lord of salvation for the benefit of many people. Reflecting on the providential hand in the fulfilment of his cherished dream, Chavara raised his heart to God in loving gratitude and praise. In this autobiographical text, Chavara narrates his experience of his original inspiration. He felt that it was a call personally addressed to him, and this was the mission that the Providence had entrusted to him. Chavara looked at the foundation of the convent as the realization and fulfilment of his cherished dream, which accomplished the purpose of his life. Lozano observes that, generally, when founders describe the work of God in their life, they bring to light the act of foundation as a gift that God has put into their work.² Chavara’s profound joy emerged from his deep conviction that God in his great mercy took him as an instrument in his divine hands to found a convent for which he was yearning for long. This can be seen as another way of acknowledging his charism of being the founder of the convent.

2. Community with a Mission

There was a well-defined purpose of this religious institute, which, recorded in Chavara’s words, read: “Besides striving for their spiritual realization, they [sisters] have to teach

¹Letter of Chavara to his grandnephew, Father Joseph Chavara on 21 July 1868 in *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, V: 16 (2020).

²Lozano, “Fondatore” *Dizionario Teologico della Vita Consacrata*, 763.

other girls to pray and train them in certain handicrafts.”¹ He proposed a community of dedicated women with the life style of meditation, reading, solitude, contemplation, and a vocational training program for girls and women. He defined, planned, and demarcated such areas of work for women when there was a widespread thinking that girls must be trained to do work only connected with the home and the upbringing of children.

The deepest feminine yearning is to achieve a loving union. Such a yearning is an essential aspect of the eternal destiny of woman. It is not simply a human longing but is specifically feminine and is opposed to the specifically masculine nature.² Chavara made the sisters understand that to be a spouse of Christ is the most sublime vocation, and whoever sees this way open before them will yearn for no other way. It is a call to belong to God fully in love’s free surrender and to serve him. The first members of Koonammavu Convent understood it in this way. For Thresia, the third member, when the attraction to religious life was awakened in her, it was as if the Lord were courting her. She expressed her desire in the following words:

Elishwa had a sister called Thresia. When she was sixteen years old, she was asked to get married. But she refused saying, she would not accept any one except Jesus as her spouse. She did not want an earthly marriage and was living unmarried. Therefore, it was decided that she also be admitted to the convent.³

¹CKC, vol. 1, 5.

²Stein, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, vol. 2: *Essays on Woman*, eds. Gelber and Leuven, 84.

³CKC, vol. 1, 7.

The 'Rite of Religious Vestition', which Chavara had prepared for the sisters of Koonammavu convent, began with the prayer, "O! Spouse of Christ, come..." After this prayer, "Chavara gave an exhortation on the greatness of the status of the spouse of Christ and on the responsibilities of the vowed life they are going to take."¹ He made them understand that the life of consecrated chastity is an anticipation of the heavenly marriage feast. Nevertheless, this is but a prospect of the eternal feast. The bridal happiness and fidelity of the soul consecrated to God must stand firm and unshaken in the test of open and hidden battles and in the everyday flow of religious life. The spouse whom she chooses is the Lamb that was slain on the cross. If she is to enter into heavenly glory with him, she must allow herself to be fastened to his cross. The three vows are the nails. Then, being crucified itself becomes for her, the marriage feast.

In the *Atmanutapam*, Jesus' journey to Calvary carrying the cross is presented as a journey to his wedding banquet.² Calvary is the decorated Rostrum.³ The crucifixion itself is presented as a royal wedding. The priority here is for them to focus their undivided devotion upon the Lord. A contemplative relationship with God is the beginning, and this relationship nourishes the spousal love. They prioritise contemplation and prayer as the main activities in their daily schedules. They hesitate to participate in meetings, and prefer the silent openness to the movement of the Spirit. Excessive attractions and attachment to persons, things or

¹CKC, vol. 1, 67.

²Chavara, CWC, vol. 2: *Atmanutapam*, Cantos 8: 73-84.

³The term used is *Manappandal* which means decorated podium of *pandal* for wedding feast.

places are bound to distract the sisters from being attached to God intimately. Therefore, in order to give priority to being consciously in God's presence and to converse with him incessantly and unceasingly, they were instructed by Chavara in practical terms. The art they should excel in was the art of loving Jesus. They were asked to learn only one thing: the art of loving Jesus. In the following line he explained how to learn this art by staying constantly in his presence, walking along with him, and conversing with him continuously. Jesus himself asked them to remain constantly in him, "abide in me as I abide in him" (Jn 15:4). It is his request, his desire that we stay with him. Chavara continued: "He loves me. I should love him. This continuous abiding in him is the essence of learning the art of loving Jesus."

This was the experience and teaching of the Carmelite saints such as Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross, Saint Little Flower, Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity, and so on. Leopold Beccaro, in his 'Testament,' which he gave to the first members of the Koonammavu Convent on 27 March 1867, instructed the sisters saying,

As Saint Teresa teaches, always remain in the presence of God, which means love Jesus seeing him present within you. Pray to him. This practice, which is difficult at the beginning, will become sweet, effective, enjoyable and useful.¹

Saint Chavara wrote to the sisters of Koonammavu Convent in 1870: "Learn the art of loving Jesus, walk along with him always, sit close to him, converse with him..."² The *Chronicle*

¹Jossy, ed., *Leopold Missionariyude Kathukal* (Letters of Father Leopold), V: 1 (paragraph 10).

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VIII: 7 (2020).

records the following instruction given by Chavara to teach the sisters to experience intimacy with God, while they were involved themselves in their day-to-day activities:

In all that you do, when you open or shut the door when you are in the room or at work, when you walk, when you spit, when you sweep with a broom or when you pray your canonical prayers...¹

The path of sanctity for a Carmelite nun was a simple one, the sanctity of daily life. He communicated with the sisters that the key to growth is living each day in the fear and knowledge of the Lord, beholding his majesty, staying in love. It is God's presence that transforms us. He lifts us from one degree of glory to the next, as we look into the face of Christ (2 Cor 3:17-18).

Whenever you feel an inordinate love or desire for a thing, or take excessive delight in it, this beloved Lord of yours turns to you and complains: "Look at me! Does this silly thing give you more delight than I? Is it not suffering that it after all brings? Why do you then run after it? I shall make you really happy. Is it not enough for you?" He is thus, full of concern and is constantly by your side. He never leaves you, even for a moment.

His sole desire is to make you happy. All that He wants of you in return is that you must love Him. He is ever seeking to meet all your needs! In fact, there is not anything left that He has not already given you. He has given Himself to you. What else is there? The heaven and earth, and all things in them are His creation. Are they of more value for you than He? ... Oh! My Lord, do not leave us until we become one with you!²

¹CKC, vol. 1, 65.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 6 (2020).

In another letter, he taught them the ways in which they could unite with him. He told them how meditative reading would lead them to intimate union with the Lord.¹ He reminded them of the dignity and greatness of their religious call, consecration and the spousal relationship with Jesus Christ. He instructed them:

Is there anyone in the world more fortunate than you? Do you know how many there are in the world, who are richer than you in the temporal goods, but who spend their whole lives in tears and in affliction? ... Consider how sweet is the voice of your loving spouse – he is vigilantly watching in your hearts jealously, lest you love anyone more than Him, lovingly looking to all your needs.²

In almost all his letters, we see instructions to sisters to grow in spousal love. According to him, it is the spousal love that makes their consecration meaningful and relevant. Sending them his reflections on ‘the Status of Consecrated Virgins’, he stated:

O! Consecrated virgin! O, blessed virgin! Your spouse is the richest on this earth and heaven. He chose you from among other girls and accepted you as his bride. Don’t you know that he has given you the first fruits of His love for you? Therefore, you should have a great love for him. Saint Bernard says: “There is no relationship between you and the world. O! Bride of Christ, renounce yourself and the world. You are not yours, not of this world but of the Lord’s. You are His to whom you offered yourself totally and completely.”³

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 8 (2020).

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 7 (2020).

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 12 (2020).

In addition, being aware of the poor educational standard of these sisters, he was determined to make them proficient in languages as well as in the art of writing.

3. Writing as Self-Expression

In those days, girls were not instructed in the art of writing. Even though girls were allowed to attend the village school, called 'kalari', they were not taught how to write. It was reserved only for those boys who decided to take up writing as their occupation, or intended to become secretaries in offices. Here, we see the vision and courage of Chavara in deciding to train the first members of the Koonammavu Convent in the art of writing, through which they could express themselves. He realized ever more, how important it was to write down their experiences as women. He made them aware that those who can articulate the movements of one's inner life, who can give names to one's varied experiences, need no longer be a victim of herself, but is able slowly and consistently to remove the obstacles that prevent the Spirit from entering.

On the first day of the blessing of the Koonammavu Convent, Chavara recorded his satisfaction in seeing that Anna and Theresa were fast in learning things shown to them: "The two young Sisters Anna and Theresa took to writing on paper, playing musical instruments and in handicrafts."¹

We have to consider these three forms of art separately, namely, 1) writing on paper, 2) playing musical instruments, and 3) handicrafts or vocational training.

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 129.

Writing on Paper

In the nineteenth century Kerala, not only women, but even priests were unskilled in the art of writing. We have some historical evidence in this regard in the documents of the Kerala church, and in books on the said period. On 20 February 1867, Monsignor Bernardine Baccinelli, vicar apostolic of Varapuzha, submitted an official report to the Propaganda Fide based on the questionnaire given from Rome. Its question number 38 and the answer given to it reveal the nature of writing material of the time and lack of writing skills among the priests of the Malabar church.¹ Question number 38 reads:

Whether they [priests] accurately use distinct books (registers), in which are described the details of the baptized, of those united in marriage, and of the deceased...

Answer to this question was given as follows:

To make them orderly, keeping the parochial registers is something that no one has ever succeeded in accomplishing, not even the bishops, or the vicars apostolic, though they have tried everything possible. I have mentioned registers, and not books, because, as it is known, here, leaves were used, and not paper, on which there are not many who know (how) to write, and also, because it costs too much. However, on the leaves of palm admirably they write with a stylus, but great care is needed to preserve it, and defend it from termites. By its very nature this nation is very lazy and negligent, and

¹ APF, *Scritture nei Congressi Indici Orientali* (1865-1867), vol. 19, ff.1130-1152. *Relazione del Vicariato di Verapuzha Redatta li 20 Febbraio 1867*; see also ACO, *Scritture nei Congressi Malabaresi* (1862-1877), *Report*, 20 February 1867, in response to Q. No. 38.

the most loving idleness, but the very hot and moist weather excuses them.¹

This was the situation of the priests of the Catholic Church in 1867 with regard to the habit of and the ability to write or to keep records. Even priests were not trained on how to write. Writing in papers had not been introduced in Kerala, the reasons for which have been given by the bishop, namely, that paper was costly, and in the education system of the day, writing on paper had not become common. P. Bhaskaranunni's description of the system of education in the nineteenth century makes this point clear that in those days learning to write was not part of *kalari* education.²

¹ APF, *Scri. Rif.nei Congressi Indie Orientali* (1865-1867), vol. 19, ff.1130-1152. *Relazione del Vicariato di Verapuzha Redatta li 20 Febbraio 1867*; ACO, *Scri. Rif.nei Congressi Malabaresi* (1862-1877), ff. 150-172.

² പി. ഭാസ്കരനുണ്ണി, *പത്തൊമ്പതാം നൂറ്റാണ്ടിലെ കേരളം*, തൃശ്ശൂർ: കേരളസാഹിത്യ അക്കാദമി, 2012, പുറം, 1047. Importance was given to learning how to read, mainly *Puranas*, *Ithihasas*, and some other accounts. Reading and writing were understood as two different entities. Even those who were considered literate and educated did not know how to write; they were even ignorant of writing their own names, the author notes. This was the situation even in the beginning of the twentieth century. E. M. S. Nampoodiripad, who was the then Chief Minister of Kerala, spoke from his own experience: "Even though I had learned the Malayalam and Devanagari scripts, I was not trained to write those characters. When one is introduced to *Kalari*, the initiation ceremony was to make the child write on the rice or sand; the practice of writing was stopped with that. After learning the alphabets, we start reading of the books. This was the schooling I received." ഭാസ്കരനുണ്ണി, *പത്തൊമ്പതാം നൂറ്റാണ്ടിലെ കേരളം*, പുറം, 1047.

Palm Leaves and Stylus

Writing was taken up by only those people who had specialized in the skill. Those who wanted to take up writing as an occupation had to learn the art of writing under some masters called *Aasan*, especially to write on the palm leaves using stylus. In the first letter Leopold Beccaro OCD wrote to Rome after his arrival in Malabar in 1859, he explained the method of learning in the village schools.

They [students] all take their places sitting on the floor with their legs crossed. According to their custom, the floor serves them as chair, material to write, dining table, etc., and is used by them for everything that was necessary to the school. They draw on the sand syllables and words with the tip of the finger of their right hand. To write other words they erase the writings on the sand with their hand. Their books are written on palm leaves tied together and attached on some ropes hanging from the top of the roof of the school. They learn to read; not much to write.¹

From the above description and other sources we come to know that children learn to write on the sand with their fingers. It was in this context the initiative of Chavara to give training to the sisters to write on paper becomes revolutionary. First of all, writing was not meant for girls or women. Secondly, paper was not easily available. Moreover, they were not trained to write on paper using ink pen or a feather. Perhaps, they might have received some training in writing on palm leaves using stylus. It may be because of that that Chavara specified that they started writing on

¹Jossy, ed., *Leopold Missionariyude Kathukal* (Letters of Father Leopold), II: 1, Letter of Leopold Beccaro to his superiors in Rome in 1864 (Place and date are not given).

paper. Their lack of training or familiarity in writing is evident in the pages of the chronicles of Koonammavu Convent.¹ Even though Chavara gave them training, when the sisters started writing in the notebook, some pages were torn because of the additional force they otherwise used to employ in writing with stylus on palm leaves, whereas writing with pen was new to them which did not need exerting any force.

4. Inclusion of Women's Contributions

For long, what women have done and experienced has been left unrecorded, neglected, and ignored. Thus, history tells the story of humankind only from the male point of view. Women have been excluded from the historical record and have been kept away from recording their past though they have made history.² Understanding the value and importance of having a sense of history and the experience of the foundation period, Chavara instructed the Superior of Koonammavu Convent: "Persuade Sister Anna to write down all matters. If you write regularly, even the silly facts, without a tint of lethargy, after some time you yourself will feel so happy."³

Chavara's insistence on recording in detail all the events related to the convent can be considered his appreciation of women's role in society, and his vision that it would be appropriate to rewrite history in an inclusive manner than

¹In pages 17-19 of the *Chronicle*, the writing ink was spread and the paper was torn because of the lack of familiarity of Anna in writing on paper.

²D'Souza, *Woman Icon of Liberation*, 230.

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 1 (2020), Letter of Chavara to the Superior of the Koonammavu Convent on 29 April 1867.

perpetuating a one-sided recollection of human history from the male perspective. It was one way of transmitting women's contributions to posterity, and interpreting the founders' vision for the community to the generations to come. He told them to avoid writing history in a manner that gives greater attention to extraordinary and sensational events than to the daily rhythm of life. He insisted on reversing this trend.

Initiated and guided by Chavara, Sister Anna wrote the *Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent (CKC)*. There, she recorded the details of the daily events and the founders' efforts to form the Sisters in a true religious spirit and in the administration of the temporalities of the convent. Chavara made Anna aware of her potential to express herself in writing. It is impressive to read the writings of the first members of the convent. As testified in the cover page and in the margin of page three of the first book of the *CKC*, the first sixteen pages, page 200, and half of page 201 are written by Chavara himself.¹ Those passages deal with the beginning of the Koonammavu Convent as well as the record of the official matters of the institute, such as the religious investiture and profession of vows of the first members. It is clearly stated that Anna wrote the rest of the pages of the *Chronicles*. This fact is further evidenced from Chavara's letter to the Superior of the convent.² The first volume of the *Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent* written by Sister

¹In page 201, Chavara's writing concludes with the recording of the event of the profession of the first four members.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 1 (2020), Letter written by Chavara on 29 April 1867 to the Superior of Saint Teresa's Convent, Koonammavu.

Anna, who was gifted in the art of writing, stands out as one of the important feminine writings of the nineteenth century.

4.1. Chavara's Influence in the Chronicle

Chavara's influence in the *CKC* cannot be limited to those pages recorded in his hand. In the following pages, Anna had copied Chavara's letters and instructions as well. In the first book, she had copied nine letters, and in the second five letters.¹ The small notes sent by him during the days of his terminal illness, which were copied in the chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent, show that the Sisters held them in high regard, and express their reverence and love towards him. Anna concluded her writing of the first book of the chronicle of the Koonammavu Convent by copying a letter of Chavara sent to the convent, informing them of the death of the Superior General of the OCD on 8 July 1870.² Thus, from the beginning to the end of the first book of the *CKC*, Chavara's influence is evident. Besides those letters copied in the chronicle, there are also some references to Chavara's letters written to the Sisters in the *CKC*.³

It is worth noting some parallel descriptions of events in the *Chronicles of Koonammavu and Mannanam*, which surely confirm the influence of Chavara in the *CKC*. Certain events written by Chavara in the *CMM* in detail can occasionally be seen in Anna's hand in the *CKC*. What is special in such descriptions is that in those events, neither Anna nor any other member of the convent was directly

¹There are references to his letters, which are not copied in the chronicle. For example, see *CKC*, vol. 1, 79, 109.

²*CKC*, vol. 1, 192. Pages 195-197 present a long list of books and in between some pages are empty.

³See *CKC*, vol. 1, 22, 48, 79, 84, and 109.

present, but Chavara had been present. However, Anna recorded those events as an eyewitness to those events.¹ The best example can be the description of the preparation for and the episcopal ordination of Mellano.² Perhaps, Chavara dictated it to her, or gave her a copy of those portions, which he himself had written in the chronicles of Mannanam. What is noteworthy here is that Chavara's direct intervention or influence is evident throughout the first book of the Chronicle of Koonammavu Convent. Another interesting feature one observes is the same sequence of events in the same style in both the chronicles. Since Chavara was the author of both journals, the content, style, approach, and presentation of the event of foundation

¹Examples are many to this effect. See the similarity in narrating the events related to the episcopal ordination of Mellano as well as the reception given to the newly consecrated bishop at Koonammavu. Another example can be the recording of the illness, death, and burial of Monsignor Baccinelli in *CKC*, vol. 1, 101-103 = *CMM*, 1:143-144. From where did Sister Anna get the details of the number of parishioners who participated in the funeral service, the order of the procession, etc.? An extraordinary similarity can be seen in the detailed reporting of the conversion of a Konkani woman. *CKC*, vol. 1, 112-115 = *CMM*, 1:148-151. It is true with the descriptions of the arrival of Madam Clerck (*CKC*, vol. 1, 115-117 = *CMM*, 1:148) and that of Father Gerard Beccaro (*CKC*, vol. 1, 117 = *CMM*, 1:152) as well as the journey of Monsignor Mellano and Beccaro to Europe (*CKC*, vol. 1, 141-146, 148 = *CMM*, 1:153-155).

²In both the Chronicles, the words of introduction of the day of consecration, the speech given by Father Marceline OCD on the day, and many other details are amazingly similar (*CKC*, vol. 1, 105-110 = *CMM*, 1:144-148).

are found to be similar in both.¹ Indeed, Sister Anna had the ability and intelligence; she recognized that ability, appreciated it, developed and used it. That was the key to her success in producing the Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent. In that process, Chavara was a constant source of support.

4.2. The Art of Composing Poems

Whenever any important guests came to Koonammavu Monastery, Chavara brought them to the convent as well. Before they reached the convent, he would send a note instructing the sisters to prepare the hall, seating arrangements, and especially to pen a poem, and to arrange flower bouquet (“കവിതയും പൂക്കളും”). In the presence of the guest, he would tell the girls in the boarding house or the sisters to recite the poem.² He taught them Marian hymns and songs.³ He made available to them, the Marian Litany in Latin and encouraged them to sing.⁴

4.3. Artistic Talents of Girls

The artistic talents of the sisters and the girls in the boarding house in activities such as flower making, embroidery, singing, writing poems, playing the harmonium, etc., were encouraged, fostered, and exhibited. When bishops or other distinguished guests made their visits to the convent, the artistic works of the girls in the boarding house were exhibited. Rosaries made by the sisters were gifted to them.

¹CKC, vol. 1, 24-25 = CMM, 1:134; CKC, vol. 1, 63-64 = CMM, 1:139-140.

²CKC, vol. 1, 191. When Bishop Leonard visited the convent after his return from Europe “our Mother Superior offered him our poem and flower bouquet and he received them happily.”

³CKC, vol. 2, 11.

⁴Chavara, CWC, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 13 (2020).

Father Chandy Kattakayam, one of the first members of Mannanam Monastery, once visited the Koonammavu Convent in 1882, and noted down in his diary his impressions of wonder and admiration for the artistic talents developed in and the changes that had come in the sisters:

They [Sisters] are educated and got trained in many handicrafts proper to women who knew only to cook rice and clean up pots and plates. Anyone will be convinced of this if at least once they enter their convent chapel. Experts in various handicrafts were brought from faraway places to train them in embroidery and sewing. On those days in Malabar it was difficult to find at least four women who knew the art of writing on paper, not even on palm leaves. It was true about women's ability in reading and writing. But now, these sisters write neatly on paper and teach the same to other girls. There are more than 100 girls in the school who are day-scholars; they study along with the girls of the boarding house. They learn all these things. They are trained in flower making, scapular and rosary making, stitching church vestments such as Alb, Surplices, etc., preparing candles, 'host' making, and so on and so forth.¹

4.4. Sisters' Skill in Dramatics

Chavara had prepared one-act plays, which are collectively called 'Eclogues' (*Idayanadakangal* or shepherd dramas), to be acted in monasteries and seminaries, and he sent them to the Koonammavu Convent as well. He had composed a series of ten plays centred around the birth of Jesus, which were staged one after the other in monasteries. Realizing the

¹Chandy Kattakayam, *Diary* (Malayalam, MSS), Archives of Mannanam Monastery, 49-50.

great value of theatre or acting out the Christian message, he encouraged the seminarians, sisters, and those who were in different stages of formation, to stage the portrayal of the divine birth of Jesus against the backdrop of the manger, and supported by appropriately created characters. He instructed the sisters to stage these dramas at the time of recreation during Christmas season, after Christmas day till the Epiphany. It was in the Christmas season of 1867, during the first Christmas celebration of the sisters in the newly built convent, that he sent a note to the sisters on how to stage the drama on Christmas night and the following days' recreation. The sisters felt that the Baby Jesus would be happy with the crib they had prepared, and all other celebrations of the Christmas. They specifically noted that *Priorachan* had sent a special note about the recreation, and they did everything as per his instructions.¹

4.5. Playing Musical Instruments

In his diary note, on the day of the blessing of the bamboo-mat convent at Koonammavu, Chavara made a note that Sister Anna and Sister Teresa had started writing on paper; and that they are also learning how to play the harmonium.² We do not have many other documents regarding his attempts to equip them with playing musical instruments. Though we are not sure how far he was successful in these attempts, we get to know more about his big dreams for women, and how he introduced something great in the lives of women, which they could not have imagined otherwise.

¹CKC, vol. 1, 84.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 127 (2000).

5. Training Sisters in Languages for a Better Life

Regarding the discrimination against women, in 1995, Pope John Paul II wrote to the head of the Holy See's Delegation to the Fourth World Conference, that it was disheartening to note that in today's world, the simple fact of being a female rather than a male can reduce the likelihood of being born or of surviving childhood; it can mean receiving less-adequate nutrition and healthcare, and increasing the chance of remaining illiterate and having only limited access, or none at all, even to primary education.¹ Many held the view that women cannot aspire to spiritual knowledge, and that their domain was limited to earthly activities; but Chavara wanted the sisters to learn different languages, including Latin, so that they could get acquainted with the writings of great saints and doctors of the western Church. He allowed them to participate in religious discussions. He understood their need to have contact with the world of books beyond their mother tongue, Malayalam. Chavara took interest in teaching the girls and the Sisters languages such as Latin, Tamil, Syriac, etc.

