

Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 1

SPIRITUALITY

of Saint
Kuriakose Elias Chavara



Fr Thomas Kochumuttom CMI

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2017

Chavara Central Secretariat

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Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara

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FOREWORD

Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara (Bombay: Saint Pauls, 2014) by Fr Thomas Kochumuttom CMI offered a simple, brief and enjoyable biography of the Indian Saint. Now the author has come out with a complementary work, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*. Referring to sources like the different biographies of the Saint, his writings, letters, prayers, and relevant ecclesiastical and other documents, the author has brought to light various facets of the spirituality of St Chavara, which will be treasured by readers.

Every human person is unique. Every saint lives his saintly life in a unique way. The historical context, events, persons and the needs of the times play a role in shaping the life, deeds, attitudes and, finally, the spirituality of a person. St Chavara, who belonged to the Syro-Malabar Church and lived in Kerala during the nineteenth century, was an intrinsic part of the struggles and dreams of his Church and the society of that time. In the providence of God, these harsh realities were tools in His hands, which was instrumental in later carving out the magnificent image of Chavara the Saint. The author has vividly captured this image and has presented it in the work.

Apart from merely recalling the different facets of the spirituality of the Saint by referring to events and experiences, the work offers a theological reflection on Christian spirituality, especially that of consecrated persons, priests, and religious. These reflections are based not only on the words, deeds and experiences of St Chavara but also on verses and passages from the Bible and even from scriptures of other religions. The long years of recollection

and prayer the author has spent in Jeevan Dhara Ashram in Jaiharikhal in the Himalayas, and his consistent, prayerful and untiring study of the sources of St Chavara's life and works, make the reflections convincing and illuminating.

Two of St Chavara's contributions are considered the greatest. One is the defence of the Church against the Roccisian revolt. The other is the founding of two indigenous religious congregations, Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) for men and Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC) for women, both being the firsts of their kind in the Syro-Malabar Church. They were the dreams of his life for which he prayed at the time of his ordination to priesthood and at the offering of his first Eucharistic celebration. He, together with the other founding fathers struggled, suffered, underwent humiliations, but persevered and, finally, succeeded in founding two congregations. This may be the reason why the author dwells at length on religious life in general, while expounding the spirituality of St Chavara in an effort to convey the dedication necessary to pursue such a life.

Predominant characteristics of the spirituality of St Chavara are exposed in thirty chapters. Focusing more on the aspects of religious life, the author shows that 'spousal love' flourishes in the vow of celibacy, the vow of poverty is an experience that 'the Lord is my portion', and that 'obedience is the only mark of a religious'. Dwelling on the words of Saint Chavara the fundamentals of religious life – solitude, silence, austerity, custody of senses, community life, prayer life, etc. – are highlighted. Religious life is a call to intimate union with God. Prayer and mysticism sustain it. The author discovers and recognizes St Chavara as a person with deep mystical experiences. The phenomenon of

mysticism is explained by looking into the writings of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross. Unflinching love for the Church, heroic Christian charity, unwavering trust in the providence of God, filial devotion to the Mother of God, and abiding devotion to the Blessed Sacrament are some other aspects of the spirituality of St Chavara that are amply illustrated in the work.

Reflections on the Mariology of St Chavara are refreshing. The author has brought to light the rich imagination of the Saint who draws a vivid picture of the day-to-day life of Mother Mary especially during the times of passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and during the growth of the nascent Church.

I consider it a privilege and honour to be invited to write the foreword to this work. Fr Thomas is my teacher and confrere. Going through the pages of this work, for me, was a spiritually motivating and nourishing experience. I hope that it will be so for the readers, too. I sincerely congratulate Fr Thomas for this wonderful gift to spiritual seekers looking for a model.

Feast of St Thomas
3 July 2017

Augustine Keemattam CMI
Darsana, Wardha

PREFACE

This work is a sequel to my *Blessed* [now Saint] *Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, (KEC).¹ While the former presented the life story of Chavara, the present one concentrates on his spirituality. Fr Paul Kalluveetil CMI, in his review of KEC, rightly observed that it lacked reflections on the Saint's spirituality. This new volume is expected to make up for this deficiency. Of course, the two works have much in common, as far as the subject matter is concerned. The present study, however, is broader in scope and different in perspective. In addition to looking at Chavara's life and undertakings from a spiritual point of view, it also brings in fresh data that have a bearing on spiritual life.

The first chapter introduces the book by recalling Chavara's first biographer and spiritual director Fr Leopold Beccaro's challenge that those of us who would like to die as happy a death as Chavara's should lead as virtuous a life as his. Then, chapters 2-4 deal with the Saint's love for the Mother Church, the most outstanding of his virtues. In explanation of this point, the ecclesial concerns of the Saint, undertakings for the renewal of the Church, work in defence of Catholic unity, and the various innovative contributions to the good of the Church and the reform of the society at large are examined. In all these acts, they were selfless, having in mind nothing but the benefit of the Church and society. Even in founding the two religious congregations, one for men and the other for women, their primary objective was to serve the Church and society.

¹It was published in 2014 by St Pauls, Mumbai.

Chapters 5-7 reflect upon common life and love of the neighbour. By establishing an institute for consecrated life, the new dimension that was added to the life of Chavara and the other founders was the community aspect. Otherwise, their lives, for all practical purposes, were the same as before. They were already practising the evangelical counsels, although not as vows. Now the difference, therefore, was that they started to live, pray and work together as a community, with common concerns and projects, and having no private possessions and programmes. They practised real Christian love in the fullest sense, which was extended not merely to the community members but to all people irrespective of caste and creed.

Chapters 8-9 are a detailed analysis of the founding fathers' understanding of consecrated life in terms of *vana-vāsa*, *darśana-vītu*, *tapasu-bhavanam*, *otunki-pārkal*, *miṅṭa-aṭakkam*, *bes-rauma*, *kaṅṭu-paṭhittam* *koṭuppān*, *punṇya-samketam*, *punṇyattinte kannāṭi*, etc. The Mannanam community is then presented as an interpretation in action of Mt 5:13-16: "You are the salt of the earth;...You are the light of the world..." Chapters 10-16 elaborate how they, especially Chavara, perceived and lived the evangelical counsels of chastity (*kanni-sukham/brama-cārivoam*), poverty (*agativoam*) and obedience (*col-vīli*): they refer respectively to bridal mysticism, childlike trust in God and total dependence on His providence, and love and unconditional surrender to God's will that is made known mostly through human agents.

Chapters 17-19 discuss the prayer and prayerfulness coupled with austerity and allied virtues of the founding community. Even as they were active in pastoral ministries

and the service of the Church and society, they were deeply prayerful and austere as well. Chavara's mystical leanings and insights too are brought out in the process. While chapter 20 depicts him as an apostle of the Holy Eucharist, chapters 21-22 portray him as a servant of Mary (Mariadas) whose life was modelled after hers. Then, in chapters 23-24, we get an interesting narrative of Chavara's Mariology and the central place and role the Mother had in the early Christian community. Chapters 25-27 present Chavara as a grateful as well as penitent saint, and deal with his instructions about the common pitfalls in the life of the priests and religious. There are also practical reflections on confession and spiritual direction.

The last three chapters (28-30), by way of concluding the work, briefly point out that the characteristic mark of the Saint's spirituality, which consisted in his ability to be a contemplative in action and, then, discuss the practical aspects of what may be termed the Chavara spirituality.

In support of our reflections on Chavara spirituality, we have taken care to quote or at least refer to the relevant texts in his writings and other reliable source material, most of which are originally in Malayalam. For their English translations, although I have taken recourse to the existing ones, and, in almost all cases, I have modified them so as to be more faithful to the original. While quoting lyrical texts I have rendered them in prose.

While focussing on the spirituality of St Chavara we have also considered that of the other founders as well as the founding communities of both the CMI and CMC Communities. Therefore, the work will naturally interest the members of both these congregations. Moreover, the many

congregations that took origin following these two progenitors of religious life in Kerala are also very likely to benefit from its perusal. It is further hoped that it outlines in general terms the basics of consecrated life as such.

Another point worth noting is that, by way of analysing the spirituality of Chavara and the founding community in Mannanam, the study endeavours to present a model of religious-priestly spirituality that is valid for all times. The three founding fathers—Palackal, Porukara and Chavara—were initially committed diocesan priests. This was true about most of the members of the founding community in Mannanam. While continuing as zealous priests engaged in pastoral ministry and social apostolate, they embraced consecrated life professing the vows of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, and followed a common life. Religious life for them was the flowering of priestly spirituality!

I am aware of some repetitions of texts and narratives of events. I have not dispensed with them for the following reasons: One, viewed from different angles the same text or event would yield different nuances of meaning relevant to different aspects of spiritual life. Two, I preferred to save the reader the strain of every now and then turning the pages backward.

While most of the historical data involved in our discussions are found in KEC, the reflections on spiritual topics like common life, prayer and mysticism, and Eucharistic devotion were previously published as articles in different periodicals, the details of which are given in the “Guide to Footnotes and Source Works” at the end of this study. I acknowledge my indebtedness to the publishers of

these works. Still more, the contents of the book are, basically, the notes that I used for a series of retreats on Chavara Spirituality that I was invited to preach to different groups of my confreres and other interested men and women in 2014-2016. I gratefully recall the generous encouragement I received from my superiors and the retreat participants. With fond recollections I pay prayerful homage to late Fr George Thanchan CMI who had always promoted and supported my humble pursuit of Chavara studies.

I am more than grateful to my friend and guide Fr Augustine Keemattam CMI who patiently went through the entire text and painstakingly corrected and improved its style of language and methodological issues. He has also blessed this work with a cogent foreword presenting the work in a very persuasive manner! God bless him!

Finally, I sincerely thank Fr Saju Chackalackal CMI, General Councillor for Evangelization and Pastoral Ministry, for readily accepting the book for publication under the auspices of Chavara Central Secretariat as the first in a series of publications under "Theological Studies on Saint Chavara." May Our Lord Jesus Christ through the intercession of St Chavara inspire all my readers and well-wishers with the kingdom values of joy, peace and justice!

Feast of St Thomas
3 July 2017

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Chapter 1

LIFE IN THE LIGHT OF DEATH

1.1. As the Life So the Death

“Let us all who desire to be blessed with a happy death like that of Chavara lead a virtuous life as he did.”¹ This is the statement with which Fr Leopold Beccaro OCD concludes St Chavara’s biography. We may remember that Beccaro, besides being the novice master and provincial delegate of the new congregation, was also Chavara’s confessor and spiritual director during the last decade of his life. As such, this young Italian Carmelite priest knew him very intimately and personally. Still more, in his diary note of 3 January 1871, the day of Chavara’s death, he wrote about him, “I loved him as myself,”² and prayed to him, “O holy and beautiful soul, pray for me!”³ This, indeed, is Chavara’s first biography, written and published immediately after the Saint’s death. Though very brief, it is, nevertheless, a very authentic and substantial work, indeed. That makes the author’s message worth consideration: Those of us who would like to die a happy death like that of Chavara should lead as virtuous a life as his!

1.2. The Beauty of Chavara’s Death

On the morning of 1 January 1871, Chavara made his last confession to Fr Leopold and received Holy Communion. At about 3.00 pm, there came a great change over his face and he kept losing consciousness intermittently. Physician

¹Beccaro 2003: 15.

²Beccaro 2003: 18.

³Beccaro 2003: 18

Mathu Tharakan of Aranattukara advised the Fathers to administer the anointing of the sick immediately. The members of the community, in tears, gathered around him. Sitting on the bed and in full consciousness Chavara spoke to them in a clear voice:

Why are you weeping? Man, whoever he may be, has to die one day. Now it is my time. By the grace of God, I have always been keeping in mind this moment. Moreover, for some time now I have been preparing myself for it as far as possible. My pious parents in many ways impressed on me great regard for the Holy Family: Jesus, Mary and Joseph. [*Pointing to the picture, which was placed on the table near his bed in such a way as he could see it always, he continued:*] In this way, I have always been keeping and honouring the Holy Family in my heart and mind. Thus, their help was always available to me. By the grace of God, I dare say that with their help never had I experienced an occasion where I was deprived of the grace received in baptism. I dedicate this humble congregation of ours and all its members to this Holy Family. Keep your trust in the Blessed Family. Let them reign your hearts.¹

¹Moolayil, *Positio*: 548, quoted in Mundadan 2008: 390-391. Fr Louis (Aloysius) of Manjummel, who was one of those present on the occasion of these instructions of Chavara, also has in his testimony stated almost the same things, and specifies that the prior expressed his confidence that with the help of the Holy Family he had not ever lost the baptismal grace (*Positio*: 561-563). Fr Leopold Beccaro also has noted in his diary; "A little before his death he [Chavara] was able to attest that he had never lost the baptismal grace" (*Positio*: 456). (See Footnotes 11 and 12 in Mundadan 2008: 390-391).

These words of Chavara from his death-bed tell us how glorious and beautiful was his departure from this life: he was well prepared, content with the past and fully confident about the future! Certainly all of us would like to have a death of this kind. But, for it to happen, we should necessarily live as he did.

1.3. How Did Chavara Live?

The words quoted above also indicate how Chavara lived:

- He looked at death in a matter of fact way; so, for him it was nothing unexpected or frightening. He faced it, in his usual calm and cool!
- He had always been cognizant of the event of inevitable death. He lived in the light of death so that his life was such that it ensured a happy death. He knew where he was heading. He was well aware of the destination of his life-journey so much so he carefully directed his steps towards it. His was a purposive life.
- He understood death to be the glorious end of life on earth, the most important and welcome event of life. The thought of escaping it never crossed his mind. Instead he always looked forward to it as the triumphant passage from this world of temporalities to one of eternity. For him it was the event of being received by the Lord into His kingdom and, therefore, the fulfilment and flowering of his life! The Lord becomes all his property, and he becomes the Lord's! The mutual possession of the Creator and creature! Indeed, a moment of bliss and celebration!
- He had been preparing himself for it as far as possible so that when it arrived he was ready to celebrate it! It would

be no exaggeration to say that his life was a preparation for death. It is usual that people celebrate all the important events in life, such as wedding, religious profession, priestly ordination, etc., as occasions of jubilation. For these, they make elaborate preparations, too. Death, in fact, is the most important event in one's life, the realization of the goal of being definitively united with the Creator. Hence, it is worthy of celebration with due preparations and in the company of one's friends and relations.

- As he admits, Chavara always kept and honoured the Holy Family in his heart and mind. Thus, their help was always available to him. In more general terms, he constantly lived in the awareness of being sustained and protected by God and the heavenly beings who he knew were present in his heart and mind! He was a man of uninterrupted prayer, a contemplative in action!
- Finally, by the grace of God he was right in being confident to declare that he had never the misfortune of losing the grace received in baptism. Indeed, he was incessantly, all his life, in God's grace, ever the darling of God. Chavara's life certainly was modelled after the lives of Mother Mary who was full of grace, and that of Lord Jesus, the beloved Son of God the Father. What more can one dream of!

1.4. Contemporaries' Testimony

We have reliable testimonies of Chavara's contemporaries concerning how impressive and inspiring his life among them was.¹ Here we recall a few of them. The Sisters in the

¹For most of these testimonies, see Valerian 1939: 229-243.

convent of Koonammavu on 3 January 1871, the day of Chavara's death, wrote in their chronicle: "This Father of ours was a model and *guiding light* to all the Christians in Kerala. Moreover, he was a *pillar that supported* the Catholic Church because of the zeal he evinced in its expansion and in the protection of faith."¹ A senior priest Fr Jacob Palakunnel says: "The Prior Chavara looked like an angel." The same priest further says that in order to find the prior one had to "look either in front of the Bl. Sacrament in the church or in the cemetery!" In the context of a quarrel between two rival groups in the parish of Anackal, the parish chiefs approached the ailing prior in Koonammavu and said: "It is enough that you just come, and peace shall be restored!" He went with them and peace was indeed restored! Ms Mariam Powath of Kainakari, aged of 92 years, was in tears while exclaiming: "My God! How varied are the noble things Fr Chavara did for the people of Kainakari before he died! Can there be another man like him?"

Mani Kurian, a very elderly parishioner of Muttuchira, says: "I have seen Fr Prior. Still more, I was fortunate to hear his sweet sermons. How delightful his appearance was, is difficult to describe. He was indeed a man filled with the Holy Spirit! He possessed a soft but clear voice! Everybody in the church could easily hear his music-like sermon. Ah! I can never forget it. I feel as if I heard it just yesterday!" Fr Varkey Muttathupadath, one of Chavara's disciples, once, ignoring his opposition, collected a few strands of his hair and respectfully preserved them as a relic. Later on, they were handed over to Mannanam Monastery where they are now venerated.

¹CKC: 210; NKM: 20-21.

Bp Mathew Athanasius, the founder of the Reformed Mar Thoma Church, was an intimate friend of St Chavara. His words have become proverbial: "In this country who else than Fr Prior is likely to go to heaven? Holding on to his leather belt I, too, shall endeavour to reach there!"

Fr Louis (Aloysius) of the monastery of Manjummel, when he lived in Koonammavu for several years, had Fr Prior as his spiritual director. He died in 1938. He says: "Fr Prior was my spiritual director for several years. Among the virtues that were conspicuous in him were: insistence on the observance of the rules of the congregation, constant union with God, and commitment to the religious vows and so on. During the whole one hour of evening meditation he would be on his knees shedding tears... The priests respected him as a god."

Fr Leopold in his short biography of St Chavara writes: "Fr Prior fulfilled his priestly and religious duties more by his good conduct and virtuous practices than by words and deeds. All are impressed by his deep humility, unparalleled charity and spirit of submission to authority. Therefore, they not only respect and love him, but also unquestioningly trust his words. Among his virtues the most notable ones are the devotion to, and the love for the Mother Church and Holy Father."

Chavara exemplified the Christian ideals of love and forgiveness. In the testament to his confreres, he instructs them to "render as much help as possible to the family of Mathan Manjooran Kalapurackal of the parish of Muttuchira. In so doing you will be imitating the disciples of Christ and setting a model." This Mathan, once the steward of Mannanam Monastery, had unjustly

appropriated some property of the monastery for which he was punished by the civil court. Later, he filed a complaint against Chavara in the criminal court of Alapuzha. The court met the prior in the Church of Holy Cross at Alapuzha and, after hearing his version, the Hindu judge dismissed the case as fraud, and after a personal conversation with Chavara remarked: "Fr Prior indeed is a man of God. Those who complain against so great a man should be grossly wicked and deserve God's anger!"

Following the footsteps of Jesus Christ, Chavara was a good shepherd committed to the care of his sheep even at the cost of his life. While serving as the vicar of Pallipuram, one night he was informed that a critically ill parishioner was asking for the anointing of the sick. The prior immediately got ready to go to him. But the people tried to stop him saying that it was a case of contagious small pox. But the prior would not care. "It is my duty! God will take care of me," he said. Courageously reaching the patient's home he joyfully administered the anointing of the sick.

Chavara was a man of moral integrity as well. The construction of the convent at Koonammavu was in progress. Some money was urgently needed. Directed by him, Fr Geevarghese Thoppil went to different parishes and returned with Rs 400 received as donations. Having met the need with just half the amount, Chavara was quite clear about what to do with the remaining sum of Rs 200. "Gratefully give it back to the donors!" he said.

1.5. Physical Features

Keeping in mind St Chavara as an icon, we shall now try to meditate on his spirituality. For this purpose it may be helpful to have before us his physical features as well, so

that the object of meditation is at least mentally visible. We are fortunate to have a portrait of the Saint in the words of Fr Louis. In an interview given to Fr Placid Podipara CMI in 1936, he says:

The Prior Fr Chavara was a fat man. I had with me a picture of St Liguori (which unfortunately is missing now.) The prior had his looks. While sitting he kept his head so bowed that his chin always touched his chest. He was comparatively fair in complexion—indeed your [Fr Placid's] colour. The eyes were rather large, but not too large. He was not so bald but moderately so. The face was round. The nose was longish, but not too long. He was short in stature. Well, he had my [Fr Louis'] height, [that is, while standing he would be reaching up to your [Fr Placid's] nose].¹ Being fat he did not look that tall, though.

He had a working knowledge of Portuguese, Latin and Italian. Of course, he was not an expert in them. It was lately that he learned Italian, realizing that there were many good books in it... He wore a white habit consisting of a cassock with a leather belt around the waist, scapular and cowl; he always wore simple sandals, too.

He had everything in common with others in the community; there was nothing special at all. He was ever satisfied with the food served in common. For breakfast, he had rice gruel with one curry; for lunch, rice with two curries; at 4 pm, a little rice gruel; and for supper, rice with two curries. The priests considered him a god! He had a strong will, and was

¹Fr Placid was about 5' 8" high and of fair complexion.

able to bear sufferings and all sorts of hardships. He was very concerned about the priests' formation and theological studies. For no reason, he would excuse himself from taking part in any of the community acts.

Being fat he dragged his legs while walking. There was swelling in the legs. While walking he would occasionally swing his arms, not swiftly but gently! In his old age, while walking along the veranda he always used a walking stick. As a rule, he kept his hands under the scapular. His voice was sweet and clear. His sermons were quite audible for all. For functions like Mass he would sing beautifully. He was soft-spoken. He did not have any unusually heroic practice worth mentioning. In accordance with his knowledge and discretion, he loved God, and that was it! Till his death, all his teeth remained in tact. His eyelashes seem to have ever remained dark, not gone grey.¹

¹Louis (or Aloysius) 1936: 5-10.

Chapter 2

LOVE OF THE CHURCH

2.1. Chavara's Most Outstanding Virtue

Fr Leopold writes:

Among his [St Kuriakose Elias Chavara's] virtues, the most outstanding was his ardent faith in and the devotion to the Holy Catholic Church and the Holy Father. He had an ardent desire to spread the light of the Holy Church in all directions; he was grieved to the point of shedding tears when he heard of the trials and persecutions of the Church and eagerly longed to see the days of her triumph. Whenever he happened to hear the news about the Pope, he was always moved to tears, either of sorrow or of joy. It was because of his extraordinary faith that he showed great veneration, love and obedience towards the Papal Legate who was the representative of the Holy Father, and towards the missionaries who were the messengers of the Holy Church.¹

He says again:

Never did Chavara hold himself back from any work, or fight shy of any difficulty, as he was always prompted by two motives: obedience to the bishop and the salvation of souls.²

While reflecting upon the spirituality of Chavara, the first theme that one should consider is his love for the Church and the society at large. In all his undertakings, the good of the Church and society was uppermost in his mind, but only

¹Beccaro 2003: 12-13.

²Beccaro 2003: 12.

after the glory of God. This is true also about the other founding fathers and the founding community as a whole of the CMI Congregation. We shall now try to substantiate the point.

2.2. Palackal: A Church Leader

The founding fathers of the Congregation all through their lives were faithful and committed servants of the Church and society. The first among them was *Malpān* Fr Thomas Palackal. He was very committed to the good of the Church and the society at large. All his undertakings were ultimately aimed at their wellbeing and development. More particularly, he was concerned about the reform and discipline of his own Syrian community. In fact, ever since his ordination he was engaged in works of common concern and was respected by all as an able leader and reliable guide. His first appointment was as the secretary to Vicar Apostolic Raymond Suria (Sura),¹ a post that he held from 1808 to 1816 after which he moved to Pallipuram as the *malpān* in the seminary there. He had good knowledge not only of Church matters but also of temporalities such as the acquisition, buying and selling of properties belonging to the vicariate of Varapuzha. He was indeed a great help in the administration of the vicariate. Therefore, even after he relinquished the secretarial work in 1816, he continued as consultant to the vicars apostolic. In all these capacities, he won the respect and love of his superiors, associates and disciples alike.²

¹His full name is Raymond of St Joseph Roviglia, bishop of Suria (or Sura), and he was vicar apostolic of Varapuzha from 1803 to 1816.

²CWC I (1990): 61f; CSK I (1981): 68f.

Indeed, the Church and society did benefit a lot from his social influence and good will. Well known are his initiatives in reforming the seminary training and priestly life and ministry by introducing new rules and discipline, promoting the habit of reading, and encouraging the study of foreign languages. He was also instrumental in introducing cassock among the Syrian Catholic clergy as a matter of honour and dignity.¹

Towards the pastoral care of the faithful, too, *Malpān* Palackal made significant contributions. It was as a result of his insistence that the vicar apostolic started making the Episcopal visitation in the parishes personally. The practice till then was that the vicars apostolic would delegate some missionaries to do so, which, obviously, was not quite effective. Again it was Fr Palackal who counselled Bp Miles Prendergast² to direct all the churches, Latin as well as Syrian, to have cemeteries, confessionals and confraternities. Till then, the Latin churches did not have cemeteries and confessionals while the Syrian ones did not have confraternities.³

2.3. Porukara: A Committed Pastor

The second of the founders was Fr Thomas Porukara. He was a zealous pastor and a much sought after preacher. After his ordination in 1823, Porukara spent two years caring for his mother and younger ones in the family as his father had died in 1818. He got for his brother Antony a job

¹CWC I (1990): 55ff; CSK I (1981): 62f.

²"[He was] appointed vicar apostolic in 1818 but took charge only in 1821, left Malabar in 1827, resigned in 1831 and died in 1844." (Mundadan: 2008: 24).

³CWC I (1990): 63; CSK I (1981): 69.

in the Resident's office at Kollam, and entrusted to him the care of the family. For the next two years, he served as the vicar of his own parish and, then, on 15 August 1927, was transferred to Thankassery. There the parishioners were impressed by his extraordinary administrative abilities. He was also deeply spiritual and an exemplary pastor. His sermons inspired his flock to lead a virtuous life.¹ His younger brother Fr Kuriakose Eliseus Porukara says: "As thunder makes seeds sprout from their sleep and flourish, so Fr Thomas Porukara opened the inner eyes of the people irrespective of their financial or social status. Many, who had not received the sacrament of reconciliation for a long period, were converted. The fear of God led them to repent and return to Jesus through confession. Even today there are some who, cherishing its memory, continue the devout life."²

Porukara's stay in Thankassery was short. In 1828, after being appointed secretary to the Vicar Apostolic Bp Maurilius Stabilini, he moved to Varapuzha. It was Fr Palackal who had recommended Porukara to this post. Bp Stabilini who was appointed vicar apostolic in 1827 requested Fr Palackal to be his secretary or to suggest some other reliable priest to the post. The bishop conveyed the message that he would be very happy to have as his secretary Fr Palackal himself who had already held that post under Bp Raymond of Suria (or Sura). However, not wanting to give up the teaching profession in the seminary, he recommended his friend Fr Porukara.³

¹For a short biography of Porukara, see SP: 15-24.

²SP: 16.

³CWC I (1990): 1-2; CSK I (1981) 1-2.

That the bishop appreciated and valued the Fathers' services in the vicariate is clear from his words to them when they approached him for permission to assume consecrated life: "If you, the only ones who are knowledgeable, go away to live in silence and solitude [*miṅṭ-aṭakkamāyi vāccaṭattum otunki pārttāl*], who else will be left to teach the people?" And the prelate made sure that, even after the establishment of the proposed religious house, their services would be available to the people! To stop being at the disposal of the Church and society had, in fact, never occurred to them, either. Instead, by embracing the consecrated life, they intended to be more committed to the service of the people, even by doing the many good things that were so far left undone!¹

2.4. Chavara's Ecclesial Concerns

i. Lack of Learned Leaders

We may also recall a few statements of Chavara that bear witness to his anguish about the pitiable condition of the Church of Malabar in his time. First of all, he notes the lack of learned leaders, priests as well as laity. He was convinced that the leaders should be learned, because otherwise they would be like the blind leading the blind (Mt 15:14). In a circular, dated 25 March 1850, he deplores that for want of learned clergy and laity, his Church does not have the vitality or wisdom of saints:

St Ephrem, a Doctor of the Church, teaches that the second source of enlightenment is learning. Just as without eyes one cannot see the material things of the world, so without learning it will be impossible for us to see or understand the reality of the world that is

¹See the quotation referred to by footnote 18 below.

above and the Lord that dwells therein. As those who have no eyes are called 'blind', so those who have no learning should be called 'spiritually blind.' Thanks to the latter kind of blindness, although we the Nazarenes [in Kerala] claim to be Christians of ancient origin, we do not have the seeds and sprouts of saints. Our Lord Himself has taught that if one blind person leads another, both will fall into a ditch.¹

ii. Lack of Good Books

In another context, Chavara regrets that while the Greek and the Latin Rite people in other countries have excellent theological books and treatises, the Church in Kerala has not produced such good works. The reason, he says, is that in those nations the people have their own native bishops and missionaries who, in course of time, have produced good literary and theological books. They succeeded in doing so because there the bishops and missionaries speak the same language as the local clergy and laity and, therefore, among them there is perfect unity and understanding so that in an atmosphere of peace and harmony they can successfully undertake literary and theological works. But in our land those in the administration of the Church—the bishop and missionaries—do not know the language of the native clergy and laity nor do they care to learn it which causes an insurmountable and disastrous gap between the two groups. While the local priests perform all the liturgical functions in their own Syrian Rite and Syriac language, the bishop and missionaries do them in their Latin Rite and language. The ignorance of one another's Rite and language causes a lot of misunderstanding and suspicion between the

¹CWC IV (1990): 95-96; CSK IV (1986): 125-126.

local and missionary communities. Even for the priestly ordinations the bishop follows the Latin Rite and language. As a result, there exists and develops between him and the priests not the relation of father and children, but that of master and slave. Similarly, the parish priest and parishioners should be like a father and spiritual children. But such an understanding is entirely missing here. The instructions given by the hierarch and missionaries, with the best of intentions, are interpreted by the local leaders as coming from those who do not know our Syrian language and Rite, and as intended to destroy our Rite and traditions. The ordinary people believe them and blindly welcome the Persian intruders and slavishly follow them. This persisting atmosphere of tension and conflicts prevents us from engaging in more important and creative pursuits like literary and theological works, and leaves us intellectually bankrupt and spiritually shallow!¹

iii. Disunity and Barrenness

The most striking factor about St Chavara and the other founding fathers of the CMI-CMC Congregations is their love and concern for the Mother Church. They were lovers of the Church, and committed to the service of the Church. It is while deploring the disunity and barrenness of the Syrian Church of Malabar that Chavara opens the third part of *The Chronicles* in which he reviews some past episodes in the history of the same Church:

As a magnetic needle always points towards the north, so the brethren of my own flesh and blood called the Nazarenes of Malankara had their hearts set from the earliest times on getting Syrian bishops. This

¹CWC IV (1990): 57-59; CSK IV (1986): 86-87.

had often endangered their spiritual life and led them to break away from the communion of the Holy Church. As any close observer can perceive, the Christian way of virtuous life and exemplary conduct has not yet taken root in this land of Malabar! This Church had received the gift of Christian faith right from the Apostle St Thomas. But even today she remains barren without giving birth to even one saint, while some other countries and islands which received faith much later have brought forth several saints!¹

Till the 16th century the Syrian Church of Persia was looking after the spiritual needs of the Christians of Malabar.² The Portuguese, who arrived in the 16th century, through the illegally convened Synod of Udayamperur (1599), forcibly severed the Persian connection, and blocked the arrival of Persian bishops. They then brought the Syrian community of Malabar under the Latin jurisdiction of the Portuguese

¹CWC I (1990): 146; CSK I (1981): 173.

²Malankara or Malabar in this work refers to the present state of Kerala in India. Till 16th century all the Christians in this land there were Catholics who trace their faith to St Thomas the Apostles. They are variously called as St Thomas Christians (of Malabar/Malankara), Nazarenes (or Nazarene Christians of Malankara/Malankara), Syrian Christians (of Malabar/Malankara). They followed the East Syrian liturgical Rite and language and were taken care of by the East Syrian (or Chaldean) Church of the then Persia. In 16th century, with the arrival of the Portuguese and other European missionaries the Latin Rite Churches, Catholic as well as non-Catholic, were given shape. The original St Thomas Christians also started dividing into different denominations.

Padroado.¹ In a very highhanded manner they started to Latinize the liturgy and ecclesiastical life of the St Thomas Christians. They utterly failed and even refused to understand and appreciate the age old Syrian traditions and practices. There are also stories of severe illtreatment and humiliations the Syrians suffered at the hands of the Portuguese missionaries. The Syrians, therefore, naturally yearned to go back to the Persian patronage and the Syrian bishops instead of the Portuguese. This tension led to the “*kūnan* (bent) cross oath” (1653) and the subsequent very unfortunate split of the Church of Malabar into the Catholic and the Jacobite groups, the latter entering into communion with the West Syrian Jacobite Church of Antioch. The St Thomas Christians’ struggle for the restoration of their identity and autonomy continued; their aspiration for Syrian bishops became ever deeper; it even became an obsession, repeatedly occasioning the near schismatic and greatly disturbing and debilitating movements like the Roccas episode in Chavara’s own time.

It is in keeping with all these events that Chavara observes that his people “had their hearts set from the earliest times on getting Syrian bishops.” Here, he is not saying that the people’s antagonism towards European missionaries and their desire for Syrian bishops were unreasonable or illegitimate. His concern rather is that the obsession for Syrian prelates was ‘endangering their

¹The word *Padroado* means patronage. By an agreement with Rome, the Church had accepted the patronage of the Portuguese king, who in turn was granted the privilege of nominating the archbishops and bishops in the newly established Portuguese colonies. Thus, the archdioceses of Goa and Kodunkalloor came under the Portuguese *Padroado*.

spiritual life and leading them to split away from the communion of the Holy Church.’ The preoccupation with such administrative matters distracts them from the essentials of Christian living so that even after so many centuries they are fruitless, bereft of recognized saints and holy men and women.

Chavara further notes that ‘many of the European missionaries leaving their relatives and homelands come here prompted by good intentions and absolute charity and with the sole motive of teaching us the intricacies of true religion and the way of salvation. But our prejudice against them inhibits us from loving and submitting to them wholeheartedly. We, in our ignorance and bias, fail to appreciate their sacrifices and sufferings for our sake! We refuse to trust and cooperate with them and, consequently, their efforts to get closer to us do not bear fruits and they have to work without a sense of satisfaction. We, then, blindly welcome one or another Syrian prelate who manages to intrude into our community and splits us away from the Holy Catholic Church! We, thus, fall into spiritual perdition. This has been repeatedly happening in our Church of Malabar. Of course, most of the times we eventually repented and the Mother Church kindly received us back. But this recurring rise and fall have left us spiritually drained!’¹

2.5. Religious Congregation for the Common Good

It is important to note that the foundation of the CMI and CMC Congregations by Chavara and others was meant to fill a gap in the Church of Malabar. They observed that in the absence of religious congregations the members of this

¹CWC I (1990): 146-147; CSK I (1981): 172-173.

Church had no possibility of leading consecrated life and that, as a result, many good things were left undone. Their concern, therefore, was to open the way of consecrated life not merely for themselves, but for all the members of the Church of Malabar and, thus, to provide the Church with consecrated men and women who would do the many good things that were otherwise left undone.

Of course, most of the foreign congregations had by then come to this land and established their communities, and were engaged in mission work. There were already, for example, the Dominicans, Augustinians, Franciscans, Jesuits and Carmelites. But they would not admit any of the natives as members because of the prejudice that their Christian faith was not strong enough for consecrated life. Chavara opens his *Chronicles of the Convent at Koonammavu* as follows:

The people in Malabar had true faith from the ancient times. But in their midst there has been no monastery or convent. They have heard a lot about the consecrated life in such religious houses. But they never had living examples among them. Of course, the men among us could become priests and, thus, lead the celibate life. But the women had no option but to get married and lead the life of a householder. Even those of them really desired to pursue the life of consecrated virginity had no chance of doing so! This has been our sorry plight so far!¹

Thus, the founders were more concerned about the Church's urgent need to have religious houses than about their own need. St Chavara has recorded how the senior members –

¹CWC I (1990): 193; CSK I (1981): 231.

Frs Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara – felt about the matter:

He [Fr Thomas Palackal] and his most intimate friend Fr Thomas [Porukara] had yearned to establish a religious house [*darśana-vīṭu*], since, in the absence of a house of penance [*tapasu-bhavanam*] in Malabar, even for priests, much good was left undone. They were sad at heart as there was no one to give them support, but they went on praying.¹

Here again their concern is that “in the absence of a house of penance [*tapasu-bhavanam*] in Malabar, even for priests, much good was left undone.” They were, therefore, “yearning to establish a religious house” first for men and then for women. Then they took the matter to the Vicar Apostolic Bishop Maurilius Stabilini. In their discussion with him, the focus on the need of the Church and society became clearer. The bishop appreciated the Fathers’ desire to assume consecrated life. But he reminded them that the people were badly in need of their services and that, therefore, they should not altogether withdraw from the society. He then advised them to put up a monastery right in the midst of the people from which not only the members but also others would benefit. Brother Jacob Kaniyanthara writes:

One day both of the Fathers, Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, having discussed the question of going for religious life, decided to approach the Very Reverend Bishop for permission. During a recreation time they said to him: “Both of us would like to live

¹CWC I (1990): 1; CSK I (1981): 1.

somewhere in solitude [*vāccaṭattum otunki pārkkamam-
ennu nirūpicciṭṭuṅtu*]. We beg to be permitted to do so.”

The bishop responded thus: “If you, the only ones who are knowledgeable, go away to live in silence and solitude [*miṅṭ-aṭakkamāyi vāccaṭattum otunki pārttāl*], who else will be left to teach the people? If you like, you may establish a monastery so that all people can benefit from it.”¹

That the religious house should be at the service of the Church and society was not a new idea for the Fathers. While thinking of the establishment of a religious house their intention, obviously, was to be able to do the many good works that would otherwise be left undone in the Church and society. In their own terminology, it should be “a house built on a hilltop (*bes-rauma*)” for all others to look at and be inspired, a ‘mirror of virtuous life’ (*punṇyattinte kaṇṇāṭi*) looking at which all can easily learn what it means to lead a virtuous life, and a ‘spiritual resort’ (*punṇya-sanketam*) where all are welcome to come and be spiritually refreshed and revitalized. So, the bishop’s suggestion was readily acceptable for them. But they expressed their helplessness that they did not have the means to construct a monastery with all the accessories. But the bishop assured them of the people’s support. They too felt convinced of it, and with a sense of confidence launched the project of a religious institute in view of the good of the Church and the society at large.

Later, while establishing the convent, too, they had similar thoughts. Some of the objectives of the convent included: the members, besides themselves pursuing a life

¹Kaniyanthara: 6.

of Christian perfection, should set a good example of Christian life, teach others catechism and other religious matters, educate and train children in manual work and handicrafts like tailoring and embroidery. The convent, in addition to being a place of intense Christian living for the members, should be also a spiritual resort (*punnya-sanketam*) for all!

Chapter 3

DEFENDER AND BUILDER OF THE CHURCH

3.1. Defender of Catholic Unity

Among the achievements of Chavara and his collaborators, two of them stand out as decisive contributions to the history of the Church. One is the foundation of the two religious congregations, one for men and the other for women. As we have already stated, their appearance filled up a centuries-old gap in the life of the Church in Kerala and made her turn over a new leaf, becoming pastorally, spiritually and socially more dynamic and lively. As a matter of fact these congregations should be given the credit for much of the developments in the Church and society in the past two centuries.

The other historically important achievement of Chavara is that he, with the help of his religious community, successfully managed an existential crisis that would otherwise lead to a schism in the Church. It was in the year 1861-1862 that the Syro-Malabar Church of Kerala experienced an open rebellion. On 9 May 1861 the Chaldean bishop Thomas Roccas from Baghdad arrived in Kochi without authorization from the Holy Father. In fact, the Holy See had clearly instructed the Chaldean patriarchs not to interfere in the affairs of the Church in Kerala. But Patriarch Joseph VI Audo in response to repeated petitions from Kerala and under the pressure of some of his own people consecrated Roccas, and sent him to Kerala 'not to stay and administer but only to enquire about matters in Kerala and leave.' But, as Roccas landed in Kochi, the Syrians, mostly misguided by some of their own leaders and

out of their enthusiasm for getting a bishop of their own Rite, welcomed him in spite of the repeated warnings from Archbishop Bernardine Baccinelli, the vicar apostolic of Varapuzha. They were miserably fed up and dissatisfied with the Varapuzha administration and the European missionaries at large who had utterly failed to understand and respect their legitimate requests and feelings. Therefore, they refused to believe the vicar apostolic when he said that Bishop Roccas had come without the Pope's permission. Instead, they blindly mistook the intruder for their lawful hierarch and declared allegiance to him. Bishop Roccas, too, overwhelmed and encouraged by the unexpected support of the people started exercising jurisdictional power over them and performing Episcopal ministries among them. Very soon the Syrian parishes one after another went to his side. Out of the total 154 parishes, 86 fully and 30 partially followed him!

The vicar apostolic and the missionaries could only helplessly watch the situation going out of hand and leading to a disastrous schism. The only solution they could think of was to appoint a Syrian Rite priest as the vicar general whom the Syrian community would trust and respect. Chavara was the person that they found able to meet the need of the hour. Archbishop Baccinelli immediately made him the vicar general for the Syrians in his vicariate. In the letter dated 8 June 1861 appointing Chavara as vicar general, the prelate, first of all, admits the difficulties he had long been experiencing in the administration of the churches in Kerala, and then regrets that his efforts so far have not produced the desired spiritual fruits among the priests and laity. Then he continues:

In the present circumstances, ... hereby I nominate you as vicar general so that you may administer, as regards the spiritual matters, the priests and laity of the Syro-Malabar Church under our jurisdiction. For, I am convinced that you have the fortitude, ability and the virtues necessary to carry out this office. Hence, besides the authority and privileges, which the common law acknowledges, I grant you all those privileges, which I am entitled to impart in accordance to my patent letters.¹

The same prelate recommended the consecration of Chavara as co-adjutor bishop. In his letter dated 15 June 1861, informing the Propaganda Congregation of the Prior's appointment as vicar general, he wrote:

In these difficult and critical times, with the consent of my councillors, I have constituted as my vicar general the seniormost among the Tertiaries, the Prior of the principal monastery, and the head of the entire congregation, a man truly Christian, virtuous, very prudent, well-versed in Sacred Scripture, expert in Syriac language, who in the present circumstances has proved by facts most attached to the Catholic religion, and to the Holy See. Though the rebel group and the intruder bishop attempted by several ways to win over Fr Chavara to their side, even by offering him episcopacy, he did not succumb to any such temptations. Had he accepted their offer, no doubt, the whole Church would have followed him, because he enjoyed among all the people great esteem, respect

¹The original in Malayalam is kept in ASJM, and its Latin version is given in *Positio*: 216f.

and authority. Now I have an idea and I request Your Eminence to give serious consideration to it. In case the dignity of vicar general alone will not be enough to keep away the people from the intruder and from the Chaldean patriarch, will it not be better to consecrate the said prior as coadjutor bishop for the Syrians?¹

Surprisingly, however, in the same letter the archbishop expresses one reservation, namely, that the prior lacks the necessary perception of the proposed office of bishop. But he reassures that with the support of the vicar apostolic and missionaries he will reap more fruits than the Chaldeans because he is a good, prudent, and obedient person and a captivating preacher. He further says that having made a simple vow of humility Chavara would not accept the position unless commanded under obedience, as it was the case when he was appointed as vicar general.

The prior immediately set to work to convince the people that Bp Roccas had no authorization from the Holy Father, and to persuade him to stop his destructive efforts in Kerala and go back to his country. Through correspondence with Rome for direct information about the Chaldean bishop, gently and peacefully dealing with him and his supporters, and in the spirit of a good shepherd winning the confidence of his own people and lovingly guiding the strayed ones back to the sheepfold, he settled the issue within ten months. It was a matter of hard work for the prior and his confreres. There were times when his life was at risk. The rival group also tried their best, even offering him bishopric, to win him over to their side. But he remained firm in his

¹Quoted in Mundadan 2008: 229.

commitment to the Mother Church and loyal to the legitimate authority. His only concern was the unity of the Catholic Church and obedience to the lawful superiors. Finally, in early March 1862 in a truly Christian manner Bp Roccas was sent back to his patriarch, and getting reconciled with the Church he quietly led a retired life. Soon after the departure of Bp Roccas, by the constructive work of Fr Prior and his religious priests, most of the separated parishes were brought back and almost complete unity was restored. "Holy Father Pope Pius IX, gloriously reigning, on hearing about the stability of Chavara's faith and about his zeal for saving the Christians from schism, wrote to him a letter of high praise and satisfaction."¹

By way of assessing Chavara's involvement and role in containing the Roccas revolt, let us quote:

Was the Roccasian affair a schism? Perhaps, not in the full sense of the term... Chavara calls it a "religious quarrel" (*veda-kalāpam*) and a "matter of misery" (*duritam*), and it was so, indeed. Why did he oppose it so vehemently? For him obedience to legitimate superiors was a supreme value. He was equally sure that Roccas had come here against the Holy Father's order and that he was refusing to submit to the local ordinary Abp Baccinelli. Therefore, people who are persuaded to follow him also are misled and exposed to the danger of eternal damnation. So, the committed pastor in Fr Prior thought that he was duty-bound to rescue them.

Moreover, the prior believed that union with the Pope and the ordinaries appointed by him was essential for

¹Beccaro 2003: 11.

salvation. The Roccisian movement was obviously a threat to that union and was paving the way for a schism, if it were not already one. Chavara wanted to prevent that misfortune. He was already deeply concerned about the tragic division between the Jacobites and Catholics within his Syrian Church of Kerala that occurred in the mid-seventeenth century as a result of the highhanded dealings of the Portuguese missionaries. The prior did not want his Church to split again. He rather would do anything to bring about the reunion of the Jacobites. The latter also, ever since their separation, were by and large eager to be reunited. But they insisted not only that they should be permitted to retain their customs and practices but also that their Episcopal dignity should be recognized so that their identity and autonomy would be maintained. The Carmelite missionaries were opposed to these conditions. Chavara, however, continued to encourage all efforts for the reunion of the separated brethren. [And it is well known that his congregation has ever since worked for the Jacobite reunion with considerable success].¹

3.2. Renewal of Priestly Training and Ministry

Yet another field in which the founding fathers made remarkable contributions is the formation and ministry of priests. Those days the candidates for priesthood received formation in one or another *malpanate* under a priest appointed by the bishop as *malpān*, a Syriac word literally meaning 'professor' or 'teacher.' There the teaching and formation were not generally so very systematic or of the

¹Kochumuttom 2014: 205-206.

desired standard. But there were exceptions like the one in Pallipuram where Fr Thomas Palackal was *malpan* under whom Chavara was well trained for priesthood. In fact, all his life Palackal remained the *malpan* of the same seminary and was committed to the profession of training priests. Well aware of the need for well trained and erudite priests in his Church, he made seminary training an important apostolate of his congregation. By his initiative already in 1833 a seminary attached to Mannanam monastery started functioning. While the seminary at Pallipuram eventually ceased to exist, Mannanam continued as the only seminary for the whole of the Syrian community until others attached to the monasteries of Vazhakulam, Elthuruth and Pulinkunnu were opened in 1866, 1868 and 1872 respectively. All these seminaries were meant not for candidates for the religious congregation but for the diocesan ones, although from among them the Fathers hoped to get vocations for religious life as well. In other words, in running the seminaries the primary motive of the Fathers was their love and service of the Church at large. Later, all those four seminaries were correlated with the major one that was started in 1866 at Puthanpally for all Kerala under the direct supervision of the vicar apostolic and administered by the missionaries.¹

The Fathers were concerned not only about the training of priestly candidates but also the ongoing formation and discipline of priests. The use of cassocks introduced long before by *Malpān* Palackal had created in the clergy a sense of priestly identity and dignity, and that, in turn, made them more respectable before the people. The same *malpān*

¹Valerian 1939: 87-88; Mundadan 2008: 245.

instilled in the priests taste for reading good books which made them more spiritual and learned pastors of people. To help the priests sustain their spiritual fervour and pastoral zeal Chavara took pains to conduct for them annual retreats at Mannanam, usually by the end of May.

3.3. Liturgical Renewal

Another important service of Chavara was the compilation of the Divine Office of his Church. This was a much called for work. The daily Divine Office, which was in use those days, was too lengthy, and available only in manuscripts that were too few and very badly preserved. It is no wonder that the priests tended to ignore its recital. Chavara took up the challenge of preparing a handy book of Divine Office. This was a task into which he was already initiated by his *malpān* Palackal during his seminary days in Pallipuram. In the course of time, he collected from different places old manuscripts. After having a discussion with several *malpāns* assembled at Koonammavu he made the necessary changes with extreme care. He took great trouble to write down in his own hand the whole of the breviary neatly and orderly. The manuscript seems to have been ready by 1862. Only the book of Psalms was printed immediately,¹ while the rest was done in 1876,² five years after Chavara's death. It is to be noted that this was the Divine Office that was in use till late 1960s when the breviary in Malayalam was introduced. It was, indeed, the only book that sustained the practice of canonical prayers for almost a century in the Church of St Thomas Christians!

¹SP: 29; *Positio*: 484f.; Bernard 1989: 138.

²Bernard 1989: 139.

Chavara made sure that the Holy Mass is celebrated in an orderly manner. The 1774 missal, printed first in Rome, was reprinted in 1784 and was still available. But there was no book giving the correct rubrics in detail, nor a properly organized calendar. Therefore, the priests while saying Mass followed customs and practices that were different from place to place. As a result the Eucharistic celebration lacked uniformity which in turn caused confusion and embarrassment for the people. To remedy the situation:

Chavara wrote a book called *Tūkāsa* containing the rubrics of the Syrian Mass and got it printed for the use of priests. The *Tūkāsa* was composed in order to bring about uniformity in the rubrics of the Mass. The contents were almost the same as those followed traditionally by the priests. It was to ensure uniformity that Chavara at the order of the ordinary composed it and got it printed.¹

This book reprinted in 1926 was in use till 1962 when a new missal with an *Ordo* was promulgated by Rome.² That means, for almost a century Chavara's *Tūkāsa* served as the only means of ensuring an orderly and uniform manner of Eucharistic celebrations in Syro-Malabar Church, and that was a great service, indeed.

The Saint, then, turned his attention to the restoration and updating of the liturgical calendar of his Syrian community. They did not yet have a calendar of their own tradition. For many years they were using the Latin Rite calendar which naturally enjoined the Latin practices and altogether ignored the Syrian ones such as the division of

¹Bernard 1989: 136f.

²Mundadan 2008: 268.

the year into liturgical seasons. This was certainly a matter of serious concern and deep regret for the Syrians. This explains the importance of the new calendar with all the essential features of the Syrian Rite liturgy that Chavara with great difficulty prepared and got printed before the end of 1865 and was in force from next year."¹ It is important to add that this work has been instrumental for the preservation of the St Thomas Christians' ancient tradition of dividing the liturgical year into the seasons of Nativity, Epiphany (*Denha*), Lent (*Sauma Ramba*), etc. It also shows Chavara's knowledge of his Church's ancient traditions and his concern to preserve them.²

3.4. Pastoral Care of People

The people of God were mostly the beneficiaries of the renewal of priests and liturgy. They were happy about having more meaningful, orderly and spiritually enriching liturgical services. They also benefitted from the more committed pastoral care from their priests. In this regard, the ministry of preaching that has been an integral part of the charism of the new religious community assumes importance. They had made their own the Dominican ideal of 'preaching what one contemplates'. While Palackal was an able teacher of the Word of God, Porukara and Chavara were much sought after preachers. Their followers also readily took it for granted that preaching of retreats and sermons was one of their important apostolates. Kuriakose Porukara writes:

¹*The Chronicle of Mannanam* III: 91; CWC IV (1990): 100; CSK IV (1986): 130-131; *Positio*: 500.

²Mundadan 2008: 270-271.

The apostles casting their net at the bidding of the Lord had so huge a catch of fish that they could not lift the net by themselves. So, they sought the help of their friends (Lk 5:4ff). Similarly, these brothers [in Mannanam Monastery], at the order of the archbishop, preached in different parishes having a thousand or two thousand or even five thousand or more faithful spiritual retreats and sermons, taught catechism and heard confessions. Thus, they rooted out the reign of the Devil and led people to eternal life. The glory of God and the salvation of souls effected in this way gave joy to the archbishop, parish priests and laity, for which they thanked God. In order to spread this good work, he [Chavara] visited many places and with due consultation with and permission from the ecclesiastical authorities founded monasteries.¹

Pleased with the success of their preaching ministry already in 1849 Vicar Apostolic Ludovic Martini appointed them as official preachers of retreats for the entire vicariate. Accordingly, they were to conduct eight-day retreats in the churches the expenses for which would be met from the parish funds.²

Both of the early biographers, Frs Leopold³ and Porukara, are all praise for the pastoral concern with which Chavara fought against the Roccosians. Given below are Porukara's words:

¹SP: 28.

²See the a palm leaf copy of the vicar apostolic's letter preserved in the archives Arakuzha; *Positio*: 93f.; Mundadan 2008: 242.

³Beccaro 2003: 10-11.

During those stormy days he [Chavara] was endowed with the dignity of vicar general for Syrian churches. All who have any recollection of those events know well how many people he saved from falling into the abyss of schism, how many churches he salvaged from the clutches of the Roccisian partisans, all through his good influence among people, his eloquent sermons and his life of virtue. If there were not the ark of Noah during the flood no single human being would have been spared; similarly if there were not Fr Prior and this religious community, it is quite reasonable to think that all Syrian churches would have been lost in schism.¹

Following the Roccisian disturbances the preaching ministry was more intensified and organized. It became more a team work than an individual undertaking. Each retreat was preached by a group of four or five priests. Every year there used to be twenty to thirty retreats conducted in different parishes, and after each of them the vicar apostolic would make his canonical visitation of the parish. It was through the efforts of Chavara and his priests that preaching of sermon on Sundays and feast days became a regular practice in Kerala. It is said that there was hardly any church in which Chavara had not preached.²

Mention may be made also of certain practices and devotions that the Fathers introduced and promoted. We have already mentioned *Malpān* Palackal's pastoral innovations in the Syrian as well as Latin Rites communities. Later on, Chavara began to conduct the 40-

¹SP: 28.

²Parapuram: 1111ff.; Valerian 1939: 204; Mundadan 2008: 242.

hour adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in the monastery chapels. He also wrote down the Office for the Dead, and adopted the Holy Saturday Service, all for use in the Syrian parishes; he and his community members also promoted and encouraged among the people devotions like the Way of the Cross, Marian Rosary and Scapular, and Novena Prayers. Of course, these are not either liturgical prayers or originally Syrian practices. However, with their introduction the Christian life among the Syrians became livelier, more appealing and responding to the legitimate emotional needs of the common people. We should appreciate that the Fathers did their best to nourish and sustain the spiritual life of the faithful, taking into account, as far as they could in the given circumstances, the Syrian traditions and the practical needs of the people.

Chapter 4

SELFLESS SERVICE OF SOCIETY

4.1. Printing Press for the Church and Society

We have discussed the undertakings of Chavara and the other founding fathers in which they were motivated by the love for and loyalty to the Church, and their primary purpose was to strengthen her and ensure her wellbeing, spiritual vigour and unity. They were deeply concerned about the society at large as well, and had many initiatives in view of the benefit of all the people irrespective of caste and creed. We shall now briefly consider some of them.

First of all, we shall look at the setting up of a printing press in Mannanam by Chavara in 1846. In doing it, his sole intention was to meet a dire need of his Syrian community. Till then they had no press of their own nor did they have direct access to any of the existing ones.¹ Already during the seminary time under his *malpān* Fr Palackal he had become deeply aware of the crucial role of books in the life of priests and laity alike. He was equally concerned about the scarcity of good books among his people which badly handicapped them in the spiritual as well as secular matters. So, he was certainly considering ways and means of remedying the situation. Obviously, a printing press would be an enduring solution. He started working on it in 1843 and it was, indeed, a long and arduous task for him as we shall in due course.

What interests us at the moment is Chavara's motive in such a daring undertaking. To say the least, it was a selfless

¹Mundadan 2008: 346-345.

service for the benefit of the Church and society. It certainly cost them a huge amount of money – more or less Rs 1000 which was so big a money those day! Today it would be equal to Rs 400,000! They did not have ready cash for it, but had to borrow, if not beg! Once the project was completed they were literally bankrupt! That means, they contributed for the wellbeing of the Church not out of their abundance, but out of their poverty; they put in all they had to live on (Lk 21:3-4)! Obviously, they did not expect any monetary gain from this venture, nor did they consider it a profit-making project. Their only objective was the benefit of the people and the building up of the kingdom of God!

It was also a hard work for three years, sometimes even humiliating and embarrassing! For one thing, they had to undertake again and again difficult and long journeys, some of them to no avail! They had also to go through all sorts of human situations and hardships, both physical and mental; they had to take time and be patient; there were times when their trust in God possibly was tested and tried; they had to depend on so many people, and almost go begging for help and money; in some places they were rejected and disgraced! But they would never lose heart or give up their trust in God or stop seeking help from people. They were determined and ever remained well-intentioned. Finally, with God's blessing and good people's cooperation they realized the goal that ever since has been of great service to the Church and society.¹ Let me reproduce an observation I made elsewhere:²

¹For more details about the arduous work of the setting up of the printing press, see below chapter twelve: "The Lord Is My Portion," sections 9 and 10.

²Kochumuttom (2014): 112-114.

One does not need much brain to understand how revolutionary a step was the setting up of the wooden press in Mannanam. The great service it has rendered the society at large is known to everybody. The flood of literature including the daily paper *Dīpika* that has ever since issued from it has nourished and sustained the spiritual and intellectual thinking and life of the Church in Kerala, formed and clarified her stand at many critical times in history, and consistently defended the people's rights. Chavara's confreres were very aware of the achievement that the press was. They regretted that Fr Leopold Beccaro in his short biography of Fr Chavara, published immediately after the latter's death in 1871, did not mention anything about the press.¹ On the other hand, the other biographer Fr Kuriakose Porukara has a beautiful statement: "Fr Chavara has already been helping in many ways the people of this place in their spiritual needs. They were ignorant of religious matters. He wanted to provide them with good books. There was no printing press in the locality except the one run by the Protestants in Kottayam. He tried much to visit it in order to see and learn about the printing works. But he could not. However, being extraordinarily intelligent and noble a person, he himself managed to set up a press."²

4.2. Chavara the Educationist

The reforms that Chavara and his religious community brought about in the educational and social fields are well

¹Parapuram: 1469.

²SP: 27.

known. Their efforts and achievements in these areas, although not so spectacular by today's standards, were next to being revolutionary in those days. It was a time when the Syrian community was far behind others in learning. Hardly any of them, including the clergy, had more than the *kalari* training in reading and writing. Between 1817 and 1866 there were English schools run by the non-Catholic groups of missionaries. But entry to them and even the study of English language were forbidden for the Catholics for fear of their being influenced by Protestant ideas. This accounts for the low profile of Catholics in the professional fields then.

It is in this background that Chavara's endeavours to promote education assume importance. The first among them is the setting up of a Sanskrit school attached to the monastery in Mannanam probably in 1846.¹ "Priests and others in the monastery as well as students from the neighbouring places studied there. For the proper running of the school they had brought from Thrissur a teacher belonging to the Warriar caste, an expert in Sanskrit and Malayalam."² That obviously means that the school was open to all sections of people, something unthinkable in the caste-ridden society of those days.

That it was a Sanskrit school testifies to the Fathers' love for the Indian culture and positive attitude towards 'the true and holy elements'³ in the Hindu and other religions whose sacred language is Sanskrit. Underlying it is also their desire

¹Valerian 1939: 137.

²Parapuram: 1473f.

³See Vatican II's "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions" no. 2.

to enrich and serve their mother tongue (Malayalam) which has much of the vocabulary, grammar and literary style in common with Sanskrit. Again, that they employed an expert teacher belonging to the Warrior caste hailing from a far off place shows on the one hand their keenness in maintaining the quality of education and on the other the openness to 'the rays of truth reflecting across the boundaries of caste and creed.'¹ They did not go for an English school, which would have been more in demand for practical and professional reasons: it may be, at least partly, because of their regard for the stand of the missionary community against English as a language of heretics.

In the course of time Chavara took leadership to make school education still more popular and available to all sections of people in the society. The catechetical schools attached to the monasteries at Mannanam and other places were indicative of his concern for the integral wellbeing of people, especially the poor and the needy. He also started other schools of more secular nature, and insisted that there should be provisions to educate not only the upper class people but also others.

A revolutionary innovation attributed to Chavara is the setting up of a school each attached to all churches. Of course, it was Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli who decreed it through a circular. But it is widely agreed that the whole idea was conceived and that the circular was written by Chavara who was then the vicar general for the Syrian community. This view is confirmed by the fact that the manuscript of the circular kept in the archives of Mannanam Monastery is in the recognized hand of Chavara. The central

¹*Ibid.*

directive of the circular was that attached to every parish a school should be established for the education of children.

Accordingly, Mannanam Monastery immediately started the construction of a school in the monastery compound. It was in 1865. Chavara also fixed the hill of Thuruthumaly family at Arpookara as the place for a chapel with a school attached for the converts from *pulayas*. He collected funds from the parishes and important persons and bought a plot of seventeen *para* wet paddy field nearby and ordered that the monastery must run it.¹

What was the kind of schools that Chavara had in mind and insisted that all parishes should start? Certainly, they were not the catechetical schools meant for the instruction of Christian faith and morals. Instead, they were private schools where not only religion but also secular subjects were taught. It is possible that many of them in the course of time became regular schools run with government financial aid. For example, the one at Mannanam became a regular English school in 1885, and was raised to a middle school in 1890 and a high school in 1902.²

4.3. Social Concern

We have already seen that in his undertakings for the wellbeing of people Chavara had an inclusive thinking. He made sure that all sections of the society should benefit from his and the congregation's services. The greatest gift he

¹See Valerian 1939: 137 and *The Chronicle of Mannanam* III: 90.

²Mundadan 2008: 257; Bernard 1989: 230, 235. For more details about Chavara's contributions in the field of education see Kochumuttom 2014: 114-116 and 249-251 of which the present description is an abridged version.

could offer was the Christian faith which the traditional St Thomas Christians had generally thought was the prerogative of high caste people. That should be the reason why in earlier centuries they did not take much interest in sharing the faith with the people of lower social classes. It was overcoming this prejudice that Chavara opened catechumenates for *Īzhavas* and *Pulayas*, where they were provided not only with spiritual instruction but also the bodily needs like food and clothing. Even while opening public schools he made it a point that they should also include arrangements for the members of *Dalit* groups, although because of the then insurmountable social resistance he was unable to let them sit in the same classrooms as other students.

Chavara's concern for the poor is clearly expressed in the testament that he wrote to his people of Kainakari Parish in February 1868.¹ This letter has become famous as *Loving Father's Parting Wish*. In it he says that a day spent without doing any good to others is lost, and that helping the needy is everybody's basic duty.² He again insists on the prompt payment of just wages and the human way of dealing with labourers.³

Chavara further persuaded the society at large to undertake works of charity in a more organized and sustainable manner. He meant works which will benefit the poor and suffering not only in their bodily needs but also the mental and spiritual ones. This is the subject matter of his second letter of 15 October 1869 to the same Kainakari

¹CWC IV (1990): 102-117.; CSK IV (1986): 132-149.

