

AGONIES AND ECSTASIES OF ST. CHAVARA



DEDICATED TO THE SUFFERING HUMANITY

FR THOMAS PANTHAPLACKAL CMI

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Theological Studies on Saint Chavara, No. 9

AGONIES AND ECSTASIES
St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara

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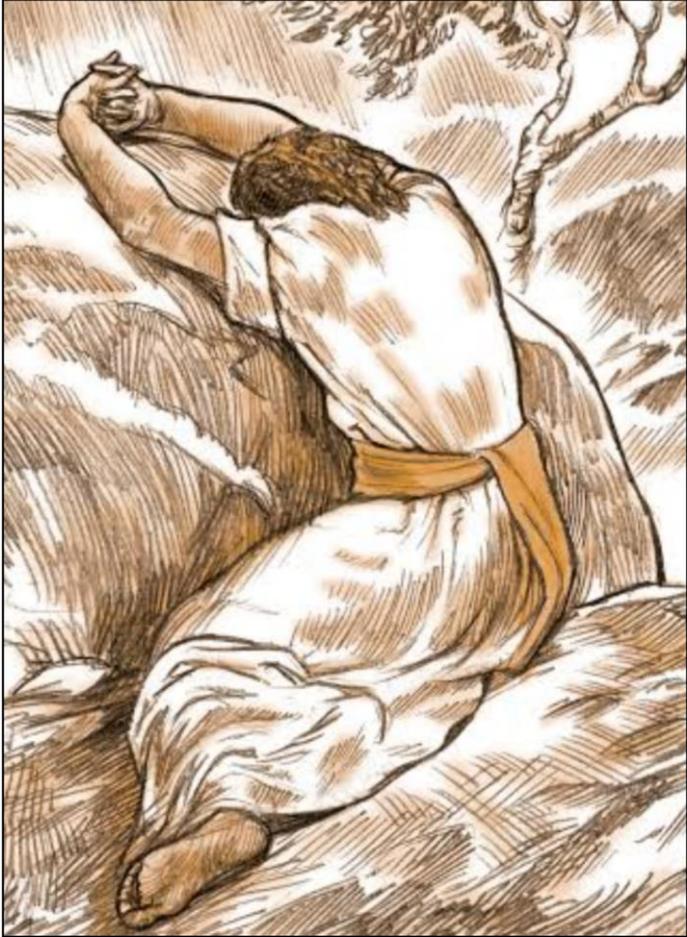
ST. CHAVARA'S PRAYER GAZING THE HOLY FACE

"Oh! My Blessed Father, I don't dare to raise my eyes towards You and see Your face. How many times have I myself wounded you with the thorns of my thoughts? Instead of looking at the greatness of creatures with my eyes and glorify You, I used to look at the futile and sinful sights that caused You cry with blood flowing from Your eyes in excruciating pain. When can I see again Your glowing eyes and your beautiful face? Then I heard: "My child! When there is change in your behaviour, then My eyes and my facial expression also would change." My Lord from today onwards I will forsake all my desires and will not desire anything other than Your wish. Please shift the burden of thorns from desire anything other than your wish. Please shift the burden of thorns from Your head to my head. Until my death let the memory of Your sufferings make me feel miserable and prevent any thought that you don't like from entering my head."

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OUR CALL IS TO SHARE THE SUFFERINGS OF JESUS FOR THE SALVATION OF ALL.

Word of Blessing

St Kuriakose Elias Chavara is revered today as a spirit-filled person who contributed towards rejuvenating the Christian life and initiating reform in the social life of the people of Kerala. The Vice President of India Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu while honouring him at the conclusion of his 150th entry into the heavenly bliss on 3rd January 2022 at Mannanam, described him in the following words: “This iconic spiritual and social leader of Kerala, whom people considered as a saint during his lifetime, was a true visionary in every sense of the term.” He is held as a leader, and an activist who could give direction to the Church and to the society of his time. He is the co-founder of a Congregation for men and women. But at the same time his saintly life shows categorically how a saintly person like him can, also going through the sufferings and agonies of life, can remain firm and solid in his faith turning every such moment as moment of blessings and grace and to declare with confidence finally with a sense of gratitude to God that he has never lost the baptismal grace which he has received.

The Agonies and Ecstasies of St Chavara by Fr. Thomas Panthaplackal exposes a less discussed theme on the life of the saint: his sufferings and ecstasies which manifests the real depth of his spiritual life. Many have been puzzled by the suffering we see in our day today life in this world. The question is often asked: “If God is all-powerful and all-good, why does He allow

suffering?” For some, this is not just an abstract logical conundrum, but a deeply personal cry of despair, welling up from intense personal pain. Theirs is the experience of King David in the book of Psalms: *“My soul also is sorely troubled. But thou, O LORD- How long?”* (Psalm 6:3). But our faith teaches us that enduring suffering is an act of choosing—intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally—that you will embrace opposition from the world and the devil for the sake of Gospel so that God’s name will be known in all the earth and among all mankind.

The life of St Chavara presented in this book, which comes in the series of studies on the life and teachings of St. Chavara, speaks of his approach to the various incidents and events of pain and suffering as God’s own plan and will and the willingness to submit to them joyfully. In 33 chapters Fr. Thomas describes various incidents that happened in the life of this great saint which he made into moments of blessings. From his childhood onwards in every phase of his life St Chavara was confronted with tribulations and difficult moments. Analyzing all those events and moments, the author presents the way how a person with deep spiritual experience can creatively and positively approach such moments without wavering or becoming uncertain.

In all such moments St Chavara realized that they are God-given moments to depend more closely and intensively on God and in his providence. The best

example is the untimely and unexpected death of his parents and siblings. The strong persuasion from his family members was there to leave the seminary life and to take up the family responsibility. But, he was convinced of the divine call and the ways of the Lord for him and was determined to remain firm in his vocation finding solution to the problems that came on his way. One could overlook into these events as ordinary life experiences. But Fr. Thomas Panthaplackal attempts in this book is to analyze these events from the perspective of faith-experience and to show that they were for St. Chavara grace-filled moments. As the proverb rightly says "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud" (Proverbs 16:18-19). Therefore, these suffering moments revealed the great humility and trust of St. Chavara on the loving providence of God throwing him completely to the loving care of God, the Father, whom he could call *ente appa* (my Father).