Chavara was convinced that his fundamental vision, as a pastor, was focused on the proclamation of the Word of God. Real renewal of the people of God is possible only through liturgy and preaching of the Gospel. He learnt with great interest the liturgical languages, namely, Latin and Syriac. He knew various languages and took interest in learning new languages even in the evening of his life. We have today his writings published in five languages: Latin, Syriac, Malayalam, Tamil, and Italian. His readiness to encourage the sisters to learn as many languages as possible

¹John Paul II, *Letter to Mary Ann Glendon and the Holy See's Delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women* (29 August 1995).

is obvious from the fact that he made himself available to teach the sisters different languages.

5.1. Liturgical Languages

It is an acknowledged fact that one of the significant contributions of Chavara to the Malabar Church is in the field of liturgical renewal and making those texts available to people. The Church gratefully remembers him for his formulation of *Tukasa*, rituals of Forty Hours Adoration, preparation of Liturgical Calendar, and compilation of the Divine Office for the priests, etc. He earnestly desired that the sisters get the real spirit of the Eucharist and other sacraments and exhorted them for the same. Though the liturgical language of the Syrian Christians was Syriac, people were not familiar with this language much; the women of Kerala had no opportunity to learn it and, hence, they were totally alienated from the use of this language. For the use of the sisters in the convent, translating from both Latin and Syriac was necessary, and Chavara prepared para-liturgical texts and community prayers in Malayalam.

5.2. Marian Hymns in Syriac and Latin

The testimony of the first community at Koonammavu given below speaks of Chavara's sincere concern that the Sisters learn Marian hymns in Syriac and Litany in Latin so that they love and praise Mother Mary deeply. The event took place on 15 October 1870, during one of his final visits to them. They recorded their indebtedness towards him:

Then he had us sing *Slamlekh* (Hail Holy Queen). Since we did not know exactly where the pauses were, he showed us the places where we were to stop, and marked them for us. We are unable to tell you how

interested our good Father was to teach us and to have us sing this hymn. His efforts were not in vain. But, he was not fortunate enough to hear us sing this according to the regulations.¹

In addition, he also wrote and gave the sisters the Marian Litany in Latin and gave practice to them to sing the same.²

5.3. Teaching Latin Language

Chavara wanted the Sisters to learn Latin as well, which, he believed, would open their minds to the wide world of philosophical, theological, and other literary treasures of the West. Though the attempt was not fully successful, Sisters have recorded his interest and indicated that he had tried very hard to teach them Latin:

Our *Priorachan* gave us four books, printed both in Latin and in Malayalam. Their transliterations were also printed, to enable us to study Latin without the help of a teacher. One copy of the book was for the children of the boarding house and the other three were for us. *Priorachan* often came and taught us how to read and write Latin and we began to pick it up slowly.³

On seeing Chavara's interest and hard work in teaching the Sisters the Latin language, people laughed at him saying, *he has gone out of his senses*. But those who knew him closely would say that he was following the example of his master,

¹CKC, vol. 2: 11.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 13 (2020).

³CKC, vol. 1, 152. This is the entry on 1 October 1869. While Beccaro was in Europe Chavara took more interest in teaching the Sisters Latin and other languages. In his letters of this period as well as in the *CKC*, one often sees frequent references to this effect. See *CKC*, vol. 1, 152, 162, 163; Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 1, 6, 11, 13 (2020).

who went against the prevailing culture of His times. For, Jesus courageously accepted and recognized women's equality, dignity, and giftedness. His great sensitivity and respect for women are an invitation for a deep conversion for the church and society. He might have realized that the conditioning of history has been an *obstacle to the progress of women*.

5.4. South Indian Languages

One day Chavara wrote to the Sisters that there is no possibility of teaching them Latin, as he had planned earlier. Therefore, he told them to study Tamil well. He informed them that there were many spiritual books in Tamil and that they could expect many more in the future.¹ Seeing the extraordinary interest of Chavara in teaching them Latin, Syriac, and other languages and giving vocational training, the Sisters felt deeply indebted to him and recorded it for posterity. When the Kerala society in general discriminated and condemned women, Chavara restored them to their dignity and humanity. They felt that they could not give anything in return for his love except that they pray earnestly for him. The chronicler records:

My dear Sisters, what love and gratitude can we return for this? We cannot do anything. So, let us remember that it is our obligation to pray always for this Father of ours in our poor prayers.²

There are a number of instances which significantly show Chavara's exceptional concern and attention for women and his attempt to bring them to equal status in the society. Women's status was severely limited by the caste-ridden

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 6 (2020).

²*CKC*, vol. 1, 152.

Kerala society and, in this background, Chavara had shown a preferential option for women, which definitely upheld their dignity and accorded them their special role in the society. This attitude reveals his unique love for women and their welfare.

5.5. Inculcating the Reading Habit

Chavara gave great importance to reading spiritual books. In his *Chavaraul*, he instructed his parishioners about the importance of having good books in their houses and reading them: "Spiritual books and philosophical writings that promote and nurture devotion are treasures to be earned for children. Buy as many books of this sort as your means allow, and keep them in store in your house."¹ He instructed the Sisters as to what to read and how to read. According to him, readers are of two kinds: the first group cares more for knowledge and enjoyment, and the second group aims at knowledge and devotion. The latter is the sure way to acquire virtue and to persevere in the same [spiritual growth].² Since there was a shortage of books for spiritual reading in Malayalam, the Sisters were advised to learn Tamil.

In many of the letters written by Chavara to the Sisters, there are references of sending books to them. It was a joy for him to send books for the Sisters; he wanted to share with them the best that he had come across. Once Chavara found a book and sent it to them with a note, which says, "O joy of joys... By chance, I saw a book in a room. Taking it, I saw that it was on the discipleship among virgins. I am sure that God has sent it for you. I translated it into Malayalam

¹Chavara, *Chavaraul*, 1: 21.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 8 (2020).

and completed it yesterday. All must read this carefully for spiritual reading at least once.”¹ In another letter, he wrote: “In case you need any book either to study Tamil or to read, and if you specify it, I shall send it to you.”² Accordingly, a collection of such books can be seen in the convent at Koonammavu, and a majority of the books in the catalogue are Tamil books.³ Most of them are manuscripts among which one can see seven copies of *Atmanutapam*, the autobiographical poem of Chavara.⁴ It surely conveys the intention of the founder to share his own God experience with the members of the institute he founded. Who else has taken interest in encouraging and improving the reading habit or expanding the horizons of knowledge of women except Chavara, in that century? Reading, spending time in reflection and study of theology, etc., as per general perception, had not been meant for women in those days; men could have access to all these activities in their lives. Hence, Chavara motivated not only sisters to experience the pleasures of reading, but also the girls in the boarding house.

6. Apostolates for the Uplift of Women

According to the descriptions given in the Chronicles regarding the commencement of the apostolate of the first community at Koonammavu, Chavara had envisioned and arranged for various apostolates. As he planned out the

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 10 (2020).

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 1 (2020).

³*CKC*, vol. 1, 195-197.

⁴*CKC*, vol. 1, 196. Since these pages are in the handwriting of Sister Anna, who died on 25 May 1871, and it was before the printing and publication of the *Atmanutapam*, one can naturally think that Chavara took interest to make seven copies of it available to the Sisters.

details, he had the following in his caring mind: the situation of women in the Kerala church and in society, the economic scenario, his perception of their need, his response to the need, a particular lifestyle, and the image of Jesus who responded to a similar need in his time, namely, Jesus' attitude and approach towards women. The conferences and exhortations he offered to the Sisters, the devotions he practised, the spirituality he fostered, the paternal and maternal love he expressed toward the Sisters, the life lived by Chavara, and the activities undertaken under his guidance, have provided us with some insights into the vision and nature of the apostolates of the institute.

6.1. Vocational Training

The idea of women's education was not welcomed by non-Christians, who explicitly expressed their discontent against Chavara's attempts, stating that women were like cattle and there was no use of giving education to them as they would not get any employment opportunities outside their houses. Social reformers, on the other hand, viewed that the disadvantaged Indian women should be imparted formal as well as technical education so that they could be involved in embroidery and needle work, spinning and lace work, stitching church vestments, preparing Host and candles, rosary and flower making in view of earning a livelihood.¹

6.2. Economic Independence and Financial Security of Women

Since the people of Koonammavu were mainly involved in agriculture, the women had no work except at the time of sowing, harvesting, etc. Hence, Chavara aimed at making use

¹See Kent, *Converting Women*, 141.

of their free time in some profitable work; he believed that if these women get some vocational training, it would greatly help to alleviate the poverty in their families. Poor peasant women were denied many skills and capacities in life's functions. Unpaid care work, such as caring for parents and siblings, working for the community, cooking and fetching water, cleaning and sweeping the home, feeding and bathing children, among others, is usually seen as women's work. The majority of them are denied the opportunity to engage in other income-generating activities to support their families as well as to empower themselves economically. Lack of access to basic services further denies their empowerment, undermining their efforts to attain participation in public activities and ensure their basic livelihood. The problems of hunger and malnutrition are clearly linked to the inequalities and threats to livelihood security. They are less educated and are mostly not allowed to take decisions that affect their lives for personal development.

6.3. Women's Right to Property

Another area where women did not enjoy equal rights with men was inheritance to the ancestral property of the family. Women were forbidden to have any right to own property in their name. There had been no definite law governing the right of women in the matter of inheritance and succession until recently. The women had no economic independence among the Syrians. It may be noted that this situation of women continues even today. The husband is in charge of the finance. All the inheritance follows the male line. The wife is to be supported by the husband but she has no strict right to the family properties. Women were not expected to take up any job besides their household work; it remained a taboo in various communities for women to acquire

property or engage in any lucrative business with the explanation that they are ordained to be caretakers.

The right of inheritance that prevailed in Kerala society was matriarchal, whereof the right of entitlement was bequeathed from the mother to the daughter.¹ But among the Christians, the daughters enjoyed no such rights; girls were left out of family distribution of property. In this context, the Synod of Diamper (1599) intervened into the institution of inheritance among the Christians and decreed that the daughters should also inherit the property of the father.² However, even after these interventions and instructions, since the patriarchal system was very strong, they did not make any change in this regard. Women were totally dependent on men for their financial needs. In the conference of the three vicars apostolic in Varapuzha (April 1862), this question of women's right to inherit the family property was again discussed and made strict law.³ In spite of all these laws, in the report sent to Rome on 20 February 1867, Monsignor Baccinelli said: "This is a general abuse and disorder, namely, property is not given to legitimate daughter" instead, "the relative, also a very distant one in transverse line, should be the necessary heir in place of their daughters."⁴ In addition, women were not allowed to work outside. "Woman's place is in the home" was the general

¹Chandramohan, *Growth of Social Reform Movements in Kerala*, 456-458.

²Zacharia, *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diamper 1599*, 58; 211-212.

³Kanjirathinkal, *A Church in Struggle*, 182.

⁴ACO, *Ponenze 1865*, 687-690; Report of Baccinelli on 20 February 1867, Question No. 116 in Paul Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly and the Saint Thomas Christians in 1867: Kuriakose Elias Chavara Unworthy of Episcopate?* Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2018, 88.

norm. Seeing the lack of economic freedom among women, Chavara planned various vocational training programmes for women, by which, he hoped, they would earn something and, thus, gain economic freedom.

When Chavara and Beccaro envisioned the activities of the convent, they included the training in handicrafts for girls. Economic freedom remained a distant dream for women. Men were not able to support the family with their income alone. Thus, women also had to work towards supplementing the income. Owing to the seasonal nature of agriculture, women's work mostly remained confined to the home during this time. It was the agricultural wage labourers, who mainly faced this problem; all of them depended upon agriculture. This situation of poor income and the fewer number of working days of women inspired Chavara to initiate the women of the locality into training in handicrafts, so that they could earn something for their families.¹ The founding Fathers thoughtfully collected and arranged those things needed for this purpose. Both were of the same mind in this regard. They journeyed together in search of some experienced persons to give the Sisters training in handicrafts.² Even when the Sisters lived in the bamboo-mat convent, the Fathers brought a lady named

¹See Archives of Saint Teresa Convent, Koonammavu, for a letter written on 8 April 1882 by some women of Koonammavu, thanking Signora Marchioness Fanny Anguissola Viscouti for providing materials for their handicrafts. This letter speaks of the development of this apostolate and the attitude of the beneficiaries towards it. A copy of the letter is kept in the archives of the Koonammavu Convent.

²CKC, vol. 1, 60, 64; CWC, vol. 1, 139-140; Chavara, CWC, vol. 4: *Letters*, V: 12 (2020).

Francisca, who was skilled in needlework.¹ The Sisters faced many inconveniences in the bamboo-mat convent, owing to the lack of enough rooms, leaking of the roof, and many other such things. Above all, Francisca, who was brought for this purpose, was not a person who could easily accommodate or adjust to the facilities of the bamboo-mat convent. Since her life situation was different from that of the Sisters of the convent, some special food was brought for her daily from the Koonammavu Monastery. In spite of all these practical difficulties, the priests decided to initiate the Sisters to this apostolate soon after the opening of the bamboo-mat convent. While describing the events of the first days of the convent, Chavara noted down his attempt of searching for some women to give training in handicrafts to the Sisters:

When we were looking for some persons to teach embroidery and sewing, we came to know that the sisters of Padre Jaseantha of Thankassery were good at needlework and making vestments. However, on writing to the Vicar Father Geevarghese, we received the reply that they were not willing to come. We trusted that God would now complete what we started.²

6.4. Rosary Making as Cottage Industry

The CKC has recorded Chavara's special concern in providing training to the Sisters in handicrafts. When Beccaro was away in Europe in 1870, Chavara took special interest in bringing two European sisters from Fort Kochi to the convent at Koonammavu to give training to the sisters in needlework, stitching, flower making, etc. He personally

¹CKC, vol. 1, 35-41.

²Chavara, CWC, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 129.

attended to this task, to ensure the arrangement of specially cooked food to be brought from the Koonammavu Monastery for these sisters each time they stayed in the convent for nine days.¹ On those days, according to a letter to Father Chandy Kattakayam, Chavara instructed him to bring to Koonammavu some materials needed for handi-crafts: "Sisters have arrived from Kochi to teach in the convent. Good printed pictures for scapulars are not available here. Therefore, send all the big and small blocks of the scapular available there. Its printing can be done here in the hand press."² In the same letter Chavara spoke of the ten rosaries made by the superior of the Koonammavu Convent and he blessed them in order to distribute them to certain individuals.³ This letter shows his great interest in developing this income-generating programme of the sisters. On some other occasions, with a view to encouraging the Sisters in this apostolate, whenever some dignitaries of the Church visited the convent, Chavara informed the Sisters beforehand to gift them some articles such as scapulars, rosaries, flowers, alb, etc., prepared by the Sisters.⁴ The CKC has the following record: "On 25 October *Priorachan* wrote and informed us. 'Today *Elias Moopachan* will come there to see your convent. Then it will be good to gift him some rosaries and scapulars...' When they visited

¹CKC, vol. 1, 178.

²Chavara's letter to Father Chandy Kattakayam, dated 30 March 1870, in Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, V: 12 (2020).

³Chavara named ten persons to whom the rosaries were to be distributed; it may be that he was offering those rosaries to them either as a token of gratitude for the donations received from them or encouraging them in Marian devotion by praying the rosary.

⁴See CKC, vol. 1, 84.

the convent and as they were about to leave, the sisters gave Elias *Moopachan* some rosaries and scapulars.”¹

An incident recorded in the *CKC* throws much light on Chavara’s personal interest in the Sisters’ vocational training. In the month of October 1870, Chavara was taken seriously ill and could not walk on his own. In spite of being in a condition such as this, he visited the convent twice on 15 October. In the afternoon when he came to the convent, he carried with him some kind of threads and dyes and instructed the Sisters as to how to dye the threads. The Sisters were deeply touched by the gesture of their beloved Father and recorded it in their chronicle: “He taught us what thread to use for sewing, how to dye the thread, the process to be followed, and the colours to be used, etc.”² Later, this grew as a cottage industry in Koonammavu and rosaries made in the families were sent to different parts of the country and even abroad.

6.5. Boarding House for Girls

As discussed earlier, a boarding house along with the convent was thought of as an arrangement for the promotion of vocation of girls for religious life. The idea of a boarding house for girls seemed to be similar to what Chavara had expressed in the circular letter written on 25 March 1850, which was meant to open a study centre for boys. In that circular letter, he spoke of two stages of study: In the first stage, the boys would learn different languages, such as Syriac, Latin, Tamil, etc., and, in the second stage, those who have the bend of mind for priesthood, would

¹*CKC*, vol. 1, 155.

²*CKC*, vol. 2, 12. He did it while visiting them the second time in the evening hours on 15 October 1870.

learn theology and other matters connected with priestly life.¹ This seemed to be the system of formation envisioned for, and practised in the boarding house at Koonammavu. Chavara's special interests and efforts to teach the girls Latin and Tamil would confirm the above fact.

In the case of the Koonammavu Convent, the term used to denote the system of formation for girls is *educumdath*,² an Italian term, by which Chavara meant a place of formation for girls designated for their holistic development. When we think of Chavara's usage of the term *educumdath* in his poem *Anastasyayude Rakthasakshyam*, which he wrote in 1862, one could admit that this term was very familiar to Chavara, even before Chavara changed his residence to Koonammavu in 1864. It suggests that the original idea of the boarding house for girls came from Chavara. He took great interest in the formation of the girls. This system of formation was carried out by the sisters directed by the founding Fathers. The Sisters were asked to cooperate with all their strength because the education and formation of girls, which require theoretical foundation as well as practical applications, were specifically a feminine responsibility. Just as he promoted school education through his invitation 'One School for One Church', girls' education became popular through his instruction 'One Boarding House for One Convent'.³ Seeing that their daughters were safe with the sisters, parents were ready to send them to the boarding houses and schools which were opened by the Sisters.

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, IX: 2 (2020).

²It comes from the word *educare*, which means to educate; *educumdath* is a place to educate children.

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VI: 5 (2020) (paragraph 3).

Chavara was aware of the particular receptivity of feminine nature for all that is morally good and divine; from this receptivity, devolves the function of moral and religious education for women and activities for their formation. Women's receptive nature is paramount in understanding women's genius. Along with good education they were amply supported with faith formation, training in music, housekeeping, personal grooming, spiritual and intellectual formation, psychology, training of their faculties, religious education, gardening, and other kinds of vocational training.

The founders told them that the children in the *educum dath* or school do not merely need what we have, but rather what we are. The entire educational process must be carried out with tangible love, which is perceptible in every disciplinary measure, without instilling any fear. The most effective educational method does not lie in the words of instruction, but in the living example, without which all words remain useless: "Even if you tell them by word to love Jesus, they will not believe you, unless they see it in you."¹ Thus, along with theoretical and practical training, models of 'good motherhood' were also presented before the girls.

Sister Clara's influence on her students as the boarding mistress and teacher through her personal example can be substantiated by the number of girls joining the convent from the boarding house and others who became good housewives and mothers in their respective families. Girls from faraway places reached the boarding house and, as the report of Monsignor Marceline Berardi shows, in 1883, the

¹KKC, vol. 1, 58.

number reached thirty.¹ The same report speaks of the apostolate of the Sisters extended to day-school, orphanage, hospital, etc.

Chavara's correspondence with the convent expresses his unique love for the girls of the boarding house and his unshakeable vision about it. In almost all his letters to the sisters there is mention about the girls of the boarding house. In his letter, dated 1 March 1870, he persuaded the girls to go for the Forty Hours adoration in the monastery chapel at Koonammavu.² In the same letter, he encouraged them to buy the book on 'May Devotion'. When he shared his God-experience with the Sisters through a letter, he instructed the sub-prioress to read and explain it to the girls.³ He wanted them to imbibe the spirit of offering through every movement of the body, and make it a prayer, joining with the passion of Christ. On another occasion, he expressed his apology that he could not give conferences to the girls of the boarding house due to his ill-health.⁴ The words of apology came from his consciousness that he was responsible for the formation of the girls in the boarding house. Further, in another letter, he, after explaining the different stages of meditation, told the Superior to make the girls understand according to their age and their ability. He was much interested to teach them many languages, such as

¹ACO, *Scrit. Rif.nei Congressi Malabaresi* (1878-1889) ff. 1158-1178. Report of Monsignor Marcelline Berardi in 1883 (f.1170) reads: "*In questo hanno un educandato di circa 30 educande, ed una scuola giornaliera di circa 100 ragazze: attendono pure all'orfanotrofio, ospitale di femmine unito allo stesso monastero.*"

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 2 (2020).

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 3 and 6 (2020).

⁴Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 8 (2020).

Latin and Tamil. Once he made the books available to learn Latin, he, at the same time, separately brought books for the girls also.¹ His concern for the girls' study and development of languages can be seen in these words: "Since the girls have learnt Tamil, now they can read the Tamil book as well and learn easily if the translation is read side by side with it."² This note was attached to a book that he had translated from Tamil into Malayalam and sent to the boarding house.

It was not only those who desired religious life that sought admission in the boarding house. Those who stayed there and received training became good homemakers and mothers making their homes fertile soil for vocations. During the first four or five years, till their fields of education and other apostolate became established, the boarding house was their sole apostolate along with vocational training and faith formation.

7. Empowering Women through Education

Investment in the care and education of girls as an equal right is foundational to the advancement of women. It is for this reason that the Catholic Church has always – from the very beginning of the school system in Kerala, which was initiated by Chavara – placed major emphasis on the education of girls and women. Today, the Church is one of the foremost educators in India. According to Chavara, the convent was a place where girls of Malabar could learn *Vedakaryangal*, namely, matters of religion and Sacred Scripture. *Veda* is understood as Scripture as well as religion.³ Chavara's understanding of the value and importance

¹CKC, vol. 1, 152.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 11 (2020).

³The word used for catechism is *Vedopadesham* (instructions in religion).

of transformative education could be seen from the circular letter he sent to the parishes of Kerala.¹ In his 'Testament of a Loving Father', written on the second anniversary of the foundation of the convent at Koonammavu and given to his parishioners at Kainakary, Chavara reminded the parents of their responsibility of imparting and facilitating proper education to their children.² He gave clear instructions to the parents:

As soon as the children come to the age of reason, they must be sent to school. Besides, parents should inquire whether and how the children study and behave, and who their companions are. Their studies should be tested every Sunday.³

One of the letters of Father Kuriakose Porukara to the Sisters at Koonammavu highlights their previous situation and the change that had come up in their lives. He observed:

Dear children, I read your letter most happily, again and again. I praise God, because the hands that were once engaged in holding the pounding piston and in washing pots and pans, have now written like this and also because, you who did not know how to read properly putting letters together, and who like animals, were

¹See Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, IX: 2 (2020). Referring to Saint Ephrem's theme of 'the Luminous Eye' Chavara instructed the people that the second source of enlightenment is learning or knowledge. Just as those who have no eyes are called 'blind', those who have no learning should be called 'spiritually blind'. He wrote: "Consequently, although we, the Nazarenes [Thomas-christians], claim to be Christians of ancient origin, we have neither the vitality nor the wisdom of the sages because of this spiritual blindness."

²See Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, IX: 10 (2020).

³Chavara, *Chavarul*, 2: 14.

confined to work in the kitchen, have now been raised to such a great height.¹

Porukara who was well aware of the condition of women during the nineteenth century in the Kerala church, praised God on seeing the great change and growth that was brought about in the sisters. Within a short time, miraculous changes had taken place in them, in their style of writing, in the way of expressing their ideas beautifully, and so on. The Fathers had foreseen the possibility of tremendous growth for the women of Kerala through education, and the presence and services of these dedicated women. Also, they knew that education is a major force of change in traditional sex-role patterns.

7.1. Higher Education for Girls

Social uplift, Chavara rightly concluded, was impossible unless the women and weaker sections of the society received education, and gave up superstitions by mastering the true significance of their religion. When a school was planned along with the convent, its purpose was to provide an opportunity to the girls to learn spiritual and secular matters so that empowerment of women would be facilitated. Naturally, what is contained in empowerment is nothing but infusion of power and awareness through sharing of information and change of consciousness. By empowerment he meant enhancing or improving the capacity of girls to develop their uniqueness and identity. It also meant 'giving power'. In the case of women, it also meant regaining or re-establishing their God-given power

¹Letter written by Father Kuriakose Porukara from the Mannanam Monastery to the Sisters at Koonammavu, dated 23 October 1874; it is kept in the archives of the Koonammavu Convent.

and utilizing it in the same way as in the case of men for guiding the entire human society.