²CWC IV (1990): 108; CSK IV (1986): 139.

³CWC IV (1990): 109; CSK IV (1986): 140.

parishioners.¹ According to him, it is at the time of death that one is most in need of others' help.² The prior makes it clear that the assistance rendered to the dying is not merely a matter of helping them to have a good confession and such other spiritual supports, very important as they are. It includes also the care and nursing of the sick and aged, providing them with good food, neat clothes, comfortable shelter, medical treatment, psychological support, and above all personal attention and love. For this purpose he proposed the establishment of a *Dharma-śāla* or *Upavi-śāla* (Charity Home) under the auspices of a Confraternity for Happy Death under the Patronage of St Joseph that should be established in every parish. He gives detailed instructions concerning the running and functioning of the Charity Home and the Confraternity.³

4.4. Family Apostolate

Yet another area of concern for Chavara was the families. He was convinced that one's experiences in the family would decide the quality of one's life on the personal as well as social levels. This was a lesson he learned from his own life in the family. It was the family of his God-fearing and loving parents and relatives that moulded his character and prepared him to do the noble things he accomplished in the course life. For the benefit of the posterity he has beautifully sung the sweet memories of his early life in the family in his long poem *Ātmānutāpam*.⁴

¹CWC IV (1990): 117-128; CSK IV (1986): 150-161.

²CWC IV (1990): 118-119; CSK IV (1986): 151.

³CWC IV (1990): 126; CSK IV (1986): 158-159.

⁴This work is included in CWC II (1989) and CSK II (1981).

In the religious congregation, too, the prior lived in the family atmosphere of his community of loving and lovable members. He wrote in the above mentioned letter dealing with the Charity Home: "Now I am writing this from the monastery in Elthuruth. I have my brethren here who love me more than my own brothers and sisters. Tomorrow if I go to the monastery in Koonammavu, I will have the same experience there as well; so also if I go to the monastery in Mannanam or Vazhakulam."¹

With all these experiences about life in a family he wrote his longest letter,² which he calls his testament to the people of Kainakari who, he says, as members of his own parish and ancestry, are doubly his children. In it he presents what may be called the "Charter of an Ideal Christian Family," which he earnestly wants them to preserve, read every month, and have as the rule of life. It is widely recognized as a solid document with insights and principles that are valid for all times. Its opening statement is:

A family is the community of a few people joined together in blood relation and bound together by a bond of love, where the members have mutual respect and practise obedience to parents and walk in peace before the Lord and people; and each one according to one's state of life seeks to attain eternal salvation and lives peacefully.

Then, he gives a set of 24 rules governing a good family, and another of 16 guidelines for parents for bringing up the children. He illustrates his points with interesting stories, anecdotes and incidents.

¹CWC IV (1990): 126; CSK IV (1986): 159.

²CWC IV (1990): 102-117.; CSK IV (1986): 132-149.

Chapter 5

COMMON LIFE¹

5.1. New Dimension in Life

A new dimension that was added to the life of Fr Chavara and the other founders of the congregation was the communitarian one. For all practical purposes they were already leading consecrated life. With regard to the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience they were already practising them. As priests they were celibates, hardworking and satisfied with the minimum facilities and comforts of life, and obedient to the ecclesiastical superiors. They were also deeply prayerful and zealous pastors. Therefore, by the establishment of the new congregation what was newly added to their life was the communitarian dimension. Becoming members of a community they now started living, praying and working together rather than as individuals. They are now members of a family, praying and working together, and as such 'they are now able to do many good things that were left undone' in the absence of a religious congregation.

A basic factor of the life in *Bes-rauma*—the house on the hilltop of Mannanam—was that it was communitarian. As members of a family they lived, prayed and worked together. Any religious congregation in their effort to recapture and relive their original spirit should consider it a crucial point for reflection and examination of conscience.

¹This and the next two chapters were originally my article "Life in and for the Community," *Herald of the East*, Vol. 12, 1, Bengaluru: 2016, 123-142.

As a matter of fact, there is a general feeling that, in recent times, among the religious there is a decline of community spirit. They may have quite a few commendable achievements and developments to enumerate. But it may be that the community aspect of their life is being replaced by an increasing phenomenon of individualism in which priority is given to personal projects and gains. If so, they should urgently adopt corrective measures to arrest such an alarming trend. Otherwise the foundation of their life is in danger, as Chavara warns his followers: "The strength of the monasteries does not consist in the thickness of their walls but in the religious zeal and virtues of the members."¹ He further deplors: "These monasteries have been established by God so that they shall be mirrors of virtues and abodes of virtuous people. But they have now turned out to be communities of executives and holes of selfishness!"²

5.2. Common Life as Fullness of Consecration

For the young priest Chavara the fullness of religious consecration consisted in common life. We may recall how Archbishop Francis Xavier Pescetto had tested the obedience of the founding fathers by transferring Fr Thomas Porukara to Kollam and Fr Chavara to Pallipuram. Later, pleased with their spirit of docility and cooperation the prelate let them return to Mannanam and resume the construction work of monastery. Arriving back in Mannanam Chavara wrote:

From that day considering myself a full-fledged monk
I was determined to keep away from my blood
relations, and to give myself up to the monastic

¹CWC IV (1990): 65; CSK IV (1986): 94.

²CWC IV (1990): 61-62; CSK IV (1986): 90.

pattern of life with all my income going to the common fund and all my needs met from the same.¹ Here he thinks two things to be essential for the fullness of consecrated life: separation from the family relations, and common life in which one has nothing privately. The first among them was already realized when he left home for the seminary training, and still more when, following the loss of his parents and the only brother, he gave up his family property in favour of his sister and brother-in-law. Now, in fulfilment of the second condition, he adopts the common life in Mannanam. That is, for the consecrated life to be flawless and perfect one should have no personal possessions or programmes or projects, but have everything in common and share in the common mission and undertakings. Personal interests give way to the common goals.

This ideal is made still more official in 1840 when they began the community life in a more formal manner. Chavara writes:

On 18 June 1840, the feast of *Corpus Christi*, Frs Thomas Porukara, Geevarghese Thoppil and I began living as a community in *Bes-rauma* [Mannanam]. We were already enjoying spiritual brotherhood; but we wanted to have unity in temporal matters as well. Therefore, following the example of [the early Christians led by] St Peter, we began to hold in common all our material goods and possessions, and

¹CWC I (1990): 27; CSK I (1981): 32. A more literal translation of this text would be: "From that day considering myself a full-fledged monk I was determined to keep myself completely away from my blood relations, and to have all my incomes going to the common funds and all my expenses met from the same."

to keep a common account [of incomes and expenses].¹

Obviously, the early Christian community was their model:

These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to prayers. The many miracles and signs worked through the apostles made a deep impression on everyone. The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. They went as a body to the temple everyday but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved (Acts 2:42-47).

The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed for his own use anything that he had, as everything they owned was held in common. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all given great respect. None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any members who might be in need (Acts 4:32-35).

These two texts from the *Acts of the Apostles* spell out the characteristics that distinguished the early Christian

¹This statement in Chavara's hand is found in the diary of Fr Kuriakose Eliseus Porukara, and is reproduced in CWC I (1990): 175-176; CSK I (1981): 208-209.

assembly which the founding community in Mannanam strived to make their own: United, heart and soul, they had not only spiritual brotherhood but also unity in temporal matters. Among them there were no private possessions or projects; they were free of selfish interests. They enjoyed everything in common; none of them was in want, either. Their life was a powerful witness to the resurrection of Lord Jesus Christ. They remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, the word of God. They were regular in attending the community worship in the temple as well as the celebration of the Holy Eucharist in the houses. They shared the meals with joy and generosity. Their spirit-filled life and work made a deep impression on the people. They were respected and loved by all. And the Lord increased their number day by day!

5.3. Born of and Nursed by the Same Mother

Chavara, in his testament, has a beautiful instruction to his confreres regarding the kind of love that should exist among them. He advises them to be like children of the same mother:

No matter how many monasteries there may be, they should be like a single family, and all the members should be like children born of the same mother and grown up by drinking her milk. This kind of genuine love among them should never diminish, but keep increasing. All should consider this as the greatest of my advices. In order to ensure that this love never decreases, the superiors of monasteries should take interest in responding to the requests of one another rather than merely meeting the needs of their own respective communities. Meeting together from time to time they must settle the accounts, and through

frequent letters keep mutually informed of matters concerning the wellbeing of members, and take care of the needs of one another.¹

Chavara considers an ideal religious community to be a family so that among its members there should be the family spirit. For him, the model for all families is the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, which in turn is the Holy Trinity of God on earth. Therefore, according to Chavara, the Holy Trinity is the prototype of all families and for that matter of the religious community as well. We may recall that this is the Church's teaching clearly stated in the apostolic exhortation of Pope John Paul II:

This particular way of 'following Christ', [namely, the consecrated life] ... expresses in a particularly vivid way the *Trinitarian* nature of the Christian life and it anticipates in a certain way that *eschatological* fulfilment towards which the whole Church is tending... The consecrated life, thus, becomes a confession and a sign of the Trinity, whose mystery is held up to the Church as the model of every form of Christian life.²

We may ask: What indeed is the characteristic mark of the Holy Trinity in heaven and the Holy Family on earth? In each of these cases one sees three persons, who in spite their differences remain united. In other words, there is in them diversity and unity going hand in hand. In the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three persons different from one another, but at the same they are one in all respects. Their personal differences do not come in the

¹CWC IV (1990): 71; CSK IV (1986): 100.

²*Vita Consecrata*, nos. 14 and 21.

way of unity. Similarly, in the Holy Family Jesus, Mary and Joseph had certainly personal differences in terms of age, gender, temperament, needs, likes and dislikes; but in spite of them they were perfectly united by love. This is the ideal that should be realized in every family and every religious community. Their members certainly have differences which should be respected and retained as God's gifts, and in spite of them they must be one, heart and soul. This is certainly a challenge!

In a family of parents and children, the challenge is comparatively less because the members are naturally inclined to love one another: between the parents as husband and wife, man and woman, the love is natural, and so too between them and their children the love is spontaneous, and the children also have natural love mutually and for the parents. Hence, it is rather easy for them to forget the differences in order to remain united. But when it comes to a religious community we must realistically admit that it is not a natural family and, hence, for the members with personal, cultural, educational and temperamental differences to remain united and loving is not spontaneous. To do so they must in the light of faith as children of the same Parent, namely, God, rise above the differences and love one another without limit and conditions. The religious community, thus, is or rather becomes a supernatural family. What a family naturally is, the religious community in the light of faith must consciously become! This was the creditable achievement of the founding community of *Bes-rauma* in Mannanam.

5.4. The Founders' Unity in Diversity

Let us consider the first four members of *Bes-rauma*: Fathers Thomas Palackal, Thomas Porukara and Kuriakose Chavara, and Brother Jacob Kaniyanthara. They, obviously, had quite a few and considerable differences. Palackal was an ascetic theologian, academic, disciplinarian, ecclesiologist and a follower of the Dominican ideal of consecrated life: "*Contemplata praedicare*," which means "Preach what one contemplates." Porukara was a practical man, *karma-yogi*, administrator, committed pastor, much sought-after preacher, deeply prayerful and fond of popular devotions, and a devotee of St Joseph. Chavara was an inexperienced young priest, full of good will, zealous and docile. Kaniyanthara was a layman of simple faith, cooperative, hardworking and knowledgeable in secular matters. The admirable thing is that, in spite of such diverse personality traits, they lived like members of the same family and children of the same parents, and successfully worked together for a common cause and accomplished their goals.

Many indeed are the instances in which we see them rising above the differences even making sacrifices of personal views and interests, and working in unison with mutual respect, understanding and appreciation. For example, on the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone for the monastery on 11 May 1831, Bishop Maurilius Stabilini, though present, was too ill to officiate at the ceremony. So, he suggested that Palackal the senior-most and leader of the group would do it. The latter, however, probably in appreciation of the greater role played by Porukara in acquiring the land and the government's permission for the monastery, readily expressed his desire that he must lay the foundation stone. But Porukara was

only too happy to honour Palackal for his seniority and leadership, and insisted that he must conduct the function. For a while it was a test of the two priests' humility, mutual love and respect.¹ Finally, Fr Porukara was persuaded to be the celebrant. How smoothly they resolved the differences and came to an agreement!

Then, there arose the question regarding who should be the patron of the foundation. Again, there were different opinions. The bishop suggested St John the Baptist. In Fr Palackal's mind, they were already Dominicans, and as such he was also particularly devoted to St Dominic. So, he wanted the new foundation to be in this saint's name. Fr Porukara, a great devotee of St Joseph, naturally proposed him to be the patron. If it were today such differences of opinion would easily stall the entire project of monastery! But here the issue was instantly settled. The bishop and Fr Palackal respected Fr Porukara's desire, and St Joseph's name was unanimously adopted. What a beautiful example of great people working together without letting their differences come in the way of achieving the goal.

We may recall one more commendable incident of the founders' exemplary spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation even at the cost of personal interests. Fr Palackal expressed his pet desire to start a seminary attached to the monastery. He thought that it would be an ideal arrangement as the presence and study programmes of the seminarians would, on the one hand, make the monastery more appealing to the people, and, on the other, enhance the solemnity of liturgical services. He also hoped that, if the monastery and seminary existed side by side, the

¹CWC I (1990): 20-21; CSK I (1981): 24-25.

former would eventually get more and more vocations from the latter. In fact, he sincerely believed that under the prevalent circumstances of the place there was no other way of making the monastery viable. According to him, therefore, a seminary was indispensable.¹

However, Fr Porukara's thoughts were different. He observed that their primary concern was to have a monastery. For that they must put the trust in God. On the contrary, if they relied on human help and approval, they would be inviting hindrances. Moreover, he said, the past experiences are such that places with seminaries put up for the purpose of teaching, have in the course of time ended in ruins; and that training the seminarians is a difficult task, indeed!²

When the two elderly Fathers had, thus, different views, Fr Chavara in his naivety, as he himself admits, found both of them to be in the right. He was equally happy either way. The following are his own innocent words: "Thus, they were divided in opinion. For stupid me, however, both the views were agreeable. Both inwardly as well as outwardly I happily agreed with Fr Porukara as well as the *malpān*."³

However, the differences were easily got over, as it always happens when they are between really great people. Previously, on the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone, Fr Palackal sacrificed his desire to name the monastery after St Dominic, and accepted Fr Porukara's suggestion to name it after St Joseph. The latter also was ever so considerate of Fr Palackal, whom, according to Fr

¹CWC I (1990): 27-28; CSK I (1981): 32-33.

²CWC I (1990): 28; CSK I (1981): 33.

³CWC I (1990): 28; CSK I (1981): 33.

Chavara, he loved and followed even more than his own *malpān*, and whose opinions and feelings he was resolved to respect. Thus, this time it was Fr Porukara who made a sacrifice by giving in to Fr Palackal's views about the seminary.¹ Thus, rising above the personal differences and remaining "one in mind and heart" (Acts 5:132), they inaugurated, unceremoniously though, the seminary at Mannanam in 1833, with Fr Chavara and others looking on in admiration.

¹CWC I (1990): 28; CSK I (1981): 33.

Chapter 6

REALLY CHRISTIAN LOVE

6.1. Love without Boundaries

The founding members practised love without boundaries. Their love and concern were not confined to their community. It extended also to the people at large irrespective of caste and creed. They put human relations and communal harmony with everybody above material consideration and comforts. For example, in their search for a site for the monastery they first came across a hillock called Pullarikunnu in the village of Kumaranalloor in Ettumanoor Taluk on the river side and to the east of the church of Kudamaloor. They climbed and looking at the surroundings decided that it was suitable. They made arrangements to get it registered for putting up a church and monastery. In response to their application for permission, the government issued a public notice enquiring whether anybody had any objection to it. The local chieftains after discussing the matter informed that they were unable to permit the erection of a church in Pullarikunnu as, it being the resort of the goddess of Kumaranalloor, the trustees would not consent to it. The Fathers felt disappointed. Then a big merchant at Ettumanoor called Ojanar Methar and several others promised that they would get the land provided the Fathers would be ready to face some challenges. But the latter said that they would not quarrel with anybody, but rather be content with a less convenient place.¹ For them peace and

¹CWC I (1990): 9-13; CSK I (1981): 12-16.

harmony with the people were more important than the land and such other temporalities.

6.2. Love at the Cost of Life

Following the footsteps of Jesus Christ, Chavara was a good shepherd committed to the care of his sheep even at the cost of his life. While serving as the vicar of Pallipuram, one night he was informed that a critically ill parishioner was asking for the anointing of the sick. The prior immediately got ready to go to him. But the people tried to stop him saying that it was a case of contagious small pox. But the prior would not care. "It is my duty! God will take care of me,"¹ he said. Courageously reaching the patient's home he joyfully administered the last sacraments. Chavara followed to the letter his Master's instruction: "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13).

6.3. Be as Perfect as Your Heavenly Father

Jesus' teaching on love, which, in fact, is the only Christian rule of life, is comprehensively presented in Mt 5:38-48.² This passage concludes with a very challenging statement: "You must, therefore, be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). We may wonder: Can one be as perfect as God Himself? Our natural tendency is not to take these words of the Lord seriously, let alone literally. But a little thought would urge us to take them at the face value.

¹SP: 26.

²For the interpretation of this text in this and the next chapters we depend mostly on William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study: The Gospel of Mathew*, Vol. 1, (Bangalore: Theological Publication of India, 1999), 162-178.

What could be the perfection of God that the Lord had in my mind in this context? He has explained it a little earlier: "He [your Father in heaven] causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike" (Mt 5:45). That means, while dealing with His children He does not make any distinction between good and bad people, or saints and sinners. All are equally His children, and He treats all of them equally with no trace of partiality or discrimination against anybody. This is the heavenly Father's perfection which the Lord wants us to realize, which is certainly possible as well.

This does not mean that we have naturally the same level of feelings to all the members of the community or society at large. In my community, with some of them I naturally feel free and spontaneous so that I am perfectly at ease and happy while dealing with them; even their presence is a matter of joy for me. With some others I am not that free and spontaneous. I can just tolerate and adjust with them with some effort. There are still a few others: even their presence is disgusting for me; when one of them approaches me I feel like running away! He has not done anything wrong to me, nor have I to him. For no fault on either side, I have this natural dislike or even aversion for him, of which perhaps he is not aware at all. I think this kind of variation in the level of feelings towards others is our common experience, which as a matter of fact we cannot help. I think we need not worry about it. Let us realistically admit and accept it. But in my dealings I should not act according to the natural feelings, but rising above them in the light of faith I must treat all the members equally and impartially. My faith tells me that they are all equally my brothers and sisters! I should

not discriminate against any of them. Then I am as perfect as my heavenly Father.

There is no doubt that Chavara aimed at the heavenly Father's perfection. There is no reason for us to think that he excluded anybody from his world of love. He loved and treated with respect and compassion even those towards whom he could naturally have negative feelings. For example, in his dealings with the intruder Bishop Thomas Roccas, the prior was very careful not to hurt his feelings. While seeking an appointment with him Chavara expressed his preference to meet him within closed doors, because he would not be kissing his ring which was a symbol of authority he had illegally gained. Kissing it would mean that he was party to the bishop's wrongdoings, and that would scandalize the people. All the same, Chavara did not want to humiliate him by refusing in public to kiss the ring!

Bp Roccas and his supporters had first plotted to take over Mannanam Monastery by force and make it his residence. Some people suggested that the prior should seek police protection. But he did not think it necessary. He put his trust in St Joseph, and believed that God would guard him and his people, and that even the government authorities, non-Christians as they were, would give them the right of possession against encroachment. Later, the rebels officially decided to capture the monasteries of Mannanam and Elthuruth and make them Roccas' residences, each for six months of the year. Still Chavara would not take any step against them.

Roccas wrote a letter, dated 24 June 1861, full of abuses at the prior, and threatening him with excommunication and

expulsion from the monastery.¹ He then published a notice in the churches, saying: "As the prior and the members of the monastery have insulted me and our patriarch who has sent me, their salvation is in danger. I feel it is my duty to inform you of this so that by following their evil counsel you may not fall into eternal perdition." Because of this notice many more people turned against the prior. They included, writes Chavara in anguish, "priests and deacons who had grown up drinking the spiritual milk of the word of God from our monastery and seminary. From them as well as the Jacobites and Protestants we had to suffer much humiliation and oppression. They threatened to force us out of the monastery and install Bp Roccas there."² Even so Chavara did not hate or entertain any ill-feeling for Bp Roccas or anybody. His only wish and prayer was that all should come to realize and accept the truth about the situation, and return to the right path and the Catholic fold. Finally, when Bp Roccas admitted that he had come without the Holy See's permission and expressed willingness to leave the country, it was Fr Prior as directed by Archbishop Baccinelli that painstakingly made all the arrangements for his safe return journey, and even patiently waited for hours in the harbour till the ship left.

Just before the arrival of Roccas in Kerala, another Chaldean priest called Denha Bar Jonah had come here without authorization, and pretending to be a duly consecrated bishop he began to alienate the faithful from the Varapuzha administration. Eager to win over Fr Prior and his community to his side, one evening he came to

¹A copy of the letter is in ASJM, and its Latin translation in *Positio*: 220f.

²CWC I (1990): 86; CSK I (1981): 100.

Mannanam. Fr Prior, although he was well aware of his evil intentions, respectfully received him, and patiently listened to him. Of course, the Prior made his disapproval of Denha's scheming, and declined to support him. However, he and the community treated the visitor politely and hospitably. As it was too late to let him leave, as a matter of courtesy they served him a good supper and accommodated him for the night. But next morning they refused to permit him to say Mass in the monastery as he did not have the patent letter from the vicar apostolic. Denha shouted at them and left! Very soon Fr Prior received a letter from the archbishop's office severely scolding him for letting Denha stay in the monastery. To the edification of all, Chavara accepted it positively saying that although he and his community were well-intentioned, the matter could confuse and scandalize the people.

We may mention one more incident illustrating Chavara's good will and concern for the rivals and the lost sheep. Just when Roccas left for his country, the leader of his supporters, Fr Antony Thondanat, went to Mesopotamia, got consecrated by the Nestorian Patriarch Simon Ruben XVIII in Kurdistan, and returned to Kerala as Archbishop Abdisho. But hardly anybody cared for him. He felt abandoned and was even without means to live. Adding to the misery he fell ill. He desperately appealed to Chavara expressing repentance and willingness to live as a loyal Catholic priest. With the archbishop's permission the prior arranged to meet him in a church in Fort Kochi. On the appointed day Chavara reached there at 11.00 am and patiently waited till 5.00 pm when Thondanat arrived! Chavara listened to him with sympathy, negotiated for him with the archbishop, accommodated him in Mannanam

monastery where he made a retreat, confessed, was duly accepted by the archbishop as a member of the diocesan clergy and was appointed vicar, first in Edamattam and then in Vilakumadam. Indeed, Chavara the good shepherd went out of his way in search of a lost sheep and rescued it!

6.4. Forgiving Love

The love among us should be *really* Christian. When does it become really Christian? In Greek language there are four words, each meaning 'love' in a different sense: *storge* refers to a parent's love for his/her child, *philia* to the love between friends, *eros* to that between man and woman, or husband and wife, and *agape* means the love extended to all people including enemies. Among them the first three—*storge*, *philia* and *eros*—are obviously natural love in the sense that one instinctively experiences them. For example, it is quite natural for a mother to love her child; people are friends only if there is love between them, not otherwise; and the love between man and woman, or husband and wife is built into the human nature. But when it comes to *agape*, it is certainly not natural love, because one's natural tendency towards an enemy is to hate him/her, not to love! To love the enemy one should certainly rise above the natural feelings and love him/her from the supernatural perspective of faith that all are equally the children of the same heavenly Father, and, therefore, own brothers and sisters! It is supernatural love. In the Gospel, the term used for love is *agape*, the supernatural love extended even to enemies, if any. This, therefore, is the *really* Christian love, namely, *forgiving* love. Jesus said: "For if you love those who love you, what right have you to claim any credit? Even the tax collectors do as much, do they not? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything

exceptional? Even the pagans do as much, do they not?" (Mt 5:46-47).

This is certainly the kind of love Chavara practised, and wants his follows to practise: *forgiving* love, the *really* Christian love. In his testament to the fellow religious, he says: "The Mannanam community should render as much help as possible to the family of Mathan Manjooran Kalapurackal of the parish of Muttuchira. In so doing, they will be setting the best example of Christian disciples."¹ This Mathan, once the steward of Mannanam Monastery, had unjustly appropriated some property of the monastery for which he was punished by the civil court. Later he filed a complaint against Chavara in the criminal court of Alapuzha. The court met the prior in the church of Holy Cross in Alapuzha and heard him. Dismissing the case as a fraud the Hindu judge was greatly impressed by Chavara's personality. Later, on his own initiative he had a long personal conversation with the prior on spiritual and religious matters, after which he remarked "Fr Prior indeed is a man of God. Those who complain against so great a man should be grossly wicked and deserves God's anger!" However, Chavara sincerely forgave Mathan, and made vain efforts to have him reconciled with the monastery. He continued generously to help Mathan in his financial needs. Finally, how edifying indeed is the above quoted advice of the prior in his testament!

¹CWC IV (1990): 73; CSK IV (1986): 102.

Chapter 7

LOVE WITHOUT LIMIT AND CONDITION

7.1. Challenge of Christian Love

The *really* Christian love, *forgiving* love, knows no revenge. That is what Jesus explains in the former part of the Gospel text under reference. He opens it by recalling the then prevalent Jewish practice: “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth” (Ex 21:24). This was the accepted norm of justice in the Old Testament time. The hurt you receive at the hands of another, you can return to him/her without feeling guilty. We would now say it is too bad! But it was already a reform that the prophets had brought about among the Israelites. The people around them had a still worse practice. For example, if someone in village-A would kill another in village-B, the latter villagers were permitted to destroy the entire village-A! The prophets, considering this as too harsh a judgment, gave the people of God another rule that sounds equitable: “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.” But now Jesus says that in His New Testament even that must go. His disciples should not retaliate at all.

The Lord has illustrated his point with four powerful examples. “If anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well” (Mt 5:39). Here it is taken for granted that people are right-handed. Then for me to hit another one standing face to face with me on the right cheek, I must use the back of my palm. In the Jewish society, to be hit with the back of the palm was conventionally a double insult! Therefore, the Lord meant to say that even if you are doubly insulted, you should not retaliate, but tolerate, forgive and be generous. This indeed is how He behaved even when

people spat on Him, mocked at Him and made all kinds of false accusations against Him! But He did not retaliate at all. He, therefore, rightly wants his followers to follow His example.

Secondly, "If a man takes you to law and would have your tunic, let him have your cloak as well" (Mt 5:40). Again, another convention among the Jews was that to have both the tunic and the cloak was everybody's fundamental right. One needs both of them against the scorching heat during the day and the biting cold during the night. The Lord then says that his disciples even if their fundamental rights are denied, should not retaliate but tolerate, forgive and be generous! This is how He behaved when He was denied even the most basic right to have at least a piece of cloth on! Of course, He would always defend and fight for the rights of the poor people. But when it came to His own rights, He was tolerant and forgiving. This is how His disciples too should be.

A third example is: "And if anyone orders you to go one mile, go two miles with him" (Mt 5:41). This has reference to the postal system in Palestine those days. It was the Roman soldiers on horseback that carried the post from place to place. At the appointed places they were to be provided with food and drink taking which they would continue the journey. If at one or another place the provisions for some reason are missing, they were permitted to force any native Jew coming that way to carry the post further. The poor man hasn't done anything wrong except that he is a helpless native! What if he was urgently going somewhere else! So, it is obviously an injustice to order him to carry the post. But the Christian disciples, even if injustice is done to them, should not retaliate, but tolerate, forgive and be generous.

The cross, which was the most extreme punishment given to the criminals those days, imposed on Jesus who was the most innocent of all, was certainly gross injustice from the human point of view. But, fully aware that it was His Father's will, Jesus did not resist it, but joyfully accepted it. However, He always stood for His people's justice and resisted any injustice done to them. His disciples should certainly emulate Him.

Finally, "Give to anyone who asks, and if any wants to borrow, do not turn away" (Mt 5:42). In the Jewish society, the jubilee year is declared from time to time, when all the debts are cancelled. Therefore, even good people who are willing to help others would hesitate to lend money, for if the borrower delays the payment until the jubilee year, they would lose the money. But Jesus says: When someone in need approaches you to borrow some money, and if you have enough money to spare, you must help him even if you see the possibility of loss. Help the poor even at your own cost!

7.2 Founding Fathers' World of Love

Chavara and the other founding fathers are shining examples of love that knows no limit and condition. Many were the instances when they were insulted, humiliated, unjustly treated, and had their rights denied; they were, however, invariably tolerant and forgiving, and ever at the service of the Church and the society without counting the cost. For example, the young seminarian Chavara after the reception of tonsure paid the customary visit to his home parish of Chennankari but was denied the ritual welcome. It was certainly an episode of insult. But Chavara did not nurse any grudge against anybody; instead, all his life he

treated the parish and the parishioners with love and concern. Again, his *malpān* Fr Palackal having made all the necessary arrangements sent him and two other fellow seminarians to Varapuzha to attend the Latin course in the seminary there; but they were denied permission to sit in the class with the regular students! The incident was painful for all concerned, as Chavara later recalls. It caused disgrace, waste of time and money, and made the three students forget even the little Syriac they had learnt!¹ But the *malpān* and his students tolerated and forgave. Still again, Fr Palackal with all the preparations took his deacons including Chavara to Varapuzha for their priestly ordination on the date that was already announced. It was on their arrival there that they were told that the function was indefinitely postponed. One can imagine how disappointing an experience it must have been for the *malpān* and the deacons! But they would not protest or refuse to cooperate.²

Some priests and others, mostly of the Latin Rite, were opposed to the monastery project and Bp Maurilius Stabilini. Ten Latin Rite parishes decided not to support or invite Frs Palackal and Porukara and their disciples for any ministry in their churches. They complained to the next vicar apostolic Abp Francis Xavier about the monastery, and reported that Fr Porukara was going about collecting donations and giving the money to his family! Misguided by them the archbishop eventually developed misgivings and questioned Frs Palackal and Porukara whether they had permission to establish the monastery and whether they had

¹CWC I (1990): 65; CSK I (1981): 74-75.

²CWC I (1990): 3-5; CSK I (1981): 4-7.

it in writing. They produced the letters of Bp Stabilini. As if not satisfied with them the archbishop first transferred Fr Chavara as vicar in Pallipuram and, then, Fr Porukara as vicar in Kollam side. These transfers, for all practical purposes, were punishments that the Fathers did not deserve, and, therefore, unjust. Moreover, their absence from Mannanam virtually meant that the construction work of the monastery had to be stopped, which was deeply painful! But in all these unfortunate developments we see the Fathers never complaining or disobeying. Instead, they gracefully accepted the humiliations, forgave and tolerated the opponents and generously cooperated with the hierarchy.¹

The foundation stone for the monastery was laid on 11 May 1831. Gradually, a very well organized community took shape with a good number of members, prayerful, zealous and disciplined, and committed to pastoral ministries and other apostolic activities. All including the vicars apostolic, priests and the laity were happy about them, and highly appreciated their presence and service. Even the society at large admired their way of life and ideals. In short, there was all that was required for consecrated life in the tradition of the Church. But the most crucial factor, namely, the canonical approval was indefinitely delayed. The Fathers made repeated requests for it to the vicars apostolic that came and went one after another: Maurilius Stabilini, Francis Xavier, Ludovic Martini, and Bernardine Baccinelli. They all were happy with the community. But they would not readily give the canonical approval, probably because they were prejudiced

¹CWC I (1990): 22-27; CSK I (1981): 27-32.

against the Syrian Rite people's rootedness in matters related to faith and morals. It could certainly hurt the feelings of the community, and they could rightly feel that their basic rights as equal members of the Church were denied. But trusting in God's providence and in a spirit of tolerance and respect for the ecclesiastical authorities they patiently waited for God's time to come for their rights to be granted and dreams to be realized. In the meantime, two of the elders, Frs Palackal and Porukara, died, the former in 1841 and the latter in 1846, without seeing the fruition of their hard work just as Moses and Aaron were not permitted to enter the Promised Land!¹

Finally, it was in 1855, after almost a quarter of a century long waiting on the part of the Fathers, that Abp Baccinelli granted them permission to make the profession of religious vows. He imposed on them the rule of the contemplative Order of the Carmelites Discalced (OCD). He rejected the Fathers' request to adjust the rule to *their Syrian traditions, the local conditions and needs, and the original spirit and charism of the congregation that combined the contemplative and apostolic dimensions of religious life*. This was again a denial of their basic right and disregard of their identity. But they, under the guidance of St Chavara, tolerated, forgave and generously cooperated. Eleven out of the twenty two candidates fearing that they might not be able to stand the demands of the unduly strict rule at the last minute decided against making the profession. Chavara informed the archbishop of this unfortunate development, but his response was disgustingly cold: "Only those of good will and determination need to be admitted. Don't worry about

¹SP: 26-27.

the dropouts. I shall pray for the remaining few!" Fr Chavara gracefully bore the pain of the loss of so many members and the lack of understanding on the part of the ordinary!¹

Still later the OCD Superior General, most probably with the connivance of the Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli, highhandedly affiliated the new congregation as their Third Order. Thereby the congregation lost its identity as an autonomous indigenous institute, and Fr Chavara stopped being its prior general, to say the least! It was clearly an unjust interference of the missionaries and a questionable appropriation of what did not belong to them. There must have been many of the members of the congregation who rightly objected to the entire episode. But Chavara, trusting that God will in the course of time put things right, kept his calm and cool and pacified the disturbed members. He was tolerant, forgiving and generous!²

In the context of the Roccas incident, the archbishop, convinced of his inability to contain the agitation, was all praise for Fr Chavara and appointed him vicar general. In his letter dated 15 June 1861 to Rome, informing of Chavara's appointment as vicar general, the archbishop suggested that the prior could even be consecrated the co-adjutor bishop for the Syrians. But, after the Roccas event, when there was an enquiry from Rome regarding the possibility of the prior's consecration as bishop, the archbishop and the missionaries strongly objected to it. Fr Marceline wrote: "Where do you find one who has the qualities necessary for a bishop? There are in the

¹Bernard 1989: 41-42; Valerian 1939: 104.

²Kochumuttom 2014: 159-165.

monasteries many good, upright priests. But where is the prudence, where the courage, where the knowledge and other qualities required of a bishop?" Of course, he does not make any clear mention of Chavara. Fr Leopold not only agrees with Marceline's position in its entirety, but also makes negative remarks about Chavara's nomination as bishop, namely, that he lacks knowledge of moral theology and experience in matters of administration, being already 63 years old¹ is too advanced in age, and has bodily indispositions and health problems. Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli sent to Rome his reply dated 24 September 1865. In it he still holds that the prior is a good man and the best among the Syrian priests, but endorses Leopold's views that he had little knowledge of moral theology and experience in administration, and was too old!²

Perhaps Chavara was not aware of the correspondence between Varapuzha and Rome concerning his nomination for episcopacy, and, therefore, was spared of embarrassment. However, there were occasions when the missionaries openly failed to treat him with due respect and recognition. For example, we may mention one incident. 13 February 1866 was fixed for the inauguration of the first community of Sisters in Konnamavu. As directed by Chavara, a widow called Eliswa (later her name was changed as Clara), aged 37, from the parish of Vaikom with all the necessary preparations and accompanied by her uncle arrived on 11 February to join them. But Fr Leopold said that he would not accept her without first interviewing and personally getting to know her. Thus, being asked to

¹Leopold considers 63 years for a man in India as equal to 80 in Europe. In fact, at that time Chavara was only 60.

²Kochumuttom 2014: 210-214.

wait, she and her uncle stayed in a house outside. The young priest Leopold certainly could have trusted the experience of the prior and respected his judgment. But he did not! "This caused much sorrow and disturbance. Yet, they stayed and waited holding firmly on to obedience,"¹ writes Chavara. It was obviously a humiliating experience for him; but he accepted it without any complaint in a spirit of dignified obedience. The day after the inauguration of the convent Fr Leopold called the lady to the confessional, interviewed and heard her confession, and then admitted her to the community.

7.3. A Concerned and Paternal Superior

The unity and well-functioning of the community will depend very much on the superior. He/she should be a model for all to look at and feel inspired, and a point of unity. Chavara had a clear picture of what it means to be an ideal superior, and in this regard he was indeed ahead of his time. In a letter to Kuriakose Porukara, the then vicar of Mannanam Monastery,² he says that the superior of the community is called to be a partner with God in tending His sheep, and that as such he should love the sheep and be concerned about their wellbeing.³

Chavara was himself a very concerned, understanding and paternal superior, loved and respected by all. Fr Scaria Kalathil's uncle priest while on his deathbed wanted to see him. Fr Leopold's opinion was that Fr Scaria should not make a visit to his dying uncle. Fr Prior, however, felt the other way round. It was the time when all the superiors

¹CWC I (1990): 107; CSK I (1981): 237; CKC (2002): 26-27.

²Valerian (1939): 373-374.

³For the relevant part of this letter, see below Chapter 16.

were having a gathering at Koonammavu. Fr Leopold suggested that they might take a decision by secret vote. Accordingly they met and were about to cast votes. Then Fr Leopold held a black (negative) pellet between his fingers and raised it for all to see. Fr Prior held between his fingers a white (positive) pellet and showed it up. The superiors were in a predicament! They pleaded that the two major superiors—Leopold and Chavara—take an appropriate decision in the matter. But Fr Leopold was insistent on voting. Reluctantly, all obliged. Alas! When the ballot box was opened, all votes except one were white! Fr Leopold's displeasure reflected on his face.¹

Chavara's love and concern was obvious for the community of Sisters that he founded in Koonammavu with the help of Fr Leopold. Fr Kuriakose Porukara says: "Just as Patriarch Jacob had a greater love for his younger son Benjamin, so he [Chavara] loved them [the Sisters] most deeply, and brought them up most carefully, providing for all their needs, even as a mother takes care of her children."² His love for them indeed was both paternal and maternal, the former symbolized by the love of Patriarch Jacob and the latter by that of a mother. In fact, especially as he advanced in age, his parental feelings were deeper and intense. His usual way of addressing his confreres was *sahodarankal* or *kūṭappirappukal* (those born of the same womb/mother). But in his testament he calls them *priyamuḷḷa-kuñjuka!* (beloved little children)!³ In many of his letters to the Sisters he

¹Parappuram: 1430-132.

²SP: 29.

³CWC IV (1990): 70; CSK IV (1986): 99.

addresses them, too, likewise.¹ In the letter to his parishioners of Kainakari, he fondly calls them *sahodarankal* (born of the same womb) and *makkal* (children)!²

¹For example, Letters VII/2, VII/6, VII/7, and VII/11 in CWC IV (1990) and CSK IV (1986).

²Letter IX/7 in CWC IV (1990): 117 and CSK IV (1986): 150.

Chapter 8

IDEALS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

8.1. Words from the Fullness of Heart (Mt 12:34)

It is important that we start with a clear picture of what the founders had in mind when they set out for consecrated life. What exactly was their vision of consecrated life? What was their ideal of consecrated life? This we get when we analyze the terminology they used to describe their thoughts about the new life they were adopting. We do not find a definition of it in their conversations and writings. But on various occasions they used a variety of expressions while dealing with the matter in their discussions and writings. They were indeed 'words from the fullness of their hearts' (Mt 12:34). Putting them together we can gather a pretty clear understanding of the kind of religious life they were envisaging.

8.2. Withdrawn Life (*Vana-Vāsa*)

The first recorded mention of religious life comes from Fr Thomas Porukara. He presents it as life in a forest (*vana-vāsa*), and as a means of securing eternal life for which, according to him, life in the world is not very helpful. After his diaconate he met his friend Jacob Kaniyanthara, a young man of his home parish, and said to him:

After my priestly ordination let both of us go and stay in some wilderness [*vācca-vana-vāsattinum poykalayām*]. For living in the world it may not be easy to secure eternal life.¹

¹Kaniyanthara: 1.

Here the word used for religious life is *vana-vāsa* (forest-dwelling), which, however, is not to be taken in its literal meaning, as is clear from his subsequent words and deeds. What he meant for sure was *a life withdrawn from the worldly affairs* so that he could serve God and His people without distraction. Those days the word '*vana-vāsa*' might have been a common expression among the locals including Christians for religious life.

8.3. A House of Vision (*Darśana*) and Austerity (*Tapas*)

Porukara, after his ordination in 1823, spent two years caring for his mother and family, and then served as vicar for another two years in his own Champakulam Parish, and then for less than one year in Thankassery. In 1827, he was transferred to Varapuzha as secretary to Vicar Apostolic Bp Maurilius Stabilini. It was Fr Thomas Palackal who recommended him for this post. During the time of the previous vicar apostolic Bp Raymond Roviglia, Palackal had held this post from 1808 to 1816 when Porukara was a seminarian in Varapuzha. Thus, from that time Palackal and Porukara knew each other. In 1816, Fr Palackal moved to Pallipuram as the *malpān* of the seminary there. But he continued to be a frequent visitor to Varapuzha as consultant to the vicar apostolic. Thus, it was possible for him and Porukara to continue to be in mutual touch. Now that Porukara has come back to Varapuzha as secretary to the vicar apostolic, the two priests' association was renewed and further enhanced.

When Fr Porukara was staying at Varapuzha as secretary to the bishop, our beloved *malpān* Fr Thomas of Pallipuram was living in the seminary for some time as a luminary of wisdom. Pleased with the *malpān's* status and good character the saintly bishop

loved him much and used to invite him for consultation on important matters. From that time on, Frs Palackal and Porukara became close friends. Fr Porukara loved the *malpān* as his father and a great friend.¹

With regard to the idea of religious life they were like-minded as well. Fr Palackal's lifestyle was for all practical purposes that of a monk: deeply spiritual, prayerful and contemplative, austere, ascetic, detached, committed to the continuous study and teaching of sacred sciences, and a spiritual guide and counsellor for all. It is pretty clear that even from his younger age Porukara cherished the desire for a life withdrawn from the world and family affairs. This seems to have been his motive in joining the seminary. His younger brother and biographer Kuriakose Porukara writes: "Young Thomas lived in the seminary *motivated by the desire to spend his life in the service of God without getting entangled in worldly and family affairs.*"² It is quite natural then that Palackal and Porukara shared the aspirations for religious life in solitude. Chavara has recorded the thoughts that the two priests had in common about religious life:

He [Fr Palackal] and his most intimate friend Rev. Fr Thomas [Porukara] had yearned to establish a house of vision [*darśana-viṭu*] since in the absence of a house of austerity [*tapasu-bhavanam*] in Malabar even for priests much good was left undone. They were sad at heart as there was no one to give them support, but they went on praying.³

¹SP: 17-18

²SP: 1-2.

³CWC I (1990): 1; CSK I (1981): 1.

In this statement two new expressions appear referring to a religious house: *darśana-vītu* (a house of vision) and *tapasu-bhavanam* (a house of austerity). The religious should be people with clear vision (*darśana*) about life and the principles of life, regarding what to do and what not to do. They should be equally persons of austerity and ascetical practices (*tapas*), leading a life that is simple and austere. By moving to such a house of vision and austerity the founders did not mean total withdrawal from the society or unconcern for the people and their needs. Instead, they wanted to do the 'many good things that in the absence of a *tapasu-bhavanam* were left undone.' It is also, therefore, clear that by *vana-vāsa* Porukara did not literally mean 'living in a forest,' totally cut off from the outside world. Or, perhaps earlier as a seminarian he entertained some such romantic idea which as a result of further reflection and consultation with Palackal he gave up in favour of a life of freedom and detachment from the worldly affairs and interests.

8.4. Life in Solitude (*Otunki Pārkkal*)

Then there appeared a well-wisher and supporter of the project in the person of Fr Paschal Baylon de Jesu Maria. He belonged to the community of "Five-hundreds," and was working in Mumbai, where the Bp Stabilini was previously the vicar apostolic. The latter knowing him to be a man of character, virtues, learning and prudence, brought him to Varapuzha as his trusted consultant and confessor as well as the chancellor. It is also remarkable that Fr Paschal had personally supported Fr Porukara's appointment as secretary.¹ Most importantly, he did appreciate and encourage the establishment of a religious house, and the

¹SP: 17-18.

association with him must have been a great help for Frs Palackal and Porukara to go ahead with the ambitious programme. “He extended full support for the cause” of a religious house, says Chavara.¹

The trio—our *malpān*, the secretary and the chancellor—were now pondering over the establishment of a religious house trusting in our Lord’s words: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” [Mt 18:20], and “Ask and you shall receive” [Mt 7:7].²

The next important step is to take the matter to the vicar apostolic Bp Stabilini for advice and approval. At that time the bishop was residing in St Andrew’s Parish, Arthunkal.³ The two Fathers Palackal and Porukara met him and requested to be permitted to start a religious house. His Excellency was extremely pleased with the idea. Chavara writes:

His Excellency, who was like a mirror of virtues, spending days in fasting and prayer, and keeping vigils, heeded to their request. Hearing it, he who was thirsting for holiness, was as delighted as does a parched land in rain. He was delighted to grant the permission, and issued an order appealing to all who seek to please God to support the cause by financial assistance.⁴

¹CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

²CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

³For the circumstances that made the bishop shift his residence in September 1829 from Varapuzha to Arthunkal see CWC I (1990): 3-5; CSK I (1981): 4-7. See also Kochumuttom 2014: 68-69.

⁴CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

Kaniyanthara gives a more detailed and slightly different version of the priests' meeting with the bishop:¹

One day both of the Fathers, Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, having discussed the question of going for religious life, decided to approach the Very Rev. Bishop for permission. During a recreation time they said to him: "Both of us would like to lead a withdrawn life [*vāccaṭattum otunki pārkkanam-ennu nirūpicciṭṭunṭu*]. We beg to be permitted to do so. We shall arrange for someone else to take the place [of secretary] here."

Still another expression that we get in this passage to describe consecrated life is *otunki-pārkkal*, literally meaning *a withdrawn life*, which in effect would mean *a life in solitude*, keeping their distance from the noisy and distracting world so that one's contact with God, the prayerfulness, becomes easy. By this they meant the recollected state of mind more than one's physical isolation from the society.

8.5. Life in Silence (*Miṇṭ-Aṭakkamāyi*)

The good bishop did appreciate their desire for religious life, but it seems that he was afraid that they were planning to withdraw altogether so that their service would not anymore be available for the faithful. It is remarkable that he admitted that they were among the few, if not the only, learned priests in the vicariate able to teach and guide the people. He could, therefore, hardly afford to lose their active service and pastoral ministry. Hence, he proposed that their consecrated life should be such that it would benefit not only them but all others as well.

¹Kaniyanthara: 6-7.

The bishop then said: “If you, the only one or two priests who are knowledgeable, go away to live in silence and solitude [*miṇṭ-aṭakkamāyi vāccaṭattum otunki pārttāl*], who else will be left to teach the people. If you like, you may establish a monastery so that all people can benefit from it.

Here, the bishop is happy about the priests’ proposal to establish a religious community, and he acknowledges their learning and gift for pastoral work. He further admits that religious life includes not only *otunki pārkkaḷ* (life in solitude) but also *miṇṭ-aṭakkam* (silence).

8.6. For the Common Good

Then the prelate reminds that such a life in solitude and silence is not necessarily irreconcilable with availability for pastoral ministry and other apostolates. So, he positively suggested that they would put up right in the midst of the people *a monastery from which not only the members but others also may benefit*. This suggestion of the bishop reminds us of St Paul’s teaching that ‘every gift of the Holy Spirit is for the common good’ (1 Cor 12:7). It applies also to the gift of the call to consecrated life. It is not merely for the benefit of those receiving it, but the community – the Church and the society at large – should benefit from it. Obviously those belonging to the active or apostolic religious institutes render excellent service to humanity through the various apostolates and ministries. Those in the cloistered convents and monasteries of the contemplative orders, too, serve the society not only through their prayer but also through their challenging and inspiring manner of life. In fact, they continually represent the entire human family to God and worship Him for their sake as well. The bishop’s suggestion was that the proposed congregation should be an apostolic

one, actively serving the Church and society, while remaining deeply prayerful and free from the worldly and family matters. It should be a contemplative as well as prophetic community.

8.7. Trust in God and His People

The Fathers certainly were more than happy about the bishop's suggestion to put up a monastery. But they expressed their helplessness in finding funds for it.

Their reply was: "Is that possible? Who will help us with money? If here we had a Christian king, he would help us!"

The bishop said: "Don't worry! If you are determined and diligently set out, you will succeed. For you, there are so many Christians. Go to them, and ask for contributions. They will certainly give you enough funds."

The priests returned, and discussed the matter with some of their friends who, too, found the bishop's proposal agreeable. So, once again, they went to the bishop and expressed their willingness to proceed as he suggested. They requested him to give them a letter recommending the cause to the public. He was first reluctant to do so. However, he greatly loved them and had much confidence in them so that he was unable to refuse any of their requests. So, he directed them to draft a letter soliciting donations from the people. They wrote it well and showed him. Having signed it, he immediately gave them Rs 200 as his contribution.

Consecrated life is basically a life of renunciation: the threefold renunciation of family, possessions and oneself

practised respectively by means of the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. In Indian terminology, it is *sannyās*, which literally means total (*samī*) renunciation (*nyās*) of all except God. The only resource that the religious have at their disposal is God and his providence that will never fail. Therefore, for livelihood as well as the various undertakings for God's glory and people's benefit they should depend not on their own material and human resources but God's providence and His people's generosity. Provided they remain committed to their vocation to consecrated life and maintain the purity of intentions, they can certainly count on the support and help of God and His people in all their endeavours. The lack of material and human resources should not ever deter them from doing the good work that is part of their call. On the contrary, putting the trust in money and human talents is totally against the supernatural nature of consecrated life, and caricatures it!

8.8. Contemplative and Apostolic

The message of the bishop's letter of recommendation, dated 1 November 1829,¹ makes it clear that the life in the new congregation should blend prayer and apostolic work. The message of the letter may be summarized as follows: 'It is necessary that in this territory there are *persons who are continuously engaged in prayer and good works for the greater glory of God and the edification of the Church*. Even in places where the Gospel was preached much later, there are

¹The original of this letter is kept in the Archives of St Joseph's Monastery, Mannanam (ASJM 4/B/2); a Latin version is given in *Positio*: 88f. Its original in Malayalam, reproduced by Valerian 1939: 49-51, is not easy to decipher. We follow the translation by Mundadan 2008: 79, which is thought to be faithful to the text.

monasteries for men and women. But you, who have received the gift of faith from ancient times, do not yet have any of them, although you have requested the Holy Church to establish them among you. In order to open a door for religious life, these two priests, Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, desire to establish a religious house [*darśana-vītu*] with a church and other necessary provisions for those men who are willing to follow this blessed way of life. But they do not have the required means for it. So, the necessary funds are to be made available to them. Hence, I earnestly recommend that donations be made from the churches and the people. Those who give are indeed more blessed than those who receive. Those who would help in this project will undoubtedly share in all the benefits resulting from it. *The religious will be free from all worldly affairs and they will devote themselves entirely to spiritual things. By the zealous work of these elect souls, all possible blessings will be secured for the Church and the entire world. Their example will instruct the ignorant.* It is, thus, a community of religious 'persons who are continuously engaged in prayer and good works for the greater glory of God and the edification of the Church... Free from worldly affairs they will devote themselves entirely to spiritual things.'

The letter also enumerates the apostolic objectives of the new congregation: (i) to instruct the ignorant by means of good example (*kaṇṭu-paṭhittam koṭuppān*), (ii) to receive into the Church those who are willing (*manassāka-pettavare cerppān*), (iii) to reunite the separated Christians (*cetara-pettavare kūttān*), (iv) to enhance the growth and wellbeing of the Church (*paḷḷiyuṭe teḷivu*), (v) to promote the peace and harmony among the nations and world religions (*rājītankaluṭeyum lokamatankaluṭeyum nirappu*), and (vi) to

realize on earth a community of those called for the eternal kingdom of heaven (*ennanneykum aṭutta ākāśa-rājitattinu viliykapetta-kūttam*).

It is, thus, obvious that from the very beginning the founders as well as the Church represented by the bishop had in their mind a congregation that is at the same time contemplative and prophetic. The contemplative dimension is implied by expressions such as *vana-vāsam*, and *miṇṭ-aṭakkamāyi otunki pārkkaḷ*. The prophetic dimension, namely, that they should engage in apostolic activities with prophetic zeal, is clear from the fact that the founders were hoping to do ‘the many good things that in the absence of a *tapasu-bhavanam* were left undone.’ Fr Palackal was following the Dominican ideal: “Preach what one contemplates.” Moreover, the bishop clearly instructed them that employing their God-given gifts like knowledge and counselling they should continue to serve the faithful, and that, therefore, instead of totally withdrawing from the society they should establish a monastery from which not only the members but all others, too, will benefit. Still more, he gave in writing a wide ranging list of active ministries they should undertake.

8.9. House on Hilltop (*Bes-Rauma*)

As the Fathers with the bishop’s recommendation letter approached the people, they experienced warm welcome and generous support for the cause of monastery. The necessary funds were easily raised, and after a prolonged and strenuous search for a site, in which people – clergy and laity alike, and even non-Christians – wholeheartedly cooperated, they chose mount Mannanam for the monastery which they significantly christened *Bes-rauma*, a Syriac word

meaning "house on hilltop."¹ This name obviously refers to the elevated nature of life that those in the monastery should live so that they become a symbol of Christian life for all others to look at and feel inspired and challenged. In Jesus' own words, 'they are a city set on a hill that cannot be hid ... and a lighted lamp placed on a stand so that it gives light to all in the house. Let their light so shine before men, that they may see their good works and give glory to their Father in heaven' (Mt 5:14-16). In short, it points to the responsibility that the consecrated men and women have taken upon themselves to be shining examples of Christian life in perfection. Their life should be a persuasive proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹CWC I (1990): 13-14; CSK I (1981): 16-17.

Chapter 9

CHAVARA'S SHARE AND CONTRIBUTIONS

9.1. Chavara's Share of Inspiration

By now, Chavara, after his ordination on 29 November 1829, became actively involved in the monastery project. When Palackal and Porukara started considering and discussing it, Chavara was only a seminarian under Fr Palackal. Indeed, he was the beloved disciple of the *malpān* from 1817 or 1818. Chavara too was equally committed to him, and gratefully recalls that 'the *malpān* looked after him in all the spiritual and bodily needs, taught and brought him up, considered him his heir and finally entrusted him with the works of the monastery that he had already started.'¹ This *guru-śiṣya* and even father-son relationship certainly included the sharing of the inspiration for monastic life. Indeed, he was ever so obedient and earnest to execute his decisions. In his own words, already "from his young age he was determined to be of one mind with the *malpān*."² Acknowledging his indebtedness not only to the *malpān* but also to Porukara, Chavara admits that "he was led to priesthood by being guided by the wisdom of the two Fathers."³ From all these we can reasonably conclude that Chavara shared with the senior priests the monastic inspiration from the time of its inception.

In his First Mass on 29 November 1829 that he concelebrated with Bp Maurilius Stabilini who ordained him, and in the next day's High Mass in his own parish of

¹CWC I (1990): 52-53; CSK I (1981): 59.

²CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 26.

³CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 26.

Chennankari Chavara prayed God to bless the efforts to establish a monastery, as he himself says.¹ Then after about three or four months of pastoral work and visits here and there, in early 1830 as directed by his *malpān* he started being fully engaged in the monastery matters. According to *The Chronicles*, Chavara joined the group in their third journey in search of a site for the monastery.² Eventually, he settled down in Mannanam looking after the construction work of the monastery. In fact, he was 'one of the only three persons, the others being Fr Porukara and Br Kaniyanthara, who were committed to stay in Mannanam and work full time for the monastery, having wholeheartedly renounced the family and other relations.'³ All these mean that Chavara shared in the monastic inspiration from the very beginning and made his contributions in developing and materializing it.

Chavara made his contributions to the vision of consecrated life more by way of consolidating the elders' thoughts which he first lived and then passed to the confreres through his verbal and written instructions. With little awareness of what consecrated life means, he started following the evangelical counsels to make renunciation of family, possessions and oneself in exchange of the radical discipleship of Jesus Christ. For example, even as an adolescent he left not only his parents and family but even the family inheritance, and adopted the motto "The Lord is my portion" (Ps 16:5). As he himself admits, from his seminary days he excelled in the practice of self-denial by being determined to be of one mind with his *malpān* Fr

¹CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 26; SP: 25; Beccaro 2003: 6.

²CWC I (1990): 8-9; CSK I (1981): 11.

³CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 26.

Palackal.¹ Immediately after the ordination he was actively involved in the work of founding the new congregation, and considering himself a full-fledged monk adopted the monastic pattern of life with all his income going to the common fund and all his expenses met from the same.² Thus, he was unambiguously stating by deeds that consecrated life for the most part consisted in the practice of chastity, poverty, obedience and common life. Still later, in 1840, when Frs Porukara and Geevarghese Thoppil and Chavara started to live as a community in *Bes-rauma* (Mannanam), they began *to hold in common all their material goods and possessions and to keep a common account of incomes and expenses.*³ Thus, they were underlining their conviction that *common life* is a constituent factor of consecrated life.

9.2. Chavara's Words of Wisdom

Going through Chavara's writings we get his insights into the essentials of consecrated life. We shall reproduce a few of them.

i) In his *Testament* written in August 1870 to the members of the congregation Chavara writes:

The only mark of a religious is that one, totally giving up one's will, obeys as if one does not have eyes and ears. One who does so is a true religious... Those who practise thus perfect obedience [to the ecclesiastical superiors, religious major and local superiors, and one another] will enjoy heavenly peace already here in the

¹CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 26.

²CWC I (1990): 27; CSK I (1981): 32.

³CWC I (1990): 175-176; CSK I (1981): 208-209.

monastery which is a miniature heaven. This is certain.¹

Dear brethren, however numerous the monasteries may be, all of you should love one another as if you are children born of the same mother and grown up drinking her milk. This love should never weaken, but keep growing stronger and stronger. Bear this in mind as my most important advice.²

It is for the salvation of our Christian brethren that the Almighty God has willed to found this congregation.³ These excerpts from the *Testament* clearly bear testimony to Chavara's understanding of religious obedience as the unconditional and total surrender of one's will to God's, which in turn is the identity mark of a consecrated person. The perfect obedience on the part of the members makes the monastery a miniature heaven, indeed! He earnestly desires that there should ever exist among his followers genuine love and family spirit, and makes it clear that the congregation has been founded for the apostolic purpose of working for the salvation of brethren.

ii) In the circular that Chavara wrote in August 1869 jointly with Fr Leopold to the members of the congregation, we read:

Beloved brothers and dear children... This humble congregation of ours is not a work of man. All of you are witness to the fact that through many unusual interventions God has founded it and made it grow. Therefore, neither any persecution nor rejection from

¹CWC IV (1990): 70-71; CSK IV (1986): 99-100.

²CWC IV (1990): 71; CSK IV (1986): 100.

³CWC IV (1990): 71; CSK IV (1986): 100.

human beings nor any creature's opposition shall prevail against it. But there is one thing that can cause its destruction. If we neglect our divine vocation and ignore its obligations, and fail in the practice of the virtues proper to this our state of life such as humility, obedience, charity, religious modesty and genuine love of God, or value them only in thought and words, but not in deed, then within a short while all these monasteries will fall to ruin.

With deep sorrow we see the possibility of such a misfortune befalling us. Therefore, we bring to your notice this agonizing wailing of our hearts. That is, we were expecting grapes, but we got raw roots! Of late, it has become common among us to think that the practice of the virtues like humility, obedience, charity, religious modesty and genuine love of God is not meant for all. These virtues are not even considered necessary for all! Instead, they are thought to be beyond the reach of the ordinary people so that only the saints need to cultivate them! As a result, without the slightest fear of God or any prick of conscience people not only neglect their practice but even fall prey to the opposite vices.

Thus, God's purpose in founding the monasteries is defeated. God has meant them to be mirrors of virtues, and resorts of virtuous souls. But they have now turned out to be assemblies of business administrators, and residences of selfish people. They are now houses of people who remain satisfied with reluctantly doing just the minimum necessary things! To engage in spiritual conversation has become a matter of shame! Religious modesty and practice of

devotions are considered the ways of fools and idiots. Holding one's tongue and not retorting when even slightly offended are considered marks of ignorance and weakness...

Chavara sees here God's providence in the foundation of the congregation which, therefore, shall withstand all sorts of human and secular forces and oppositions, provided its members remain committed to their vocation and faithful to their duties as consecrated persons. He desires that they should never fail in the practice of virtues like humility (*eḷima*), obedience (*col-viḷi*), charity (*upavi*), religious modesty (*sannyāsa-aṭakkam*) and genuine love of God (*pattāṅgayulla-bkakti*). He is convinced that the monasteries are meant to be mirrors of virtues (*punyaṭtinte kaṇṇāṭi*) and resorts of virtuous souls (*punyaṭmākkaḷute saṃketam*). The members, therefore, should be extremely careful not to disfigure and disgrace them with their worldly behaviour and selfish motives.

The circular then by way of some corrections gives instructions regarding the spirit and practice of poverty and obedience, silence and solitude, and austerities and discipline in the monasteries. Pointing to some failures among the members in these matters Chavara concludes the circular:

Ah! Beloved brethren, be sure, if you continue like this within twenty years hence these monasteries will disappear! The strength of the monasteries does not consist in the thickness of their walls, but in the zeal and virtue of the members. In many places there have been still more numerous and bigger monasteries. Nobody knows how those places have been transformed into forests and abodes of wild animals! We are the beginners of these our monasteries. We are

indeed their cornerstones! After half a century our followers will look at us and our deeds as ideals for them to imitate. [Hence, our responsibility to be sure guides for them].

Finally, beloved brethren and dear children, none of us has entered the monastery because of hunger or desperate living conditions in the world. Had we remained in the world, we all had the chance of enjoying a comfortable life. But we have left our possessions and parents, [retaining God alone as our portion]. Then, if through our negligence and indolence we forsake Him, what a great mistake it would be, and what madness!

Chavara's observation is still valid: "The strength of the monasteries does not consist in the thickness of their walls, but in the zeal and virtue of their members." Today it seems that the religious are under the illusion that their strength consists in bigger structures, the latest fashions and furnishings, bigger and regular sources of income, larger institutions with competitive spirit, etc., so that they fail in strengthening their interior life and prayerfulness! Still more, in their preoccupation with secular gains and distracting programmes they get their priorities wrong, putting first things last and vice versa. They seem to forget the ideals of consecrated life and crazily run after things they had once solemnly given up.

