

**BLESSED
KURIAKOSE
ELIAS
CHAVARA**

Rev. Fr Leopold Beccaro of St. Joseph o.c.d.

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A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF BLESSED KURIAKOSE ELIASCHAVARA

By Fr. Leopold Beccaro of St. Joseph, o.c.d.

*Translated from Malayalam and re-printed
by the Postulation of the
Cause of Bl. Chavara, St. Joseph Monastery,
Mannanam*



FOREWORD

This biography of Bl. Chavara, though brief, is an important document as it is the first biography of Bl. Kuriakose Elias Chavara written in 1871, in Malayalam, immediately after his death, by Fr. Leopold Beccaro ocd, the Italian missionary. As an appendix we publish also the note, which the author had written in his personal diary on the very day of his death and burial.

The author was the co-operator and spiritual director of Blessed Chavara of whom the author writes "*whom I loved even as myself.*" Hence the importance of this short biography is evident. We are happy to reprint this biography together with the Preface written by His Eminence, the late Joseph Cardinal Parekattil in 1970 for the first edition, on the occasion of the approaching second centenary of his birth: 1805-2005.

Fr. Lucas Vithuvattical cmi,
Postulator
Mannanam

January 3, 2003

PREFACE

In January 1971, it will be hundred years since the illustrious son of the Church of Kerala, Bl. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was called to his eternal reward. The 19th century was, in several respects, a period of crisis for the catholic community of Kerala. Bl. Kuriakose was the man sent by God to help the people to tide over the crisis successfully.

The services of Bl. Kuriakose in effectively meeting the dangers posed by the attempts of bishop Roccas to win over the oriental Catholics of Kerala from the lawful authority of the Church, his attempts at revising liturgical texts and deepening the spiritual life of the clergy and laity, notably by the compilation of the Divine Office for the clergy, the lead he gave for spreading among the faithful the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, the starting of Institutes for the social and educational welfare of the people, and above all, the foundation of organized religious community life both for men and women in the Church of Malabar, these are but some of the achievements of Bl. Chavara. There was, in fact no phase of the Church in Kerala, which does not bear the the imprint of his dynamic personality.

The secret behind such wonderful achievements was that Bl. Chavara was a man of great interiority, living in constant union with God and dedicating his life and activities to His service. He could declare on his death-bed that he had kept his baptismal innocence intact.

The present booklet does not even briefly describe all the activities of Bl. Chavara. Nevertheless, it has a unique merit for the simple reason that it is a faithful translation into English of the original book written by his spiritual director, the Italian Carmelite missionary, Fr. Leopold Beccaro O.C.D.. The book was written in Malayalam and was published in the very year of the death of Bl. Chavara.

May the life and activities of the outstanding man of God inspire us to lead our Christian lives with greater earnestness and dedication. I pray that the process of the canonization of Bl. Chavara be soon completed and crowned with success.

Joseph Cardinal Parekattil
15th April 1970

Birth and Early Boyhood¹

Kuriakose Chavara was born in 1805 of God-fearing parents in the parish of Chennankary. When he was a little boy, everybody admired him on account of his unusual piety and good qualities. Father Thomas Palackal from the parish of Southern Pallipuram, who was known for his erudition and devout life in those days, happened to meet our little Kuriakose, when he was eleven years old. He was impressed by the character and piety of the boy. He took the boy with him to the Seminary at Pallipuram.

In the Seminary

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.

It sometimes happens that those who have genuine vocation and possess priestly virtues and knowledge are raised to the sacred Orders earlier in their life, even though they may not ask for them. It was the case with our little

¹ Paragraph headings are inserted by the translator

Kuriakose. He was privileged to receive the sacred Tonsure at the age of 13. from His Excellency bishop Peter Alekantra, the then Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly. But our young cleric realized that an uneducated priest was not only inefficient to do anything worthwhile in his pastoral work, but may be even detrimental to the salvation of souls. Therefore, after receiving the Tonsure, he devoted himself all the more earnestly to his studies so that he might become a knowledgeable minister of God.

Ordination and First Mass

He received the minor Orders and the sacred major Orders in due course. In November 1829, His Excellency bishop Maurilius Stabilini, the then Vicar Apostolic, ordained him priest. His first solemn Mass was celebrated in his own parish the same month. After ordination and first Mass he put himself under the direction of Malpan Thomas of Pallipuram Seminary. The young priest preached sermons in many churches, at a time when preaching was very rare, and performed many other pastoral services with great zeal. During this time he preached a retreat in the parish of Pulincunnu at the request of the parishioners. Those who participated in the retreat were moved by it, and derived great spiritual benefit, as is testified by many, who still retain fresh memories about it.