From the nineteenth century onwards, education and Christianity went hand-in-hand in Kerala. Chavara established that the religious factor is indispensable for any educational effort to cultivate the emotions, and so he introduced schools along with churches. His view of education and the method he adopted for girls' education in Koonammavu Convent was focused on his perception of the unique characteristics and the intrinsic value of woman. The syllabus he introduced portrayed his vision regarding the education of girls.

Three leading concepts in the intellectual background of Chavara were visible in the educational institutes he had opened: necessity for integral education, religious foundation of educational action, and definite understanding of the proper nature of women's education. These concepts motivated Chavara as an educator to open schools for girls as well as boarding houses for them. A study of these leading concepts may be a valid introduction to the most profound character traits of his personality and noble vision of education.

Thus, the girls' school at Koonammavu, dedicated to intellectual formation, practical instruction, and academic excellence, became a symbol of scholarship and social dedication. This system carved out a special niche for itself in transformative education. Following the inspiration of Chavara, the Sisters believed that education had the tremendous potential to liberate people from all forms of darkness and ignorance. Many schools, colleges, and other formal and non-formal educational institutions run by the CMC Sisters, and their devoted service to the poor and the needy have received wider acceptance, recognition, and

appreciation. The CMC institutions continue to train young minds and to inculcate in them a deep sense of responsibility, morality, and spiritual wellbeing, together with a solid training in emphasizing on the humanistic aspects of education, and the harmonious development of all human faculties, the body, mind, and spirit. The CMC institutions make available a very valuable contribution towards the building up of the nation. In particular, it is an extremely positive fact that in Kerala, which is a hundred percent literate state in India, the presence of trained women teachers is constantly increasing. History shows that this greater involvement of women in education has led to a qualitative leap in the educational process itself. With access to education for women, they are in all professions, and many of them do make a difference in enhancing the social capital. The entry of women into all professions in society and into political roles is truly new and truly revolutionary.

Thousands of alumni spread all over the country and abroad vouch for a high academic standard, along with spiritual and moral values stressed and a secular outlook fostered in the CMC educational institutions. Education, as an instrument of social change, was centred on the idea of inclusive education. To improve the overall development of children, cutting across stereotyped boundaries, the CMC sisters made it clear that admission in their institutions is open to everyone irrespective of caste, creed and language. The members of the economically and socially disadvantaged sections of society were given adequate attention. The CMC believed that quality education imparted on time would obviously empower further those empowered women. Empowerment, the Sisters were convinced, is an active process with which women realize their full capability and

power, and approach the empowering process as the surest way to the full blossoming of their potential.

7.2. Encouraging Leadership Role of Women

Realizing the need for special concern towards forming Catholic girls and young women to leadership roles, Pope John Paul II invited the educational institutions in the following words: "I appeal to Catholic universities and centres of higher education to ensure that in the preparation of future leaders in society, they acquire a special sensitivity to the concerns of young women."¹ There is a popular belief that women do not make good leaders; it is a lie. The founders of CMC proposed a new structure of leadership of women religious, a kind of leadership that changed the community from being mere followers to participants, fostering relationship and spirituality. The training they received in leadership and administrative capabilities provided them a sense of dignity and honour. They understood in a better way the true meaning of leadership in serving others and not trying to rule over them. It cultivated new forms of community rooted in love and commitment to service. This new community leadership pattern that conceived of service as an instrument of presenting Christ to the world, while highlighting, through example, the mission of women in the Church and the special gift of the feminine genius for humanity. This offered the women to find greater space for their leadership role in the founding of religious institutes for women and renewal movements of Christianity. When Chavara envisioned the religious life for women at Koonammavu, he planned three institutions

¹John Paul II, *Letter to Mary Ann Glendon and the Holy See's Delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women* (29 August 1995).

together in one building, namely, the convent, boarding house, and school. All these three institutions, according to him, were to be administered by the Sisters. In the boarding house, girls would live together without the support of any male members. One sister would take care of the girls and manage their accommodation, lifestyle, food habits, dress code, education, and such other things.

Naturally, these three institutions or services were expressions of empowered womanhood, breaking the barriers built by *Manusmriti*, that '*na sthree swathanthryamarhathi*' (meaning, 'no woman deserves freedom'). Those who have the gifts, rather than those authorized by the traditional institution, are acclaimed as leaders. In this situation women too emerged as leaders. Those who are gifted and are committed are validated by the community as leaders. Along with the educational institutions, this was found to be true in those institutions that are involved in healing ministry and social work as well. The greater possibility of leadership roles for women in the church in Kerala, doubtlessly, has something to do with these institutions, which were opened in Koonammavu. One can find this positive phenomenon recurring in the history of Christianity in Kerala; it has continued for generations, even when convents were opened in other states of India and abroad.¹

¹However, in the following generations, when the diocesan corporate managements took charge of the educational institutions in certain dioceses, and began to institutionalize them, there was a loss of freedom as well as leadership role of the Sisters. The Sisters, earlier employed as teachers in a number of institutions, were forcefully reverted to traditional, submissive roles dictated by the patriarchal patterns, with the priests becoming managers,

7.3. Towards a Leadership for Tomorrow

Chavara envisioned a new type of leadership for the sisters: they are to become leaders of the internal world. They are invited to be spiritual leaders, to be in touch with the deep and significant movements of the Spirit; to offer people creative ways to communicate with the source of human life. In one of his letters, Chavara instructed the Sisters as to how they must attune to the whisperings or conversations of God. He wrote:

In the beginning that conversation and language may not be fully understood. Then the Lord will lead the bride to the wine-cellar and make her taste a little of the finest wine... When the Bridegroom sees that she is following his language, he will speak more clearly. Rejoicing in their love, the Bridegroom presents the bride with ornaments. The doors of union with God are opened and fear vanishes.¹

He concluded the letter with an instruction to the Mother Superior to explain the style of relating with the Divine Indweller to the girls in the boarding house as well. What he expected to happen in the boarding house was not a handing over of tradition; what he, instead, wanted to take place was a careful and sensitive sharing of what is happening within the Sisters so that the boarders would be familiar with the inner world and its dynamics. The Sisters are, therefore, called to help people recognize the work of God in them. A spiritual leader is one who helps those who are searching to discover the inner reality as the source of

principals, etc., and women, after being removed from the leadership roles of the educational institutions of the diocesan management, were relegated to more submissive roles.

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 8 (2020).

their existence. Compassion is born when we discover in the centre of our own existence that our neighbour is really our fellow human. In this way the Sisters were challenged to be articulate, compassionate, and contemplative leaders in the society.

8. Faith Formation

Following the example of the great women who have enhanced the life of the Church, Chavara visualized that the women religious in Kerala church should give leadership in faith formation of the people of God. It was for this purpose that he formed and motivated the Sisters of the Koonammavu Convent from the beginning. Imbibing the spirit of their founder, the Sisters motivated themselves in teaching catechism, preparing the students for their first Holy Communion, conducting retreats for them, preparing them for marriage, etc.

In his 'Testament', Chavara indicated possibilities of greater participation of women in important areas of ecclesial life. He had already envisioned the presence and service of the Sisters in areas other than the Syro-Malabar Rite. He expressed this desire in his 'Testament', which he prepared in August 1870. He created a significant space for women in the Church, which was unheard of in Kerala, namely, "to render necessary and useful spiritual ministry to the faithful of the two vicariates of Varapuzha and Kollam." What does the spiritual ministry of the Church include? She embraces new members and cleanses them through Baptism, feeds them in the Eucharist, reconciles them by Confession, and heals them with anointment. She consoles, sustains, and teaches her members that they might find dignity and meaning. As the sisters were appointed as teachers in the school, opened along with convent, women

were regarded as shapers and transmitters of tradition. Chavara worked as a liberator of women from the oppressive political and economic structures of the period, and from the oppressive religious institutions.

He encouraged the sisters to have a full awareness of their potential, and their role at the service of the society and the Church. Later, CMC sisters also tended to find greater space for leadership in the founding or renewal movements of Christianity. They exercise their leadership in establishing and conducting retreat centres in different parts of the world, and many Sisters also engage themselves in preaching retreats and guiding people in their pilgrimage of faith.

8.1. Formation for Other Religious Institutes of Women

The Sisters at Koonammavu took up the responsibility of giving formation to the candidates of their own community, and also to those who are called to other religious communities. The community in Koonammavu being the first religious institute for women, it inspired other bishops, who requested this service from the sisters. Monsignor Carlos of Kollam Vicariate, for example, paid a visit to Koonammavu Convent in August 1871 with the intention of inviting the Sisters to open a convent in his diocese.¹ The Chronicles has recorded that, as a result, in February 1875, the novices from Kollam came to Koonammavu and received formation there.² Later, this service was rendered to different religious congregations such as FCC, SABS, Visitation, and many others. Moreover, in a matter of time, the number of religious institutes for women increased in Kerala, which, in particular, emerged as a powerhouse of

¹CKC, vol. 2, 38.

²CKC, vol. 2, 94-95.

vocations to consecrated life. Later, by instituting the common Juniorate program at Aluva, which is known as Carmel Jyoti Vidyabhavan, CMC continued her ministry of forming the formators of many religious institutes by welcoming young Sisters from various women religious institutes.

8.2. Feminine Styles of Holiness for the Church

Pope Francis acclaims the genius of woman that shines in the feminine styles of holiness, which are essential means of reflecting God's holiness in this world.¹ Chavara instructed the Sisters by saying that we are called to be holy, by a life lived with love, and by bearing witness to the Lord in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. He pointed to very practical examples from their everyday life. He taught them to experience a communion with Jesus while being involved in any kind of activity, that is, according to Chavara, "when you open or shut the door when you are in the room, or at work, when you walk, when you spit, when you sweep with a broom, or when you pray your canonical prayers, in all that you do..."² His words were echoed when Pope Francis contemplated the holiness present in patience of God's people in their ordinary living.³ On another occasion, Chavara told them how to remain united with God by becoming aware of, and offering continuously, the body movements: "That we offer to our Lord as prayers the movements of our veins and nerves, the winking of our eyes, every breath of ours, listening to the chirping of birds, etc., each separately and all together."⁴ We see in him a

¹Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate* (2018), 6, 14.

²CKC, vol. 1, 65.

³Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate* (2018), 14.

⁴Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 3 (2020).

mystic searching for sacredness in everything following a feminine style of holiness.

8.3. Mother Saints as Models

Affirming the dignity and greatness of various mother saints, Chavara presented before the Sisters many mother saints as models and heavenly companions for them to copy in their life of consecration. He was well aware of the power of the communion of saints. The Catholic teachings insist that when we pray along with saints, those prayers become more powerful and effective. Therefore, while presenting the importance of reading, he advised the Sisters to read the biographies of 'mother saints', such as Saint Teresa and Saint Rosa, etc.,¹ and to remain in communion with them. In the list of books given in *CKC*, we find nine copies of the biography of Saint Teresa of Avila, which means each one had a copy of the book, the Sisters as well as the girls of the boarding house; they also had two copies of the biography of Saint Rosa.² These mother saints were presented as models of community life, meditation,³ vowed life,⁴ courage,⁵ etc. He did not seem to encourage the reading of the biographies of [male] saints⁶ and imitating them because he was aware of the negative effects of it on their self-understanding and their relationship with God.

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 8 (2020).

²*CKC*, vol. 1, 196.

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 8 (2020); *CKC*, vol. 1, 45, 72, 73.

⁴*CKC*, vol. 1, 26, 42, 71.

⁵*CKC*, vol. 1, 23, 26, 99, 100.

⁶We do not see any reference to Saint John of the Cross, a great Carmelite mystic saint, in Chavara's instructions or letters to the Sisters.

The founders managed to get some relics of 'mother saints' such as Saint Teresa of Avila¹ and Saint Mary Magdalena de Passi.² Once, when they got a big piece of holy relic of Saint Teresa, Chavara said: "Our mother Saint Teresa, as a sign of her blessings on you, has given you a part of her bodily remains to be kept with you, that she is willing to be with you and guide you as your Mother and Superior."³ When their maiden names were changed, the names of female saints were not changed to those of males.

9. Caring for the Temporalities of the Convent

Being aware that women are to take an increasingly active role in the whole life of society, it is very important that they take responsibility in the various fields of their daily life and the Church's apostolate. His attentiveness to the welfare of the convent was not limited only to the spiritual life of the Sisters. He was keenly interested in the temporal affairs of the Sisters. Examples are many, which show the paternal and maternal care of "Our Father *Priorachan*" toward the wellbeing of the Sisters. With a feeling of indebtedness, the chronicler has reported many of the works of renovation accomplished by Chavara in 1870. Chavara taught the Sisters how to take care of the coconut estate so that it becomes a source of support for the convent. In addition, the examples given below are the initiatives of Chavara, while Beccaro was away in Europe for fourteen months. The paternal love of Chavara enabled him to take care of all the needs of the convent, such as digging a well in the compound, preparing a barn outside the cloister, and many

¹KKC, vol. 1, 25, 68, 69, 71, 89, 121, 147.

²KKC, vol. 1, 63.

³KKC, vol. 1, 71.

such other things. The Sisters substantiate the concern of their founder father:

... During this April [1870], our *Priorachan* decided to make a well at any cost. Therefore, he arranged for the materials required, such as stone, lime, etc., and sent many labourers in order to finish it within a short time. The work was completed within a few days. Though Father was sick and tired during those days, he often came and supervised the work.¹

As another example of Chavara's tender love and concern for the convent, the Sisters have noted down the following in the Chronicle: "All the yielding coconut trees, as well as the young ones in the compound, inside and outside the enclosure fence, were dug and manured, bringing soil from the nearby paddy fields."² Here is another letter, which shows how Chavara was interested and involved in the minute details of the life of the Sisters. It also presents the comprehensive vision of Chavara integrating spiritual and temporal matters of religious life:

As I am suffering from severe headache and fatigue, I could not come there. That is why I am writing these instructions. Ask the procurator to give the instruction to the masons: the granaries, the large one and the smaller one, have to be set on a solid granite foundation so that white ants may not attack the wood and the grains. The floor must be paved with bricks before the wooden granaries are fixed on the floor. There should be a veranda. It must be strongly and neatly paved so that paddy can be put on the floor and measured on it... The tops of the coconut palms must be cleared of the dry

¹CKC, vol. 1, 174-175.

²CKC, vol. 1, 175; see also Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 5 (2020).

leaves, etc. Thus, when the base and the top of the coconut palms are cleared, the tree will bear more fruit and we will get plenty of materials for firewood. Ask the procurator to do all these.¹

9.1. Training in Proper Accounts Keeping

Being fully aware that a balanced formation includes not only theoretical, but also practical experiences, Chavara taught the Sisters how to keep proper accounts of their daily expenses and income. This was not only to inculcate the sense of accountability, but also to make them involved in all the matters of the convent. In Kerala society, the mindset was that girls must be trained to do work only connected with the home and the upbringing of children, while boys are meant to do work that calls for thinking, that which requires intelligence, and involves physical challenges. There was another understanding that girls generally should not be trained to participate in politics, economics, and business, unless it is a necessity or family tradition. Therefore, girls were not allowed to go shopping or handle money, and, hence, they were not exposed to accounts keeping. Naturally, it was a challenge, a novel one, for them in the convent, and they, understandably, made many mistakes. Understanding this, Father Chavara introduced them to the techniques of accounts keeping, which was considered an important job in the convent. Realizing the seriousness of the responsibility of the finance officer/treasurer/bursar/economista, she was officially elected by the chapter. Whenever the chapter members gathered to elect the superior and assistant superior, they elected the bursar by casting votes. In one of his letters to the convent, Chavara

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 5 (2020).

instructed them: "You must be very accurate in writing the accounts."¹ This letter gives the impression that Chavara, keeping the accounts book of the convent open before him and pointing to the inaccuracies in the accounts, taught them the correct method of maintaining accounts. He trained the Sisters in methods of proper accounts keeping. According to him, women must know how to keep accounts and they must be involved in financial matters of the family and society. He taught the families that income and expenditure are to be balanced. While hosting functions and celebrations, families have to be aware of their financial limitations and they should not make themselves pauper.² The words of Sirach are worth-recalling for their strong warning: "Do not revel in great luxury, for you may become impoverished by its expense. Do not become beggars by feasting with borrowed money when you have nothing in your purse" (Sir 18:32-33). In the light of these, Chavara instructed his parishioners to put in practice this Word of God: "Be frugal in spending, and don't spend beyond your means in celebrating anniversaries and festivals. For, no one knows how long one can keep up such a style. The light of a mini lamp that burns longer is preferable to a torched haystack that blazes for a while and gets extinguished instantaneously."³ People have to be wise and always see that the income and expenditure are well balanced.

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 7 (2020). This letter gives the impression that Chavara cared for all their needs.

²Chavara, *Chavarul* 1: 6.

³Chavara, *Chavarul* 1: 6.

9.2. Numerical Increase of the Members

The establishment of the convent was a much-awaited event in the Kerala Church, and Chavara and Beccaro noticed that there was an attraction among the women toward consecrated life in the convent. One could see Chavara's concern about the possibility of receiving new members to the convent, even when he thought about constructing the new building for the convent. He writes: "To consider how to find means for expanding the convent to accommodate all those who aspired to enter it..."¹ These words show that the thought about the new building for the convent, its future members, its apostolate, etc., were always an integral part of his thought process and concerned planning. Even when the Sisters were living in the bamboo-mat convent, the founding Fathers informed the Sisters that many more had expressed their desire to embrace religious life. The Sisters were asked to keep those girls in their prayers. On 17 December 1866, the Fathers told them: "Now the construction of the new convent is almost completed. Many people have requested to join the convent. We have to pray for this from now on. Therefore, for fifteen days, after the evening meditation, pray the 'Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary'. In honor of Saint Joseph, pray the 'Our Father', 'Hail Mary', and 'Glory be' five times."² They started receiving new members soon after the blessing of the new convent (27 March 1867). They welcomed a new girl on 1 April³ and two girls on 30 June.⁴ The *CKC* tells of the arrival of another new member on 9

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 1: *Chronicles*, 131: "കന്യാസ്ത്രീമഠവും അതിൽ മനസ്സായവരെ ചേർത്തു നടത്തുന്നതിനും."

²*CKC*, vol. 1, 32-33.

³*CKC*, vol. 1, 59.

⁴*CKC*, vol. 1, 64.

September 1867.¹ Likewise, there was a steady increase in the number of new candidates to the community. The first four members were vested with the religious habit on 27 March 1867, and the fifth member, on 8 September of the same year.²

In his *Testament of a Loving Father*,³ Chavara strongly argued for the freedom of girls in choosing their own vocation or state of life. He wrote:

When children are old enough to determine their vocation, they should be given full freedom to follow their bend of mind; it is God who determines the nature of their vocation and it is their personal business to make the choice. It is not the parents' duty. Negligence in this point would cause a soul to be lost. Therefore, when a boy is sixteen or eighteen and a girl fourteen or sixteen, he or she must choose his or her vocation.⁴

Chavara admonishes the parents that it is the children's duty to choose the vocation that God has designed for them, and not the parents. Parents must allow girls and boys to follow their vocation. During that period it was unheard of

¹CKC, vol. 1, 68.

²CKC, vol. 1, 65. Even though the doors of the convent were open for all Catholic girls to join religious life, one may notice that other than the first three members, another new member from the Latin community made her religious profession only in 1886, that is, twenty years after the opening of the bamboo-mat convent. By that time, Sister Anna, the second member, had passed away (i.e., in 1871).

³See Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, IX: 10 (2020). Chavara wrote a long letter, dated 13 February 1868, to his own parishioners of Kainakary, which was known as the *Chavarul*.

⁴Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, IX: 10 (2020). This is an instruction on 'The Upbringing of Children': Chavara, *Chavarul*, 2: 14.

for girls to be given the assurance of freedom to choose their vocation. Those days, women faced many restrictions in religious matters. One can assume that these words of their Vicar General had encouraged and supported many girls to discern their vocation to religious life. When Chavara wrote these words of encouragement, there was only one convent for women, and naturally, the girls knocked at the doors of the Koonammavu Convent to realize their vocation to consecrated life. Moreover, his influence in the parishes, and the people's appreciation for the renewal programmes conducted by the TOCD priests throughout the Kerala Church might have contributed much to the fulfilment of the desire of girls to embrace religious life. With the aim of admitting girls to religious life, a boarding house attached to the Koonammavu Convent was opened on 2 January 1868. Many girls entered there, desiring to lead a life deeply rooted in Christian values and virtues.¹

9.3. A Forward Looking Animator

Chavara established a relationship with the Sisters that was distinguished by great freedom and friendship. He loved them as his own daughters. Once, he sent to the convent of the Sisters two mangoes and some chillies with the following letter:

I send you this gift in honour of the Mother of God. These chillies are from the plant that grows in the pot kept at my window. I was thinking it won't yield any more... The mangoes I send to you were presented to me as a gift by our *Parayee*. The two red ones are of a different variety. They are the best I have found in

¹See *CKC*, vol. 1, 83, 84.

India... Slightly peel off the outer rind, then slice it into pieces and let everyone in the convent taste of it.¹ He also wrote: "I send them to you so that you may taste and see for yourself how sweet they are and that you may plant them."² This was always a main concern for Chavara. He wanted them to look to the future, pay attention toward the coming generation. Whatever he did for the small community of sisters and the girls of the boarding house was not merely for them; it was for posterity as well. His vision was to empower women through women; they were to empower and enlighten others so as to change the face of the present generation of women.

10. Women's Right to Take Decisions

According to the norms of the time, girls could not take decisions about their lives, only parents could. Generally, it was also held that women had no right to have their own mind or to make choices of their own. It was accepted that the men are in charge of the women and the former would decide the latter's destiny and would 'send' them wherever and whenever they liked! This was the typical mindset of a majority of India's sons. In a patriarchal society, boys develop a false sense that they are in charge of women, and that their safety and security are men's responsibility. They are taught to control women by curtailing their freedom: first their sisters, then their wives, and, later, their daughters. This male-dominated society even issues codes regulating women's behavior, for example, with instructions such as you must not laugh aloud, you must dress in a certain way in public, you must return home before a certain

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 8 (2020).

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 8 (2020).

hour, and a thousand other do's and don'ts. The instructions in the *Chavarul*, in this context, become revolutionary as we find Chavara uniquely recognizing the personality and identity of women. Chavara was very keen that women enjoy a greater role in the family, especially in the processes of decision-making. According equal opportunities to girls and boys, Chavara conceived of developing a holistic society. As part of instructions to the parents on upbringing children he told the parents to give freedom for boys and girls to take decisions regarding their life.¹

This instruction produced much fruit. It was for the first time that the people of Kerala heard that girls should be given the opportunity to take decisions regarding their life. They, too, have a say in choosing their future plan. Therefore, we see many girls from Alleppey, Pulinkunnu, and other distant places joining the boarding house at Koonammavu, either to study in the school or (also) to join the convent. He emphatically said: "Their consent must be specially ascertained before marriages are arranged."² Chavara, thus, called upon the people to raise girls' marriageable age to fourteen or sixteen, which was twelve years or less in those days.

11. Greater Participation of Women in the Life and Mission of the Church

Formerly, it was held that a girl's education would mould and groom her to be a better spouse, a better mother, or a better nun. For centuries, hardly any other feminine vocation was known to us. Girls were expected to be initiated into domestic activity and religious practices either in the family or in the convent; accordingly, they were

¹Chavara, *Chavarul*, 2: 14.

²Chavara, *Chavarul*, 2: 14.

prepared for their later vocation. The nineteenth century Industrial Revolution revolutionized average domestic life so that family-space ceased to be an exclusive realm sufficient to engage all of women's potentialities. At the same time, the diminishing life of faith excluded convent life as a serious consideration for most people. The situation led to an immersion into an overly sensual life or empty dreams and flirtations. There also resulted a turning away from home but in favour of more professional activity. Thus, the feminist movements came into being.

Vocations other than domestic had been exercised for centuries almost exclusively by men. It was, therefore, natural that these vocations assumed a masculine stamp and that training for them was adapted to the masculine nature. The radical feminist movements demanded that all professions and branches of education be open to women. In the face of severe opposition, the movement was able to advance only very gradually, until almost suddenly, it obtained nearly all its demands after the revolution. In the beginning of the movement, the women who entered into professional life were predominantly those whose individual aptitudes and inclinations went in this direction, and they were able, comparatively speaking, to acclimatize themselves easily.