Like Job in the Old Testament he never assumed or lost heart in the midst of sufferings and trials that God wasn't listening or didn't care. He learnt to believe in some excellent advice from King David: "Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the LORD!" (Psalms 27:14). Thus, Saint Chavara maintained patient respect and trust in God even in the midst of his sufferings (James 5:10-11). Let this book be an inspiration for all those who read it to accept the will

of God in all the circumstances of life and to turn them as moments of blessings and grace-filled saving events in our lives. I do congratulate Fr. Thomas Panthaplackal for this work which will definitely an inspiration for many to look into one's own painful experiences and events in the light of the life of St. Chavara and to find solace and happiness in our lives in spite of various difficult moments in our lives.

May God bless the author as well as all those who read this book abundantly!

Fr. Thomas Chathamparampil CMI
Prior General

Message

Sufferings and holiness are siblings in the family of salvation. Just as gold is cleansed in fire, the quality check of the holiness is carried out in the furnace of suffering. When one becomes a partner in the sufferings of Christ who had been crucified, suffering leads to salvation. Jesus who experienced the chalice of suffering from the manger to the Calvary, is a fellow-traveller in our journey of sufferings. Like Jesus all saints used to climb the Calvary of their life praying, *Let only Your will be fulfilled*. The history of the Church, from the beginning to this day has been the continuing chapters of the drama of salvation. When the Catholic Church in Kerala faced hardships in the 19th century St. Chavara was in the forefront carrying the cross and providing proper direction to the history of salvation.

While going through *Agonies and Ecstasies (Athisahananaglum Athyanandagalum)* by Fr. Thomas Panthaplackal, in which the physical, mental and sentimental sufferings of St. Chavara have been thoroughly analysed, an imprint was made in my mind that anybody could transform sufferings into love, if only he was prepared to embrace the cross, and die on the cross. Though St. Chavara cannot be said to have lived an extraordinary life, by the way he transformed the agonies he had gone through into ecstasies, this great Saint has set a model for all of us for imitation.

Father Thomas has presented in the 33 chapters of his book the experiences that St. Chavara went

through from his childhood till the day he died, as if he was an eye-witness of those incidents. In narrating these 33 incidents in the Saint's life, he has combined both the notes left by the Saint in writing as well as the testimonies of his contemporaries. So, this book can be considered a new biography of St. Chavara.

One of the inspirations that St. Chavara has given to the Universal Church, through his life and teaching, is how to convert sufferings into saving graces. He was suffering from rheumatic fever as his life-long companion, from childhood till the end of his life. Whenever he had high fever, his legs would become swollen and sometimes burst pus oozing out, making him wince in pain. This fever also made him fall unconscious during these travels. Some eye disease left him totally blind for three months. Whenever he tried to open his eyes, he felt as if his eyes were on fire. During his last days he used to vomit continuously, had difficulty in breathing, could not eat anything, and had several sleepless nights.

He was suffering also from arthritis which made his veins stretch too much and pull out his limbs too strong, causing high blood pressure. God had selected St. Chavara, we can be sure, as the heavenly mediator of the suffering humans on earth, as he had experienced in his earthly life on almost every limb of his body. This mediator's intercession with God will not go in vain, as testified by the many favours of healing devotees obtain when they pray to St. Chavara.

St. Chavara's mental sufferings were intense than his physical sufferings, starting from childhood when he had received his Divine Call. When he was only 15 years old, he lost both his parents as well as his only brother. As they had died in the epidemic of malaria, he was not able to see them at their deathbed or attend their funeral. He had the sad news only a few days after their funeral. Later, when he had been the Vicar General in charge of the Syrian Catholics, he had to undergo great sufferings as he fought against the schism that almost destroyed the unity of the Church in Kerala. He was the founder of several monasteries and managed them efficiently for 35 years. However, he had been accused of being incapable of recognising the Divine Call of even a young girl.

However, St. Chavara accepted all the mental sufferings he experienced as gifts of God and converted them into moments of heavenly joy and became a Saint and Doctor of the theology of suffering.

Though there are several books on the life, services and spirituality of St. Chavara, there has been no book, so far, dealing specifically with his sufferings. Father Thomas Panthaplackal deserves special congratulations, for producing for the first time a book, well written, presenting St. Chavara not merely as a reformist, as a literary figure, or as a religious leader, but as a great Saint who taught how to use all sufferings as gifts from God in our journey towards heavenly bliss.

I wish all the readers of this book blessings from God to open a new path in their life regarding the sufferings they experience.

Father Paul Achandy CMI
Rector, Dharmaram College,
Bengaluru

FOREWORD

The paths of the saints are the same that of the Lord. The dreams of the saints are always the reflection of the will of God. Sainthood is not being awarded rather it is being fought and achieved. Human beings are in constant interaction with their fellow beings, situations, nature and God. Jesus Christ had experienced this interaction and taught us how to follow the will of God and ensure compassion and salvation to humanity in the real context of our life. Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." (Luke 9:23 - 24). As a true disciple of the Divine Master, St Kuriakose Elias Chavara has taken up his cross successfully and also made the path so clear by taking over and removing the suffering of others and thus helping the millions over centuries to walk through the paths of grace and creativity. This book, *Agonies and Ecstasies of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara* by Rev. Fr Thomas Panthaplackal CMI unveils the struggle that the saint has undergone to liberate a society from the spiritual blindness and social inequalities.