Beginnings of the Religious Institute

A priest, by his vocation, has the pastoral obligation to take care of the spiritual well-being of others and to work earnestly for their salvation; but, at the same time, he has to strive for his own personal salvation and sanctification. Bearing in mind this twofold obligation of a priest, the above said Thomas Palackal and Fr. Thomas Porukara, a God-fearing and pious priest from the parish of kallurkatt, and our Fr. Kuriakose Chavara decided to start a monastery which might help to realize these objectives easily and unhampered by worldly cares. So they approached His Excellency bishop Maurilius, the vicar Apostolic for the necessary permissions. When permission was granted, they selected a hillock called Mannanam in the parish of Kudamaloor as a proper site for the new monastery. The foundation stone was laid very solemnly on May 11, 1831 by the venerable bishop. While Malpan Thomas, and Fr. Thomas Porukara resumed their pastoral work, and collected funds for the new monastery, father Kuriakose Chavara remained at Mannanam, to see to the construction of the building.

Parish Priest at Pallipuram

While the construction work of the monastery was going on, Fr. Kuriakose, by the order of the bishop, had to take charge of the parish of Pallipuram as vicar. As a parish priest he was very careful and zealous in keeping the

church neat and orderly; he attended to every spiritual need of his parishioners with incomparable interest and zeal. Anybody, who had at least a very short acquaintance with him, was aware of this fact. One day when Fr. Kuriakose was getting ready to visit a parishioner, severely affected by small pox, people tried to dissuade him for fear of contagion. But he said to the people: "This is my duty, and God will be at my side", and boldly went to the sick man's house. Not only did he administer the sacrament to the sick man, but also, with appropriate counsels, helped him to die a peaceful death.

Community Life at Mannanam

In April 1833 he was relieved from the office of the vicar of the parish at Pallipuram. Then he could 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. It was at this time that he had to suffer two great bereavements. Malpan Thomas Palackal of Pallipuram, the pioneer of the monastery and teacher and director of Fr. Kuriakose Chavara left this world for his eternal reward on the 13th of January 1841. Similarly, on January 23, 1846 Fr. Thomas Porukara who was deeply involved in the affairs of the monastery died at Mannanam impressing others with the signs of his outstanding piety. Thus, our young

Fr. Kuriakose, who was among the pioneers in all the new enterprises, was left alone.

Canonical Erection of the Religious Institute

Fr. Kuriakose however made up for his lack of age with prudence and exemplary conduct. Several priests and clerics joined him for leading a devout life. Fr. Kuriakose Chavara was aware of the fact that, however devout and pious be the way of life, it had to be approved by the representative of the Church, the bishop, to make it completely pleasing to God; and so he requested the local Ordinary on several occasions in different ways to grant approbation for the new monastic congregation.

Archbishop Bernardine, the Ordinary of Verapoly at the time, at last granted the request. He named them the Discalced Carmelites of the Third Order, and gave them the Rules and Constitutions. In accordance with the provisions of these Constitutions, our Fr. Kuriakose and ten other fathers made their religious profession in the monastery at Mannanam on December 8, 1855, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Upto this time Fr. Kuriakose Chavara, who was Malpan (professor) in the seminary at Mannanam, was known as Malpan. But His Grace the Archbishop changed that title, appointing him as the first Prior of Mannanam and other places. Several other monasteries were started in course of time

and the number of the religious also increased. They were actively engaged in the pastoral work in the different parishes.

Fr. Kuriakose with his Companions Fights Against the Schism of Roccas

During this time a challenging situation arose which threatened serious damage to many. It however provided an occasion to test the deep faith and prudence of Father Chavara. Without any power of jurisdiction and contrary to the orders of the Holy Father, Pope Pius IX, the Chadaean schismatic² Bishop Roccas from Baghdad came to Malabar in 1861, under the name of bishop Thomas. Father Prior (Kuriakose Chavara) had the unshakable conviction that there was no salvation or truth except in union with the Pope, the Head of the holy Catholic Church and the Vicar of Christ and that it was actually succumbing to schism to withdraw himself from the lawfully constituted authority of the Vicar Apostolic who was ruling in the name of the Pope and obey another authority. So he did not pay any attention to the different appeals and persuasions of the schismatic bishop and his party, nor was he moved by their threats; he stood firm in his allegiance to the right authority. During those stormy days, as Vicar general of the Vicar Apostolic for the Syrians he saved many ignorant persons from falling into

²In fact, he was not a schismatic bishop; but when he came to Malabar, he claimed jurisdiction over the See of Malabar against the express order of the Holy See (Translator)

the abyss of schism and rescued a great many parishes that had strayed into it. This is a fact well known to all who retain memories of those troubled days. When the crisis was over and truth prevailed, it was quite evident to all that those who had followed his advice were enlightened and those who had disregarded him had to undergo great sorrow and spiritual damage.

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.