The goal of religious education was to prepare young people for incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ. Intimate communion leading to personal love and life with Christ meant that all those who cling to Christ, also belong to one another, just as one member of our physical body forms part of the others. Filled with the spirit of supernatural maternity, a woman had the mission to win others over as children of God. In a particular way, a woman was a symbol of the Church, the Bride of Christ. Supernatural maternity

was considered to impregnate only women who live and die with Christ, and who awaken, through education, the same purpose in those entrusted to them.¹

A woman's mission – which is epitomized in the life of Mary the Mother of God, who begot the whole humanity in Christ, her offspring – is to imitate Mary. She must further the life of faith by providing a secure and enduring foundation. As a teacher, she must be the maternal and loving educator for Christ. She must nourish a rich life of faith in young persons, through their intellectuality and voluntariness. By so consecrating herself to supernatural maternity, a Catholic woman becomes an organ of the Church. In this way, she would fulfil this function in the religious life as in a life united with God, in the world.

Encouraging women undertaking their specific roles in the Church, John Paul II stated: "Openly acknowledging the personal dignity of women is the first step taken to promote the full participation of women in Church life as well as in social and public life."² On another occasion, he reiterated: "To enhance their service in the Church, there should be greater opportunities for women to take up courses in theology and other fields of study, and men in seminaries and houses of formation need to be trained to regard women as co-workers in the apostolate. Women should be more effectively involved in pastoral programs, in diocesan and parish pastoral councils, and in diocesan synods. Their abilities and services should be fully appreciated in healthcare, in education, in preparing the faithful for the sacraments, in building community and in peacemaking."³

¹Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 35.

²John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (1988), 49.

³John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (1998), 45.

In Christianity, originally, women seem to have been incorporated into the teaching role, but were eliminated early enough, as a result of which even the Church Fathers took it for granted that women might never act as public teachers. In the Middle Ages, this was modified as far as saints and holy women were concerned, but women were kept away from the universities. There were women writers of spirituality, but there were no women scholastic theologians.¹

Those who have embraced virginity for Christ had the option to become spiritual mothers to the Christian community. Pope John Paul II described motherhood as a woman's 'prerogative' and being a dedicated virgin (which, in practice, meant becoming a nun) did not deprive her of the chance to fulfil her maternal inclinations. It could express itself as concern for people, especially the most needy: the handicapped, the abandoned, the orphans, the elderly, children, young people, the imprisoned, and in general, people on the edges of society.

In the early nineteenth century Kerala, the CMS and LMS missionaries established schools and encouraged girls' education and appointed women as teachers. Catholics were not allowed to approach those schools because they feared of the Protestant ideologies. However, Chavara was bold enough to appoint women as teachers and Puthanangady Clara as boarding mistress, which implied that these women were given leadership roles. In order to equip them as teachers he gave them training in different languages, South Indian as well as European languages; enabled them to read many books and to express their ideas in writing. He made it clear that we must keep encouraging those simple and

¹Ruether and McLaughlin, eds., *Women of Spirit*, 17.

straightforward gifts that enabled women in Kerala to play an active a role in society.

Consequently, the minds and hearts of the Sisters become universal by recommitting themselves for the welfare of the whole humanity and of all creation. It is not always easy for us to enlarge our lives as well as that of others. We have this natural tendency to live our lives within carefully demarcated borders, with clearly established norms; many consider it to be safer that way. God's providence, however, urges us to press forward to "the more" and "for ever more," keeping the common good of humanity as the goal. God asks us to grow ... to expand ... to stretch ... and to move beyond.

12. Chavara's Relationship with the Sisters of Koonammavu Convent

It was not so much in what Chavara said, but, in how he worked for the empowerment of women, and how he related with women, that revealed revolutionary outlook and approach in empowering women. Whether man or woman, whether consecrated or not, he reached out, and exhorted each one to become an imitation of Christ. The further humanity continues on this path, the more people will be closer to the ideal. Christ embodied the ideal of human perfection: in Him all bias and defects were removed, and the masculine and feminine virtues were united and their weaknesses redeemed; therefore, His true followers would be progressively exalted over their natural limitations. Hence, we see in holy men, a womanly tenderness and a truly maternal solicitude for the souls entrusted to them; in holy women, there is manly boldness, proficiency, and determination. Chavara believed that women can open new vistas for the culture of life from the

authority and power of their places in a society that values women's rights. Of course, only women with a formation in and an understanding of their feminine genius would bring about those changes. Chavara believed that it is precisely here that education as well as formation of women has to commence and all his efforts to bring out their talents and capabilities.

It is in the context of his relationship with the sisters of Koonammavu Convent that we see how he developed a caring and nurturing spirituality in his personality; Chavara cultivated a culture of encounter and closeness. He loved the Sisters more than his blood relatives. He made arrangements for them to live according to their dignity; he also shared with them his mystical experiences and the art of loving God. He taught them through actions so that they might find dignity and meaning in life. He was open and bold enough to acknowledge that the love-relationship between the Sisters and himself was stronger than that of the blood relatives. He once exclaimed: "Why do you love me more than your own blood relatives? Or why do I love you more than my own people? O! Lord, do not be separate from us until we are one with you."¹

Admiring the strong bond of kinship that Chavara had developed for the Sisters, Father Kuriakose Eliseus Porukkara, the biographer and contemporary, who succeeded Chavara as the Prior General, once commented that Chavara loved the Sisters more than he did, his sons, worked hard for the construction of the convent building, collecting enough books for them, giving spiritual formation to the Sisters, and so on. This was his comment on the attention Chavara gave to the sisters:

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 6 (2020).

Just as Patriarch Jacob had a greater love for his youngest son Benjamin so he [Chavara] loved them [the Sisters] most deeply, and brought them up most carefully, providing them with all the needs even as a hen takes care of the chicks.¹

Porukara and the contemporaries of Chavara recognized his love for the Sisters, both paternal and maternal, the former symbolized by Patriarch Jacob and the latter by the hen. This has been amply substantiated by his letters to the Sisters.

12.1. O! Glorious Royal Ladies!

The *CKC* gives an impression that the Sisters of the Koonammavu Convent were aware of the issue of the ordination of women to the priesthood in the Catholic Church. In the *Chronicle of the Koonammavu Convent*, we see a statement from Father Leopold Beccaro where he jockingly stated that if he were to become a bishop, he would ordain the Sisters priests.² As the chronicler did not give any details about the response of the Sisters to this statement, we do not know whether it was a point of their serious discussion. On the part of Chavara, however, the concern was to make the Sisters aware of the dignity of their call to religious life. He considered consecrated life superior to married life. He wrote to them: “Ha! My children, who else on earth enjoy happiness like you? How many women greater and richer than you in this world live in tears and troubles? Remember how sweet is the voice of your loving Bridegroom?”³

¹Porukara, *Short Biography of Most Reverend Father Prior of Monasteries* (1871), 35.

²*CKC*, vol. 1, 145.

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4, *Letters*, VII: 7 (2020).

A woman's dignity is closely connected with the love that she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love that she gives in return. Respecting the dignity of women and the special status they had attained in the Church, Chavara addressed the Sisters: "O! glorious royal ladies (*Maharajasthreekal*), the spouses of my Lord and God, how great and glorious the status to which you are raised."¹ This unique address reminded them of the greatness of their vocation to consecrated life and their spiritual proximity with the Lord. He seemed to say that everything they need was already within them, only they must approach themselves with reverence and love. It would work wonders if they let themselves believe in themselves. He invited them to believe that they are persons with dignity, self-reverence, and self-love: first and foremost, approach yourself with respect and love. He never promoted self-condemnation and self-distrust. People with self-condemnation feel that they are helpless and powerless. They see themselves as helpless to do anything because they do not see the power within them; such people may begin to hate themselves. Hating oneself would hold herself back from experiencing the fullness of life. All that one needs is already inside oneself; it is just a matter of noticing them; know one's own self worth, think positive, and have positive beliefs. These can be powerful in shaping one's life, mind, heart, and character. Appreciating the inner beauty and talents of the Sisters, on the opening day of the convent itself, Chavara openly wrote in his diary that Sisters Anna and Therese were quick in learning everything.² In a letter

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 2 (2020).

²Chavara, *CWC*, 1: *Chronicles*, 127 (2000).

written to the Sisters on 1 March 1870, he addressed them 'Glorious Royal Ladies' and told them:

While reading Saint Alphonsus Liguori's book *Monaca Sanctae* (Holy Nuns) I felt a holy envy at your immense fortune. It is undoubtedly very true! O! Queens and spouses of my God and Lord Jesus Christ! How great and praiseworthy indeed is the state of life you have embraced! Many of the empresses of this world will be jealous of you. You will realize it on the day of last judgment!¹

Moses once expressed his sense of wonder: "What great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?" (Dt 4:7). According to Chavara, the greatness of consecrated life is that God has chosen and made these Sisters as his own; He dwells with them and within them. He reminded them: "What could possibly be better than being chosen by the Almighty God to be his own special possession?" His caring love for the Sisters summoned the people of Kerala to broaden their vision and to have real respect and love towards Sisters in the country. They honoured the Sisters by calling them 'mothers'; in their difficult moments, they ran to the Sisters for the support of their prayers; they sent their daughters in big numbers to the convents to embrace religious life; they admired their lifestyle and extended their helping hands in all their needs.

The CKC gives an impression that the Sisters of the Koonammavu Convent were aware of certain issues with theological nuances, for example, whether ordination of women to the priesthood was possible in the Catholic Church? We come across a statement from Father Leopold

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 2 (2020).

that he jockingly said that if he became bishop the Sisters would be ordained as priests.¹ The chronicler did not give any details about the response of the Sisters to this statement. We have no indication as to know whether there was any serious discussion on the same. From the part of Chavara, his concern was to make the Sisters aware of the dignity of their call to religious life. He considered consecrated life superior to married life. He wrote to them: "Ha! My children, who else on earth enjoy happiness like you? How many women greater and richer than you in this world live in tears and troubles? Remember how sweet is the voice of your loving Bridegroom?"²

12.2. Words of Appreciation

Chavara, the founder father, highly appreciated the first members of the Koonammavu Convent. No where do we come across any negative remarks about them in his instructions or in his writings. On the first day of foundation of the convent, the founders showed them all the things that were arranged in their rooms and how to string the beads, etc. Then, Chavara penned in his diary: "Sister Anna, the daughter of the woman, who was now the Mother Superior, being more intelligent, prudent, and confident than the others, was learning everything very quickly. By 11 o'clock we finished everything and left."³ When he wrote about Elishwa Puthanangady from Vaikom, he painted the picture of her spiritual life in shining colors. The readers get a clear picture of her life as a widow, her thirst for God, her faith journey, her desire for religious life, and her eagerness to

¹CKC, vol. 1, 145.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 7 (2020).

³Chavara, *CWC*, 1: *Chronicles*, 127.

reach Koonammavu, etc. He concluded his writing on that day in these words: "She was admitted with the name sister Clara. Thus, the convent had four sisters and a helper to begin with. A seven-day clock was bought for Rs. 23. The two young sisters - Clara and Thresia - took to writing, playing on instruments and needle work."¹

12.3. Women with Inner Freedom

The relationship style of Saint Chavara was so remarkable that one can only call it amazing. He treated women as fully human in every respect; no word of deprecation about women, as such, was ever found on his lips. As an accepted leader of the Church, Chavara identified with the oppressed and disinherited; he related with women with respect and accorded them due freedom as is expected among equals. There were a number of instances which significantly showed Chavara's exceptional concern and attention for women and his manifold attempts to bring them to equal status in the society. Women's status in the rest of the society, by contrast, was severely limited by the caste-ridden Kerala society; it was in this background that Chavara had shown a preferential option for women, which definitely upheld their dignity and accorded them a special role in the society. Such an attitude and approach revealed his unique love for women.

He was aware of what constitutes women's essential richness and their own feminine genius. While he maintained that men and women are equally valuable, he also held that they are created to be different with a separate male and female essence.

¹Chavara, *CWC*, 1: *Chronicles*, 127.

Those 'mother saints' whom Chavara venerated were the ones who left their homes for their passion for Jesus. They were enlightened to opt for a new lifestyle which was not that common. Chavara experimented with it as seen in the case of Clara Puthenangady of Vaikom. She was the first woman in Kerala who left her home, travelled a long distance from one kingdom (Travancore) to another (Kochi) to embrace the religious life. In the same way, many girls from faraway places reached Koonammavu to get enlightened and empowered. Although the opportunities for girls to be educated on par with boys still remain a distant goal for many in India today, the visionary interventions of Chavara during the nineteenth century made it possible at least for those girls and women who got associated with the Koonammavu Convent.

Chapter 4

MARY OF NAZARETH, THE HIGHEST EXPRESSION OF FEMININE GENIUS¹

For Chavara, Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, was an exceptional feminine genius who influenced Jesus' life as well as the life of the apostles and the Church. In the *Atmanutapam*, we find his reflections on Mary's mission in salvation history, and in the life of the Church. He looked through the eyes of Mary and described how she felt about womanhood, about herself as a daughter, wife, and mother. She viewed herself as a disciple of Jesus; she followed him and his group of followers for three years; after the death of Jesus, as the beloved disciple and mother were mutually entrusted to each other (see Jn 19:27), she lived with John. Mary showed herself as a woman who was willing to be received, who humbly let herself become part of the disciple's world; as an obedient disciple, she was willing to adapt to the pace of someone younger than herself.

Chavara's Mary of Nazareth, as he had presented in the *Atmanutapam*, while completely devoted to the will of God, was far from being a timidly submissive woman; on the contrary, she was a woman who courageously stood at the foot of the cross when her son was disowned and deserted even by his closest disciples; she became the mother of the group of apostles and of the Church, with her motherly instinct and leadership qualities. Later, as per the direction of Jesus, she went to Spain, from there to Jerusalem. Then

¹Saint John Paul II, in his *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), had affirmed: "Mary is the highest expression of feminine genius" (No. 10).

she travelled to Ephesus and stayed there for two years with John. Once when the apostles gathered in Jerusalem to discuss some important issues, Peter called her to Jerusalem and there she died at the age of sixty-seven.

Very often Mary was affirmed of her womanhood; the Heavenly Father addressed her as “my daughter,” Jesus the Son called her “my mother,” and for the Holy Spirit she was the bride. In the *Dhyanasallapangal*, Chavara gave some more details about her marriage: she got married at fourteen and became a widow at the age of forty-five. As any other woman, Mary’s dominant life experience was through her body – pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, nurturing, caregiving, etc., which Chavara had picturized colourfully. She continued her spirituality of caring, nurturing, teaching, cooking, healing, etc., while she stayed with the Jerusalem community. Moreover, she was the mother and leader of the community; she cared for all the disciples. Chavara, in turn, affirmed and acknowledged such a spirituality of women as authentic. What we discover here is that Chavara presented Mary’s relationship with God and humans as rooted in her womanly experiences. She was not hindered from developing herself to her full God-given potential, by being restricted to and burdened in her home during or after her life with Jesus. First, therefore, we shall analyse Chavara’s relationship with Mary that enabled him to have a closer look at her life, attitudes, and values.

1. Chavara’s First Relationship with Mother Mary

1.1. Family Encounters

Chavara’s encounters with Christ began in his own family, in the authentic faith received naturally from his parents, particularly from his mother. He had the great blessing of growing up in a family in which faith was lived in a simple,

practical way. His mother taught him how to pray, and to make his acts of faith. During the same period of faith initiation, without being explicitly aware of it, young Chavara had his first personal encounters with Our Lady. After all, as a good Catholic family in Malabar, devotion to Mary was simply a part of one's daily life. Diving deep into his childhood memories, Chavara tried to identify the first image of Our Lady that accompanied him. Pope Francis once told: "If you want to know who Mary is, go to a theologian and he will tell you exactly who she is. But if you want to know how to love Mary, go to the people of God, who will teach you better."¹ Chavara's encounters with Mother Mary were very similar to those of the faithful in general.

1.2. Offering at Vechoor Church

In Chavara's description of the event of himself being offered at the feet of the Mother of Jesus at Vechoor Church, we get a Marian heart of his mother, Thoppil Mariam. He recollected (i.e., based on the experience shared by his mother) the precious words the priest told his mother at the moment of his dedication, and all the gestures of both the mother and the priest. Those words were very important for him and he even remembered them in the evening of his life. The event of dedication remained so firmly engraved in the young boy's memory, that even after 64 years he could still remember it vividly. In the *Atmanutapam*, Chavara recollected his mother's words regarding the relationship with Mary:

She your mistress, you her serf
Beware my son, preserve this in your mind!²

¹Homily of Pope Francis at Santa Martha on 25 March 2013.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos II: 23-24.

The young Kuriakose learnt about Our Lady intuitively in an encounter of faith that would mark his entire life, thanks to the strong religious traditions of his family. It was part of the family atmosphere in the home. Chavara's heart returned to Vechoor as he recalled his Marian experiences there, which would later deeply influence his spiritual path.

1.3. Celebration of Mary's Birthday

The Universal Church rejoices at the birth of the little Miriam, born to Joachim and Anna, who lived in an obscure village called Nazareth in Galilee. Chavara had made it a habit to visit Vechoor church for the annual feast, marking Mother Mary's birthday, along with his mother till her death. With the birth of Mary, human history takes a great turn. The period of waiting had ended and the period of realization began. The birth of the Virgin Mary was the prelude to the birth of Jesus; she is the new Woman, the new Eve; from her was to come the Redeemer, and a new people of God was inaugurated. The Second Vatican Council spoke of the birth of the Virgin in a very felicitous way: "With her, the incomparable Daughter of Zion, after having long awaited the promise, the time was fulfilled and a new economy was begun."¹ Mary's birthday, for Chavara, was a "day of grace." He sang:

On the day of grace, September eighth
 Holding her hand, to Mary's altar I'd go
 Pay my ransom, never once failed unto death;
 She performed the pious deed in devotion true.²

Chavara believed that Mary's birth gave hope to the unwanted females of India; he believed that his love for

¹*Lumen Gentium*, 55.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos II: 19-22.

Mary was significant for Indian women, who were denied of their human dignity, rights, and worth; he believed that Mary would help Indian women see themselves as full human beings capable of leading a self-directed life, claiming their rightful place in society and the Church. The very fact that God chose Mary, a simple girl from Nazareth, to become the Mother of His son affirms that every girl child enters this world clothed with dignity. She is God's chosen gift to humanity, entrusted with a divine mandate to be 'a life-bearer', an icon of love and compassion, courage, strength, and beauty. Through Mary's birth as a girl child, who was full of grace, God's favour had sanctified womanhood.

1.4. Prayer Pattern of Mannanam Community

For Chavara, Mary is a mother who keeps the family together. Knowing that the Rosary is, undoubtedly, the Catholic Church's most traditional Marian devotion, it became one of the most important prayers in the Mannanam Monastery from the time the fathers started staying together. They used to pray daily the fifteen decades of the Rosary.¹ Slowly people started coming from far and near, to pray with the priests in the community. The vibrations of their prayer spread around, to other families and villages. He believed that Mary, the person who is closer to God and his children, is an excellent mediator through whom, God offers us to foster a deeper encounter with Him.

Being a convinced Marian devotee, Chavara knew that the Rosary does not diminish the love we owe Christ, but, on the contrary, encourages it, perhaps even deepens it. "The Rosary, though clearly Marian in character, is at heart a Christo-centric prayer. In the sobriety of its elements, it

¹Chavara, *CWC*, 1: *Chronicles*, 32 (1985).

carries the full depth of the Gospel message in its entirety and can be described as a compendium of the Bible.¹ It was with this personal conviction and experience that he included the whole text of Rosary with the Marian Litany, 'May Devotion' and some other prayers to Mary when he printed *Jnanapiusham*, the first book printed and published from Mannanam press, in 1847. He included in that book various prayers that can be used as family prayer (*sandhya namaskaram*). We have many references of his interest in reaching this prayer book to many parishes, families, and also to Koonammavu Convent, boarding house, etc.² It had brought much solace in the lives of Christians.

1.5. Marian Devotion of Malabar Christians

We get an example of the growth in Marian devotion of Malabar Christians in a book authored by I. C. Chacko. During Mar Louis Pazheparampil's personal audience with Pope Leo XIII in 1897, the Pope marvelled at the Rosary devotion of the Christians of Malabar. The Pope asked him about all aspects of the faith-life of the people, such as their Sunday observance, sacramental life, Marian devotion, and so on. To the question about which are the expressions of their love for Mother Mary, Mar Louis replied that on Marian feasts when the families of the believers make their confession, and receive Holy Communion, they abstain from meat on Saturdays and Wednesdays, and they observe scapular devotion, and pray with the rosary. The Pope showed his amazement by asking, 'Everyday'? and 'all families'?³

¹John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002), 1.

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII: 1 (2020).

³Chacko, *Mar Louis Pazheparampil: Jeevithavum Kalavum*, 579.

We get the resonance of Chavara's love for Rosary in the words of Pope John Paul II, who affirmed: "The Rosary is my favourite prayer. A marvellous prayer! Marvellous in its simplicity and depth."¹ The Pontiff did not miss an opportunity to witness to the importance of the Rosary in his life. In his Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, he wrote enthusiastically: "From my youthful years this prayer has held an important place in my spiritual life... The Rosary has accompanied me in moments of joy and in moments of difficulty. To it I have entrusted any number of concerns; in it I have always found comfort."² Chavara's love for Mary, which he inherited from his mother, created on-going ripples in Christian families, especially among the mothers, who, in turn, transmitted the love to their young ones.

2. One Mother, Many Titles

Chavara's love for Our Lady always remained the same, regardless of the many titles by which faithful Christians address her. In different moments of his life, we see Chavara's emphasis on one or another title through his personal devotion: Our Lady, Help of Christians, Our Lady of Tenderness,³ Star of the sea,⁴ Arch of the Covenant,⁵ and many others. Among these numerous titles his most favourite ones were titles of her motherhood, such as 'my mother',⁶ 'my mother sweet',⁷ 'our mother',⁸ 'Immaculate

¹John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002), 2.

²John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002), 2.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IV: 105.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VI: 36.

⁵Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IV: 56.

⁶Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VII: 168, 120; II: 16, 192, 216.

⁷Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VII: 168.

⁸Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VII: 66; XII: 68.

Mother',¹ 'holy mother',² 'mother of Carmel',³ 'mother of God',⁴ 'virgin mother',⁵ 'merciful mother',⁶ and 'O! Mother'.⁷ Because he believed that the uniqueness of a woman lies in the notion that she is made for the 'order of love', she can find herself only by giving love to others⁸ and the typical vocation for every woman is motherhood in its physical and/or spiritual dimension.

3. Mary's Identity and Vocation

Mary was aware of her vocation, identity, uniqueness, feminine richness and her mission. Chavara presented Mary as the 'Woman promised', who lived her womanhood as daughter,⁹ wife, leader, and mother of the community.¹⁰ Moreover, as Pope Francis spoke, Mary's greatness lies in

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XII: 92.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VII: 124; X: 64, 114; XII: 92.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VII: 176.

⁴The title 'Mother of God' is repeated many times. See, for example, Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos I: 60; II: 255; V: 140, 142; VII: 86, 90, 336; X: 335.

⁵Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VII: 64, 548; Concluding Prayer: 4. Chavara addresses and invokes her as 'virgin' many times. See Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IV: 35; IX: 4.

⁶Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IV: 82.

⁷Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XII: 430; IX: 200.

⁸John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 7.

⁹Chavara called her Mary Joachim, or Mary daughter of Anna, which means that Mary kept her identity as daughter of Joachim and Anna. See *Dhyanasallapangal*, 40; see also Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 2: *Maranaveetil Padanulla Pana*, 1149-1161; 172 (1986).