9.3. Confirmed in the Context of Convent

Later in 1860s when Chavara with the help of Fr Leopold founded the women's congregation with its first convent in Koonammavu, the vision of religious life was confirmed. As we have already said, Chavara had inherited it from his

mentors Frs Palackal and Porukara, and in his turn consolidated and brought it to full realization when he and his community of ten priests in 1855 made the religious profession in Mannanam. The idea of a congregation for women was already conceived as part of the original inspiration for religious life. Frs Palackal and Porukara observed that in their Syro-Malabar Church, there being no religious congregation, neither men nor women had the chance of embracing consecrated life, and that much good was left undone. So, they felt the urgency to found a religious congregation, first for men and then for women as well. Thus, with the establishment of the monastery in Mannanam in 1855 only the first half of their plan was realized. Frs Palackal and Porukara had long passed away, the former in 1842 and the latter in 1846. But Chavara cherished the desire for founding a convent and kept earnestly praying for it. When in 1867 a temporary house was being built in Koonammavu for the first community of women religious he wrote: "It appears that God has been pleased to fulfil something which seemed difficult, and *for which I have long been praying*, namely, a convent for women."¹

Thus, the convent was included in the original inspiration to start religious life, and, therefore, that, too, was meant not just for the benefit of a few individuals but "for the common good." It was meant to fill in a gap in the Syro-Malabar Church, namely, the absence of consecrated men and women, and "to do the much good that was otherwise left undone." Moreover, all that the founders had in mind while establishing the monastery apply also to the

¹CWC I (1990): 104; CSK I (1981): 126.

convent: The life in it is a withdrawn one (*vana-vāsam*) in silence (*miṇṭ-aṭakkamāyi*) and solitude (*otunki pārkkal*); it is a house of austerity (*tapasu-bhavanam*) and vision (*darśana*); it should blend contemplation and apostolic work; trust in God and His people is the unfailing resource to meet all its needs; it is a house built on hilltop (*bes-rauma*); in it the basic rules of life are the spirit and practice of evangelical counsels and common life; among its members there should exist genuine love and family spirit; it is not man's work but God's, and, therefore, no human or natural forces can destroy it while the members' neglect of the divine call can; they should yield fruits like humility (*eḷima*), obedience (*col-viḷi*), charity (*upavi*), religious modesty (*sannyāsa-aṭakkam*) and genuine love of God (*pattāṅgayulla-bkakti*); it should be a mirror of virtues (*punṅyāttinṭe kaṇṇāṭi*) and a resort of virtuous souls (*punṅyātmākkalūṭe saṃketam*); and its strength is in the members' zeal and virtue, not in the thickness of the walls!

9.4. God's Freehold Property

There is an interesting conversation that the founding fathers had with the Sisters. It points to the challenge of religious vocation. The message briefly is that a professed religious is no more his/her own property, but God's.

16 May 1868 was fixed for the profession of the first members of the convent in Koonammavu. One day in June Frs Leopold and Chavara together met them and asked: "Do you desire to make the religious vows?"

"Certainly, we do," the novices answered.

"For what purpose?" the Fathers enquired.

"So that we may become fully the possession of Jesus Christ," the novices replied.

Still unsure that the novices had not properly understood the matter, the Fathers explained: "You

have not clearly understood the gravity of making the vows because in this land of Malayalam such a thing has not taken place so far. Suppose you have two plots of land: a freehold one and the other leasehold. Which of them will be more your own?"

The novices' prompt reply was: "Of course, the freehold one."

The Fathers continued: "You are right, for the leaseholder has only the right of the use of the property while the freeholder has the right of its ownership. The leasehold property has to be returned to the owner whenever he demands it because it is not yours. Similarly, you are God's property; before making the vows you are its leaseholder. By making the vows you return it to Him and you become fully His freehold property.¹

9.5. Women's Congregation in Founders' View

(a) *Contemplative and Apostolic*: Certain statements made in the context of the foundation of the convent also betray what Chavara and the other founding members had in mind regarding its nature and objectives. For them a religious house, irrespective of whether it is for men or women, is a means not only of the members' personal holiness, but also of doing "much good' in the society, and it should be "useful for all." In founding the congregation for women, too, this was Chavara's motive, namely, that from it not only the members but also others, especially women, should benefit. He clearly states the purpose of the new congregation for women as follows:

¹CKC: 96-97; KMN: 90.

Besides striving for *their own spiritual realization* they [the members of the congregation] have to *teach other girls catechism and the practice of virtues, and train them in some handicrafts.*¹

Thus, the purpose was twofold. The *spiritual realization of the members* was the first among them, referring to which Fr Leopold writes:

It was his [Bl. Chavara's] great desire to start a religious house for women with the main intention of making it a safe place for the girls of Malabar to live their religion as good Christians and to learn spiritual things.²

Kuriakose Porukara, in his short biography of Chavara, repeats it almost verbatim:

While in Konnamavu Chavara desired to establish a convent that would be a spiritual resort [*punnya-samketam*] for the girls of Malabar to learn religious matters and live as good Christians."³

The second purpose also is equally important, namely, "to teach other girls, and train them in some handicrafts." We can, therefore, rightly conclude that the women's congregation was meant to be an effective agent of the uplift, reform and wellbeing of women.

(b) *Modelled on Mannanam Monastery:* Even before putting up the bamboo-mat house in Koonammavu some efforts were made to establish a convent. Already in 1859 they had nearly bought a site for it in Alangad. But on second thoughts they left it, and moved to Putthanpally where the

¹CWC I (1990): 195; CSK I (1981): 234.

²Beccaro: 10.

³SP: 29.

Syrian parish made available a plot of its land. The parish records dated 4 February 1859 show that the plot was leased to Abp Baccinelli for the clearly stated the purpose “of building and conducting a convent in the name of the Immaculate Holy Mother of Carmel.”¹ For the present what interests us more is the proposed name of the convent, mentioned at the beginning and end of the deed: “for the purpose of building and conducting a convent in the name of ‘the Immaculate Holy Mother of Carmel’.” This corresponds to the original name of the CMI Congregation: “*Servants of Mary Immaculate of Mount Carmel.*” It clearly indicates that St Chavara and his supporters including his confreres were planning the new community of nuns as a sister institution of the CMI Congregation, bearing the same name. Therefore, the two congregations are meant to share the same spirit and charism so that whatever we said about the nature of the Mannanam community applies also to the Koonammavu one.

9.6. An Interpretation of Mt 5:13-16²

We may rightly say that the consecrated life for the founding fathers was an interpretation in real life of Mt 5: 13-16 where the Lord insists that His disciples should be ‘the salt of the earth and light of the world.’ The life in Mannanam community, which they called *Bes-rauma*, was its interpretation in action.

¹The deed, kept in the Parish Archives, has been signed by four men, who were members of the parish council and of prominent ancient families, transacted on 4 February 1859.

²For the interpretation of this text we depend on William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study: The Gospel of Mathew*, Vol. 1 (Bangalore: Theological Publication of India, 1999), 118-126.

i) *Salt of the Earth*: Salt first of all is so *simple and ordinary* a thing. It is so cheap that even the poor can afford to buy it, and it is universally available and useful for the rich and the poor alike. The life in *Bes-rauma* certainly matched this description. The members following a simple life style were easily approachable and readily at the service of all alike.

A second characteristic of salt is that it is *pure*. When properly processed it shines and glitters like anything. Itself pure it purifies other things as well. It is indeed considered a symbol of purity. Purity means first of all the state of being *unmixed with anything* else: the thing is just what is meant to be, or claims to be. Secondly, purity stands for the purity of heart or a *clear conscience*. One enjoys the testimony of one's conscience that one hasn't done anything wrong. A third meaning of purity is the *purity of intentions*: one does everything for the pure intention of glorifying God and helping others, with no selfish motive. All these qualities characterized the members of Mannanam community. Their life was cent per cent Christian, consecrated and priestly, with no admixture, dilution or adulteration. They excelled in purity of heart and enjoyed clear conscience. Their leader St Chavara on his deathbed was confident to declare that by God's help he never in life lost the baptismal grace! Their purity of intentions in all the undertakings, too, was unquestionable: *all for the greater glory of God and the good of people!*

Thirdly, salt is a *preservative*: it prevents things like meat or fish from going bad which otherwise would easily disintegrate and decay. People in the presence of Christian disciples should be able to preserve their goodness and even increase it, and never lose it. The disciples should always be a source of inspiration, and never of any scandal. This

exactly was the Mannanam community. It was indeed a *punnya-samketam* (a spiritual-resort) so that everybody coming there would invariably feel spiritually refreshed and strengthened. The clergy and laity alike would resort to it for all their spiritual needs like retreat, sacraments and spiritual direction. The archbishop would direct his priests who would be in need of some correction or improvement to Mannanam monastery. It was a *punnyattinte kannāṇi* (a mirror of virtues) so that looking at it the people could clearly realize what it means to lead a virtuous life. It was truly a symbol of Christian life for all to look at and be inspired and even challenged.

Perhaps the most known characteristic of salt is that it is a taste-maker; it makes food tastier. The Mannanam community certainly served this purpose: with its appearance on the scene life on all levels became tastier, more enjoyable and beautiful. Obviously, it played a big role in the renaissance of the Kerala society through substantial contributions to the socio-cultural, educational and religious fields. More particularly, the Christian community experienced a revival of faith and its practice thanks to effective pastoral care and orderly liturgical celebrations. Christian life among the clergy as well as laity became much tastier and more enjoyable!

ii) *Light of the World*: Light generally has two characteristics. The first one is that it is *visible*. To see it one does not need another light. Light, if it is there, is immediately seen; if you do not see it, be sure it is not there! Similarly, the light that you are, namely, your being a Christian, or the Christian faith in you, is invariably seen by all people around you. You cannot hide it at all. Seeing it the people are also fascinated and impressed; it enlightens and

inspires them to lead a life of faith. The second thing about light is that it makes other things also *visible*. The light shows the path and helps the travellers to see and avoid the dangers on the road and to take the right path. All these were true of the Mannanam community: it was a lighted lamp placed on a stand, clearly visible to all around, and making visible the right path they must take in the life journey. It was rightly called *Bes-rauma*, a house built on a hilltop for all to see and be impressed and persuaded to emulate the life of its members. Indeed, seeing their good works they gave glory to their Father in heaven (Mt 5:14-16). This reminds us of the ever valid view of consecrated life as a symbol of Christian life.

9.7. Symbol of Christian Life¹

Right from the beginning of the Church, consecrated life has always been understood as a symbol of Christian life for all others to look at, and be inspired and even challenged. As a matter of fact, the early Christians started like a monastic community: They followed a common life, having everything in common and nothing privately, and they regularly assembled to break the bread, praise God and listen to the Apostles' teaching. They were one in mind and heart (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-35). Most probably they were under the impression that they should literally accept and put into practice all the teachings of Jesus, including that 'one should sell all one's possessions and give the money to the poor' (Mt 19:21; Mk 10:21; Lk 18:22). But as their number and

¹This section is reproduced from my article "The Sign Value of Consecrated Life" in *Power of Positive Presence*, eds. Thomas Kollamparampil, et al. 411-412, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014.

duties increased, they found the new style of life not practical. Therefore, on second thoughts, they concluded that some of Jesus' teachings need not be taken literally but in spirit. For example, his instruction to renounce one's possessions need not be taken literally, but in its spirit that one should not be greedy, but be generous, that instead of accumulating wealth more than necessary one should share it with those in need, and that one should maintain the detachment of heart from all that is not God. All the same, they seem to have agreed that at least a few of them should continue the monastic way of life so that they would be a symbol of Christian perfection for all others to look at and feel inspired and encouraged. This is in this sense that the Church has since then promoted monastic life among the faithful. The greatest harm that Martin Luther and his followers are said to have caused is that they destroyed the monasteries. In the absence of monasteries, the people were at a loss not having symbols to look at and feel inspired! It is heartening that in modern times there are signs of a revival of monastic life.

Even today the religious and their communities should function as symbols of Christian life, able to challenge and inspire the people at large to follow the Gospel message with commitment and perseverance. Suppose the people approach the local ordinary with the complaint that the Gospel values such as faithfulness to one's marriage partner, obedience to parents and ecclesiastical superiors, generous sharing of wealth with the needy, forgiveness and love of enemy, control of senses, and so on, are not practical. The bishop should be able to say: "My children, I do understand your difficulties. But look at the convents or monasteries in our midst. Those living in them are human beings like us;

they are even our own flesh and blood. What do they do there? They follow the Gospel teaching even literally. If they can do that much, we should be able to follow the same Gospel at least in spirit! Feel challenged and inspired!"

There was indeed a time when even the common people understood a monastery or convent as a source of inspiration. They would approach the major superiors with the request to establish a religious house in their parish or so. Their purpose invariably was that the presence of the religious in their midst would bring God's blessing upon them and the younger generations, and that it would be a source of inspiration as well. It is a pity that this understanding of religious life is being lost sight of, if not totally ignored! People now-a-days would rather approach the religious superiors requesting not for a monastery or a convent but for a school or some such project. The image of the religious as source of inspiration for Christian perfection has given way to that of professionals in various fields of activity. The urgent task before us, therefore, is to restore the lost image of the religious as a symbol of holiness and Christian life, and gear up all the training programmes to form the candidates into such symbols.

Chapter 10

CALL TO SPOUSAL LOVE

10.1. The Most Basic Vow

Among the three religious vows the most basic one certainly is that of chastity in the sense that the other two spontaneously arise from it. For example, through the vow of chastity one comes to possess God as one's own, as the Psalmist says: "The Lord is my portion" (Ps 16:5). Having God as one's possession, naturally one does not need anything else; in and through Him one indeed has everything. Hence, all else than God become quite insignificant, and one spontaneously becomes detached from them, which certainly is the real spirit of poverty. Similarly, through the vow of chastity Jesus Christ becomes the Lord of one's heart so that one finds it a matter of delight to do all that He would even desire, let alone command, one to do. Thus, from the vow of chastity that of obedience, too, naturally arises. In short, where there is the vow chastity, there certainly are also the spirit and practice of the other two vows.

In the case of St Chavara and the founding community, the vow of chastity seems to have been taken for granted, and it seems they took it seriously and lived it earnestly in spirit and practice. That may be the reason why we do not find in their writings and discourses frequent instructions or corrections concerning it. In Chavara's writings, there is hardly any direct mention of it while his letters and circulars to the members of the two congregations abound in admonitions about the vows of poverty and obedience and severe scolding for failures related to them.

However, putting together the hints that Chavara has dropped here and there one realizes that in his thought and experience the essence of religious chastity consists in the mutual relation of personal and intimate love between the Lord and oneself, which the mystical theology has termed spousal love. His terminology for the vow of chastity is *kanni-sukham*, the joy of consecrated virginity. (*Kanni* [in Sanskrit *kanyā*] means a virgin, and from it is derived the word *kanyātoam*, meaning virginity.) So, it is a positive state of joy rather than a negative act of renunciation. Of course, it entails the renunciation of married life on the human level; however, it is positively considered much more desirable a marriage on a spiritual level between God and the human being, known as spiritual or mystical marriage.

It is interesting that among the Kerala Catholics religious life is identified as a state of consecrated virginity. That is why a woman's option for religious life is described as "her going for becoming a *kannyāstri*, a virgin." Although as a rule she is already a virgin, still people say: 'She is going to become a virgin (*knyāstri ākān pokunnu*)! That obviously betrays their conviction that the essence of religious life consists in consecrated virginity.

10.2. Three Kinds of *Kanni-Sukham*

The founders of the two congregations regretted the absence of consecrated people in their Syro-Malabar Church as there was no religious institutes in it. Therefore, they felt it urgent to start religious congregations, one for men and another for women. Chavara writes:

People in Malabar had Christian faith from very ancient times. But there was no monastery or convent of their own. Therefore, they had only heard about

consecrated life, but had no living examples of it among them. The men, of course, could embrace priesthood (*patta-sukham*), and, thus, could have the joy of consecrated virginity. But for our women the only option was to get married and lead family life. Therefore, even those of them, who were desirous of leading the life of consecrated virginity, had no chance! They were in this sad plight for a very long time. Then in 1831 *Malpān* Thomas Palackal of Pallipuram took initiative to establish a monastery.¹

Here we see the distinction made between what we call the priestly celibacy and the consecrated virginity of religious men and women. Of course, no other term than *kanni-sukham* is used for priestly celibacy, but it is more than clear that the celibacy enjoined by priesthood is not the same as what is understood by the consecrated virginity of the religious. The latter is a vocation by itself that God may grant to men and women alike.

Then we find the founders making another distinction between the consecrated virginity professed by widows and that by life-long celibates. Referring to the first members of the convent in Koonammavu, Chavara writes:

A widow named Eliswa and her only daughter Anna belonging to Vakayil [called also Vadakkan] family at Koonammavu had the missionary Fr Leopold as their confessor. They shared with him their desire to lead the life of consecrated virginity (*kanni-sukham*) till death; that is, Eliswa would remain in the state of consecrated widowhood and Anna in that of

¹CWC I (1991): 193; CSK I (1981): 231.

consecrated virginity in the fullest sense called *Brahma-cāritoam*.¹

Thus, consecrated virginity is of three kinds: priestly celibacy, consecrated widowhood, and consecrated virginity in the fullest sense called *Brahma-cāritoam*. For our discussion the last one, which for all practical purposes is the same as the other two, is more relevant.

10.3. *Brahma-Cāritoam: Virginity in Full*

Brahma-cāritoam (or more popularly *Brahma-carya*), literally means 'walking in Brahma (God).' While referring to a celibate or virgin it implies something very significant and personal. Brahma originally means 'a word,' spoken or written. For example, pointing to his metric work a poet would say: "This is my *brahma*," or a Vedic hymn is termed a *brahma*. But the Brahma stands for the Hindu Scripture called Veda. *Brahma-cāri*, therefore, means one who is engaged (*carati*) in the study of *Brahma*, the Scripture; he is a Vedic student—one in the first one of the four stages of life called *Brahma-carya āshram*. It may be recalled that in the traditional *guru-kula* system of education the main subject matter of teaching and learning is the Veda, the Scripture, the other subjects being considered *Veda-angas*, accessories to the Vedic study. For instance, one has to learn grammar in order to read and understand the Veda. The words *Brahma-cāri* and *Brahma-carya* respectively came to mean a celibate and celibacy because while a student in the *guru-kula* one is naturally a celibate or unmarried person. But its deeper meaning is one's commitment to the Word, the Scripture.

¹CWC I (1990): 194; CSK I (1981): 233.

Still more, the Scripture is believed to be the manifestation of the Absolute Being, and, therefore, to be the same as the latter. Hence, both the Scripture and the Absolute are named Brahma: while the former is *Śabda-Brahma* (the *Sound-Brahma*, the Absolute manifest as the Word), the latter is *Aśabda-Brahma* (the *Non-sound-Brahma*, the Unmanifest Brahma). Therefore, one's commitment to the Word (the Scripture) is the same as one's commitment to the Absolute Being, God. For the Christian disciples God the Word is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, and the same Word become flesh is Christ. Therefore, *Brahma-carya* would mean one's commitment to Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh. Mystical theology would describe it as 'being wedded to the Divine Bridegroom Jesus Christ!' This is how Chavara understood consecrated virginity, as he puts it while introducing the third member of the convent in Koonammavu:

Eliswa had a sister called Thresia. She was 16 years old. She refused the proposals for marriage. Not wanting to be married in the earthly manner to any human being, she was looking forward to having Jesus Christ as her Bridegroom (*Īśo-mśihāyoṭu kūṭeyuḷḷa maṇavāḷattam*). Therefore, it was decided that she also be admitted to the convent.¹

For Chavara and the founding members the essence of consecrated virginity, and even of consecrated life as a whole, is to have Jesus Christ as one's Spouse (*Īśo-mśihāyoṭu kūṭeyuḷḷa māṇvāḷattam*). The vow of chastity solemnizes this spiritual marriage. Chavara, too, considers this vow as the most basic of the three vows, and presents the other two as

¹CWC I (1990): 196-197; CSK I (1981): 235-236.

resulting from it. Thus, regarding them Fr Leopold gives the Sisters the following advice which certainly Chavara also shares:

In the secular society would there be any wife who refusing to obey and take care of her husband goes about enjoying herself? If she does so, will it not make him feel sad? Similarly if you indulge in pleasures that your Divine Spouse abhors, will the crucified Lord like it?¹

You need not worry about anything. Let your only concern be about matters related to God. Suppose a woman has married a wealthy man. If she begs for alms from his servants, won't he be sad? You must endeavour to please God alone. He who created heaven and earth and all that are in them did not have a place even to lay his head. You who are His spouses have a big convent, a common room, a dining hall, and a private room each with cot and blanket. Now, therefore, you have poverty only in name. You don't practise the precious poverty of Jesus Christ in real life! Therefore, if you happen to be wanting in a little thing, or if the mother superior refuses to let you have one thing or another, you must feel happy and even smile with joy, thinking that you have been given the privilege of being like your Divine Spouse at least in this small matter.²

Thus, it is natural that the religious, who through the vow of chastity is wedded to the Divine Spouse Jesus Christ, takes delight in obeying and serving Him and takes pride in

¹KMN (2009): 27-28; CKC (2002): 43.

²KMN (2009): 61; CKC (2002): 70.

having a share of His experience of poverty. Thus, the vows of obedience and poverty are included in that of chastity.

10.4. Gift of Spousal Love

We may rightly say that the vow of chastity is a call to spousal love leading to what is called spousal or bridal or nuptial mysticism. The essence of this vow consists in that Jesus Christ offers to be one's life partner. That the human being, man or woman, should not be alone is God's eternal plan (Gen 1:18). It applies also to the religious. Normally, this plan of God is realized through marriage. But in the case of a religious the Lord offers Himself to be his/her life companion. Certainly, it is a matter of honour and privilege for him/her. The Holy Spirit then inspires and strengthens him/her to respond positively to the Lord's gracious offer. Thus, inspired and strengthened by the Holy Spirit he/she welcomes Him into his/her life, and commits himself/herself to Him as well. This mutual commitment of love between the Lord and the religious is the essence of the vow of chastity. He/she then becomes so united with Him that there is no more space left between them for another human person to enter. Therefore, as a result he/she remains unmarried with another human being. Thus, not to marry is the natural consequence of the personal and intimate union of love between the Lord and the religious. Therefore, what comes and what should come first is His love for the religious and his/her love for Him, as a result of which he/she spontaneously remains unmarried. It should not be understood the other way round, namely, that one first decides not to marry, and then accepts Jesus Christ as a substitute! Even in the case of human marriage, if the partners sincerely love one another, they cannot let anyone else, even the parents, come between them and disturb their

relation! In their lives their mutual relation of love comes first, and then all others certainly get their due places.

In our human experience the most intimate and personal relation of love is that of marriage. It is more intimate and personal than that between a parent and child, because one becomes a parent by giving birth to a third person, whereas in marriage two persons become one. Further, the husband and wife will share secrets that they may not disclose even to the parents. Between the husband and wife there is no barrier at all! Such an unconditional, intimate and personal love should exist between the consecrated person and Jesus Christ, and that indeed is the joy of consecrated virginity (*kanni-sukham*).

What is decisive in one's spousal love for the Lord is one's commitment to Him. Even in the human marriage the couple should remain committed to one another, that is, each of them promises to the partner: "My dear! In my life I give the first place to you and your needs so that ignoring you and your needs I shall not ever go for anything or anyone else!" While professing the vow of chastity one solemnly makes such a promise to the Divine Spouse Jesus Christ, and one should ever abide by it. The Lord and His mission should be given priority in his/her life. This is the clear instruction Chavara gives the consecrated men and women. For example, see the first passage quoted in the next chapter.

10.5. Bridal Mysticism¹

That the human spirit and God are mutually related as bride and Bridegroom has always been a favourite theme in Christian mysticism. William Johnston, a mystical theologian of recent times, observes: We usually say that man and woman are made for one another, which, of course, is true to some extent. But in the last analysis it is not man and woman that are made for one another, but every human being – man or woman – is made for God. Therefore, the real love affair goes on not between man and woman but between every human being and God. Every human spirit is thirsting for God, as St Augustine has beautifully put it: “God, You have created us for Yourself, and, therefore, our hearts are restless until they find rest in You!” This restlessness of the human spirit in the absence of God is the thirst for God. The beauty of it is that God also is equally in love with the soul. This affair develops through the initial longing for each other, relentless search on both sides, occasional glimpses of one another, each being afflicted and wounded by the lance of love, the game of hide and seek, alternating pain and joy of separation and reunion, spiritual betrothal, and spiritual marriage leaving the bride longing for the beatific vision in the next life.

Already in the Old Testament it is almost taken for granted that Yahweh and the people of God are respectively the husband and wife. Of course, the lady is faithless and frequently runs after someone else! But Yahweh’ faithfulness is proverbially steadfast. Every time He with

¹This section has been reproduced from Kochumuttom 2011: 181-182.

concern goes in search and lovingly brings her back so that their relation is kept ever secure.

The Song of Songs in the Old Testament is a poetic presentation of the love story between God and the human spirit. *The Spiritual Canticle* of the Carmelite mystic John of the Cross is his personal version of the same. Read from the purely human angle, it may look like the outpouring of the raw sentiments of sensual love between a man and woman. But from the spiritual point of view in which John wrote it, the book is the gradual unfolding of the mystical love relation between God the Lover and His beloved the human spirit, and as such there cannot be more positive a theme and more appealing an approach in spiritual theology. In fact, it is a fascinating narration of John's own experience of mystical love. A spiritual romance, the treatise spares no effort in highlighting the cost of love in terms of renunciation, detachment, mortification of inordinate sense appetites, tests and trials, the pain of separation and waiting in uncertainty, and what not, all for the Beloved. But they are given a positive meaning and value as creative means of self-purification, proofs of enduring love, and part of the process of transformation in the Divine Bridegroom through the stages of spiritual betrothal and marriage. Having thus reached the closest union possible with her Beloved here on earth, in the last five stanzas (36-40) the soul looks forward to the glorious marriage of beatific vision in His kingdom, and anticipates her identification in words that may sound blasphemous but can be interpreted as Christian *advaita*. She daringly says to Him:

Let us so act by means of this loving activity the we
may attain to the vision of ourselves in Your beauty
that we may be alike in beauty, and both behold

ourselves in Your beauty, possessing now Your very beauty; this in such a way that each looking at the other may see in the other his own beauty, since both are Your beauty alone, I being absorbed in Your beauty; hence, I shall see You in Your beauty, and You will see me in Your beauty, and I shall see myself in You in Your beauty, and You will see Yourself in me in Your beauty; that I may resemble You in Your beauty, and You resemble me in Your beauty, and my beauty be Your beauty and Your beauty my beauty; wherefore I shall be You in Your beauty, and You will be me in Your beauty, because Your very beauty will be my beauty; and, therefore, we shall behold each other in Your beauty.¹

It is significant that the characteristic mark of Carmelite spirituality is spousal love of which the three Carmelite mystic Doctors of the Church—Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Therese of Lisieux—are heirs and spokespersons. St Chavara certainly is in their line of spousal mysticism. He is, indeed, a mystic and mystical theologian of this tradition as we shall see in a later chapter of this work.

¹John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle* in Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD, *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (Trivandrum: Carmel Publishing Centre, 1996), 547.

Chapter 11

DYNAMIC, STEADFAST AND FRUITFUL

11.1. In the Company of the Divine Spouse

St Chavara's reflections on consecrated virginity are found mostly in his exhortations and letters to the Sisters. He takes it for granted that they are the brides of Jesus Christ, and he depicts their life in the convent as a matter of keeping company with the Divine Spouse and enjoying His company. It is true that in the case of women religious such descriptions would sound spontaneous and relevant. In mystical theology, however, it is commonplace to say that the human spirit, whether of man or woman, is the bride of God who then is the Bridegroom. Therefore, Chavara's advices to the Sisters rightly apply to the men religious as well. Given below are some examples. In a letter addressed to the Sisters, he writes:

Ah! Abide in the love of Jesus Christ. Continually remain before His eyes. Walk side by side with Him. Incessantly speak and listen to Him.

Whenever you feel 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?" Thus, full of concern, He is constantly beside you. 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 isn't anything left that He hasn't already given you. He has given Himself to you. What else is there? The heaven and earth, and all things in them are merely His creation. Are they of more value for you than He!?!... Oh! My Lord, do not leave us until we become one with You!¹

11.2. Love Is Dynamic

The marriage relation being a matter of love is a dynamic reality in the sense that it undergoes a gradual process of growth and maturing until, finally, it is all pure and totally selfless. It may take time and the partners' sincerity and authenticity may be repeatedly put to severe tests and trials, and for them with times of ups and downs it can be very demanding and challenging as well. However, even in moments of excruciating pain deep down in the heart they are at peace and overwhelmingly happy. In one of his letters to the Sisters, Chavara, using terminology typical of mystical theology as in the Old Testament book *The Song of Songs* and St John of the Cross' *The Spiritual Canticle*, he hints at the process of the dynamic growth of one's love with Jesus.

Chavara reminds that spiritual life is to climb up a mountain until you reach its summit, the perfection of love. You should make sure that you keep moving upward, never stopping anywhere on the mountain-slope or slipping down from the heights. The early stage of the journey—the ascetical part—consists mostly of one's own efforts, of course, with God's help, by means of the avoidance of wasting time in useless conversion, the reading of the Bible

¹CWC IV (1990): 82; CSK IV (1986): 112.

and other spiritual books, observance of silence and solitude, etc. In the latter stage—the mystical part—however, God takes over the work to which one unconditionally surrenders and passively cooperates. Chavara writes:

I wish that all of you carefully read and learn well the following humble advice. You must reach the summit of holiness, and take care not to slip and fall down the slope. As a means of it, do not waste your time in vain conversion. Instead, apart from the time of common recreation, the rest of the free hours you must spend in reading spiritual books. There are two kinds of reading: some people read for the sake of news and entertainment, while others take delight in reading books on the Passion of Christ and biographies of great saints like Teresa of Avila and Rose of Lima. The first group of people is seeking for knowledge and enjoyment, while the other for knowledge and love of God. The latter is the sure means to advance in spirituality and to persevere in it.

When you, thus, come to love reading spiritual books, you will love solitude. When the soul delights in solitude, Jesus Christ will come to meet it in solitude, and start conversing with it!

At first you will not understand His language. Then He will take you, His beloved spouse, to the wine cellar, and pour some wine for you, at first a little. Once you enjoy it, you begin to understand His language. Seeing that you understand Him, He will speak more and more clearly, and show how greatly He loves you! Your love for Him, your divine Bridegroom, also will greatly increase. He will become immensely pleased with you, His lovely bride, and

adorn you with ornaments! Thus is the beginning, then it advances without fear!

Thus, spiritual reading, solitude, meditative [vocal] prayer, and meditation are the first four of the seven degrees of spiritual life. Strive to reach at least this fourth one. Mother Theresa reached the seventh! Among her community members there were some who reached the fifth, and still some others the sixth. We should certainly reach at least the fourth.¹

11.3. Steadfast Love and Faithfulness

Again, my commitment to the divine Spouse has to be perpetual, not for a short while, because His commitment to me is for eternity. As we have already mentioned, in the Old Testament Yahweh and the people of God were considered husband and wife. It was a marriage in which divorce was impossible. The lady—the people of God—would again and again unfaithfully go after others. But every time the husband Yahweh would go in search of her and lovingly bring her back. Hence, there was no chance of divorce! His love and faithfulness are steadfast, indeed, as the Psalmist frequently sings. The consecrated person's commitment to Him also should be likewise never failing.

In the human marriage, too, this is the case. If the couple are genuinely committed to one another, and if one of them is dead, the other will refuse to enter into marriage with another, for their mutual love survives even death. Even death cannot separate them! Similarly nothing or nobody at all should separate the consecrated person from his/her Lord. He/she should join with St Paul who challenges:

¹CWC IV (1990): 84-85; CSK IV (1986): 114-115.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:35-39).

Chavara's spiritual lyric *Anastāsyaṅyūṭe Rakta-sākṣyam* (*The Martyrdom of Anastasia*)¹ beautifully illustrates that the consecrated virgin's love for her divine Spouse survives even death; she considers martyrdom for the sake of her Beloved is a great privilege, and her proud share in His sufferings and death on the cross.

The work sings the story of St Anastasia's martyrdom under the Roman Emperor Valerian in the third century. He was compelling the Christians to give up their faith and worship his god Jupiter. There was a convent founded by Mother Sophia. She was herself its superior and novice mistress. Anastasia was a beautiful girl living as a novice under her. At the command of the emperor's minister Probus, the soldiers took Anastasia by force to the royal palace. Probus first tried to win her heart by promises of presents. But she would not yield. So, he threatened to kill her unless she gave up Christian faith. She bravely refused to obey. He put her in prison. While in prison she sang in praise of her Beloved. The persecutors mercilessly tortured her and cut off her tongue. A Christian young man called

¹This work is included in CWC II (1989) and CSK II (1981).

Cyril, for giving her some water to drink, fell victim to their sword. Anastasia gladly accepted all the sufferings and gave up her life for Christ.

The content of the poem is the touching words of goodbye that Mother Sophia, while her novice Anastasia was being forcibly taken by the soldiers, said to her by way of encouragement to remain firm in her commitment to her divine Spouse Jesus Christ. Embracing and kissing the novice she said (given below is a summary of her advice in prose):

My darling daughter, your most beloved divine Spouse thirsting for your love is beckoning to you. Hurry up! Remember the day when He lovingly held you in his hands and tenderly embraced you. Call to mind that in order to redeem you from the slavery of sin He took a humble birth on earth, and carrying a heavy cross as his flag of victory climbed up Mount Calvary, and died! With a crown of thorns as His royal diadem he offered his life in ransom for your sake. Today you must prove your love for Him. Make haste! He is not a spouse of this world! He is indeed the most glorious God! Hurry up, be quick, my dearest daughter!

In his *Ātmānutāpam* (*The Compunction of Soul*),¹ Chavara, with his poetic imagination and mystic insight, describes Jesus' journey carrying the cross to the top of Mount Calvary as a marriage procession. His red garment is the royal wedding robe. The blood-drops on it are the pearls and precious stones adorning it. The crown of thorns is the wedding diadem. The pious women are the virgins

¹This work is included in CWC II (1989) and CSK II (1981).

escorting him. The top of the mount is the marriage tent (*kalyāṇa-pandal*), and the cross the bridal chamber in which he joins his bride, the human spirit (especially the consecrated virgin)! The implication is that she should identify with Him in the sufferings so that she would share in His glory thereafter.¹

11.4. Jealous Spouse

In another letter written to the Sisters probably in 1869, Chavara deals with their call to consecrated life and says:

While reading St Alphonsus Liguori's book *Monaca Sancta* (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!²

Then, he makes a very important point, namely, that theirs is a jealous Spouse Who is so demanding that He will not tolerate anyone else even glancing at them! Nor should they let anyone else claim their heart! He wants each of them to be totally and exclusively His, just as He loves each of them with an undivided heart! The context of the letter was the days when the 40 hour adoration was going on in the monastery chapel in Koonammavu. It appears that the Sisters in a letter had consulted the Prior Chavara regarding their participation in the adoration. Their own preference seems to have been for remaining in the solitude of the convent. All concerned discussed the matter and found it

¹*Ām* 8: 65-108 in CWC II (1989): 67ff, and CSK II (1981): 67-68.

²CWC IV (1990): 77; CSK IV (1986): 107.

appropriate for the Sisters not to come out of the cloister. Chavara, therefore, writes explaining how fitting it is for them to adore the Lord remaining in the convent rather than joining the public in the monastery chapel:

Ah! Dear little children, I received your letter. Right Reverend Vicar Apostolic, Fr Leopold and all others appreciate your opinion that the adoration that you offer to your divine Spouse Jesus Christ from the corner of your convent is most pleasing to Him. I have seen with my own eyes that the palanquin in which the pagan bride of our great king travels is covered on all sides with a thick curtain in order to hide her from the gaze of people. If so, would not your divine Spouse be much more concerned about protecting you from others' look? For this and such other reasons the Holy Church graciously stipulates that it is enough that you adore the Lord while remaining in the convent which will not be of any less merit. It is quite just and fitting, indeed.¹

11.5. Fruitfulness of Consecrated Virginity

The consecrated virginity professed by the religious should be fruitful. It is not and should not mean barrenness, inability to become a parent. Instead, by virtue of it one should become a parent. That is what happened in Blessed Virgin Mary. She was indeed the purest of all virgins. However, because of her virginity she also became the greatest of all mothers, the Mother of God! In her person virginity and parenthood amazingly went hand in hand! This should happen in every consecrated person. To become a parent means to bring into this world a new life. Mother

¹CWC IV (1990): 76-77; CSK IV (1986): 106-107.

Mary by the power of her virginity brought into this world not just an individual life but the life itself: Jesus Christ, the Word of God! This should happen in the consecrated persons: by virtue of their vow of chastity they should each become a channel for God's life to flow to the people around, and, thus, a spiritual parent of the same people. They would certainly enjoy and feel proud of the spiritual parenthood. Thus, their consecrated life becomes fruitful, productive and creative, and that in turn gives them a sense of satisfaction, fulfilment and fullness. Otherwise, God forbid, they will naturally feel frustrated, wasted and empty!

11.6. Pauline Insights

For St Paul marriage is the symbol of the relation between the Church and Christ. That is, the Church's relation with Christ is *the reality* of which marriage is only *a symbol* (Eph 5:21-33). As a rule, it is going through *the symbol* of marriage that one attains *the reality*, namely, the union with Christ. But in the case of consecrated persons the symbol is dispensed with. They are instead privileged to unite themselves directly with the divine Spouse Christ! As we have already mentioned, God's decision that the human being should not be alone is ordinarily realized through marriage; but in the case of a consecrated person, God Himself becomes his/her life companion!

Paul makes yet another important observation that is relevant for our present discussion is:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his

interests are divided. The unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit, but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband (1 Cor 7:32-35).

Paul notes that the celibate men and women are in such a privileged position that they can be free of anxieties about the worldly affairs, and that, therefore, they can be wholeheartedly and single-mindedly concerned about the Lord and His affairs. It should be considered their duty to be full time engaged in matters related to the Lord and His kingdom. It is indeed their call to which they should conscientiously respond. They should not let their hearts be in any way divided or their minds be distracted from the service of the Lord. They should rightly be anxious about "how to please the Lord," their divine Spouse! Naturally, therefore, they should be careful that they avoid all that may displease Him, and fight tooth and nail to resist all temptations to do anything that would offend Him. Avoid sin, big or small, by all means.

In the last analysis, the only concern that the consecrated celibates should have is "how to be holy in body and spirit." What does "holiness" mean? St Paul is speaking in the Old Testament context. There, "holiness" means the presence of God. Wherever there is God's presence, there is holiness. Thus, Mount Sinai was called a holy mountain because there was God's presence on it; the Temple of Jerusalem was called a holy temple because there was God's presence in it. In the New Testament, every Christian disciple, especially every consecrated person, is a temple of the Holy Spirit: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God" (1 Cor 6:19). The

consecrated virgin should be really concerned about how to maintain this Divine Presence in him/her, and be afraid of the misfortune of losing it. It is through sin that one loses God's presence in oneself. Hence, one should be constantly on one's guard against committing even a venial sin. One should be all the more alert against failures in matters of chastity because the matter is delicate, and one is more vulnerable to temptations related to it.

11.7. Growing Reality

The vow of chastity—the consecrated virginity—is a growing reality, not static, because it is a matter of love. As a matter of fact, love between two individuals is not perfect or pure all at once. It takes some time, and usually is a challenging process of give and take, struggles and sacrifices. This is obvious even in the case of the love between married couple. In Kerala culture, before the marriage the boy and girl may have met only a few times rather formally. Still on the day of marriage they are full of confidence that they would agree with one another in all matters cent percent. But, as they begin to live together, soon they start experiencing differences, sometimes serious ones. What do they do then? In the western countries, the couple even before their marriage know each other pretty well so that it is with reasonable confidence that they begin the life together. Even so, before long they are likely to feel differences. In many cases, then, they agree to separate, and each of them would go in search of another one who would agree with him/her in all matters cent percent, which is never realizable, indeed. In the entire human family, there are no two individuals who are alike in all respects. The most amazing thing is that God has created every individual as different from all others. Therefore, the search for a

completely agreeable individual is invariably vain, and one who keeps changing the partner will never have the satisfaction of facing the challenges of married life!

Among the Catholics in Kerala, the husband and wife realizing mutual differences of various kinds, even painful ones, as a rule would say: "God has united us; we should by all means remain together." In the light of faith they stick to one another, accommodating and adjusting to one another, making sacrifices for one another, and bearing the burden of one another. It can be a life-long and relentless struggle, for both the man and woman. At long last in their good old age sitting side by side in front of the house with a sweet smile on their faces they silently tell us: "We have made it! We had certainly differences, even serious ones, but in spite of them by the grace of God we ever remained united and we are now happy!" That is the time when their love is pure and mature, solid and authentic, but of course it was a hard work to attain it.

Religious life, the life of companionship with Jesus Christ, cannot be different. Initially, one may feel quite confident to agree with Him fully in all matters. That is the confidence the Lord would grant you as an incentive. But soon you are going to meet with difficulties and hurdles on your life journey together with Him. He turns out to be extremely demanding and uncompromising. He would say that you have to adjust to Him all the while, whereas He cannot at all. Why so? For He has already adjusted Himself to you to the maximum degree so that it is impossible for Him to adjust anymore! For example, for your sake 'He emptied Himself of His form of God, became a human being like you, even a slave man, humbled Himself, obeyed unto death, even death on a cross, and was buried underground'

(Phil 2:6-8). What more adjustment He can make!? Now, therefore, all the adjustment should come from your part. Of course, he helps you in the process. Still it certainly is an excruciatingly painful experience. Accept, and go through it, patiently, steadily. This is the sure means for you to be thoroughly purified of the selfishness and related evil inclinations. Finally, having become one with Him you will share in the glory of His Resurrection forever!

Here we have two practical lessons. First, being a growing reality your life of chastity, especially in its early stage, needs special care and attention. A plant, when it is young and tender, needs more shade, manure and water. So is chastity in its growing, maturing stage. One should be extremely careful to avoid all possible circumstances that may lead one to temptations against this virtue. One must be aware of matters that may endanger it, and take all necessary precautions against them such as prayer, daily Mass and Communion, devotion to Mother Mary, practice of virtues like humility and modesty, custody of senses, reading of the word of God and other good books, regular confession and spiritual guidance, and so on. In short, in this matter one cannot take things for granted; personal efforts and continuous vigilance are indispensable!

The second lesson is that, this virtue being a growing reality, and the human nature and life conditions being what they are, one must certainly expect tests, trials and temptations which should not surprise one. Even the Lord would permit them to happen so that overcoming them one's love for Him may be purified, proved and attain maturity. In case, God forbid, unfortunately some failures occur in this matter, one should not ever lose heart; instead with sincere repentance and a deeper sense of humility one

must immediately turn to the Lord and rise up, and putting the trust in Him continue the life journey with Him, Who for sure is all compassion and love!

11.8. Signs of Celibate Life

A consecrated person must bear the signs of celibacy. What could they be? Swāmi Sadanand, who died on 25 April 2016 at the age of 68, once shared with some of us one of his interesting experiences. He was a CMI priest belonging to the province of Bhopal, India. Right from the beginning of his priestly ministry he was more or less a social activist, going about in the style of an Indian *sannyāsin*, wearing *dhoti* and shawl, barefoot, vegetarian and eating only one meal a day, practising yoga, meditation and other austerities. In the latter part of his life, he settled in an ashram first in Narsinghpur in Jabalpur Diocese and then in Bhamodi in Nagpur Archdiocese. Earlier, however, he used to join the workers under one or another contractor, doing the construction of roads and buildings. The contractor would not know that he is a priest. He would work as one of the unskilled labour, share in their hardships, take the same food, and sleep under the same shelter as they. By the time the contractor comes to know of his identity, he will have left the place!

Once Father Sadanand went and lived in a traditional, interior village in Raisen District, Madhya Pradesh. There a family accommodated him in a small room on their veranda. Very soon he made friends with all the villagers including the *sarpanch*, the head of the village. This man became very fond of him, and they would frequently meet and discuss various subjects. One day the *sarpanch* said: “*Swamiji*, I appreciate you and believe all that you say. But I am sorry I cannot believe one thing!” The Father asked:

“What is it that you cannot believe?” He replied: “*Swāmiji*, I cannot believe that you are a *brahmacāri*, a celibate. I am sorry!” “Why can’t you believe that I am a celibate?” the Father enquired. “*Swāmiji*, you are a person moving about and mingling with so many different kinds of people. I don’t honestly think that a man living like this can be a celibate! I am sorry,” he explained. The Father said: “Well, whether you believe it or not, I am a celibate. But I can’t prove it! Let us leave it at that.”

The Father returned to his little room, and thought: “What can I do to make the *sarpanch* believe that I am a celibate?” He thought out a plan. He changed his style of life, which, of course, was already very different. He rang the next mission station, some 70 kilometres away, and said to the priest-in-charge and Sisters there: “Until I shall inform you again, please do not come to visit me, especially the Sisters.” He, thus, cut off all the contacts. Then, he would get up early in the mornings at 4.30 am, and, although it was the winter month of January, he would have a cold bath. He would then practise yoga, and sit in meditation, *bhajan*, etc., for long hours. He kept strict silence all days and all day long, and fasted frequently. It went on like that for one week, two weeks and three weeks.

Then the *sarpanch* came, and exclaimed: “*Swāmiji*, now I believe that you are a celibate!” The Father smiled and asked, “Please tell me, what is it that now makes you believe that I am a celibate?” His firm reply was: “A man who lives *like this* can be a celibate!” By “*like this*” he obviously meant a life characterized by *solitude, silence, discipline, austerities, prayer and meditation*. These indeed are the signs of celibacy for the people in India. When you claim to be a celibate they would look for these signs in you. In their absence, they will

find it difficult to believe you. It is not only for the sake of others, but your own experience would clearly teach you that without those marks you cannot at all be honest in this matter.

The Constitutions of every religious institute in its chapter on the vow of chastity has as a rule two sections. While one deals with the theoretical aspect of the subject, the other prescribes the practical means that every member should necessarily employ for the successful observance of the promise he/she has solemnly made to God. For example, the *CMI Constitutions* (2014), nos 23-26, mentions: constant prayer, discipline of the body, senses and mind, meditation, healthy community life, commitment to apostolic work, religious decorum and dignity in social contacts, moderation in recreation, visits and entertainments, Holy Mass and Communion, and filial devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary. How wise and practical an advice that one certainly should take seriously if one really means to keep one's promise to God!

Chapter 12

“THE LORD IS MY PORTION”

12.1. *Agatitvam*: Having No Means to Live

This chapter deals with the evangelical counsel of poverty as St Chavara and his confreres understood and practised it. The word used by him for poverty is *agatitvam*, which literally means ‘having no means to live.’ The religious vow of poverty, therefore, means that one promises to have no possessions of one’s own so that for anything and everything one depends on God’s providence and the people’s charity. That is to renounce freely the right of private property and surrender the right of ownership of all things of monetary value. This goes very much in line with the Indian understanding of a *sannyāsin*, a person of renunciation. He/she is formally called a *bhikṣu/bhikṣuṇi*. In the popular usage, the word means a beggar, who having nothing of his/her own lives on alms. To go about begging for livelihood is thought to be his/her right. Dependence on others is his/her characteristic mark. That is true of a *sannyāsin* or a consecrated person as well. We may add that among the three religious vows that of poverty is the most characteristically Indian one because as soon as the word *sannyāsin* is mentioned, what comes to one’s mind is the picture of a poor person, a homeless wanderer!

In a way, a religious through the vow of poverty makes himself/herself worse than a beggar. Whatever the beggar may get by begging becomes his/her property which he/she can use for anything of his/her choice without seeking anybody’s permission. But what a religious may get by way of salary or gift or donation, does not become his/hers, but

automatically goes to the community so that for all big or small needs, he/she must humbly approach the superior! Thus, irrespective of how much he/she earns, a religious remains literally penniless! Indeed he/she has willingly and freely made himself/herself so. For what purpose? In order to conform himself/herself to Christ who said about Himself: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk 9:58). He was indeed literally so: empty-handed! He was not complaining, though. In effect, he was proudly saying: 'Having nothing as mine own, for anything and everything I depend on the providence of my Father and the generosity of my people.' This is the inspiration of the religious in the practice of voluntary poverty. This was St Chavara's ideal of poverty.

Chavara was very fond of the expression '*agatitvam*' that he uses quite frequently. For example, once the humble bamboo-mat convent for the first community of nuns in Koonammavu was completed, with a sense of satisfaction he exclaimed: "With this small amount [of Rs 358 donated by different individuals] we have constructed a humble house that is truly an abode of *agatitvam*."¹ He uses the same terminology while describing the beginning of the monastery in Mannanam. It was the day before the laying of the foundation stone for the monastery. The bishop had agreed to conduct the ceremony for which he would come already on the previous day. To accommodate him they put up a temporary tent with a bamboo-frame fixed on four pillars and thatched with palm leaves. The tent was divided into two rooms with mats for walls. Chavara writes: "The

¹CWC I (1990): 105-106; CSK I (1981): 128.

bishop was brought already on the previous day. It was in that tent of *agatitvam* that he spent the night. All of us priests, too, slept in it. It was indeed an experience of life in forest.”¹

For the early members of the Mannanam Monastery and Koonammavu Convent, that they did not have any private or personal possessions was a deep-rooted conviction. They had *everything in common* from which the individuals were given *things for use*. They were taught to practise this even in their words. For example, recording the admission of a new member called Sr Clara to the community *The Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent* (CKC) says: “The things that Clara brought were to be kept in common and used as if they were all of one family. In order to show their charity and commonness even in words they were commanded not to use the expressions “mine,’ ‘yours,’ ‘hers’, etc. Instead, they were to say, ‘the room I use,’ ‘the clothe Sr Anna uses,’ ‘the bed-sheet I use,’ etc., and that it should be really so in word and deed.”²

12.2. “The Lord Is My Portion”

Chavara’s spirit of poverty was obvious already from the early days of his seminary life. In 1817 or 1818, he was formally initiated into the seminary with the reception of tonsure from Bp Peter Alcantra who was at that time the vicar apostolic of Varapuzha. On that solemn occasion he adopted the motto: “The Lord is my portion” (Ps 16:5), and ever since he lived up to it. For him God was everything, as he beautifully sings:

¹CWC I (1990): 20; CSK I (1981): 24.

²CKC (2002): 32-33; KMN (2009): 15.

Oh my God! You are my love, my joy, and all my fortune. If not in You, how could I live my life? You are my breath, my food and my drink. What a solace have I in You!¹

We are familiar with the distinction between poverty in spirit and that in reality as implied in the different versions of the beatitude of poverty in the Gospels according to Mathew and Luke. While Mathew speaks of poverty *in spirit* Luke speaks of poverty without any qualification: "Blessed are the *poor in spirit*" (Mt 5:3); and "Blessed are you who are *poor*" (Lk 6:20). The difference is in the readers the evangelists had in mind. Mathew was writing for the Jewish Christians who were not so poor but were comparatively well-to-do. Mathew is instructing them not to put their trust in the riches they now have for they can any time fail them and, therefore, are unreliable. They must rather put their trust in God's providence that will never fail them. This sense of dependence on God rather than on the riches one may or may not have is called *poverty in spirit*. Luke on the other hand is writing for the Gentile Christians who were literally poor, not having enough to eat, clothe and shelter themselves. They were experiencing abject *poverty in reality*. Therefore, Luke thought it was irrelevant to speak to them about poverty in spirit. They must rather be helped to find meaning in the actual poverty in life.

One may ask: Which of the two kinds of poverty – that in spirit and that in reality – should the consecrated people practise? Certainly they must have the poverty in spirit, that is, the sense of dependence on God's providence for everything. However, they should also be careful to practise

¹Am 2:141-146 in CWC II (1989): 10 and of CSK (1981): II: 10.

the poverty in reality as well, that is, to have no private possessions, to remain satisfied with the minimum necessary things of use, etc. The poverty in spirit, which, of course, is more basic, should be related not merely to material possessions but all aspects of life. In other words, one depends on God not only for the material needs but for everything bodily, mental and spiritual. I depend absolutely on God for my bodily health and strength, mental powers like reason, memory, imagination, etc., and spiritual endowments like faith, hope and charity. “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5), says Jesus Christ. Even for my life and bare existence I depend totally on God. Apart from Him I have nothing and I am nothing! This awareness and grateful acceptance of total and utter dependence on God is the spirit of poverty in its full sense. This is how St Chavara understood and practised the evangelical poverty.

12.3. Practice of Poverty before Profession

Chavara and, in fact, all the founding members of the congregation started practising poverty much before their formal profession of it. We have already mentioned the motto Chavara adopted as he was conferred the minor order of tonsure: “The Lord is my portion” (Ps 16:5). That implied his detachment from all that is not God. During his seminary life an epidemic broke out in which his parents and the only brother died, leaving the latter’s wife with a girl child. So, the uncles, concerned about the family’s continuance, took Kuriakose back home from the seminary, and strongly advised him to give up the priestly studies in order to get married. But he held on to the motto: “The Lord is my portion,” and discussed the matter with his sister who was living with her husband in Edathva, and entrusted to them the care of the family and the brother’s daughter. He

had also promised in writing to leave to them the family property, which, however, as the uncles objected, he later withdrew. He, then, returned to the seminary to continue the studies.¹ Here the point at issue is that the young seminarian on his part renounced his possessions in order to pursue the call of God to priesthood. We may remember that he was only a diocesan seminarian. The thought of becoming a consecrated religious could not have even crossed his mind because there was no existing religious congregation that would admit him. Perhaps the idea of founding a new congregation was in its seed-form in the minds of Frs Palackal and Porukara. But the young seminarian at that time could not possibly have any hint of it. All that he could aspire for was to be ordained a diocesan priest, and as such he had to provide for his livelihood. But giving up the family inheritance he was making himself financially insecure! We are at a loss what made him to do so! For all practical purposes he literally put into practice Jesus' instruction: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me" (Mt 19:21). Thus, without waiting for any formal and legal procedures Chavara on his part, responding to the prompting of the Spirit, professed the evangelical counsel of poverty.

12.4. Everything in Common

The foundation stone for the monastery was laid on 11 May 1831 and the construction works began. While Fr Palackal remained at Pallipuram looking after the seminary there, Frs Porukara and Palackal stayed in Mannanam supervising the works, assisted by Brother Kaniyanthara. Bishop Stabilini,

¹Valerian 1939: 26-27.

who had given permission to found the monastery, was replaced by Archbishop Francis Xavier as vicar apostolic. Although initially he was appreciative of the monastery project, misguided by some priests the archbishop developed misgivings about it and the Fathers involved in its work. He questioned Frs Palackal and Porukara whether they had proper permission to establish a monastery. They showed him the letters of permission granted by the previous vicar apostolic. Then, as if to test their obedience and sincerity, the archbishop transferred Frs Chavara and Porukara as parish priests respectively in Pallipuram and Kollam. Their absence from Mannanam would mean the stopping of the work of monastery as practically there would be no one else responsible for it. Hence, it was a matter of considerable concern and anxiety for the Fathers. Still trusting in God’s providence they obeyed the prelate and accepted the new assignments and did their new duties with full commitment and fruitfulness. In the meantime, Fr Palackal, too, wholeheartedly cooperated with the archbishop and helped him in matters related to the administration of the vicariate. Impressed by their spirit of obedience and cooperation the archbishop permitted Frs Chavara and Porukara to return to Mannanam and resume the construction works. On his return Chavara wrote:

From that day I began to consider myself as a full-fledged ascetic and was determined to keep away completely from my blood relations and to give myself up to the monastic pattern of life *with all my income going to the common funds and all my needs met from the same.*¹

¹CWC I (1990): 27; CSK I (1981): 32.

A basic aspect of the practice of evangelical poverty is the voluntary renunciation of the right of private property so that the religious have everything in common and nothing in private. Consequently whatever a religious may acquire as salary, gift, etc., automatically goes to the common funds from which his/her needs are met as well. As the above quoted statement of Chavara testifies, he started the earnest practice of this basic principle of religious poverty almost twenty-five years before he canonically made his profession in 1855! That means religious life and the practice of evangelical counsels for him was more a personal and charismatic matter than something legal and institutional.

12.5. Personal Practice of Poverty

Not merely the young member Chavara but the entire group of founders had in their personal lives the poverty in spirit as well as reality irrespective of its canonical profession. Fr Palackal belonged to a traditional family that was rich and reputed; but by his time it had declined in wealth because of some untoward incidents like a famine and small pox epidemic in 1789 in which his own father and many capable members of the family died. He was brought up by his poor mother, and even during his seminary days and thereafter he depended on her limited means. His food was frugal, and life was simple and austere even as he was a hardworking person.

Fr Thomas Porukara's family, of course, was pretty well-to-do and educated. His father, a clerk in the Resident's office, brought up his children, including Thomas, with good education and Catholic practices. Already from his younger age Thomas cherished the desire for a life withdrawn from the world and family affairs. But to

embrace consecrated life was out of question as there was no congregation that would admit him. So, he chose the next best, namely, priesthood. Thus, ‘a life withdrawn from the world and family affairs’ seems to have been his motive in joining the seminary. This indeed is the impression we get while reading his biography by his younger brother Kuriakose Porukara: “In accordance with the pious intention of his father, and motivated by the desire to spend his life in the service of God *without getting entangled in worldly and family affairs*, young Thomas lived in the seminary...”¹ That is, renunciation of and detachment from family and worldly possessions were his basic ideals. Later on, fully aware that he had no means of his own he was well disposed and humble enough to go to the people begging for contributions (*dharmam-tenṭal*)² for the construction of monastery. Still more, every now and then he turned to God in prayer for help. Every time he set out for some work and official matter he would seek God’s help by offering Mass and requesting others as well to offer Mass and pray for the intention.³ His hard work and spirit of asceticism are known to all. He was happy with the simple facilities of the humble dwelling during the initial stage of the monastery in Mannanam.

Regarding Brother Jacob Kaniyanthara, he was a middle class farmer with basic education. He certainly had the prospect of a comfortable family life. But giving it up he joined Fr Porukara to go for “a sort of forest life,” (*vācca vana-vāsa*), meaning *life of renunciation*.⁴ Already when Porukara

¹SP: 1-2.

²CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 27.

³For example, see CWC I (1990): 15-16; CSK I (1981): 19.

⁴Kaniyanthara: 1.

was a deacon Jacob had agreed to do so. Later Porukara, when he was secretary to Vicar Apostolic Stabilini, took the more or less 28 year old Jacob to Varapuzha as a helper, and soon afterwards to Mannanam. Jacob was closely involved in the search for the site for the monastery and its construction work. Chavara writes:

We three—Fr Porukara, Br Kaniyanthara and myself—were the only persons committed to stay in Mannanam and work full time for the monastery, having wholeheartedly renounced the family and other relations. Begging for alms was the only means of finance. As directed by the bishop Fr Palackal had to continue as the rector and teacher [*malpān*] in the seminary at Pallipuram.¹

Even after the construction of the monastery in Mannanam, Jacob continued to stay there with the community, taking part in the prayers and looking after the temporalities. He was also involved in the work of the later foundations like those in Elthuruth and Ampazhakad. In 1865, he made his profession of vows as the first of the brother co-operators in the new congregation, and died in 1898 at the age of 98.

Thus, Kaniyanthara was a person who even as a youth renounced his family and possessions and followed the call to hard work and selfless service. He worked hard for the community not only as a professed member but also for more than 35 years before the profession. He worked hard not for remuneration or any other selfish gain but as part of the practice of poverty in response to the divine call to follow the Lord.

¹CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 26.

12.6. Collective Practice of Poverty

Without waiting for the canonical approval of the congregation and the profession of vows the founders started community life in which the collective practice of poverty was characteristic. Their model was the early Christian community in which “the believers were of one heart and soul, and *no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was in common*” (Acts 4:32; see also Acts 2:44-47). Chavara writes:

On 18 June 1840, the feast of *Corpus Christi*, Frs Thomas Porukara and Geevarghese Thoppil, and I started living together as a community in *Bes-rauma* [at Mannanam]. We were already enjoying *kūṭappirappu-sukham* (spiritual brotherhood) that held us spiritually united. We wanted to have unity in temporal matters as well. Therefore, following the example of [the early Christians led by] St Peter, *we began to hold in common all our material goods and possessions, and to keep a common account [of incomes and expenses]*.¹

Here the observance of evangelical poverty is understood not merely as an ascetical practice but as a sign of “the oneness of heart and soul,” not only in spirit but also in bodily matters. They already had *kūṭappirappu-sukham* (which literally means *the spiritual joy of being the children of the same parent*, namely, God) that spiritually united them. They wanted to ensure oneness in temporalities as well for which they renounced private ownership of possessions, and owned everything in common with a common account

¹This statement in Chavara’s hand is found in the diary of Fr Kuriakose Elias Porukara and is reproduced in CWC I: 175-76; CSK I: 208-209.

of all incomes and expenses. The statement quoted above is, in fact, an introductory note to their common account.

Chapter 13

THE POOR WITH THE PEOPLE

13.1. Poverty Wins People's Hearts

It is a proved principle that genuine practice of poverty will enable one to receive more and more from God and people. Meeting with a beggar with his hands and vessel full of money you are not likely to feel sympathy for him! Even if you offer him something he is not in a position to receive it for his hands and vessel are already full. On the contrary, if he is empty-handed you will feel like helping him and he also is in a position to accept your offering. A really poor person can expect God's special care and protection as well. Jesus came to this world proclaiming to the poor the good news (Lk 4:18) that they are blessed for theirs is the kingdom of God (Lk 6:20; Mt 5:3).

The founding fathers' experience amply vindicates the above reflection. Frs Palackal and Porukara approached the then vicar apostolic Bishop Maurilus Stabilini for permission for consecrated life which they described as "life somewhere in solitude [*vāccaṭattum otunki pārkkāṇam-ennu nirūpicci-ṭṭunṭu*]." The bishop appreciated their desire for consecrated life. But he expressed his reservation: 'You are the only knowledgeable priests that I have to teach and guide the people. If you go away to live in silence and solitude [*miṇṭ-āṭakkamāyi vāccaṭattum otunki pārṭtāl*], who else will be there to take care of them? Therefore, please don't think of total withdrawal. Instead, you may put up a monastery right in the midst of the people from which not only a few of you but all can benefit.'"

The Fathers were happy about the prelate's suggestion. But having no means they expressed their helplessness: "Is that possible? Who will help us with money? If here we had a Christian king, he would help us!" The bishop said: "Don't worry! If you are determined and diligently set out, you will succeed. For you are so many Christians. Go to them, and ask for contributions. They will certainly give you enough funds." The priests found the proposal agreeable. The bishop then gave them a letter recommending the cause of monastery to the faithful in the vicariate. On the spot he gave them Rs 200 as his contribution.¹

With the bishop's recommendation letter the two priests Palackal and Porukara and their supporters started on journeys to the Syrian parishes appealing for contributions, and the result was very positive and encouraging. Everywhere they received hearty welcome and generous help from the clergy and laity alike. In the first journey itself, they got 1,000 measures (bushels) of rice worth Rs 200 from Kalloorkad Parish, and 10,000 *cakrams* worth Rs 400 from Koilmukku Parish, which were obviously huge amounts in those days.²

In their search for a site for the monastery also almost the entire society irrespective of caste and creed joined them with an extraordinary spirit of oneness and cooperation. Sometimes the chancellor Fr Paschal, too, accompanied them; there was also Mr Ittiaip Kallungal going with them in the first journey, and a low caste boy called Ittan on several occasions. The bishop too was always there to support them with letters of recommendation, and obliging

¹For more details see Kaniyanthara: 6-7.