Life of St Kuriakose Chavara was eventful with his spiritual and social initiatives that were aimed for an all round development of the society and the Church. His pioneering contributions include the establishment of the first indigenous religious congregation of India,

safeguarding the unity of the Church, social reformation, upliftment of women, education revolution, preaching, publication, care for the sick and old etc. He had enormous difficulties from the authorities as there was no proper system in place to respond to his pioneering efforts. Mis understanding, priorities of the governance and lack of resources and personnel escalated his struggle. But, St Chavara has faced all these without dispirit. St Teresa of Avila says, "We always find that those who walked closest to Christ were those who had to bear the greatest trials." All his interaction with the external world was a response to his personal prayer experience. Will of God was his highest and supreme priority. He made proper communication and waited for the official responses from the Pope, his delegates and local bishops. He believed in the time of the Lord, *Chronos*

His personal determination for self sanctification had helped Kuriakose Elias Chavara to work for the salvation of others more effectively. Carmelite saint, St John of the Cross says, "Whoever does not seek the cross of Christ doesn't seek the glory of Christ." Like Christ enjoyed His suffering on the cross, the mystic heart of St Chavara made him work for his people with contentment and commitment even during the time of severe discontentment. He explains the concept of happiness as follows. "You could have found happiness everywhere if you had been seeking the will of God instead of desiring to satisfy your own will. If you observe charity, humility, neatness and promptness in what concerns you, you as well as the world around you

will be happy.” Value creation can happen only with empathy and addressing the problems of the society. St Chavara is the role model for this. His agonies were for others and the kingdom of God. His expression of faith has been translated into the action plans for the future. Sensitization to the challenges of the people and responding to it will invite agonies. But an immaculate life could overcome this and transcend it to the ecstasies.

The vivid narration based on true historical documents unveils the real personality of St Chavara as gold purified in fire. Each incident in this book is a stepping stone for the persons who really seek self realization and the will of God. This work will also function as a handbook for the spiritual directors. I am sure that those who go through the chapters of this book will find comfort and meaning in life. Let the legacy of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara be a guiding light for the generations to come.

Fr Thomas Thekkel CMI

Provincial

CMI St Thomas Province, Kozhikod

CHAVARA CENTRAL SECRETARIAT

Chavara Central Secretariat aims at promoting the spirituality and devotion of St. Chavara and to publish various works on him. Now a series of Theological studies are being published based on the life and works of St Chavara. In this issue we bring to light with a theological perspective the mental, spiritual and physical sufferings St Chavara had endured with Christ for the salvation of the human race especially for the people of Kerala of 19th century. This is a specific contribution by Fr Thomas Panthaplackal CMI, who has developed this book “Agonies and Ecstasies of St. Chavara” from the original sources.

INTRODUCTION

Happiness and sorrow are part of our life. Life is a mixture of happiness and sorrow. If any man or woman is able to transform the sufferings, he/she experiences in life into happiness, human life itself will become successful and fulfilled. This will give new insight, inspiration and strength of mind to those who are trying to run away, by all means, from their pain and sufferings.

If we make a deep investigation into the life of St. Chavara, we can see that his life was a wonderful mosaic image of agony and ecstasy. He was surrounded by physical and mental agonies from his childhood. However, looking at the mirror of God's caring love, he was able to transform each of his agonies into ecstasies. He attained the ability for this, through staunch trust in God. Having a deep awareness of his total dependence on God, and complete surrender of his life to God, he was able to forget his own life's bitter experiences. He found a new meaning in the human sufferings in this existence, by participating in the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the human race. As he matured in life and grew in holiness, he was able to turn all the agonies he experienced into ecstasies.

Human sufferings are of three types: physical, mental, and spiritual. Physical sufferings are related to one's own body which could happen naturally through one's behaviour. Natural sufferings are the pains and sorrows caused by sickness resulting from the mal-

function of the human body and most of them are curable. Mental sufferings are caused by one's own actions which result in wounds or bruises through irresponsibility. These wounds and bruises are caused also by fights with others or through reactions from others. These could be avoided if one takes extra care. Both physical and mental suffering a person experiences are easily visible to others.

However, the depth of seriousness of certain types of mental sufferings may not be easily visible to others. Others might get some clues from the eyes or expressions but it would be difficult to understand the cause of the sufferings from the actions or face of those who suffer. Most mental sufferings originate from inter-personal relationships: lack of love, understanding, acceptance, co-operation, or the existence of misunderstanding, inability to answer questions, lack of compassion and kindness. These problems cause drift in inter-personal relationships. All these result in deep suffering.

Spiritual sufferings are caused by inner conflicts resulting from guilt feeling of having failed in one's responsibilities towards God and others. The past failures in the path of justice, purity, belief, goodness and truth, could have created deep rift in one's relationship with God and humans. All these could be easily hidden from the eyes of the others, but not from one's own self. However, the sufferings resulting from one's memories of the past always haunt one and cannot be hidden from God. Everyone is answerable for

one's past and it can affect his eternal hope too. Repenting on the path of one's co-operation with God's grace, each person can be led to the path of repentance and experience of hope in sufferings or to deeper sufferings in fear, sorrow and hopelessness.

AGONIES AND ECSTASIES: THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Theology would help us to revive our faith, hope and moral efficiency by deepening our experience of the mystery of Christ. It transforms our hearts through meditation and communication of hearts to follow Christ's path. It also strengthens the commitments between individuals as well as in doing noble things for the community. According to the famous theologian Leonard Boff:

Theology is focused on both the ancient past, when hope had originated and on the present when salvation is experienced as a reality. These two different periods should help us to build the future.

The core relationship the Son had with the Father and the Holy Spirit, resulted in the incarnation of the Son in Jesus Christ, leading to his birth, sufferings, crucifixion, death and resurrection. For the salvation of mankind God chose the path of self-sacrifice leading to resurrection. God created everybody by a word, *Let it be*. He could have done the same for the salvation of mankind too. However, through Jesus, his son, God chose a quite different path- the path of suffering. There is a definite purpose behind this plan of salvation. Suffering is the mirror image of real love. God poured

out his love in the form of suffering for the redemption of mankind from sin.

Every member of mankind experiences suffering in his life as a result of the collective sin of humanity as well as his/her personal sins. These sufferings can be wiped out, in the last analysis, only by a personal conscious participation in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. God loved the world so that, by sacrificing his own son, sufferings could be transformed into love. Each and every experience of the suffering or sacrifice that one accepts willingly is the best means for the salvation of other humans also.

When Christ called his disciples, he did not give them any instructions other than to carry their daily cross and follow him every day. It is God's plan that in this daily carrying of the cross everybody should cooperate with one another. Moreover, when St. Paul said, "For the sake of the church, whatever is lacking in Christ's suffering I am completing it in my body," (Col 1:24) he was reminding us that every follower of Christ, has a role to play in the salvation of all others. His participation in the sufferings thus became a reminder to all of us to do the same. This is why, even though God could have saved all by uttering a word, he took up the path of suffering for the salvation of mankind.