¹⁰Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IV: 1, 82; Cantos X: 96-104, 123-124 speak of the leadership of Mary in the community.

her attitude of littleness.¹ According to Pope John Paul II, “The Church sees in Mary, the highest expression of the feminine genius and she finds in her a source of constant inspiration.”²

3.1. Mary: ‘Crown of Womankind’

Chavara’s use of eulogies to address Mary shows his understanding of the greatness and glory of her womanhood. He addressed her as “supreme lady,”³ “crown of womankind,”⁴ “my mistress,”⁵ etc. Chavara often pointed to Mary as garbed with the sun, crowned with stars, and standing on the moon, referring to the last book of the Bible (Rev 12:1-6). Bible scholars say that this woman is first of all the Church, the new eve, who gives birth to the body of Christ. Then, according to the traditional interpretation, she is Mary herself. Without doubt, Chavara affirms in the *Atmanutapam*, that Mary is that woman, promised in the Garden of Eden; in her were fulfilled the promises of God. He presented her as the proto-type of ‘the woman’, whom each woman longs in her heart to take after, as she is the woman of the New Testament, the image of the Church. Mary is the model of femininity that is authentic, the epitome of the feminine genius. The poet calls Mary, “Crown of womankind”:

¹The Pope said this while presiding over the First Vespers of the Solemnity of the Mary Most Holy, Mother of God, on 31 December 2019 at Vatican. <https://zenit.org/articles/category/rome> (accessed on 2 January 2020).

²John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), 10.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IV: 37.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IV: 1, 82, 106.

⁵Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IV: 27.

Mother benign, O! Crown of womankind
 Through you was God's promise to man fulfilled
 Since Eve, the first parent, the mother of all
 Was deluded by the vile serpent's vice...
 Pointing to the Blessed Mother he said
 Between her sons and you will enmity evoke.

The Son born of her, "your head shall crush
 Underfoot without fail," This curse
 Found fulfilment in you, Hence for all

Ages to come, generations will hail you 'Blessed'.¹

When Jesus was nailed on the cross, Lucifer was confused for a while; but, when he heard Jesus telling, "Woman, this is your son," and to the beloved disciple, "Behold thy mother!" (Jn 19:26ff.), his doubts vanished:

Now the conviction dawned: This was the Christ!

This, the Lady who would crush his head.²

Chavara, at any rate, had recognized the fulfilment of the prophecy in Genesis 3:15 that Mary was the woman promised, and Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman.³ Mary was able to communicate the deeper truths of the effect and power of the feminine vocation. Years later, Pope John Paul II affirmed Chavara's conviction by saying that "At the beginning of the New Covenant ... there is a woman: The Virgin of Nazareth... Mary is 'the new beginning' of the dignity and vocation of women, of each and every woman." Further, he stated: "In Mary, Eve discovers the nature of the true dignity of woman, of feminine humanity. This

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IV: 1-12.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VIII: 249-250.

³Chavara wrote: "This is the Lady who would crush his head."

discovery must continually reach the heart of every woman and shape her vocation and her life.”¹

3.2. Mary’s Vocation to Motherhood

The ‘proto-gospel’ already proclaims that the woman whose posterity will crush the serpent’s head (Gen 3:15) is a mother. The last pages of the Bible also refer to a woman in birth pangs, the seed of the woman, and the woman clothed with the sun and moon at her feet (Rev 12:1-6). What is basic to Chavara’s understanding of Blessed Virgin Mary is her motherhood.

Motherhood is more than just a bodily action; it is a process as well as a status that involves the whole person. Chavara enlists various expressions of her motherly concerns towards Jesus, his disciples, and the Church. At the time of the Lord’s death, a new family, namely, the Church was brought into being. The Church proceeds from the sacrifice of the Son of God, and the union of the beloved disciple and the Mother of the Lord that prefigures and foreshadows the genuine bond of love between the mother and child.²

It is important to notice that the relationship established between the mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple was that of ‘mother-son’. A new family was begun there: John got a nurturing mother; from that time on, John’s house became Mary’s house. Mary’s relationship to the disciple – then and now – is that of mother. The ‘mother of Jesus’ now becomes the ‘mother of the disciple’. She could, therefore, rightly be called the ‘Mother of the Church’ and the ‘mother of Kuriakose’, an expression we often see in Chavara’s writings.

¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 11.

²Hoskyns and Davey, eds., *The Fourth Gospel*, 530.

In her vocation to motherhood she reached the summit of its dignity and potential. In the special mission entrusted to her, Mary brought all her feminine richness, first to the family of Nazareth, to the disciples of Jesus (Jn 2:11) and later to the first community of believers (Acts 1:14).

Through his portrait of the Mother of Jesus, Chavara had rounded off his message. The Mother of Jesus, even in John, is not a distant unattainable figure; she is simply the consummate realization of what was portrayed as possible in all the other women; she is an epitom of the quality of life of faith and receptivity, that finds itself in the radical loss of self in a deep and unquestioning trust in the word of Jesus, the revelation of God in the person and message of Jesus of Nazareth.¹ Chavara invited us to realize that Mary is always at our side, and lets us feel her presence near us, even if we do not see her.

3.3. Blessed Virgin

Believing that Mary's virginity was designed by God, Chavara enjoyed praising her as 'Blessed Virgin'. In the biblical worldview, virginity stood for faithfulness to God. In the Bible, Israel was termed virgin when she was faithful to Yahweh. If not, she were referred to as an adultress or a whore. Mary was qualified to give a human response to God because she was faithful to God. Mary's virginity, therefore, couldn't be reduced to a physical level alone, but her physical virginity was a sign of her virginity at a deeper spiritual level, which is her deep personal relationship with God. Meditating on the beauty of Mary's virginity, Pope Paul VI said: "The modern woman will appreciate that Mary's choice of the state of virginity, which in God's plan,

¹Moloney, *Woman First among the Faithful*, 90-92.

prepared her for the mystery of the Incarnation, was not a rejection of any of the values of the married state, but a courageous choice which she made, in order to consecrate herself totally to the love of God."¹ Even though Chavara praised the motherhood of Mary, he seemed to believe that in order to fulfil her vocation as a woman, she need not have become wife and mother; she could have remained a virgin in her heart and body.

After the death of Mary, when all the apostles and believers of Jerusalem community were present, they heard a hymn from the heavens declaring Mary as ever virgin:

Joyous praise the angels sang
 "Hailed by God, full of Grace!"
 "The Lord of goodness is with you!"
 The distinguished stood singing
 All who came sang in joy
 A virgin before and after conception
 "Chaste at the conception and
 Chaste for ever" so acclaimed.²

3.4. Mary as a Perfect Wife

When the angel had announced "Do not be afraid to take Mary, your wife, into your house" (Mt 1:20), Joseph's greatest desire was to have Mary as his wife. Once every doubt had been happily resolved, they became happy spouses, uniquely united by God. For, between the spouses there was a secret known to them alone; there was the presence of the Son of God who had brought them together and for whom they would live their lives. The beauty and gladness of their relationship was that both Joseph and

¹Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* (1974), 37.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XII: 203-209.

Mary were aware of their greatness, the great role that God had entrusted them, which they accepted with joy. Joseph understood who his spouse was – the long-awaited woman prophesied in Genesis 3:15; she was the Virgin Mother predicted by Isaiah as a sign of salvation (Is 7); the son, conceived by the working of the Holy Spirit, was the very Son of God himself. Pope John Paul II affirmed that, through obedience to the Word of God, Mary accepted her lofty, yet, not easy vocation, as wife and mother in the family of Nazareth.¹ On 19 March 1995, the Pontiff gave his Angelus reflection on the Holy Family of Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary helped each other in managing their family and caring for the child Jesus in these words: “As a carpenter, Joseph was a craftsman in the truest sense of the term. Mary, who looked after the household chores, could today be considered a housewife, and, as such, the model for all those women who are true ‘homemakers’.”²

3.4.1. Mutual Respect between Joseph and Mary

According to a popular saying, “a good wife makes a good husband.” In the *Dhyanasallapangal*, while praying to Saint Joseph, Chavara reflected upon the mutual love and respect between Joseph and Mary. Joseph accepted Mary at the age

¹John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), 10.

²John Paul II, “The Feminine Presence in the Family” (19 March 1995). The following text explicates it further: “When Jesus opens up to woman the possibilities of freedom and allows her to become herself, the man loses a slave but rediscovers the companion that God had “brought to the man,” a partner who is free and equal, complementary but not identical... In union with each other, man and woman discover fullness of life and freedom.” Balquiere, *The Grace to Be a Woman*, New York: Scribner’s, 1971, 12.

of fourteen and looked after her till she was forty-five, says Chavara.¹ During the time of Mary in Palestine, there was one common point that characterized women's condition throughout, namely, dependence. As a young girl, she was under the father's responsibility, at the time of marriage this authority was simply exchanged from the father to her husband; she was often referred to as 'given' or 'offered' in marriage. The husband now became the master of his wife, and she was seen as his possession. But this was not true about Mary, as Joseph had high reverence for Mary.

There is another reason for their mutual respect and admiration, namely, Mary's immaculate conception. It was the 'original sin' that spoiled the relationship between man and woman. The punishment levelled against woman ("Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" Gen 3:16) damages 'the unity of the two' that God had intended. This is damaging to both man and woman, but is more damaging for the woman.² This 'domination' indicates the disturbance and loss of the stability of that fundamental equality, which man and woman possess in the 'unity of the two'. Being sinless, Mary was free of this curse and, in the case of Mary and Joseph, their equality, resulting from their dignity as persons, lent beauty to their mutual relationship, and there remained an authentic communion of persons. Chavara's presentation of their mutual love becomes more beautiful when it is seen in their Jewish background, or even within an Indian patriarchal mindset. Even today equality of the sexes seems to elude the society's frame of mind. Consequently, the partnership in marriage is not on equal terms in the Jewish system. Woman

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 30 (1981).

²John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 9.

is not seen as a 'partner' by many, but a servant or a service provider.

According to Chavara, Joseph was the head of the Holy Family; he was the protector and educator of Jesus. Angel told Joseph: "You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). These words defined the work for which the Son of God became man: to save, to redeem from sin and, thus, to reopen the gates of heaven. Joseph himself would be in charge of the human formation and education of the Son of God, in order to prepare him for his mission. The relationship between Mary and Joseph, from the moment their union was willed by God for taking care of Jesus, was one of extreme respect and understanding. Mary had the assistance of a most faithful companion, who would share her joys and sorrows, as she would share with him the secrets of her own identity and that of Jesus. There was no conjugal relation, but there was true love, one that was not confined to the senses. This is the picture of the beauty of the relationship that existed between Mary and Joseph one that we get from the *Atmanutapam*. Whereas, in the *Dhyanasallapangal*, we see a prayer by Chavara to Saint Joseph, a meditation on the inner struggle of Joseph and Mary, regarding the mystery of Mary's pregnancy which had not been revealed to Joseph yet:

O merciful and gracious Saint Joseph, you were the strong guardian and protector of the immaculate Virgin Mary. As her lawful husband you looked after her with loving care and vigilance so much so that the holy queen was not in the least bored or annoyed with your company. Not only that, you tended to the needs of the holy mother with so tender a devotion that she always seemed contented with, and indebted to, your loving service.

For, she was impelled by the nature of the times, not to reveal to her husband in person unasked, that she had conceived the Son of God through the annunciation by the angel. She knew how broken-hearted Joseph was, when the mystery of Incarnation had not been clearly understood by him. It was certainly a troubled time for him. He could hardly bear the silence of Mary. In his heart he never doubted the integrity of Mary. But, 'the signs!' Holy Mary, however, was afraid, knowing through her inner eye, what was happening in Joseph. Mary was afraid that her holy husband, her only stay and support on earth, would abandon her and her son. But, her modesty and sense of propriety did not allow her to tell him the truth of her conception. She, in all humility, suffered everything in silence, but tried her best to alleviate his sufferings through her attentive love and care. His paternity, however, was too holy to point an accusing finger against her fidelity. Instead, he kept on staying with the Holy Mother and cheering her in all possible ways.

So also, O! Saint Joseph, my dear Father, your paternity fostered young Jesus in such a way as He would feel quite at home in your guardianship and protection. Saint Joseph, dear Father, you abided by the honour and sanctity of the Holy Mother, who bore in her womb the son of God for nine months.¹

In the *Atmanutapam*, Chavara visualized that Joseph's esteem for Mary was transformed into true veneration: Joseph was truly the first great devotee of Mary, most holy. Joseph seriously reflected on himself and realized how much God must have expected of him by entrusting Jesus

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 30-31 (1981).

and Mary to him, and said: "By Your mercy, I was made her companion." Even in the midst of various inconveniences and difficulties they neither accused nor blamed each other; instead, both were concerned about the other and lavished words of appreciation for each other. It is in these words that Chavara painted Joseph's concern for Mary, when they reached Bethlehem, searching for a place to give birth to the Son of God:

Where do I find a place for her to rest?
 Lord, your mother so full of mercy
 Why did you entrust her to me, a worm?
 As the shining moon hid by rain clouds
 You son now reposes calmly in her womb
 And if, today my God, He is to be born!
 Yet, my Lord, remember Your Mother she is
 Her heart so fair, pure immaculately so!¹

After entering into the cave, realizing that the time has come for Mary to give birth to her son, Joseph was eager to see the baby. In the following verse, the poet describes Joseph's joyful excitement in these words:

Lord of all, giver of gifts
 As the Sun, tearing clouds, shines forth
 May your son, you granted to be
 Savior of all, come forth the virgin womb;
 Permit us to adore Him on earth
 Come, quick to slake our thirst.²

The poet described Mary and Joseph kissing the new born baby for the first time as a heartwarming experience.³ Parenting roles and joy of parenting of both Mary and

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IV: 101-120.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos V: 25-30.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos V: 84-90, 119-128.

Joseph were emphasized. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II exhorted that women should not bear the whole responsibility of parenting; instead, the child's upbringing, taken as a whole, should include the contribution of both parents. It is for this purpose that the task of procreation is given to both man and woman. This idea is beautifully depicted in Chavara's *Atmanutapam*.

Mary never asserted a proprietary right toward her son; as wife, she had a limitless trust and practised a compliant submission suitable to her conviction that her husband was given to her by God.¹ Many are the examples of her appreciation for, and devotedness to, Joseph; Mary's complete trust in Joseph and the satisfaction of knowing that he was enlightened by God. The attitude of Mary was that she is not worthy to be the wife of such a great man, Joseph, and that she was indebted to him for every help and support he had extended to her. The mutual love and appreciation of Joseph and Mary remained as a healing therapy to the Jewish community where woman's identity was that of a commodity of 'use and throw' stature; men failed to see any spiritual dimension in her activities.

Both Mary and Joseph took Jesus for circumcision and to the Jerusalem temple for the rite of purification. They had made it a habit to go to the temple for the annual Passover Feast. All these little incidents contribute to strengthen their bond of love with each other and with God. We get an echo of the message of Chavara's *Atmanutapam* in *Gaudete et Exultate* of Pope Francis to families/parents where the Pontiff reminded them of the God-experience of ordinary activities of each family.²

¹Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 22.

²Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate* (2018), 11.

3.4.2. Mary's Sufferings

Mary's divine maternity did not exempt her from suffering. According to Chavara, Joseph's initial doubts and uncertainty regarding his decision constituted the first of her great sufferings.¹ There were other ongoing and greater sufferings that would accompany her in future. Throughout their flight to Egypt, for example, she was filled with the fear of being followed and caught, until they had managed to cross the border. It was a long journey of many days on foot. Simeon's words in the temple of Jerusalem while he was offered to the Lord, her widowhood, her being a single parent, the loss of her son, her son's passion, crucifixion, and burial, etc., gave her much sorrow. Mary, who did not suffer labour pains as she gave birth to her son in Bethlehem, had to live her motherhood amidst continued suffering.

The poet has titled one canto of the *Atmanutapam* as *Mathrudukham* (The Mother's Grief) with 238 lines in which Mary pours out all her sorrows during the night after the crucifixion and death of Jesus. She recollected all the joyful and bitter experiences of her life with Jesus. She posed many questions that had no answers here on the earth. The Lord did not spare her either the sorrow or the torment of not understanding the reason for her sufferings. It was painful for a mother to not understand her own child. The answer did not come from the cross and death, but from the resurrection. At the conclusion of the canto, we see her forgiving Peter and other apostles for abandoning their Lord, and gathering them together into a community.² Then, the Holy Spirit had revealed to her that her son had gone to the nether

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 30 (1981).

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 212-229.

world. With full hope she contemplated his resurrection. Therefore, in Chavara's words, "she remained in her contemplation, and deep in her heart awaited for Saturday."¹

From the very beginning of the saviour's earthly life, she was intimately united to the rejection that he would encounter. This maternal suffering reached its apex at the foot of the cross where Mary experienced the pangs and "the labour" of childbirth (Rev 12:3). Mary was so intimately united with the sacrifice of her son, that she experienced in her soul what he suffered in his body; because it was a kind of sweet connection between the child and the mother that if the child got hurt, the mother too simultaneously felt the pain.

Chavara presented the sufferings of Jesus and Mary, especially on the way to Calvary in a mystical way; also, he provided a picture as to how Mary cooperated in the salvific suffering of Jesus. Saint Thomas Aquinas presented the Annunciation in a nuptial symbolism: "When the Word became flesh in Mary's womb it was like the celebration of a marriage between humanity and the Word. Mary gave her consent "in lieu of that of the entire human nature."² Chavara presented Jesus' way to Calvary as a wedding procession, cross as wedding garland, Golgotha as wedding canopy, and the cross as the wedding chamber, where the Bridegroom embraced the bride.³

He crowned, the crown he wore, a mark of love
And leading his beloved one, the perfect bride
He journeyed forth for His nuptials towards
The Rostrum decorated on Calvary's peak.

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 236-238.

²See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a, 30, 1.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VIII: 13-40, 64-108.

With loud acclamations of exuberant joy
 He's dragged in haste. To see the progress
 Brave sweet maiden came forth
 And looked intently on her beloved's neck.
 To see the garland invisible to the eye;
 O! how picturesque his bracelets
 Invisible even to celestial dignified Lords,
 The crown of your handsome bridegroom
 The blessed Bridegroom, His mother follows him.
 To see the garland invisible to the eye;
 O! how picturesque his bracelets
 Invisible even to celestial dignified Lords,
 The crown of your handsome bridegroom!¹

The path of her life followed a course completely different from what was told about her son Jesus. The angel had told her that he would be king... But how was his kingship? What sort of king was he! She did not get any clear answer for her innumerable questions: her life was beset with problems; election of a village girl, Mary of Nazareth, as the mother of Jesus, the redeemer, did not give her a clear understanding of the plan of God, which would have enlightened her, as a result of which, her uncertainty, doubts, and questions went without an answer. The number of questions Chavara put in Mary's mouth on the night after the burial of Jesus tells us that the Lord is not bound to give us an explanation of his behaviour. Her life speaks loudly that to have patience, to be quiet, and to wait, etc., are virtues which often cost us dearly.

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VIII: 84.

3.5. Mary: A True Disciple of Jesus

Mary's vocation as the mother of Jesus and partner in the work of redemption is well expressed in her own words in the *Atmanutapam*:

To help you save all, I follow you
 Knew your will and willingly came
 All my will I offer you
 With my life, I'll do the same.¹

Being convinced that her following of Jesus was His will, she fully associated with the mission of Jesus. Chavara portrayed Mary as a true disciple of Jesus, her son; she saw herself as a disciple of Jesus. She loved her son so much that she wanted to participate in his saving mission. Even at the birth of Jesus, while kissing the tender feet of the new born baby, in Chavara's vision, Mary acknowledged him as supreme guru.² The baby Jesus seemed to tell her: "Beloved mother, watch over me and yourself to all that you are my mother."³ The words used by Chavara in this instance can have the meaning, namely, looking at me, you follow me; you show to all that you are my mother.

According to Suzanne Watts Henderson, "presence and practice" characterize the Christian discipleship.⁴ On the one hand, from the outset of Mark, Jesus gathers a band of followers, who remain mostly in his presence. As the first public act to follow his opening proclamation, Jesus addresses four fishers with the imperative, "follow me" (Mk 1:17). Later, when he convenes the Twelve, Mark's Jesus appoints them first of all in order that they might "be with

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 157-160.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 76.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos V: 80-82.

⁴Henderson, "Discipleship after the Resurrection," 106-124.

him" (Mk 3:14). In both instances, Mark's language suggests that discipleship begins in Jesus' presence, and the unfolding narrative situates the disciples as prominent, even privileged, characters who accompany Jesus on his way. In this aspect, Chavara's Mary is a perfect disciple who remained in Jesus' presence throughout his life.

While Jesus was staying with his mother, especially after the death of Saint Joseph, Mary sought his continuous presence. As portrayed by Chavara, when the time came for Jesus' baptism, Jesus gave her a loving embrace and left for baptism. Afterwards, when Jesus came to Mary's residence with his five disciples, Mary kissed his feet with love, devotion, and reverence,¹ which was considered to be the gesture of a disciple towards his/her guru. Believing that her son redeemed the world through his passion and death, Chavara portrayed her as meditating on, and visiting various stations of the cross. Before she returned to her heavenly home, she made a pilgrimage to Calvary along with thousands of angels and John. She reflected deeply on the agony He had endured and adored the spots of His passion.²

3.5.1. Mary: A Constant Follower of Jesus

From the beginning of Christ's mission, women showed to him and to his mystery a special sensitivity, which is characteristic of their femininity. Mary was a perfect disciple following Jesus throughout his public ministry, and he gave her due respect of a mother and a true disciple.³ In both his poetic works *Atmanutapam* and *Maranaveetil Padunna Pana*

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 137-144.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 342-345.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 162-165.

and his *Dhyanasallapangal*, Chavara pictured Mary, the mother of Jesus, as being present among the women disciples who followed Jesus in his ministry.¹ When Chavara gives the name of women disciples, who followed Jesus, he includes 'Mary Joachim', the mother of God in that group.² In the *Pana*, Mary is called the 'daughter of Anna'.³

What is special to the name of Mary in his writings is that Chavara keeps her maiden name, 'Mary Joachim' or 'daughter of Anna', meaning that she is still the daughter of Joachim and Anna.⁴ Even after getting married to Joseph, her identity as the daughter was not lost or abandoned. Was it because she became a widow by that time?⁵ Social attitudes added to the burden of a widow's pain and grief and there were a lot of restrictions imposed by the society on the life of widows. But, Mary was not directing herself and her life according to a conventional style. Being a widow, Mary's presence among the group of women disciples, inspired the society to develop a positive and supportive attitude towards widows, and, thus, she remained an icon of liberation.

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 162-165; Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 2: *Maranaveetil Padanulla Pana*, 1149-1161; Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 40 (1981).

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 40 (1981); 20 (2000).

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 2: *Maranaveetil Padanulla Pana*, 1149-1161; 172 (1986).

⁴Chavara did not address Mary as the wife of Joseph. Against the traditional patriarchal mind-set, in the Christian belief, Joseph is designated as the husband of Mary (Mt 1:18); thus, instead of calling Mary the wife of Joseph, the evangelist gives prominence to Mary.

⁵Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 87. Mary lamented that, first, Joseph passed away and, then, her son.

3.5.2. Mary: A Woman Free for the Gospel

Although the evangelists do not present Jesus' mother as travelling with Jesus and the group of disciples in his Galilean ministry, Chavara was bold and loud in his assertion that Mary was a constant follower of Jesus, namely, she was there in his infancy and childhood, in his Galilean ministry and Journey to Jerusalem and in the events that happened in Jerusalem.