²CWC I: 2-3; CSK I: 3-4.

them with all the formalities within his capacity. Fr Ittoop Mundackal of Kothamangalam, though he was staying in a far off place, shared their idea. Enquiring about the matter he came to meet Fr Palackal at Pallipuram and the bishop at Arthungal, and joined in the second journey of exploration for land. They received plenty of offers and invitation from all parts of the state. All these clearly testify that very soon the monastery became a people's project.

When eventually the construction of the monastery on Mannanam hilltop was completed, it was truly the people's achievement. While launching the project the only resource the founders had with them was unwavering trust in God's providence and people's generosity. They had no money in reserve or any land of their own. Nor did any money come from abroad. The entire expense was met by the generous contribution of the local people! They were happy to cooperate in all possible ways because they were convinced of the worth of having a monastery among them, and that the founders were really poor but utterly sincere and well-intentioned. Their poverty and moral integrity won the people's hearts.

This is perhaps a question the present day religious should ask themselves and sincerely answer: "Do they have the guts to approach the people for their needs?" Possibly not! For they are afraid that the people will retort: "You the religious should help us rather than we help you, for obviously you are much richer than we!" Compared to the state of affairs in earlier times, now things have turned upside down: The religious who have formally professed the vow of poverty are among the richest in the locality, living in luxury and enjoying all sorts of comforts and facilities! People might even doubt their moral integrity and

intentions in the undertakings labelled as different apostolates!

13.2. *Niṣkāma-Karma*: Selfless Service

The practice of poverty consists more in *giving to* than *giving up*. That is, through the vow of poverty one shares one's possessions with those in need rather than uselessly and aimlessly giving them up. The ideal is that "though he [Lord Jesus Christ] was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). Likewise, the religious voluntarily make themselves poor in order to make others rich. What they renounce should benefit others. Already as one sets out for religious life, what one leaves behind benefits the other members of the family. With your share of the family property that you have given up, your brothers and sisters become richer, or they are in a better position to help the poor. So, you can literally claim to have followed the example of Jesus Christ.

But you should not remain satisfied with that initial gesture. Even after entering the religious community you must continue the process of sharing your possessions with the needy. Of course, the individual religious have no possessions of any monetary value to give others. They have, however, many other possessions such as the precious time, bodily health and strength, the mental powers of intelligence, memory and creativity, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit like knowledge, wisdom, counselling, faith, hope and love, and the natural talents to sing, speak, teach, paint, cook and so on. One should place all these at the service of others without reserving anything for oneself. The greatest satisfaction one could have at the time of death is the thought that one has spent oneself and all that one had

for God and others without any selfish motive! One should be a Christian *karma-yogi* doing *niṣkāma-karma*, selfless service of God and humanity. “When you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’” (Lk 17:9). “When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Mt 6:3). One should adopt the motto of St John the Baptist: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn 3:30).

On the part of the religious community as well there should be the practice of poverty by way of spending the resources for the benefit and wellbeing of the needy people and the society at large. It is not merely a question of doing social work and executing developmental projects using the surplus income or money received from funding agencies. One should contribute not out of abundance but out of poverty (Lk 21:4). It should not also be the case that the religious run institutions or undertake programmes in order to make profit and generate income. It should rather be a matter of sincere love and selfless service of God and humanity. This was the distinguishing mark of St Chavara and all other founding members of the congregation in all their undertakings in the fields of pastoral ministry, social apostolate, education and print media. For instance let us presently consider the setting up of the printing press by St Chavara and his community.

13.3. Poor People’s Big Contribution¹

Already above in the first section of chapter 4 we have mentioned the printing press established in Mannanam. It

¹In this section, we are more or less reproducing Kochumuttom (2014): 109-113.

was one of the most remarkable initiatives of Chavara. His efforts for it began in 1843 with the help of a printing worker called Ittikuruvila Thoppil.¹ Next year, wanting to learn about setting up a printing machine, he went twice to see the CMS press in Kottayam, but was denied permission. He did not give up the project, though. In 1845, he made a journey to Kollam in the hope of seeing a press, but there, too, they did not permit him.² He then went to Thankassery and tried to buy a press and ink from Pudussery or Chennai. There the ink was not available, while the press would cost Rs 500, which Chavara did not have! Still he did not lose heart. Instead, with determination, he “went about asking people who were in the field and with the information received started the work of constructing a press.”³

How exactly he finally obtained the necessary information and translated it into action, is an interesting story. Along with his seminary mate Fr Paulose Parampil of Muttuchira he went to Thiruvananthapuram. There with the help of some Catholic workers in the government press they were able to see and learn everything about the working of the press as much as they wanted. Fr Paulose Parampil possessed a good taste for and expertise in handicrafts and skilled work. Returning to Mannanam he made the model of a press in plantain stem. Then according to this model they got a press constructed in wood by a skilful carpenter. A base crafted in granite was fixed to it.⁴

¹CWC I: 38; CSK I: 43.

²CWC I: 45; CSK I: 51.

³CWC I: 38; CSK I: 44.

⁴Bernard 1989: 26-27; Parapuram: 1411.

Thus, the printing press was ready. The next thing to provide was letters. For it they somehow secured the service of Shivaraman, a goldsmith working in the CMS press, who cut first square shaped letters and later other varieties of them, too.¹

In their efforts to find workers, for printing they managed to get the service of a certain Kuriyan, an employee of the government press in Thiruvananthapuram, and for book binding they brought a black Jew of Kochi, who had training in this profession in Mumbai. These two men trained a few local people of Mannanam in their respective trades.²

In March 1845 or so permission from Rome to print books was duly received.³

Making further enquiries about ink and paper Chavara and some others then went to Alapuzha. There with the help of Cheriankunju Elanjickal and Kochupaulose from Vaikom they arranged with a merchant called Kameesa to import for them paper, ink and lead, all together worth Rs 100, and paid an advance of Rs 10. Then, in September (1845?), they were informed that the articles had arrived. Chavara along with Fr Kanjirapally went and found 10 bundles of paper and a barrel of ink, worth a total of more than Rs 400. But they did not have that much money. They requested the merchant to let them have only a small

¹Bernard 1989: 27.

²Bernard 1989: 27.

³CWC I: 47; CSK I: 53. According to this text, 'the co-adjutor bishop promised that he would get the necessary permission from Rome to print books' from which we reasonably infer that he eventually got it.

portion of the ink. But he insisted that they should take the whole lot because otherwise he would not be able to find a buyer for the remaining part. Naturally the Fathers were in agony (*mana-viśādam*). Providentially there came a good man called Thomman Chennakat. He negotiated with the merchant and got him to agree to sell to the Fathers just half a barrel of ink and paper. But even they would cost Rs 300 which they did not have! They had with them only Rs 100. Where would they find Rs 200? The zealous Thomman immediately collected Rs 100 from different people in the form of a *citty* (chit fund) that he instituted on the spot in the name of St Joseph. For the remaining Rs 100 he gave a promissory note to the merchant and sent the Fathers home with the goods.¹

Now the press with all the accessories, printing material and workers is ready for use. The ecclesiastical permission also has been granted. The royal sanction is yet to come. That, too, was easily obtained through the good office of the Vicar Apostolic Ludovic Martini. It was in 1846 that he obtained it through the British Resident Mr Kallan.²

There occurred also a sign of God's blessing. All the expenses being duly met and the debts paid, the Fathers had run out of money. There was no penny left even for the urgent needs and paying the wages of the workmen. What happened then has been narrated by Fr Chavara:

We started praying earnestly to the guardian angels and St Joseph. Then something like a sign of God's special favour happened. One day in great distress I was praying in the church. Suddenly a man by name

¹CWC I: 38-39; CSK I: 44-45.

²Bernard 1989: 27.

Itty Nellipuzha from the parish of Cherpunkal arrived, and said that he had brought with him 500 *cakrams*. He added that if someone went with him, he would send 500 *cakrams* more. Hearing it I heaved a sigh of relief. Earlier also he had given us 1000 *cakrams*... I received the money and met the urgent needs.¹

13.4. Contribution Out of Poverty

We have presented in some detail the event of the establishment of the press in Mannanam because it gives quite a few lessons in the practice of the vow of poverty. First of all, it is an instance of expending the resources on helping others or common causes, *not out of abundance but out of poverty* or even livelihood. To set up the press the Fathers may have incurred a total expense of more or less Rs 1000 which was certainly a huge amount those days that was beyond their means. Obviously, they had not earmarked any money for this purpose or expected any funding agency to come to their aid. It was a time when, having no source of steady income, they had to find their livelihood on a daily basis from what they would get from here and there. They were indeed living from hand to mouth! Therefore, it was their utter trust in God's providence and the people's generosity that made them venture on such a big project. They were also equally well-intentioned and convinced of the usefulness of it.

However, it does not mean that their trust in God and people immediately brought them an abundance of finance and that they had no hurdles to overcome. Not at all! Money came in small amounts and that too very irregularly and from

¹CWC I: 39; CSK I: 45.

unexpected sources. Therefore, there was always a kind of uncertainty that made the Fathers keep turning again and again to God for help. It is said that on certain days the community in Mannanam did not even have enough food to eat! Finally, when the press was set up they were bankrupt and did not have money even to pay the workers their daily wages. Jesus' words in praise of the poor widow at the temple-treasury certainly apply here: "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on" (Lk 21:3-4).

A second lesson is that the religious with the profession of the vow of poverty *should not seek exemption from the rule of work*. Hard work indeed is the sign of poverty which the religious should certainly bear. A poor man unless he works hard cannot have his bread. Whether he likes it or not, he has to work hard for survival. That man should work hard is the first command of the Creator: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Gen 3:19). Later on St Paul has put it still more sharply: "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat!" (2 Thess 3:10). The religious are not exempted from this universal rule of work. Each of them should certainly work at least for his/her own livelihood. Otherwise, taking advantage of the hard work of the rest of the community, he/she would be doing injustice! Refusing to work hard, one turns out to be a parasite in the community! One has to work also to support those members of the community who for one or another reason are unable to work. It is equally important that the religious should help the poor around them not merely distributing what they receive from other generous people, but also from the fruits of their own hard work. Thus, it is mandatory that the religious should bear

the sign of poverty, namely, hard work, and share the lot of the poor people. The poor have not only to work hard but also to face all the associated ordeals like humiliations, rejections, denial of rights and so on. This is illustrated by the bitter experiences that the Fathers had during their prolonged effort to set up the press.

For the Fathers the project of press certainly was a hard work for three years. For one thing, they had to undertake again and again difficult and long journeys, some of them to no avail! One may remember that those days there were no good roads and comfortable vehicles and communication facilities as today! And the climate sometimes was inclement: either hot summer, or incessantly raining monsoon. In spite of such adverse factors and even health problems the Fathers undertook frequent journeys covering the length and breadth of Kerala!

As we have seen they had also to go through all sorts of human situations, humiliations and embarrassments; they had to take time and be patient; there were times when their trust in God possibly was tested and tried; they had to depend on so many people, and almost beg for help and money; in some places they were rejected and disgraced! But they would never lose heart or give up their trust in God or stop seeking help from people. They were determined and ever remained well-intentioned. Finally, with God's blessing and good people's cooperation, they realized the goal that ever since has been of great service to the society.

There is a third lesson which perhaps is still more challenging, namely, that the religious should be *selfless* in the service of society. There is no gainsaying that the Fathers

spent themselves and their resources, even at the cost of their livelihood, for the cause of the press. But the thought of gaining something for themselves never crossed their minds. There was no chance of such a selfish gain at all. They did not hope or want to make profit out of it, nor did they look at it as a source of income and financial security. They were not possibly aiming at enhancing their own name and fame, either. The only intention that they had, therefore, was to glorify God and serve the people. Are the present-day religious in their manifold undertakings in fields of education, healing ministry, social apostolate, etc., so pure in their intentions? For example, while opening a super-specialty hospital or a school to provide quality education do they not have at least the unexpressed intention of having a source of income? Or, their intention may be to make a name for themselves, or to compete with other agencies! Without some such mundane motive would they generally venture into such projects?

13.5. Moral Sensitivity

Chavara's moral sensitivity regarding money matters was remarkably deep. While the construction work of the convent in Koonammavu was going on, once they ran out of money. In order to meet an urgent need Chavara sent Fr Geevarghese Thoppil to parishes to appeal to the people for help. He returned with Rs 400 that he received as donations from different persons. With just half of that amount the need was met. "What could we do with the remaining Rs 200?" they enquired of the prior. With no hesitation he replied: "Return it immediately to the donors!" One's usual tendency is to keep the money for some other needs in the future. But Chavara's thought was different: The people have generously donated the money to meet a particular

need. What remains after meeting the need certainly belongs to them. We should honestly return it. In case another need arises one should be humble enough to approach them again, and one can feel confident that they will help again.

There is still another incident that similarly bears testimony to the Fathers' sense of honesty in handling money. This too is related to the money they spent for the construction of the convent in Koonammavu. Chavara writes:

As we planned to construct the convent we had no money with us. But God inspired good people to contribute money. Thus, we received as donations Rs 8000 with which the work was completed. Apart from it, there was an amount of Rs 100 which according to the conscience of the missionary Fr Leopold was not honest money. Hence, we refused to use it for the construction works. Instead, with the archbishop's permission we distributed it among the poor as alms.¹

This is a lesson for us in the modern times when issues of corruption and black money are rampant to which even the religious sometimes fall prey!

¹CWC I (1990): 115-116; CSK I (1981): 138.

Chapter 14¹

CONVENT BORN IN POVERTY

14.1. The Humble Beginning in Poverty

The story of the founding of the convent in Koonammavu was not different regarding financial matters. We can rightly say that it was in poverty that Chavara and his associates gave birth to the first women's congregation in Kerala of which the convent in Koonammavu was the first house. As is well known, it was in a bamboo-mat house that its first community was accommodated. But they did not have any money to put up even such a make-shift dwelling! However, God's providence and good people's generosity did not fail them. Different persons offered a small amount each: one gave Rs 8, another Rs 10, another Rs 25, another Rs 15, and still another Rs 300. Thus, they had a total of Rs 358. Completing the bamboo-mat convent the founder Chavara exclaimed with a sense of satisfaction: "With this small amount of money we constructed a humble house that is truly an abode of poverty [*agatitvam*]."²

The bamboo-mat convent, however, was only a temporary arrangement. To keep the Sisters in it for long was neither safe nor proper. While they were in it they endured "the sorrows and tribulations" such as diseases, snakes and such other creatures crawling into the house, the

¹This chapter here and there almost verbatim reproduces, with comments and observations in terms of the spirit and practice of the vow of poverty, relevant narratives from part III of Kochumuttom (2014): 285-367.

²CWC I (1990): 105-106; CSK I (1981): 128.

rain water leaking into the rooms through the roof, etc.¹ In 1867 Mgr Bernardine in his report to *Propaganda Fide* wrote, "They [the Sisters] lived in a hut in a pitiable state."² So, it was necessary to construct urgently a proper building for the convent. But where is the money going to come from? They trusted in God's providence and turned to the people for help. A meeting of the lay leaders was held in which they started the system of *piṭiyari* (a handful of rice)³ as means of collecting money. Then Chavara and Leopold undertook a week-long journey to the Syrian parishes in Kuttanad side appealing to the people for help. Everywhere they received very positive response. They returned with an amount of Rs 1900. With it they felt confident to start the work. Two gentlemen generously sold their lands at a concessional rate for the purpose of the convent. The foundation stone was laid on 13 June 1866.⁴

Once again, the people appreciated the Fathers' initiative for the good cause of a convent; they were also convinced that the Fathers, although they were well-intentioned and selfless, were genuinely poor in spirit and reality. Therefore, they were generous and happy to cooperate with them by supplying them with what they lacked, namely, finance. Of course, it does not mean that the Fathers always had ready-cash in store. Instead, it was a clear instance of God directing the events in a surprising manner through people

¹CKC: 33-45; KMN: 16-30 and CWC I: 202; CSK I: 242f. See also CWC I: 109, 111-112; CSK I: 132, 134-135.

²*Positio*: 318.

³*Piṭiyari* means "a handful of rice." Each family every time they take rice to cook a meal, put away a handful of it as a means of raising funds for a special purpose.

⁴See Kochumuttom (2014): 311-314.

of good will. Once or twice loans were taken from the monastery and some others, and the work went on without interruption.¹ But Fr Leopold was not happy about this way of meeting the expenses. So, they decided to keep the work either going or suspended depending on the money being made available or not by God's providence. But to their great joy and amazement, just enough money would always come so that they never had to stop the work. Once, for example, they were worried about the large amount of money required to purchase wood for such a big construction. Then a man came and offered to sell good *akhil* wood at the rate of just three and a half rupees (per metre?) which till the previous year would cost eight or even nine rupees.²

Things went on like this. Another time when the money ran out, causing the Fathers much concern, a rich man named Geevarghese of the Holy Cross Parish of Alapuzha, came and stayed in the monastery to prepare himself through confession, etc., for making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Being requested by Fr Leopold, he agreed to get some donation for the work of the convent. Taking the necessary letters of recommendation from Chavara, he immediately went about and returned with Rs 36—Rs 26 collected from others and Rs 10 from his own pocket.³

Towards the end of the work, being short of money, the Fathers sent a letter to the people in Kaduthurthy and Muttuchira, and the response was marvellous: "Thus, by

¹CKC: 59; KMN: 47.

²CKC: 59; KMN: 47-48.

³CKC: 59-60; in KMN: 48 the amount is Rs 300—Rs 200 collected from others and Rs 100 from his own pocket.

God's grace, within six or seven months an amount of nearly Rs 791 was received as donation."¹

It seems that Frs Chavara and Leopold, together or separately, made further trips to raise funds for the convent. Fr Kuriakose Porukara has clearly mentioned one such journey that Chavara made to Malayattoor side.²

Besides the lay individuals and parish communities, the clergy, especially, Chavara's disciples, whom he contacted by letters or/and personal visits, were a source of financial assistance.³ A circular sent by Fr Leopold to the Syrian churches to raise funds for the construction of the convent also must have persuaded the people to contribute.⁴ The archbishop also seems to have given some money.⁵ The total amount collected by all these means was more than Rs 8000.⁶ Out of this Rs 100, which Fr Leopold's conscience said

¹CKC: 60; in KMN: 48 the amount is Rs 600.

²*Ālocana*: 131.

³Sr Jossy CMC, *CMC in the Shadow of the Most High*, trans. by Sr Susan CMC and Sr Seraphia CMC, CMC Publications, Mount Carmel Generalate, Aluva, 1957: 30, refers to Mgr Bernardine's report sent to the Sacred Congregation in Rome in 1861, which says that "the construction of the convent building was completed with the money collected from the priests and the Syrian churches." (*Positio*: 318; see also *Ālocana*: 139-140, quoted below.)

⁴Its original is kept in the archives of St Joseph's Monastery, Mannanam.

⁵See *Ālocana*: 139-140, quoted below.

⁶*The Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent* observe: "... Leopold missionary had given strong and powerful statement of witness that this convent had been built with the sum of Rupees eight thousand (Rs 8000), collected by Father Cyriac Elias Chavara

was not clean, was, with the archbishop's permission, given away as alms.¹

Fr Kuriakose Porukara gives a moving description of the matter in the consultation book (called *Ālocana*) of Mannanam Monastery:

The desire was to construct a convent of the European style, but it was a time of financial crisis. With the donations the monasteries were just pulling on, and all were tired and feeling helpless. Still they hoped against hope, and more than a sum of Rs 8000 was collected from the archbishop, the programmes like "a handful of rice," and in a miraculous way, so to say, from the parishes and priests, and, in a manner unheard of, from the priests who were contacted through letters. And within a short period of time a convent of unusual model was constructed, and was furnished with all the necessary things already during the next Lent. It was a matter of amazement to watch that, although so many workers were employed at the expense of a huge amount, the work had never to be stopped for want of money. It reminds us of the Scriptural words, "We are taken for people having nothing, though we have everything" (2 Cor 6:10).²

Finally, on 27 March 1867 the community moved from the bamboo-mat convent to the new one. It was also the day

from the Syrian people and Syrian churches. It is on account of this statement, which was proved with clear evidences that this convent came to be given to the Syrians. This is one great thing that the members of this convent should ever gratefully remember" (CKC: 297).

¹CWC I (1990): 115-116; CSK I (1981): 138.

²*Ālocana*: 139-140, quoted by Valerian: 216.

when the first four members were given the religious habit. It is obvious that the women's congregation, just as it was the case of the men's one, was given birth and brought up by the founders in utter poverty, with their trust in God and His people as the unfailing resource. Do the members of the two congregations still have this kind of the spirit and practice of evangelical poverty?

14.2. Be Grateful, Sane, and Rich toward God

According to Fr Leopold, the building complex—a two-storey convent with a block each on either side, one for a boarding house and the other for a school—was nothing short of a miracle. Giving full credit to God he spoke to the Sisters on 29 January 1866:

Don't you wonder how this building has come up so quickly? Last year we did not have money to build even a bamboo-shed. Now within four or six months so much has been built. It is only God's miracle that we were able to put up this building. So, you too have the duty to pray for all the benefactors who have donated for this purpose. If a man, knowing that you are desirous of loving God, builds a house in a big compound and makes you live in it, won't you feel grateful towards that donor? Surely you will. Then, when you are given such a quiet area in order that you may always think of God and love Him alone, if you go and seek things other than God, you will go to hell.¹

These words of advice from Fr Leopold apply to the CMC and CMI members of all times. While beginning the congregations the only capital the founders had with them

¹CKC: 56; KMN: 44.

was the trust in God who mostly through the faithful provided them with all they needed for the founding and nurturing of the communities. The members should be ever sincerely grateful to God and His people. On their part, too, for everything related to consecrated life they must depend on God's providence and people's cooperation. They must individually as well as collectively always resist the strong temptation to accumulate wealth to the neglect of the spirit and practice of poverty. They should not be like the rich fool in Lk 12:13-21 who said to his soul:

Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So, it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.

Chavara also repeats in his characteristic manner the same warning to his followers in a circular that he wrote jointly with Fr Leopold:

Finally, beloved brethren and dear children, none of us has entered the monastery because of hunger or desperate living conditions in the world. Had we remained in the world, we all had the chance of enjoying a comfortable life. But we have left our possessions and parents, [retaining God alone as our portion]. Then, if through our negligence and indolence we forsake Him, what a great mistake it would be, and what madness!¹

Chavara in his *Dirge* (*Marāṇa-vīttīl Pāṭuvānuḷḷa Pāna*) tells a story to make his point clear:

¹CWC IV (1990): 66; CSK IV (1986): 95.

A man [let us call him Isaac] was sentenced to death by the king. He was naturally upset. How to escape the death penalty? Who would help him? He remembered his three intimate friends. Each of them had promised to help him in all his needs. Feeling quite encouraged he approached the first friend and entreated: "Please help me! I am in trouble." The friend enquired: "What is the matter? Tell me, please; I'll certainly help you!" "The king has sentenced me to death. Please rescue me!" he pleaded. "Death? I am sorry. In all other matters I shall help you, I promise. But when it comes to death, I am helpless! Kindly excuse me!"

The man felt disappointed. But gathering courage he met the second friend. But he, too, expressed his helplessness in the case of death. Similarly the third one also turned down his request. Dejected and depressed Isaac was sitting on a road side. Then there came a man. They had met once in a while, but were not so close friends. The man asked: "Hey, it seems something is disturbing you! What is the matter? Tell me, I'll help you." "Will you help me? Are you sure?" Isaac appreciated the man's good will, but doubted his ability! But the man reassured that he would help whatever may be the matter. "Even in case of death?" Isaac again probed. The man replied: "Don't at all doubt. I shall defend you not only in the event of death but even beyond death. Believe me!" Isaac felt happy and was relieved of his worry.

The three friends who failed Isaac at the time of death were his wealth, health, and people. Neither of them is of any help at the time of them: the wealth is useless,

the health is lost, and the people are listless! They can't at all prevent death! The fourth friend who offered to stand by him even after death was a few good deeds like acts of charity that he had done during the life time. They accompany you even beyond death and defend you before God!¹

This story is an illustration of the words of Jesus: "For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit the life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" (Mt 16:26).

14.3. Poor, Simple and Hardworking Chavara

In his personal life Chavara was poor, simple and hardworking, as our study has clearly shown. His food, for example, was very ordinary and commonplace. He was always happy with the community's meal, never asking for anything special. The common food those days consisted of rice-gruel (*kaññi*) with one curry for breakfast, cooked rice with two curries for lunch, a little rice-gruel (*kaññi*) at 4.00 pm, and cooked rice with two curries for supper as well. On days of fast it was just a little salted rice-gruel (*kaññi*) without any curry for breakfast, a full meal of cooked rice with three vegetable curries for lunch, and a little rice-gruel (*kaññi*) with vegetable pickle for supper. On Good Friday the only meal was the lunch consisting of salted rice-gruel (*kaññi*) without any curry.²

His room and the furniture in it were equally simple: an ordinary table, a plain chair, and a wooden box. There were a few books on the table. The cot too was quite ordinary, and the mattress was very thin and rough with a single

¹*Dirge* 31-208 in CWC II (1989): 130-134, and CSK II (1981): 136-141.

²Louis (or Aloysius) 1936: 6-7.

pillow which also was very ordinary. There was no provision for mosquito-net, and there was no bedsheet either!¹

Archbishop Baccinelli once came to meet Chavara in his room in the monastery. He was surprised to see the so poorly furnished simple room of his vicar general! Now where to sit? Making the prior sit in the chair, the archbishop sat on the box!²

Chavara was a hardworking person; he hardly had time to rest. In spite of his poor health and even in his old age he worked hard, making journeys up and down for various pastoral and other official purposes. Forgetting oneself he spent himself uninterruptedly for God and His people. We have already come across many instances of his hard work. We may once more recall one of them:

In his zeal to construct the convent, he [St Chavara] in the beginning of the season of [second] monsoon [September-October] went to the parishes in Malayattoor side. While at Cheranalloor he was laid up with rheumatic fever, and was unconscious for two days. Thoroughly exhausted he came back to the monastery in Koonammavu. The swelling in the leg aggravated and burst. And gradually he recovered.³

In short, Chavara had in his life all the identifying marks of a poor person: lack of possessions, simple living and hard work.

¹*Ibid.* 5.

²Testified by the eye-witness Fr Ambrose Thoppil who died in 1938.

³*Alocana*: 131.

Chapter 15

OBEDIENCE THROUGH SUFFERING

15.1. *Col-Viḷi, Śuśrūṣā*: Obedience

“Although he was a Son, he learnt obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8). This Scriptural statement about Jesus Christ applies to Chavara and other founding fathers of the CMI Congregation. Chavara’s own strong conviction, clearly expressed in his testament, is that “obedience is the only mark of a consecrated person,”¹ and indeed he lived up to his conviction.

The word used by the founders for obedience is *col-viḷi*. It would mean “someone is calling you *by name*.” He knows you personally, is concerned about you and has confidence in you so that he takes the freedom to call you by name. He expects you to respond positively with respect and love: listen to him attentively, understand his mind, and promptly and unconditionally put it into practice as a matter of your care for and duty to him.

There is a significant word in the Indian tradition used in the context of the relation between a disciple (*śiṣya*) and master (*guru*), namely, *śuśrūṣā*. It is popularly taken to mean the service (*seva*, the assistance) the disciple renders the master in his domestic, official and bodily needs. But that is far from the real and implied meaning of the word. Etymologically its construction is *śrotum icchā*, which means desire/readiness (*icchā*) to listen (*śrotum*) [to someone speaking to you]. It is not enough that one listens to what the *guru* says but should also correctly understand and put

¹CWC IV (1990): 70, CSK IV (1986): 99-100.

it into practice. Hence, the real *guru-śuśrūṣa* consists in obedience without which whatever other help one might render the *guru* would be worthless.

Still another related term is *śradhā* which in practice means 'attentiveness' that one pays to a teacher or speaker. But the attentiveness that one should pay to one's *guru* is different from that one pays to other secular teachers and speakers. While listening to the latter I have the freedom to question and disagree with them. But in my dealings with my *guru* I do not have similar freedom. I must necessarily accept all that he says, no matter whether I understand them or not, and whether I like them or not. The *guru* for me is an *avatāra*, God in disguise, who knows things much better than I, and what he says is invariably good for me. Therefore, I must unquestioningly accept and follow up all that he says. This is what is meant by faith in Christianity: to accept things that I cannot understand by my own reason; I accept them because I have full trust in the person speaking to me, for I know that he is knowledgeable and trustworthy. In short, therefore, *śuśrūṣā* meaning obedience is an act of faith in the *guru*. This is indeed how St Chavara and the other founding fathers understood and practised *col-viḷi* obedience. Seeing the Lord in the person of superior, listen to him in a spirit of faith, and put into practice all his instructions wholeheartedly and unconditionally.

15.2. Resolved to Be Obedient

In Chavara's own words, "from his early age he was resolved to live in accordance with the mind of his *malpān* Thomas Palackal."¹ He remained ever so committed to this resolve. For examples, we may cite an incident. Ordained on

¹CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 25.

29 November 1829, next day Chavara celebrated the First Mass in his home parish Chennankari. It was the first Sunday of the liturgical season of Annunciation. He stayed back there for a month. He felt at home there. Then he moved to Pulinkunnu and enjoyed making some visits here and there. In the beginning of the Lent, he also preached a retreat in the chapel in the southern sector of Pulinkunnu. It was a grand success, much appreciated by the participants. Naturally, Chavara, too, was delighted. Thus, he became a little attached to the place and people there as well. But he realized that his *malpān* Palackal was not very happy about his visits and wanderings. Hence, fearing his scolding he hurried back to Pallipuram. He then writes: “Never again did I ever aimlessly roam about. Then onwards I was determined to be subject in all matters to the *malpān*’s mind and views. He directed me to go and stay in Mannanam to look after the construction of monastery. Indeed, there wasn’t anyone else than we three – Fr Thomas Porukara, Br Jacob Kaniyanthara and myself – who would wholeheartedly leave the family and relations, and engage totally in the work there.”¹

15.3. Learning Obedience through Suffering

In the course of time, the founding fathers’ spirit of obedience was severely tested and proved as it happened in the case of Abraham in the Old Testament. Bp Maurilius Stabilini, the vicar apostolic of Varapuzha, who granted them permission to found the monastery, immediately after the laying of its foundation stone on 11 May 1831, returned to Rome. His departure was a matter of great concern for the Fathers, not knowing what would be his successor’s attitude

¹CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 25.

towards the monastery under construction. It was in tears that they bid Bp Stabilini farewell!

The next vicar apostolic was Archbishop Francis Xavier. Earlier, he was in Kerala as a missionary and had personally known *Malpān* Palackal. Now as the new vicar apostolic, he was initially sympathetic towards the monastery project. Gradually, however, misguided by the group of people called *Ezhunnūttikār* he started developing misgivings about it. They were against ordaining to priesthood candidates belonging to the fishermen group called *Añjūttikār* who were considered a low caste community. Bp Stabilini's efforts to persuade them to give up such an un-Christian stand failed. Displeased with them he decided to go back to Rome. But *Malpān* Fr Palackal, the Secretary Fr Porukara and others pleaded with him not to leave Malabar. They suggested that as an interim arrangement he could move to any other parish, Latin or Syrian, and make it his residence. The bishop obliged, and shifted his residence to St Andrew's Church, Arthungal. This naturally infuriated the *Ezhunnūttikār*. They believed that Frs Palackal, Porukara and the Chancellor Fr Pascal were the people who encouraged the bishop to ordain priests from the *Añjūttikār* and brought him to Arthungal. The priests, the *Ezhunnūttikār* and ten of their churches met and decided neither to invite to preach nor to support the two priests Palackal and Porukara and their students. This continued conflict and tension between the prelate and people is alleged to be the reason why the bishop, may be at his own request, was called back to Rome.

The opponent group and even a few from the Syrian side were quick to approach the new vicar apostolic, Archbishop Francis Xavier, with complaints against the monastery and the former vicar apostolic. At first the archbishop did not

give credit to the complaints. However, he asked Frs Palackal and Porukara whether they had got permission to start a monastery. "Yes, Your Grace! We have got it from your predecessor Bp Stabilini," they replied. "Have you got it in writing?" he again asked. "Yes, indeed! Here is the document of permission." They produced the letter of Vicar Apostolic Stabilini. The archbishop went through it, but did not say anything in reply, negative or positive. The Fathers took it for granted that the issue was settled, and returned home.¹

But the rivals would not keep quiet. They even spread the rumour that Fr Porukara was going about collecting donations from the parishes and helping his family! The archbishop became more suspicious about the monastery project and the people involved in it. He decided to take action. All of a sudden he issued an order appointing Fr Chavara as the vicar of Pallipuram Parish. At this the Fathers were much grieved and hurt because once Chavara is gone there would be practically no one responsible left at Mannanam to look after the construction works. They suspected it was a move to stop the work. The senior priests instructed Chavara: 'You may represent the matter before His Grace and make a request not to insist on the transfer order; if he accepts it, well and good; otherwise unconditionally obey the order!' So, Chavara went to the archbishop and humbly informed him that, as *Malpān* Palackal was ill and Fr Porukara had to go about collecting funds, there would be none but himself to take care of the work at Mannanam, and, that, therefore, if he is transferred the work would suffer. His Grace curtly replied that the

¹CWC I (1990): 23-24; CSK I (1981): 28.

order should be obeyed. When the young priest went on pleading for his grievance to be redressed, His Grace turned at him and in a stern tone of authority rebuked him saying that he could do whatever he liked if he had not yet learned to obey the orders of the ordinary. With fear and trembling Chavara withdrew and at once obeyed the order, taking charge as vicar of Pallipuram Parish.¹

There was still worse to come. Soon afterwards the archbishop appointed Fr Porukara as the vicar of some parishes like Kayamkulam and Pallithope in the diocese of Kollam. On receipt of the order he rushed to the *malpān*. After discussing the matter in detail Porukara concluded that the archbishop's order, even if it is issued to test their spirit of obedience, should be considered God's will, and, therefore, be obeyed forthwith without complaint. The *malpān* agreed, and Porukara left for Kollam in tears!²

Yet more disastrous was the next incident. In Pallipuram, where Chavara took charge as the vicar, there was the newly ordained priest Fr Varkey of the same parish. A nephew of the *malpān*, after the First Mass he continued to stay there. From time to time Chavara, entrusting the parish matters to him, would go and stay in Mannanam for supervising the construction works. Once, while Chavara was in Mannanam, as part of the three day fast in Pallipuram there was the distribution of rice-pudding in the parish church. During the distribution Fr Varkey happened to beat with a cane Itty Kurissinkal, a ruffian belonging to an ancient family. His relatives felt insulted. They presented a petition to the archbishop: "Our Vicar Fr Chavara, having

¹CWC I (1990): 24; CSK I (1981): 28-29.

²CWC I (1990): 24-25; CSK I (1981): 29.

entrusted the parish duties to an inexperienced junior priest of this parish, stays away in Mannanam to look after the construction of monastery. We feel much hurt that this young priest has publically beaten a man of gentlemanly conduct among us." In reply His Grace immediately wrote to Chavara, commanding him to redress the petitioners' grievance and not to be away from Pallipupram for more than eight days at a stretch without his written permission. The letter was delivered to Chavara at Mannanam and it naturally grieved him more than ever before. Rushing to Pallipuram much to his relief he realized that the *malpān* had already pacified the concerned parishioners. But the other part of the archbishop's order that forbade him from leaving Pallipuram was more vexing. Who else would be there to care for the work in Mannanam? He asked the *malpān* whether he could request the archbishop to appoint Fr Varkey in his place as vicar. The *malpān* readily agreed. Chavara hurriedly went to Varapuzha. He first met the archbishop's secretary Fr Michael Corenju who was full of regard and appreciation for the Mannanam group and project. From him Chavara sensed that the archbishop was much impressed by the Fathers' prompt obedience and cooperation and had started thinking better of them. For, in Kollam, Fr Porukara was working wonders among the people through his committed ministry and effective preaching, and the *malpān* proved a great help in the administration of the diocese and the training of priests. All these seemed to have made the archbishop more kindly disposed towards them and their project in Mannanam. But there followed a dramatic scene. Here is Chavara's own description of it:

Feeling encouraged I entered the archbishop's room and kissed his hand. The prelate's face changed which

I did not notice. "What do you want?" he enquired. In a very matter of fact manner, I replied: "If I move from Mannanam, the work there would stop, and, therefore, please replace me with someone else as vicar at Pallipuram." But the archbishop gave no answer. Then like an obstinate child I went on saying: "Fr Varkey is an apt substitute for me as he is an able priest. Besides, the *malpān* because of his illhealth will always be there to give him proper guidance. Therefore, please be good enough to appoint him in my place. But His Grace ordered me to go away! I felt very distressed. He then asked me to send Fr Varkey to him. Feeling encouraged I dared to give some irrelevant explanations: "As soon as I reach Pallipuram I must go to Mannanam; Fr Varkey knows well to administer the sacraments and all else." Hearing my nonsensical and unnecessary explanation he noisily shifted his chair towards me. I got frightened! He then with paternal love reprimanded me: "Aren't you still a young priest? Is it how you should respond to the ordinary? Are you trying to have everything your own way? You deserve to be suspended at once!" Hearing it I was terrified. I knelt down, kissed his hand and came away!¹

On the way, Chavara recalled: "In the meantime Fr Michael had gestured to me several times to keep quiet. For, from experience, he had understood the archbishop's displeasure reflected in his changed face. But I was unaware of it! My indiscretion and zeal for having the monastery built led me to give answers grave enough for suspension! Regretting my words and grateful that His Grace has understandingly

¹CWC I (1990): 26-27; CSK I (1981): 31.

forgiven me, I returned to Pallipuram. I sent Fr Varkey at once to Varapuzha, and His Grace was good enough to appoint him as vicar."¹

Having his obedience, thus, severely tested and proved Chavara returned to Mannanam, and wrote: "From that day considering myself a full-fledged monk I was determined to keep away from my blood relations, and to give myself up to the monastic pattern of life with all my income going to the common funds and all my needs met from the same."²

15.4. Continued Tests and Trials

Henceforward things moved smoothly. But the founders had to go through still more tests and trials of their spirit of obedience. Now the issue is quite different. Formerly, it concerned the construction work in Mannanam that was almost blocked when the archbishop unilaterally transferred Frs Chavara and Porukara to distant places so that there was practically no one else left in the site to supervise the work. Now the matter is more legal and, therefore, graver in nature: it concerned the canonical approval of the new congregation. The situation briefly was as follows.

The hierarchy's patronage and laity's support of the monastery were obvious. Even as the construction work was still in progress more and more priests and laity volunteered to join the group. Gradually a very well organized community took shape with a good number of members who were prayerful, zealous and disciplined, committed to the pastoral ministries and other apostolic activities. All including the vicars apostolic, priests and the laity were

¹CWC I (1990): 27; CSK I (1981): 31-32.

²CWC I (1990): 27; CSK I (1981): 32.

happy about them, and highly appreciated their presence and service. Even the society at large admired their way of life and ideals. In short, there was all that was required for consecrated life in the tradition of the Church. The monastery truly was *bes-rauma*, a house built on hilltop, to which all looked for light, direction and inspiration. It was literally a *punya-sanketam*, a spiritual resort for all sections of the society. For example, it was to Mannanam that the priests used to frequent for their spiritual needs such as days of quiet and prayer, confession and guidance, monthly recollection and annual retreat. The bishop would send those of his priests in need of correction or improvement to the monastery to spend some time under the guidance of the priests there and return with their certificate of approval. The laity too invariably had recourse to the monastery for daily Mass, confession and Holy Communion, retreat, anointing of the sick and other last rites. Even the non-Christians looked at the monastery as an agent of socio-cultural renaissance, and appreciated the community's initiatives in the fields of education, media and social work.

But the most crucial factor, namely, the canonical approval was indefinitely delayed. The Fathers made repeated requests for it to the vicars apostolic that came and went one after another: Maurilius Stabilini, Francis Xavier, Ludovic Martini, and Bernardine Baccinelli. They all were happy with the community. But they would not readily give the canonical approval, probably because they were prejudiced against the Syrian Rite people's rootedness in matters related to faith and morals. It could certainly hurt the feelings of the community, and they could rightly feel that their basic rights as equal members of the Church were

denied. But trusting in God's providence and in a spirit of obedience to and respect for the ecclesiastical authorities they patiently waited for God's time to come for their rights to be granted and dreams to be realized. It must be underlined that during this long period of uncertainty and a considerable amount of strain and stress never did they refuse to cooperate with and obey the hierarchy. There was never indeed even a trace of defiance of or protest against the authority. In the meantime, two of the elders, Frs Palackal and Porukara, died, the former in 1841 and the latter in 1846, without seeing the fruition of their hard work just as Moses and Aaron were not permitted to enter the Promised Land!¹

Finally, it was in 1855, after almost a quarter of a century long waiting on the part of the Fathers, that Archbishop Baccinelli granted them permission to make the profession of religious vows. But subsequently many things occurred that tested further and proved beyond doubt the Fathers' spirit of faith in God's providence and submission to the authority. For example the archbishop imposed on them the rule of the contemplative Order of the Carmelites Discalced (OCD). He rejected the Fathers' request to adjust the rule to *their Syrian traditions, the local conditions and needs, and the original spirit and charism of the new congregation that combined the contemplative and apostolic dimensions of religious life*. This was again a denial of their basic rights and disregard of their ecclesial identity. But they, under the guidance of St Chavara, tolerated, forgave and generously cooperated. Eleven out of the twenty-two candidates fearing that they might not be able to stand the demands of the unduly strict

¹SP: 26-27.

rule at the last minute decided against making the profession. Chavara informed the archbishop of this unfortunate development, but his response was disgustingly cold: "Only those of good will and determination need to be admitted. Don't worry about the dropouts. I shall pray for the remaining few!" Fr Chavara gracefully bore the pain of the loss of so many members and the lack of understanding on the part of the ordinary!¹

Still later, the OCD Superior General, most probably with the connivance of Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli highhandedly affiliated the new congregation as their Third Order. Thereby the congregation lost its identity as an autonomous indigenous institute, and Fr Chavara stopped being its prior general, to say the least! It was clearly an unjust interference of the missionaries and a questionable appropriation of what did not belong to them. There must have been many of the members of the congregation who rightly objected to the entire episode. But Chavara, trusting that in the course of time God will put things right, kept his calm and cool, and pacified the disturbed members. He was tolerant, forgiving, obedient and generous!²

In the context of the Roccas incident, the archbishop, convinced of his inability to contain the agitation, was all praise for Fr Chavara and appointed him the vicar general. In his letter dated 15 June 1861 to Rome, informing of Chavara's appointment as vicar general, the archbishop suggested that the prior could even be consecrated as the coadjutor bishop for the Syrians. But after the Roccas event, when there was an enquiry from Rome regarding the

¹Bernard 1989: 41-42; Valerian 1939: 104.

²Kochumuttom 2014: 159-165.

possibility of the prior's consecration as bishop, the same archbishop and missionaries strongly objected to it. Fr Marceline wrote: "Where do you find one who has the qualities necessary for a bishop? There are in the monasteries many good, upright priests. But where is the prudence, where the courage, where the knowledge and other qualities required of a bishop?" He does not make any mention of Chavara particularly. Fr Leopold not only agrees with Marceline's position in its entirety, but also makes negative remarks about Chavara's nomination as bishop, namely, that he lacks knowledge of moral theology and experience in matters of administration, being already 63 years old¹ is too advanced in age, and has bodily indispositions and health problems. Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli sent to Rome his reply dated 24 September 1865. In it he still holds that the prior is a good man and the best among the Syrian priests, but endorses Leopold's views that he had little knowledge of moral theology and experience in administration, and was too old!²

Perhaps Chavara was not aware of the correspondence between Varapuzha and Rome concerning his nomination for episcopacy, and, therefore, was spared of the embarrassment. However, there were occasions when the missionaries openly failed to treat him with due respect and recognition. For example, we may mention one incident. 13 February 1866 was fixed for the inauguration of the first community of Sisters in Konnamavu. As directed by Chavara a widow called Eliswa (later her name was changed as Clara), aged 37, from the parish of Vaikom with

¹Leopold considers 63 years for a man in India as equal to 80 in Europe. In fact, at that time Chavara was only 60.

²Kochumuttom 2014: 210-214.

all the necessary preparations and accompanied by her uncle arrived on 11 February to join them. But Fr Leopold said that he would not accept her without first interviewing and personally getting to know her. Thus, being asked to wait, she and her uncle stayed in a house outside. The young priest Leopold certainly could have trusted the experience of the prior and respected his judgement. But he would not! "This caused much sorrow and disturbance. Yet they stayed and waited holding firmly on to obedience,"¹ writes Chavara. It was obviously a humiliating experience for him; but he accepted it without any complaint and in a spirit of dignified obedience. The day after the inauguration of the convent Fr Leopold called the lady to the confessional, interviewed and heard her confession, and then admitted her to the community.

¹CWC I (1990): 107; CSK I (1981): 237; CKC: 26-27.

Chapter 16

THE ONLY MARK OF A RELIGIOUS

16.1. Total Surrender of One's Will

In the very first paragraph of his testament, Chavara has spelt out his radical understanding of obedience that he wants his followers to practise. "The only mark of a religious is total surrender of one's will and obedience as if one does not have one's own eyes and ears. One who practises it is a true religious. This is not a difficult task. Still we must admit that we have not yet practised it to perfection, and make a strenuous effort in this regard."¹ Whom should they obey? Chavara's unequivocal answer is that they should obey the ecclesiastical and religious superiors, as well as one another. Those days the former included the vicar apostolic who was on the one hand the representative of the Supreme Pontiff and on the other provincial superior. The religious were to obey also the missionary appointed as the vicar apostolic's delegate and known as the provincial delegate. They owed obedience to other missionaries as well, because they were sent by the Holy See and as such were called missionaries apostolic. The subordinate superiors like the common prior and his vicars also were to be obeyed, and finally the members were to practise obedience to one another. In today's context, it would mean that the religious should obey:

- i) the hierarchy (including the local ordinary and the parish priest), and the major superiors in the congregation,
- ii) the local superiors, and

¹CWC IV (1990): 70; CSK IV (1986): 99-100.

iii) one another.

Chavara, then, concludes: "He who practises obedience in all these three levels will enjoy heavenly peace already while in the monastery which is a miniature heaven. This is certain!"¹

In this presentation, Chavara is obviously advocating *total surrender of one's will and obedience as if one does not have one's own eyes and ears*. The present-day readers may not find it quite palatable, for in practice it is a plea for what we traditionally called *blind obedience* that is no more appreciated but considered outdated.

16.2. Responsible and Creative versus Blind Obedience

In contemporary theology the vow of obedience is not to be understood as a slavish and blind submission to the superior. It is rather an effective means of discovering and executing the will of God. Both the superior and the subject have the common intention of discovering and doing the will of God. It is true that the right of making the final decision rests with the superior, and that the subjects should obey him/her in all matters that are within their ability and not sinful. It is also true that the religious community is not a democracy in which the superior is bound by the majority opinion. All the same it is insisted that it should function in a democratic manner. First of all, the superior should be very careful not to ignore the majority opinion because it is very likely that a position on which the community is united is God's will because it is hard to think that God lets the entire community go wrong although a few individuals may make mistakes. It is good to keep in mind the Lord's promise that He would be with His disciples when two or

¹CWC IV (1990): 71; CSK IV (1986): 100.

more of them are united in His name (Mt 18:20). He may speak not only through the superior but also through the members and the community as a whole. Therefore, he/she must respect their opinions and suggestions as well. Moreover, the superior should promote responsible and creative obedience among them by involving them as well in the process of decision making. This he must do by letting them freely express their opinions and feelings and taking the same into account while coming to the final decision. Thus, it should be a joint or collective effort by the superior and the members to discover and execute the will of God which is the only thing needed. Thus, the religious community becomes the kingdom of God on earth where God's will is perfectly done, and acts as a sign for all others to look at and be inspired.

In relation to the prevalent practice of responsible and creative obedience, is there any room for Chavara's *total surrender of one's will and obedience as if one does not have one's own eyes and ears*, which certainly sounds like blind obedience? The present author's conviction is that Chavara would even today stick to his position and insist that his followers should practise it even in the changed times. Moreover, his statement on obedience, as it appears in his testament, should be accepted and treated as foundational for his community, and its members should not for any reason think of dropping or reformulating it. Retaining it in the original form and sense they may interpret it in the changed contexts, incorporating newer theological insights. For example, the idea of responsible and creative obedience is more about how the superior should approach and handle the issue of obedience from the subjects: he/she must make the act of obedience for them meaningful and a

matter of delight and satisfaction. However, the age-old principle still stands that while making the profession of obedience the religious is solemnly promising to God that in all matters concerning oneself except sin, he/she leaves to the superior the right of making the final decision. Here it is the prerogative of the superior to make the final decision which the subject is bound to accept provided it is within his/her power and is not a matter of sin. The idea of responsible and creative obedience does not overrule the superior's right of making final decision and the subject's obligation to accept it. But the superior is advised to promote responsible and creative obedience, and that he/she must do by making the subject involved in the process of making the final decision. In other words, the superior before giving the order should discuss the matter with the subject, and respect his/her opinions and feelings so that the final decision turns out to be a joint one of both the parties. It helps the subject to own the decision and to be aware of why he/she is asked to do the matter. Thus, he/she feels responsible for the decision and is able to execute it creatively applying personal insights and innovative ideas.

16.3. Blind but Reasonable Obedience

To the question whether the practice of blind obedience is any more relevant, the answer then would be 'yes' and 'no'. Ideally the superior, by way of discussion and sharing with the subject, should make him/her involved in the process of decision making, in which case there is no room for blind obedience. But there may be instances in which such a procedure is not possible because either the matter is so urgent that the decision cannot be delayed, or it is such that it cannot be divulged. On such occasions the subject should understand the superior and certainly cooperate without

insisting on explanations. Or, the superior may be such a character that he/she is not in the habit of consulting, discussing or sharing things with others! Human situations being what they are, it is not surprising that once in a while one gets a superior of this kind! Then the prudent thing for one is to tolerate the superior's style of behaviour rather than declare war with him/her. In all these and such other cases one's obedience is blind in the sense that one is in the dark regarding why one is asked to do the matter and so on. Still it is not a blind act because what one is asked to do is within one's power and is not anything sinful and, therefore, as far as one is concerned it is God's will, which is enough reason for one to obey! It is, thus, indeed a reasonable act and not a blind one! Hence, there is no instance in which one can excuse oneself from making a *total surrender of one's will and [practising] obedience as if one does not have one's own eyes and ears.*

Chavara, even as he is uncompromising about the practice of obedience, expects the superiors to be humble and democratic in the manner of functioning while making decisions related to the community and individual members. Far from being authoritarian and unilateral, they must involve the subjects in the process of decision making and, thus, promote among them responsible and creative obedience. Chavara has clearly spelt out a code of conduct for the superiors:

1. A good superior should consider himself as a servant of all others in the community. He must have as his model Jesus Christ who having washed His disciples' feet said: "So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:14).

The monastery and the community are not for the sake of the superior, but he is for their sake. Therefore, he must love them as his own children. As a loving mother is, so he must be more concerned about meeting their spiritual and bodily needs than his own. He should not let any of his religious to be sad even for a moment. God is not pleased with a service rendered in sadness. During the allotted times all must together recreate with religious moderation.

2. The superior is appointed by God to observe the rules as well as to enforce them among the members. He should not relax them. Many great religious congregations have perished because of the superiors' carelessness in this regard. On the contrary, the continuance of a congregation in its spiritual vigour and vitality will invariably depend on its superiors' care and vigilance.

3. The superior should not wait for the members to approach him with their needs. Instead, he should anticipate their needs and meet them. If so, they will be ever so happy and seek permission only for genuine needs.

4. While giving an order to the subjects, the superior must do it as if he is lovingly making a request of them. However, in case they refuse to respect such sweet and gentle words, he should not hesitate sternly to exercise his authority.

5. As the rules demand, the superior should be an example for others in all matters. His task is not a pleasant one, indeed. However, when he does it in a

spirit of charity in accordance with God's will, He will render it a matter of delight.¹

These are indeed the rules the Saint himself as a concerned superior faithfully observed so that his subjects considered it a privilege to live under him. As a matter of fact, there is hardly any instance of people complaining about his way of functioning as a superior.

16.4. Obedience to Hierarchy

Chavara's view of obedience is so comprehensive that the religious should obey practically everybody: the ecclesiastical superiors, the religious superiors both major and local, and one another which would include even those outside the religious community.

Obedience to the ecclesiastical superiors means that the religious are not outside or above the Church. They are very much part of the Church and subject to the hierarchy through whom her divine authority is exercised. There may be differences of opinions between the religious and the hierarchy, and the members of the hierarchy may have human frailties, make mistakes and adopt unacceptable policies. But that is no reason for the religious not to obey and cooperate with them. As prophets in the New Testament, the religious through sharing of ideas, positive suggestions and creative criticism, and in a spirit of faith in God's providence should tolerate and assist them. This was Chavara's and other founders' way of dealing with the hierarchy. In all matters, they would consult the authorities, make their positions clear, share their feelings, and clearly

¹Chavara gave these instructions in a letter he wrote to Fr Kuriakose Porukara who was the then vicar of Mannanam Monastery, and are reproduced in Valerian 1939: 373-374.

express their opinions, but always accept the superiors' decisions; they would then keep their cool, leaving the rest of the matter to God's providence. We have already mentioned many such instances. We may presently recall some of them once again.

As Frs Palackal and Porukara approached the bishop for permission "to live somewhere in solitude," he suggested that instead of totally withdrawing from the society "you may establish a monastery so that all may benefit from it." Although the idea was acceptable, they expressed their helplessness that they did not have the means for it. However, they readily obeyed the bishop's instruction to go to the people and seek their contributions, and proceeded.¹ When they had to make a choice between the two sites—Pullarikunnu and Mannanam—for the monastery they sought the bishop's advice.² Once the government permission for building the monastery on mount Mannanam was obtained, the bishop directed the Fathers immediately to erect there a wooden cross in the presence of the public in order to avoid any further dispute. They obeyed without delay.³ While the construction work was going on, the Fathers desired to put up a temporary tent on the site in which they could say Mass and stay and, thus, save themselves the trouble of daily going up and down the mountain. But the bishop refused permission saying that it would not be proper to say Mass in a make-shift tent, and

¹Kaniyanthara: 6-7.

²CWC I (1990): 13; CSK I (1981): 17.

³CWC I (1990): 19; CSK I (1981): 23.

asked them immediately to construct a well-built chapel. They did so.¹

When Chavara was transferred as vicar in Pallipuram in such a way that there would be hardly anybody left in Mannanam to supervise the construction work, he met the bishop and explaining the matter requested him to reconsider the transfer order, which the prelate refused to do. Chavara then willingly obeyed and took charge in Pallipuram.² Similarly, when Porukara was transferred to Kollam side, they discussed and concluded: "The bishop may be testing our obedience! For us, however, his order is undoubtedly God's will which we must obey without any complaint." Porukara then in tears went to Kollam, and with wholehearted commitment did the ministry there.³ Again Chavara was denied permission to be absent from Pallipuram for more than one week, which meant that he had to be altogether away from the construction site in Mannanam. Consulting Fr Palackal he went and pleaded with the archbishop to relieve him from the vicar's post in Pallipuram. Only after severely scolding and shouting at the young priest the archbishop granted the request. For Chavara it was indeed a humiliating and embarrassing experience which, however, he gracefully bore in a spirit of obedience.⁴ During the long period of about 25 years between 1831 and 1855, the Fathers made repeated requests to the prelates one after another for the congregation's canonical approval, which, however, was indefinitely delayed for no apparent reason. But they never reacted or

¹CWC I (1990): 17-18; CSK I (1981): 21-22.

²CWC I (1990): 24; CSK I (1981): 28-29.

³CWC I (1990): 24-25; CSK I (1981): 29.

⁴CWC I (1990): 25-27; CSK I (1981): 29-32.

refused to obey. While cooperating in all matters with the hierarchy, they patiently waited for almost 25 years fully trusting in God's providence.

When finally in 1855, being canonically approved they were permitted to make the religious profession, the archbishop handed over to them the Rule of the Order of Carmelites Discalced (OCD) which they found too strict, unsuited to the local conditions, and not in tune with the Syrian traditions and the spirit and charism the founders originally had in mind. Chavara duly shared with the archbishop the community's serious reservations about the Rule. But the prelate would not mitigate it in any way. Chavara persuaded himself and others to respect his stand.¹ However, nearer the time 11 out of 22 members, fearing that the Rule was too strict, withdrew from making the profession. It was certainly heartbreaking for Chavara. Expecting some consolation he again approached the archbishop whose cold response was: "Do not worry about the dropouts. Only those of good will and determination need to be admitted!" Chavara accepted these unkind words as God's will! A man of faith!²

Still more painful and questionable was the uncalled for affiliation of the congregation as Third Order of Carmelites Discalced (TOCD) by which it very miserably lost its autonomy and identity. But Chavara kept silence and seems to have prevailed upon the community not to react. He must have thought that in the given circumstances refusal to

¹For details and sources of information see Kochumuttom 2014: 128-130.

²For details and sources of information see Kochumuttom 2014: 131-132.

accept the affiliation would not be wise as it comes from the Carmelites including the archbishop who can even derecognize the congregation. He, therefore, leaving the matter to God's providence remained obedient. As far as the written documents go, he has not made any comment, positive or negative, about the affiliation. 'That the congregation turned out to be included in the Carmelite family of spirituality is certainly God's providence, not man's plan and, therefore, to be wholeheartedly accepted,' Chavara clearly states in his testament. But he is altogether silent about its being made a Third Order of the same. The members also, although they probably resented the affiliation, seem to have been largely happy about their inclusion in the Carmelite tradition because ever since the congregation's inception in 1831 they were closely and positively associated with it, and by the time the first community made the profession in 1855 they were quite used to it as well.¹

16.5. Independent Thinking

The Fathers, thus, were obedient servants of the Church. But it is already pretty clear that in all matters they had independent thinking and stand, which they would appropriately and in a spirit of charity make known to the right persons and at the right time. It was evident with regard to the policy matters and administrative set-up in the Church. Regarding the people's cry for Syrian bishops of their own, the Fathers would always caution them not to be

¹*Ibid.* 159-165. In this work, however, the testament's mention of the inclusion of the new congregation in the Carmelite family is interpreted by mistake as referring to its affiliation as a Third Order of the Carmelites.

carried away by passions and emotions, but to be reasonable. They should avoid excessive dependence on the Chaldeans. Fr Palackal's wise advice to his disciples was: "Do not use opium, do not consume toddy, and do not bring Syrian bishops!"¹ According to him, Paremakal's *Varttamāna-Pustakam* is too emotionally charged a work that its indiscriminate and unguided reading can destructively arouse your passions and make you blind regarding the right course of action. "It is, therefore, not to be read but burned!"² he said.

True to the teaching of his *malpān*, Chavara wrote that the obsession for Syrian bishops had led his people in Kerala to break away from the communion of the Holy Church and endangered their salvation.³ Their liking for these bishops is understandable because they share with them the same Ritual practices and liturgical language while they do not experience such an affinity with the European missionaries. But they fail to see that the Syrians are weak in faith, greedy for money, and practice simony.⁴ European missionaries on the contrary have the power of endurance, generosity, devotion, readiness to work for the glory of God and other virtues. But, of course, they are handicapped in matters of language and Ritual practices which alienate them from the people and stands in the way of unity. The sad thing is that

¹This is the testimony of one of Palackal's disciples and a close relative Fr Geevarghese Konnankara as recorded in Parapuram: 704f.

²CWC I (1990): 149; CSK I (1981): 176.

³CWC I (1990): 146; CSK I (1981): 173.

⁴CWC IV (1990): 57; CSK IV (1986): 85.

most of them never care to learn the local language and to do the liturgical ministry in the Syrian Rite!¹

According to Chavara, the only remedy was that the European missionaries should learn the local language or at least the Syriac language and adopt the Syro-Malabar Rite for the liturgical services. They would, then, have a combination of learning, spirituality as well as familiarity with the local or/and Syriac language and Syrian Rite. The next bishops and their vicars in the parishes should be from such missionaries. This would also facilitate the reunion of the Jacobites who often complain that the Syrian Catholics do not have bishops of their own Rite.²

The prior later on thought out a still more lasting solution that he hoped would not only prevent future dissensions but also hasten the reunion of Jacobites. In a letter to Barnabo, Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, he warns that the “calm” that followed the Roccas episode might not last for long as any little provocation would again prompt his people to resort to Babel to get a bishop of their own Rite. To avoid it he suggested that there be two bishops here: one for the Latin community and another for the Syrian one. Then the Syrians’ longing to have a bishop of their own will cease, and gradually their relationship with Babylon, too, will end. This would encourage the Jacobites to renounce the schism and return to the unity of the Catholic fold.³ It is believed that this letter influenced the Sacred Congregation later on to appoint native bishops for the Syrians.

¹CWC IV (1990): 58; CSK IV (1986): 86.

²For these thoughts of Chavara, see CWC IV (1990): 57-59 and CSK IV (1986): 85-87.

³CWC IV (1990): 14; CSK IV (1986): 35.

16.6. Heaven on Earth

It is obvious that the religious should obey their major and local superiors. But Chavara goes a step further and directs them to obey one another as well. What he means should be that God's will, no matter who makes it known, should be accepted and put into practice. It may be a fellow-religious or someone else who brings you God's message; accept and pursue it wholeheartedly. To do so may not be within the legal range of the vow of obedience, but is required by the spirit of it which should be the aim of every sincere religious.

The last part of Chavara's statement on obedience too is significant: *He who practises obedience in all these three levels will enjoy heavenly peace already while in the monastery which is a miniature heaven. This is certain!*" This is logically as well as theologically a sound observation. It goes without saying that heaven is where God's will is perfectly done by everybody alike. That is the same as the kingdom of God, that is, the state of affairs in which God is the king. When and where God is the king, His will is and should be done by all the subjects. In other words, God's kingdom and His will are synonymous: Where one is, there the other too necessarily is. That is said to be the reason why in the Lord's Prayer, the two clauses, "Your kingdom come" and "Your will be done," are put in apposition, one explaining the other. The prayer then would mean: 'God our Father, grant us the grace that by doing Your will we may bring about Your kingdom!' Therefore, Chavara is quite right in stating that a community where the members through perfect obedience do God's will without fail is indeed heaven, the kingdom of God, where genuine peace prevails!

16.7. Practical Instructions

In August 1869, Chavara wrote a long circular jointly with the Provincial Delegate Fr Leopold. Its content is a series of corrections of the short-comings the authors observed among the members those days. Going through the text one can easily infer the ideals set before them and the kind of discipline expected of them. In particular, it gives more practical instructions about obedience, which may be summarized as follows:

In a spirit of humility the religious should be prompt to obey the superior, giving up their own will and stubbornness. The tendency to seek membership in monasteries where the superiors and brethren are to one's liking is not desirable. If we seek the will of God, we can find happiness everywhere.

The members should see Jesus Christ in their superior and accept the latter's words as His. While obeying one should resist the temptation to weigh the superior's intelligence, wisdom and virtues as well as to evaluate his deeds and behaviour. It is not proper that one obeys only those orders that are acceptable and to reject others giving a hundred reasons or to obey them grumbling. It is not as well healthy to obey only those superiors whom one likes and not others.