Just as how God made us all partners in the salvation of mankind, an important question is how a man can participate with Christ in securing his/her own salvation. As every man/woman is cursed with the original sin, he/she is obliged to toil all his/her life and

to eat food only by the sweat of his/her brow. In short, only by walking along the path of suffering, man can attain salvation (Gen 3: 15-19). This is why God in his mercy decided to participate in the sufferings of mankind and make everyone to participate in suffering to ensure his own salvation and of others. Hence, it is impossible for anybody to avoid sufferings and it is possible to make suffering a source of salvation for oneself and for others.

St. Chavara, through his life, is presenting the best example for transforming suffering into an experience of salvation. He made his sufferings meaningful by focusing in eternal salvation. Therefore, instead of complaining about his own sufferings, he made them a way of salvation for himself as well as for others.

This book is a biography of St. Chavara, presenting his life in 33 chapters, starting from his birth and ending with his death. This book is the result of an investigation into the incidents in the Saint's life to see how he converted his sufferings into expressions of his love for God and all others with whom he had any contact and showed how agonies could be converted into ecstasies.

As we go through these 33 chapters, we see unveiled the Theology of Suffering St. Chavara had developed with his own life. St. Chavara in these pages emerges as a guiding beacon of light to the modern man who is constantly trying to run away from all kinds of sufferings, physical, mental or spiritual. Going ahead in

life St. Chavara, with God's grace, never allowed the wounds he had, caused by others, to persist or grow deeper. In fact, most of the agonies he suffered had been related to the failures of the Church in Kerala especially in growing in its unity and vitality. In his role as a spiritual leader of the Church, he took upon himself all the sufferings and problems the Church experienced. His life's vision was to make always the sufferings of others lighter. What his story of life tells us is that he was not concerned with his own sufferings. St. Chavara was fully committed to programmes that would improve the life of others, in all its dimensions.

St. Chavara did develop his own views, not through reading, but by personal experiences on all aspects of life, namely, God, God's Will, authority, parenting, family life, relationship of siblings, colleagues and enemies, and about consecrated life. All these are combined together in this book as study materials for the development of a Chavara Theology of Suffering.

If we meditatively go through the 33 chapters of this book, we can all personalise not only the authoritative theology of suffering but also get well-versed in the art of converting agonies into ecstasies.

AGONIES AND ECSTASIES: STRUCTURE

Agonies and Ecstasies is trying to investigate from theological perspective, rather than psychological, how St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara had faced his physical, mental and spiritual sufferings and converted them into opportunities for happiness both earthly and heavenly.

This is an attempt to provide a handbook for all people, who have to walk through this life into the midst of sufferings of all sorts. The raw materials for this book are both the life experiences as well as the dictums of St. Chavara.

Between 2011 and 2014, I was able to give talks to about 1200 brothers and sisters of the CMI and CMC religious families both founded by St. Chavara himself, in several conferences, on how their founder had turned his sufferings into blessings for himself and for all others. Those who were listening to me often urged me to publish a book on St. Chavara's sufferings. However, I was not able to do so until 2017, when, with the permission of the CMI Prior General, I published a book. I have used only authentic sources, the Saint's own writings or testimonies of eye-witnesses. I have presented the materials I had collected and often talked about in 33 short chapters. In each of these chapters I have tried to present a particular incident in St. Chavara's life, from his childhood until he passed away at the age of 66. This book is all about the physical, mental and spiritual sufferings that this Saint experienced throughout his life and how he turned his agonies into his ecstasies.

On his death-bed, St. Chavara said: *I dare to say that I haven't lost the grace of God, that had been given to me at my baptism.* He believed that out of love for God, if one did good to others, he could definitely defeat selfishness and attain holiness. The sufferings

one endures during his life, is a great message to himself and for all others.

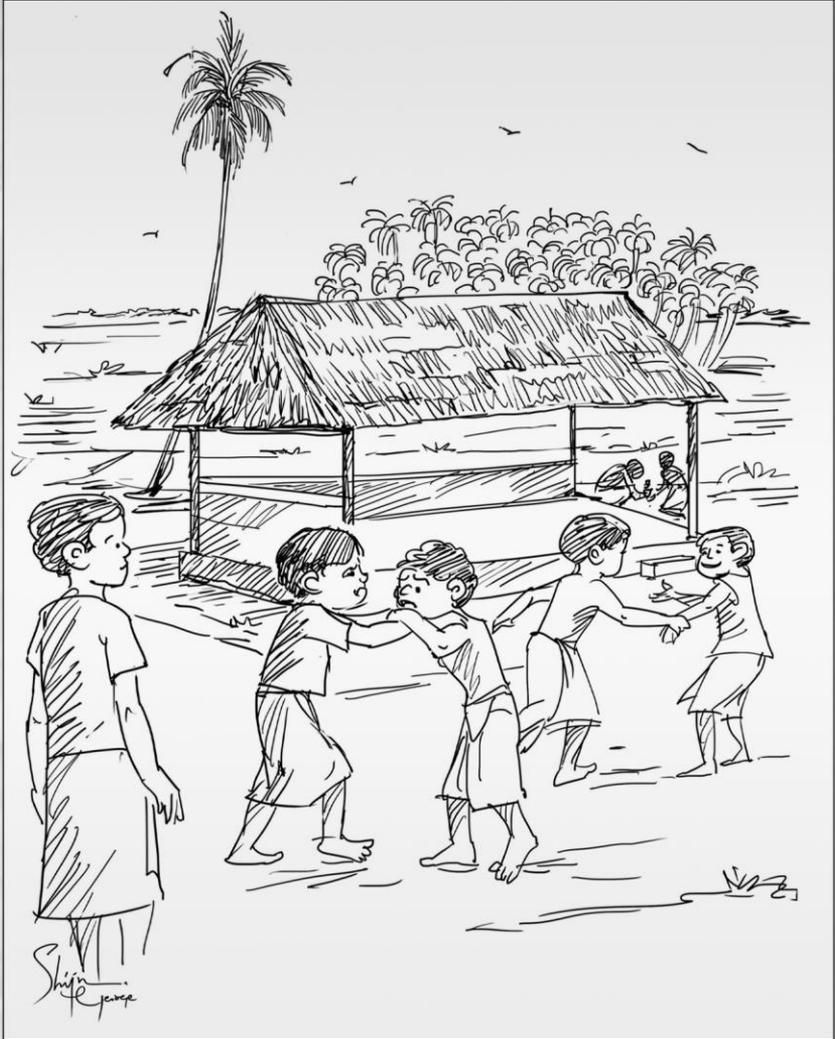
When this book was published in Malayalam in 2017, I received very positive feedback from readers. That prompted me to publish an English translation of the book. The introduction on the theology of suffering is newly introduced. The message by the former Prior General, Father Paul Achandy CMI, given for the Malayalam edition, is translated and retained in this edition. The quotations of St. Chavara from his writing – ‘Athmanuthapam’ and the Bible quotations about the meaning of suffering added in the demonstration pages, explain also the theology of suffering.