Codifies the Book of the Divine Office

In the meantime Father Prior did a very useful thing for the whole clergy. Among the Syrians the different churches used different books for the divine office. Father Prior invited the *Malpans*³ from the different areas to Koonammavu to discuss the matter, to eliminate the differences and to bring about uniformity and order. He wrote out in his own hand the whole book of the Divine Office neatly and systematically with the intention of printing it. The various endeavours he had undertaken during his life give evidence to his deep interest and zeal in the proper conducting of the Divine Service.

³*Malpan* is a Syriac word which means Professor, or Teacher. It is a honorific title conferred to learned priests, known for their learning and sanctity of life, by the bishop in the Syro-Malabar Church.

Starts the Religious house for Women

In 1864 he left Mannanam for Koonammavu in view of greater facilities there to manage the various undertakings on hand. During this time he carried out a number of projects under the orders of the Bishop. Never did he hold himself back from any work, nor fight shy of any difficulty, as he was always prompted by two motives: obedience to the bishop and the salvation of souls. It was his 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. A full account of all the great things he had done for the realization of this desire, when God willed it so, is beyond the scope of this short biography. It is known to all how interested and zealous he was in the orderly progress of the convent in virtue and perfection, once it was founded.

The Virtues of Father Kuriakose

It must be pointed out that Father Prior succeeded in all these holy endeavours not merely by the power of his words, nor by his logic, but by his extraordinary character and sanctity. Those who came to know him were convinced of his unusual humility, extraordinary charity, unqualified obedience and submissiveness to the Ordinary. As a result all loved and respected him; and they put their trust in his words. Among his virtues the most

outstanding was his ardent faith in, and 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.

Special Devotions

Two devotions, namely, the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and the devotion to the Bl. Virgin Mary were especially outstanding all through his life. 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. His devotion to the Bl. 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 his death came to his mind, he would recall

the kindness and mercy of the Bl. Virgin, whom he used to call 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.

Athmanuthapam

In order to give vent to the devotion, love and gratitude that were pent up in his heart and also for his own consolation, he composed a small poetical work, titled *Athmanuthapam*⁴ (Lamentations of a contrite soul.) included in this volume, before he fell a victim to his last illness. Reading it, one feels certain that this book is extremely well suited to inspire good thoughts and to foster devotion to God.

The Last Illness

Advancing age and a life of hard work exhausted his strength, and in October 1870 he fell ill. Many tried in several ways to save his precious life. But God had decreed otherwise. For three months he endured cheerfully and with extraordinary patience the pangs of his

⁴ The author mentions here only one of the several writings of Blessed Chavara. The author originally published this short biography as an introduction to the work *Atmanuhapam*, under the title A short biography of the venerable father who composed these poems.

last illness and the consequences of complete blindness. Having received the last Sacraments of the Church with great devotion, on January 3, 1871, at 7.30 in the morning, he died in peace surrounded by his spirital sons. He was perfectly conscious till the moment of his death, conversing with his spirital sons on spirital matters and giving valuable pieces of exhortation. The following day his mortal remains were interred in the monastery church amidst tears and lamentations of all present. Let us all who desire to be blessed with a similar death like his, try to imitate his virtuous life.

APPENDIX

An Excerpt from the Diary of Fr. Leopold Beccaro
dated 3-1-1871

J.M.J.

Oggi 3 gennaio 1871, Martedì, alle ore 7-1/4 di mattina, il Padre Ciriaco Elia della S.Famiglia Primo Priore dopo una vita della più grande innocenza, tale che esso prima che morisse poter attestare di non aver mai perduto l'innocenza di Battesimo. S'impegnava nell'esercizio delle più belle virtù, specialmente nella semplicità di cuore, fide vivissima et tenerissima obbedienza e devozione verso il SS.Sacramento, Maria Santissima et S.Giuseppe, dopo aver subito immense fatiche per il bene della cristianità del Malabar, specialmente in tempo dell'inaugurato schisma di Rocco in cui nominato Vicario Generale di Siriani con esempio raro di devozione e fedeltà alla S.Sede. Combatte giorno e notte l'inazione dello schisma da cui salva circa 40 o più parrocchie per cui gli fu diretto da S.Padre Pio IX un breve del suo aggrimento. Fondatore e primo Priore di Terz. Carmelitani Scalzi nel Malabar ha fondato con somme fatiche il monastero delle monache, sempre sommamente amato dai Vic. Apostolici di Verapoly, amato più ancora dal tutto il Malabar, non esclusi Gentili e Nestoriani per le sue amabili virtù, erudizione e perfetta conoscenza della lingua Siriaca, godendo presso tutta la cristianità del Malabar una illimitata influenza, dopo aver sofferto con invincibile resignazione anzi allegria

una malattia di due anni, distaccato affatto d'ogni cosa e persona della terra perseguitato dal piu verso il fine della sua vita, dopo aver ricevuto con rara pieta il SS.Sacramento con una pace di paradiso, compianto da tutti e specialmente da me che io amavo quanto me stesso, in età di 65 anni spirò l'anima in pace e fu sepolto in questa santa chiesa di Coonammavu.