In rabbinic Judaism, women were allowed to hear the word of God in the synagogue, but they were never disciples of a rabbi, unless their husband or master was a rabbi willing to teach them.¹ But here, Chavara demonstrated an entirely different set of values by depicting Mary following Jesus with the group of women disciples. By including Mary along with the group of Galilean women disciples, Chavara brings to our mind that she accompanied Jesus in towns and villages (Lk 8:1-3) and she was totally available for the cause of the Gospel. His intention of including Mary can be that the faith of the disciples would be strengthened (Jn 2:11), they could imitate her as their role model, and see her as their companion, mother, elder sister, and even as their friend. Moreover, she was a disciple totally free for the Gospel. According to Chavara, as a mother, she was concerned about her son's wellbeing. In the *Atmanutapam*, Mary said: "For three years I reverently followed your footprints and took care of your food and that of your disciples."² Woman's work of birthing, caring, nurturing, teaching, cooking, healing, etc., is presented as life-giving and, therefore, closely related to God's work of giving life. Women also experience God through these

¹Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, vol. 3, 117.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 162-165.

experiences that are valuable, according women greater dignity since they convey God's love and bring people to an abundance of life. In order to partake in Jesus' mission of saving the humanity, he allowed Mary to follow him:

To help you save all, I follow you
Knew your will and willingly came
All my will I offer you
With my life, I'll do the same.¹

Mary understood her mission to be a disciple by becoming a doer of the Word of God. Realizing that it was the will of Jesus that she walked along with him in his ministry and she did it joyfully experiencing the fullness of life that Jesus had brought to offer (Jn 10:10). According to Chavara's meditative imagination, Jesus himself appreciated and valued her constant following and accompaniment; she followed him not only in moments of joy and jubilation but also on his way to Calvary and in the moments of his excruciating pain, rejection, humiliation, helplessness, hopelessness, and humiliating death. He also emphasized the fact that she was there at all decisive moments of his messianic mission.²

Mary proved to be a perfect disciple of Jesus, not only in following him, but in also following the will of God. She admitted that throughout her life she kept the will of God.³ Mary exclaimed: "Ah! It is will for me your holy will be done."⁴ According to Chavara, Mary is the person God included most fully in his work of salvation, and who most willingly participated in mediating Christ, the only

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 157-162.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 353-368.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 448.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 72.

mediator. He believed and described Mary's mission as the "permanent helper and associate of Jesus in the work of salvation." Permanent, because it does not end with her earthly life, but continues in eternity, as Vatican II explains:

Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this salvific duty, but by her constant intercession continued to bring us the gifts of eternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and problems, until they are led into the happiness of their true home.¹

3.5.3. Mary: Model and Mother of Consecrated Life

Chavara considered Mary as the first consecrated person, the model of perfect consecration to God and the mother of consecrated persons. Mary lived her womanhood in a sublime manner. Pope John Paul II praised Mary in whom full realization of consecration is present: "In fact, there is present in the 'womanhood' of a woman who believes, and especially in a woman who is 'consecrated', a kind of inherent 'prophecy', a powerfully evocative symbolism, a highly significant 'iconic character', which finds its full realization in Mary, and which also aptly expresses the very essence of the Church as a community consecrated with the integrity of a 'virgin's' heart to become the 'bride' of Christ and 'mother'" of believers."² Consecrated virginity acquires a spiritual value, and in reference to Mary, it had a great influence in this regard, as the epitome of virginity itself. As both spouse and mother, Mary became the model of woman *par excellence*. Paul VI made it clear in *Marialis Cultus* that Mary "has always been proposed to the faithful by the

¹*Lumen Gentium*, 62.

²John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), 11.

Church as an example to be imitated, not precisely in the type of life she led, and much less, for the socio-cultural background in which she lived, but, for the way in which, in her own particular life, in which she, fully and responsibly, accepted the will of God.”¹ She is, therefore, the model for all believers, and not just for consecrated persons, or women.

Chavara reminded the sisters of Koonammavu Convent to observe and imitate Mary to become more aware of their specific identity and mission in the Church. He encouraged women in their vocations by saying that those women, who wish to fulfil their feminine vocations in one of several ways, will most surely succeed in their goals if they keep the idea of the Virgin Mother in front of their eyes, and strive to form themselves according to her image.² They must also entrust themselves to her guidance and place themselves completely under her care. The sisters of Koonammavu Convent recorded these words of their founder father: “Like Mary, the mother of God, you must always have a noble attitude and a sweet behaviour.”³ In moments of trouble, Chavara used to approach Mother Mary with a childlike freedom and trust. On 1 March 1867, he had such an experience of great blessing from Mary that she proved to be a caring mother and an ‘influencer’ of God. Later, he shared this experience with the sisters. He narrated:

As we were having a heavy heart, both for me and my spiritual director, our Delegate Provincial told our sisters to say some prayers - three Hail Holy Queen and three *Memorare* - to the effect that what seemed to assume

¹Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* (1974), 35.

²John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), 46.

³CKC, vol. 2: 52.

mountainous proportions was soon made as light as a flower by the Blessed Mother.¹

He testifies to his strong bond with Mary from his own experience: "Till now, I have never cast a net in the name of our Blessed Mother which has been in vain."² In the collection of Chavara's prayers, one prayer to Mother Mary captures our special attention.³ It speaks of his filial relationship with the Mother of Jesus. He believed that when Mother Mary offers Chavara's requests to Jesus, they would not be rejected.

On various occasions, Chavara presented Mary as the model of committed lifestyle that the sisters enjoyed in the convent so that they learned from her the joy of being fully themselves, establishing mutual relationship of respectful and genuine love. While following her son and pondering over the events of his sorrowful journey, Chavara wrote: "Loving mother saw all things in her heart."⁴ He insisted that the sisters become contemplatives and persons with big hearts like that of Mary, in all the events of life as well as in their dealings with others. He assured them that their strong relationship with Mary would enhance their encounter with Jesus, their Spouse, more deeply. Chavara was a man with a deep love for Mary, like millions of other Catholics of Malabar. His spirituality was made up of personal

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 46 (1981).

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, V: 17 (2020), Chavara's letter to his grandnephew, Father Joseph Thressia Chavara on 9 December 1869. He wrote this on the payment of Rupees 120 as tax of the convent at Koonammavu.

³Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 68 (1981): Prayer to the Holy Mother of God.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VIII: 116.

encounters with our Lady, each of which was an essential part of his pilgrimage of faith. Pope John Paul II thanked the consecrated women of the world for following the example of Mother Mary: "Thank you, consecrated women! Following the example of the greatest of women, the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, you open yourselves with obedience and fidelity to the gift of God's love. You help the Church and all humankind, to experience a 'spousal' relationship to God, one which magnificently expresses the fellowship God wishes to establish with His creatures."¹

4. Mary's Lifestyle in the Community of Believers

Chavara presents Mary's life after the death of Jesus in Jerusalem community with the disciples till her departure from this earth. In between, she lived with John in Ephesus for two years. Her way of life was fully guided by her son Jesus, which was a clear expression of Mary-Kuriakose bonding. Mary's role was significant rather than incidental. She became united with God and involved in his plan in a way that was unique. No other human was united with God in such an intimate way. Moreover, to be mother of God, was a role open only to a woman.

Mary attained the supernatural elevation of union with God that all humans eventually hope to achieve in the afterlife. To this extent, she is an archetype or a representation of what humanity can become. However, her role is also distinctive. Only she has the mother-son relationship with God.

For Chavara, Mary offers the group of disciples the perfect model of the disciple of the Lord. We find her in the 'Upper Room' with the group of apostles and believers,

¹John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), 2.

waiting prayerfully for the Holy Spirit; she is a listening disciple, pondering over things in her heart. She lives in the present moment, caring for the needs of the disciples and joins her will to the will of God, showing her unfailing devotion to Jesus and His work. Being a genius mother, she exercises her maternal influence to unite all children and the believers accept her as their mother. Pope John Paul II explains the reason for this kind of motherhood: "The maternal 'reign' of Mary consists in this. She, who was, in all her being, a gift for her Son, has also become a gift for the sons and daughters of the whole human race, awakening profound trust in those who seek her guidance along the difficult paths of life on the way to their definitive and transcendent destiny."¹

Mary disclosed to the community of believers in Jerusalem, about how to be open, receptive, and sensitive to the deepest human needs. Her pastoral commitment contributed much towards the faith building of the community. The elevated place that Chavara has placed Mary in, at the school of apostles, echoes the words of Pope Francis, who defended the feminine role: "A Church without women is like the Apostolic College without Mary. The role of women in the Church is not only maternal, as the mother of the family, but it is stronger: it is, in fact, the icon of the Virgin, Our Lady, the one who helps the Church grow..."²

In order to picture the total availability and the swiftness of Mary's actions, very often, Chavara depicted her as

¹John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), 10.

²Pope Francis' press conference on 28 July 2013 enroute the home-bound flight from the World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro.

travelling in the chariot of clouds.¹ Sometimes, angels carry her to her destination. On some other occasions, Chavara presented her as doing many activities at a time, just as the mothers do in their families. For example, we can see how, as directed by Jesus, the angels carried Mary, the queen of heaven, in a chariot of clouds and reached Sarcos (Spain) in a moment, where she instructed Apostle James how to accept the will of God. Angels placed a picture of Mary in Spain. Back to Jerusalem Mary reached in a chariot of clouds. From there, Mary was travelling in a boat to Ephesus along with John.²

When they reached Ephesus, the believers joined together and they offered a house for Mary and another one for John. By that time James had reached from Spain, and he venerated Mary and asked for her blessing to do the will of God.³ He pleaded with Mary to bless him with courage to become a martyr, requested her to be present at the time of his martyrdom. Then, he hurried to Jerusalem and Herod killed him.⁴ Jesus sent an angel to Ephesus to inform Mary of the death of James, and instructed her to reach Jerusalem soon. The angel took her in a chariot of clouds, and she reached the spot of his martyrdom, sat by his side, and consoled and strengthened James at the time of his death. She took the soul of James to Jesus in a chariot of clouds. This incident took place on 5 July 48 AD. She, then, returned to Ephesus. When she came to know that Peter was in prison, she sent an angel and had him freed from the prison.

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 201-208; in Cantos X, there are many examples of this sort.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 221-224.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 269-272.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 279-296.

Thus, Mary was fully involved in all the matters of the growing church. Jesus communicated with her from heaven, and she guided the apostles and the church community accordingly.

Chavara also presented Peter as venerating Mother Mary and Mary, in turn, respecting the authority of Peter, whom Jesus had appointed as the head of the apostolic group. Their mutual respect is beautifully pictured. There is no indication in Chavara's presentation that Mary was, in any sense, dependent on, or subordinate to, Peter or John or any other man. He emphasized the gift of the feminine genius of Mary that she lived in her spirit of service in Jerusalem community. Chavara asserts that women are not for subordination but for communion. Chavara exalts Mary's capacity to lead, by taking risks, and facing tensions. Through her personal efforts and powers of leadership, Mary moved the group of disciples to act in ways they had not thought of. She is mother to the apostles, and to the group of Jesus' disciples. She represented the maternal identity of the Church. In this way, the twofold bond, which unites the Mother of God with Christ and with the Church, takes on a historical significance.

4.1. Mary: Leader and Director of the Group

The disciples were scattered after the death of Jesus. It was under the maternal influence of Mary, that all the apostles, many women, and the brothers of Jesus, gathered together in the upper room and continued in prayer (Acts 1:14). Chavara, then, named those who were gathered there as a family, namely, the eleven apostles, Mary, Martha, Lazar, the group of women, believers, and relatives; they moved to Sehion hall; they were a hundred and twenty in number. Chavara highlights Mary's maternal influence in gathering,

guiding, and leading the group, which is the source of Mary's importance in the Church.¹ In that group, the dominance of men and masculine values was not projected. They remained there for ten days in constant prayer, in order to welcome the Holy Spirit. Their solitude led them to contemplation. Mary extended her maternity to all people and her maternal tenderness touched everyone.

Many a time, in the poetic expressions of Chavara, the Heavenly Father and Jesus address her as queen. Chavara stated that, in the early days of the Church, she was the queen of the community. In the Old Testament, the mother of the king has the right to approach the throne of the king; she can make any request to the king. The queen mother does two things: one, she gives counsel to the king in matters concerning administration of the kingdom (Prov 31:2; 1 Chro 22); two, she intercedes before the king for the people who approach the mother to tell her all their needs. Mother presents their needs to the king (1 Kg 2:19-20).

Being the mother of the king, Mary had the right to approach the king at his throne. Mary who stood at the foot of the cross is the symbol of the Church. It was her responsibility to prepare the Church for the second coming of Christ. She gathered and prepared the disciples of Jesus to receive the Holy Spirit. She still continues this duty of preparing and guiding the people. Christ said on the cross "It was consummated." Jesus had completed his mission. But, Mary has to continue the mission of Jesus. Chavara beautifully visualized the way in which Mary completed her entrusted mission. Mary, the queen and pilgrim of faith, advanced faithfully and preserved her union with Christ.

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 96-104, 123-124.

Mary was never discriminated against in the community; there was no domination, no control, no primacy of the male and subordination of the female. She was recognized as an important person, and was involved in the policy and decision-making processes regarding all matters of the growing community, including the Jerusalem Council. The presence of men in the group did not inhibit her from taking up leadership roles, as commonly seen in the local communities and families. We do not see any opposition from anywhere with regard to the leadership role she played in the apostolic group. No impression had been made that Mary was inferior because she was a woman or a widow. Mary did not seem to be conditioned by the patriarchal norms of her time.

The long years Mary lived in the Jerusalem community and in Ephesus, along with John, and the various journeys she made, indicate that she led a self-directed life honoured and treasured by the disciples as if she were the leader of the community. She was making decisions, of course, in consultation with Peter, and always guided by Jesus, her son. She enjoyed a privileged position in the group. She trusted and entrusted herself to other women, viewing them as sisters and friends, with whom she shared a common bond.

Chavara showed that such a life was possible for women in the Church and society, and that women were expected to lead a kind of life Mary lived, totally dedicated to and guided by God, and committed to the cause of humanity. Mary did not appropriate to herself in her leadership role, male characteristics. On the contrary, she remained true to her femininity. Chavara did not present Mary as acting against her essential feminine richness.

This presentation of Chavara on Mary echoes the words in *Mulieris dignitatem* that the personal resources of

femininity are certainly no less than the resources of masculinity: they are merely different. Hence, a woman, as well as a man, must understand her 'fulfilment' as a person, her dignity and vocation, on the basis of these resources, according to the richness of the femininity which she received on the day of creation and which she inherits as an expression of the image and likeness of God that is specifically hers.¹ She was valued not for her physical beauty, but for being a woman and for her maternal sensitivity in every situation, especially in the case of the growing community of disciples. In his *Letter to Women*, Pope John Paul II sadly noted: "How many women have been, and continue to be valued more for their physical appearance than for their skill, their professionalism, their intellectual abilities, their deep sensitivity."²

4.2. Mary: A Courageous Woman

Chavara never painted Mary as a hapless woman, crying bitterly or fainting on seeing the sufferings of her son; instead, Chavara portrayed her as having "no ostentatious grief on her face."³ The first thing Chavara mentioned was that Mary "stood near the cross of Jesus." She stood there, at the foot of the cross, with unwavering conviction, fearless and immovable. This is the way in which Mary presented herself powerfully - she stood near those who suffer, those from whom the world flees, including those who were close to Him. The Mother also stood close to those who were abandoned, steadfast beneath their cross of incomprehension and suffering.

¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 10.

²John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), 3.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 109.

She is a courageous woman, capable of leading an integrated life. Chavara presented the mother of Jesus as a pillar of support to Jesus, accompanying her son throughout his ministry, especially on his way to Calvary. In each step, the mother was with him; hers was a strengthening and consoling presence to Jesus. She followed him not from afar, but from a very close distance. In the *Atmanutapam*, Canto IX, Chavara highlighted Mary's feminine genius and her receptivity to divine guidance in each step.

When the body of Jesus was brought down from the cross, Mary accepted it courageously and with a serene mind.¹ Chavara addressed her 'Mistress' when she ordered the multitude of heavenly hosts to guard the body of Jesus kept in the tomb: "She set them to guard the Treasure from every danger."² She also told the angels to collect the precious blood drippings and bits of flesh, which tore off his body, splashed at passion and lay sticking on the ground. They soon collected them as relics. Then, she lovingly led all those who were gathered there to the cross, adored it, and, after which, she blessed them all. Then she marched towards Sehion, her quiet abode, along with John and other women. Mary spent the night alone in her sorrows. Chavara pictured her retirement to solitude in words implying that she was like an army chief:

As the chief of an army³ after a deadly fight
 To nurse his wounds at times, seek reprieve.
 In his tent, and probe each wound to gauge
 Observe his feet, arms, neck and stomach

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 88-100.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 146-148.

³"വീര്യ ശൂര രണപതി" (*Veerya sooraranapathi*) is the term used to denote army chief.

Nay his form entire for sounds each stroke
Then will his wounds smart afresh, I ask?¹

Throughout this journey to Calvary, whenever any need arose, Mary prayed to her son and immediately her prayers were answered. Examples to this effect are many. When she saw his lacerated shoulder, and he was sorely fatigued she watched and wept.

She prayed that some relief he may find.

Lo! Her loving son did hear his mother's plaint.²

Then, the soldiers pressed Simon, a way-farer who passed that way, to lend his hand to bear the burden behind. When his cross was removed and Jesus was freed, Mary wanted to see the face of her beloved son. Jesus heard this prayer, too. According to the poet, Mary's maternal, feminine sensitivity remained the ideal mirror of all true femininity and motherhood.

She felt the pain with her son. Even in those moments of suffering, Jesus fulfilled each desire of his mother. When the soldiers offered him poisoned vinegar to drink, Mary prayed in tears and forbade him. When Jesus was stripped of his garments, Jesus' mother, John and the three Marys approached to pay homage to him. Mary made a fresh offering of her son to the Heavenly Father for the redemption of humankind. In Chavara's contemplative imagination, Mary approached Jesus and kissed his hands before he was nailed to the cross.

At times, she raised her eyes to the Heavenly Father and her prayers were answered. When the soldiers were trying to turn the cross upside down in order to bend the tips of the nails to inflict unbearable pain on Jesus, his fond mother

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 23-28.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VIII: 117.

raised her eyes to the Heavenly Father and prayed to spare his eyes. He heard his 'loving daughter's woeful lament' and ordered angels to grant her will.¹

4.3. Mary: A Merciful Mother

Chavara's Mary is an ocean of mercy and forgiveness. After the funeral of Jesus, Mary retired to the 'Upper Room' and spent the night in solitude pondering over all the events related to the life of Jesus.² While thinking of the betrayal of Judas and the running away of other disciples, Mary, filled with compassion, justified their actions by saying to herself that it was because of their fear of death that the disciples deserted Jesus, their master.³ Mary showed herself to be a woman open to forgiveness, to setting aside resentment and suspicion. She did not give in to frustration or helplessness. On Holy Saturday, before dawn when John approached Mary, she told him to search for Peter and bring him to her. Receiving her blessing John set out. Chavara depicts the situation of Peter, his compunction, his meeting with Mary and Mary's kindness to Peter and other disciples, etc., in a very touching manner:

He [John] found Peter, not far away at daybreak
Battered, squatting on the ground, the whole night to
weep.⁴

John assured Peter that Mother Mary is merciful and she would accept him with warm feelings of love:

Our mother has sent this message to you,
"Your sorrow cast aside

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VIII: 184-200.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 1-185.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 170.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 194-195.

Be not broken, mourn you not,"
Our mother seat of mercy!¹

Hearing these words of John, Peter's pain vanished, and slowly walked, his head bent in shame. Peter could not face Mary; his compunction was unbridled. He paused at the door with unbearable sorrow. Chavara portrayed that Peter was helpless, dispirited, and even deprived of words. He poured forth before Mary his transgressions in sobs. Then, Mary knelt down in humility, and said:

Peter, for pardon of your offence I have prayed
To my son, nay your august master and Lord.²

When Mother Mary told them to pray for pardon, all other disciples came; they prostrated and begged for forgiveness. She lifted the disciples one by one up and praising God she assured them of His pardon.³

Mary had started her mission of forgiveness much earlier. While Jesus was on the cross, a soldier, Longinus by name, and who was blind since birth, pierced Jesus' heart with a spear; blood and water gushed forth. Seeing this, Mary prayed to Jesus with love and compassion to look on him with mercy. Then a drop of blood splashed into his eyes and his heart and eyes opened at once. As a response to this great mercy, he prostrated and blessed the Lord in thanksgiving.⁴

4.4. Mary: A Privileged Mother

Chavara portrayed a unique scene of Jesus' appearance to Mary after his resurrection. Along with the patriarchs of the

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 197-199.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 223-224.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 225-229.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 19-30.

Old Testament, Joachim and Anna, Mary's parents, Saint Joseph, her loving spouse, and John the Baptist, Jesus came to Mother Mary who awaited them. At the sight of Jesus' sacred face, she humbly prostrated. With intense love, he held her closely, and imparted all graces to her. They heard a mysterious voice: "My Love, ascend now to the skies." Graced by divine power she was privileged to see the godly scene and rejoiced. They were all delighted to see one another.¹ Since that meeting with the Risen Lord, history has no longer been the same. That morning changed history. The hour when death seemed to triumph, is shown in reality to be the time of its defeat. It was made possible to encounter life in places where death had reigned. Even that heavy stone, placed at the mouth of the tomb, could not resist; Jesus conquered death by giving up His life for us. A new hope and happiness dawned on her. How much joy she experienced in his presence!

4.5. Mary: A Caring Mother of Christ's Disciples

Chavara portrayed Mary as a constant follower who had accompanied Jesus' group throughout his ministry; also, he specified that she was concerned about their food. According to him, Mary spent a long time with the apostles, and she was considered an affectionate mother, concerned about all aspects of their life. His presentation of Mary echoed the words in *Marialis Cultus*, where Pope Paul VI said that "Mary appears not as a mother exclusively concerned with her own divine Son, but rather, as a woman whose maternal role was extended and became universal on Calvary."² Chavara highlighted the bond between the

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 29-40.

²Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* (1974), 37.

Blessed Virgin and the community of disciples, and she offered the group, oppressed by anguish and loneliness, a serene and reassuring vision of life in communion. She represented the victory of hope over anguish, communion over loneliness, peace over upheaval, joy and beauty over tedium and nausea, eternal perspectives over temporal ones, and life over death.

Keeping her mind open, she cared for the needs of those who were entrusted to her, namely, Jesus' disciples and the Church. The poet enlisted many examples of Mary's caring love for Jesus' disciples in Cantos XI. Mary spent time serving the disciples. She saw her son in all the believers and went to the extent of taking the trouble to sew attire that was similar to the one Jesus had worn, for the disciples and had it delivered to them; to those disciples who were far away, she despatched the attire through some messengers.¹ She stitched altar clothes and vestments for the Holy Mass.² She showed special care for Peter, who was the head of the apostolic group.³ Once when Peter was staying in Rome, and knowing that he was in trouble, Mary reached him in secret, and strengthened him.⁴ James and other apostles also had experienced Mary's strengthening presence in their moments of difficulties. Requested by Jesus, Mary was present when Apostle James was martyred in Jerusalem; she imparted strength to him.⁵ Then, Chavara continued as follows:

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 25-40.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 103-112.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 33-40.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 47-54.

⁵Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 280-284.

After he died, his soul she bore
 To the presence of her son blessed.
 To protect the corpse from the foes
 She asked the disciples to guard it.¹

The incidents of Mary's travel to different places, for different purposes, highlight Chavara's intention of portraying her as a woman who was actively involved in the lives of those who were entrusted to her; as a woman who guided their lives, accompanied them, stood by their side at the critical moments of their lives; as a woman having certain aptitudes for finding shared goals, healing relationships with unity at heart.

According to John Paul II, Jesus and the Church are Mary's children. Jesus is her first child, one whom she had given birth to, and the Church, her second child, which was protected by her, and whom she took care of, during her childhood. Both children enjoyed the same love and affection from Mother Mary. In the college of apostles, the relationship was inspired and guided by the law of 'free giving'. By respecting and fostering personal dignity in each and every one as the only basis for value, this free giving takes the form of a heartfelt acceptance, encounter and dialogue, generous service and deep solidarity.² Her life was conducted without anxiety and fear; it was an incessant pilgrimage towards Jesus and to his followers, with a heart full of love, faith, and joy.

4.6. Mary: Protector of Women

Chavara has enlisted some instances of Mary's concern and care for the women in Jesus' group. For example, after Jesus'

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 286-289.

²John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), 43.

body was kept in the tomb, Mary blessed and sent all those who were present there, for paying homage to Jesus. Mary reached Sehion Hall along with John, other disciples, and women of the group. When John requested Mary to eat something, she was more concerned about the women of the group, and asked John to take care of his sisters.¹

While Mary was staying in Ephesus, she came to know the malpractices prevailed in the temple of goddess Diana. Some women, who were Diana's devotees, prayed calling upon her name; they called themselves celibates, but their hearts held no God. Seeing this, Mother Mary was deeply grieved. She appealed to her son with devotion, and the Lord responded and decreed that their might should be swept off. The mother sent one of her angels who turned the tide. The unchaste women were fully subdued and turned virtuous and innocent. They gathered soon around our Lady and with affection she embraced them. Mary chose fourteen of them and tutored them. Slowly, their number increased to 'seventy-three true virgins'. Mary prepared a 'Book of Rules' for them. When it was time for Mary to leave Ephesus, she entrusted the community to a new person named Maria, who was devoted to her. One could see Mother Mary giving instructions to the leader of the community to administer it well.² Having shown the way through her courageous 'yes' to God, Mary continued to serve as an intimate partner in the joys, hopes, and sorrows, a model of faith for every man and woman, inspiring their audacious response to God's invitation.