A WORD OF THANKS

A big thanks to the Prior General, Very Rev. Fr. Thomas Chathamparampil for his words of blessing and encouragement. I thank Rev. Fr. Josey Thamarassery CMI, Vicar General and Director of Chavara Central Secretariat, Kakkanad, for taking up the responsibility of publishing this book under the series of Theological studies on St. Chavara. I also thank Rev. Fr. Thomas Thekkel CMI, Provincial of St. Thomas Province, Calicut, for his beautiful Foreword. Many thanks to Ms. Beena Joseph for rendering the original book in Malayalam and other new additions into elegant English. I also thank Fr. Sebastian Poonolly CMI, who went through the text and got it ready for publication. Fr John Mannarathara CMI has helped me very many ways. Thanks for the illustrations on the life of St. Chavara from his collections. Thanks to the Amala Media House for

setting the demonstration pages on each chapter of this book. Finally, a big thanks for all my brethren in CMI Congregation and sisters of CMC congregation for the encouragement they give me to keep on writing and publishing books especially, on our Holy Founder, St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara.

Fr. Thomas Panthaplackal CMI



KURIAKOSE WITH HIS FRIENDS AT KALARI

Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the
sake of righteousness: for theirs is the
kingdom of heaven.

Mathew 5.10

*God almighty , who was in the beginning
You created me, a son of Adam
O God, wherefore this grace, reveal to me
O Lord eternal, your infinite mercy*

*Were I but a common brute of the earth
What right would have I, to ask you why
Who on earth and heaven would ever dare
To question you of your mighty deeds?*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam I: 1-8

CHAPTER-1**STARTING POINT OF CHAVARA'S
SUFFERINGS**

St. Chavara came to know about Holy Mother and Jesus from his own mother from his infant days itself, when he was being breastfed. His primary education days at the Kalari had given him experiences beyond his Christian thoughts which had left deep wounds in his mind at a very young age.

Individuals usually would not remember the experiences and incidents that happened in their life at a tender age, the memory process starts functioning as they grow older. We mainly hear about old stories through the words of our elders, especially from our mothers. They are the first contact who connects a child to the outside world, they are the main source of knowledge in a child's life. But sometimes some people share stories and incidents that happened long time back about which even their mothers are not aware of. Those are the ones whom we call the spiritual people. They are deeply bonded with God and can remember many things that happened in their childhood or even beyond. They remember certain incidents as if God himself had revealed those incidents to them.

We can find the best example of this in the Autobiography of St. Little Flower. Her mother passed away when she was barely three years old. Upon the insistence of the mother in the convent where she lived, St. Little Flower penned down her life story before passing away at the young age of twenty-four. She described about many incidents that happened long time back, which was not humanly possible to remember, incidents about which others had no knowledge about or witnessed, in her book. The amazing thing was, she was able to describe the incidents as clearly as she had witnessed the incidents herself.

Such incidents were mentioned in the documents made about the life of St. Chavara too. He completed a work of poetry, "Compunction of a Soul" (*Atmanutapam*), a few days before he passed away at the age of sixty-six. The first two cantos revolve around his childhood memories. He described about many incidents that did not have a remote possibility of his hearing about them from others, let alone witnessing them. He also talked about his experience at the *Kalari* where he had his primary education, before the age of ten. His memories of this period were mostly painful and he had been tormented by them for a long time. St. Chavara also remembers the sweet memories of his mother reciting to him aspirational short prayers while feeding him, when he was a baby. At night she used to get up and kneel to pray while St. Chavara as a little boy would lean on her lap chanting Lord's name. St.

Chavara's sweet memories of learning about God from his mother at such a tender age is heart-warming.

“Mixed in her sweet milk, she regaled me
 With thoughts of heaven, and words of grace so pure.
 And when reason grew strong, my little mind
 Patiently, informed, to lisp holy names.
 Huddled close to her feet, I learnt aright
 Gently, of matters sublime, of my faith.
 As at midnight she rose and knelt at prayer
 Warding off sleep and petty dullness to the air.”
 (Compunction of a soul 1:45-60).

Thus, St. Chavara grew up in God's love and knowledge every day. When he was five years old, he joined a primary education centre (*Kalari*) to get basic education. His *Kalari* days had been associated with painful memories that remained with him for some time. His mother taught him the Holy names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, but his teacher in the *Kalari* taught him something entirely different. Studies there were based exclusively on non-Christian traditional Hindu rituals, and they had nothing to do with the Catholic belief he grew up with. He regretted that instead of being filled with the love of God, his heart was filled with unpleasant words from his group mates and events in that period. He lamented that his thoughts and actions had gone astray owing to the experiences he had from the *Kalari*. He was tormented with memories of that period as he felt those experiences made him move away from the virtuous Lord.

“While being nurtured in body and mind
Was I beloved too of God, my Father
Fast spent five years of my life;
And I was made to learn of a pagan guru.
He sat by my side and with my finger bade me
Write on grains of rice spread afloor
Made me repeat every object by name
And I with humble accord obeyed him.” (Compunction
of a soul: 1:87-98).

Travelling through his train of thoughts, he realised how he had been led by the merciful God through difficult paths in life. That thought made him even more grateful to God.