One should obey not only the formal orders but also the superior's wishes, and that too promptly so that he should not need to keep reminding you of the matter. The superiors also should take care to give orders only in accordance with the will of God and not in consideration of the liking of the members.¹

¹CWC IV (1990): 63; CSK IV (1986): 91-92.

16.8. Gracefully Aging in Obedience

Chavara's spirit of obedience was still more conspicuous and graceful in his advanced age. In his old age, the way he accepted the archbishop's order of transfer from Mannanam to Koonammavu is an example. Ever since his ordination in 1829 he was in Manannam for 35 years, deeply involved in and personally contributing to all the wonderful developments that took place there in the meantime. He had indeed become part of the landscape there. Remaining there in his good old age, he could relish recalling with a sense of satisfaction the many past experiences of agonies and ecstasies. It would be quite understandable if he, therefore, wished to spend the rest of his life, and finally be buried in that sacred soil! But no such natural aspirations would occur to the *karma-yogi* in Chavara. His ideal was selfless service (*niṣkāma-karma*) of God and people, which in the words of his *Guru* Jesus Christ means: "So, you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Lk 17:10). This is testified by the most edifying manner in which Chavara accepted the transfer to Koonammvu. We have it recorded by his successor in Mannanam Fr Kuriakose Porukara:

Mannanam is the place where Fr prior lived from his younger age. There he worked hard to put up the monastery and, then, as the superior took good care of the community for all these years. In the meantime, he also accomplished many good things there for the people. However, in 1864 most willingly obeying the order of the local ordinary he left Mannanam and went to stay in Koonammavu.¹

¹SP: 29.

The prelate must have been well-intentioned in ordering this transfer. He probably thought it would be helpful if Chavara who was not only the common prior of the new congregation but also his vicar general (for the Syrians) stayed closer to the archbishop's house in Varapuzha. For the prior, however, it could not have been a pleasant experience except in the light of faith!

In late December 1869 or early 1870, Chavara developed eye complaint and other complications. Physicians like Varkey and Eapen Muttathupadath tried their best to heal him, but they could not. The Fathers in Mannanam then suggested that he be shifted to Mannanam in view of cooler weather and Physician Eapen's better accessibility. Vicar General Fr Philip and acting Provincial Delegate Fr Gerard in Koonammavu also consented.¹ The prior got ready to go to Mannanam and, God willing, to die there at the feet of his dearest patron St Joseph.² Then one of those days while visiting the Sisters in the convent he disclosed the plan to go to Mannanam. Sad at the thought of missing him they requested him not to go. His characteristic answer was:

Have I my own will? I desire neither to go there, nor to stay here. I am ready to do as I am told. I don't wish to do my will. I am ready to do whatever I am commanded to do.³

As the prior returned to the monastery Fr Gerard inquired how he felt about going to Mannanam. His response again was:

¹Louis (or Aloysius) 1823: 5-6.

²He has expressed this desire in a letter he wrote to Fr Kuriakose Porukara. See fn 8 in Mundadan 2008: 384; *Positio*: 345.

³NKM: 11; CKC: 203-204.

Father, is my will different from yours? I am prepared to do whatever you wish me to do. I've no will of mine own to go there or not!¹

However, a little later, may be on second thoughts, he said to the Fathers that 'as he had come to Koonammavu at the command of the archbishop, it would not be proper that he returns to Mannanam when His Grace and the Provincial Delegate Fr Leopold were away in Rome, and that his conscience does not permit him to do so.'² Dr Guenther from Ernakulam had already warned them that Fr Prior's death would be at any unexpected moment. Further, they felt that at Mannanam the atmosphere would not be as healthy as that at Koonammavu, and that the European doctors or even good native physicians might not be readily available. Anyway, in the end, the Fathers gave up the plan to take him to Mannanam, and the Saint gladly accepted their decision.³

On 2 January 1871, as desired by the prior, they were getting ready to administer him the anointing of the sick. The Fathers asked him: "Whom do you like to administer the last sacraments?" There are different versions of his response.⁴ Basically he was open as to who administers them and in which Rite. If at all his personal choice seems to have been between his spiritual director and vicar provincial Fr Leopold⁵ and the vicar of Koonammavu Monastery Fr Joseph

¹NKM: 12; CKC: 204.

²Louis (Aloysius) 1823: 6.

³Mundadan 2008: 384; NKM: 12; *Positio*: 459.

⁴For details see Mundadan 2008: 391-392.

⁵Referring to the chronicle of St Philonina's Monastery, Koonammavu, *Positio*: 459 (see Mundadan 2008: 391); also NKM: 18; CKC: 209.

John of the Cross. The latter had the advantage of the knowledge of Syriac.¹ Finally, the prior said:

As you all will. If it is in my own [liturgical] language [i.e., Syriac], then I too can join in giving responses to the prayers. But I shall be quite satisfied with whatever you decide.²

How amazing indeed was his spirit of resignation even in such innocent and Ritual matters! Fr Leopold was so overcome with sorrow that he could not even stand on his legs.³ Therefore, Fr Gerard started giving the sacraments while Fr Joseph John conducted their main part in Syriac.⁴

Nearer the end of his life, saying to Fr Gerard that he then had much peace and joy, a little scrupulously he added, "Father, I did not go to Mass last Sunday." Fr Gerard consoled him saying that it was not by his own will but in obedience to the superior's command that he had not gone to Mass, and that as such it should not worry him. That instantly settled his doubt, and he responded, "Yes, it is true. It is in obedience that I did not go to Mass. That is enough for me." Since then he was ever calm and serene. Noting down this incident, the chronicler of the convent shares her reflections:

Ah! My dear Sisters, we have just now heard how our Father Prior was perfectly obedient during his lifetime, and that its thought brought him great peace and joy at the time of his death. If we desire to

¹Moolayil in *Positio*: 548 (see Mundadan 2008: 391).

²NKM: 18; CKC: 209.

³ Referring to the chronicle of St Philonina's Monastery, Koonammavu, *Positio*: 459 (see Mundadan 2008: 391).

⁴NKM: 18 along with Mundadan 2008: 392; CKC: 209.

experience such peace and joy at the time of our death,
let us now try to be persons of blind obedience.¹

¹For this quotation and the whole incident see NKM: 20; CKC: 210.

Chapter 17

LIFE OF PRAYER AND AUSTERITY¹

17.1. An All-Embracing Factor

By prayer we must mean not merely the formal acts of vocal or mental prayer. It is rather the life in relation with God in general including the practices of austerity, the supernatural motives in all our undertakings, our attitudes to the people and things around us, the faith-vision we maintain in our responses to all that happens to and around us, and the supernatural perspective in which we see and assess the events and experiences. Prayer or prayer life, therefore, is an all-embracing factor in one's life. Again, while treating prayer one has to make a distinction between communitarian and personal prayer on the one hand, and prayerfulness on the other. St Chavara and the other founding fathers of the CMI Congregation practised prayer in all these levels and in its most comprehensive sense.

17.2. A Praying Community

Let us, first of all, consider their prayer in community. Their active life did not hinder the spiritual exercises or stifle the spirit of prayer. Their daily timetable as presented by Chavara clearly shows that prayer was given the first place in their life. It briefly was as follows: Rising up at 5.00 am all say the Morning Prayer. The priests then say the canonical prayer. Then along with the religious candidates and seminarians they gather in the church and say the joyful

¹This and the next two chapters were originally my "Mystic and Mystical Theologian Chavara" in *Herald of the East*, Vol. 11, 2, Bengaluru: 2015, 211-236.

mysteries of rosary, the prayers in honour of the five sacred wounds of Our Lord, and the dolours of Our Lady, and the prayer to St Joseph for help for celibate life and happy death. Then, the priests go for offering Mass. Thereafter, they all together recite the Litany of All Saints. Then all engage in the study of spiritual books. At noon the priests gather to say the sorrowful mysteries of rosary, the prayer in honour of the sacred wounds of Our Lord, the devotion to the sorrows and joys of St Joseph, act of love, the prayer expressing desire for suffering, and the prayer for help to do good works. Then, they take lunch, the religious and seminarians in separate refectories. At the sunset the bell goes for *Angelus*. Then, all gather and the assigned person announces the saint whose feast is held the next day. He then says: "God, create in me a pure heart! Renew an upright spirit in me!" To it the community responds: "Reject me not from your presence! Do not take away from me your Holy Spirit." Thereafter, a passage from the book *Jñānamuttu-māla* is read out, and all meditate on it. Following it the candles on the altar are lit, and all together say the Litany of Our Lady, *sdr-ālāha*, the glorious mysteries of rosary, the prayer in honour of the sacred wounds of Our Lord, the scapular-devotion, and the praise of St Joseph. Then, the students and their masters go to their own places and spend time till 10.00 pm in prayer, meditation and study. During the Lent, however, after supper they would keep awake till midnight doing various devotions.¹

17.3. Palackal: An Ascetic Theologian

They prayed not only in community but also personally. They were first and foremost men of prayer. In the short,

¹Bernard 1989: 39-40.

biography of his *malpān* Thomas Palackal, Chavara has portrayed him as a man of rigorous asceticism, discipline, hard work, love of knowledge, concern for the common good, pastoral-mindedness and prayerfulness, and all these in spite of poor health. He was a strong-willed ascetic and deeply interested and committed to the good of the Church.

The *malpān*, when we were staying with him and, it seemed, even from the time he said the First Mass, used to eat a full meal of rice only at noon. For supper he would take a little *kaññi* [rice gruel], but nothing for breakfast. This was his practice for long; for how many years, we could not ascertain. Later on he had a severe attack of fever. Then *Vaidyan* Ittoop Puthanangadiyil gave him a strict order to take *kaññi* for breakfast. Even while he was secretary to the vicar apostolic at Varapuzha, or perhaps even earlier, he was not eating anything in the morning, and he was continuing the same habit when we joined the seminary.

Moreover, while in Pallipuram he was getting meals from his family. They were in financial difficulties then, as mentioned above. A few days before the *malpān* said the First Mass, his mother had passed away. He had one elder brother and two sisters. The husband of the elder one of these ladies was ill-natured and improvident, and, therefore, she had come back home. It was she who prepared and sent the food for the *malpān*. His brother also was not very capable. Hence, all these people were depending, although not fully, on the *malpān* from the day of his First Mass. Either because of this hardship at home, or because he wanted it to be so, he had only one full

meal a day – rice and a curry at noon, and that too the same every day. That is, ever since we began our studies under him, it is rice and a dry curry of boiled peas seasoned with chilli powder, and buttermilk. Though rarely there was a change, these continued to be brought almost every day for a long time. Then the peas were replaced by small prawns, which also was prepared in the same manner. This too went on for long. Then came the *vaidyan's* order. Even after that the *malpān* continued to eat only what his sister would prepare at home and send to him.¹

In spite of such frugal food and poor health the *malpān* was ever so hard working and followed a strict discipline. He drew up a strict code of conduct and time table for the students, which he, too, meticulously kept. He regularly sat with them in the study-hall reading and writing for hours on end. At night, although the students would go to sleep by eleven o'clock, he would continue staying up for reading. He joined the students also for all the community prayers. For example, he was there with them for canonical prayers at regular hours in the evening, night and morning. He would not combine them as many others used to do for the sake of convenience. In the morning, except on Christmas Day, he would start quite early before dawn with the recitation of the fixed set of 8 or 9 psalms, and end with the Morning Prayer before Holy Mass. During

¹CWC I (1990): 59; CSK I (1981): 65-66.

Lent the number of psalms on weekdays would be about 60, and on Sundays about 90!¹

17.4. Porukara: A Man of Prayerful Action

His biographer Kuriakose Eliseus Porukara says about *Malpān* Thomas Porukara:

It is practically impossible to describe the life and achievements of Fr [Thomas] Porukara. His blessed soul was aflame with God's love which flowed to the neighbours, and made him practise heroic virtues. For the glory of God and benefit of people he [co-]started the monastery, and for running it he went through enormous troubles and sufferings, made a number of difficult journeys and offered prayers. From the day of his First Mass he led an austere life. For example, early in the morning he would go to the church to attend Mass, say the prayers and then offer Mass. It will be noon when he takes breakfast! On Sundays and feast days after the Mass, sermon and prayers it will be 1 or 2 o'clock in the afternoon when he takes food. On the day of the laying of the foundation stone of the monastery after the long function he accompanied the bishop to Athirampuzha and there all were surprised to see him saying Mass and then standing on his knees in prayer! Whether he attends a solemn High Mass or says the 15 mysteries of rosary, he would be standing on his knees from the beginning to the end. In the nights, even after all have gone to sleep, he would be in prayer with his elbows on the table for a long time.

¹This is a summary of CWC I (1990): 57-58; CSK I (1981): 64-65, reproduced from Kochumuttom 2014: 45.

Going to sleep very late in the night was his regular practice!¹

17.5. Chavara: Heir of Prayer Culture

Chavara was the proud heir of a prayer culture, a culture in which prayer was considered a supreme value. In it prayer was an archetype, which he shared from the very birth and even from the conception, so to say. "His parents, who were of excellent virtues,"² especially his mother, who sowed in his tender mind the seed of the spirit of prayer, were the primary and the most powerful agents of this culture. Chavara's own testimony is as follows, in the form of a prayer to God:

You gave me a mother to bring me up without any mishap in life. As she brought me up suckling me with the love you gave her, she guided me to say my little prayers as well. And as I grew up she taught me more and more assuredly and made me learn all my prayers. Sitting at her feet I slowly began to know God. Even when she woke up to pray at midnight and prayed on her knees, I too was beside her on my knees and learned from her lips the name of Jesus and the prayers to the Mother of God.³

By word and deed his mother initiated him to prayer, introduced him to the mysteries of Christian faith, and to the devotions to the Holy Family, the Holy Eucharist and Bl. Virgin Mary; and she brought him up as a disciplined child. As he himself says, under such a motherly care he grew up

¹SP: 23.

²SP: 24.

³*Am* 1: 45-60 in CWC II (1989): 2-3 and CSK II (1981): 2-3.

as a child pleasing to God.¹ The event of his dedication during the childhood to the Mother of God by his own mother, the latter's practice of daily prayer even at midnight on her knees, her motherly corrections not with stick or hand but by eloquent looks, and the parents' devotion to the Holy Family, have left in his mind lasting and deep impressions which gradually became the unconscious force in his life, inspiring him to a life of incessant prayer. Those impressions, containing all the ingredients of Christian prayer, in fact, became the foundation stone of his prayer life, as a look at his later life would substantiate.

The seed of the spirit of prayer that had fallen in the good soil of Chavara's heart, duly sprouted, and was nurtured first by the priest in the presbytery where he was sent by the parents to stay for some time just before he entered the seminary at the age of about thirteen. He recalls: "The priest there brought me up, and taught me to participate in and assist at Mass, and practise virtues and avoid whatever is evil."² Another great and decisive influence on his prayer life was exerted by the ascetic theologian Fr Thomas Palackal, who was his *malpān* (rector) in the seminary, the spiritual director, and the main source of inspiration in the task of the founding of the two religious congregations. Chavara was the *malpān's* favourite disciple, who had in turn great appreciation for the latter as well. About twelve years of life under the personal guidance of Fr Palackal, a person of strict asceticism and discipline, deep spirituality and learning, gave a solid theological frame and intellectual content to Chavara's prayer life. It is remarkable that "in those

¹*Ām* 1: 85-86 in CWC II (1989): 3 and CSK (1981): 3.

²*Ām* 1: 136-140 in CWC II (1989): 5 and CSK (1981): 5.

days as a special matter he [Chavara] chose the rector himself as the confessor."¹ Even after the ordination he continued to be under the guidance of and in close association with Fr Palackal.

17.6. A Prayerful Seminarian

Chavara's confessor and spiritual director Fr Leopold writes about his seminary life:

As his fellow seminarians, who are still alive, attest, the young Kuriakose was deeply interested in his studies, in observing the rules (of the seminary), and in cultivating the fear of God, motivated solely by the desire of pleasing God. He never harboured any petty jealousy or bad blood against his companions, as was usual among the young, but always kind and charitable towards them.²

Kuriakose Porukara again writes:

His [Chavara's] life in the seminary is admitted to have been very exemplary by all his fellow seminarians. His devotions, obedience, and charity were outstandingly impressive. The seminary was a new one, and the discipline enforced was particularly strict. Yet throughout the rather long period of training, there was no instance of his having been reproved for even the slightest offence.³

17.7. Blend of Prayer and Apostolate

Immediately after the ordination under the guidance of his *guru* Palackal, the young priest Chavara settled in

¹Valerian 1939: 28.

²Beccaro 2003: 5.

³SP: 24.

Mannanam sharing the monastic inspiration and supervising the construction work. There too he had before him an impressive model of the harmonious blending of prayer and active ministry in the person of Fr Porukara. Chavara's life in his company for about fifteen years not only consolidated his prayerfulness but also taught him the rare art of combining deep prayerfulness and apostolic ministry. Fr Leopold has made remarkable observations about Chavara's prayer life in the midst of his hectic active life while at Mananam and thereafter:

In April 1833 he [Chavara] was relieved from the office of the vicar of Pallipuram. Then onwards he was able to stay at Mannanam and devote himself more completely to the construction of the monastery. There he led a well-ordered and devout religious life, striving for his own spiritual progress through prayer and meditation without discarding his pastoral obligation outside.¹

The admirable dignity, devotion, and recollection with which he celebrated the Divine Liturgy, made a great impression upon those who participated in it. Besides the usual visits to the Blessed Sacrament enjoined by the Rule, he used to spend long hours on his knees, immersed in prayer before the tabernacle.²

In order to find Chavara people had to look in the chapel or some such other places of prayer. "Fr Chavara looked like an angel," says Fr Jacob Palakunnel, a senior priest who relates the following incident:

¹Beccaro 2003: 8

²Beccaro 2003: 13.

It was the day before the titular feast in a parish. Fr Prior too was present. But even until late in the night the preacher did not turn up. So, they decided to request Fr Prior to preach the homily and looked for him, but he was missing! Someone who knew him personally said: "Look for him either in front of the Blessed Sacrament in the church or in the cemetery."

Indeed, they found him praying in the cemetery.¹

In all his needs Chavara invariably would take recourse to prayer, even as he would certainly be doing all that was within his power. We have already mentioned how once in Mannanam Monastery there was no means even to pay the daily wages. Fr Prior in great distress went to pray in the church. Suddenly, a certain Itty Nellipuzha from the parish of Cherpunkal arrived, and said that he had brought with him 500 *cakrams* (about Rs 18, which was a big amount those days). He added that if someone would go with him he would send 500 *cakrams* more. On hearing it Chavara naturally heaved a sigh of relief and thanked God.² Another time Chavara and Leopold were struggling with some knotty problem. They requested the Sisters to pray for it saying in honour of Mother Mary three times each *Salve Regina* and *Memorare*, and they did so. The result: 'The mountain-like problem turned out to be as light as a flower!' says Chavara.³ His experience always was: "Having cast the net in the name of Our Lady, I never had to draw it empty!"⁴ About his filial love and trust in Mother Mary Fr Leopold testifies:

¹Valrian 1939: 242

²CWC I: 39; CSK I: 45.

³CWC III (1990): 24; CSK III (1981): 47.

⁴CWC IV (1990): 55; CSK IV (1986): 83.

His devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary was characterized by a genuine filial love. He spoke eloquently of her glories to others and tried to inculcate in them the true devotion to her. Very often, when the thought of death came to his mind, he would recall the kindness and mercy of the Blessed Virgin, whom he used to call "Mother," to overcome the fears and temptations associated with that fateful moment.¹

17.8. Setting Up of the Game

[In her book *Way of Perfection*] while answering the question, "How to pray," Teresa [of Avila] does not straight away start speaking about prayer as such. Instead, she devotes half the book for what she calls "the setting up of the game." Prayer is to be seen as an integral part of life so that its quality will depend on that of one's life, and vice versa. One's life is the background and context of one's prayer. To be able to pray properly one should organize one's life as a whole based on such values as would dispose one to pray. Of course, it works also the other way round: if you pray well you will find it easy and spontaneous to organize your life based on values. This is why Teresa as an introduction to her treatise on prayer deals extensively with "the setting up the game," namely, the values and virtues one should cultivate in life. She calls them the "foundation for prayer." "Now realize that anyone who doesn't know how to set the pieces for the game of chess won't know how to play well. And if he doesn't

¹Beccaro 2003: 13-14.

know how to check his opponent's king, he won't know how to checkmate it either" (W 16.1).¹

In the process of 'the setting up of the game' of prayer there are three virtues that Teresa considers to be foundational: love of neighbour, detachment of heart from creatures, and humility. In the case of Chavara, it is obvious that he practised all the three of them and all other related virtues as well. For example we may mention a few of them. *First of all*, he was a man of *austerity and detachment* of heart. We have already seen how simple and austere his food was:

He would take only the common food, nothing special: For breakfast there would be rice gruel with one curry; for lunch, rice and two dishes; then a little rice gruel at 4.00 pm; and for supper, rice with two dishes. During Lent: for breakfast there would be a little rice gruel (of *ozhak* rice) with salt but no curry; for lunch, rice (of *nāzhuri-rice*) with three vegetable dishes, and for supper, rice gruel (of *ozhak* rice) with pickle. On Good Friday the only meal is lunch consisting of rice gruel with salt but no curry.²

His room was ever so ordinary with minimum furniture: a simple table, a plain chair, and a wooden box; a cot with very thin country mat and a single pillow; no bedsheet or provision for mosquito net; there was a clay mug with water, and a few books on the table, and nothing else!³

¹Kochumuttom 2011: 132-133.

²Louis (or Aloysius) 1936: 6-7.

³*Ibid.* 5.

The archbishop once came to visit his vicar general in his room in Koonammavu. Seeing there just one chair he was surprised, and making the prior sit on it, he sat on the box!¹

Secondly, Chavara's love for the neighbour was unparalleled. In his testament, he advises his followers: "How many in number may be the monasteries, the entire congregation should be like a single family of members born of the same mother, and grown up drinking her milk. This sincere love among you should never diminish but keep becoming ever stronger day by day. You must consider this to be the most important of my advices."² This is the kind of love that Chavara had not only for his confreres but for the entire humanity. He literally put into practice Jesus' words: "The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them." While he was the vicar of Pallipuram Parish, one day Chavara was getting ready to visit a parishioner, severely affected by small pox, when the people tried to dissuade him for fear of contagion. But he said to them: "It is my duty! God will take care of me,"³ and boldly he went to the sick man's house. He administered to him the last sacraments and with appropriate counsels prepared him for a peaceful death!

Chavara indeed practised charity in its really Christian form, namely, the forgiving love, love extended to all including enemies, *agape*. In his testament, he directs his community at Mannanam to render all possible help to Mathan Kalapurackal of Muttuchira parish and, thus, to become the best examples of Christian disciples. This man,

¹Testified by the eye-witness Fr Ambrose Thoppil who died in 1938.

²CWC IV (1990): 71; CSK IV (19861): 100.

³SP: 26.

once a steward of Mannanam Monastery, had unjustly appropriated a part of the Monastery's property for which the civil court punished him. Later he filed a case against Chavara in the criminal court in Alapuzha. The judge, a Hindu, having heard the prior, dismissed the case as fraud, and remarked, "This priest indeed is a man of God. Those who complain against so great a man must be grossly wicked and deserve God's anger." But Chavara sincerely forgave Mathan, and tried his best but in vain to have him reconciled with the Monastery. While alive he would go out of his way to help him in his financial needs! And now in the testament he is instructing the community to continue the help for his family!

Thirdly, many indeed are the instances illustrating Chavara's deep sense and practice of *humility*. He was appointed the vicar general for the Syrian community of the entire vicariate of Varapuzha. To make him accept the post the archbishop had to give him an order under obedience.¹ It was indeed the highest position a Syrian of that time could think of. Thereby Chavara became the first among the Syrians to be officially in the Church's administration, and in those troubled days of the Roccas episode he did his duties very well to the satisfaction of all including the Holy See. Pope Pius IX sent to him a personal letter of appreciation in this regard.² However, one may be surprised to note that Chavara never mentions or signs any of the documents with the title of vicar general. It is from other sources we come to know of his appointment to that post.

¹See Abp Bernardine Baccinelli's letter dated 15 June 1861 to the Propaganda Congregation.

²Beccaro 2003: 11.

Chavara clearly said to the intruder Bp Roccas that he would not kiss his ring because it was symbol of illegally gained authority. But he added that as an act of humility he was ready to kiss his hands and feet!¹ While Fr Palackal was strongly in favour of setting up a seminary attached to the monastery at Manannam, Fr Porukara with equal force opposed the idea. Of course, each had his own strong reasons. Chavara then in all simplicity and humility says: "Thus, they were divided in opinion. For stupid me, however, both the views were agreeable; inwardly as well as outwardly I happily agreed with Porukara as well as the *malpān*."² When the Roccas' supporters tried to win him over to their side by offering episcopacy his spontaneous reply was: "I would rather save my soul than be made a bishop!"³

His humility was proved beyond doubt in the practice of obedience as a sure means of discerning the will of God as well as the only mark of consecrated life. In the testament, he unambiguously states: "The only mark of a religious is obedience surrendering totally one's will and as if one does not have one's own eyes and ears. One who has it is a religious."⁴ Chavara and all the founding fathers practised this kind of obedience. Their avowed position was: "An order from the local ordinary is God's will, which, therefore, should unconditionally be obeyed."⁵ Being unexpectedly and in a distressing manner transferred from Mannanam to Pallipuram the young priest Chavara approached the

¹CWC I (1990): 175; CSK I (1981): 207-208.

²CWC I (1990): 28; CSK I (1981): 33.

³CWC I (1990): 161; CSK I (1981): 191.

⁴CWC IV (1990): 70; CSK IV (1986): 99.

⁵CWC IV (1990): 24-25; CSK IV (1986): 29.

archbishop and humbly explained the matter and begged to reconsider the order of transfer, but the archbishop refused to oblige. Without any further hesitation Chavara obeyed.¹ Similarly, being transferred to Kollam side Porukara unconditionally obeyed and went there in tears!² Again, Chavara was once severely reprimanded by the archbishop for no fault of his own. Still he did not protest; instead he accused himself of indiscriminate behaviour, and was grateful to the prelate for not punishing him with suspension! Indeed, he graciously accepted the reproof as a paternal correction.³

Similarly, the many events that followed thoroughly tested and proved the spirit of obedience and humility of Chavara and all the founding fathers. We may recall some of them: almost 25 years of patient waiting for the canonical approval of the congregation; the archbishop's refusal to mitigate and adapt the Rule to the local conditions and needs, the honoured Syrian traditions and the founders' ideals; the last minute withdrawal of 11 candidates from making the profession of religious vows; the high-handed affiliation of the congregation as a Third Order of the Carmelites Discalced; the humiliations and insults at the hands of the supporters of Bp Roccas; Chavara's transfer to Konnamavu from Mannanam where he had been for almost 35 years; certain occasions when his close associate and spiritual director Fr Leopold at least apparently disregarded him; and the severely painful old age difficulties and illness and equally painful medical treatment and isolation in a house outside the enclosure!

¹CWC IV (1990): 24-27; CSK IV (1986): 28-29.

²CWC IV (1990): 24-25; CSK IV (1986): 29.

³CWC IV (1990): 25-27; CSK IV (1986): 29-32.

Chapter 18

IN THE LINE OF MYSTICS

18.1. Mystic Chavara

Was Chavara a mystic? If the extraordinary gifts called mystical phenomena like those in the life of Bl Mariam Thresia or St Alphonsa are considered essential for one to be called a mystic, we must realistically admit that Chavara did not have many of them. But we cannot totally rule out the possibility of his being a mystic. There are hints that he had a few mystical phenomena at least to some degree. Let us see. Sr Ruby Therese CHF, in her doctoral thesis on the mystic Mariam Thresia, has identified the following mystical phenomena.¹

(i) *Visions*: They are the supernatural perception of an object naturally invisible to human eyes. They may be *corporeal* (apparitions), or *imaginative* (representations of images supernaturally produced in the imagination), or *intellectual* (a simple intuitive knowledge supernaturally effected and directly perceived by the intellect without the aid of any sensible image in the interior or exterior senses).

(ii) *Locutions*: They are words spoken by the Lord or any heavenly source and heard either from the innermost depth of the soul or from the outside. They are heard with the bodily ears as if they are uttered by a human voice.

(iii) *Reading of Hearts*: This phenomenon consists in the knowledge of the secrets of others' hearts.

¹Ruby Therese 2016: 193-212.

(iv) *Gift of Prophecy*: Foreknowledge of events and gift of forecasting them.

(v) *Transverberation*: Experience of the soul being wounded in the heart as if it is pierced by an arrow.

(vi) *Stigmata*: Experience in one's own body the wounds of crucified Christ.

(vii) *Levitation*: The raising of the body above the ground without any visible support to overcome the force of the gravity of earth.

(viii) *Bilocation/Multilocation*: One's presence at two or more places at the same time.

(ix) *Crucifixion*: Experience of being painfully scourged, crowned with thorns, carrying the cross, and being crucified as one's Beloved Jesus Christ was.

(x) *Exchange of Hearts*: Experience of one's heart being exchanged for that of Jesus, similar to the exchange of rings in marriage.

(xi) *Spiritual Espousal*: Jesus' promise that He would lead the soul to the spiritual marriage. It usually takes place during ineffable ecstasies, and is accompanied by a vision of heart, bestowal of a symbolic ring, exchange of hearts or a locution in which the Lord formally espouses Himself to the soul.

(xii) *Mystical Aureoles*: A resplendent light radiating from the mystic's body, especially while he/she is in contemplation or ecstasy.

(xiii) *Supernatural Fragrance*: A sweet fragrance, incomparable to any known perfume, emitted from the mystic's body or tomb.

(xiv) *Gift of Tears* of sorrow or joy that the mystic uncontrollably sheds either at the thought of Jesus suffering caused by the sins of humans or at the experience His glory and majesty.

(xv) Other frequently mentioned phenomena, besides the above described ones, in the writings of St Teresa of Avila, are: *Ecstasy, Trance, and Rapture*, all meaning almost the same. Accompanying them there may be also the experience of the *Suspension* of the senses and other faculties. The word *ecstasy* etymologically means standing (*stare*) out (*ex*). One feels that one's spirit aflame with the love of God and unable to be contained in the body goes out of it. The body looking dead goes cold and would be devoid of sensation. St Paul refers to this experience: "I know a man in Christ who, fourteen years ago, was caught up—whether still in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows—right into the third heaven. I do know, however, that this same person—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows—was caught up into paradise and heard things which must and cannot be put into human language" (2 Cor 12:2-4). At times accompanying the ecstasy there is the experience of the *Transport* of the soul by the Lord wherever he desires, and the *Flight of the Spirit*, namely, the experience of something like the flame of fire rising from the intimate part of the soul and going wherever the Lord wills!

Did Chavara have any such experiences? There is reason to believe that he had some of them. For example, Fr Louis of Manjummel in his testimony to Fr Marceline Alackapally in 1936 writes:

According to the first *Constitutions* [of 1863], the duration of the evening meditation was one full hour. Fr Prior spent the whole time on knees, absorbed in

ecstasy, continually shedding tears. Those who went to him during the meditation for getting permission had to be satisfied with merely kissing his scapular. At the end of the meditation he had to be reminded by others that the time was up. Then having said the concluding prayer he would return to his room still shedding tears. During the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament it was a delight for others to watch him lost in contemplation.¹

From these words of the eye-witness Fr Louis we can reasonably say that Chavara enjoyed mystical ecstasies and gift of tears.

A former prior general of the CMI Congregation Fr Maurus Valiaparampil reports what he heard from a contemporary of Chavara:

One day a priest went to visit the prior and knocked at his door. There was no audible response. Believing that the permission was granted, the priest entered the room. He found Chavara absorbed in deep contemplation, with his face beaming with extraordinary light. So, the priest not wanting to disturb him rushed out of the room, and waited for some time. Then, he again knocked and the prior responded. Entering the room the priest saw his face still brightly shining! And the prior said: "What a bliss it is for us humans that God allows us to converse with Him."²

Is it not an instance of trance, mystical aureole, and locution?

¹*Positio*: 561.

²*Positio*: 623.

Fr Gerard, who too was very close to the prior, testifies to an incident during the last illness of the latter:

While I was giving the prior Holy Communion, I saw an extraordinarily bright glow and joyous expression on his face, the kind I have never seen!¹

This too may be considered the mystical phenomenon of aureole.

18.2. In the Interior Castle

Teresa of Avila, with whose mystical theology, Chavara was familiar, presents the soul as a beautiful castle made of a single diamond, with seven mansions, one inside the other. God the Divine Spouse dwells in the innermost of them. Spiritual life which is the same as prayer life is a journey inward, passing through the mansions one after another until the soul reaches the innermost of them where it is united with its Beloved Spouse. Chavara's advice to his followers is that they must reach at least the fourth mansion: "It is enough that we reach the fourth mansion. Our Mother Teresa indeed reached the seventh one, and some of her spiritual daughters of those days the fifth and sixth ones. Let us strive to reach at least the fourth one."²

It should be remembered that the fourth mansion, at least where Chavara wants his followers to reach, is already the realm of mystical prayer. Prayer in general is ascetical or mystical. In ascetical prayer, the human is active, employing all his/her physical and mental powers and faculties of the senses, intellect, memory and will; and, therefore, it is mostly a matter of human effort, of course, assisted by God. In the mystical prayer, the human role is much less while

¹CKC: 209.

²CWC IV (1990); 85; CSK IV (1980): 115.

God does most of the work. As one enters and proceeds in the mystical stage of prayer, one's own effort becomes more and more irrelevant, while God's role increases until the soul becomes totally passive except that it lets God act on it as He wants. In the ascetical level of prayer, one's knowledge or experience of God is said to be acquired by oneself with His help, while that in the mystical level it is infused by Him.

In Teresa's scheme of inward journey, the first three mansions represent the ascetical stage. In the first and second mansions one's prayer is vocal, and in the third one it is mental (discursive meditation). In the fourth mansion, in which the mystical prayer begins, one experiences prayers of recollection, quiet and sleep, which mean that one's senses and the spiritual faculties of reason and memory spontaneously are recollected and quiet so that one very effortlessly enjoys the Lord's presence and love as something supernaturally granted. In the fifth mansion, the prayer of union, namely, the supernatural union of the wills of the soul and God, begins, and the soul goes through a radical transformation like a silk worm changes beyond recognition into a butterfly. In the sixth mansion, the prayer of union deepens and most of the mystical phenomena like ecstasy, trance, rapture, transport, levitation, vision, locution and transverberation are experienced, and in the midst of them the spiritual betrothal between the soul and its Beloved Lord takes place. Finally, in the seventh mansion, the journey successfully ends with the spiritual marriage of the soul with the Divine Spouse, and in it the phenomenal experiences give way to unassailable calm and ineffable delight!

It would not be too much to infer that Chavara who advises and expects his followers to enter at least the fourth mansion, where one starts enjoying mystical prayer, must have himself gone still ahead through the fifth, sixth and even the seventh one! Again, does he mean to say that his followers may remain satisfied with the attainment of the fourth mansion? Possibly not! His hope should be that, having reached and enjoyed the bliss of the fourth one, they are not likely to refuse to proceed still further. Instead, they will experience an irresistible urge to keep moving until the ultimate in the seventh one, the bridal chamber.

18.3. Essential Mysticism

Whether Chavara was a mystic with phenomenal experiences of union with God may be disputed. However, it is beyond doubt that he was a man of essential mysticism. As a matter of fact, the phenomenal experiences or the mystical phenomena such as ecstasy, stigmata, transverberation, vision, etc., are not essential for one to be a mystic. They are the gifts the Lord grants to a few for certain purposes, and those receiving them must gratefully and humbly use them for the same purposes. Even if there are no such experiences one can be a mystic in the sense that one is habitually in personal union with the Lord. This is the universal call of every Christian which he/she realizes in different degrees while alive on earth, and in the fullest degree with the beatific vision in heaven. This is the call implied in Jesus' instruction "to pray always without ever becoming discouraged" (Lk 18:1) and St Paul's advice "to pray at all times" (1 Thess 5:16). For the Carmelites "incessant prayer" is said to be their special charism. Referring to *The Primitive Rule* of Carmelites, St Teresa of Avila says: "We must pray without ceasing... For unceasing

prayer is the most important aspect of *The Rule...*¹ St Chavara practised such 'incessant prayer' in a heroic and extraordinary manner and that too all his life. As a result while on the deathbed with utter sincerity he was able to state: "With God's help I have never in life lost the Baptismal grace."

Chavara's personal union with God kept ever deepening, never diminishing, and this is what qualifies him for the title of a mystic. Towards the end of his life he instructed his spiritual daughters in Koonammavu Convent: "Ah! Abide in the love of Jesus Christ. Remain constantly before His eyes. Walk side by side with Him. And continually converse with Him!"² This certainly is what the prior practised himself, and while scribbling these lines in his good old age it had become the irreversible trait of his personality: the deep and constant awareness of being in love with Jesus Christ, being lovingly gazed at by Him, being in His most enjoyable company, and sweetly speaking and listening to Him! This indeed was Chavara's mystical experience. This is essential mysticism. In *Ātmānutāpam*, the mystic in Chavara sings: "Oh, Lord! I gaze at Your most beautiful lotus-face with single-minded love!"³ Another lovely piece of advice he gave the Sisters is: "I have locked up your hearts in the tabernacle of Jesus. I have done the same with mine as well. Let us remain there until the day of resurrection."⁴ This reminds us of Jesus' saying: "Where your treasure is, there your heart, too" (Mt 6: 21). For the Christian disciples their

¹St Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, 4: 2.

²CSK IV (1986): 112.

³Line 56 of *Anubandham* (Appendix) to *Ām* 3 in CWC II (1989): 22 and CSK II (1981): 22.

⁴CWC IV (1990): 85; CSK IV (1986): 115.

treasure is the Eucharistic Lord in the tabernacle, and, therefore, their hearts too should be there. This was the constant mystical experience of Chavara. Again, in *Ātmānutāpam*, he sings to Mother Mary: "O my Mother, there is constantly in this my heart your thought!"¹ On his deathbed he said: "All my life I had Jesus, Mary and Joseph installed with reverence in my heart and mind!"² Yes, indeed, the mystic Chavara lived constantly and consciously with God and His kingdom inside and outside him, and that is essential mysticism.

18.4. Practical Mysticism

St Chavara can rightly be called a man of God's thoughts. Looking at everything through God's eyes he easily saw His provident hands at work in all that happened to and around him, and, therefore, every experience, pleasant as well as unpleasant, was equally acceptable for him. St Peter with the best of intentions tried to dissuade Jesus from carrying the cross. Scolding him sternly Jesus instructed that he should look at the cross "with thoughts from God, not from himself" (Mt 16:23). Those days the cross was the greatest punishment that a criminal could be given. To impose it on Jesus who was the most innocent of all was then humanly speaking the grossest injustice. But from God's side it was a necessary part of the work of the redemption of mankind, and, therefore, not something to be rejected but welcomed. In a similar way, Chavara looked at everything from God's side and gracefully accepted it. That indeed is the key to explain his spirituality. This we may call *practical mysticism* which enabled Chavara to understand everything that

¹CWC IV (1990): 13; CSK IV (1986): 13.

²Moolayil, *Positio*: 548.

happened in his life as God's will and nothing else. This realization on the one hand kept him humble and realistic, and on the other grateful to and confident in God. In his good old age, looking back upon his life, he thought to himself:

Are all those things that God made me do, within my power? How have you arrived so far? Who made you leave your family? How come you were ordained a priest? How did you join the monastery? Where did the religious congregation come from? Who appointed you as prior? How have you reached here? Are you worthy of anything of these? Not, certainly not! So what? God's will is done. It will always be done!¹

Indeed, in everything Chavara saw God's will being done, he was sure that it was so. In our search for 'Chavara spirituality', we should not be looking for unusually mystical experiences such as those in the lives of St Teresa of Avila or St Alphonsa; nor should we expect highly theological thoughts as in the writings of St Thomas Aquinas or St John of the Cross. Even his initiatives, great as they were in his socio-cultural milieu, are not in themselves the yardstick of his spirituality. Generally speaking, he was not an intellectual or exceptionally talented in many things. His asset on the one hand was the simple faith which endowed him with a spiritual perception of people, things and events. His faith was not merely theoretical but practical that enabled him to see the loving hands of the provident God in all that happened to and around him, pleasant as well as unpleasant, positive and as well as

¹*Colloquies* in CWC III (1990): 1 and CSK III (1981): 1.

negative. That indeed made him different in his responses and dealings with the people and their affairs.

For Chavara faith is the “heart’s eye,” an expression used by St Paul in Eph 1:18: “May He open the eyes of your hearts so that you can see what hope His call holds for you...” Chavara’s advice is: “Falling prostrate in the holy presence of God Almighty you must look at Him with *the eye of your heart* and worship Him.”¹ In fact, the prior had the *eye of his heart* always wide open so that in every event of life—small or big, delightful or painful—he would easily see God’s hands and, thus, he enjoyed uninterrupted vision of God, *Īśvara-darśan*. This is essential as well as practical mysticism.

As a result Chavara was ever a man of peace, ever calm and cool. He was able to keep his cool in all places, at all times and under all circumstances, because he knew for sure that everything was all right in the provident hands of God in Whom his life was grounded. The foundation, on which his life was built, namely, Jesus Christ, is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb 13:8). Why should then he shake and feel disturbed or worried? This made him a *sthita-prajña*—a steady minded person or a person of stable consciousness—in Indian terminology. The following description of a *sthita-prajña* in *Bhagavad-Gīta* (2:55-72) certainly applies to mystic Chavara:

2:55. He, who gives up all cravings of mind, and is happy in and through the spirit, is called a man of stable consciousness.

¹*Dyana-sallapankal* in CSK III (1981): 25.

- 2:56. He, whose mind remains unperturbed in the midst of sorrows, and who has no desires for pleasures, and is free of infatuations, fear and anger, is called a sage of stable consciousness.
- 2:57. He, who is with no attachment anywhere, and neither exults in fortunes nor hates misfortunes, has his consciousness stabilized.
- 2:58. He who, as a tortoise withdraws the limbs from all sides, so withdraws the senses from their objects, has his consciousness stabilized.
- 2:59. From him, who does not feed on them, the sense-objects, but not his taste for them, withdraw; once he has seen the Ultimate, however, his taste for them, too, withdraws.
- 2:60. O Kaunteya, the churning senses of even a wise man, who does make efforts to control them, forcibly carry away the mind.
- 2:61. Let him having controlled all the senses, and being integrated, remain committed to Me. For he, whose senses are under control, has his consciousness stabilized.
- 2:62. For a man dwelling on sense objects, attachment to them develops; from attachment arises craving, and from craving arises anger.
- 2:63. From anger results delusion, from delusion failure of memory, from failure of memory loss of reason, and from loss of reason one perishes, indeed.

- 2:64. But a disciplined person, who deals with objects with the senses that are under his control, and are free of likes and dislikes, attains clarity.
- 2:65. In the state of clarity there comes the end of all sorrows, and the clear-minded man's intellect suddenly becomes firmly stable.
- 2:66. For an unintegrated man there is neither understanding nor thinking, and for an unthinking man there is no peace; from where can there be happiness for a man without peace?
- 2:67. As the wind carries away a boat on the waters, so a man's mind that follows the wandering senses carries away his consciousness.
- 2:68. Therefore, O the powerful [Arjuna], he whose senses are restrained from sense-objects on all sides has his consciousness stabilized.
- 2:69. Where it is night for the [worldly] people, there the disciplined man is awake; where it is night for the enlightened sage, there the [worldly] people are awake!
- 2:70. The ocean is ever being filled with the waters [of rivers] flowing into it; yet it remains immovably still. So, the pleasurable objects ever meet the senses of man; if yet he remains unperturbed, then he attains peace, not if he craves for such objects.
- 2:71. He, who has given up all cravings, moves about free of desires, and is nonpossessive and selfless, attains peace.

2:72. This is the divine state of existence. Oh Pārtha!
Having realised it one is not any more deluded.
Remaining in it at least at the last moment one
attains the calm of God.

Chapter 19

MYSTICAL THEOLOGIAN

19.1. Chavara's Mystical Theology

A last point to consider is Chavara's teaching on mysticism. Even if one is not a mystic one can teach mysticism and, thus, be a mystical theologian. But Chavara's case was that he would not teach or preach what he did not himself practise or experience. As a matter of fact he did not have much academic or scientific training in theology or any other branch of knowledge. He learned things mostly by doing and meditating. When it comes to divine sciences, he learned mostly by meditating on the word of God under the guidance of the Spirit. And what he, thus, learned and experienced or what the Spirit taught or infused into him, he shared with the fellow humans. Hence, whatever mystical theology he taught was his own mystical experience, to say the least. It should be with this in mind that we look into his teaching.

Naturally, Chavara is more in the Carmelite line of mystics. And they mostly follow the tradition of spousal mysticism in which the relation between God and the human being is understood and experienced in terms of a spiritual but real marriage, meaning the mutual commitment of love between them. As we have already discussed in chapter 10, this way of thinking is rooted in the Old Testament where Yahweh and His people are presented as husband and wife. *The Song of Songs* is the love story between God and the human spirit presented in so raw a language that reading it purely from the natural perspective one can get scandalized. One should read it in the light of

faith from the mystical point of view. St John of the Cross has his own beautiful version of it in his *Spiritual Canticle*, which is believed to be a lyrical presentation of his own personal experience of the love relation with Jesus Christ. Both these books present the love affair between God and the human spirit, developing stage by stage: the initial longing and relentless search for one another, their delightful meeting for a while, then the pain of separation, long waiting in hope, tests and trails in the meantime, a game of hide and seek, later on the ecstatic spiritual betrothal, and at long last the glorious end in spiritual marriage. St Teresa's experience of relation with God too was not different, and she has presented it in her autobiography called *Life*, and systematic treatise called *Interior Castle*.

Among the Carmelite mystics, the one with whose ideals and teachings Chavara was most familiar is St Teresa of Avila. It is rather surprising that nowhere in his writings or instructions St John of the Cross is explicitly mentioned. However, his mystical theology is essentially the same as that of the latter: one's complete detachment from all that is not God, on the one hand, and the consummate union of one's spirit with God on the other. This understanding of spiritual life is unambiguously described by Chavara, not in the characteristically Johannine language of *dark night*, *ascent of mount*, *living flame of love* and *the spiritual canticle*, but in his own simple but convincing term and style. We shall present a few instances in Chavara's writings that point to his experience and understanding of the issue under reference.

In his *Ātmānutāpam* Chavara presents Jesus climbing up Mount Calvary carrying the cross as a marriage procession. The description runs more or less like: Jesus is the Divine

Groom; His wedding robe is studded with diamonds and pearls (the drops and stains of blood) He wears a diadem of rare beauty (the crown of thorns), the weeping women are the brides, the soldiers and others are dancers and singers, the spears and other weapons are the musical accompaniment, the hilltop is the wedding pandal, and the cross is the bridal chamber!¹

Anastasia's Martyrdom is a call for commitment on the part of the human being to his/her Beloved Spouse Jesus Christ not only to the point of death but even beyond death. It was the time of the Roman Emperor Valerian in the third century. He forced the Christians to worship the pagan god Jupiter. There was a convent founded by Mother Sophia. She was its superior and the novice mistress. Anastasia was a novice under her. Probus was the Emperor's prime minister. He came with his army to arrest and take by force Anastasia to the Emperor's palace. Reaching there she was cruelly persecuted. She resisted to the sacrilegious demands of the Emperor and his minister. She was put in jail from where she sang praises of her Beloved. They cut off her tongue. She was at the point of death. A young Christian called Cyril offered her a glass of water. He was killed and attained martyrdom. Eventually, Anastasia also was martyred.

In this work, Chavara beautifully and touchingly presents Mother Sophia's parting message to her novice Anastasia as she was being taken to the Emperor. Embracing and kissing her Sophia says:

Oh dearest daughter, your most beloved Spouse Jesus Christ, thirsting for your love, is calling you tenderly.

¹*Am* 8: 65-108 in CWC II (1989): 67-68 and CSK II (1981): 67-68.

Hurry up! Remember, He has once before, holding you in His hand, embraced you, when you consecrated yourself to Him. For your love He came into this world; carrying the cross, His beautiful flag, He climbed up Mount Calvary. There He died for you, and redeemed you from the slavery of sin. He had on His head the royal crown of thorns. He sacrificed Himself on the cross for your sake, and proved His love for you. Today you must prove your love for Him, and display your superhuman beauty. Hurry up, my child! He is not a spouse of this world. He is the glorious God of immense beauty. Go in haste, my child, and get lost in His embrace of love!¹

After Anastasia's martyrdom, while narrating the welcome she was accorded by her Divine Spouse, the poet Chavara's imagination takes wing:

Holy Anastasia's soul was instantly bathed in heavenly beauty. While her body underwent the cruel torture, her soul was adorned with a glittering crown! And she was in unspeakable bliss! Her beloved groom Jesus welcomed her into His royal palace, and heaping on her jewels of marvel and pearls of price, with a thirst of love He enthroned her in the bridal chamber!²

In his letters to the Sisters, Chavara frequently reminds them of their spousal relations with the Lord, how tenderly He loves them, how conscientiously they must remain faithful to Him, and so on. First of all he depicts Jesus Christ

¹*Anastasia's Martyrdom*: verses 45-60 in CWC II (1989): 167; CSK II (1981): 176-177.

²*Anastasia's Martyrdom*: verses 173-180 in CWC II (1989): 171; CSK II (1981): 180.

as a demanding lover who wants His beloved to love Him more than everything else:

Above all, learn the art of loving Jesus Christ... When you feel inclined or attached to any other object, this loving Lord turns His gaze on you, and says: "Look at Me! Does this little thing give you more delight than I? Or, is it not pain and affliction that it causes you? If so, why should you be worried? I shall make you really happy. Is that not enough for you?" Thus, your Beloved Spouse is constantly at your side. His sole desire is to make you happy. He whispers to you: "You must love Me. Whatever you desire, I will do it for you! I have already given you everything that I have. There is nothing, which I have not given you." Yes, He has given Himself to you. He is the Creator of the entire universe. He asks you: "Is this little object greater than I?"¹

The Sisters must realize and treasure their privileged position as the brides of the Divine Spouse. He is a jealous lover, tolerating no one else trying to steal His beloved one's attention. Interestingly, Chavara is envious of them! He advises them to love the solitude of their cells where they can enjoy the warmth of their Divine Spouse's love.

Is there anyone in the world more fortunate than you?
... Consider how sweet is the voice of your loving Spouse. He is vigilantly and jealously watching in your hearts, lest you love anyone else more than Him, and He lovingly looks after all your needs.²

¹CWC IV (1990): 82; CSK IV (1986): 112.

²CWC IV (1990): 83; CSK IV (1986): 113.

May Jesus Christ bless you; with joy and peace of mind remain with Him in your cell which is His royal chamber...¹

I feel a holy envy at your immense good fortune! It is very true. Oh queens and spouses of our Lord and King Jesus Christ, the state of life you have embraced is indeed great and praiseworthy. The terrestrial empresses will feel jealous of you...²

The adoration you give to your Divine Spouse Jesus Christ from the corner of your convent is most pleasing to Him. I have seen with my own eyes that the palanquin, in which the queen was travelling, is covered on all sides with a thick curtain in order to hide her from human gaze. If so, how much more demanding would be your Divine Spouse?³

Finally, the mystic saint in Chavara portrays a scene of divine love in a style and language very similar to that of *Song of Songs* and *Spiritual Canticle*:

When the human spirit is in the delightful solitude, the Lord Jesus Christ comes to meet His beloved in that lovely solitude. He begins to speak with her sweetly. At first she does not clearly understand His language and intentions. Then He takes her to the wine cellar and pours her some wine, initially a little. Having enjoyed it she begins to understand His language; yes, she understands His love! Then this Lover of hers begins to speak more distinctly, and opens His heart so as she realizes how great His love

¹CWC IV (1990): 78; CSK IV (1986): 106.

²CWC IV (1990): 77; CSK IV (1986): 107.

³CWC IV (1990): 77; CSK IV (1986): 106.

for her is. Her love, too, increases! He becomes pleased with her, adorns her with precious ornaments! This is how the affair begins, and then it doesn't ever stop!¹

It is while speaking about meditation that the Doctor of the Church St Teresa of Avila's influence on St Chavara is conspicuous, as he has himself acknowledged in his *Dhyāna-sallāpankal*. Given below is his marvellous description of meditation as an intimate conversation between lovers:

Meditation is a conversation with God. As you would do with a friend, so moved by love you sit close to God, intimately communicating with Him. Meditation then is to converse with your beloved Spouse Jesus Christ, sitting very close to Him... You converse with God as you do with a friend. It is a common experience that two friends go on speaking nonstop with one another until they part. They are never short of matter to speak about. That means, where there is love, there is always something to speak about. Nobody has to teach you this kind of conversation. Two friends, even if they do not know one another's language, will mutually speak and understand. To converse with a friend, who does not understand your language, is easier than speaking with another, who, though he/she can understand your language, is not a friend. Even to sit in silence very close to your friend is a matter of satisfaction!²

We may compare this description with Teresa of Avila's statement: "Meditation in my opinion is nothing but to fall in love with Jesus Christ, frequently conversing in secret

¹CWC IV (1990): 85; CSK IV (1986): 113-114.

²CWC III: 2; CSK III: 14-15.

with Him Who we know loves us.”¹ For both the saints meditation is an intimate communion between the human spirit and its Divine Spouse!

19.2. Mystical Hermeneut

A renowned Biblical scholar Fr Paul Kalluveettil in a scientific study of *Dhyāna-sallāpankal* has qualified Chavara as a “dynamic hermeneut of the Word.”² Complementing his observation we may say that Chavara is not only dynamic but also mystical a hermeneut. His approach to the word of God far from being academic is deeply spiritual and personal. In a spirit of faith and attitude of reverence, he attentively listens to the Word, and zealously responds. It is a personal communion with a mystical tone.

Kalluveettil observes that the work *Dhyāna-sallāpankal* is thoroughly Biblical because its themes as well as the style of presentation are inspired by the Bible. There are 43 explicit citations from the Bible, and 70 implicit or allusive ones. Then there are seven texts which Chavara interprets in a very creative and personal style. He interprets them by way of expressing, explaining and translating them, which according to Kalluveettil, is the threefold process of a true interpretation. “His [Chavara’s] whole personality was an *expression* of the word of God ... he could explain the Bible in his own life situation... He ‘translated’ the Bible; the word of God became his own word.”³

¹Teresa of Avila, *Life*, 8: 5.

²Paul Kalluveettil, CMI, “Chavara the Dynamic Hermeneut of the Word” in Paul Kalluveettil, CMI and Paulachan Kochappilly, CMI, eds, *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, Bangalore: 2004, 294-311. We draw on this article for the present section of the study.

³*Ibid.* 295.

Chavara adapted or applied the Bible themes to his personal situations. For example, in the parable of wedding banquet (Mt 22:11-13) the man did not care to ask for a marriage garment while Chavara did and got it.¹ In the Biblical events and characters Chavara finds not only comparisons and similes but metaphors so that he would identify himself and his situations with them. For instance, he does not merely compare but identifies the chapel with Mounts Sinai and Zion (Ex 19:24-30, 34; 40:34-38), himself with Zachaeus (Lk 19:1-10), the lost sheep (Lk 15:1-7), the prodigal son returning home (Lk 15:11-24), Mary Magdalene embracing the foot of the cross, one of the nursing babies shouting "Hosanna to the son of David," and the good thief.²

Chavara further imagines himself as the son in Jesus' statement from the cross to His Mother: "Behold your son," and as one of the brides accompanying the Lord in the solemn procession to the nuptial pandal, Calvary.³ Entering the bridal chamber he engages in intimate conversation with Him.

Identifying himself with the lost sheep, Chavara makes Jesus say to him: "In search of you I wandered along forests and hilltops, seas and mountains, because I loved you and had resolved to take you to My royal house."⁴ Similarly, contemplating on the birth of Jesus, the author makes the

¹CWC III (1990): 1; CSK III (1981): 13.

²For these identifications see respectively: CWC III (1990): 9ff., 15ff., 18f., 10-11, 4ff., 13, 20, 8; CSK III (1981): 24ff., 34ff., 39f., 27, 16ff., 32, 41, 23.

³CWC III (1990): 22, 8; CSK III (1981): 44, 22-23.

⁴CWC III (1990): 10; CSK III (1981): 27.

latter say: “To find you out I stepped down from My throne ... that you may have no fear of Me... I was born as a baby for your sake...”¹ Thus, Chavara interprets the event of incarnation as intimately related to himself.

Again, even as Chavara identifies Mounts Sinai and Zion with the chapel, he says that unlike those mountains, the chapel with the Blessed Sacrament is a place of divine mercy, grace, blessing and love. The chapel is indeed the New Sinai and Zion. Already on mount Calvary the frightening God of Sinai and Zion had transfigured into the compassionate Saviour in the person Jesus Christ.² Calvary is the nuptial pandal,³ and the cross the bridal chamber.

19.3. Mystically Inspired Prayers

The prayers that Chavara used to say and recommended to others are full of mystical insights and mystical in character: spontaneous, personal and intimate. He relates himself to God as a child to the parent, or a lover to the beloved, and is overwhelmed with sentiments of trust, confidence, love, repentance, gratitude and wonder.

As the great mystic Moses did, so Chavara feels free to ask God for the humanly speaking impossible. For example, one of the distinctive marks of Chavara’s spirituality is the intense desire to see God, the longing for the *darśan* (vision) of God. Included in his *The Compunction of Soul* is a poem of 168 lines giving full vent to his deep-rooted yearning for seeing the Lord in every stage of His life and in all His glory, beauty and magnanimity, the refrain with which

¹CWC III (1990): 10; CSK III (1981): 26.

²CWC III (1990): 9-11, 15; CSK III (1981): 24-25, 34.

³CWC III (1990): 8; CSK III (1981): 22-23.

every other line ends being: *kāṇākeṇam* (*I long to see you*). Given below is a section of it:

The Lord of mercy, the Son of God, His glorious splendour, I long to see! ... How He stayed for nine months in the womb of His mother, I long to see! Born in her womb, how He came to Bethlehem to obey mighty Caesar, I long to see! ... How Jesus, Anna's Grand Son was hunger-smitten, I long to see! And with the Pharisees He discussed law in His twelfth year, I long to see! ... The Good Shepherd, seeking His flock that had gone astray, I long to see! The Lord of goodness, proclaiming Himself as our loving Friend, I long to see!¹

The prior fondly addresses God as 'my Father,' *ente appan*, just as every now and then Jesus would cry to God: *Abba! Abba!* We may recall St Paul's words: "The Spirit makes you God's children, and by the Spirit's power we cry out to God, 'Father, my Father' (Rom 8:15). The thought of being God's darling child gave Chavara confidence to return to Him as the prodigal son did. Making his own the latter's sentiments Chavara prays:

Oh, it is a long time since I saw *ente appan's* divine face. I squandered all He gave me. Now I am working for an unjust employer, feeding his pigs. I am so famished that I wish I could feed on the food the pigs eat... Further delay is suicidal. So, I set out on the journey back home with my jungle-stick and country cap (*toppi-pāla*)... Oh my soul! Your *appan* is so bounteous as to forgive and forget every act of the ingratitude of yours. Oh, have a look at your *appan's*

¹CWC II (1989): 17-19; CSK II (1981): 17-20.

palace and mansions... Who is there to open this big lock and door for me? ... Who on earth would inform *ente appan* of the arrival of this outcaste? ... Would He not be furious with me, would He even deign to look at me? Can I go into His presence without permission? ... How can I approach such an august presence and seek forgiveness? Yes, that is true, indeed. Still *ente appan* is so generous and full of love that I needn't entertain any fear... Behold, the doors are wide open! There *ente appan* is coming out! ... Oh *ente appā!* I have sinned against heaven and before You ... I am not worthy to be called Your son... My heart, however, tells me to call You by no other name than *ente appan*... Therefore, *ente appā* ... forgive me... Oh *ente appā*, I cast myself on my knees before Your throne of mercy...¹

Chavara's approach to Blessed Virgin Mary whom he used to call "my Mother" (*ente amma*), was equally filial and spontaneous. Here he offers a very interesting insight. Not satisfied with merely being in the Lord's presence, no matter how reassuring it is, he wants Him to take His seat in his heart, but is conscious of his unworthiness. As a remedy, he entreats Mother Mary to be seated in his heart so that Jesus would be more than pleased to sit in her lap. He then says:

O Lord, behold, I have opened the door of my heart and set there the holy lap of your Divine Mother, most dear to You. Be pleased to take Your seat in it. How happy is a little child to sit in its mother's lap! Similarly, O my Saviour, kindly be seated in Your Mother's holy lap. A child in its mother's lap readily does whatever she asks it to do. Likewise, my Lord,

¹CWC III (1990): 4-5; CSK III (1981): 16-18.

sitting in Your Mother's lap, kindly grant her intercessions for me. Please listen to her words: 'Ah! My dearest Son, You are my Creator and Master! I am Your servant and mother! I recall Your words from the cross, Your deathbed on Mount Calvary. I was standing at its foot, immersed in the sea of suffering. Looking at me You said: "This is your son!" By those words You gave me this poor Kuriakose as my son. Behold, he is now standing at my feet, shedding tears of sincere repentance for all his sins! You please forgive all his sins and cancel all his debts. Still more, kindly grant him the grace never in life to lose his baptismal innocence, and ever to keep growing in his love for You! May he ever be aware of Your loving presence. You were kind enough to give a happy death to Your foster father and my husband Joseph. Remembering that favour please grant this little Kuriakose as well the joy of breathing his last in Your, my husband's and my presence, and let us instantly take his soul into heaven. As a sign that You grant me these requests, kindly stretch Your divine feet towards him!¹

To be so childlike in one's relation with Lord Jesus and His Mother Mary, and so innovative while praying to them one should certainly be a mystic, and that is what St Chavara was!

¹CWC III (1990): 22; CSK III (1981): 44.

Chapter 20

APOSTLE OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST¹

20.1. First of the Outstanding Devotions

Two devotions, namely, the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and the devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, were especially outstanding all through his [Chavara's] life. The admirable dignity, devotion and recollection with which he celebrated the Divine Liturgy, made a great impression upon those who participated in it. Besides the usual visits to the Blessed Sacrament enjoined by the *Rule*, he used to spend long hours on his knees, immersed in prayer before the tabernacle.²

Chavara is rightly called an apostle of the Holy Eucharist. Fr Valerian writes:

This invaluable devotion [to the Blessed Sacrament] began to make its appearance from his [Chavara's] childhood itself. He was vigilant to go to communion as frequently as it was allowed. Even as a child, not strong enough to lift the Missal, he learned to serve at Mass. This was perhaps the beginning of his Eucharistic devotion. During the seminary life this devotion grows to such an extent as to cause wonder in his fellow seminarians. There he was an apostle of this devotion.³

¹For the original version of this chapter see Sr Jossy CMC and Fr Thomas Kochumuttom CMI, "Holy Eucharist: Mystery of the Lord's Universal Availability" in *In Christo*, Vol. 43, 1, Ranchi: 2005, 25-34.