Pope Francis made some remarks during his press conference on 28 July 2013 enroute the home-bound flight

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 16-18.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 305-328.

from World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro. On “Catholic Womanhood,” he said the following: “Indeed, there is a great need to catechize women on their dignity and vocation, to undo the falsehood of secular philosophy that has infected too many. Archbishop Fulton Sheen considered women the barometers of western civilization. It would be fruitful to work towards transforming the ‘interiority’ of women in the Church. Many women are busily focused on ‘doing’ and are robbed of the joy of ‘being’ a woman who, like Mary, ponders Christ to magnify him. Marian pondering is not an optional luxury but a necessary formation for the feminine person. Mary was a contemplative in action. A profound theology of Catholic womanhood should begin and end in Mary, icon of the Church who is feminine, spouse, and Mother. We need Mary to help us rediscover the beauty of a healed, holy, hospitable feminine heart.”¹

5. Mary: The Mother of the Church

Chavara saw Mary’s exalted place in the early Church and in the group of apostles and understood her vocation as the ‘Mother of the Church’ in relation to the Blessed Trinity, who, from all eternity, predestined her to be the Mother of the Redeemer, and enriched her with the gifts appropriate for such a role. Chavara described how Mary was raised to the status of the ‘Mother of the Church’. After the resurrection of Jesus, one day, Mary had a vision of the most Holy Trinity in which the Father Almighty commanded the angels to make Mary seated on a throne next to the Father. There heard a voice: “O! Loving Mother, come to my side.”

¹Pope Francis’ press conference on 28 July 2013 enroute the home-bound flight from the World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro.

Then, she was raised to the holy presence of the Trinity; God the Father entrusted her the responsibility of protecting the Church saying, "Loving daughter, you look after the Church which was founded by the Messiah, who is your son and my son, while he was on earth. I entrust you to make the Church grow." At that moment, the Holy Spirit bestowed upon her the wisdom and all other gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Church, which is the bride of the Holy Spirit, was commended to Mary by the Holy Spirit. The angels who were present there praised her as the queen of angels. Her most loving son, then, entrusted his spouse, the Church, to his mother.¹

And a signal voice she heard:

"My Love, ascend to the skies!"

The Father then approached her

And lovingly said: "My daughter,

Your Son, my beloved Son, the

Church founded on earth by Him;

It has so grown in number

I entrust it to your care."

The Holy Spirit on her bestowed

Virtues great of wisdom and knowledge

The loving Father then entrusted

The Church to the Mother's care and pledge.²

Thus, it was the design of the Holy Trinity that Mary remained the Mother of the Church. The poet concluded this section repeating the entrustment of the Father saying that it was a duty assigned by the Holy Trinity to Mary, the loving daughter of the Father. His deep insight reached the Second Vatican Council, its chapter eight of *Lumen Gentium*, titled as

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 65-92.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 77-88.

“The Mystery of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Mystery of Jesus Christ and in the Mystery of the Church.” So, to understand the place of Our Blessed Lady in living our Christian faith, in our devotion, is to contemplate Mary in the mystery of Jesus Christ and in the mystery of the Church.

The Church was growing fast under the direction of the Mother. The Holy Trinity accorded to Mary the power of intercession, wisdom of life, and merciful tenderness, than the rest of the creation, and committed her to an attitude of service to humanity, which all her children could enjoy. She was present in all the important events of the early Church. Before the Ascension, according to Chavara, Jesus approached the Mount of Olives along with Mary, the Queen of the Church. She worshipped her Son there and he ascended to the heavens.¹ Mary is a figure and archetype of the Church: the human face of the Church. “In her, the Church again finds her own visage as mother.” Before Mary was taken into heaven Jesus once again appeared to her, and assured her responsibility to be the Mother of the Church:

And once you have entered Heaven

To absolve these from stain of sin

And be the succour of men who sin

Your duty would be to pray for them.²

Pope Benedict once said: “Mary projects a ‘light that, which the Creator intended for women in every age ... through her virginity and motherhood, the mystery of woman receives a very lofty destiny from which she cannot be torn.’”³

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 109-112.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 353-368.

³Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World” (2004), 13.

The Second Vatican Council clearly said that the maternal duty of Mary towards humans in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but shows His power. For, all the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on humans originates, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. It flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on His mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its power from it. In no way does it impede, but rather does it foster the immediate union of the faithful with Christ.¹

5.1. Mary: Loving Daughter of the Heavenly Father

Mary discovered her vocation in the depths of the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Her vocation to be the ‘Mother of the Church’, as Chavara presented it, has an eminently Trinitarian structure, because it involves a distinctive relationship with God the Father, with Jesus, the Son of the Most High, and with the Holy Spirit. Mary proudly recollected that the Heavenly Father called her ‘powerful and loving daughter’:

“Behold my loving daughter,” the Almighty said

I chose her through my mercy.²

In Chavara’s eyes, Mary stood first of all as the “beloved daughter”³ of the Father. Because of her task as mother, she was endowed with an exceptional holiness on which the Father rested his eyes. Chavara held that the sole value of Mary rested on the fact that she was chosen by God to play a role of superior importance to any human exaltation. She

¹*Lumen Gentium*, 60.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 149-150; see also Cantos VIII: 192, 228.

³*Lumen Gentium*, 53.

always corresponded fully, with intelligence and freedom, to the will of her Lord. Pope Francis, on the solemnity of the feast of the Mother of God on 31 December 2019, also highlighted the aspect of the divine choice of Mary: “When God wants to make all things new through His Son, He doesn’t begin from the temple, but from the womb of a little and poor woman of His People. This choice of God is extraordinary!”¹

5.2. Mary: The Beloved Mother of Jesus

Jesus called her, “My Mother, my choice.” He chose her from among the many and addressed her ‘Queen’.² Mary accepted her election as mother of the Son of God, guided by spousal love, the love which totally ‘consecrates’ a human being to God. By virtue of this love, Mary wished to be always “given to God,” living in virginity. Her response, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord,” expressed the fact that, from the outset, she had accepted and understood her own motherhood as a total gift of self, a gift of her own person to the service of the saving plans of God. Chavara wished to emphasize that Mary’s relationship to Jesus as her son was not only a Mother-Son relationship, but was also a holy ‘partnership’, a most profound union of hearts and minds in the common fulfilment of the Father’s salvific plan.

Mary has an exceptional relationship with the second person of the Trinity, the Word made flesh, since she is directly involved in the mystery of the Incarnation. She is his mother and, as such, Christ honours and loves her. At the same time, she recognizes him as her God and Lord,

¹<http://zenit.org/articles/category/rome> (accessed on 2 October 2019).

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 151-152.

making herself a disciple with an attentive and faithful heart (see Lk 2:19, 51), and his generous associate¹ in the work of redemption. She responded: "I offer my will to you. I am ready to give up my life for your life."² She had a unique gift of new eyes, capable of "a contemplative gaze," namely, a look of faith that discovers God in her sufferings and the mysteries of life.³

Jesus, wishing to become Incarnate and to enter human history, willed to have Mother Mary and, thus, raised woman to the highest and most wonderful peak of dignity, in the light of the Gospel, such that women acquire their full meaning and value in Mary, who, as a virgin, became the Mother of the Son of God. These two dimensions of the female vocation were united in her in an exceptional manner, in such a way that one did not exclude the other but wonderfully complemented it.⁴

5.3. The Holy Spirit Respects Mary as Bride

The Holy Spirit bestowed on Mary many gifts. Chavara recognized in Mary the prototype of the docile answer to the inner movement of the Spirit, the model of full acceptance of His gifts. When the Father and Son praised her, with resounding words, the Holy Spirit, who loved her from her birth, in order to make her glad, paid tribute to her. The Holy Spirit had a unique address for her:

"You my lovely queen,
Full pure you are, all bright

¹*Lumen Gentium*, 61.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos IX: 156-160.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos VIII: 116.

⁴John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), 17.

You alone, untainted by sin."¹
 Hearing this respectful words of the Holy Spirit,
 the Court of Heaven,
 Praised God and acclaimed with glee
 All angels clapped their hands
 With harps and tumbrels thus sang,
 "Mary Mother immense born holy
 Fair without stain of sin."
 Then she the holy people sees
 In Heaven, all look akin.²

The Spirit supported her faith, strengthened her hope, and rekindled the flame of her love. The Spirit made her virginity fruitful and inspired her canticle of joy. The Spirit enlightened her mediation of the Word, gradually opening her mind to an understanding of her Son's mission. It was once again the Spirit who supported her anguish at Calvary and prepared her, in the prayerful expectation of the Upper Room, to receive the full outpouring of the gifts of Pentecost.³

6. Mary: Person with a Decisive Role in the Church

Chavara presented Mary as an educated woman; as a result, she was not subjected to gender-based discrimination in her childhood. The poet pictured her as a woman of letters; on different occasions she had written letters to apostles. She lived with her sense of self-worth and dignity. When she came to know that her time for departure was approaching, she wrote letters to convey this message to those apostles

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 218-220.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 221-224.

³John Paul II, "Homily at the Concluding Mass of the International Mariological Congress" (27 September 2000), 1.

who were scattered.¹ Those who were staying near her, she strengthened them in faith, and taught them sound truths.² The Vatican Council pointed to her as a “teacher of humanity” and a model for the Church in its mission to serve the “deepest aspirations of the human heart.”³

Chavara perceived Mary as an assertive person, a woman with sharp intellectual abilities and deep sensitivity. Also, she even prepared a Constitution for the community of virgins that she had established and directed, while she was staying in Ephesus with John for two years.⁴ The poet even stated that she wrote the rules with her own hand:

She with her own hand wrote out
A book of Rules for them to obey.⁵

6.1. Mother Mary and the Jerusalem Council

The college of apostles looked up to her as a wise and prudent mother who was able to take significant and proper decisions for the Church. In those days, when the disciples assembled in Jerusalem City to settle a serious problem, which arose in the early church, they, aware of the decision-making role of Mary in the Church, desired that the Mother should be with them and that she should be fully included in the decision-making processes. Regarding this the poet wrote: “When about to enter discussion they wanted the Lady, the prime, to join.”⁶

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 291-296.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 296.

³*Lumen Gentium*, 65.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 305-312.

⁵Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 325-26.

⁶Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 327-352.

Peter wrote a letter to Mother Mary requesting her to reach Jerusalem for the Council meeting and expressed the reason why she should be present:

To Mary, our Mother of God,
 We write this for a good cause
 Your servants, the apostles of Christ
 The slave of your servants, Simon Peter.
 Our Lady, some doubts have arisen in us
 Some new doubts in your servants
 So, the apostles have assembled
 In Jerusalem the chief of cities.
 Our mistress, if you are not with us
 The new decision will not please
 Hence, if you come to us now
 Many a rare gift will be ours.¹

The content, the adjectives used to address her, the use of respectful tone of the letter, etc., showed the high honour the college of apostles had for Mary. They looked upon her as a self-confident, self-reliant, and self-directed woman. One may look at this letter of Peter as their plan for integration of the gender component in the decision-making body of the Church. They seemed to acknowledge the value and importance of the feminine way of looking at problems and solving them, and the college of apostles committed themselves to integrate gender concerns in their discussions, which inspired them to bring Mary into their midst, though she was in Ephesus staying away from them. Women would be able to influence matters that affect not only their lives but also those of family, community, and the larger society. Peter and the other apostles seemed to believe what Pope Francis acknowledged much later: “Our Lady, Mary, was

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 343-346.

more important than the Apostles, than bishops, deacons, and priests.”¹ As soon as Mary received Peter’s letter she set off for Jerusalem. Grasping the significance of the meeting, she told John:

“It’s imminent we should go.”

She said, “Make preparations.”²

While travelling to Jerusalem in a ship, they faced a tempest and other calamities. She ordered the sea and it became calm. After eighteen days of journey they reached Jerusalem City, and met Peter and other disciples.³

6.2. Mother Mary and Celebrations of the Feasts in the Church

From the time Mary started staying in the ‘Upper Room’ she was taking decisions regarding the early Church in consultation with Peter; both of them fixed the dates of the celebration of Christmas, Easter, Ascension, etc., and she ordered that Sundays must be celebrated.⁴ Earlier it was ordered by Jesus to celebrate the feasts of Presentation of Jesus in the temple, Immaculate Conception, Wedding of Mary and Joseph, etc.⁵ The poet held that, though seated far away, Mary served and governed the infant Church.⁶

Saint Pope Paul VI praised Mary for her ability to take decision regarding her life, which remained an icon of hope for “the modern woman, anxious to participate with decision-making power in the affairs of the community, will

¹This statement was made during an interview of Pope Francis with *America Magazine* in August 2013.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 357-358.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 366-412.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 41-46.

⁵Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 165-180.

⁶Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 55-64.

contemplate with intimate joy Mary who, taken into dialogue with God, gives her active and responsible consent,¹ not to the solution of a contingent problem, but to that 'event of world importance,' as the Incarnation of the Word has been rightly called."²

Seventy-four years after this statement of Pope Paul VI, on 16 January 2020, Pope Francis appointed women in decision-making with regard to the Church. Pope Francis named the first woman to hold a high-ranking post in the Secretariat of State, the male-dominated Vatican's diplomatic and administrative nerve centre. An Italian lay woman lawyer, Francesca Di Giovanni (aged 66), assumed the newly-created post in a division known as the Section for Relations with States where she took the rank of under-secretary, effectively, one of two deputy foreign ministers. The Roman Catholic Church allows only men to be ordained as priests and much of the Vatican bureaucracy remains male dominated; women have traditionally been consigned to the shadows of its administration. CNN has commended Pope Francis, and has remarked that he is one of the most progressive Holy Fathers in history.³ He has made an unprecedented decision and has promised to appoint more women to various offices at the Vatican. Last year, Francis also appointed four women as first female councillors for the Synod of Bishops, a department founded more than 50 years ago, and which prepares major meetings of world bishops held every few years on a different topic. An Italian journalist, Stefania Falasca, recalled proudly that for the first

¹*Lumen Gentium*, 65.

²Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* (1974), 37.

³<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/pope-francis> (accessed on 20 January 2020).

time in a Roman Synod, the Synod on the Amazon (6-27 October 2019) was able to count on the participation of 35 women, including leaders of native populations, experts, lay and religious women.¹

7. Mary: In Harmony with Mother Earth

In the twelfth Canto of the *Atmanutapam*, Chavara wrote that when the time came for Mary to depart from this earth, there occurred a change in the environment among people and nature as signs of their sorrow. The believers of Jerusalem community and all creatures expressed their sadness; there were changes in the sky. The poet devoted about hundred lines to portray the sorrow of the birds of the air, the animals in the forest, stars and planets in the sky, etc., caused by the imminent departure of Mother Mary from her earthly sojourn.²

Besides the grief of Palestine
 E'en the stars and planets, signs
 Of sorrow showed; the birds
 Of the air moaned in pain.³
 "Alas! Our queen has forever left us"
 The pain momentarily hurt their heart
 For her blessing sweet they longed
 For it long they fondly waited
 And lo! Wild beasts, from caves
 On the mighty hills and mounts
 And abysses deep like comrades came
 Long before her day of demise.⁴

¹Falasca, "Francis and Women," 1.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XII: 192-312.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 309-312.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 324.

They felt and expressed the pain and sorrow because Mary, their queen, had left them. Her whole being was in synchrony with nature's rhythm. This was because every form of life remains sacred, and has its own importance in the order of the universe. In Chavara's words, Mary understood and respected the intrinsic purpose of every form of life, nay every element of nature, and related with it without selfishly disturbing the harmony of existence. She lived in harmony with nature; there existed an interconnectedness between Mary and the living beings. There was peaceful co-existence among all living beings. She had achieved and enjoyed real harmony by attuning herself to the rhythm of the cosmos around her; there was unity with the mother earth. Therefore, when she departed from them, its harmony was affected.

According to the concept of eco-feminism, women are seen as being closer to nature than men. Great women mystics, such as Hildegard of Bingen, speak of the uniquely feminine experience of the most intimate process of the natural world. Her poetry pulsates with a rapturous, sensuous love of the earth. It is full of ardour and passion. Women possess physiological qualities of fertility and motherhood that are similar to Mother Earth and create in them a predisposition to be caring, nurturing, and intuitive. Nature evokes joy, wonder, praise, awe, and, especially, love. Indeed, both women and nature reflect similar life cycles and processes. The cyclic rhythm of the seasons has a parallel in woman's body rhythms and, hence, Mary's departure could affect nature.

Moreover, Chavara always presented Mary as sinless and immaculately conceived. The disharmony between human beings and nature occurred as a result of the original sin. Since Mary was free from this original sin, and any personal

sin, the original harmony was restored in her, and this explained her ties with nature and the consequent reason for the change in the environment or in the living beings.

Therefore, according to Chavara, when Mary travelled through the sea, the sea creatures and fishes gathered together to venerate her and got her blessings. He had depicted it in a mystical manner. As Jesus guided her to go to Ephesus with John, she got ready for the journey. When the believers of the church of Jerusalem got this news, they gathered around the Mother of the Church with many gifts and offerings. However, Mary took only a small boat to travel to Ephesus. As soon as Mary, along with John, got into the boat, the fishes and the sea creatures recognized her as the 'Star of the Sea' and the 'mother of all living'. When they came to know that she was passing through, they approached and blocked the ship. Then John explained to Mary that they have come with joy in seeing her, and to get her blessing. See! How the poet in Chavara picturized the scene of the reverence of the fishes towards Mother Mary:

The ship's crew not knowing why
 Though to see a person so great,
 These creatures resolutely
 Intercepted their path onwards.
 You must at once oblige them
 Or from you they'll never part
 The creatures of the sea with might
 Push us to stop our onward path."
 The Lady then lifted her hand
 Gave her blessing to all in the crowd
 Then together they raised their heads
 And soon, as if to obey they bowed.¹

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 218-251.

After getting the blessing from Mother Mary the fishes and the sea creatures returned joyfully and Mary and John quickly reached Ephesus. On another occasion, while she was travelling from Ephesus to Jerusalem in a ship, a legion of devils entered the waters and there was disturbance in the sea. When Mary prayed to Jesus, he appeared and commanded the mother to control the waves and the devils. She commanded, and all was calm.¹ The poet communicated that Mary had the authority over Nature as well as the devils. She was recognized to be the mother of the universe and of humanity.²

Another expression of her harmony with Nature is that the room where Mary used to pray was filled with sweet fragrance from Mary's body when she was taken to heaven:

Stream-like flowed from Sion Oratory
The sweet perfume from the body rising
Spread the land of Jerusalem
Giving joy to the people around

When the Lord assumed her unto Heaven.³

Those who came to pay homage to Mary after her death could not see her body because of a blinding light that hid the body.⁴ Mary acknowledged that all living beings obeyed her and she prayed for them. The poet described her motherly heart and concern for the universe and everything in it. She prayed for all humans that they be filled with divine grace and that all humanity acknowledge God as the Lord and master of their lives. She prayed that they be ever

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X: 367-408.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos X1: 333.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XII: 275-280.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XII: 193-200.

grateful to God.¹ The poet concluded the twelfth canto of the *Atmanutapam* in these words that the Heavenly Father affirmed about Mother Mary: "The Triune God highly pleased... Behold the foremost of our creation!"²

According to Chavara, her first title was 'mother of the Creator'. Now, she got the titles of 'mother of all humanity'³ as well as 'mother of the universe'. Chavara venerated Mary as the mother of all the living. Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* taught about "the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system."⁴ Pope Benedict XVI observed that the world cannot be analyzed by isolating only one of its aspects, since "the book of nature is one and indivisible," and includes the environment, life, sexuality, the family, social relations, and so forth.⁵

8. Annunciation of the 'Departure of Mary'

When Mary reached the age of sixty-seven, her desire became strong to stay constantly with her son; He prepared to welcome her to his heavenly abode.⁶ Chavara imaginatively described the events that took place before the death of Mary and the sorrow of the believers as well as the birds in the air, animals in the forest, stars and the planets, etc.⁷ The description of this scene is almost similar to the Annunciation of his birth (Lk 1:26-38). Jesus, the Son of God,

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 457-478.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XII: 309, 313.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 333-336.

⁴John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), 34.

⁵Cited in Francis, *Laudato Si* (2015), 6.

⁶Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 267-278.

⁷Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 307-332.

sent his messenger Gabriel to convey the message to Mary that after three days she will journey towards heaven.¹ The angel announced:

“Your son has decreed your life to be curtailed
On earth, this valley of tears,” he said.
“In this valley of tears, three days
Still, you will sojourn
Then to Heaven you’ll speed!”
Her response to this, a humble “fiat.”²

Then, the poet narrated that Mary had voiced her desire to meet the disciples before her departure; she wrote letters to them who were scattered across the earth. Consequently, they all reached Jerusalem to express their sorrow.

9. Mary’s Testament

It is a tradition in patriarchal families for the head of the family to prepare the last will before his death. But, in Mary’s case, according to Chavara, she prepared the ‘Testament’, asking permission from her son,³ by which Chavara meant to say that she had been recognized as the head of the family.

Chavara prepared his testament to the members of his Congregation in August 1870. He might have been influenced or inspired by Mary’s Testament. We could see some similarities in both. If testament means “declaration of a person’s wishes regarding the disposal of his/her property after his/her death,”⁴ we need to see the properties Mary had disposed of and to whom. When our horizons are

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 267-278.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 275-280.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 417ff.

⁴*Collins Concise Dictionary*, Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers 1996.

limited to the closed culture in which we are reared we will have only small things to dispose of. In the case of Mary, who believed that she is the daughter of the 'mother Church' planted and nurtured by the precious blood of Jesus her son,¹ she had something precious to distribute. She held that this Roman Catholic Church is my Mother, my Haven, my Glory and Prize.² Whatever riches she possessed all that came to her through the mother Church and it would be deposited in the Church: "All my wealth shall your Treasure be... Therefore, let myself and all my children be heirs of Christ by you." The uniqueness of Mary's testament can be seen in her all-embracing love for the believers and the Mother Earth. There was also a special gift for John. She offered her mantle to John and two tunics to two girls who were serving her;³ her sufferings to the believers, her love of God to the Church.⁴ She asked pardon from John for not loving him with a tender love of a mother. She acknowledged that she had received ample love and service from him.⁵ When her testament was ready, she presented it to the Holy Trinity:

After she had made this Covenant,
This will by her Son's mediation
And approved and blessed by
God, the Trinity benign.⁶

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 400-01.

²Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 406-408.

³Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XII: 116.

⁴Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XII: 113-116.

⁵Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XII: 125-128. This kind of asking pardon we see in Chavara's testament too. See Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VI: 5 (2020).

⁶Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XI: 485-488.

When Mother Mary reached heaven, the Heavenly Father declared her as the queen of heaven and earth:

The Triune God highly pleased.
 The Father the chief of the Trinity
 A sound proclamation made
 For angels and celestial beings to hear.
 Behold the foremost of our creation
 This my daughter, know ye for certain
 Henceforth unto eternity shall reign
 A spotless virgin crowned as Queen!¹

10. Mary and Feminine Genius

Looked at from a Marian perspective, *Atmanutapam* was *Her-Story*, story of Mary; it was one in which she voiced her story, and articulated how she lived her life as a highly favoured daughter of the Heavenly Father. It was Jesus' story seen through the eyes of Mary; it was also Chavara's story, meditated by and intertwined with the lives of Jesus and Mary. It was the story of every woman who looked up to Mary as exhorted by John Paul II "to contemplate the face of Christ in union with, and at the school of Mary."² They wanted to imitate this Mary, who was self-confident, self-reliant, and independent. Chavara's attitude towards motherhood liberated women from remaining dependent, poor, and constrained to the home. In spite of her immense suffering, the genius of Mary, namely, her thoughtful sensitivity, totally feminine and thoroughly maternal, was the ideal mirror of all true femininity and motherhood! Mary participated in every stage of the life of the Church; she was involved in the decision-making processes of the

¹Chavara, *Atmanutapam*, Cantos XII: 309-316.

²John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002), 3.