He was filled with deep gratitude, whenever he thought about the amazing ways through which God had helped him escape from falling prey to sinful situations. A home visit by Malpan Palackal Thomas, from *Pallipuram*, who was the rector at the seminary, paved way for him to join the seminary. When Fr. Palackal was visiting his younger aunt in *Kainakari, Kalasseri*, he took the initiative to take the ten-year-old young boy Kuriakose to the seminary. There were no priests in his family before him, and the decision of Fr. Palackal made little Kuriakose very happy. With that decision, the seed of Divine Call buried deep in his mind, got the light of the day to sprout. He was longing to serve God and saw this opportunity as a direct call from God to do his duties in this world. He might have also considered this as an opportunity to rectify the

shortcomings of his childhood days at the *Kalari*. He looked at it as a blessing to grow up in the love of God and in loving one another.

“Ten long years passed riotously by
 And on that day of days, He called me back
 Sowed in me a sacred seed of wisdom
 A firm resolve, else what my fate had been!
 No priest ordained among kinsfolk until then
 Welcome tidings it came to all and sundry.
 My mother’s heart leaped with exultation
 That God did ear-mark me to be His possession
 Tear – dimmed eyes gleamed as sun amid clouds
 Could a heart maternal brave such parting?
 Emotion’s twain wrung her heart in sooth
 That her son, one of two, God’s own would be.”
 (Compunction Of A Soul, 1:113-128).

Every time he thought of his mother, his childhood and the time he had spent at the *Kalari*, St. Chavara, was filled with gratitude for the love of God that had been bestowed upon him. Instead of going into melancholic mood when struck by the memories of *Kalari*, he realised each and every thing that happened helped him move closer and closer towards God. He was overwhelmed thinking of how God had used his mother, the *Kalari* teacher, and Fr. Palackal as tools to help him move towards God’s love and in loving one another.



PARENTS IN A DILEMMA BEFORE THEIR SON KURIAKOSE

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Mathew 16. 24

*O Fount of Mercy, in your crystal streams of grace
Was my soul once cleansed and made spotless fair
Beauteous, bright, bedecked in gems of virtue
Through my Baptism, a boon, a day of days!*

*What shall I render you, my Lord, my God,
For all your wondrous gifts of mercy and love
For cleansing my soul, so holy, spotless and fair
At the very start of my journey of life?*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam I: 33-40

CHAPTER-2

A DARK SHADOW FALLS ON HIS DIVINE CALL

Even though his parents had agreed of his priestly call, a dark cloud drew over St. Chavara's Divine call. Family member's involvement made a new way out and erased all the difficulties. He was firmly convinced about his realisation that Divine Call was made complete with the help from many others.

What he saw and observed in young Kuriakose made Malpan Thomas Palatka, take an important decision, which was quite unusual. In his first meeting with the child, Malpan Thomas recognised the spirituality and maturity which was evident in Kuriakose even at that young age. He took an out of the way decision to enrol Kuriakose in the seminary and mould him into a good priest. Usually, the Parish Assembly took decisions in their meetings regarding a prospective candidate for the seminary and then let the Malpan know about their collective decision. Instead of that Malpan himself took the decision and informed Kuriakose's parents about this. His parents welcomed the good decision. They considered the selection of their son to join the

seminary as a blessing as there had been no priests in the Chavara family before.

When the time was getting closer for him to leave his home, his parents began to weep. God had granted them six children. The youngest and eldest were boys, the rest were girls. All of them would eventually leave when they got married. The youngest male child usually stayed back with the family as per the custom. His parents had all kinds of mixed emotions going through their mind. He was the smartest kid among all. On top, he was at a very tender age, and they did not feel like they had enough time with him. Joining seminary would mean he would be living far away in *Pallipuram*. It would be hard to see him often. They couldn't bear even thinking about being away from him for a day. They were in a dilemma. Part of them wanted to send him off and part of them wanted to hold him back. Finally, they decided not to send their little boy to the seminary, especially at this young age.

They let their son know about their decision. Kuriakose felt his world suddenly went upside down, his world turning dark. His hopes were crumbling down. He wanted to be a good priest. Not just that, but a saintly priest, and do a lot of good things for people. But he had no other option but kneel down in front of his parents' love. A second time in his life he had to go through painful moments. All he wanted to do was to run away, avoid all the sinful situations and be a servant to God. He lost his appetite and sleep. He could often see his parents' eyes filled with tears. Kuriakose might

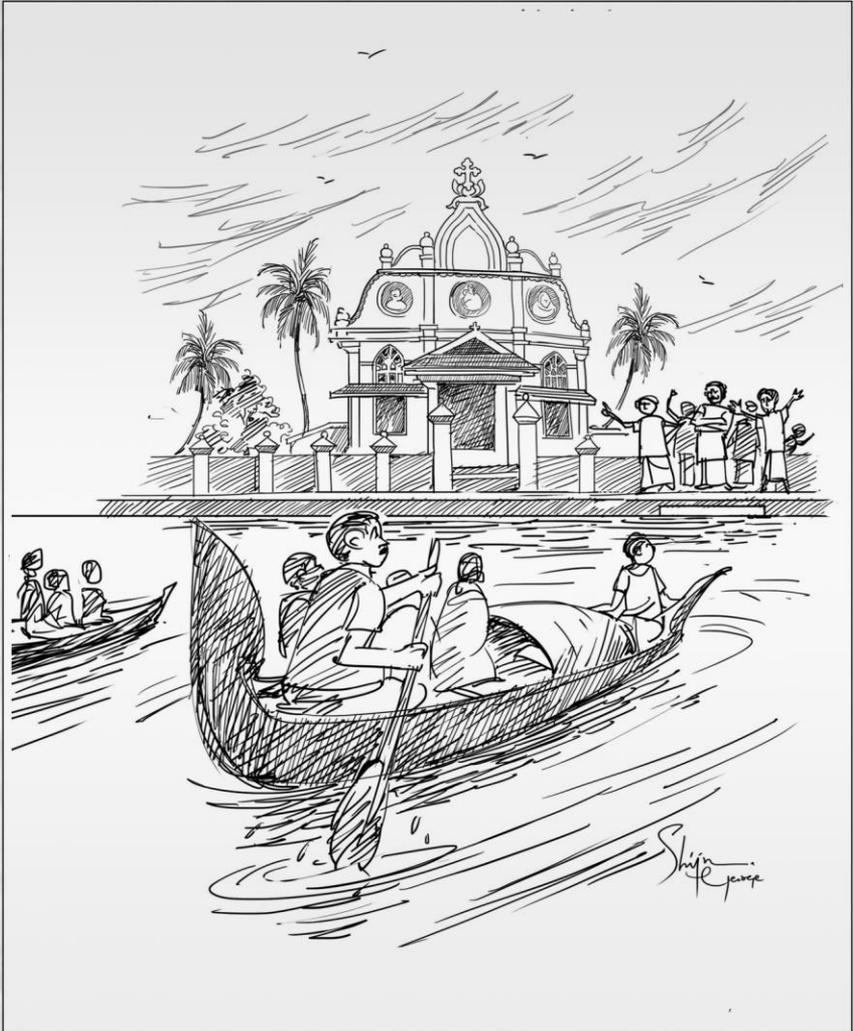
have visited his heavenly Mother on and off seeking comfort during that difficult time. He might have remembered the good words his mother used to tell him:

“She is the mother of your Lord and you are her servant Remember this always in your mind.” (Compunction 2: 23,24).

Sensing the unpleasant, sorrowful situation at home, his uncle Thoppil Kurian and the younger brother of his father, decided to get involved in the matter (Chavara Chronicle, 62). The matter also reached the ears of the priest at *Chennamkari* parish. Everyone came together to find a favourable solution to this. They decided not to stop little Kuriakose from joining the seminary. For the time being they let him stay with the vicar at the parish. The priest would give him training to assist him during the Holy Mass and also teach other things related to church activities. Since the church was not that far his parents could visit him often and also see him during Mass. They could even take him home at times. After a while he would be sent over to the seminary at *Pallipuram*. It was a decision accepted by all and his parents came out of their dilemma. (Chronicles 62, Compunction 4,5, 132-140).

It was like the darkened clouds suddenly poured down and the skies cleared again. Kuriakose was freed from his misery. Family and friends were happy too. He realised there were different ways of serving God and that taking a decision on Divine Call was not an individual decision alone or choice. It was a collective

response in discerning the will of God after realising the responsibilities awaiting ahead. He understood that in future when he had to take decisions on serious issues, it should come out of the collective responsibility taken with God and the society. After spending about two years in the parish, little Kuriakose at the age of 13, became a disciple of Malpan Palackal and joined the seminary in 1818. God's will and his wish both reached their destination. The happiness he felt knew no bounds.



BEING REJECTED BY HIS OWN PEOPLE AT THE PARISH CHURCH

Remember the sufferings Christ endured in the
flesh and arm yourselves with his resolution:
whoever endures suffering in this life has
finished with sin.

1 Peter 4, 1-2

*The Lord of mercy in His great compassion
To His blessed mother did enslave me
And while on nectar mother on earth fed me
Mary at her feet, houtly kept me safe.*

*“Accept him as your humble slave
To your maternal love, I entrust him
My humble womb's worthless “tender fruit”*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam II: 1-8

CHAPTER-3

BEING REJECTED BY HIS OWN PEOPLE

The welcoming function of his tonsure got disrupted by rules and regulations of law and traditions and his own parish members had forsaken him. In that turmoil he got a taste of how to be a part in Jesus's sufferings in such a young age.

Little Kuriakose was a staunch devotee, a very wise and humble child. He started his studies along with other students at the seminary. The experience he had from staying with the priest at the parish in *Chennamkari*, helped him a lot. Malpan Palackal got a clear understanding of Kuriakose from the short interaction he had with him, and decided to grant him the first order "*Asthappadupattam*" that same year itself. (The first order received from the seminary, before receiving the final sacramental ordination, is called Tonsure or *Asthappadupattam*). He received the tonsure from the Bishop of *Varapuzha*, Peter Alkandra, soon after. (Chavara 62,63)

The Syrian Christian families used to have a particular celebration when a family member received the first order, *Veedu Kayattam*, (solemn entry into his home, after receiving the tonsure) and *Idavaka Kayattam*, (seminarian's solemn entry into his parish

church after receiving the tonsure), which was done with much gaiety. The parish members and other people in the community welcome the newly ordained Brother with so much joy, in a festive mood he would be taken to his home and then to the church. But, before conducting a celebration like this, a meeting should take place at the church and a *Desakkuri*, (letter of recommendation by the parish assembly) would be sent to the seminary. The letter was considered as a certificate of acceptance of the candidate by the parish assembly. By doing this the church agrees to take over all the study expenses of a Brother while he was at the seminary, and he also gets the right to accept *passaram*, (a share of offerings to priests and seminarians on special occasions from the parish church).

Since Kuriakose was directly admitted to the seminary by the rector Malpan Palackal, the above-mentioned procedure had not taken place. For violating the tradition, some important people in the parish and some members of the church assembly, were waiting for an opportunity to retaliate. After he received the tonsure Kuriakose was happily brought home to celebrate *Veedu Kayattam* and afterwards he was to go for the *Idavaka kayattam* ceremony at the parish church. Some of the important members of the church committee did not participate in this. When the Brother and his companions went to the parish church from home, still celebrating the occasion accompanied by several boats, they were stopped at the dock leading towards the church. The people who were waiting to retaliate created barriers to prevent them from entering

the church's courtyard, by heaping plenty of slimy mud on the shore that it became impossible for anyone to step out of his boat. The Vicar who was forced to cooperate with the church members, locked the church and left. (Priest Mathias, St. Chavara Kuriakose Elias 1936:14).

This was a huge blow to Brother Kuriakose and his family; this incident destroyed their self-respect. He had been prevented from entering his own church by his people, his own church locked him out. Without going through the official ceremony of entering his parish church, he couldn't possibly go back to the seminary to continue his studies either. Not many people came to participate in the feast prepared at home for celebrating the occasion, which was another blow to his self-respect. Thinking about how his family was going to survive this difficult situation and continue living there made him teary eyed. He couldn't find answers to the questions that kept coming into his mind, but he knew he could find all the answers from God. Tears started flowing from the young seminarian's eyes, sitting inside the boat he prayed with a melting heart, he was burning in the furnace of self-tolerance.