²Beccaro 2003: 13.

³Valerian 1939: 263-264.

Many of his undertakings were directed to the promotion of this devotion among his people. Through proper training of seminarians and renewal of priests he enabled them to minister to the Eucharistic Lord with due reverence and decorum. In order to ensure the uniform and orderly celebration of the Divine Liturgy, he painstakingly wrote down in detail its rubrics and restored the liturgical calendar of his Syrian Rite. Introducing in Syrian parishes the liturgy of Holy Saturday and devotions like 40-hour adoration he strengthened and sustained the people's zeal and love for the Lord in the Holy Eucharist.

In fact, the Holy Eucharist was the centre of Chavara's spirituality and prayer. To use his own terminology, he preferred to remain locked up in the tabernacle with Jesus. He wrote to the nuns: "I have locked up your hearts in the tabernacle of Jesus. I have done the same with mine as well. Let us remain there until the day of resurrection."¹ We shall now have some reflections on Chavara's insights and experiences related to the mystery of Holy Eucharist.

20.2. Greatest Privilege

The greatest privilege the consecrated men and women enjoy is that they live in the same house with the Lord Jesus Christ who is present in the Holy Eucharist in their chapels. The psalmist longed to spend at least a day in God's temple or even to stand at its gate (Ps 84:10):

One day spent in Your temple is better than a thousand anywhere else. I would rather stand at the gate of the house of God than live in the houses of the wicked!

¹CWC IV (1990): 85; CSK IV (1986): 115.

For the religious, however, it is not just a day or two, but all their life, day in and day out, they literally live with Him under the same roof. St Chavara was deeply aware of it as he states in his *Colloquies*:

In order to grant all my heart's desires, and permitting me to ask without any hesitation for whatever favour I would like to have, He deigns to dwell day and night continuously very close to my room!¹

What a blessing! What a fortune! However, one should take care to make this wonderful presence of the Lord a reality for oneself personally. It can so happen that, although the Lord is really present in your house, it may not be a reality for you personally. The presence of anything or anybody becomes a reality for you only when you become aware of it. For example, suppose your dad, travelling a long distance, comes to meet you in the monastery or convent. Certainly he is received warmly by the receptionist brother or sister and is lovingly treated, and comfortably seated in the parlour. However, for one or another reason he or she forgets to inform you of your dad's arrival, and goes about doing his/her work! Your dad is present in the house, but you are not aware of it, and as a result, his presence, real as it is, does not become a reality for you!

Then, suppose by evening the receptionist realizing the mistake rushes to you with a big apology, "I am sorry, very sorry, your dad is waiting for you in the parlour. He has been there all day long. I am sorry, I forgot to inform you!" Imagine the feelings the news would evoke in you. Although the dad was present so close to you the whole day, being unaware of it you did not feel it. His presence

¹CWC III (1990): 19; CSK III (1981): 40.

was not a reality for you personally, nor did it touch you in any way. Now that you are aware of it, you are full of fine feelings and sentiments. It has become a reality for you personally, touching you very deeply and moving you to emotions of love and joy! Well, similarly make the Lord's presence in the house a reality for you personally, being aware of it continuously. That will make your thoughts, words and deeds completely different.

We may remember the experience of the two disciples journeying to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35), which the Holy Father John Paul II in the apostolic letter, *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, makes the basis of his reflections on the Holy Eucharist. There the Lord's presence, who accompanied those disciples all along the journey, did not become a reality for them until they were awakened when He broke the bread before them! One should indeed try to remain fully awakened to His presence all along the life-journey.

20.3. Keep and Enjoy the Company

Knowing that the Lord is present in one's house, one must avail oneself of it by keeping company with Him and enjoying His company. It is, indeed, a duty and a privilege of the consecrated people. When an important guest is in the house, we take care to keep company with him/her so that he/she is not ever alone. It is a matter of courtesy and hospitality, to say the least. However, in the Holy Eucharist we have not just an important guest, but the Lord who is everything for us. Can we afford to let Him be all alone, unattended, and uncared for? Not at all! Be with him constantly, and make sure that at least some one of the community is always there in the chapel, speaking and listening to Him, and attending to His needs, so to say. For

us it should not merely be a matter of etiquette, but a genuine expression of our personal love for Him, our Beloved.

We must also learn the art of enjoying His company, which indeed is the most desirable and enjoyable company of the sweetheart. Can anything separate the hearts of lovers? Nothing, neither distance nor work. Love keeps them continually aware of one another. Let it be so between the Eucharistic Lord and us. Our frequent visits to Him, no matter how short they are, are and should be concrete expressions and effective means of our loving awareness of Him. Every now and then, especially when we go in and out of the house, drop into His presence, saying 'hello' or a word of love, gratitude, repentance, consultation, or even complaints and requests. Where else should we go to pour out our feelings of joy and pain? We may recall the beautiful instruction of St Chavara to the Sisters of Koonanmmavu Convent:

Ah! My little children, these days you must meditate well on the love of Christ... Continuously abide in the love of Jesus Christ. Always be before His eyes [Always be gazed at by Him]. Walk side by side with Him, and constantly converse with Him! ¹

It is significant that he wrote these lines in the days immediately following the feast of the Most Blessed Sacrament, when in the religious houses there used to be canonical prayers solemnly sung before the Bl. Sacrament exposed. That means, his instruction was specifically with reference to the Eucharistic presence of the Lord. Let the Sisters contemplate Him, abide in His love, be constantly

¹CWC IV (1990): 82; CSK IV (1981): 112.

aware of His presence, walk along with Him, and constantly speak and listen to Him. Well, let them keep company with Him and enjoy His presence, even if they are busy with many other things outside the chapel.

The two disciples on reaching Emmaus requested Jesus: “Stay with us, Lord” (Lk 24:29). We too may make the same request. And we are reassured that He does and will stay with us all the time faithfully. Even when we would wander away from Him, which is quite possible any time, He would certainly abide with us. St Chavara says:

[He is there in the Holy Eucharist] graciously permitting me to call on Him any time, and to remain close to Him as long as I want. However, feeling indifferent and lazy I frequently go out of His presence!¹

Therefore, we have to take care to abide with Him.

20.4. Saving Presence

We may now think of the saving presence of the Eucharistic Lord. As a matter of fact, Jesus, “the one mediator between God and man” (1 Tim 2:5), is the only link or bridge for us humans to return to and get reconciled with the Father and, thus, to be saved. “No one comes to the Father, but by me” (Jn 14:6), said Jesus clearly. Hence, anyone wanting to be saved, should meet Jesus, touch Him and be touched by Him. During His lifetime in Palestine all the people who were fortunate to meet and touch Him, and be touched by Him, were healed and saved. Even today, this is the necessary condition: meet and touch Him and be touched by Him. But one may rightly ask: How is that possible? Jesus lived in a place and time far removed from us. How can we

¹CWC III (1990): 19; CSK III (1981): 40.

meet Him, let alone touch and be touched by Him? The answer is the Holy Eucharist. This is the wonderful arrangement that the Lord has made whereby His presence is made universally available to the people of all times and places. Indeed, the Eucharist is the mystery of the universal availability of the Lord! The Holy Eucharist being the sacrament of the universal presence of the Lord, anybody who wills, can easily meet Him personally anywhere at any time.

We may say that the Holy Eucharist is the extension of the mystery of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. In the event of incarnation, God became man, and was available for anyone of that time and place. Then taking one more step the same God, Who became man, further becomes a piece of bread, and that is the Holy Eucharist. Through this second step, His presence has been extended to every corner of the world and to every page of history, not just metaphorically or symbolically, but really. Consequently, He is now readily available for all people living even in the remotest and most difficult places and times!

20.5. Spousal Love

What we see here is God the lover pursuing the human being, His beloved, humbling Himself further and further. First in search of her, He humbles Himself and becomes an ordinary human being. Then humbling still further He becomes a piece of bread, a non-living thing, so to say! As we frequently say, love is blind. That indeed is what we see here. The self-emptying and self-effacing love of Jesus Christ, which made Him forget Himself! Yes, love knows no limit and puts no condition. Unfathomable is the depth of the Eucharistic Lord's love!

We are aware of the miracle worked by Jesus whereby he multiplied a few loaves of bread, and fed thousands of people (Mt 14:13-21; 15:32-38; Mk 6:30-44; 8:1-10; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1-14). It was certainly a great miracle, but still only a pre-figuration of a much greater miracle, namely, the Holy Eucharist. If in the first case He multiplied a few loaves of bread and fed a few thousand people, in the other He multiplies not a lifeless thing but Himself, and feeds millions and millions of people of all times and places. In every little piece of the Eucharistic bread, He is fully present so that anybody taking it can rightly and proudly say that he or she is in possession of the Lord fully and really. What a miracle!

We are familiar with the Hindu story of Lord Krishna having many thousand consorts. Often we are inclined to dismiss it as a popular myth, having little to do with reality. But pause for a while, and reflect a little deeper. It turns out to be a myth with a profound meaning for anybody irrespective of caste and creed. What this myth intends to communicate is that each one of those girls convincingly experienced that the Lord loved her wholeheartedly, as if He did not have another girl to love. Each of them claimed to have the same experience! That is indeed the mystery of God's undivided love for each of us, a kind of love that God alone can have. His love is neither divided nor half-hearted. We the humans, as a rule, do not have this kind of love. We fail to love even God single-mindedly and whole-heartedly. But God's love invariably cannot but be single-minded, undivided and wholehearted for all the people alike. Each person is His beloved in a unique manner. Thus, God has spouses not just thousands, but millions and millions. This

is and should be deeply experienced and concretely realized in the Holy Eucharist.

In the Holy Communion, Jesus becomes fully the possession of the recipient so that he/she – indeed, each of us – can really experience and say: ‘He so loves me as if He does not have another one to love.’ It is Jesus’ undivided love for me and for each of us! It is not merely a myth but a reality that Jesus, the Bridegroom, has millions of spouses!

That we are the brides of Jesus Christ is a thought so dear to St Chavara, which he inherited from the Carmelite mystical tradition through the writings of Teresa of Avila (and John of the Cross). In fact, it has been a recurring theme in Christian spirituality with a good Scriptural basis (Is 54:5; Hos 2:19; Ezek 16:8; *Song of Songs*; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25; Rev 10:7-9, 21:2, 22:17). From St Paul’s unambiguous teaching that the Church is the bride of Christ, it follows that each member of the Church is His bride. In the case of the consecrated people, the spousal relationship of love with Jesus Christ is more explicit and direct. This is the point emphasized in the Carmelite mysticism, and for that matter in St Chavara’s reflections and writings, too. On the occasion of the profession of the first members of Koonammavu Convent, he shared Fr Leopold’s thoughts that while professing the religious vows one is wedded to Jesus Christ:

When a Sister professes the vows, she becomes fully His, and God becomes her owner. Before a king marries a young girl, she is just an ordinary girl. However, when the king marries her, she becomes a queen, a royal woman. Similarly, when the Sisters are

married to the King of heaven, they become the queens – the royal women of heaven.¹

20.6. Food and Drink

In instituting the Holy Eucharist, Jesus Christ has taken into account two of our fundamental experiences or needs, namely, hunger and thirst. They are fundamental in more than one sense. First of all, both of them, unless adequately satisfied in time with proper food and drink, are fatal, leading to death. Secondly, they are fundamental in the sense that their impact is felt not in just one or another part of the body, but in the whole of it.

Usually, we are aware of our physical hunger and thirst, and take care to satisfy them duly with food and drink. However, in us there is a still deeper kind of hunger and thirst: the hunger and thirst for God. This is beautifully stated by St Augustine in his *Confessions*: “God, you have created us for yourself and, therefore, our hearts are restless until they find rest in You.” There is in every human being the inbuilt hunger and thirst for God, causing continuous restlessness until he/ she comes to possess and be possessed by God. Of course, there are people who fail to discern the real meaning of this hunger and thirst. They try wrong means to satisfy them by accumulating worldly possessions, indulging in sensual pleasures and seeking power and positions. Obviously, nothing but God can satisfy them. “God alone suffices,” says St Teresa of Avila. St Chavara beautifully sings:

You are my love, my joy, and all my good fortune! If
not in you, how could I live my life? You are my very

¹CKC: 97.

breath, my food and my drink. What solace do I have except in You!¹

It is in view of this basic and crucial spiritual need that the Lord has graciously instituted the Holy Eucharist, the food and drink from heaven. Chavara again says:

Oh! My loving God and my Saviour, as an ultimate sign of Your love for me, You have given me Your body and blood for my food and drink.²

Taking them, we must satisfy the hunger and thirst for God, and remain forever healthy and fresh in spirit. The physical food and drink satisfy us for some time, after which we again feel hungry and thirsty. But this spiritual food, the Holy Eucharist, will bring us enduring satisfaction, and take us to life eternal as the Lord Himself has said (Jn 6:49-51; see also 6:58):

Your fathers ate the manna in wilderness, and died. This is the bread, which comes down from heaven that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread, which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.

However, there is another serious concern: We must have proper appetite for the Holy Eucharist. As the loss of physical appetite is a symptom of some serious bodily ailment, so the loss of appetite for the Holy Eucharist signals serious disorders in spiritual life. Outwardly the complaints may be that we become lukewarm and careless in spiritual life. We must urgently diagnose the real disease, and taking the right treatment regain the appetite for the food from

¹*Ām* 2: 144 in CWC (1989): 10 and CSK (1981): 10.

²CWC III (1990): 21; CSK III (1981): 43.

heaven. What is meant is that we must go to the Holy Communion with due preparation and proper disposition. Otherwise, this food that is meant for spiritual nourishment and health would turn out to be counter-productive with frighteningly serious consequences, as St Paul warns (1 Cor 11:27-30):

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, brings judgement upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

Chavara's words are not less strong:

To forgive your sins and trespasses and to save your soul, has He not provided the sacrament of reconciliation? Has He not given His body and blood to feed and strengthen you that you may successfully fight your enemies and withstand their onslaught? How have you approached these sacraments? How often have you received them without due attention and preparation! What profit have you made, oh privileged priest of God, from the sacraments of reconciliation and Holy Communion? If you are not mindful of these loving gifts of God, you will have to account for it on the last day! ¹

20.7. Not Gifts but the Giver

Another point to mention is Jesus' reaction to the people, who, following the event of the multiplication of loaves, came

¹CWC III (1990): 29; CSK III (1981): 56-57.

running after Him. After a day's earnest search the next day they met Him on the other side of the lake, wondering, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" (Jn 6:25). As a rule we would appreciate such an earnest effort to find out the Lord. However, surprisingly, the Lord did not find their intention genuine. So he reproached them, saying (Jn 6:26-27):

Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of loaves. Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you.

This is a message, which must be taken note of, especially in our apostolic and missionary life. All the miracles are signs of God's powerful presence, personal concern, and boundless love for us, and as such they must make us more confident in and committed to Him. Instead, if we get away with the favours we receive, forgetting God Who gives them, we are missing the point. The favours will come and go. For example, a miraculous healing does not mean that you shall not again fall ill or even die. However, God the giver of favours endures forever, and the favours are but invitations for you to get closer and more committed to Him.

In our missionary and apostolic endeavours, we have to lead the people beyond all material benefits to the source of all favours, that is, God Himself. We are bearing witness not to the material helps we render the people such as health care, education and developmental programmes, but to the Lord who inspires and motivates us to do such services. People should not get attached to the immediate gains they get, or to us the missionaries. We must be able to tell them, "Friends, you come to us for your physical and mental

needs, and we try to help you as much as we can; but we have something else to offer, the bread from heaven, the Eucharistic Lord. If you receive Him, you will live eternally." Thus, introducing the people to the Lord and preparing the way of the Lord to the people are the crucial phase of our missionary endeavour. Till then we are in the process, although all that we do in the meantime are certainly and really part of the mission. All our undertakings for the wellbeing of the people, in so far as they prepare them to welcome Him, and pave the way for His coming into their lives, are integral part of our mission, which, however, would remain incomplete until that great moment of the mutual acceptance of Lord Jesus and the people.

Even in our personal approach to the Holy Eucharist, we must bear in mind that His person is more important than His favours. For instance, during our visits to Him in the chapel we shall, of course, pray for various favours and needs with full freedom and confidence. And He, too, may grant our prayers. However, ultimately our prayer should be: "Lord, You may or may not grant me the favours I ask for. Both ways I am resigned and happy. But I have one request which You must by all means grant me: 'Let me be all Yours, and You, mine.' I approach You not for anything but Yourself. May I come to possess and be possessed by You." This is the only thing necessary (Lk 10:42). Chavara's prayer experience was not different when he said: "Oh, Lord! I gaze at Your most beautiful lotus-face with single-

minded love [*ekānta-prema*]!"¹ He has again succinctly stated it in his letters to the Sisters:

Whenever you feel 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?' Thus, full of concern, He is constantly beside you. 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 isn't anything left that He hasn't already given you. He has given Himself to you. What else is there? The heaven and earth, and all things in them are merely 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

20.8. The Treasure

Jesus said: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt 6:21). Well, for us the Christian disciples, the Lord in the Holy Eucharist is the treasure and, therefore, it is quite fitting that our hearts also are there in the tabernacle with Him. It is with this insight that Chavara wrote to his spiritual children to remind them about their total dedication to the Lord:

¹Line 56 of *Anubandham* (Appendix) to *Ām*, 3, in CWC (1989): 22 and CSK (1981): 22.

²CWC IV (1990): 82; CSK IV (1986): 112.

Behold I have locked up your hearts in the tabernacle of Jesus. I have done the same with mine as well. Let us stay there until the day of resurrection.¹

Chavara was never tired of singing Jesus' lovely name, Emmanuel, meaning "God-with-us."² Well, 'Emmanuel' is not just Jesus' name. It is what He is: *He is God with us!* However, to make it a reality for us personally, we must equally be with Him consciously. Hence, even as we pray, "Stay with us, Lord" (Lk 24:29), let us take care that we on our part never stop staying with Him in the tabernacle until the day of resurrection when we shall be definitively united to Him.

¹CWC IV (1990): 85; CSK IV (1981): 115.

²For example, *Ām* 2: 365 in CWC II (1989): 16 and CSK II (1981): 16; *Ām* 3: 16 in CWC II (1989): 17 and CSK (1981): 17; line 63 of *Anubandham* (Appendix) to *Ām* 3 in CWC II (1989): 22 and CSK II (1981): 22.

Chapter 21

MARIADAS: SERVANT OF MARY

21.1. Devotion with Filial Love

Two devotions, namely, the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and the devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary were especially outstanding all through his [Chavara's] life... His devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was characterized by genuine filial love. He spoke eloquently of her glories to others and tried to inculcate in them the true devotion to her. Very often, when the thought of his death came to his mind, he would recall the kindness and mercy of the Blessed Virgin, whom he used to address as his Mother, to overcome the terrible fears and temptations associated with that fateful moment. He would also take refuge on such occasions in the powerful intercession and help of St Joseph, whom he venerated with great devotion and love. He would then be consoled and comforted.¹

These are the words of Chavara's spiritual director Fr Leopold. Fr Kuriakose Porukara also has the same to say about his Marian devotion:

The Prior Chavara had filial love and devotion to the Holy Mother of God. He used frequently to speak in praise of her, and endeavoured to instil into others as well singular devotion to her.²

One may aptly rename him Mariadas, Servant of Mary! He was, in fact, himself fond of presenting him by that name. In

¹Beccaro: 2003, 13-14.

²SP: 30.

Ātmānutāpam, at least twenty times he proudly describes himself as a servant of Mary.

21.2. Family Heritage

Chavara had the Marian devotion as a family heritage. He learned it especially from his mother Mariam. Named after the Mother of God she was an exemplary Catholic lady belonging to the family of Chothirakunnel in Thottakad. She took special care in child Kuriakose's Christian upbringing. In his *Ātmānutāpam*, he recalls in the form of a prayer to God:

You gave me a mother to feed and bring me up without any mishap during the childhood. As she suckled me with the love You gave her, she made me learn short prayers as well. As I grew up she taught me the prayers more and more assuredly. Sitting at her feet I slowly began to know God. When she would wake up at midnight and pray on her knees, I, too, would be beside her for a long time on my knees, and learn from her the night prayers to the Mother of God and the names of Jesus the King of kings.¹

Mariam was herself an ideal mother, loving and kind but equally careful not to spoil the child. In Chavara's own words,

Whenever she was displeased with my behaviour, she would correct me with a stern look. Sure enough I feared that stare with merciless eyes! She would not for any reason ever beat me with a rod or hand. For everything she had the eyes, to fondle me in approval

¹*Ām* 1:45-60 in CWC II (1989): 2-3, and CSK II (1981): 2-3.

as well as to scare me. Brought up thus I was certainly God's favourite!¹

It should be by transferring this image of his mother to the Virgin Mary that the boy developed sentiments of filial love and respect towards the latter, and in all his needs turned to her with childlike freedom and confidence. His mummy on earth was indeed an icon of his Holy Mother in heaven!

21.3. Dedicated to the Service of Mother Mary

Mariam made sure that her child's Marian servanthood has the blessing of the Church. In the church at Vechoor, she ritually dedicated him as a servant to the Holy Mother of God. The ceremony, which she later narrated to him, left a lasting impression in his mind. He sings:

God the compassionate Lord was so considerate as to make me a servant of Our Lady from the very beginning. When I was still a baby my mummy placed me at the feet of the Mother of God, and said: "Holy Virgin Mother of God, here is the fruit of my unworthy womb. Today I offer him at your holy feet. Kindly accept and protect him as your servant.

With this prayer she placed me as a servant before the Holy Mother. Then the priest in the name of the Holy Mother placed flowers in my mummy's hands and sprinkled holy water. And holding my tiny hands, he said [to her]: "You must bring him up as a servant of the Holy Mother. In fact, he is not your son, but hers, indeed!"

As I grew up, she narrated to me how the priest had commended me to the care of the Holy Mother.

¹*Am* 1: 78-86 in CWC II (1989): 3, and CSK II (1981): 3.

Moreover, till her death, every year without fail, on the eighth of September she would take me to the same church, and duly offering the stipulated amount of money, venerate Our Lady.

She would then say to me: "She is your Mistress and Mother, and you are her servant. You must ever keep this in mind." This spiritual and loving advice, indeed, went deep into my mind!¹

However, he sincerely admits that later on at least at times he ignored the mother's "spiritual and loving advice," and behaved mischievously! Even so, he proudly says, he would not ever be without a thought of Mother Mary:

But gradually when I grew up, I forgot the mummy's advice, and got distracted by desires for things that I saw around me, and heard being talked about!²

I am so ungrateful that I am unworthy of being considered by you, my Mother. Still, Oh beautiful Lady, kindly recall that I am your servant!

O! My Virgin Mother, you are my refuge; I admit my mistake of having gone astray from you! Still, Oh my Mother, forget me not! In this my heart there is, indeed, always your thought.³

Chavara was a person steeped in his love and devotion to Mother Mary; he was also equally loved and taken care of by her; just as he was ever thoughtful of her so she was continually concerned about him.

¹*Am* 2: 1-26 in CWC II (1989): 6, and CSK II (1981): 6-7.

²*Am* 2: 27-28 in CWC II (1989): 7, and CSK II (1981): 6-7.

³*Am* 2: 243-248 in CWC II (1989): 13, and CSK II (1981): 13.

21.4. Practice of Marian Devotion

Chavara's love for Mary was ever active, a controlling factor in his life and undertakings. In all his needs, he would spontaneously have recourse to her and seek her guidance. This is, for example, what he did when, as a young seminarian, he suddenly lost his parents and the only brother. Receiving the shocking news Chavara took recourse to Blessed Virgin Mary and renewed his dedication to her. Fr Kuriakose Porukara writes:

While the young Chavara was a seminarian, his parents and the only brother died. Only the latter's wife and a little daughter were left. He bore the pain of separation in a spirit of submission to the will of God, and in accordance with the practice he had learned from his parents he renewed his dedication as a servant of the Mother of God, and continued as her devotee with deeper commitment.¹

Chavara says: "Till now I have never had to draw the net empty after casting it in the name of Mother Mary."² Bearing further testimony to his trust in her intercessory power, he has noted down one of his experiences:

On 16 March 1867 Almighty God granted a great favour. My spiritual director Fr Leopold and I were greatly troubled about one thing. We requested our Sisters to pray to Mother Mary for this intention, saying *Salve Regina* and *Memorare* three times each. They did so. Instantly, Our Lady changed the problem that had looked as huge as a mountain into something as light as a flower!³

¹SP: 25.

²CWC IV (1990): 55; CSK IV (1986): 83.

³CWC III (1990): 24; CSK III (1981): 47.

The Vicar Apostolic Bernardine Baccinelli being informed of the unauthorized arrival of the Chaldean Bishop Thomas Roccas, and realizing that the situation was going beyond his control, requested the prior to write and sign a circular warning the faithful against him. Doing so Chavara concluded the circular with the following prayer to Mother Mary which he wanted the people to repeat frequently:

O! Immaculate Mother, you have always rescued the Church from dangers. Now a new schism is threatening us. O Mother, let it not prevail against the Holy Church. Have mercy on us so that we may ever and everywhere remain loyal and docile to the Holy Father who is the successor of St Peter.¹

At the news of any event that would promote the glory of Mother Mary the prior would greatly rejoice and celebrate it. For example, Kuriakose Porukara writes:

Hearing the news of the *confirmation* of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady [in 1870]² the prior was extremely happy, and in thanksgiving instructed every monastery to offer a Solemn High Mass and sing the hymn of thanksgiving (*Lāk'ālāhā*), and they did so. That year [i.e., 1869], the feast of the Immaculate Conception was celebrated in an exceptionally grand manner. Fr Prior himself was the main celebrant for the solemn vespers in the previous

¹CWC IV (1990): 99; CSK IV (1981): 129-130.

²The dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady was defined on 8 December 1854 by Pope Pius IX. Then, in the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), the dogma of Papal Infallibility was defined which was thought to be a confirmation of the former dogma (see fn. no. 5 in Munddan 2008: 383; also *Positio*: 54).

evening, and on the feast day he gave a lengthy sermon on the Immaculate Conception.¹

21.5. Through Mary to Jesus

Chavara was very fond of Mother Mary's intercession for him. Some of his lovely prayers to Jesus through Mary have been preserved. For example, given below is a prayer in preparation for meditation:

O! Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, you don't regret your being the Refuge of Sinners. Therefore, strengthened by this thought we who are great sinners approach you with confidence. Bless us that from now onwards we shall ever be your faithful servants. We make this prayer with deeply earnest hearts. In memory of the precious blood that your Beloved Son shed for us and of the sorrows of your heart, we implore you that this day we may rather undergo the trials and tribulations of this world than fall into any sin. Oh Mother of Mercy! Help us that we may not anymore make your Son, the Just Judge, angry and that, thus, we may avert the eternal punishment incurred by yielding to the momentary animal instincts.²

Another beautiful prayer is:

My Jesus! Bless me. My Jesus, You are angry with us! It is indeed justly so. However, please do not consider our sins. Instead, kindly look at Your Beloved Mother Virgin Mary. For the sake of her eyes that shed tears for us, and her lips that heaved sighs of sympathy for us, and her tender sacred heart that was pierced by a

¹Quoted by Valerian (1939): 279.

²CWC III (1990): 23; CSK III (1981): 45-46.

sword for our love, kindly forgive our sins. That indeed is her sacred heart on which you rested when a baby and that caressed you when dead! They are truly her holy lips that repeatedly kissed your sacred body and wounds! They indeed are her holy eyes that in your infancy delighted you with loving gazes, and that washed your bleeding wounds with tears! Ah! My Jesus, have mercy on us on account the same holy eyes, lips, and sacred heart of Your Beloved Mother!

My Jesus! Kindly relent in your anger. The sacred heart of Mary is sorry for our sake. Her holy lips are interceding for us. Her eyes of mercy alternate looks on us and You! Knowing all these, will You still be angry and refuse to have mercy on us? Indeed our sins are so grave that we are unworthy of Your compassion. Still kindly consider who it is pleading for us! Who it is speaking to You on our behalf! None other than the sacred heart of Your Beloved Mother indeed is imploring for us. Her holy lips are speaking to You! Her holy eyes are looking up to You for mercy on us! Ah! My Jesus, You cannot possibly be so angry as to ignore her. You cannot but grant the requests of so loving a Mother. Therefore, my Jesus, have mercy on us for the sake of the holy face of Holy Mary who is our Mother and Refuge. Amen.¹

Chavara in his relationship with Mother Mary is childlike and innovative, indeed. A typical illustration of this statement is a prayer that he seems to have used in preparation for Holy Communion. We have already quoted it above in chapter 19. It is, however, worth repeating again.

¹CWC III (1990): 23-24; CSK III (1981): 46-48.

By way of introducing the interesting prayer we then said: "Not satisfied with merely being in the Lord's presence, no matter how reassuring it is, Chavara wants Him to take His seat in his heart, but is conscious of his unworthiness. As a remedy, he entreats Mother Mary to be seated in his heart so that Jesus would be more than pleased to sit in her lap. He then says":

O Lord, behold, I have opened the door of my heart and set there the holy lap of Your Divine Mother, most dear to You. Be pleased to take Your seat in it. How happy is a little child to sit in its mother's lap! Similarly, O my Saviour, kindly be seated in Your Mother's holy lap. A child while sitting in its mother's lap readily does whatever she asks it to do. Likewise, my Lord, sitting in Your Mother's lap, kindly grant her intercessions for me. Please listen to her words: 'Ah! My dearest Son, You are my Creator and Master! I am Your servant and mother! I recall Your words from the cross, Your deathbed on mount Calvary. I was standing at its foot, immersed in the sea of suffering. Looking at me You said: "This is your son!" By those words You gave me this poor Kuriakose as my son. Behold, he is now standing at my feet, shedding tears of sincere repentance for all his sins! You please forgive all his sins and cancel all his debts. Still more, kindly grant him the grace never in life to lose his baptismal innocence, and ever to keep growing in his love for You! May he ever be aware of Your loving presence. You were kind enough to give a happy death to Your foster father and my husband Joseph. Remembering that favour please grant this little Kuriakose as well the joy of breathing his last in Your, my husband's and my presence, and let us

instantly take his soul into heaven. As a sign that You grant me these requests, kindly stretch Your divine feet towards him!¹

One cannot but appreciate the Saint's childlike spontaneity and mystic-like sense of freedom while saying this prayer! It must have certainly even amused the Lord and His Mother! Chavara was so limpid and genuine in his approach to her.

There is still another prayer of similar style and spirit in the sixth chapter of *Ātmānutāpam*. The chapter deals with the events beginning with the nativity up to the circumcision of our Lord. It also includes an imaginary conversation between Mother Mary and an elderly shepherd-woman called Shanti. The latter asked: 'Oh! Mother Mary, how poor and helpless is your Baby? How is that? Is He not the Son of God?! From my parents I have learned that when the Saviour comes the entire world will be in fear, and that the earth will tremble before Him! Is that not true? Please help me.' In answer to this question Mary says that there are two arrivals of God. His incarnation is the first of them in which He comes as the compassionate and forgiving Saviour of mankind. He comes again for a second time as the Judge Who graciously welcomes the just to the eternal joy in His kingdom, and mercilessly condemns the unrepentant sinners to the everlasting fire of hell. She then portrays in some detail the horrible manner in which the Judge chastises and sends away the wicked to hell. Hearing it Chavara gets frightened and prays to Mother Mary:

Alas, my Mother, your description of God's judgement of sinners fills me with dread! I shudder with fear. Oh! Mother, the thought of my evil deeds

¹CWC III (1990): 22; CSK III (1981): 44.

unsettles my mind, and makes me tremble with terror. Very grave indeed is my sin. My grief keeps deepening. My Mistress, I have no other refuge than you. Behold your Divine Son! Resting in your holy hands, and having fed on your nectar, He reclines on your bosom, quietly slumbering. My Mother, be kind enough to whisper in His holy ear a prayer for me. Forgetting that I am your servant I disregarded His Gospel. Oh! I feel immeasurably miserable. I feel greatly afflicted by what you said to Shanti about the second arrival of the Lord. My Mother, I am sure, as His holy Mother you also will come accompanying Him and be seated on His right side. Still more, you who are the Queen of Three Worlds will be invited to join Him in judging the people. Oh my Mistress, then be pleased to let me hide in your garment's fold. When the Lord Who now sweetly smiles in your lap changes His glance into frightening sternness, Oh my Mother, hide behind your throne my blinking eyes! Now His eyes sweetly gaze at you with love. Then, however, they will emit sparks of the fire of wrath. Oh! Queen of Three Worlds, cover me with your mantle and, thus, shield me from the flames of His anger that burns like arrows of fire. Spare me, your humble servant, Oh Mistress, from hearing the severe verdict of curse directed to the wicked. I deeply repent and with hate renounce all the evil deeds I have committed till this day. That I may certainly be forgiven my sin I bow before your Blessed Son!¹

¹*Am* 6: 201-234 in CWC II (1989): 42, and CSK II (1981): 42.

21.6. Gratitude and Repentance

Chavara's *The Compunction of Soul* is a triple biography put parallel to one another: biographies of Jesus, Mary and Chavara. The author looks at the lives of Jesus and Mary stage by stage. While turning again and again to himself by way of self-examination, he, on the one hand, sincerely thanks the Lord and His Mother for what they have done and suffered for him, and, on the other, expresses deep sorrow for not being fully loyal to them and for offending them in different ways. Thus, the two underlying streams of sentiment running through this book, and the two characteristic marks of Chavara's spirituality as a whole, are gratitude and repentance. Quoted below are a few lines with acts of repentance addressed to Jesus and Mary and Joseph:

Oh! God, the Emmanuel, I a sinner worship You with tender love. Oh! Lady, clad in the mantle of sun, with the moon under your feet, forgive my sins, and give me refuge at your feet.¹

What a misfortune! How horribly did I sin! I treated my Father the Almighty as my enemy. While recollecting it I realize my ingratitude is much more heinous than the sin of those [in Bethlehem who refused to give you a place to be born]!

Oh! My dear Father [St Joseph], remember me your servant. Keep me close to your foster Son. By the prayers of your beloved wife, forgive my childhood follies!

My Mother, my Mistress, remember me your servant. Your treasure Jesus is my Redeemer. Great indeed is

¹Lines 63-68 of *Anubandham* (Appendix) to *Ām 3*, in CWC II (1989): 22 and CSK II (1981): 22.

His love for you! I was, am and will forever be your servant. At the time of my departure from this world, have a special thought of me, and interceding with your Son obtain for me a happy death, and save me, Oh my Mother! Offering my body and soul before you, I entrust them to you. Give me refuge in you; with your help I hate sin.¹

21.7. Monuments of Marian Devotion

The most impressive monuments of Chavara's love for the Holy Mother are the two religious congregations, one for men and the other for women that he founded in collaboration with others, both of them named after her. The first of them is the present CMI Congregation which was originally called "Society of the Servants of Mary Immaculate of Mount Carmel."

It may be recalled that when in 1831 the foundation stone was laid for the monastery in Mannanam there was no mention of the Carmelite tradition or Marian devotion or her Immaculate Conception. Instead, the first of the founders Fr Thomas Palackal, his confreres agreeing with him, as St Chavara clearly states in his testament, had in mind a congregation in the Dominican tradition:

The founders of this congregation, Rev. *Malpāns* Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, had prayed and made arrangements for a Dominican congregation. Thus, we began the unprecedented custom of wearing the white cassock and took other steps.²

¹*Ām* 4: 197-214 in CWC II (1989): 29 and CSK II (1981): 29.

²CWC IV (1990): 70; CSK IV (1989): 99.

But by the time the members of the first community with Chavara as their prior made the profession of religious vows in 1855 the congregation turned out to be "Society of the Servants of Mary Immaculate of Mount Carmel," which the prior unambiguously says was "by the special grace of God... This has been because God willed it so and not because man planned it thus. I am as sure of this as I am sure that this material, on which I am writing, is paper."¹

Even as we appreciate Chavara's faith in God's providence, we may point out the human factors through which God worked in this matter. First of all, the day of their profession of vows—8 December 1855—was the first anniversary of the declaration of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady as an article of faith by Pope Pius IX. Hence, for Chavara and his community, who were her ardent devotees, it was naturally a matter of delight to be named after her new epithet. There was also a similar explanation for the new congregation's inclusion in the Carmelite family of spirituality. Over the past nearly 25 years since the laying of the foundation stone in 1831 the community under formation was closely associated with and influenced by the Carmelite missionaries including the vicars apostolic. Thus, they must have by then become very familiar with and even fond of the Carmelite spirituality and discipline. Finally, the process of their becoming Carmelites was completed when Vicar Apostolic Bernardine OCD provided them with the Carmelite Rule and Fr Marceline OCD preached the retreat in preparation for the profession. Chavara's appreciation of the Carmelite membership is clear from the fact that accepting the Carmelite Patriarch Prophet Elias as his second patron he

¹CWC IV (1990): 70; CSK IV (1989): 99.

began to be called Kuriakose Elias. The Carmelite features were visible in their newly designed religious habit, too: *a leather belt* over the white cassock, and a small *brown scapular* under it.

Of course, they were not happy about certain provisions in the Carmelite Rule, such as those concerning fast, silence, and enclosures. It was not that they did not love and practise them, but that as stipulated in the said Rule they were too strict, and not in keeping with the local conditions, Syrian practices and the original spirit and charism of the new congregation. Most importantly, the provisions in the Carmelite Rule were meant for the contemplative religious, while the Mannanam Community was meant to be an apostolic one after the Dominican ideal: *Contemplata praedicare*. We may recall that the founders' objective was 'to do the much good that in the absence of a religious congregation was left undone,' and that the then vicar apostolic Bp. Stabilini had instructed them to continue their active ministry so that from the new monastery not only the members but also the people at large would benefit. Thus, obviously the new community was intended to be apostolic and not exclusively contemplative in nature. Therefore, it was unwillingly that they accepted the Rule that the prelate unilaterally imposed on them, and ever since they were longing to have its clauses changed to suit their needs. All the same they were happy to be under the patronage of the Holy Mother and to be called the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate.

The second religious institute that Chavara with the help of others founded in the name of Mother Mary was the one established in Koonammavu in 1866 which later on was bifurcated as the present Congregation of the Mother of

Carmel (CMC) and Congregation of Teresian Carmelites (CTC). Originally its proposed name was the same as that of the men's community in Mannanam, as we gather from the deed by which the Syrian parish of Puthanpally gave on lease a portion of their property for the purpose of "building and conducting a convent in the name of the Immaculate Mother of Carmel."

Anyway, the point at issue is that the women's congregation in its original as well as the bifurcated forms has always been and continues to be in the name of Blessed Virgin Mary. St Chavara, therefore, can reasonably feel proud of being instrumental in erecting not one but two (or even three) religious institutes in honour of his beloved Mother in heaven. And through them, subsequently, the Marian devotion by means of rosary, scapular and so on was further promoted and popularized in Kerala. Many of the monasteries, for example, those in Elthuruth and Vazhakulam, and convents under the new congregations also were named after Mother Mary.

Chapter 22

LIFE MODELLED AFTER MOTHER MARY

22.1. Constituent Part of the Church

Immediately after the Second Vatican Council, among some people there was a complaint that the Council had not given sufficient place and importance to Mother Mary. But if we carefully go through the Council documents we will easily realize that the complaint has no basis. For ten out of the sixteen documents beautifully and appropriately present her. For example, there is a complete chapter on Mary in the document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. Besides, those on *the Sacred Liturgy, Ecumenism, Eastern Catholic Churches, Priestly Formation, Renewal of the Religious Life, Apostolate of the Laity, Ministry and Life of Priests, Church's Missionary Activity, and the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* mention her in a fitting manner. Of course, originally the plan was to bring out a separate document on her. It was even drafted and the Council Fathers started discussing it. But later they dropped the idea of issuing a separate document on Mary, and decided to have a full chapter as part of the decree on the Church. By doing so, they were making a very significant point, namely, that Mary is an essential part of the Church so that without her the latter's picture would remain incomplete. To say so is much more than praising Mary to any extent outside the Church. Certain factors like the Bible, the Apostles and the Sacraments are considered constituent parts of the Church in the sense that without any one or more of them the Church cannot be there. The Council Fathers at least indirectly are stating the same about Mary!

The Catholics in Kerala have always tacitly accepted Mother Mary as a constituent part of the Church and for that matter of Christian life as well. This is evidenced by the fact that there is practically no family among them without at least one member named after Mary. Moreover, how numerous indeed are the institutions and establishments, religious as well secular, dedicated to her! For them, clergy and laity alike, *the* prayer generally speaking means Marian rosary, and the family prayer, that is a beautiful sight every evening, is for the most part the recital of rosary. There is hardly anybody without a rosary or scapular or both of them with him/her as part of the dress. This was at least till recently the case, and Chavara was a proud heir of this tradition, as we have already seen. He took care that the religious communities that he co-founded also not only excelled in the Marian devotion but also promoted and strengthened it among the faithful. For example, Fr Thomas Palackal promoted the establishment and working of the Confraternity of Marian Scapular in the Syrian parishes.¹ Fr Thomas Porukara was a great Marian devotee, frequently seen on his knees while saying the entire long rosary consisting of 15 mysteries.² The daily schedule followed by the Mannanam Community included the 15 mysteries of rosary, the Litany of Our Lady, the prayer in honour of the Dolours of Our Lady and prayer to Our Lady of Scapular.³

As we shall see in the next two chapters, Chavara's portrayal of Mary in his *Ātmānutāpam* betrays his conviction that she is an essential part of the Christian community and life. In this book, as the story of Jesus' life unfolds, Mary

¹CWC I (1990): 66; CSK I (1981): 75-76.

²SP: 23.

³Bernard 1989: 39-40.

becomes more and more active and involved in His work of redemption. In chapters 8-9 and the former part of chapter 10, which deal with His Passion, Resurrection and Ascension, it is she who directs many of the events. In the latter part of chapter 10 and chapters 11-12, which present the post-Ascension developments, Mary takes the centre-stage in the early Christian community: everybody, even the Apostles including St Peter, every now and then looks to her for support and counsel which she assuredly and most willingly gives. She does so not as part of the hierarchy but as their charismatic leader as well as the beloved and concerned Mother!

Chavara not only recognized Marys' unique role and place in Christian life, but also had his life modelled on hers. We may briefly consider a few points of near comparison between these two lives, such as simplicity, revolutionary thinking, faith vision and unshakeable trust in God.

22.2. Simple but Revolutionary¹

There has been only one person in the entire human history, namely, Jesus Christ, who got the chance of choosing His Mother. Whom did He choose? The simple village girl called Mary! What did qualify her for this selection? Nothing but her humility and simplicity! They indeed are the marks of greatness in the eyes of God. If one of us gets the chance of choosing one's mother, as a rule one would look for a clever, talented, rich, fair and influential woman because in the world talents, riches, etc., are the criteria of greatness. For God, however, they mean nothing! Instead, as Jesus has clearly taught, the simplest and the humblest are

¹For much of the reflections about Mother Mary in this section we are indebted to Fr Francis Vineeth CMI.

the greatest in the kingdom of God. That is what Mary was: the simplest and the humblest! All the same she was not a stupid girl. She was indeed a very enlightened person, and even a revolutionary with revolutionary ideas. Her famous hymn of thanksgiving – *Magnificat* – is full of revolution. For example:

He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty (Lk 1:51-53).

This, indeed, is what we now-a-days call revolution: siding with the poor against the rich, defending the lowly against the powerful, and fighting for the rights of the exploited! And that is what Mother Mary proclaims here in unambiguous terms. In a way, she was anticipating the Sermon on the Mount that her Son was yet to preach, which opens: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). *The Magnificat* can be rightly described as a summary of the latest version of the Gospel interpretation called Liberation Theology. Mary was quite aware of her lowliness, but she was equally confident in the power of God. She deeply experienced the human uncertainties about the future, but her trust in God’s providence was equally unshakeable. She was keenly aware of the evils in the society like hypocrisy, injustice, inequality, poverty, exploitation of the poor and oppression of the just. She had a comprehensive remedy for all these, not merely a few sermons or works of charity, but her Son, God incarnate! She presented Him to the world as its Saviour, Redeemer and Liberator!

Turning to Chavara we see in him the virtue of simplicity coupled with prophetic wisdom and courage. Jesus' instruction that his followers "should be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Mt 10:16) was realized in him in an impressive manner. There are quite a few incidents that exemplify his childlike innocence. We shall presently recall one or two of them.

As stated above in section 5.4., regarding the establishment of the seminary attached to the monastery Frs Porukara and Palackal had different views: while the former strongly favoured the idea, the latter opposed it with equal force. Palackal had three good reasons for his position: one, if there is a seminary it will make the people feel more attached to the monastery so that they will support its cause more willingly; two, the presence of seminarians will enhance the solemnity of liturgical services, and, three, from among the seminarians there shall be good candidates for monastic life. Porukara's reasons for opposing the proposal were: one, in pursuing their primary goal of having a monastery they must trust solely in God, whereas to seek human support and help would invite troubles; two, experience shows that places where there were seminaries in the past have ended up in ruins; and, three, to train the seminarians is too difficult a task! Chavara's response was: "Thus, they were divided in opinion. For stupid me, however, both views were agreeable. Inwardly and outwardly, I happily agreed with Porukara as well as the *malpān*."¹ One should appreciate his simplicity in calling himself "stupid" and remaining open to different ways of looking at things.

¹CWC I (1990): 28; CSK I (1981): 33.

Another relevant instance is Chavara's response to the scolding and humiliation at the hands of Archbishop Francis Xavier. It was the time when Chavara was working as the vicar in Pallipuram Parish. But his presence in Mannanam was badly needed for the supervision of the construction work. So, he met the archbishop and, in all simplicity and in a matter of fact manner, requested him to appoint the young priest Varkey in his place as the vicar so that he could move to Mannanam. The prelate seemed to be favouring the request. Feeling encouraged Chavara took the freedom of a child to give some not so necessary explanations. That irritated the archbishop. Noisily turning his chair towards Chavara and in a fit of anger he severely reprimanded him: "Is this the way to answer the prelate? How can a junior priest behave like this? You want to have everything your own way, don't you? Have you been ordained a priest for this? You deserve to be suspended at once! Go away!" Chavara got terribly frightened. Instantly, falling on his knees he kissed the archbishop's hand and came out. Reflecting upon the event he writes: "My indiscretion and zeal for having the monastery built led me to give answers grave enough for suspension! I am grateful that the archbishop was so considerate as to forgive me!"¹ Here, again, we notice Chavara's simplicity and sincerity in accepting his own mistake and appreciating the archbishop's goodness.

However, we should not conclude that Chavara did not have his own convictions and decisions. Later on, when the responsibilities of guiding the community as their prior general and caring for the faithful as their vicar general fell

¹CWC I (1990): 26-27; CSK I (1981): 31-32.

on him, in all matters concerned he had clear views, strong decisions and prudent ways of handling various issues and challenges. This is more than obvious in the manner he managed the critical questions related to the profession of vows in 1855 and the Roccas episode in 1861-1862. "Holy Father Pope Pius IX, gloriously reigning, on hearing about the stability of Chavara's faith and about his zeal for saving the Christians from the schism, wrote to him a letter of high praise and deep satisfaction."¹ He had also a clear and creative vision regarding the course of action that the hierarchy should adopt in order to ensure peace and harmony in the Church of Kerala, and that he humbly but courageously shared with the administration in Rome, too.² We may also recall the many prophetic initiatives of Chavara such as the establishment of a printing press, education institutes open to all people irrespective of caste, creed and gender, an old age home, St Joseph's Confraternity for Happy Death, and catechumenates for *Dalit* Christians with provisions of meals at noon. One cannot also ignore his many undertakings for the training and reform of priests, renewal of liturgical life, and the setting up of two religious congregations, one for women and the other for men. Added to all these are his literary contributions of high quality and socio-religious as well as historical importance.

22.3. Pilgrim of Faith

In the final analysis, what made Mary really great was her faith. She was doubtless a pilgrim of faith. In this regard, she is comparable with Abraham the Patriarch of Faith in the

¹Beccaro 2003: 11.

²For more details see Kochumuttom 2014: 205-215.

Old Testament. The same compliment is given to both of them. About Abraham we read: "And he [Abraham] believed the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3, 9, 22, 23; Gal 3:6). About Mary, too, Elizabeth said: "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45). Abraham and Mary were solitary pilgrims, each carrying a mystery that no one else shared. On the way, each of them had to go through a series of agonies one after another before the final ecstasy, and the only resource they had with them was their faith in God's providence, nothing else.

For Mary the pilgrimage started with the Annunciation, which although is a good news for us today, was not so for her. To become an unwed mother in that Jewish arch-conservative society was to risk one's life! Their practice was that such a woman should be stoned to death in public! So, while receiving the news she was trembling with fear! The future was all dark and bleak, staring at her. Who would believe her? None at all! Neither her friends nor her parents nor her would-be husband! She was going to be at the mercy of the society, which indeed was a merciless one! She was obviously risking her life. The only capital at her disposal was pure faith! Naked faith, as St John of the Cross would put it, namely, faith with no sign at all supporting it. She simply and absolutely believed that God would take care of her. Thus, her *fiat* was an act of sheer faith, a leap into darkness!

Next we see Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem. The child was born. It was so ordinary and helpless a baby that anybody could reasonably doubt: How can it be the Son of God!? But neither Joseph nor Mary doubted. They believed

what God had said to them was correct. Then there was a quite unexpected order from heaven to Joseph: "Rise, take the child and his mother by night, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (Mt 2:13). Again, one could ask: "If He is the Son of God, why should He flee in fear of a human king!?" Joseph and Mary, however, had no doubt, but firmly believed and obeyed.

Eventually returning from Egypt they settled in Nazareth. When Jesus was twelve years old, the Holy Family as usual went to Jerusalem for the festival. While returning when they were half way the parents realized that the Boy Jesus was not with them. One can imagine Mary's agony! This was perhaps the most painful event in her life, more painful than even what she suffered while standing at the foot of the cross. For in the latter case she knew what was happening while in the present one she had no idea! She lost the treasure entrusted to her by God. What answer she would give Him? Additionally the motherly feeling and concern at the loss of her only darling Child! With great anxiety she and Joseph returned to Jerusalem where to their great consolation they met Jesus discussing serious matters with scholars. Mary heaved a sigh of relief! But she poured out her motherly feelings – perhaps the only time she spoke in a complaining tone – "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously" (Lk 2:48). Indeed, words of the Mother's concern!

But Jesus' response was a very cold one. He spoke as if they did something wrong: "How is it that you sought for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Mention of His Father! Which other father than Joseph who was standing right there? An embarrassing

situation for Mary and Joseph! "And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them" (Lk 2:50). Then comes the most significant statement about Mary in the Bible: "And his mother kept all these in her heart," a statement that was already made once before in the same chapter when the shepherds had come and gone back: "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in heart" (Lk 2:19). This statement is the most significant one because it portrays a person of faith that indeed Mary was. Persons of faith unlike those of reason meeting with things that are beyond their grasp without questioning or/and complaining would in all humility accept them as mysteries of faith to be admired and adored. They then patiently would wait for God's time to come for the mysteries to be unveiled, in the meantime contemplating them in their hearts. This certainly was the personality trait of Mary. In fact, during her pilgrimage she was presented with mysteries one after another, and in every case this was her position.

For another instance, she once visited her Son Jesus Christ while He was preaching. Visiting Him frequently during His public life must have been her practice, instead of quietly sitting at home. She was kept informed of all that was happening to Him, good things as well as bad things. There were good things like His growing popularity, the huge crowds following and applauding Him, the miracles He was working, and the revolutionary and persuasive ideas He was preaching. But there were also bad things causing concern for her. Right from the beginning He had enemies and they were becoming stronger and stronger, and plotting to kill Him. He was constantly under the threat of death. So, it was natural that Mary kept visiting Him

frequently with concern, and even accompanying Him. This was one such visit. But as He was surrounded by a thick crowd, she could not get anywhere near Him. So, the message was passed to Him that His Mother was waiting outside wanting to have a word with Him. She had not come without a purpose, but to share with Him something important. But what was His response like? Very cold and even insulting, humanly speaking! He spoke as if He did not give Mary any special place in His life: "Who is my mother...? For whoever does the will of my Father is ... my mother!" (Mt 12:48-50). Of course, the Lord was well-intentioned. But for the humans He sounded like counting Mary as just one among many. But hearing it Mary would not feel annoyed. She must have said: "Whatever my Son says and does is certainly true, no matter whether I understand it or not, and whether it is something pleasant or not! I am happy." Her faith and confidence in her Son was unshakeable, indeed.

Next we see Mary and Jesus together on the way to Calvary. We usually say parting is painful. But sometimes meeting is more painful. This was such a meeting. Mary met Jesus condemned to death, carrying a heavy cross, bleeding all over, tortured and exhausted! Which woman would like to see her son like this! Mary and Jesus stood very close to one another, face to face! They looked at each other. They would not speak a word, for their hearts were full. They certainly understood and supported each other and shared the feelings! Mary remembered God's promise that her Son would be the King of Israel, seated on the throne of David, and with a kingdom with no end (Lk 1:32-34). Is that promise going to be fulfilled? He is almost dead! But Mary would not shake; she continued to believe that God will

fulfil His promise at His time and in His way. She would not ask how and when!

Then, the procession reaches the top of the mountain. There, right in front of her, Jesus was mercilessly crucified. He writhed in pain. She remembered God's promise: 'Your Son shall be the King of Israel...' Is that going to be realized? He is almost dead! Yet she believed, hoping against hope, that God's promise will be realized at His time and in His way. Then He was raised on the cross. About Mary we read: 'She stood at the foot of the cross' (Jn 19:25). She *stood*, neither sat nor fainted! Even in the torrent of suffering she stood. It was indeed the courage of faith that she had by then gathered. She again remembered the promise that her Son would be the King of Israel. How? In a short while He will be dead! In the case of Abraham, at the last minute God interfered and saved his son Isaac. Is something like that going to happen here? No way! God is not there at all. Jesus desperately cried out: "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46). Still Mary continued to believe in God's promise. Finally, it did happen: her "Sun" set once and for all—Jesus died plunging her into the thickest darkness! What about God's promise? Humanly speaking there is no way at all for its realization. Even so Mary's faith would not falter. Then, there was the burial that left no trace of Jesus on earth. It was total darkness. In fact, that Saturday—the Holy Saturday—was the darkest night for Mary, meaning faith with no support of the senses and reason! The only light that she had was that of faith that was darkness for her senses and reason. But she was full of confidence. That is why she was not among the Apostles who had shut themselves in a room for fear of the enemies. She must have been quietly there at home, patiently waiting

for God's time to come for the mystery to be unveiled. Then the "Sunrise" on the Easter Sunday shedding flood light! Her Son rose, all glorious light dispelling the darkness altogether! The ecstasy putting an end to the series of agonies along her pilgrimage of faith! Then very soon there was the second stage of her ecstasy, the triumphant Ascension of her Son, and still later its third and final stage, her own Assumption! She was crowned the Queen of Heaven and Earth. That indeed is what she is today, of which we her children can be rightly proud. But we should be aware of, and resolved to take, the way through which she attained this elevated position, namely, a lifelong pilgrimage of faith.

22.4. Chavara's Pilgrimage of Faith

Following the example of Mother Mary, Chavara resolutely made his life a pilgrimage of faith. We may quickly recall the challenges he courageously faced, the crises he creatively managed and the hurdles he successfully overcame in the light of faith: The painful renunciation he made of his family, especially his beloved mummy, in response to God's call to priesthood; the loss of his parents and the only brother, and the subsequent crisis of vocation caused by the insistent request of his uncles to get married for the sake of the continuance of the lineage; the disgraceful experience of being refused to sit with the Latin Rite seminarians in the Latin language class for which his *malpān* Palackal had painstakingly made all the necessary arrangements; the unexpected and indefinite postponement of his ordination for which with all the preparations the *malpān* had on the appointed day taken him to the Bishop's House in Varapuzha; the giving up of the successful pastoral ministries in parishes that he had enjoyed and the

people had appreciated during the days immediately after his ordination; the withdrawal, in obedience to the desire of his *malpān*, to Mount Mannanam in order to look after the construction work of the monastery; the painful act of obedience to the archbishop's unilateral order transferring him and Fr Porukara respectively to Pallipuram and Kollam as vicars, leaving practically nobody to take care of the work in Mannanam and causing concern about its continuance; the humiliation at the hands of the archbishop rejecting his request to reconsider the transfer order; again the severe scolding by the same prelate for humbly entreating to replace him with Fr Varkey as the vicar at Pallipuram; the almost 25 year long indefinite wait for the ecclesiastical approval of the congregation and permission to make the profession of vows; the archbishop's highhanded imposition of the Carmelite Rule on the community, and his refusal to make the necessary changes in it in consideration of the local conditions, the Syrian practices and the originally intended spirit and charism of the new congregation as an apostolic one; the event of 11 out of 22 candidates just a few days before the profession deciding to leave the congregation because of the severity of the Rule which the archbishop unjustifiably refused to mitigate; the unilateral affiliation of the congregation by the OCD Superior General in Rome with the connivance of the archbishop as one of their Third Order Institutes; the stress and strain in leading the struggle against the unauthorized Chaldean Bishop Roccas and his local supporters; his being transferred in his old age to Koonammavu from Mannanam where he had worked hard and untiringly for three decades and a half to put up the monastery and bring it up; the hardships involved in founding the convent in Koonammavu and training its members; and finally the old age handicaps and

health-problems. In all these, Chavara clearly saw God's will, firmly trusted in His providence, exercised his extraordinary faith, and perseveringly maintained the Christian optimism. He certainly was a pilgrim of faith.

In all his achievements, too, he invariably saw God's provident hands, and gratefully gave full credit to Him, and humbly acknowledged that left to himself he would not have had any of them. We may repeat the beautiful self-evaluation of life that he made towards the end of his pilgrimage:

Are all those things that God made me do, within my power? How have you arrived so far? Who made you leave your family? How come you were ordained a priest? How did you join the monastery? Where did the religious congregation come from? Who appointed you as prior? How have you reached here? Are you worthy of anything of these? Not, certainly not! So what? God's will is done. It will always be done!¹

Indeed, Chavara saw God's hands in everything that happened to him and around him. What wisdom! The wisdom of faith! He looked at all things with his heart's eye (*hrdaya-kannu*), an expression he uses for faith² in imitation of St Paul's usage: 'Have the eyes of your heart enlightened' (Eph 1:18).

22.5. Take Her Home

What is practically more important for us is that Mary the Mother of Jesus is also our Mother so that we must accept

¹*Colloquies* in CWC III (1990): 1; CSK III (1981): 15.

²"Falling prostrate in the presence of the Almighty and looking at Him with your heart's eye, you must adore Him" (*Dhyāna-sallāpankal* [*Colloquies*] in CSK III [1981]: 25).

and respect her as such. We may mention three simple reasons for saying that she is our Mother. First of all, it is our basic human need that we, especially as priests and religious, should have a mother's love and care not only in our physical life but also in our spiritual journey. This need of ours is adequately met by Mary.

Secondly, it is her right that we should accept and respect her as our Mother, because she is *really* so, not merely metaphorically. When she consented to become the Mother of Jesus, she consented to be ours as well. There is no woman who is just the head's and not of the body's mother. One who is the mother of the head is necessarily that of the body as well. By this logic we should admit that Mary who is the Mother of Jesus the Head of the Church is necessarily also the Mother of all of us who are its members. So, it is her right that we accept and respect her as our Mother.

Thirdly and finally, it is God's will that we should have Mary as our Mother. That is what Jesus declared from the cross while saying to Mary pointing to John: "Woman, behold, your son!" and to John pointing to Mary: "Behold, your mother!" (Jn 19:26, 27). What could have He meant by those two tiny statements? Among us it is common that when a man dies he says to his children: "When I am gone you must take care of your mother." He is thereby expressing his concern for her and making arrangements for her care and safety. Was Jesus doing something like that? Yes, but much more than that. If He were concerned merely about His Mother's care and keeping, it was enough for Him to say to John: "Behold, your Mother!" But without stopping at that, He added, or even said to Mary as His primary concern: "Behold, your son!" He, therefore, was stating His will that Mary His Mother was also the Mother

of all His disciples represented by John, and that all of them should accept and respect her as such.

Taking into account these three reasons we must do what John did: "And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (Jn 19:27). We must indeed take Mary home! Not merely in a symbolic manner by carrying her medal or portrait or statue, but in reality as St Chavara did, proudly saying: "In this my heart there is, indeed, always your thought, [O! Mother]!"¹ Give her the rightful place in our hearts and let her guide and direct our steps in the pilgrimage of faith!

¹*Am* 2: 248 in CWC II (1989): 13 and CSK II (1981): 13.

Chapter 23

CHAVARA'S MARIOLOGY

23.1. Marian Appellations¹

It is interesting to note that Chavara has worked out a comprehensive Mariology that is spread out through his writings. We shall now have a bird's eye view of it as presented mostly in his work, *The Compunction of Soul*.

First of all, while presenting Mother Mary the author applies to her a variety of significant titles that are mostly Chavara's own inventions. For example: *Trai-lokya-rājñi* (Queen of Three Worlds 6:218), *Tri-loka-nātha* (Mistress of Three Worlds 6:228), *Vara-varṇini-śreṣṭha* (The Noblest of All Benefactors 4:106), *Nirmala-guṇa-nātha* (Mistress of Pure Virtues 7:141), *Kanyakakaḷku Maṇimakuṭam* (Diamond-Crown of Virgins 2:221-24), *Strikaḷil Śreṣṭha* (The Noblest of Women 4:1-12), *Kanyakakaḷku Maṇi-ratnam* (Pearl of Virgins 5:119-122), *Śakti-dāyika* (Giver of Strength 6:428), *Rājeśvari* (Queen of [Christ] the King 6 436), *Kāruṇya-māta* (Mother of Mercy/Merciful Mother 4:82), *Śneha-tāya* (Mother of Love/Beloved Mother 12:156), *Karmela-mātr-devi* (Divine Mother of Carmel 7:184), *Tāra-makuṭa-maṇi* (Adorned with a Crown of Stars 5:13, 6:48), *Tārā-dhāriṇi* (Wearing a Crown of Stars 6:300), *Soma-pādini* (One with the Crescent as Pedestal 5:13, 6:47), *Samudra-tāra/Aṃbudhi-tāra-nātha/Tāra-samudra* (Star of Sea 10:224, 6:34, 36), *Jerusalem-putri* (Daughter of Jerusalem 12:13, 22), and *Kāruṇya-kaṭal* (Ocean of Mercy 12:72).

¹This section has been inspired by Elizabeth 1994: 78-84, and Lisieux Therese 1996: 73-74.

In relation to God (the Father) Mary is described as *Sraṣṭāvinte Māta* (Mother of Creator 11:333), *Daiva-pitā-makaḷ* (Daughter of God the Father 10:80), God's *Sutā* (Daughter 11:432), God the Father's *Putri* (Daughter 12:68), God's *Dāsi* (Servant 11:440, 12:31), God's *Snehitā* (Friend 12:249), God's *Columba* (Dove 12:249), God's *Sneha-putri* (Dear Daughter 12:314; *Mātr-duḥkham*, line 149), God's *Mangala-makaḷ* (Auspicious Daughter 10:94).