Church. She gathered the group of disciples and strengthened them. She was, indeed, the mother to them; she was the mother of the Church; in fact, God himself had entrusted the Church to her. Throughout her life, Mary was an empowered and enlightened woman. Mary had a genius all her own, which was vitally essential to both the school of apostles and the Church.

Chavara's Mary is a multifaceted person, who finds resonance in today's times. A nurturing mother, loving wife, gentle nature-lover, healer, skilled warrior, able administrator, a widow and a strong single mom, all in one, Mary transcends her physical limitations and becomes a perfect role model for all of us, for the women of the first century to the superwomen of the twenty-first century. She questions, counters, stands up for her as well as other women's rights, but with a quiet dignity. Her love for Jesus and the Church is limitless, but never at the cost of her self-respect.¹ Putting herself at God's service, she also put herself at the service of others: *she became an icon of loving service*. Precisely through this service, Mary was able to experience in her life a mysterious, but authentic 'reign'. It is not by chance that she is invoked as "Queen of heaven and earth," Pope John Paul II told the women of the world. The entire community of believers thus invokes her; many nations and peoples call upon her as their 'Queen'. For her, "to reign" is to serve! Her service is "to reign!"²

A lifetime of deeply knowing and loving Mary, the Mother of God, left a deep imprint on Chavara. In his meditations, homilies, and talks, he spoke of her not as an idea but a person of intimate experience, whose strength

¹See Sinha, "Feminism Forged in Steel," 7.

²John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), 10.

transformed not just individuals, but the whole Malabar Church. To him, Mary was the embodiment of the merciful attitude, patient listening to the will of God, and courageous confidence in God's designs that every Christian ought to develop. In Chavara's writings, Mary was depicted as a symbol of woman's equality and feminine leadership, and she proved her capacity to lead the group of disciples and the entire ecclesia.

During the time of Mary, a girl's grooming confined her to be a wife and a mother; hardly any other feminine vocation was known. Girls were expected to be initiated into the domestic activity and religious practices in the family. On the contrary, it is interesting to note that Chavara did not confine Mary to a family, but placed her in the apostolic college. After the death of Joseph, and from the time Jesus began his public ministry, Mary had made herself free for the gospel and Chavara presented her as following Jesus and his disciples; she was never pictured as a traditional house-wife, nor a widow or a homemaker. She became the role-model for venturing out of the comfort of her home and the confines of a patriarchal family, and taking up non-traditional roles. Chavara, through his presentation, made Mary's presence and her leadership role more dynamic conspicuous in the community of believers.

Chavara presented Mary as a woman who cannot be confined to the space dictated by the patriarchal culture, but dared to go beyond her assigned domestic space and also her assigned gender role. He regarded Mary as a paradigm of our universal quest for justice, equality, dignity, and wholeness.

It is strengthening to the modern woman, that Mary's unique place in the Church does not spare her, in her earthly life, the efforts of the human condition: Mary lived to the

full, the daily reality of so many humble families of her time. She knew poverty, sorrow, flight, exile, departure, and misunderstanding. Thus, her spiritual grandeur does not make her distant; rather, she advanced on the road of human life and was in solidarity with us in the pilgrimage of faith. On this interior journey, Mary cultivated absolute faith in God's plan. Thus, precisely in the abyss of this fidelity is also rooted the abyss of greatness that made her humble and exalted more than any creature.

She has been a source of inspiration for women's dignity. Saint Chavara invites the Church in India to seek new ways to understand God's divine plan of creating man and woman in his own image and likeness so that woman would be liberated from the confined roles and unjust subordination. She showed both obedience with her *Fiat*, and courage while standing under the cross. Mary continues to be the model of authentic Christian femininity.

It is obvious that Chavara's Mary was an agent of change in the college of apostles. Through his depiction of Mary, Chavara overcame the prejudices of his time propagated against women. The signs of transformation in perspectives and attitudes are unmistakably clear. Mary's pastoral commitment contributed much to the development of the early church and her role in faith building is loud and clear. Chavara made his readers increasingly aware of the initiatives Mary and other women took, to empower themselves at every level. Therefore, Chavara considered Mary as the crown of womankind. In the same line, Pope Francis referred to Mary as the focal point of the feminine role within the Church. The Bishops of the United States of America, in their Pastoral Letter, *Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith*, proposed that Mary be envisioned as intelligent, apostolic, inquiring, creative, courageous, a woman of faith,

indeed, the “model of all real feminine freedom” (1974, no. 42). Saint John Paul II exalted Mary, as a prime example of the feminine genius, and encouraged all men and women to look up to her as an inspiration for their own lives.¹ She is the mirror and measure of femininity.

Chavara presented Blessed Mother as the icon of feminine genius. Saint John Paul II shared the same view and expressed it through a prayer that he had presented on 18 June 1995, at Saint Peter’s Square during the Angelus: “May the Blessed Virgin help men and women in our time clearly understand God’s plan for femininity. Called to the highest vocation of divine motherhood, Our Lady is the exemplary woman who developed her authentic subjectivity to the full. May Mary obtain for women throughout the world an enlightened and active awareness of their dignity, gifts, and mission.”

¹John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995), 10.

Chapter 5

PROMOTING WOMEN'S EQUAL DIGNITY

1. Place of Women in Christian Anthropology

It is highly significant that the Church is 'female' that ecclesiality is revealed in the form of femininity. Motherhood and femininity of the Church are important in Chavara's thought and experience. He developed his theology of women on the basis of the Christian anthropology that God created man and woman in his own image and likeness. We see in him a search for a feminine or gender-transcendent Divine. Chavara firmly believed that God does not discriminate on the basis of biologically determined characteristics, such as sex and race.

This profound vision on women touches all aspects of his ministry, especially his women empowerment programmes, his bond of relationship with women, his thoughts and writings. Through the example of the great women characters (Mary Thoppil, Saint Teresa of Avila, Martha, Mary, and Mary of Magdala) Chavara has used women as a vehicle to show the possibility of a journey of faith. They and other women whom we meet in his writings lived the riches of their feminine nature, especially a special sensitivity, which is characteristic of their femininity. In a society that witnessed the hapless state of women suffering from various forms of discrimination, oppression, exploitation, degradation, aggression, and humiliation, we encounter various women characters in Chavara's writings, who were courageous, creative, and highly spirited. He did not treat women as man's property, but as persons of great value in

accord with their authentic feminine nature and other natural endowments.

When each woman lives according to the special qualities proper to the fact of her femininity, Chavara intend to say, they express the wholeness and holiness expected of them. Chavara used stories of women to highlight the idea of feminine genius, and portrayed brave women as heroines of his writings who were imbued with feminine qualities of receptivity, emphasis on person, protection of life, empathy, and so on. It is heartening to see that women in the writings of Chavara had acquired control of their destiny, the world, and history. The presentation of women in his writings is revolutionary in the context of socio-religious traditions of his times.

- In his poem *Anastasiayude Rakthasakshyam*, 'woman' is used as an example of heroic commitment to Jesus and the firmness of faith upon which all Christians are to model themselves.
- His reflection on Mary of Magdala and other biblical women brings home his appreciation for the enormous capacity of women to love, or to be passionately in love with the person of Jesus, their spouse, and to endure sufferings courageously. They loved him not only at the moments of jubilation and victory but remained with him courageously even when all others rejected or abandoned him. According to Chavara, Jesus was sure of the friendship and hospitality of women disciples and, therefore, he went to Martha and Mary of Bethany along with his apostles and spent the night over there.
- Chavara's gesture of inviting Mother Mary, Mary of Magdala, other mother saints, including his own mother, into his heart to welcome Jesus and to prepare a beautiful seat for him shows his conviction that Jesus

enjoys the sweet-heartedness and company of women. On one occasion Chavara told the sisters: "I have locked in the chest of Our Lord Jesus Christ my heart and yours together; until the feast of resurrection, remain there."¹ Here he, too, joins women in his long hours of prayer. On another occasion, he wrote: "Welcome Jesus into your hearts in spirit. Until you see the risen Lord, with the Mother of God and other 'three Marys' meditating on the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ and on the joy of resurrection, remain united with him."² The basic thought that emerges from this presentation is that, like the time of Jesus, today's women are called to keep company with Jesus and that it is pleasing to him. Chavara highlights women's capacity to be intimately united with Jesus, especially with their endurance and perseverance in remaining in love.

- The depiction of the scene of Chavara's meditation room confirms that he, too, enjoyed the support and presence of mother saints during his hours of prayer.
- Finally, through his portrait of the mother of Jesus, Chavara has concluded his message that Mary is the crown of womankind and that she is no distant attainable figure. She is simply the consummate realization of what was portrayed as possible in all the other women: a quality of life of faith and receptivity found in the radical loss of self in a deep and unquestioning trust in the words of Jesus, the revelation of God in the person and message of Jesus of Nazareth.

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII, 9 (2020).

²Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, VII, 4 (2020). He wrote this letter on 13 April 1870.

- His frequent meditation on and praise of mothering experiences confirm that woman has been released from the taboo and the myths that have surrounded her in a mystique.

2. Recognition for the Creativity of Women

Patriarchy exercised control on women's creativity, social mobility, property, and other material as well as intellectual resources. It was in this context that Chavara worked for fostering feminine genius. He was an advocate or supporter of the rights and equality of women and he stood for equal opportunities for women in the Church and society. There are many instances in the *Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent* (CKC) where he argued for equal opportunities for women as men get and recorded the discrimination experienced by women in the church. He felt within that he was called to recognize the sufferings of women in his own heart and make that recognition the starting point of his service to the Church, especially through the founding of the first indigenous religious institute for women in his homeland.

2.1. 'Jesus' Model' of Empowerment

Like Jesus, who allowed women to be in the group of disciples, Chavara envisioned the collaboration of women and men religious for the service of God's Kingdom. His relationship with women proves that he was aware of the radical newness that had broken into history in the person and message of Jesus of Nazareth. Like Jesus, who revealed his identity to women, Chavara shared his deep God-experience with women. His letters to the Sisters are his 'love-notes' to them, encouraging them to learn the art of loving Jesus by remaining constantly in the presence of God. The most beautiful expression of his high esteem for the

Sisters can be seen in the following: when he prayed, he joined with the heavenly choir and among them he saw “nuns or consecrated virgins” (കന്യാസ്ത്രീകൾ).¹

Respect for women that was very spontaneous to Chavara, made him recognize their nobility and the need to offer them better opportunities in the Church to lead a life of virtue and consecration. In his own words,

In the land of Malayalam, where the true Christian religion was in practice right from very early times ..., the men, who had the privilege of priesthood, lived a life of chastity. As for women, even those who desired to live a chaste life had no way of embracing such a lifestyle. They had no option. They had to accept marriage and live as worldly women. They were living in this sad plight for a long time...²

He knew that men were in a privileged position in the society and in the Church from the very early times onward. He recognized the predicament of women and he articulated it. Chavara was pained at this situation that women were treated not equally. Their cries were not heard. Their needs were neither understood nor met. Hence, it was natural for him to conceive of provisions that would facilitate their life of commitment and dedication for their own empowerment and the empowerment of other women.

2.2. 'Chavara Model' of Empowering

The patriarchal mindset that was alive in Kerala society and in the Church in general accorded unequal status to women. But Chavara was not of the opinion that women have to be content with a secondary position at every place, starting

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 3: *Dhyanasallapangal*, 42 (1981).

²CKC, vol. 1: 1.

from their own home. He believed that the biblical image of woman has been innate in every woman though not automatically realized. He translated the theological equality of women expressed in the Bible into concrete actions. In his thoughts, writings, and ministry, Chavara treated women as equals. Thus, he offered the Church a 'Chavara model' to foster feminine genius. He realized this goal when many rules in the Church discriminated against women. He knew that these rules directly violate the equal status of men and women as envisaged in the Bible. All the four Gospels bear testimony to the fact that Jesus treated women with great respect and upheld their dignity and equality as human persons. Chavara's reflection on how Jesus related to women was very instructive for him to form his attitudes according to Jesus' example and teaching and to continue the task of fostering feminine genius which was so dear to Jesus' heart. When the society kept women inside their homes, Chavara encouraged them to extend their presence and services to unfamiliar and faraway places.

2.3. 'Koonammavu Model' of Empowerment

The kind of positive change that took place in the lives of women at Koonammavu was noticed by many on those days itself. Chavara looked at it as God's great kindness and mercy. He told the people of Kainakary that what had happened in the case of women at Koonammavu would happen in Kainakary and many other places as well.¹ He was establishing a 'Chavara model' and a 'Koonammavu model' of empowerment in his time, which was extended to the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries too.

¹Chavara, *CWC*, vol. 4: *Letters*, IX: 11 (2020), last paragraph.

Chavara made a lasting impact upon the life and faith of the Church of his time, by raising the standard of life of the women where women's charisms and gifts were recognized. His outstanding leadership in the spiritual, pastoral, and doctrinal realms in the Syro-Malabar Church was unique. Women were central, not marginal, to the making of Chavara's personality, his writings, and projects. Cognizant of, and experiencing the valuable contributions that women were capable of, towards the family, Church, and society, he initiated a process of reconstructing the status of women in the nineteenth century Kerala. He had a unique vision of God and men and women. He acknowledged the role of women in his life and affirmed those women who contributed to his project and how women accompanied and strengthened him in his pilgrimage of faith.

3. Advocating the Equality and Dignity of Women

Chavara, respected and protected women, and their collaboration also was ensured in every project he initiated in the Church in Kerala. He accorded women special roles in being spiritual animators in the society, equal status in the social and religious functions, as they naturally merit respect, freedom, and wisdom, etc. Indeed, his words and works always expressed the respect and honour due to women. He treated women with dignity and respect, and elevated them in a world where they were often mistreated. His words, gestures, deeds, and interactions remained constantly as pure inspiration, motivation, direction, hope, and stimulus for the Sisters of Koonammavu Convent and many others. The Sisters were delighted in his respect for women and his manifold attempts to bring them to equal status in the society.

Very often, Pope Francis suggested that the Church needs a profound theology of Catholic womanhood. He made a revealing self-critique: We have not yet made a profound theology of women in the Church.¹ In Chavara's writings, we see a theology of woman, theology of body, and a theology of motherhood, all of which are thoroughly biblical. He did not look at woman from the role of motherhood exclusively; but he understood womanhood in its totality and integrity. His theology of womanhood begins and ends in Mary, the icon of the Church, who is the feminine model par excellence. In the following words of Pope Francis, we get the echo of Chavara's attitude: "It is not about giving women more functions in the Church...; in this way the problem isn't solved. It is about integrating woman as figure of the Church in our thought, and to think of the Church also with the categories of woman."²

Chavara facilitated consecrated life for women in response to the cries of women of the nineteenth century; women had no opportunities to embrace consecrated life where they could commit themselves for the service of the Lord and his people. They were largely denied the basic rights to property, education, and even proper clothing. They were kept away from the decision-making processes in the family, in the Church, and society, where male domination was built into the very foundations of social dynamics.

According to Chavara, women are not a sub-species of men. They share a common humanity and common baptism

¹<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/05/10/pope-francis-tells-women-religious-church-cannot-alter-revelation-womens-diaconate>.

²Falasca, "Francis and Women," 2.

with men, and should, therefore, share the opportunity in decision-making processes and take up leadership roles in the institutional Church. Chavara saw and recognized women as qualified, independent, capable, and worthy persons, who should be integrated in the Church and society as equal partners, overcoming the prejudices of their traditionally assigned gender roles.

Mary exemplified the redeemed humanity, including women, to reach their ultimate destiny of being one with God. True femininity, in the likeness of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is every woman's hope, and remains an authentically feminine role model. Chavara pictures her as an icon of hope for today's women who fight against traditions, attitudes, systems, and any *Lakshmanarekha* that does not recognize men and women as equal partners with equal but unique identity. We do not see Mary fighting to get acknowledged her feminine genius; instead, Saint Peter, the head of apostolic college, other apostles, and the community of believers spontaneously recognize her as the motherly leader of the group and as the one who helped the Church grow. Chavara became a promoter of women's true dignity and of their vocation corresponding to this dignity.

Chavara was a champion of women empowerment. He emphasized the gift of "the genius of woman" not only in regards to great, accomplished female leaders but the ordinary women who have contributed so much in the spirit of service. He attributed this to the ability of women, more so than men, to be able to acknowledge human persons and to help them regardless of ideological lineage or abilities.

Though Chavara lived in a society which subscribed to the divisive ideology of domination-subordination, we do not see in his writings any instance of exploitation or victimization of women. Women are depicted as equal to

men in terms of talents and capabilities; he offered opportunities to develop their feminine gifts or capacities, particularly their unique style of living holiness. He saw that women articulate their thoughts, clarify their ideas, and develop their personal standpoints. He even promoted the use of a new vocabulary of inclusive language and a new theology of women.

3.1. Gospel-Based Feminism

If we are to find an authoritative starting point for our reflections upon woman, then we must turn to the Word of God, as Chavara had done. It is a matter of amazement that Chavara managed to get all the details of biblical women at a time when the Bible or its commentaries were not easily available to him. The biblical literature is necessarily linked to the times, customs, and situations that produced it. But there is a remarkable 'newness' in his reflections and interpretations on biblical characters of women. He looked through the eyes of Martha-Mary, Mary of Magdala, Salome and other women, who were loved by Jesus. Chavara, too, loved them and called them as "my mothers." It is true that he did not follow the exact sequence of the presentation of biblical texts on women. What attracted him most was their passionate love and commitment for Jesus, a quality that he expects of himself and all other men and women. He highlighted the significant role played by women at every stage of Jesus' life and Jesus, in turn, treated them as full human beings with dignity and equality.

3.2. Chavara Initiated Social Feminism in the Nineteenth Century

His ministry in Kerala as the vicar general, retreat preacher, professor of theology for more than thirty years at

Mannanam, and his observation of the lives of the people of various strata of the society, enabled him to develop his vision on women. He saw that it is very difficult for men to accept women on equal terms. Most men think that a woman's proper place is the home and the hearth. They cannot accept women thinking independently. Chavara's vision on women can be a challenge to both men and women of our times: for women, it challenges them to live up to their God-given dignity and equality with men; for men, it calls upon them to take the side of the 'vulnerable human beings' in the periphery and to shed their hard-heartedness and arrogance in the treatment of women. For Chavara, taking the side of God meant simply taking the side of the defenceless human beings, to empower them, and bring them to the mainstream of the society.

Pope Francis' sayings on the role of women in society remind modern men's attitude toward women: "I am anxious about the persistence in societies of a certain mentality dominated by men; I fear that in the Church herself the service to which everyone is called, is transformed sometimes in servitude for women," the Pope has said many times. "I suffer, I tell the truth, when I see in the Church or in certain organizations, that the role of service, that we have and that all of us must have, the role of service of woman slides towards a role of servitude."¹ Chavara offered and asserted equal place for both women and men, and taught the virtues of equality, social justice, and love. The life and teachings of Chavara stand as irrefutable evidence for the equal status of women in society; indeed, Chavara made numerous efforts to accord respect to women in his writings, in his attitude, and approach towards women.

¹Falasca, "Francis and Women," 1.

It was the first time in the history of Kerala that a Catholic priest worked for the empowerment of women by instituting a convent for women, a boarding house and school for girls, vocational training, and income generating projects for women, and so on. He provided opportunities for the development of their hobbies; he enabled them to explore their talents and human potentialities by giving them psychological empowerment and emotional support which brought forth a social awakening. The aim of these programmes was to create awareness in them that they are also equal members of the society, created in the image and likeness of God. We see women collaborating with him and contributing generously for the projects initiated by him. Chavara fulfilled his true mission of empowering and restoring women to their full human status. He was born and brought up in the patriarchal tradition, where women were considered the 'weaker' sex and were relegated to an inferior position. Women were oppressed by their social, cultural, and religious structures and were deprived of their original dignity of being in the image of God. He stood firm for the cause of women through his ministry based on love, inclusion, and justice.

In order to liberate women from the discriminatory attitudes they endured in the society, which considered women impure, inferior, and unworthy, Chavara initiated educational and income-generating programmes for them, and appreciated them. These were women who lived in a period of time when women did not have an independent identity or role in the society. They could never raise their own voice or stand up by themselves to be recognized as individual persons. Yet, these were the same women, as mentioned by Chavara, who were recognized as independent persons with dignity whose lives were

witnesses to the power of Christ. This recognition of women in his writings is essentially due to the appreciation and acknowledgment that Chavara gave to the women in his own life, whom he portrayed as intelligent, apostolic, creative, and courageous women of faith. Indeed, as models of real feminine freedom, he valued the immeasurable gifts embodied by women and wanted to ensure that the Church and the society naturally benefitted out of them.

3.3. Chavara: Supporter of Feminine Holiness

It is nothing less than genuine feminine holiness, which Chavara saw in his own mother, other mothers, mother saints, the first members of Koonammavu Convent, and so on. These women, who were honoured by Chavara, are those who truly have the dignity described by *Mulieris Dignitatem* (19). He highlighted the positive side of the realities of women's lives and the rivers of wisdom that flow from their lives. He penned with full appreciation and admiration the mothering experiences and the powerful influence of mother in one's life. It is worth-noting that Chavara recognized the life cycle of women and everything related to them as spiritual exercises.

3.4. Freedom of Relationship with Women

There are enough examples of the extraordinary deep interior freedom and peace which characterized Chavara's personal relationship with women. His ability to relate to them with ease and tranquility, showing affectionate concern for them in their various cares, and accepting their loving gestures with perfect self-composure was unparalleled in those times. His style of addressing the Sisters as 'dear children' evokes an atmosphere of paternal intimacy.

He expressed his deep compassion for the struggles of single parent, divorced or separated women in his presentation of Palackal's mother and sister respectively. Through various examples of dignified women, Chavara tried to establish the distinctive human dignity and vocation of women. His letters, instructions, and the bond of relationship that he established with them along with his deeds express his theology of women. We may not get much of theoretical speculations or scholastic statements on women from his writings; nor would we locate any fully documented theoretical argument on theology of women. The *Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent* depicts the beauty of interactions between Chavara and the Sisters, how freely he related with them and how they responded to his person, his words, and deeds, and how their lives were transformed through his presence and interventions.

It is certainly useful and illuminating to see his consistent use of women characters in his poetical works, chronicles, and letters that seem to be deliberately constructed to make important theological points, generally on the spirit of self-sacrifice of mothers and other women. Women were not made inferior and should not be treated as such, according to him. He believed that an ongoing transformative process among women as well as men is an imperative for the consciousness of the full humanity of women as created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:28). Only a true interior conversion that heals man's hardness of heart and purifies women's lust of heart will allow them to live out the divine ideal of marriage partnership without succumbing to the temptations of domination of woman on the part of man and of servitude to man on the part of woman.

The image of Chavara that can be drawn from his writings in association with women is that of a woman-

friendly man, a Gospel-based feminist, and a liberator who empowered women through women. In his empowerment project, family was of key importance. The key role of motherhood signified that family was recognized as the fundamental unit of the society, as its basic building block. From his teachings and ministry, his attitude towards women can be understood as egalitarian, inclusive, and integral. Even today most men think that a woman's proper place is the home and the hearth, and they cannot accept women thinking independently. Contrary to the societal norms, Chavara was interested to bring the women out of their homes for study and to embrace consecrated life. Being consecrated to God and for the service of humanity, these consecrated women went far beyond their familiar circumstances and widened their areas of service. In no instance, he regarded women as impure or powerless. Instead, he depicted them as models of great faith and dignity and launched a civilization of equality.

It is not the projects and infrastructure that Chavara had introduced for the empowerment of women that shall capture our attention, but his appreciation for and commitment to raise their dignity in the Church and society. His attitude and approach towards women offer something novel and promise a world where women would not be seen merely as child-bearers. He courageously proposed projects and programmes to realize the power and possibility of women leadership. Recognizing the true worth of women in the personal, familial, and societal spheres, Chavara dreamt of a Church and society in which the feminine genius is fully integrated in all areas of life. Indeed, Saint Chavara offers us dreams in the process of establishing the Kingdom of God, dreams of a 'discipleship of equals' and a gender-just Church and society here and now.

Chavara's vision of the dignity of women is one of his unique and important contributions, and it is the first of its kind within the Indian Church. There is, indeed, a fundamental advance in Chavara's teaching on women; for, his person and contributions affirm their fundamental dignity and equality with men in being persons.

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