O anima santa e bella prega per me!

P.Leopoldo Mis. Di S.Gius. (firma)

(English translation of the above text)

Today, on January 3, 1871, Tuesday at 7.15 in the morning, Fr. Cyriac Elias of the Holy Family, the first Prior, died after a life of great innocence. He could declare before his death that he had never lost the baptismal innocence. He was exercising himself in the practice of all virtues, especially in the simplicity of heart, living faith, tender obedience, and devotion to the most Blessed Sacrament, to the Bl. Virgin Mary and St. Joseph. He has undergone immense hardships for the good of the Christians of Malabar, especially during the time of the schism of Roccas, when he, being appointed the Vicar General of the Syrians, showed his extraordinary devotion to the Holy See. He fought day and night to arrest the spread of the schism, from which he could save not less than 40 parishes. On this account, the Holy Father Pope Pius IX sent him a letter expressing his great satis-

faction. He was the founder and the first Prior of the Third Order Carmelites of Malabar. He founded also the Convent of the nuns after undergoing many hardships. On account of his endearing virtues, learning and profound knowledge of the Syriac language he enjoyed great influence over the Syrians of Malabar. He was always greatly loved by the Vicars Apostolic of Malabar, the Gentiles and the Nestorians not excluded. He endured his last illness for two years in a spirit of great resignation, nay with joy. He was detached from all disorderly affections for earthly things and persons, which was all the more true in the last days of his life. Having received the last Sacraments with extraordinary piety and devotion, in a heavenly joy, and amidst the tears of all who knew him, especially of mine, who loved him even as myself, he breathed his last at the age of 65, and was buried in this church of Coonammavu.

O holy and beautiful soul, pray for me.

Fr. Leopold Mis. Of St. Joseph (sd.)

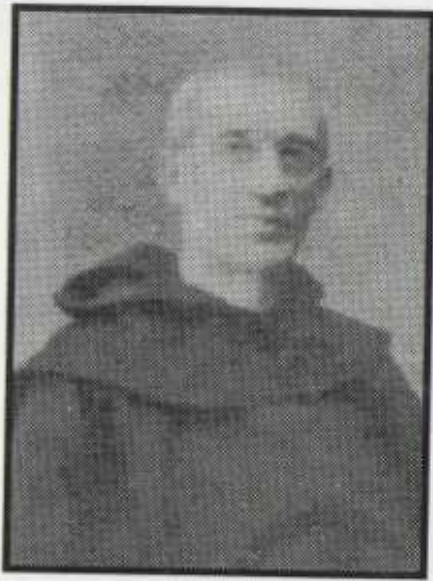
PRAYER FOR CANONISATION

Almighty and ever loving God, we praise and thank you for having our founding father Kuriakose Elias declared blessed. Give us the grace to be inspired by his ardent life of faith in order to experience you through prayer and to work for the growth of your Church untiringly, and thus to be committed to you wholeheartedly.

Loving Father, we pray to you to grant us the grace to see Bl. Kuriakose Elias canonized by the Church. Blessed Virgin Mary, Immaculate Mother of Carmel, St. Joseph, St. Thomas and St. Francis Xavier the Apostles of India, intercede before God on our behalf for this favour.

May this special intention.... for which we now pray, be granted to us through the intercession of Blessed Kuriakose Elias, Our Lord, and Our God, for ever and ever. Amen.





The author Fr. Leopold Maria of St. Joseph OCD of the Beccaro family was born at Grogna in Italy, in 1837. He professed in the Order of the Discalced Carmelites in 1854. Deputed for the Indian Missions, he came to Malabar 1859. In October 1860 he was ordained priest. Shortly afterwards, in 1861 he was appointed the Nov-

ice master of the Tertiary Carmelites of Malabar. In 1863 he was appointed as the Provincial delegate for the Tertiary Carmelites. In 1869-70 he was present at the Vatican council I, as the *socius* of Archbishop Leonardo Mellano, the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly. He was an eye-witness of the life and activities of Bl. Kuriakose Elias Chavara from 1860. From 1864-71 he was also the spiritual director and confessor of Bl. Chavara.

Immediately after the death of Bl. Chavara in 1871, the author collected all relevant materials from persons concerned, especially from the members of the congregation and wrote this short biography in Malayalam, as an introduction to the poetical work of Bl. Chavara *Athmanuthapam* and published it the same year, together with a few excerpts from the book.

Called back to Rome in 1875 by the Superiors he spent the rest of his life in his province of Liguria, where he was assigned to several administrative posts. He died in 1914.