For the Holy Spirit, Mary is His *Mahiṣi* (Empress), *Sneha-manvāṭṭi* (Beloved Spouse), and *Rājñi* (Queen) (line 44 of the appendix called "*Antya-pādam*" to the twelfth *pāda*). To the great delight of His Beloved Empress (*Sneha-mahiṣi*) He says to her: "You are my lovely bride (*saundarya-manvāṭṭi*), you are all exceedingly pure (*sarvam mahā-śudhi*), all bright light (*sarvam mahā-raśmi*), and you are the only one born without the stain of original sin (*janma-pāpattin malaṃ vinā*)" (11:220).

In relation to Jesus Christ, Mary is repeatedly addressed as Mother of God (*Deva-Māta*) not only in *The Compunction of Soul*, but also in Chavara's other writings. More or less synonymously employed expressions are: *Sūrya-deva-janani* (Mother of [Jesus] the Divine Sun/ *Mātr-duḥkham*, line 191), *Tiru-manvālan Māta* (Mother of [Jesus] the Divine Bridegroom 8:105), *Aruṇodaya* (The One Announcing the Rise of [Jesus] the Sun 2:273), *Rajeśvri* (The Mother of [Jesus] the King 4:35, 7:435, and *Nāthan-Rājan-Ammayām Rājñi* (Queen Mother of Lord [Jesus] the King 10:110).

There are statements about Mary's unique place and role in the Church: In the first place, quoting Jesus' prayer for His enemies, and His words to the good thief, Mary and John from the cross (Jn 19:26-29), Chavara identifies her with the woman whose Son, according to Gen 3:15, would bruise

Satan's head. Chavara then gives his interpretation of the matter:

While lying suspended on the cross the Lord earnestly prayed to the Father: "God! Kindly forgive them, for they know not what they do!" Hearing this holy utterance, the good thief hanging on His right prayed: "Lord! When You reach Your heavenly kingdom remember me a sinful servant!" The Lord immediately responded: "Today you shall certainly be with Me in Paradise." He then said to His Mother, "Woman, behold, your son," and to the beloved disciple, "Behold, your Mother!" Till now the Satan was doubtful about things. Now, however, everything is clear to him. From the triple statement – 'They know not what they do,' 'Today you shall be with Me in Paradise, and 'Woman, behold, your son,' – he became convinced that Jesus is the promised Saviour, and that Mary is the Woman who [through her Son] bruises his head!¹

Thus, Mary is recognized as the decisive instrument for the Saviour's appearance on earth so that she deserves to be called the co-redeemer of mankind. Being the Mother of Jesus Christ the head she is also inevitably the Mother of His body the Church. All His disciples represented by John, therefore, should accept and respect her as their Mother, and in turn they are entrusted to her motherly care and concern. Mary is, thus, called *Slīhar-rājñī* (Queen of Apostles: *Antya-pādam*, line 36), *Śreṣṭha-senā-nāyika* (Honoured Captain of [Heavenly] Army 6:48).

Mary is also given her rightful place as the queen of entire of creation, human as well as non-human. She is *Nara-*

¹*Ām* 8: 232-249 in CWC II (1989): 71-72 and CSK (1981): 71-72.

varga-rājñi (Queen of Mankind 4:32,) *Nara-kulattinnuṭe-śakti* (Strength of Human Race 11:334), *Nara-kula-māta* (Mother of Human Race 11:470), *Bhūmi-nātha* (Mistress of Earth 11:456), *Tri-loka-nātha* (Mistress of All Three Worlds 4:172, 6:228), *Trai-lokya-rājñi* (Queen of All Three Worlds 6:218), *Sarvarkkum Māta* (Mother of All 7:195), *Sarva-rājñi* (Queen of All 7:56), *Samasta-nātha* (Mistress of All 9:146), *Samasta-sṛṣṭippinum Amma/Tala/Rājñi* (Mother/Head/Queen of the Entire Creation 10:224, 10:230).

Another set of titles are concerned about Mary's position among women. She is *Mankamār-maṇi* (Pearl among Women 4:82), *Kanyā-maṇi/Kanyakā-maṇi-ratnam* (Pearl among Virgins 5:37, 5:119), *Nāryārya* (The Noblest among Women 5:50), *Vara-varṇini* (Giver of Gifts 5:105), *Puṇya-kanyā* (Holy Virgin 4:151), *Kanni-māta* (Virgin Mother 4:152), *Anperum Strīṇām Varā* (Exceedingly Compassionate and the Noblest of Women 4:1), *Śaṅkhilum VeṇmayerumNirmala-maṇi* (Pure Pearl More Beautiful than a Conch 4:120), *Nirmalāṅgi* (Immaculate in Body 7:435), *Bhāgyam Nirayapeṭṭava!* (Full of Grace CSK III (1981): 76), *Sundara-mukhi* (Lovely Faced 5:78). Obviously all these qualifications are different versions or explanations of the two Biblical statements about Martyr: the angel's greeting, "Hail Mary! Full of Grace" (Lk 1:28), and Elizabeth's, "Blessed are you among women!" (Lk 1:42). All the same perhaps Chavara personally preferred to address her as *Karmala-amma* (the Mother of Carmel):

More significantly you are the Mother of Carmel, Oh!
Immaculate Mother! I deem it a great fortune that you

have accepted me as your servant, though I am sure of my unworthiness of it!¹

23.2. Church's Dogmatic Teachings

Chavara's reflections on Mary include also beautiful descriptions of the Church's dogmatic teachings about her. Taking her Divine Motherhood for granted, in his *Dhyāna-sallāpankal* he frequently addresses her with names meaning Mother of God (see, for example, CSK III [1981]: 16, 30, 42, and 45). From the long list of Marian names given above it is clear that Chavara was deeply aware of her being the Mother of God. We may recall a few of them: *Sraṣṭāvintē Māta* (Mother of Creator 11:333), *Sūrya-deva-janani* (Mother of [Jesus] the Divine Sun/ *Mātr-duḥkham*: 191), *Tirumanvālan Māta* (Mother of [Jesus] the Divine Bridegroom 8:105), and *Nāthan-Rājan-Ammayām Rajīi* (Queen Mother of Lord [Jesus] the King 10:110). Besides, many of her titles in relation to Jesus Christ imply that she is His Mother. *Ātmānutāpam* has a poetic portrait of Mother Mary with her child Jesus:

Like a lotus bloom placed on a water-lily flower, in the hands of Mother Mary, the Star of Ocean, her child the Lord Infant Jesus rests. How lovely indeed is His sleep in the hands of the Star of Sea like a baby swan on a lotus-flower bed.²

About Mary's Immaculate Conception Chavara says:

Her Son Jesus Christ presenting Mary in God's presence in heaven, with sentiments of gratitude to the Holy Trinity, said: "In view of My birth in the human family, the Great God by freeing Mary from

¹Ām 7: 173-176 in CWC II (1989): 52 and CSK II (1981): 52.

²Ām 6: 33-36 in CWC II (1989): 37 and CSK II (1981): 37.

the stain of original sin rendered her great!" Then the Unchangeable God the Father confirmed it for the sake of the entire court of heaven: "Certainly you were born without sin." Hearing the words of the Father, the Son too repeated: "My Mother, the sinless noble lady, surely the stain of sin was never in you. Blessed are you!" When God the Father and the Son said so, Holy Spirit, the God of love, Who loved her from her birth, uttered words that delighted His beloved spouse: "You are My beautiful bride! You are all exceedingly holy! You are all immensely bright! You are the only one born without the stain of original sin!" Hearing these words all heavenly beings instantly praised God and acclaimed with glee. The entire creation, spiritual as well as bodily ones, clapped their hands and playing on fine musical instruments sang thus: "The great Mother Mary, exceedingly holy Mother, you were born altogether untouched by the stain of original sin!" At this time Mother Mary enjoyed the vision of the Three Divine Persons of God just as the blessed ones in heaven do.¹

Concerning Mary's virgin-motherhood Chavara sings: "As the sun-ray penetrates a glass unhindered, so did Mary the Noblest of All Women without losing her virginity gave birth to her Baby Jesus."² Again immediately before her Assumption he puts the following words in the mouth of the angels and saints in all the three worlds, "Oh! Mary, you were virgin before, after and at the childbirth, and you were ever so, indeed!"³

¹*Ām* 11: 205-228 in CWC II (1989): 103 and CSK II (1981): 105.

²*Ām* 5: 49-50 in CWC II (1989): 31 and CSK II (1981): 31.

³*Ām* 12: 208-09 in CWC II (1989): 117 and CSK II (1981): 119.

Chavara's presentation of Mary's Assumption is worth special mention. We have it in chapters 11 and 12 of *Ātmānutāpam*. God through Archangel Gabriel announced to Mary her approaching departure from this world. Her response was: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord! Let it be done to me according your word" (Lk 1:38; *Ām* 11:281-282). Through a letter written in her own hand she immediately passed the news to all the disciples all over the world. They and all the creation on earth were very sad! In preparation for the departure she once again made a Way of the Cross reaching up to Mount Calvary. She directed the angels guarding the holy mount to assist the pilgrims arriving there and to protect the place from being profaned by anybody. She then wrote down her last testament. By now all the Apostles and disciples gathered around her and she gave them her blessing and final message. She paid homage to Peter as the of head of the Church, acknowledging that she, in spite of being its Mother, was also one of its members and a disciple of her Son Jesus! She had also a special word of love and concern to the beloved disciple John whom the Lord had entrusted to her care! She said to Peter and all the faithful:

Oh! Peter, you are the noble guru of the community of faithful. You are the head of my mother the Church. Therefore, along with the Church and all her children, a humble servant I entreat for your blessing. Moreover, I beg pardon of you for the mistakes that I thoughtlessly committed during my life. And I request all of you graciously to grant this servant

permission to take leave of you for my journey to the next world.¹

Then, with Peter's permission, she gifted two tunics to the girls who had so far served her and a mantle to her "beloved son John." Presumably, she had herself sewed them. She then kissed Peter's feet, and then said to John: "My child, my beloved Son while on the cross entrusted you to me as my son, and me to you as your mother. I did not succeed in caring for you with a mother's love! But from you, however, I gratefully received ample service. My son, please do forgive my shortcomings."² She then turned to all the disciples gathered there and said: "As the Lord and Son of God, my Son, taught me, I love every one of you. You are His children. You must love one another. That is the blessedness and salvation for all. While in the kingdom of heaven I will remember all of you!"³

Then, Jesus appeared and gave her a choice to enter eternity either through death or without dying. He said:

My beloved Mother, you bore Me in your immaculate womb as in a home. God Our Father is awaiting you. A throne is prepared for you on My right hand side. From this valley of death you may enter into the land of life, from time to eternity. You as My Mother entered this world without sin. You are welcome to My kingdom where you shall live forever with Me. The Father lets you choose either to pass through death or right away to enter with Me into My kingdom! Mother Mary gazing at His lovely figure

¹*Ām* 12: 105-112 in CWC II (1989): 114 and CSK II (1981): 116.

²*Ām* 12: 119-127 in CWC II (1989): 114-115 and CSK (1981): 117.

³*Ām* 12: 128-133 in CWC II (1989): 115 and CSK (1981): 117.

replied with respect: "My beloved Son, Lord, my God, You are my Child, and I am Your Mother. All the same I am Your humble servant! Please listen! I am Adam's daughter, and a worthless worm! You are the just King of all beings. Even so, through me you took a human birth, lived on earth a life of sufferings, and died. Therefore, how lawful it is that I who am Your servant and insignificant dust go through the common door of death!"¹

Mary's desire was granted. Amidst hymns of praise sung by the heavenly beings she died. But it was death caused not by any natural factors like illness, but by pure love:

Then the Mother bowed her head. Jesus spoke [in the words of *The Song of Songs*]: 'My love, my dove, come forth! Monsoon is gone and summer has set in! Behold in this land of Mine blossoms have bloomed!' She then intently gazed at her Son, and said: 'I place my soul in Your hands,' closed her eyes, and instantly breathed her last. The cause of her holy death was nothing but pure divine love! Thus, she transformed illness and death to nectar on earth!²

The funeral was duly conducted with all solemnity. Then on the third day, which was a Sunday as it was in the case of her Son Jesus, escorted by Him and the entire heavenly court Mary's soul came back to the tomb and rejoining her glorious body was blissfully assumed into heaven. Welcoming her, God the Father declared her the queen of His kingdom:

¹*Ām* 12: 156-176 in CWS II (1989): 116 and CSK II: (1981): 118.

²*Ām* 12: 248-257 in CWC II (1989): 118 and CSK II (1981): 120.

As you know, this My beloved daughter is the foremost of all My creation. I crown and install her as the queen of my kingdom. She shall reign over it unto eternity.¹

23.3. Contemplative and Active

In Chavara's vision of Mary she was equally a contemplative and active person—indeed a contemplative in action. That she was a contemplative is clearly stated in the Gospel. For example, when the shepherds had come and gone after worshipping Infant Jesus, the evangelist records: "But Mary kept all things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 1:19). Again, in the context of Boy Jesus being lost and found in the temple, "His Mother kept all these things in her heart" (Lk 1:51). However, she was not a cloistered person. Instead, as a concerned mother and a committed disciple she faithfully accompanied Jesus, assisting Him in all His needs and sharing in all His joys and sorrows. In fact, she was a journeying mother and a serving disciple. Immediately after the Annunciation she went in haste to visit and help her relative Elizabeth, making a very arduous journey covering the entire length of Palestine from Galilee to Judea. Returning home she again in the difficult time of advanced pregnancy went with her husband Joseph to Bethlehem in Judea. There she delivered her Son in the most unfavourable conditions of a manger. Then by God's order the Holy Family makes the most unprepared journey abroad and lives in the foreign land of Egypt among strangers in unfamiliar life-situations. Again, returning to Palestine they settled in Nazareth in poverty and hardships. As conscientious Jews, they used to make annual

¹*Am* 12: 313-316 in CWC II (1989): 120 and CSK II (1981): 122.

pilgrimages to Jerusalem in Judea. Accordingly, when Jesus was twelve years old they went there for the festival. While returning half way they realized that Boy Jesus was not with them. With anxiety they went back in search of Him until they found Him in the temple in Jerusalem. Again the long journey to Nazareth to continue the life of hard work and inconveniences for the next 21 years in that small village with minimum facilities!

Even as Jesus began His public ministry, as a mother and disciple Mary closely followed Him. On one occasion during His public life in her presence He declared that she was His Mother more by hearing and obeying the word of God, than by giving Him birth (Mt 12:50; Mk 3:35; Lk 8:2). Then we see Mary actively present with Jesus during His suffering and death which Chavara narrates with imagination and theological implications. The garment that the soldiers ruthlessly took off the body of Jesus, first before scourging Him and then before crucifying Him, was the same as that Mary had herself beautifully woven and put on Him while a baby and grew with Him.¹ On the way to Calvary, Mary seeing her Son, brutally tortured and exhausted, prayed that He might be granted some relief and consolation. Responding to her prayer the Lord through an angel made the soldiers soften their hatred and cruelty, and press a wayfarer Simon to lend Him a helping hand in bearing the cross.² The Mother again ardently desired to have a loving look at her Son's face, and He obliged her by directing angels to help her to reach Him through the crowd.³ Reaching the top of the mountain the persecutors offered

¹*Am* 7: 437-455 in CWC II (1989): 59 and CSK II (1981): 59-60.

²*Am* 8: 109-121 in CWC II (1989): 68 and CSK II (1981): 68.

³*Am* 8: 122-129 in CWC II (1989): 68-69 and CSK II (1981): 68-69.

Him a drink. Mary realizing that it was mixed with poison entreated Him not to take it, although, expressing His willingness to suffer for the sake of love for the mankind, He drank it with delight!¹ They were about to take off His clothes, and He was ready to accept the gross humiliation! However, at the behest of His mother He did not let them strip Him full naked.²

As the soldiers were getting ready to nail Jesus to the cross He entrusted His Mother to the Father, and prayed for all His disciples, and even sinners including those who were crucifying Him. The Mother, too, prayed for them. Eventually, they started the process of crucifixion. Making Him stretch His arms along the horizontal bar of the cross they marked the points where they then bored holes to drive in nails through His palms. But the carelessly made holes were so wide apart that they had mercilessly to tug His arms using a rope to make them reach the slots! The Mother fondly approached and tenderly kissed His hands. The enemies, however, stopped her!³

Having cruelly pinned Him against the cross with nails in His hands and legs, they were about to turn the cross upside down in order to bend the tips of the nails. The onlookers vehemently protested against the cruel move. Mother Mary prayed to the Father that the persecutors might spare His Son's eyes from being hurt by hitting the granite stones! The Father granted her prayer: His angels stood invisibly beneath the cross, keeping it in the mid-air,

¹*Am* 8: 136-141 in CWC II (1989): 69 and CSK II (1981): 69.

²*Am* 8: 154-159 in CWC II (1989): 69 and CSK II (1981): 69.

³*Am* 8: 166-183 in CWC II (1989): 70 and CSK II (1981): 70.

while the soldiers under the impression that the cross was on the floor securely bent the nails!¹

After Jesus' death Mary is presented as standing at the foot of the cross flanked by Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene, all of them with hearts full of sore with grief untold. Mother Mary consulted with angels how best to bear down His sacred body quickly and bury it in the sepulchre safely. Seeing blood and water rushing from Jesus' heart pierced by the spear of Longinus who was blind from birth, she prayed to Him: "Lord, deign to turn Your justice to pity and look on him with mercy!" In response, He gratefully let a drop of His blood splash into Longinus' eyes. Instantly, his eyes and heart opened! Full of gratitude he blessed the Lord.²

Saturday was dawning. Hence, the body had to be urgently removed from the cross. But how?! Who will pull the nails off His limbs and bear the body down? Helpless, the Mother with eyes raised to heaven again prayed to the Father. In answer, the compassionate Father sent sympathetic people to her assistance. Seeing them coming up from the valley at first she felt fear: "Who could they be!? They are carrying some weapons! May be they are another group of miscreants wanting to do further cruelties to the Lord!" Reading her thoughts on her face the beloved disciple John said words of consolation: "Mother, they are not enemies but our friends. They are coming to console you and take the Lord's body from the cross. They have brought with them fine perfumes and linen cloths to anoint and wrap it for the burial which, too, they will do." Joseph of

¹*Am* 8: 183-197 in CWC II (1989): 70 and CSK II (1981): 70-71.

²*Am* 9: 1-30 in CWC II (1989): 73-74 and CSK II (1981): 73-74.

Arimathea and Nicodemus with some other disciples reaching the Mother of Dolours stood at her feet, steeped in grief. Unable to utter a word they gazed at her with sincere sympathy and deep concern. As finally she somehow allayed their grief, they greeted her.¹

As they were getting ready to remove the body from the cross, the Mother said:

My Son is the Lord of the triple world. He created the innumerable stars, and the birds of the air. See how He has been tortured by the hands of the wicked! His face has been dealt severe blows again and again. Like a lamb He bore them all while I helplessly stood in silence, unable even to sob! My children, I know for sure that you are not murderers but friends. You haven't come to inflict wounds but do good things. Therefore, I am not worried, but happy. My children, I am confident to receive into my hands the sacred body that you, removing the nails, would lower into them.²

Eventually, the disciples with reverence and love lowered the body into Mary's lap, the Throne of Grace. She had fastened it to her heart, pressed her loving lips on His wounds. All others too kissed Him in adoration. Seeing that the sun was setting Joseph sought her permission to bury the body. She herself anointed it with fragrant myrrh. They in a spirit of adoration and with due solemnity carried the coffin to the place of burial. As they closed the tomb with a stone slab Mary directed the angels who were escorting her to guard the Lord's sacred body until dusk while singing His praises.

¹*Am* 9: 31-60 in CWC II (1989): 74-75 and CSK II (1981): 74-75.

²*Am* 9: 69-84 in CWC II (1989): 75 and CSK II (1981): 75.

Chapter 24

MARY ON CENTRE-STAGE

24.1. Mother of the Church

After Jesus' death Mary takes the centre-stage in the Christian community. On Holy Saturday evening she sent John to fetch Peter. In a solitary place, the latter was squatting on the ground bitterly weeping for his sin. John persuaded him to take heart and go to meet the all compassionate Mother Mary who was asking for him. Peter felt encouraged, and went. With head bent in shame he stood before her. Other disciples too were present. Peter poured forth in sobs his transgressions: "I have sinned against my Lord, and meted out sheer ingratitude to my Mother!" She graciously said: "Let us pray that my Son and your Master may kindly forgive Peter's sin." Falling on their knees, they all prayed while the Mother with raised hands granted forgiveness on her part.¹

The first thing that Jesus did after His Resurrection was to pay a visit to His Mother, a privilege that she certainly deserved. Early in the morning on Easter Sunday, escorted by the heavenly retinue of angels and saints He in all His glory and beauty appeared before her, throwing her into ecstasy. Lifting her up He embraced her! There sounded a heavenly voice: "My Love! Ascend now to the skies!" The Lord then showered on her whatever spiritual gifts could be given to a creature.²

¹Lines 190-230 of *Mātrī-duḥkham*, in CWC II (1989): 83-84 and CSK II (1981): 84-85.

²*Ām* 10: 29-44 in CWC II (1989): 86 and CSK II (1981): 87.

For the next forty days before His Ascension Jesus went about reassuring His disciples about His Resurrection and confirming them in faith. The Holy Mother, preferred to be quietly in prayer at home. One day, while she was in meditation, the Holy Trinity in wondrous brilliance appeared in her little oratory. In awe, she fell prostrate and worshipped. Then there was again the heavenly voice: "Beloved Mother! Ascend to the skies!" Instantly she found herself in the Divine Presence. God the Father spoke: "Daughter, My Son who is also your Son while on earth founded the Church, the community of faithful. So that it may grow in spirit and membership I entrust it to your care." The Holy Spirit then bestowed on her His gifts of wisdom and understanding, and the Son, too, commended to His Mother's loving care the Church that is His bride and kingdom. The angels then recognized her as their queen and the refuge of sinners.¹

On the occasion of Jesus' Ascension among the 120 faithful gathered on the Mount of Olives His Queen Mother stood nearest to Him. She then fell at His feet for His final blessing, all others following suit. Sure enough He blessed first the Mother and then others. Following the Ascension Mother Mary, as directed by the Lord, led the Apostles and some select disciples to the upper room in Zion, and remained there in prayer until the Pentecost on the tenth day.²

24.2. Source of Courage and Light

In the Christian community that kept increasing in number Mother Mary was unquestionably the acclaimed leader and

¹*Am* 10: 53-92 in CWC II (1989): 86-87 and CSK II (1981): 87-88.

²*Am* 10: 93-130 in CWC II (1989): 88-89 and CSK II (1981): 89-90.

guide, of course, not institutional but charismatic. All of them, even the Apostles including Peter, every now and then would look to her for direction and light. In fact, in all the significant events she was graciously present to encourage, console and strengthen the community. The latter, too, not only appreciated but even insisted on her inspiring and supportive presence with them on all important and crucial occasions.

The first worth mentioning incident is Stephen's glorious martyrdom. Though humanly speaking a sad event, it was a victory of faith that made the faithful more zealous and courageous in bearing witness to the Lord. Infuriated by it, Lucifer provoked his army to double their tricks and wickedness among the followers of Christ on earth. "But at the same time the Mother tended the flock of her Son with tender love and offered incessant prayer for them."¹

Next we see Mary's intervention and involvement in the conversion of Saul. She came to know about his departure for Damascus with the devilish intention of persecuting and destroying the Christians there. Certainly Lucifer and his army were behind him, with their villainous schemes and suggestions. Realizing all these Mother Mary with fervour and concern prayed to her Son for the conversion of Saul. The Lord very willingly granted the prayer and dramatically changed Saul's mind and direction. He repented and became one of the most committed followers of Jesus and His Gospel. He was deeply sorry and disturbed about his sins and was afraid of facing Mother Mary. The latter, however, sending an angel consoled and counselled him. He was soon baptised. Peter and others perhaps could

¹*Am* 10: 133-140 in CWC II (1989): 89 and CSK II (1981): 90.

not believe the genuineness of Saul's conversion. Mother Mary cleared their doubt and prayed that Saul might become a support for the community.¹

24.3. Messenger of Christ

Seeing that the opposition to Christian disciples in Jerusalem was becoming stronger, John suggested that the Mother would move with him to his own dioceses of Ephesus. In a spirit of obedience to the Apostle, she agreed. But as he was making preparation for the Journey, Jesus appeared to the Mother and said: "You must first go to Spain. There in the city of Syracuse my Apostle James lives. You must instruct him to go to Jerusalem where he shall be beheaded for My sake." In a gesture of assent she bowed before Him and soon got ready. Her guardian angels instantly seated her in a cloud-chariot of supra-mundane brilliance, and flew it along the sky while singing in unison heavenly melodies. Reaching Syracuse in no time, the Queen of Heaven informed Apostle James of her Son's will. The angels, then, installed in that miraculous courtyard a splendid image of Mary. Later, a beautiful church was built there in her name through which the Almighty granted many favours to the faithful. Mary was 53 years and 3 months old when her Son thus honoured her.²

24.4. Queen of Creation

Leaving Syracuse by the same cloud-chariot she reached soon back in Jerusalem. Immediately, as commanded by the Lord, the beloved disciple John was getting ready to take her to Ephesus. The faithful from far and wide arrived with

¹*Ām* 10: 141-166 in CWC II (1989): 89-90 and CSK II (1981): 90-91.

²*Ām* 10: 185-212 in CWC II (1989): 90 and CSK II (1981): 91-92.

various gifts to send her off. She did not accept any of them except an ordinary ship for journey in line with her spirit of poverty. Bidding farewell to all, along with John she got into the ship. Realizing that the Star of Sea and the Mother of All Creation was on board, all kinds of small and big fish and other sea-animals, forgetting their differences and ill feelings, gathered around the vessel, with their heads raised above water to have a glimpse of their queen. They refused to let the ship move forward! Having no idea about what was happening, the crew and passengers were overwhelmed with mixed feelings of joy and fear. However, John understood the matter. Approaching Mary he said: "Oh Mother! With joy and exultation the creatures in sea have gathered for your blessing. Without delay kindly send them away with your blessing. Otherwise they will continue to block the way, putting the crew in trouble!" The Mother at once obliged. Raising the holy hands she imparted her graceful blessing to the innocent creatures. Gratefully bowing before her, they joyously returned to their places.¹

24.5. Queen of Martyrs

On her arrival in Ephesus the believers welcomed her, offering with delight houses for her residence. As was her wont she chose one of the humble houses for herself and another for John. A few days later James on his way to Jerusalem stopped in Ephesus to meet the Mother. Paying obeisance to her he praised her for the favours of God that he received through her kind intercession. Once again she clearly mentioned the Lord's holy will about him. Falling prostrate and in tears he begged for her blessing for doing it fully and wholeheartedly: "Oh Mother! You must give me

¹*Am* 10: 213-250 in CWC II (1989): 91-92 and CSK II (1981): 92-93.

assistance and courage. You must be present at the time of my death." She consoled him and agreed to grant his request. At once he left for Jerusalem where he was arrested and imprisoned by the soldiers of King Herod Agrippa. Subsequently, in order to please the Jews, the cruel king sentenced James to be beheaded. As he was being led to the place of execution the Lord through an angel sent word of it to Mary, and she was immediately flown on the clouds. In her motherly presence, James in calm and joy suffered martyrdom. It was in the year 48 AD. Our Lady herself by a chariot took James' soul to her Son in heaven, and through angels directed the disciples to guard his body against enemies.¹

Continuing to pray for the Church's success in the battle against the Devil's increasing assaults, Mary returned to Ephesus. Shortly afterwards, she got the news that the king in order to placate the Jews had captured and imprisoned Peter. The Mother sending her angel released him.²

24.6. Founder of Consecrated Life

In Ephesus there was a huge temple dedicated to goddess Diana. In it there were many maids living as her devotees, singing in praise of her name. They were known as virgins, but there was no truth in it! Deeply grieved our Lady cried to her Son for them. He kindly obliged by letting her do what she wanted in this regard. Then by her order an angel in one night destroyed the temple. The unchaste maids were crushed to death under the debris. There were, however, nine innocent ones who survived unhurt. Our Lady gathered and brought them up. There were also other sixty-

¹*Am* 10: 251-288/9 in CWC II (1989): 92-93 and CSK II (1981): 93-94.

²*Am* 10: 295-304 in CWC II (1989): 93 and CSK II (1981): 94.

four girls. She took care of them as well. Thus, in total they were seventy-three, most of them virgins. The Mother with her own hand wrote out a book of rules for them, and trained them to live according to it. This was the beginning of the first convent.¹

24.7. Queen of Apostles

It was a time when the disciples had met in Jerusalem to discuss and decide upon matters related to the Gentile Christians' practices. (The reference obviously is to the Jerusalem Council in the year 49 AD, the first of the Ecumenical Councils, described in Acts 15:1-34.) However, before formally beginning the Council they unanimously felt that Mother Mary also should be present on the occasion. Immediately, therefore, Peter the head of the Apostles sent a formal letter to her:

To Mother Mary, the Mother of God, I, your servant Simon Peter, an Apostle of Christ and the servant of all His servants, write for a good cause.

My mistress! Among these your servants some fresh doubts have arisen. In order to settle them, we the fellow-Apostles have assembled in Jerusalem the city of God. My mistress, unless you, too, are present with us, this new community will not feel satisfied. Therefore, if you would kindly come and join us, it will surely bring for us many a rare gift including the death of the archenemy Devil.²

On receiving the apostolic letter the Mother knelt down with great reverence and kissed it with immense joy. She

¹*Am* 10: 305-328 in CWC II (1989): 93-94 and CSK II (1981): 95.

²*Am* 10: 327-346 in CWC II (1989): 94 and CSK II (1981): 95-96.

then handed it over to the beloved disciple John who read it to her and explained the matter. She requested him to tell her what to do. His reply was that this being an order from Peter the head of the community should be obeyed. With no hesitation she agreed and gave instructions to make arrangements for the journey. In the meantime, she took care that in her absence the convent founded by her would function properly. The superior of the community was one of the virgins, who at baptism, was named Maria after the Mother. She was very devoted and obedient. The Mother entrusted to her the convent affairs.¹

24.8. Protector of the Church, the Ship in Storm

Mary accompanied by John left for Jerusalem by ship. She knew in advance that during the journey there would be fierce attacks from the Devil and his army. She, therefore, warned the angels to be alert. Sure enough as soon as the vessel was out to sea a legion of devils entered the waters. A large dragon started churning the ocean and disturbing the waters to a storm. The ship rose high and was lashed by the waves. The crew became scared for never before they had seen so violent a tempest. Satan appearing in different horrible forms made awful sounds! The desperate crew and passengers felt like trying to save themselves by jumping out of the ship!²

Meanwhile the Mother in deep meditation realized the gravity of the situation, and passed fourteen days in ardent prayer for the people with her. Approaching her John entreated: "Mother! Pray fervently to your Son, or else we will perish!" She replied: "Fear not, son! Know that it is the

¹*Am* 10: 347-364 in CWC II (1989): 94-95 and CSK II (1981): 96.

²*Am* 10: 365-390 in CWC II (1989): 95-96 and CSK II (1981): 96-97.

time of battle. It is just and proper that you must put up a bold fight for your Master. However, none will perish. Don't worry. The Lord will surely assist!" Just then her Son appeared and cheered her. He ordered her to command the sea and the arrogant Devil and his soldiers to be quiet. The Mother did so. Instantly, all was calm! In a short while they reached Jerusalem. The journey that would normally require only 6 days in this case took 18 days of inexpressible sufferings!¹

24.9. Obedient Daughter of the Church

On reaching the city of Jerusalem Mary's first desire was to pay a visit to the places sanctified by the precious blood of her Son. However, as a person of obedience she straight away went to meet Peter. Respectfully kneeling before him she kissed his hands, and after a few days with his permission went to the holy places starting with Gethsemane in the garden of Olives. While she was in Gethsemane to her great joy the Lord appeared expressing His appreciation of her loyalty and obedience to Peter that all His disciples should emulate. Then recalling and meditating on the sufferings of her Son she moved from place to place up to the top of Mount Calvary. She, thus, initiated the devotion of the Way of the Cross. Then she spent ten days in prayer for the disciples who had met in Council. Through her intercession they got all the doubts cleared and returned to their respective places.²

The Mother continued to be at the service of the Christian community, even frequently visiting them in different places. With the help of angels she stitched uniform dresses

¹*Am* 10: 391-412 in CWC II (1989): 96 and CSK II (1981): 97-98.

²*Am* 11: 1-24 in CWC II (1989): 97 and CSK II (1981): 99.

for the Apostles in the style of that worn by Jesus. She had special care for Peter. Once he was praying in pain for something. She came to know of it. Immediately paying a visit to him in Rome she consoled and enlightened him on the mystery of the Church. She also helped him to fix certain matters like the Sunday observance and the celebration of Our Lord's Nativity, Resurrection and Ascension. On another occasion, when Peter was again in trouble, she sent for him and strengthened him in faith.¹

24.10. Prayerful and Austere

Mary's life was very prayerful and austere. To keep recalling in detail and contemplating the Lord's Passion was her regular practice. There were also times when He would appear and console her. She would also regularly do the Way of the Cross. Every week from Thursday after noon she would remain indoors in prayer and meditation till Sunday when she would have Holy Communion with love and devotion. She took keen interest in stitching the sacred vestments for Mass, keeping them neat and tidy, and providing everything needed for the altar on which John used to celebrate the Eucharist. Naturally, people would present her with precious gifts. Respecting their feelings she would gratefully accept them, but then use them for works of charity. She slept very little. Her food was frugal and simple: a small piece of bread and water! Once in a while in order to oblige John she would have a small portion of fish. She was indeed always obedient to him. At the same time with motherly love and concern she took care to feed him well. He, too, would not ever leave her unattended.²

¹*Am* 11: 25-54 in CWC II (1989): 98 and CSK II (1981): 100.

²*Am* 11: 55-136 in CWC II (1989): 98-101 and CSK II (1981): 100-103.

Sometimes to add to her joy the Lord would Himself descend to take care of her needs, or the angels would lift her on luminous clouds to the upper regions. On Sundays the Lord used to command them to take her to heaven where He would be waiting at the gate to welcome her. Towards the end of her life, by order of the Lord, John gave her Holy Communion daily which for her was the greatest joy and honour. Through her the Lord Jesus made John understand many of the mysteries, and expressed His desire to have feasts celebrating the important events of her life: the Presentation in the Temple, Immaculate Conception, and Marriage with Joseph. Among them the feast of Immaculate Conception should be held most solemnly.¹

One day Jesus took her by a royal chariot to the presence of His Father in heaven. She was seated on the right side of the Son. She thanked and praised God for the gift of Immaculate Conception. The Father confirmed it: "It is an unchangeable truth that you were conceived immaculate!" The Son proclaimed: "Oh My Mother! Immaculate and noble! Hail! It is indubitably true that you are unstained by the sin of man!" The Holy Spirit also greeted her: "My lovely bride! All pure! All luminous! You are the only one born without the stain of original sin!" Then the court of heaven playing on all sort of musical instruments sweetly sang: "Oh Mother Mary, hail! Immensely holy! Born without the stain of sin! Hail!"²

The rest of the book is a lyric narrative of Mary's last days, death and Assumption, themes we have briefly considered elsewhere above. Now, to conclude our study of

¹*Am* 11: 137-196 in CWC II (1989): 101-102 and CSK II (1981): 103-104.

²*Am* 11: 197-228 in CWC II (1989): 102-103 and CSK II (1981): 105.

Chavara's Marian devotion and reflections, he exhaustively presents her role in the early Christian community and for that matter in the entire Church, using poetic imagination, illustrations and reflections of a devotee. There are indeed theological insights and suggestions, too, about her place in the Church and Christian life. The Church's teachings and traditional beliefs about her are persuasively presented. Most of the descriptions in the Litany of Our Lady are beautifully illustrated. His Mariology, therefore, is comprehensive and simple in style, and it interests the laity as well as scholars.

Chapter 25

MAN OF REPENTANCE

25.1. Penitent Saint!

It is well known that Chavara, while in his deathbed, humbly but confidently stated that he had never in life lost his baptismal grace. All the same he was a man of repentance as well. In fact, his sense of repentance was deeper and deeper as he advanced in age and spirituality. It may sound contradictory: on the one hand the never diminishing innocence and on the other the ever deepening repentance! The co-existence of holiness and repentance in the same person is a riddle for the human reason. But as a matter of fact it is the trait of all saints including Chavara.

25.2. The Compunction of Soul

As we have already seen, Chavara's spiritual lyric called *The Compunction of Soul* (*Ātmānutāpam*) is three biographies put parallel to one another: those of Jesus, Mary and the author. Chavara looks at the lives of Jesus and Mary stage by stage, and turning again and again to himself by way of self-examination, on the one hand, sincerely thanks them for what they have done and suffered for him, and, on the other, expresses deep sorrow for not being fully loyal to them and even offending them in different ways. Thus, the two underlying streams of sentiment running through the book, and the two characteristic marks of Chavara's spirituality as a whole, are gratitude and repentance. Here below we may quote some examples of his sincere acts of deep repentance.

First of all, he is sorry about staining the snow-white garment he was given at baptism. For example, in the first chapter the author *gives thanks to God* for creating him, giving him birth as a healthy child from ideal Catholic parents in a middle class family, and recounts his childhood events and experiences of baptism, Christian upbringing, *kalari* education and call to priesthood, and ends with *sincere acts of repentance upon his very minor failures* during the same period!

In the second chapter Chavara *gratefully and proudly recalls* how his mother dedicated him as a servant of Mother Mary, how God saved him from the epidemic that broke out those days in his village, and devotes quite a few stanzas to recollect and *seek God's forgiveness* for the mischievous behaviour of childhood and lack of the custody of senses. We may reproduce the final stanzas:

Oh! God, You gave me the eyes so that I might see and understand the things in the world and thereby serve and worship You. But alas! I made them tools of many evil deeds.

You gave me ears to hear good things. But using them I enjoyed listening to things that now prick my conscience. Oh! God, Ocean of Goodness! You gave me feet and hands that going to church I might worship You!

However, Oh Lord, I behaved in such a way that the blind, lame, deaf and dumb will abhor me who am now so ugly a mass of darkness! Through baptism You accepted me as Your child. Losing that dignity I became a slave of the Devil!

A stupid sinner I lost the grace [*nanma*] by staining the white garment that was given to me as a symbol of innocence in which I was ever to walk; You gave me a lighted lamp so that through my good works I might show the people the right path of serving You.

But Oh, the pity of it! As I, Your servant, grew up my lamp ran out of oil and the light went off and the wick smouldered. Who else could be as greatly unfortunate as I am! What a fool am I! My lamp extinguished without my knowing!

You gave me a powerful torch that I might guide others; but I changed it into darkness! I am immensely sorry that alas even as a child I lost all my spiritual beauty!

My Saviour Lord! By virtue of the tears that Your shining eyes shed at Your birth forgive me my childhood sins. With pain I, a sinner, crave for Your pardon!¹

The third chapter with 100 stanzas, with an appendix of 60 more, present a beautiful portrait of the events in Jesus' life, with the refrain "I long to see (*kāṇākeṇam*)" in all but the last stanza. This fascinating outpouring of the yearning of the poet's soul to see its Beloved in all His poses and stages of life ends with the following earnest prayer to Him and His Holy Mother for forgiveness:

Oh! God Who is Emmanuel! I a sinner worship You with tender love. Oh! Lady, clad in the mantle of sun,

¹Ām 2: 337-364 in CWC II (1989): 15-16 and CSK II (1981): 16.

with the moon under your feet, forgive the offenses of sinful mine, and give me refuge at your feet.¹

In the fourth chapter, we find a detailed description of the long and tedious journey of St Joseph with his expecting virgin wife to Bethlehem and their sad plight on being refused admission into any of the inns of the town of their own city, their helplessness, and the writer's feelings of repentance on his role in causing them so awful sufferings. We may quote the last stanzas:

My Lord the Baby Emmanuel did desire to make my heart His dwelling. But I, the wicked servant, planting my love in things of this world drove Him away; how sad!

I too desired to have my soul bathed in His blood, and make Him dwell in it joyfully. But alas! I made friends with the killer Devil!

What a misfortune! How horribly did I sin! I treated my Father the Almighty as my enemy. While recollecting it I realize my ingratitude is much more heinous than the sin of those who denied a place in Bethlehem!

Oh! My dear father [St Joseph], remember me your servant. Keep me close to your [foster] Son. By the prayers of your beloved wife, forgive my childhood follies!

My Mother, my mistress, remember me your servant; your treasure Jesus is my Redeemer. Great indeed is His love for you! I was, am and will forever be your

¹Lines 63-68 of *Anubandham* (Appendix) to *Ām* 3 in CWC II (1989): 22 and CSK II (1981): 22.

servant. At the time of my departure from this world, have a special thought of me, and interceding with your Son, obtain for me a happy death, and save me, Oh my Mother! Offering my body and soul before you, I entrust them to you. Give me refuge in you; with your help I hate sin.¹

In the fifth chapter, the poet narrates the birth of Jesus in the manger, the angels' celestial song of praise announcing the good news to the shepherds, their visit to the Divine Baby, and St Joseph fondling it in his hands. The chapter, as usual, ends with the poet's introspection and repentance:

Oh! My Guide and Almighty God, Lord and the Saviour of mankind, kindly turn your eyes towards me. You, the King of the entire universe, are all innocence and holiness. But I, Your servant, am a frail and worthless sinner! With this thought I am oppressed and feel sad!

You are my Father and the Lord of creation. Your love never fails, indeed. Still, aware of my sin how dare I appear before You?

I am not worthy to stand before You or even to look at You. However, Oh Seat of Compassion, where else would I go? Oh! Lord, I long to see Your sacred body, lovely face, bright eyes, beautiful nose, red lips, conch-shaped shining teeth, and to hear Your soft voice that trickles from Your mouth like drops of sweet honey! But alas! My eyes are not worthy of looking at You!

You are the fire of love! With longing I thirst for the ocean of Your mercy. Is my sin an obstacle? However,

¹*Am* 4: 189-214 in CWC II (1989): 28-29 and CSK II (1981): 28-29.

Oh God Almighty, I realize how the gracious look of Your divine eyes can allay my fear.

As I gaze at Your dazzling face, not Your anger but love is aflame; as I gaze at Your eyes, their look proves that You have come not to punish but save.

As I look at Your little arms, it is as if they are blessing me and would like to embrace me with joy! As I look at Your lotus-feet, they look like running in search of sinners!

Watching all these, though ungrateful, I feel consoled in mind. You, Oh Lord, are, indeed, the Shepherd Who has come in search of the lost sheep! Kindly accept and save me who am one of them!

Even as a child I went away from You. But today I take refuge in Your presence! Extending Your holy hands grant me Your blessing, and forgive my sins as well.

Please be kind enough to look at me and relieve me of my worry! Take care of me and keep me in Your presence. Today I repeat the holy words of Your virtuous ancestor King David: Remember not the misdeeds of my childhood; instead, Oh Divine Child, with Your compassionate look ease my pain!¹

The sixth chapter presents Jesus' circumcision and meditating on the pain that the Divine Babe underwent in the ceremony the poet repents upon his sin for which He suffered it:

¹*Am* 5: 143-182 in CWC II (1989): 34-35 and CSK II (1981): 34-35.

Behold Him Who is God Almighty and Who created everything by His Will. Becoming a helpless child He is now crying in pain! Oh Lord of all! For this plight of Yours there is no other reason but Your love! God, the Ocean of Mercy! Through Your precious blood grant me pardon for all my sins and sanctify me.¹

The seventh chapter includes the poet's meditation on the Passion of Jesus and the sorrows of Mary, his solemn confession that it was his innumerable sins and failures that caused Them these pains, his sincere repentance for them, and finally his heart-felt prayer that he may like St Andrew Corsini be converted and sanctified. Having described the cruelties the enemies did to the Lord, Chavara turns to his own misdeeds:

With the heavy blows dealt by the wicked His body was badly wounded all over. His lovely body being repeatedly lashed, its flesh was torn into pieces that scattered all around! ... Seeing it the merciless enemies beat and wounded Him still more cruelly. Alas! Why should I blame the enemies in vain! What He endured is the punishment for my horrible sins.

Oh! Lord, punish me the sinner as You will. Mother, my mistress, I've caused you great distress. Whereas I am the great sinner, why should you do the penance? Well, knowing my helplessness you graciously do it for my sake!

However, Oh Lord, if my sins were a little less grave, Your sufferings, too, would be at least a little less.

¹*Am* 6: 349-352 in CWC II (1989): 46 and CSK II (1981): 46.

Committing all kinds of sin with all my senses I inflicted pain on all members of Your body!¹

Alas! Why should I elaborate on their deeds of ingratitude, O my soul! Haven't you in sinful pride haughtily behaved? Lament your own evil passions. It is true, my Father, it was I who so cruelly wounded Your head. Very deep indeed is my sorrow! Through my evil looks and hearing of bad words I rudely pressed on You long sharp thorns. By bridling my eyes and ears I could spare You the severely painful pricks of thorns. Oh my Father, using the eyes that You gave me I inflicted the pricks of thorns in Your eyes! If I had died the same moment as I was born or if You had punished me as soon as I sinned for the first time, the pain that the sharp thorns give Your head today would not be so intense! But so kindly again and again You prolonged my life and health, which, however, I unfortunately used to augment my wickedness and commit graver offences against You! How sad!²

25.3. Forgiveness from Fellow Beings

Chavara was very careful not to offend the fellow human beings, and ever humble enough to seek their forgiveness for the minor and not so deliberate offences against them. For example, in 1869 during the days when the 40-hour adoration of the Blessed Sacrament was going on in the Monastery Chapel, Koonammavu, he wrote a letter to the Sisters. In it he begs their pardon for his lapses:

¹*Am* 6: 459-476 in CWC II (1989): 60 and CSK II (1981): 60-61.

²*Am* 7: 522-540 in CWC II (1989): 62 and CSK II (1981): 62.

My dear children, ... I am afraid my days are coming to an end. So, I request you to pray for me to God the Father, especially during these days of the 40-hour adoration. Please pardon me for my bad examples, scandalous words, and disorderly behaviour. By my negligence I have caused scandals for the innocent little souls [in the boarding house] who are entrusted to my care, and also for you the brides of the Lord. Please pray to God that He may kindly forgive them and spare me the terrible punishment I justly deserve. Intercede with Him that I may spend the rest of my life doing always His will in all things and finally die a happy death.¹

Another clear instance is the words of apology included in his last testament, written in August 1870, just six months before his death:

Finally, I beg pardon of the Very Rev. Vicar Apostolic, the Very Rev. Provincial Delegate and the Very Rev. Missionary Fathers, and all the members of the monasteries. I beg of them before God to pardon me for all my shortcomings in fulfilling the duties and services that I owed each of them. Again, I entreat my confreres to pray for me. I professed my religious vows as the first member of our congregation; and I was made the first prior. But I have not fulfilled to satisfaction my obligation in observing our *Constitutions* and enforcing the same. I did not give you good example. You must kindly forgive the scandals I have given you. Instead of following my

¹CWC IV (1990): 77; CSK (1986): 107.

bad example, by living still more zealously you must make reparation for my failures, too.¹

25.4. Abiding Compunction of Heart

We could, thus, go on quoting from Chavara's writings passages that clearly betray his deep and enduring sense of repentance. We shall now consider the question what could have been the matter for such an all pervading sentiment of sorrow. Obviously, the offences he mentions are very minor and ordinarily negligible: the usual childhood follies, innocent participation in some non-Christian rituals during the *kaḷari* (primary school) days, humanly speaking almost unavoidable lapses in fulfilling the duties of the high positions he held, not so serious imperfections of the human nature, and so on. His own testimony while on deathbed is that he had never lost the baptismal grace by committing any mortal sin. Why then should the Saint be so full of sorrow for sins? The following reflections may explain the matter.

John the Baptist began his preaching by calling the people to repentance: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:2). This is, in fact, how many of the prophets began their preaching, because repentance is the beginning of a new life. Even Jesus Christ, according to St Mathew, began the preaching with an invitation to repentance: "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Mt 4:17). Later by the end of the Gospel, sending out His disciples to different parts of the world, Jesus instructed them "that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk

¹CWC IV (1990): 74; CSK (1986): 103.

24:47). Accordingly, they set out and started to preach. In his very first sermon, Peter said: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Thus, we see that the prophets including John the Baptist, Jesus Christ and His disciples began their preaching with an invitation to repentance, because, as we have already said, repentance is the beginning of a new life.

Repentance means to turn in the right direction. To commit a sin means to take a wrong direction in the journey of life, while repentance means that realizing the mistake, one stops and turns in the right direction. It certainly implies that the person undergoes a change of heart or perception or the style of life, adopting a new set of values in the place of the former one. The Hebrew and Greek words, usually translated as repentance, are respectively *teshuba* and *metanoia*, both meaning *to turn*, implying that one turns away from sinfulness towards God. For example, in the case of the prodigal son, he first turned away from his father (God) towards creatures in search of happiness. It was to commit a sin. Later while in the miserable piggery coming to senses he turned away from creatures towards the father (God) in search of genuine happiness. It was to repent.

However, we should not think that repentance is a single act that can be completed all at once. It is, instead, a continuous act all along one's life. Of course, the moment one sincerely says to God one is sorry about one's sin and begs pardon, He forgives. One should never doubt His forgiveness. But even after God has forgiven my sin I have reason to continue to repent. For, although I know for sure

that He has so graciously forgiven my sin, the thought that at least once in my life I offended Him, Who so loves a Father of mine, makes me feel sorry! It is not a matter of fear of punishment, but an act of pure love. And this sorrow never ends! In fact, it keeps deepening, for the more advanced I am in spirituality, and the closer I get to God, the more clearly I come to realize how good and kind He is and has been to me so that even my minor offences against Him appear to be unforgivably grave! This is why all the saints experienced ever deepening repentance for their sins, big or small. This is what the famous little spiritual classic of Thomas A. Kempis, entitled *The Imitation of Christ*, calls “an abiding compunction of heart,” which as a matter of fact is the trait of every saint. This is what we see in St Chavara as well. There is no doubt he had not committed any mortal sin, but being a human being, sharing in the fallen human nature, he certainly had his venial ones about which his sorrow was ever deepening. And that explains his posture as a man of repentance!

Further, it is not enough that one repents upon one’s own sins, but also on those of one’s neighbour, indeed, those of the entire human family. This is so for two reasons. First of all, an act of sin means a hurt inflicted on God who is my beloved and loving Father. When my Father is hurt, no matter who has hurt Him, I am sorry. I must do all that I can to console Him and heal the wound. Secondly, the one who, thus, hurts Him is my own brother or sister, because we are the children of the same parent, God. Naturally I feel sorry that this brother or sister of mine has had the misfortune of offending the Father and losing His favour. I must certainly do whatever would be in my power to have him/her reconciled with the Father and restored to His grace. I must

intercede with the Father, apologize for his/her sake, and offer to make reparation for his/her sin as well. In a school, if a child does something mischievous, it may not care to go apologizing to the principal. But the good parent will do so, saying: "Sir, my child has done the mistake, please forgive it." Such an apology on the part of the parent for the sake of the child is acceptable and the latter is forgiven. Similarly, our repentance and penance for the sake of the other members of the human family is well acceptable to God the Father, responding to which He will readily forgive their sins and cancel their debts. All these mean that one has always enough and more matter for repentance and penance: one's own present and past sins and those of the entire humanity! There are people who would ask: What to repent of? I haven't committed any serious sin! Or, perhaps in the past I did some. But I have already repented and confessed them and have been forgiven. What more!? Well, it is never the case, as we have explained.

In fact, repenting and doing penance for the sake of the people at large is a serious duty of the priests and religious in the Church, and, indeed, it is part of their call to such a lofty state of life. The people around them, especially the simple and needy ones, may not know what it means to repent and make reparation for sins. But the consecrated priests and religious are well taught and trained in such matters, and also have enough time to spend for them. Using this privileged position they should help themselves and all others as well. It is good to keep in mind that the consecrated ones are called to spend much, if not all, of their time before God representing the rest of humanity, worshipping and thanking Him for their sake, repenting and doing penance for their sins, and interceding for their

needs. Thus, the gift of the call to consecrated life that they have received benefits and should benefit not only themselves but also the entire humanity. St Chavara's life clearly illustrates this message.

Chapter 26

YOU BROOD OF VIPERS!

26.1. Condition for Admission to the Kingdom

Let us come back to the preaching of John the Baptist. He presented repentance as a condition for admission to the kingdom of heaven. 'If you would like to have a place in the kingdom of heaven, you must repent,' he said. When he put it like that, the ordinary people were very happy, and responding to his invitation they "went out to him ... and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, *confessing their sins*" (Mt 2:5-6). But the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, although they came for baptism, seem to have refused to repent and confess their sins, claiming that being the children of Patriarch Abraham they were not in need of repentance and confession. It was as if they had a free pass to the kingdom! But John rebuked them using the strongest possible words: 'You brood of vipers! You too are in need of repentance, for you also are sinners. Your claim that you are the children of Abraham is no use!' (Mt 3:7-10).

We, too, especially the consecrated priests and religious, sometimes happen to pose like the Jewish leaders, and refuse to go for regular confession with proper repentance. We may at least indirectly claim that, unlike the criminals, dacoits, adulterers, murderers, and so on, we are not in need of repentance and confession. We may, instead, claim that hailing from traditionally Catholic families, and being members of reputed religious congregations founded by saintly persons, and that too perhaps for such a long period of time, even holding responsible positions in the Church and religious institutes, we are entitled for free admission to

the kingdom! Of course, we may not say so in so many clear terms. But we are likely to assume the Pharisaic attitude and look at repentance and the sacrament of reconciliation rather lightly. If that is the case, let us be sure that John the Baptist would repeat his harsh reproach to us: 'You brood of vipers! You too are in need of repentance and confession, for you also are sinners. Your claim for a free pass to the kingdom is unacceptable!'

26.2. Pitfalls in the Chosen One's Life

i. Vain Attempt to Serve Two Masters!

We shall presently consider the failures that Chavara thinks are usual in the lives of priests and religious. In his observation, the first mistake they are likely to commit is to attempt to serve two rival masters at the same time: God and mammon, or the sacred and the secular. He is obviously referring to Jesus' own words:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (Mt 7:24).

Chavara, while preaching a retreat to priests, exhorts them:

Oh priestly soul! You are trying to serve two masters at the same time: God and the world! You must make a clear choice between them: either God or the world. Make sure that you are fully committed to God and faithfully walk in His path, namely, the path of Christian virtues. Otherwise you will certainly end up in eternal perdition. For it is impossible for one to serve God and the world at the same time! This is the clear teaching of Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The world and God are diametrically opposed to each

other. You cannot at all have both of them together. Either God or the world! There is no middle way.¹

This may be the story of the seeds falling on the wayside in the parable of the sower (Mt 13:3-9). God the sower puts the seeds, namely, the call to priestly or/and consecrated life, in the field, namely, the human hearts. The different types of soil represent the various kinds of response one may give to the call. The seeds falling on the wayside would represent those who respond to the call not wholeheartedly but half-heartedly. It is like a candidate who coming to enter the consecrated life stands at the gate of it, putting one leg inside while keeping the other outside, doubting whether or not he should go into it fully! A state of hesitation and indecision! Initially it is quite understandable. For before taking such an important step with its binding effect on one's entire life, one may rightly take some time considering its various aspects. But to remain undetermined all one's life is to ruin oneself. One must take a clear decision either way at the earliest, and abide by it perseveringly. That is the only way to make one's life meaningful as well as enjoyable. Otherwise, it would be like trying to serve two mutually rivalling masters at the same time! Or, it would be like one wanting to travel simultaneously by two boats going in opposite directions!

A half-hearted religious will have no sense of identity. He is a man without face, a faceless man, and ugly to look at! He has neither the identity of a sincere lay person nor of a committed religious! He can never have a sense of satisfaction or fulfilment of being an authentic lay or consecrated person, for he is neither of them. The result is a

¹This is a paraphrase of CWC III (1990): 32 and CSK III (1981): 60-61.

continuous sense of dissatisfaction, restlessness, emptiness and meaninglessness in life! Obviously, one cannot go on for long in such a state of void. Very soon one ends up in tragedy which none of us would like to happen! Life, in fact, is a matter of *either this or that*, not this *and* that! Anyone trying to have both this *and* that will end up having *neither this nor that*!

A half-hearted religious does not let the seed of vocation, the word of God, go deep into his heart. He is trying to keep it just on the wayside, the periphery of life. What should really happen is that the call should go deep into one's heart and grip it so tightly that one undergoes a transformation and becomes a new creation, as St Paul puts it (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12, 3:10). The newness would consist of a new perception of things, and a new style of life and above all a new set of values. For example, before coming into religious life I had considered riches, power and higher positions in the society to be values, but now they mean nothing for me, and, instead, poverty, hard work, humility, obedience and humble service have become values; comforts, luxury and worldly pleasures have been replaced by hardships, simplicity of life, austerity and ascetical practices. The line dividing the old and new lives should be clear, and the newness should be indubitably visible to oneself and others as well. All these would mean: One should be a religious not half-heartedly but whole-heartedly, not superficially but deeply, not peripherally but substantially, and not nominally but really.

ii. Neglect of Vocation and Its Obligations

According to Chavara, the most deplorable failure on the part of the religious would be to neglect their vocation and the duties attached to it. God wants the monastery to be 'a

mirror of virtues (*punṇyattinte kaṇṇāṭi*)' and 'a spiritual resort (*punṇya-saṃketam*)'. It is unfortunate that the members reduce it to an association of self-willed stewards and business administrators.¹ Here below we shall paraphrase some of Chavara's instructions in this regard:

This [congregation] being God's work, persecution or rejection or opposition from men cannot destroy it. But one thing can cause its destruction: If we forget our holy vocation and neglect the sacred duties of our state of life and fail in the practice of the virtues of humility (*eḷima*), obedience (*col-viḷi*), charity (*upavi*), genuine piety (*paṭṭāṅgayuḷḷa bhakti*) and religious modesty (*sannyāsa-aṭakkam*), and are satisfied with valuing them only in thought and not in deeds, within a short time, all these monasteries will fall to ruin.²

The strength of monasteries does not consist in the thickness of their walls, but in the religious zeal and virtue of their members. In many places, there were monasteries that were more in number and bigger in membership than ours. But they have been transformed into woods and habitats of animals. We are progenitors of the monasteries here. We are the corner-stones.³ Hence, it is the members' bounden duty to set an example for the coming generations.⁴

The religious should be fruitful, yielding fruits, namely, virtues like humility (*eḷima*), obedience (*col-viḷi*), charity (*upavi*), genuine piety (*paṭṭāṅgayuḷḷa bhakti*)

¹CWC IV (1990): 61-62; CSK IV (1986): 90.

²CWC IV (1990): 61; CSK IV (1986): 90.

³CWC IV (1990): 65; CSK IV (1986): 94.

⁴CWC IV (1990): 65; CSK IV (1986): 94-95.

and religious modesty (*sannyāsa-aṭakkam*). They are meant to be practised by all alike in daily life, and not merely by some exceptionally holy souls. We should not take them lightly, nor neglect them without fear of God or prick of conscience. It is not enough that we do only some essential duties and that too rather half-heartedly...¹

The congregation places her highest hopes in the younger members. Their misbehaviour can be a matter of inexpressible grief. They must be gratefully aware of the many favours they have received from God and the long period of training they have passed through. They have a duty to live as mirrors (*kaṇṇātikal*) of humility (*eḷima*), obedience (*col-viḷi*) and piety (*bhakti*). Keeping in mind the examples of holiness they have seen and the counsels of virtue they have received, they must lead a life of discipline and self-control. They should not be presumptuous and arrogant, but humble and docile, and ready to cooperate with the elderly ones.²

iii. Lukewarm, neither Cold nor Hot (Rev 3:16)

The most common and almost incurable spiritual illness among the priests and religious, according to St Chavara, is to become lukewarm in responding to the promptings of God's Spirit. One becomes very insensitive with regard to spiritual realities such as the sacraments, word of God, retreats and exhortations. Even as they live in the midst of them, and even frequently handle them, the priests and religious would remain untouched by any of them! Initially,

¹CWC IV (1990): 61-62; CSK IV (1986): 90.

²CWC IV (1990): 64; CSK IV (1986): 93.

perhaps, they were very sensitive to them and always positively and promptly responded to them. But in the course of time, preoccupied with many not so holy concerns and under various secular influences, they happen to lose the interest in and enthusiasm for spiritual matters and slip into the lukewarm state of affairs; with regard to spiritual life they become neither cold nor hot, a very pathetic condition, indeed! In the book of *Revelation* the Lord says to the Church in Laodicea:

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked (Rev 3:15-17).

Chavara likewise continues his sermon to the priests:

But unfortunately and in a stupid manner you are trying to serve both God and the world at the same time. As a result you have become very mediocre, neither cold nor hot. Lukewarm!

For instance, one day you may do some good works; next day, out of indolence and negligence you give them up! Today you may be rather prayerful, but tomorrow you would hardly have a thought of God! In the morning, you may with some devotion have Mass and Communion, but for the rest of the day you will be indulging in worldly pleasures and bodily comforts! For a short while in the morning you may be in your room doing some spiritual reading. Then you go about speaking ill of others and uncharitably criticising them!

Thus, you try to serve and please God and the world at the same time. You want to parcel out your heart between God and the world: one part to God and the other to the world! Isn't it a vain effort? For, as the Holy Spirit says, one who loves the world is the enemy of God!

Do you think you are moving towards heaven? If you continue the effort to serve both God and the world together, you are sure to end up in the eternal fire of hell!

How many priests have gone ahead of you, trying in vain to serve God and the world together! They haven't had even the chance of seeing the gate of heaven! You must be afraid that you may be one of them!¹

iv. Love Gives Way to Selfishness

In most cases, the priests and religious begin their life and ministry very earnestly and zealously. They are full of love and their intentions are pure. Their commitment to the Lord and His mission is obvious, and they are ready and even happy to make any sacrifices for the sake of the Lord and His people. They are deeply prayerful as well as sincerely concerned about the wellbeing of the people of God. But gradually distracted and attracted by the world around they lose sight of the high ideals of religious and priestly vocation and start compromising the spiritual principles; they become more and more involved in the various undertakings and projects with purely secular and selfish

¹This is a paraphrase of CWC III (1990): 32-33 and CSK III (1981): 61-62.

motives; they give up prayer life and religious and priestly discipline, and their love for the Lord and His mission becomes very cold! In modern terminology, they are reduced to be mere corporate managers and executives! Pope Francis has once commented that priests and religious without spirituality are not different from the NGOs in the secular world. To the Church in Ephesus the Lord complains:

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but not, and found them false; I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you that you have abandoned the love you had at first (Rev 2:2-4).

We may recall Chavara's similar complaint that the monasteries that were meant to be 'mirrors of virtues (*punṇyattinte kaṇṇāṭi*) and spiritual resorts (*punṇya-saṃketam*) turn out to be dens of self-willed stewards and business administrators.'¹ 'The members forget their holy vocation and neglect the sacred duties of their state of life and fail in the practice of the virtues of humility, obedience, charity, religious modesty and genuine piety and are satisfied with valuing them only in thought and not in deeds so that within a short time all the monasteries may fall to ruin.'² Chavara then warns his confreres:

Lastly, my beloved brethren, loving sons, none of us has joined the monastery being driven by hunger or

¹CWC IV (1990): 61-62; CSK IV (1986): 90.

²CWC IV (1990): 61; CSK IV (1986): 90.

desperate conditions of life in the world. We could have enjoyed the best of comforts, had we remained in the world. But in order to come here we have of our own will renounced our parents and our wealth. Now if we forsake the Lord through our negligence and indolence, what a great mistake it would be, what madness!¹

St Paul's proverbial statement is worth remembering:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Cor 13:1-3).

¹CWC IV (1990): 66; CSK IV (1986): 95.

Chapter 27

CONFESSION AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

27.1. All Are in Need of Confession

It is worth recalling that among the early members of the congregation regular and frequent confessions was a noble practice which today seems to be in urgent need of revival and restoration. Chavara during his seminary days had his *malpān* Palackal as his confessor and spiritual director, and in his old age the young missionary Fr Leopold. He made it a point that he not only made regular confessions to them and consulted in all important matters, but also kept himself fully open to them inside out! Besides the ordinary confessions at regular intervals, Chavara would go for confession also on all special occasions. For example, in 1845 he was diagnosed as suffering from smallpox, a fatal disease those days. He would not panic. Perfectly composed and gracefully resigned to God's will, he, even before sending for a physician, made a confession!¹

It is obvious that all of us—not only the laity and religious but also the priests—are in need of regular confessions with genuine repentance at reasonable intervals. No one can excuse oneself in this regard, because, as John the Baptist cried out to the Jewish leaders, all are sinners in one way another! Even the priests who hear confessions of others are in need of making confessions themselves. Look at Jesus humbly standing among sinners on the bank of river Jordan. Though He was without sin He insisted on being baptized by John “in order to fulfil all righteousness”

¹CWC I (1990): 47-48; CSK I (1981): 54.

(Mt 3:15). Indeed, He took upon Himself the responsibility of the sin of mankind for which He volunteered to be baptized. If so, how much more we who are sinners, especially the priests, should be earnest to avail ourselves of the sacrament of reconciliation for our own as well as others' sins! Let us pay attention to Chavara's words of warning to priests, which we have quoted once before:

To forgive your sins and trespasses and to save your soul, has He not provided the sacrament of reconciliation? Has He not given His body and blood to feed and strengthen you that you may successfully fight your enemies and withstand their onslaught? How have you approached these sacraments? How often have you received them without due attention and preparation! What profit have you made, Oh privileged priest of God, from the sacraments of reconciliation and Holy Communion? If you are not mindful of these loving gifts of God, you will have to account for it on the last day!¹

27.2. Three Levels of Confession

i. Confession to Oneself

Confession of sin to be complete has to be made on three levels. First of all, one should make the confession to oneself. That is, one should sincerely be convinced that one is a sinner, and admit to oneself one's offences against God and neighbour. That is what we see in the parable of the prodigal son. About him we read: "He came to senses!" (Lk 15:17). At home there wasn't anything that he lacked; but he was under the illusion that elsewhere things would be much better, and going to a distant country he started leading a

¹CWC III (1990): 29; CSK III (1981): 56.

loose life in the company of people who pretended to be his friends. It was an act of sheer stupidity! Eventually, he ended up in a piggery, the dirtiest place in the world. Finding himself in that miserable condition of life “he came to senses,” which means that he became aware and convinced of his mistake! Confession of sin to oneself is not an easy thing to do because the natural human tendency is to defend and justify oneself. Overcoming it one should admit to oneself the mistakes. A patient, unless he/she is convinced of his/her illness, will not go to consult a doctor and take treatment. In the spiritual life, too, only those who are convinced of their sins will repent and seek God’s forgiveness. In modern times a matter of greater concern is that man has lost the sense of sin! The priests and religious are perhaps more in danger of losing the sense of sin and becoming self-righteous as the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ time were. In a way this was also Chavara’s fear, namely, that his followers were tempted to make the vain attempt to serve two rival masters at the same time, and that they were in danger of becoming neither cold nor hot, insensitive to spiritual realities, mediocre, and half-hearted. This should be a matter of sincere examination of conscience for us as well! Chavara, who was deeply and sincerely aware of his sins, very minor as they were, is certainly an irresistible inspiration for us in this regard.

ii. Confession to One Another

Secondly, the confession has to be made to one another. In the parable of the prodigal son, while returning home the young man said: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you” (Lk 15:18, 21) He admits his sin against ‘you’ the human being as well. That we should forgive one another is a condition for forgiveness from God. This is a

point that Jesus has repeatedly and in different ways made clear. He has, for example, instructed us to pray: "And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Mt 6:12). If we refuse to forgive others we have no right to be forgiven by God! "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt 6:15).

In fact, any sin is an offence not only against God but also against the community, that is, the Church the body of Christ. Every time I commit a sin I am inflicting a wound in the body of Christ, too, so that I need to seek forgiveness from and be forgiven by the Church as well. This is, indeed, a good reason why the confession has to be made to a priest who represents the Church. Additionally, while confessing my sins to a priest who represents the Church, I am reminded of the latter's support for me in the saving acts of repentance and penance. The Mother Church prays for me, shares in my repentance and makes up for what is lacking in my penance. This feeling of being part of a bigger community that supports and strengthens me is certainly a great encouragement and consolation for me.

Moreover, while making an examination of conscience we realize that more of our sins are offences against one another. It is not so common that we offend God directly, although there are, of course, times when we neglect or even fail in our duties to God in a big or minor manner. But our mutual offences are more frequent. For example, we frequently fail in charity, refuse to forgive and help one another, speak ill of one another, make unjust judgements, covet others' possessions, make hurting statements, entertain ill-feelings, anger, hatred, revenge, jealousy, and

so on. Therefore, we should certainly forgive and seek forgiveness of one another.

iii. Confession to God

Then, of course, we must confess our sins to God which is, in fact, the easiest thing to do, for He is our Father, all compassion and forgiveness. He is happy that we return to Him, and welcomes us whole-heartedly and unconditionally, forgetting all our wrongdoings. To approach Him, therefore, should be a matter of joy and consolation for us humans. But we must certainly go through this final and decisive part of the sacrament of reconciliation: overcoming all the natural inhibitions, fears and misgivings, we must in a spirit of genuine repentance and humility go on our knees before the priest and clearly confess our sins!

Obviously, this should be an act of faith in which we see Jesus Christ in the person of the priest. It should be a personal meeting with Him. In the New Testament, we read about two confessions, one by Judas Iscariot and another by St Peter. Both these Apostles committed almost the same kind of grave sin, the former by betraying the Lord into the hands of enemies, and the latter by denying Him publically three times. Each of them, as soon as he realized the mistake, made a confession. Judas, realizing that Jesus was condemned, *repented* and going to the *priests* in the temple said: "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood" (Mt 27:1-4), and gave back the silver coins. Outwardly it was a perfect confession: convinced of his sin he repented and clearly confessed it to the priests, and even did penance by returning the money he had unjustly earned! But he was not forgiven and grace was not restored to him! Unable to bear

the prick of conscience he despaired, and “went out and hanged himself” (Mt 27:5)!

In the case of Peter, as soon as he denied Jesus the third time, “He turned and looked at Peter” (Lk 22:61). Naturally, Peter also looked at Jesus: the mutual gaze of the Lord Jesus and the sinner Peter! “And Peter went out and wept bitterly” (Lk 22:62). In those tears of repentance, his sins were washed away, forgiveness was graciously granted, and he was fully reconciled with the Lord as the head of His Apostles. What indeed was the difference between these two confessions? While Peter personally met Jesus and made the confession to Him, though silently, Judas refused to meet Him. Even in the priests to whom he made his confession, he failed to see Jesus whom they represented. Judas was dealing with them just on the human level as a matter of business. Therefore, his sins were not forgiven. One may defend him saying that he was not given a chance to meet Jesus. It is not true, indeed! On many occasions Jesus had gently called his attention to his evil intentions, and persuaded him to look at Him. But every time he refused! Even at the last minute in an effort to make Judas turn and look at Him, Jesus lovingly called him “friend” (Mt 26:50), and said: “Would you betray the Son of man with a kiss?” (Lk 22:48). But the traitor did not care!

Even today confession of sin has to be made to Jesus Christ personally, for He alone has the power to forgive sin. In the priest at the confessional, one should, with the eyes of faith, see Him and confess the sins to Him. The sacramental theology says that every official act of the Church such as a sacrament is an act of Jesus Christ, and that every sacrament is a personal encounter between Him and the human being. Accordingly, it is the Lord who receives the penitent in the

confessional, and says: "My son/daughter, take courage, your sins are forgiven; go in peace, do not sin again!" Understood in this manner, the sacrament of reconciliation becomes an event of joy and celebration for the faithful.

27.3. Life of Penance

The last part of confession is penance. It is important that we understand it correctly. It is not something that is imposed on us by others, not even by God. Instead, it is the necessary consequence of sin, which one must inevitably accept and go through. Sin effects a distortion in the human nature which would remain even after the forgiveness has been obtained. What one must do to repair the distortion is the penance. Recall the story of the prodigal son. Realizing his mistake he arose and turned towards his father. This was the act of repentance which instantly brought forgiveness. But it was not enough for the young man to stand there turning towards the father, because he was still at a distance from the father. Therefore, he had to take steps backward until he reached the father and was lost in his loving embrace, making sure that he would not lose him again! This return journey, which had become necessary because he had gone astray in the wrong direction, is the penance, for it is an extra work that would not be needed if he had not committed the mistake of going away in the wrong direction. The moment the sinner makes a sincere act of repentance God the Father graciously forgives him; but he is still at a distance. Even God cannot excuse him from making the backward journey until he becomes one with Him, although He would assist him to make it faster and successfully!

To make the point clearer, think of a great sinner who after a good retreat makes his confession and regains God's grace. However, as he leaves the retreat centre the people there are likely to advise him: "Friend, now you are all right. But be on your guard not to expose yourself to situations of temptation. The past sins, although they have been forgiven, have left in you certain evil inclinations called habits. Therefore, unless you are careful enough you are in danger of falling again into sin. You must also make some extra efforts to overcome or rather correct those evil tendencies. Such extra efforts are the penance. What the confessor prescribes may be something simple, just a symbolic act. Without remaining satisfied with it, one must keep on doing acts of penance so that at least eventually one is free of all evil inclinations or distortions in one's nature. Indeed, one should lead a life of penance as St Chavara did.

We may look at the meaning of penance in a still broader perspective. All the disorders in the world and human nature stemmed from the original sin that man committed. The state of affairs before that is described as the state of original justice in which there existed perfect harmony, peace and love on all levels: God and humans walked hand in hand, the humans enjoyed pure love for one another, they called the animals and other creatures by name and they responded positively! Then, unfortunately, the humans committed the disastrous original sin by which everything turned upside down! The greatest tragedy was that the humans lost their good relation with God; the flow of God's life-giving grace to them stopped! Of course, Jesus Christ through His Passion and Resurrection remedied the sin and restored the lost relation between God and man. But the consequence of sin remains in the form of a distortion of the

human nature, or a rebellion built into it against God. Its expressions are the evil inclinations of the fallen nature; they are the seven capital vices, namely, pride, envy, anger, lust, gluttony, greed and laziness. They are, thus, the common heritage of the fallen humanity so that every individual is born with his or her share of all of them.

Right from the first parents through generations everybody inherits the capital vices, the evil tendencies, although only in the course of time they would make their appearance in the individual. That I have them is not fully my personal responsibility, and as such not a personal sin either. Only when I make deliberate and free use of any of them against my neighbour or even God it becomes a sin. However, although their presence in me is not my personal responsibility or sin, I cannot tolerate them in me, for as long as any of them is in me, I am not a perfect human being, fully reconciled and united to God. Therefore, I must make myself fully free of them at the earliest. The efforts I make to overcome or root out these evil tendencies, the capital vices, is the penance, which in Indian terminology is called *tapas*. It may be the acts of mortification, austerities, and ascetical practices. Everybody has the duty and need to undertake them for the sake of oneself and the human family as a whole. This explains the relevance of a life of penance on the part of every member of the human family, especially the consecrated religious and priests. This brings out the significance of the name *Tapasu-bhavanam* (House of Penance) by which the founding fathers christened their monastery.

27.4. Spiritual Direction

Finally, Chavara would not be satisfied with merely the sacramental confession of sins. He insisted also on taking

regular spiritual direction, which too is a proven support and a sure means of a secure and healthy spiritual life. As a rule all the saints have been keen on receiving guidance from their spiritual directors. In our own times, we have the examples of Sts Alphonsa and Euphrasia, and Blesseds Mariam Thresia and Mother Theresa of Kolkata. While confession is all about sin and forgiveness, spiritual direction covers all aspects of one's life: material, bodily, mental, social and spiritual dimensions of life. The principle is that one should keep the spiritual director well informed of all about oneself and in a spirit of docility and trust, accept all his/her advices and faithfully put them into practice. Whether the director makes enquiries or not, it is your duty and need to be regularly in touch with him/her and seek guidance in all matters.

This was the kind of relation that St Chavara maintained with his spiritual directors. Between him and *Malpān* Palackal there existed a *guru-śiṣya* or even a father-son relationship. He says: "From my childhood onwards *Malpān* Palackal had looked after me in all my spiritual and bodily needs, and taught and brought me up. Until his death he had cared for me more than for any of his relations and other disciples."¹ He admits that "from a younger age he was determined to be of one mind with the *malpān*" and that he was guided to priesthood by his and Fr Porukara's wisdom.² As a new priest, at the direction of Fr Palackal, he went to settle in Mannanam. Then, he wrote: "Thereafter in all matters I followed his directions and views."³

¹CWC I (1990): 52; CSK I (1981): 57.

²CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 26.

³CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 26.

Fr Leopold was Chavara's confessor and spiritual director during the last years of his life. At the Saint's death on 3 January 1871 the missionary could not control his tears. On the same day he wrote in his diary: "I loved him even as myself!" Knowing him so well Leopold was sure of his sanctity and, therefore, he concluded the dairy-note with the first intercessory prayer ever made to St Chavara: "Oh holy and beautiful soul, pray for me!" So personal and authentic was his understanding and appreciation of his client!¹ Further he invites his readers: "Those of us who wish to have a happy death as his [Chavara's] should lead a virtuous life as he did."²

¹Beccaro 2003: 17-18.

²Beccaro 2003: 15.

Chapter 28

CONTEMPLATIVE IN ACTION¹

28.1. *Karma-Yogi*: Yogi of Action

“His [Chavara’s] success ... in all his many undertakings was undoubtedly due to the intense charity and prayer, which characterised his daily life, his close communication with Christ, and his love for the Church as the visible body of Christ on earth.” These words of Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the beatification of Chavara in 1986 are an accurate description of the latter: a person who succeeded in all his undertakings by virtue of his prayerfulness. He was indeed a prayerful person of many undertakings. The Indian designation of such a person is *karma-yogi*, meaning ‘a contemplative in action.’ This great ideal of spirituality is the key concept in *Bhagavad-Gītā*, a spiritual classic of India. In it Arjuna, who for all practical purposes represents the sincere seekers of God, is persuaded to engage himself in the service of humanity without considering the gain or loss for himself. This was a call for *niṣkāma-karma*, selfless service. This is something like what Jesus meant when he said: “When you have done all that is commanded you, say ‘we are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (Lk 17:10). Then immediately the question is

¹This and the next two chapters are an abbreviated and revised version of my “Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara: a Contemplative in Action” in *Tanima*, Vol. 9, 1-4, Aluva: 2001, 30-61, and much of the matter especially in the next one chapter is repetition of narratives in different previous sections. As a matter of fact, these three chapters are meant to be more a concluding resume of the entire work.

raised: Can one be so unselfish as to be totally unconcerned about one's own gain and loss in the undertakings? In answer to this question *Bhagavad-Gītā* says: "*Yogasthah kuru karmāṇi*" (2:48), which means: "Do the service while remaining in the state of *yoga*." To be in the state of *yoga* is what the Christian tradition of spirituality basically means by being prayerful or a contemplative. Hence, the advice is that one should be engaged in activities while remaining a contemplative: be a contemplative in action, a *karma-yogi*. This is the ideal that Chavara, true to his rootedness in the Indian, Carmelite and Eastern traditions of spirituality, realised in his own person.

28.2. Active Chavara

That Chavara was a person of action is quite plain, as has been amply testified by many of the early chapters of this work. Even during his seminary days, if not earlier, his active temperament was obvious. He was active not only in his personal programme of studies, but also in sharing with *Malpān* Palackal the responsibilities of administration, discipline as well as teaching. His active involvement in the liturgical reform had started already during the seminary life, when he, with the encouragement and help of his *malpān*, collected the almost worn out copies of Divine Office from different places, and in the course of time with great effort compiled and neatly wrote down a new one.¹ Moreover, well known are his: (i) creative and committed participation and leadership in founding the two religious congregations, (ii) leading role in the struggle against the Roccisian revolt, (iii) socio-religious initiatives for the poor, (iv) involvement in the re-union movement and

¹SP: 25.

evangelisation efforts, (v) contributions in the fields of education and press apostolate, (vi) administration of the CMI Congregation as its first prior general from 1855 until his death in 1871, (vi) arduous task of founding seven monasteries, (vi) care and direction of the CMC Sisters' community at Koonammavu, (vii) literary works, and (viii) administration of the Syro-Malabar Church as its first vicar general from 1861 to 1871. But in all these undertakings the underlying force was his prayerfulness, which is our point of discussion in this chapter.

In fact, however, Chavara's greatness lies neither in the amount of work he did, nor in the contemplation he enjoyed, but in the way he harmonised both of them in himself, a task which *Bhagavad-Gītā* says is a matter of skill, *kausālam*.¹ Therefore, our central concern more precisely is how Chavara developed and maintained *the spirit of contemplation throughout his active life*, until it culminated in the supreme act of total surrender into the hands of God the Father, the act of death in which the dichotomy of action and prayer is creatively resolved once and for all.

28.3. Contemplative Chavara

Again, it is by now clear to us that Chavara was a person who spent hours and hours in prayer, personal as well as liturgical. Important as it is, the issue under reference is not so much about the amount of formal prayer he did, as about the fact of his being a contemplative. By a contemplative we mean a person who spontaneously perceives, admires and adores the loving hands of the provident God in all that happens to and around him/her. This may be described as a life of practical faith. Here, one's faith in God, instead of

¹*Karmasu kauśalam yogah* ("Yoga is skill in action" [BG 2:50]).

remaining just on the theoretical level, is made to bear on every little experience of the person, pleasant as well as unpleasant. Hence, it is not a question of the person having so many extraordinary experiences of God, but being able to convert every little experience of life into a God experience.

The contemplative character of the person is proved beyond doubt in the face of painful experiences, as it happened in the case of Chavara. For example, during his seminary life, when his parents and the only brother died, instead of giving up the vocation to priesthood, he remained committed in it, leaving the care of the family to the relatives. He gracefully accepted the humiliation when he had to return to Pallipuram from the Latin Rite seminary at Varapuzha, where he was sent for learning Latin language. His extraordinary spirit of obedience was manifested when he and Fr Thomas Porukara were transferred to distant churches in spite of his request to be allowed to continue the work of their dearest project, the monastery at Mannanam. He bore with equanimity the rejection at the hands of the people in the press at Kottayam where he went twice to see and learn about the setting up of a press. His sense of religious heroism and dedication was indeed admirable in the uncompromising fight against the intruder Bp Roccas and his supporters. He had a good laugh about the enticing offer of episcopate made by them. He was equally unafraid of their threat to seize the monastery at Mannanam, and their false accusations and propaganda as a result of which the majority of the parishes opposed and scorned him and his followers. On the other hand, he was all forgiveness. For example, when Fr Antony Thondanat, who was one of the rebel leaders supporting Roccas, showed signs of repentance and conversion, Chavara waited six hours

patiently to meet him. "Never did he [Chavara] hold himself back from any work, nor did he fight shy of any difficulty as he was always prompted by two motives: obedience to his bishop and the salvation of souls."¹

A person of contemplation would always give credit to God for all his success and achievements, and that makes him humble and free of attachments. This was quite true of Chavara. His deep sense of humility and detachment was unparalleled, as it was clear from the concluding words of the letter of Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* dated 15 June 1861, recommending to consecrate Chavara as auxiliary bishop: "... but I must warn you that the said person [Chavara] has the simple vow of humility, and even if he had not taken that vow, he would not accept such a character and dignity without an order, as the one that I had to give him to make him accept the post of vicar general." Again, to comply with the desire of Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli, the prior in his old age, in a spirit of detachment, left the monastery at Mannanam where he had lived since 1831, and moved to Koonammavu in 1864, and lived there till death. While in Koonammavu, when Vicar Apostolic Leonard Mellano and Fr Leopold went to Rome, Chavara fell ill. Then the physician and the confreres at Mannanam advised that he should come back to Mannanam for better treatment and rest. But he said: "Since the vicar apostolic and Fr Leopold wished that I should stay here, my conscience doesn't allow me to come to Mannanam when they are absent."² He endured the sufferings of the old age, including complete

¹Beccaro 2003: 12.

²Louis (or Aloysius): 1923: 6.

blindness for some time, 'with the most heroic resignation, even as heroic as martyrdom of love.'¹

28.4. *Sthita-Prajña*: Steady-Minded

The contemplative Chavara would not be elated, either, by any amount of praise or recognition. We may recall some of the direct or indirect compliments that people paid him: Already, while in the seminary, he was the favourite of *Malpān* Palackal, as he himself testifies: "*Malpān* Palackal adopted me as his protégé, looked after both my body and soul, and met the expenses of my priestly studies. Until his death he took more interest in me than in any of his relatives or other students who were his spiritual children. He considered me as his heir, and left me in charge of the work that was his heart's love, namely, the further growth and development of the monastery to which he had dedicated his life."² As mentioned above, Palackal in recognition of Chavara's ability and character, made him actively involved in the administration of the seminary, and the discipline and teaching of seminarians. Later in 1844, Vicar Apostolic Xavier, respecting Chavara's virtues, cleverness, and efficiency³ formally appointed him a *malpān* for the Syrians in the vicariate. In 1861, Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli, convinced of Chavara's skill, courage, knowledge and saintliness, appointed him as the vicar general of the Syrians in Malabar.⁴ Fr Louis of Manjummel, who had lived with

¹Valerian 1939: 260.

²CWC I (1990): 52-53, CSK I (1981): 59.

³CWC I (1990): 40; CSK I (1981): 46. *The Patent Letter*, dated 16 November 1844, in its original Portuguese is preserved in AMSJ.

⁴The original of the appointment letter in Malayalam is kept in AMSJ, and its Latin version is given in *Positio*: 216f.

Chavara for a long time, says that the Syrian Catholic priests showed him towering respect.¹ Fr Jacob Palakunnel, another contemporary, has noted down in his diary: "The people called him an angel."² Mr Mani Kurian Madathikunnel, after meeting Chavara and listening to him, said: "How pleasant an experience it was to see him. He was filled with the Holy Spirit. At the same time, all those who assembled in the church could hear his sermon without any difficulty. I still cherish these memories."³ Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli, in his letter, dated 15 June 1861, to the Propaganda Congregation, recommending Chavara for Episcopal ordination, describes him as follows:

A truly Christian, virtuous, most prudent and well versed in Sacred Scriptures, most learned in Syriac language, and who has shown himself in these circumstances by deed to be most attached to the Catholic religion and to the Holy See, so much so that the revolutionaries, the intruder and the others on his side, even up to Baghdad, have tried very much, used every art and cunning, to the extent of offering to consecrate him bishop, to get him over to their side. If they had been able to get him, all would have followed him, since he enjoys with all great esteem, reverence, and authority... My thought and request to your Eminence is, if it is judged convenient, and if it is possible, to consecrate him co-adjutor bishop ... he will certainly bring forth fruits much better than those

¹Louis (or Aloysius) 1936: 7.

²Valerian 1939: 238.

³*Ibid.* 242.

from the Chaldean Patriarch, because he is good, prudent and obedient, and in preaching he enchants.¹ Thus, all along his life Chavara enjoyed the appreciation, praise, and recognition of people of all kinds, and even those of other religions and denominations; still more, the enemies admired him and sought his support. But he ever remained a humble servant of God and people, penitent and ascetic. In his writings, including the letters, whenever a reference is made to himself, he presents himself as a penitent. He may be rightly described a *sthita-prajña*, a steady-minded person, always keeping the mind fixed on the Lord alike in praise and blame, health and illness, success and failure, life and death. He was a *yogi*, a contemplative!

By contemplation or prayerfulness is meant here the ability to live *uninterruptedly* in all circumstances keeping the mind fixed on the Lord. That is, in other words, to live *uninterruptedly* in the awareness of the presence of God. Here the stress is obviously on being uninterrupted in one's awareness of God, so that the contemplation is not confined to the formal hours of prayer in the oratory or so. Instead, it becomes a habitual trait of the person, running through all conditions and circumstances of life. According to an Indian definition, "Contemplation [*dhyāna*] is in the form of a stream of the thought [of God] that is uninterrupted like a flow of oil."² The stream of thought or awareness of God should keep always flowing, no matter where one is or what one does. This, indeed, was the great achievement of

¹Translated and quoted by Kanjiramattathil 1986: 97. See also Mundadan 2008: 229.

²*Taila-dharāvada-avicchinna-smṛti-santāna-rūpam dhyānam.*

Chavara, because of which he can be rightly called a contemplative.

28.5. Dynamic Prayer and Spirituality

Chavara's prayer life, and for that matter his spirituality, was a dynamic one in the sense that it kept evolving and deepening. He was born into the prayer culture of his family, a culture of which prayer was a decisive factor. He inherited the prayer culture. His virtuous parents,¹ especially his mother, sowed the seed of prayerfulness in his tender age. Under their parental care he grew up as "a child pleasing to God and people."² The childhood experiences of prayer including the event of his dedication as a servant of the Mother of God left in his mind lasting and deep impressions which gradually became the foundation stone of his prayer life.

The seed of the spirit of prayer put into his heart duly sprouted, and was further nurtured by the priest in the presbytery during his two year stay with him. There he was initiated into priestly spirituality. It then matured and attained stability under the expert guidance of his beloved *malpān* the ascetic theologian Fr Palackal during his seminary days and many years thereafter. His close association and collaboration with the deeply spiritual and practical pastor Fr Porukara, too, had a big role in the evolution of his spirituality with its priestly and religious dimensions.

Already as a seminarian, he had at least vaguely a liking for the spirituality of consecrated life, as is clear from

¹SP: 24.

²SP: 24.

the adoption of his motto: "The Lord is my portion," and the voluntary renunciation of his family property in favour of his sister and her husband. The monastic dimension of Chavara's spirituality became explicit and confirmed when as a newly ordained priest, if not as a deacon, he openly shared with Palackal and Porukara the inspiration to found a monastery and joined hands with them in its execution. He was one of the group in their third journey in search of a site for the monastery.¹

Very soon after his ordination as directed by the *malpān* he settled in Mannanam looking after the construction work. He was determined that "from then onwards all my life and work will be in accordance in this direction and thinking [*ī gatikyum abhi-prāyattinum cernannavanāyi*]." This can mean that from that time he was determined to follow the directions and mind of the *malpān* or to pursue the line and ideals of monastic life. Or, both these interpretations may be put together to mean that from then onwards the new priest was determined to pursue the monastic vocation according to the direction and mind of the *malpān*. Chavara then adds that "he was one of the only three persons, [the others being Fr Porukara and Br Kaniyanthara], who were committed to stay in Mannanam and work full time for the monastery, having wholeheartedly renounced the family and other relations."² As Leopold says, while in Mannanam he started being trained in the art of combining prayerful religious life and active priestly ministry: "There he led a well-ordered and devout religious life, striving for his own spiritual progress through prayer and meditation without discarding

¹CWC I (1990): 8-9; CSK I (1981): 11.

²CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 26.

his pastoral obligations outside.”¹ Thus, we see Chavara’s spirituality dynamically evolving and maturing with its Christian, priestly and monastic dimensions harmoniously blending.

The monastic aspect of spirituality kept taking more and more formal shape. Returning to Mannanam after the short stay in Pallipuram, ‘he considered himself a full-fledged monk for which he adopted the monastic pattern of life with all his income going to the common fund and all his expenses met from the same.’² The simple and austere life of want and hardships, and the selfless but innovative undertakings for the Church and society strengthened his spirit and practice of poverty; and his commitment as an obedient servant of God and His representatives was severely and repeatedly tested and proved. In 1840, when Chavara and others began to live as a community, they began to hold in common all their material goods and possessions and to keep a common account of incomes and expenses and, thus, their life was modelled on that of the early Christians.³ In short, while making the religious profession in 1855 Chavara’s monastic spirit was in full blossom.

¹Beccaro 2003: 8.

²CWC I (1990): 27; CSK I (1981): 32.

³CWC I (1990): 175-176; CSK I (1981): 208-209.

Chapter 29

THE CARMELITE FACTOR

29.1. Dominican Ideal in Carmelite Style

The last factor that decisively characterized Chavara's spirituality was the Carmelite tradition. Being providentially introduced to it, he deliberately embraced and wholeheartedly lived it. Being grateful to God, he was even proud that the congregation was included in the Carmelite family. As we know, the initial plan of the founding fathers under the leadership of *Malpān* Palackal was to follow the Dominican ideal of "*Contemplata preadicare*," meaning, "To preach what you experience in contemplation." That is, they wanted to lead the consecrated life effectively combining prayer and preaching, the contemplative and prophetic dimensions. They even took initial steps for the realization of this ideal. But providentially, as Chavara puts it, when they made the profession of vows in 1855 they called themselves "Servants of Mary Immaculate of Carmel."

We may say that the change from being Dominicans to Carmelites was rather natural and inevitable. For about a quarter of a century between 1831 and 1855—the period between the laying of the foundation stone of the monastery and the profession of vows—the community was under the guidance and training of the Carmelite missionaries including the vicars apostolic. Therefore, it stands to reason that they received a Carmelite style of formation. It must have decided their way of life, nature of community, style of prayer, manner of perception and so on. Thus, it is quite

likely that they eventually got used to and even felt happy to be part of the great Carmelite tradition of spirituality. That may be the reason why they did not resist when, on the occasion of the profession, Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli gave them the Rule of the Order of Carmelites Discalced (OCD). Of course, they wanted to have it with certain changes to suit their original ideal, local conditions and the Syrian traditions. For example, they requested that the provisions for silence and enclosures be mitigated. It does not mean that they did not appreciate the practice of silence and solitude with the help of enclosures, but that in their case it should not be so strict as in cloistered convents or purely contemplative monasteries like the OCD houses. All that they wanted was that the rules should be in accordance with the congregation's originally apostolic nature. In other words, their inclusion in the Carmelite family was not at the cost of the original ideal of being at the same time contemplative and active. In support of their position, they would easily point to Prophet Elias to whom the origin of the Carmelite Order is traced. He was basically a contemplative hermit who, in his cave, "was burning with the zeal for God the Lord of armies" (1 Kgs 19:10, 14). But when God directed, he, with equal zeal, jumped into action to fight fiercely against idolatry! Indeed, a contemplative in action! Almost the same has been stated about Porukara: "His soul was aflame with God's love which made him practise heroic virtues and flowed to his neighbour. For the glory of God and the benefit of people he [collaborated] to found the monastery, and to run it he went through enormous troubles and sufferings."¹ Palackal, too, obviously was of the same description. By the time of their religious

¹SP: 23.

profession Chavara and the community obviously and joyously opted to be *Carmelite* contemplatives in action. The prior, as a mark of his acceptance of the Carmelite vocation, took Prophet Elias as his second patron and began to be called Kuriakose Elias. It is also significant that in early 1860s, he submitted himself to the guidance of Fr Leopold OCD, a much younger but able Carmelite missionary monk, who was appointed the Carmelite provincial delegate and novice master of the new congregation. He remained Chavara's confessor and spiritual director till the latter died in 1871. Still more, convinced of God's providence in their becoming Carmelites, he lived up to it in full and, as if to clear any possible doubt in the members' mind, he wrote in the testament:

Dear children, by the special grace of God we have been called to be Carmelites, so pleasing to our Blessed Mother. This has been because God willed it so, and not because man planned it thus. I am sure of this as I am sure that the material on which I am now writing is paper. The founders of the congregation, Rev *Malpāns* Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, had prayed and made arrangements for a Dominican congregation. Thus, we began the unprecedented custom of wearing the white cassock and took other steps. But our Mother, realizing our weakness, took us into her special care.¹

Of course, when the congregation was high-handedly affiliated as a Third Order of Carmelites Discalced (TOCD) the members resisted because it called into question the institute's autonomous status and indigenous identity, and

¹CWC IV (1990): 70; CSK IV (1986); 99.

had very unwelcome legal implications. Chavara too certainly shared their hurt feelings. But he has not ever mentioned anything, negatively or positively, about the affiliation. Perhaps he took the matter to the vicar apostolic, and then, as was his wont in all such issues, left to God to put things right in His time and style.

29.2. Chavara: A Committed Carmelite

As his companions and associates like Frs Leopold and Kuriakose Porukara testify, Chavara's life and conduct as a Carmelite was flawless, in full conformity with the Carmelite rules, fully integrated to the community discipline, with childlike obedience to superiors, full of love for silence, solitude and prayer, poor, simple and austere; perfect in the renunciation of possessions, relations and himself; single-minded in the love of God, and unquenchably thirsty for the salvation of fellow human beings; with a deep devotion to the Eucharistic Lord, and a filial love for Blessed Virgin Mary. Archbishop Mathew Kavukat says that Chavara was "a very holy monk ... a monk of extraordinary sanctity..."¹ Fr Louis, who was under Chavara's spiritual direction for many years, says: "He [Chavara] was very keen on observing the spirit of obedience, love of God and devotion to the rules of the congregation."²

Chavara's views about the Carmelite ideals are clearly expressed in the instructions to the fellow religious. In the circular that he wrote jointly with Provincial Delegate Fr Leopold, he warns the members of the congregation against

¹"Foreword" in Chacko K. C., *Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mannanam 1959.

²Valerian 1953: 38.

the lowering of spiritual standards, seeking of physical comforts, bodily wellbeing and vain pleasures, brooding over the slightest sickness, grieving and complaining even about silly matters, carelessness about the spirit of silence and solitude, indiscriminate mingling and interference with the affairs of the people outside, negligence of self-discipline, meditation and prayer, selfishness and unconcern for the community, and the loss of the spirit of obedience,¹ all these being characteristically Carmelite concerns.

29.3. In the Line of Carmelite Mystics

While discussing the themes of the vow of chastity and prayer life we have already seen that Chavara's spirituality reached the heights of mystical levels. He is obviously in the line of Carmelite mystics. Among them perhaps the one with whose ideals and teachings Chavara was most familiar is St Teresa of Avila. It is rather surprising that nowhere in his writings or instructions is St John of the Cross explicitly mentioned. However, his mystical theology is essentially the same as that of the latter: one's complete detachment from all that is not God, on the one hand, and the consummate union of one's spirit with God, on the other. This understanding of spiritual life is unambiguously described by Chavara, not in the characteristically Johannine language of *dark night*, *ascent of mount*, *living flame of love* and *spiritual canticle*, but in his own simple but convincing terms and style.

The spousal mysticism, which is generally the underlying theme in the writings of Carmelite mystics, is basically accepted by Chavara, too. In support of his liking for spousal mysticism, we have quoted quite a few passages

¹CWC IV (1990): 60-66; CSK IV (1986): 89-95.

from his works while dealing with his understanding and practice of consecrated chastity and prayerfulness. He was quite familiar not only with the teachings but also the style and language of St Teresa of Avila. He accepted her as his mistress and guide in matters of prayer and meditation. He says:

God so willed that I, though unworthy, be a child of St Teresa of Avila. The Mother of Carmel, too, placed me in the care this saint. The latter also has accepted me as one of her children. A mother always grants whatever her child would ask for. If she doesn't have it with her, she will surely get it from elsewhere for her child. Mother Teresa loves her children more than any bodily mother does. She teaches matters related to prayer much better than anyone else. So, she is acclaimed as the mistress of prayer. In order to teach others she has written a book called *Interior Castle*. In it she speaks about the seven mansions of spiritual life, one inside the other. For the sake of her children she has also explained how one can move into them one after another. Therefore, I dare make a request of her: "Oh mother! Either please teach me how to read that book, or you may yourself put its contents in my heart so that I am spared the trouble of reading it."¹

Interestingly, Chavara's understanding of meditation is identical with Teresa's. In her autobiography entitled *The Life*, she says: "Meditation in my opinion is nothing but falling in love with Jesus Christ, frequently conversing in

¹CWC III (1990): 1-2; CSK (1981): 14.

secret with Him who we know loves us.”¹ Chavara also gives a beautiful description of meditation in the same style:

Meditation is a conversation with God. As you would do with a friend, so moved by love you sit close to God, intimately communicating with Him. Meditation then is to speak with your beloved spouse Jesus Christ, sitting very close to Him... You converse with God as you do with a friend. It is a common experience that two friends, sitting side by side, go on speaking nonstop with one another till they part. They are never short of matter to speak about. That means, where there is love, there is always something to speak about. Nobody has to teach you this kind of conversation. Two friends, even if they do not know one another's language, will mutually speak and understand. To converse with a friend, who does not understand your language, is easier than speaking with another, who, though he/she can understand your language, is not a friend. Even to sit in silence very close to your friend is a matter of satisfaction!²

Further, Chavara endorses the Teresian teaching that the essential mark of the Carmelite charism is incessant prayer. Referring to the *Primitive Rule* of Carmelites she says: “We must pray without ceasing ... because unceasing prayer is the most important aspect of the *Rule*...”³ In similar vein, Chavara advises: “Above all learn the art of loving Jesus Christ. Stay constantly in His presence. Walk along with Him. Continually converse with Him.”⁴ He even recognised

¹Teresa of Avila, *The Life*, 8: 5.

²*Colloquies* in CWC III (1990): 2 and CSK III (1981): 14-15.

³St Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, 4: 2.

⁴CWC IV (1990): 82; CSK IV (1986): 112.

the Teresian style of speaking in terms of the seven degrees of prayer experience: "1. Reading, 2. Solitude, 3. Meditative prayer, and 4. Meditation. For us it is enough to reach this fourth grade of prayer. Our mother Teresa attained to the seventh one. Some of her sisters reached the fifth and sixth. We must reach at least the fourth."¹

Another point on which there is striking similarity between St Teresa and Chavara is the concentration on the fatherhood of God. For the latter "Our Father" was the most effective prayer, handy for the people of all stages of spiritual life: "Therefore, Sisters, out of love for the Lord, get used to praying the *Our Father* with this recollection, and you will see the benefit before long. This is a manner of praying that the soul gets so quickly used to, that it does not go astray, nor do the faculties become restless as time will tell."² St Teresa, however, never lost sight of the difference between God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. But, for Chavara, even God the Son is his Father! Especially in his *Colloquies* he addresses Jesus Christ as "my dear Father," and, as the prodigal son did before God the Father, he places himself at His (Jesus') pierced feet: "O my Father dear! I cast myself on my knees before Your throne of mercy. I am bent on clinging to Your pierced but live feet until You speak to me words of forgiveness..."³ In *The Compunction of Soul* "he [Chavara] is ever conscious of the ugliness of sin that pains the heart of the heavenly Father: 'Father, my loving Father, I regret my offences,' is the long drawn sigh that sweeps through the whole poem. Hence, I

¹CWC IV (1990): 85; CSK IV (1986): 115.

²St Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, 29: 6.

³CWC II I (1990): 5; CSK III (1981): 18.

am even tempted to suggest for the title [of the book], *My Father, My Loving Father.*"¹

The reference to Chavara's spirit of repentance reminds us of yet another of his affinities with St Teresa, namely, an abiding compunction of heart. Neither of them had ever been a great sinner, but both of them were very aware of the imperfections they have had once in the past, and were continuously sorry for them. St Theresa, in the early part of her autobiography, recalls in detail the little distractions and carelessness in her younger life. Regarding Chavara, his *The Compunction of Soul*, especially its earlier part, is comparable to St Augustine's *Confessions*. For the most part *The Compunction of Soul* is a meditation on the lives of Jesus and His Blessed Mother. As an integral part of it, Chavara again and again looks into himself with deep sentiments of repentance for the childhood follies on the one hand, and on the other with sincere gratitude for the many blessings of God. In fact, the abiding compunction of heart is characteristic of Chavara's spirituality, which becomes ever deeper and deeper as he advances in age, and is consistently expressed in all his writings, including the letters, of the last years. We may repeat two relevant passages that we have already quoted elsewhere. One, in a letter, written probably in 1869, to the Sisters, Chavara says:

My dear children, ... I am afraid my days are coming to an end. So, I request you to pray for me to God the Father, especially during these days of the 40-hour adoration. Please pardon me for my bad examples, scandalous words, and disorderly behaviour. By my negligence I have caused scandals for the innocent little

¹Sr Mary Leo CMC, CWC II (1989): xii.

souls [in the boarding house] who are entrusted to my care, and also for you the brides of the Lord. Please pray to God that He may kindly forgive them and spare me the terrible punishment I justly deserve. Intercede with Him that I may spend the rest of my life doing always His will in all things and finally die a happy death.¹

Two, concluding his testament, written in 1870, to the members of his congregation, he says:

Finally, I beg pardon of the Very Rev. Vicar Apostolic, the Very Rev. Provincial Delegate and the Very Rev. Missionary Fathers, and all the members of the monasteries. I beg of them before God to pardon me for all my shortcomings in fulfilling the duties and services that I owed each of them. Again, I entreat my confreres to pray for me. I professed my religious vows as the first member of our congregation; and I was made the first prior. But I have not fulfilled to satisfaction my obligation in observing our *Constitutions* and enforcing the same. I did not give you good example. You must kindly forgive the scandals I have given you. Instead of following my bad example, by living still more zealously you must make reparation for my failures, too.²

This comparative analysis of the spiritual visions of St Teresa and Chavara could be carried on further with reference to the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, meditation on the Passion of Christ, devotion to St Joseph, and love for the Church. However, for fear of exceeding the space-limit we cut short.

¹CWC IV (1990): 77; CSK (1986): 107.

²CWC IV (1990): 74; CSK (1986): 103.

Chapter 30

PRACTICALITIES OF CHAVARA SPIRITUALITY

30.1. Chavara Spirituality

The end-result of Chavara's life experiences and the various influences on him was the development of his personal spirituality with its own characteristics. Let us call it Chavara Spirituality. We get a comprehensive picture of it in his works *Anasthasia's Martyrdom* (1862), *Colloquies* (1866-1868), *The Compunction of Soul* (1870-1871), *Dirge*, and many letters. All of them, with the exception of a few of the letters, were written during the last decade (1861-1871) of his life. Obviously, after the departure of the intruder Bp Roccas in March 1862, Chavara was immediately concerned about repairing the harm done by him to the Church of Kerala at large. Along with that he also turned to matters related to the progress and spiritual wellbeing of his own religious community. In 1864, he was transferred to Koonammavu where he was also actively involved in the founding and bringing up of the congregation for women. Along with these activities he also took care to give literary expression to his own spiritual experiences, reflections and insights in the form of the works mentioned above. A careful study of them reveals the nature of what we have called Chavara Spirituality. Even during the final stage of his life our description of him as a contemplative in action (*karma-yogi*) remains valid, and, indeed, it becomes finally substantiated and definitively established. The point is that, on the one hand, he never ceased to be an active person, while, on the other, he became increasingly contemplative as well as

active! Here, we see his spirituality reaching maturity and finding expression in selfless acts of charity (*niṣkāma-karma*). On the one hand, he becomes more and more aware of the approaching end of life, which made him more and more God-oriented and, on the other, as it is clear from his letters, his love for others overflows more and more tenderly and touchingly. Finally, three months before death, he lost his eyesight for some time fully and then partly, as if he was closing his bodily eyes in order to see God and the creatures alike through the contemplative eyes! On the last days of his life, he would not allow himself to be drawn into conversation on worldly things, and it is said that he even put up a notice in the room, forbidding the visitors from worldly conversations!

30.2. Longing for God's Vision

One of the distinctive marks of Chavara's spirituality is the intense desire to see God, the longing for the *darśan* (vision) of God. Included in *The Compunction of Soul* is a poetry of 168 lines, poetically describing the incidents of the life of Christ. It is beautiful to see that it's every other line ends with the expression "I long to see [Jesus]." For example:

The Lord of mercy, the Son of God, His glorious splendour, I long to see! ... How he stayed for nine months in the womb of His Mother, I long to see! Born in her womb, He came to Bethlehem to obey mighty Caesar, I long to see! ... How Jesus, Anna's grandson, was hunger-smitten, I long to see! And in His twelfth year He discussed law with the Pharisees, I long to see! ... The Good Shepherd, seeking His flock that had gone astray, I long to see! The Lord of goodness,

proclaiming Himself as our loving friend, I long to see!...¹

30.3. Familial Spirituality

Another feature of Chavara spirituality is its familial character so that in it one feels being in the family of God. Already from childhood the picture of the Holy Family had impressed upon him. And, on the day of his religious profession, he added to his new name the phrase “of the Holy Family” so that his full name was Kuriakose Elias of the Holy Family. In his advice to the members of the congregation gathered around his deathbed, he said:

My pious parents in many ways impressed on me great regard for the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. [*Pointing to the picture of the Holy Family placed on a table near his bed in such a way that he was able to see it always, he said:*] in this way I have always kept and honoured the Holy Family in my heart and mind; thus, their help was always available to me. By God’s grace I feel confident to say that with their help I never had an occasion of losing the grace that I received in baptism. I dedicate our humble congregation and all its members to this Holy Family. Keep your trust in the Blessed Family; let them reign in your hearts.²

It is remarkable that Chavara considered the family as the basic and the most decisive factor of the Church and society. That is why in his letter to his parishioners at Kainakary, which has come to be known as “Testament of a

¹*Am* 3: 1-100 in CWC II (1989): 17-22 and CSK II (1981): 17-22.

²Valerian 1953: 54; also Moolayil, *Positio*: 548, quoted by Mundadan 2008: 390-391.

Loving Father," he focuses the attention on the rules and principles of an ideal Christian family.

For Chavara the supreme rule of the Christian family is, beyond doubt, mutual love, and the consequent unity of mind and heart. In the introduction to the letter "Testament of a Loving Father," he writes that family is a *koinonia* formed by blood-relationship and love, where there is love and respect for the parents, and peace between God and man. In this our world, full of sorrows, it is to be an abode of sweet consolation, peace, and order. To live in a family without consideration for God and prayer is miserable. The author refers to the commandment of the Lord "that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12), confirming it again with another word of the Lord that a house divided against itself perishes (Mt 12:25). Mutual pardon brings peace on earth and eternal blessing in the world to come. The norm of justice in Christian family has to be greater than that of others. Chavara asks very pertinently whether we should add to the sufferings we have already inherited from our great father Adam. In the same strain, he writes: "Tale-bearing is a dangerous business. Taking family disputes to the law courts has never helped anybody."¹

30.4. Father Figures

The familial picture of Chavara spirituality has a much wider dimension in which God is understood as the Father of the family of humankind. As we have already mentioned,

¹George Kaniarakath CMI, "Chavara's Vision of Christian Family," in *Herald of the East*, Vol. 1, no. 1, Ernakulam 1991: 14-15.

to call God “my dear Father” was for Chavara the most favourite act. When he uses the expression ‘my Father’ to address the Divinity, it does not necessarily mean that he is calling upon God the Father, the first person of the Holy Trinity. Even the second person, Jesus Christ, is addressed as ‘my Father’ as is abundantly clear from his *Colloquies*. This is a point on which we have already made a mention. For example, we may repeat the touching reflections that Chavara, identifying himself as the prodigal son, poured out before Jesus Christ while addressing Him as *ente snehamulla appan* (my Loving Father):

Oh, it is a long time since I saw *ente appan's* divine face. I squandered all He gave me. Now I am working for an unjust employer, feeding his pigs. I am so famished that I wish I could feed on the food the pigs eat... Further delay is suicidal. So, here I am on my feet to return home with my jungle-stick and country cap (*toppi-pāla*)... Oh my soul! Your *appan* is so bounteous as to forgive and forget every act of the ingratitude of yours. Oh, have a look at your *appan's* palace and mansions... Who is there to open this big lock and door for me? ... Who on earth would inform *ente appan* of the arrival of this outcaste? ... Would He not be furious with me, would He even deign to look at me? Can I go into His presence without permission? ... How can I approach such an august presence and seek forgiveness? Yes, that is true, indeed. Still, *ente appan* is so generous and full of love that I needn't entertain any fear... Behold, the doors are wide open! There, *ente appan* is coming out! ... Oh *ente appā!* I have sinned against heaven and before You... I am not worthy to be called Your son... My heart, however, tells me to call You by no other name than *ente appan*... Therefore,

enṭe appā ... forgive me... Oh *enṭe appā*, I cast myself on my knees before Your throne of mercy...¹

Again, scattered here and there in the same work are the Saint's words of repentance and cry for forgiveness:

Here I come before You, Oh my heavenly Father ... seated on His throne of mercy in the chapel... Oh merciful Father! ... Looking at Your holy head I feel frightened to think how it came to be pierced with thorns... I am ashamed of myself by reason of the part I played in disfiguring Your face... Alas! I myself disfigured my Father's face, the beauty of which David the prophet sang plentifully... Look at His mangled body and His head crowned with a crown of thorns!...²

Chavara's love for paternal figures is evidenced when looking at the Holy Family he addresses its head St Joseph as 'my father'. His devotion to St Joseph, especially as the patron of the dying, which must be one of the Teresian influences on him, was unusual. He prays:

Oh St Joseph! My dear father, your paternity fostered young Jesus... St Joseph, dear father, you abided by the honour and sanctity of holy Mother... Oh most kind father, I know the dangers involved in the feeling of self-assurance... Oh my gracious father... I am given to shivers to think of judgement...³

¹*Colloquies* in CWC III (1990): 4-5 and CSK III (1981): 16-18.

²*Colloquies* in CWC III (1990): 3-6; CSK III (1981): 16-19.

³CWC III (1990): 13-15; CSK (1981): 30ff.

30.5. Mother Figures

In the spiritual family of Chavara, the mother's place was taken first of all by Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom his earthly mother had dedicated him, praying: "I offer this fruit of my impure womb at your feet; accept him and protect him as your servant."¹ The priest, then, said to her: "Bring up this child as a servant of this Mother; in fact, he is not your son but hers!"² True to this dedication to the Mother of God, Chavara developed tender devotion to her about which Fr Leopold says:

His devotion to Blessed Virgin Mother was characterised by a genuine filial love. He spoke eloquently of her glories to others and tried to inculcate in them the true devotion to her. Very often when the thought of death came to his mind, he would recall the kindness and mercy of the Blessed Virgin, whom he used to call his 'Mother' to overcome the terrible fears and temptations associated with that fateful moment.³

As his mother died, Chavara renewed her dedication to Blessed Virgin Mary, says Kuriakose Porukara: "While Kuriakose was in the seminary his parents and brother died. Only the latter's wife and a girl child were left. He bore the pain of separation in a spirit of submission to God's will, and, in accordance with the training he had received from the parents, re-dedicating himself as a servant of the Mother of God, lived with deeper faith in God."⁴

¹*Am* 2: 4-8 in CWC II (1989): 6 and CSK II (1981): 6.

²*Am* 2: 11-16 in CWC II (1989): 6; CSK II (1981): 6.

³Beccaro 2003: 13-14.

⁴SP: 25.

Among the other mother figures in Chavara's spirituality are St Teresa of Avila, the Holy Catholic Church, and his religious congregation. Calling upon St Teresa, who was also his guide for prayer, he says:

O! Mother, affectionate and generous, you being a well accomplished mistress in the mysteries of meditation, I again seek your loving intercession in obtaining for me from Jesus the great gift of love... Now that you are with your Bridegroom Jesus in the heavenly bedchamber, you have greater influence with Him than when you were on earth... O! Mother dear, teach me to pray! ... I must come to my Saviour Jesus Christ, your beloved Bridegroom, to beg pardon for my sins. Mother dear, in your mercy do go before me into the bedchamber of your beloved heavenly Spouse...¹

His devotion to the Holy Catholic Church and to its visible head the Holy Father, too, was unparalleled, to which Fr Leopold testifies as follows:

Among his [Chavara's] virtues the most outstanding was his ardent faith and devotion to the Holy Catholic Church and to the Holy Father. He had an ardent desire to spread the light of the Holy Catholic Church in all directions; he was grieved to the point of shedding tears when he heard of the trials and persecutions of the Church and eagerly longed to see the days of her triumph. Whenever he happened to hear the news of the Pope, he was always moved to tears, either of sorrow or of joy. It was because of this extraordinary faith that he showed great veneration,

¹CWC III (1990): 2-3; CSK III (1981): 15-16.

love and obedience towards the Papal Legate who was the representative of the Holy Father, and towards the missionaries who were the messengers of the Holy Church.¹

His love for the mother congregation was expressed by his commitment to her ideals and discipline, and to his own duties as a member and superior of the community:

From the very beginning till the very end Fr Chavara subjected himself to the Order with the interest and enthusiasm of a novice. He regarded the Order in such esteem as though it was his own mother. It was to him the paradise on earth, and he encouraged his disciples to hold it in similar high esteem. He would never willingly absolve any one including himself of the responsibility of conforming to the Order. Travel, old age, weakness and even infirmity hardly succeeded in making him relax much. He would relax when absolutely necessary, but only after taking permission from the spiritual director. He was ever anxious to have his meals with the community, frugal and austere as they were. Even while sick and laid up, he tried to manage with just the common meals.²

In his spiritual family, Chavara posed himself as a prodigal son come back home, full of repentance and ready to do penance for the mistakes. More than once we have mentioned how he placed himself in the place of the prodigal son in the Gospel (Lk 15:11-32) and humbly entreated the Father to forgive his sins and accept him at least as one of the servants.

¹Beccaro 2003: 12-13.

²Valerian 1953: 51.

30.6. Brothers, Sisters, Children

The rest of the humanity is, then, viewed as consisting of his own brothers, sisters, and children, and that explains his concern for others, especially the weaker and less fortunate members of the human family. At the same time, to some members of this family he feels a deeper intimacy for the simple reason that they, too, had gone through similar experiences. For example, considering himself a repentant prodigal son, he feels a closer affinity with the great penitents like Mary Magdalene and Mary Cortina, “who have always been helpful to me in evoking repentance for my sins.”¹ He also had strong paternal feelings towards those whom he considered and loved as his spiritual children. They include, for instance, the members of his congregation, the Sisters of the convent he co-founded, and his parishioners. In his letters, he addresses all of them as “My dear children!” or “My dear little children!” His testament to the members of the congregation, written in August 1870, as he was preparing for death, reads:

Dear little children! By the special grace of God we are called to be members of this congregation... My dear children, we, you and I, have not yet become genuine religious...²

To the Sisters he writes: “Ah! My dear little children, these days you must meditate on the love of Jesus Christ...”³ Again, “My dear little children, is there anyone in the world more fortunate than you?...”⁴ Still again, “My dear little children, see with what care and diligence our Lord looks

¹CWC III (1990): 3; CSK III (1981): 16.

²CWC IV (1990): 70; CSK IV (1986): 99.

³CWC IV (1990): 82; CSK IV (1986): 112.

⁴CWC IV (1990): 83; CSK IV (1986): 113.

after you!"¹ Regarding his love for the Sisters of the convent Kuriakose Porukara writes:

Just as the Patriarch Jacob had a greater love for his younger son Benjamin, so he [Chavara] loved them [the Sisters] most deeply, and brought them up most carefully, providing for all their needs, even as a mother takes care of her children.²

In a long letter that the Saint wrote to his parishioners at Kainakari (in February 1868), now known as "Testament of a Loving Father," he wrote: "Accept this as a piece of advice coming from one of your ancestors, keep it sacred, practise it faithfully, and make others, too, practise the same." ³ In another letter to them, dated December 1869, he said: "Beloved ones, in the order of flesh I am the son of Kuriakose Chavara of the parish of Chennamkari [dividing which the Kainakari parish was later formed] ... Since I was thus born in your family, I have a special obligation to do some good to you in justice and charity... So, I entrust this [letter] to you, my children of Kainakari parish, to be preserved as a treasure."⁴

Chavara's family feelings were extended in a very special way to the dying and those in the state of purgatory. A sure proof of this is his above mentioned letter to the parishioners of Kainakari, dated December 1869. In it he advises them to start a confraternity for happy death as a first step for the establishment of a house of charity (*upavi-śāla* or *dharma-śāla*) in which the poor and the destitute could

¹CWC IV (1990): 86; CSK IV (1986): 116.

²SP (1995): 29.

³CWC IV (1990):103; CSK IV (1986): 134.

⁴CWC IV (1990): 116; CSK (1986): 146.

be taken care of in their material and spiritual needs. He then describes in detail his understanding of Christian death, the need to prepare for a happy death, how to help others in their old age, sickness and deathbed, and advises to pray for the departed souls as well as to be devoted to them.¹ It may be added that prayer for and prayer to those in purgatory is very much part of Chavara's spirituality. Along with that he himself lived continuously keeping in mind his own death, and this was particularly so during the last few years of his life. In *Colloquies*, death is a theme to which he makes frequent references. The awareness of approaching death was expressed from time to time in his letters, too. The circular dated July 1869 that he wrote jointly with Father Leopold, begins thus:

Beloved brethren and dear ones, you are aware of the fact that we who write this letter are both advanced in age and are fast failing in health, and are preparing to present ourselves before the just throne of God... If this letter happens to be the last one of the kind from us, we pray, accept it as our paternal deathbed declaration.²

Among the authors of this circular, Fr Leopold was obviously a healthy young man aged 32 and, therefore, the expressions like "advanced in age," "failing in health," and "deathbed" refer to Chavara's own awareness of death. In another letter to the nuns, written almost the same time, too,

¹For the text of this letter see CWC IV (1990): 118-127 and CSK IV (1986): 150-161.

²CWC IV (1990): 61; CSK IV (1986): 89.

he makes a reference to the approaching death: "I am afraid, my days are coming to an end."¹

30.7. Devotion to the Holy Eucharist

The last, but not the least in anyway, factor of the constituents of Chavara spirituality is the devotion to the Holy Eucharist. He is rightly called an apostle of the Holy Eucharist. The liturgical reforms that he painstakingly effected included the introduction of the liturgy of the Holy Saturday, Order of the Holy Mass, Forty-Hour Adoration, and the renewal of the priests especially through seminaries attached to the monasteries. Fr Valerian writes:

This invaluable devotion [to the Blessed Sacrament] began to make its appearance from his [Chavara's] childhood itself. He was vigilant to go to communion as often as it was allowed... During the seminary life this devotion grows to such an extent as to cause wonder in his fellow seminarians. There he was an apostle of this devotion.²

Fr Leopold's testimony is unambiguous:

The admirable dignity, devotion and recollection with which he celebrated the Sacred Liturgy, made a great impression upon those who participated in it. Besides the usual visits to the Blessed Sacrament enjoined by the Rule, he used to spend long hours on his knees, immersed in prayer before the tabernacle.³

In fact, the Holy Eucharist was the centre of his spirituality and prayer. To use his own terminology, he preferred to shut himself up in the tabernacle with Jesus. He wrote to the

¹CWC IV (1990): 77; CSK IV (1986): 107.

²Valerian 1939: 262-263.

³Beccaro 2003: 13.

nuns: "Behold I have locked up your hearts in the tabernacle of Jesus. I have done the same with mine as well. Let us stay there until the day of resurrection."¹

Let us conclude this study in the words of Fr Marceline OCD, who received Chavara's religious profession of vows in 1855. In the year after the latter's death in 1871, he published *A History of the Church in Kerala* in which he writes:

When the religious house at Mannanam was canonically erected it was ... Fr Kuriakose Elias who was found worthy to be appointed prior of the monastery. Even if he were the only flower that blossomed at Mannanam, yet the labours of Fr Thomas Palackal and Fr Thomas Porukara must be considered to have been amply fruitful...²

¹CWC IV (1990): 85; CSK IV (1981): 115.

²*Positio*: 576.

Appendix

VICARS APOSTOLIC OF VARAPUZHA DURING 1784-1919¹

1. Aloysius Mary of Jesus (1784-1802)
2. Raymond of St Joseph Roviglia (1803-1816)
3. Peter Alcantra of St Antony ((1818-1821))²
4. Miles (Milesius) Prendergast (1818-1827/31)³
5. Maurilius Stabilini (interim) (1827-1831)
6. Francis Xavier Pescetto (1831-1844)⁴
7. Ludovic of St Teresa Martini (1844-1853)
8. Bernardine of St Teresa Baccinelli (1853-1868)
9. Leonard of St Louis Mellano (1868-1897)⁵
10. Bernard of Jesus (1897-1919)

¹They were all Carmelites, appointed vicars apostolic of Malabar with the title of bishop under the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, and took residence at Varapuzha. We have gathered these names and details from Mundadan 2014: 24-26.

²He was appointed vicar apostolic of Mumbai in 1796, and deputed in 1818 to take care of the vicariate of Malabar which was left vacant by the resignation and death of Raymond Roviglia in 1816.

³He was appointed vicar apostolic in 1818 but took charge only in 1921, left Malabar in 1827, resigned in 1831 and died in 1831.

⁴In 1838 or so he was conferred the title of archbishop, and it was accrued to his successors as well.

⁵Under him Marceline Berardi was appointed co-adjutor in 1877 exclusively for the Syrian.

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Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 1

SPIRITUALITY

of Saint
Kuriakose Elias Chavara

Fr Thomas Kochumuttom CMI

Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara is a sequel to Fr Thomas Kochumuttom's earlier work, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (2014). While the latter deals with the life story of St Chavara, the present one concentrates on his spirituality. This study is broader in scope and different in perspective. In addition to looking at St Chavara's life and undertakings from a spiritual point of view, it brings in a lot of fresh data that have bearing on his spirituality. It also covers the Saint's teachings on various theological issues and spiritual life. The points of discussion are well substantiated with original documents and authentic testimonies. While quoting the relevant texts from St Chavara's writings, Kochumuttom makes his own translation that sets an example of accurate and lucid English rendering of such works. The presentation is scientific but simple so that it will interest both the academic and the lay sections of readers.



Thomas Kochumuttom, born in 1941 in Kerala, was ordained a CMI priest in 1971. He holds a master's degree in philosophy and a doctorate in Buddhism from the universities of Pune (India) and Lancaster (UK) respectively. He began his academic career as lecturer in philosophy and spirituality in Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru, and then moved to Wardha as rector of Darsana Institute of Philosophy. In 1999, he opted for a quiet life of prayer in Jeevan Dhara Ashram, Jaiharikhal in the Himalayas, and ever since he is the Acharya there guiding individuals and groups of *sāthakas* in spiritual pursuit. His works include books and articles in Indian Christian thoughts and the spiritual legacy of St Chavara. In 2014, he published a detailed as well as easily readable biography of the Indian Saint Chavara.



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