His family though feeling pathetic, tried to find a solution to this issue. Some of them went to seek help from the Vicar of Mar Sleeva church in *Alapuzha*. He happily and readily allowed them to conduct the *Idavaka Kayattam* ceremony at his church. Finding a new path God had opened for them, they all felt relieved. After hearing the good news, Kuriakose and his

companions started their journey towards *Alapuzha*. Mar Sleeva church and its people welcomed their party warmly. Those trying times were noted down in an ancient song like this:

“Feeling happy that he finally fulfilled his long-time desire

He tried to get down from the boat to go home

But he was met with stiff resistance from some
of the important people in the church committee

Even though they had the permission from the
authorities

The ones stood on the shore did not yield.

Seeing the resistance, they decided to go to

One of the nearby churches, *Kallorkkad* or *Alapuzha*.

They chose to go to the *Alapuzha* church

When they reached there, Vicar of Mar Sleeva church
and the committee members welcomed them with the
Holy Cross, umbrella and flag.

They were received with so much celebrations

A cross was erected at the border and they started the
ceremonies

After the rituals the Vicar and the people sent them off
by accompanying them to the shore.

In the grandest of boats full of people, they brought him
home

As a procession with the accompaniment of musical
instruments

Everyone participated in the feast prepared at home and

Many gentlemen who came there had given the Brother gold rings as gifts.” (1939 40,41).

When St. Kuriakose was recognised and accepted by the people of Mar Sleeva Church, the parish church at *Chennamkari* failed to recognise the first saint of Kerala, founder of a religious congregation and a big revolutionary leader. By the Will of God *Idavaka Kayattam* became a joyous occasion for all at the Mar Sleeva Church which had a richer heritage and was older than the church at *Chennankari*. Brother Kuriakose did not express any displeasure towards the people at the parish church in *Chennankari*, who had put his family and himself through humiliation. He took the whole unfortunate incident as an opportunity to practise what was written in the Scriptures, to love even your enemies. He went to *Chennankari* parish in the evening itself and stayed there with the Vicar that day.

God’s beloved would not be deprived of anything, He would look after him in all his ways. To solve the problem completely, Malpan of Palackal and Vicar Apostolic got involved in the matter. Veils of uncertainties had been removed. Bishop had given order stating that Brother Chavara Kuriakose had all the right to receive *passaram* from his own parish, with that all the issues were settled down. (1936 14,15).

St. Chavara never wanted to take revenge on people who had hurt him. He never enjoyed dwelling on miseries and revengeful thoughts. Whenever hardships

struck him, he calmly found a way to solve them with love and patience. After receiving his tonsure, he received a sacred figurine of Holy Fr. Joseph from *Varapuzha*, that had come from abroad, which in turn he gifted to *Chennankari* parish. Not just that, he used to attend every year the feast of St. Joseph's at *Chennamkari* without fail and had given speeches too until he passed away, he did not even accept travel allowance. (Priest Mathias 1936).

In his journey of life, he found happiness in loving everyone and doing only good to even his opponents. His life was a story of love, love for his God and love for everyone around him.



KURIAKOSE AT THE TOMBS OF HIS PARENTS AND BROTHER

This patience is to have its full effect, so that you
may reach your full development.

James 1, 2-4

*Huddled close to her feet, I learnt aright
Gently, of matters sublime, of my Faith
As at midnight she rose and knelt at prayer
Warding off sleep and petty dullness to the air*

*Long hours, on her knee in prayer she stayed
Leaning on her then I would seat myself
While devoutly a string of pious words
To Mother of God and the Christ, King of Kings.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam I: 53-60

CHAPTER-4

PARENTS LOST AT A VERY YOUNG AGE

When the epidemic took the lives of his parents and the only brother he had, the status of his Divine Call again came to a halt. Even though relatives tried to force him to listen to the family's call, greater than that was the call of the Spirit of God. God's decision was to make him founder of Christian monasteries in India.

We consider the relationship with our parents as the most valuable relationship in the world. The relationship between the parents and the children would be the strongest and the warmest when they are young, when they are not yet ready to take responsibilities in life. If one of the parents passes away at such a tender age, it would be the hardest blow in a child's life. When one loses both of the parents along with the only brother he had, within the span of a few days, the depth of that pain would be indescribable. Such was the pain young Kuriakose underwent at that time.

Brother Kuriakose was the youngest among the other seminarian friends. He was a role model for all and for anything, and very smart in studies. A year passed quickly. At that time an epidemic highly contagious spread throughout *Kuttanad*. It was a massive destroyer. The contagious disease took the lives

of many including both his parents and his only brother. He couldn't go home because the epidemic was still very much on the move. Kuriakose could not attend the funeral ceremonies of his family nor was he able to see them one last time. In fact, Kuriakose came to know about this heart wrenching news only after the epidemic had died down. In his poem, "Compunction of a Soul" we can read about the frightening details of that epidemic, how it affected him personally and otherwise:

"Rumour ranged from every spot around

That grave epidemic laid waste the land.

Not a city, town or street was there

Where with wails and cries was not rent." (Compunction of a soul 11:35-60).

His relatives came to the seminary without having an idea of how to convey the sad news of his parents and only brother succumbing to the epidemic and losing their lives. How miserable brother might have felt listening to that news is unimaginable. His parents had been hesitant in sending him to the seminary as they wanted to have their little boy around them a little more. They all vanished from this world; the excruciating pain of that realisation wasn't easy on that young man. He was left with his widowed sister-in-law with a new born and other four sisters who had got married and settled down. Left with no one to take care of his family home and property and carry forward the family name, Brother Kuriakose wondered what would happen to the future of the Divine call he had just started following. A million such thoughts and questions

might have gone through his mind in a flash. Though not recorded, it was said that he fainted listening to the unexpected news of the deaths in his family, the sad news pierced his heart. (*Sthapaka Pithamahanmar* 30).

Relatives had a private talk with Malpan Palackal, and they conveyed to him about the dire situation they were facing. In the absence of a male in the family it was important to get young Kuriakose married and settled to carry on the family's name. The talks concluded with a request to Malpan Palackal to let Brother Kuriakose leave the seminary. When Kuriakose heard, his relatives had come to take him along with them, he might have had the feeling of abandonment of Christ on the cross, lamenting:

“My God my God why have you forsaken me? Are you, Oh God, also abandoning me? Have you brought me up here for putting me through this dilemma? Did I leave my parents to follow my heart to face this day? Surviving such a humiliation at the time of *Idavaka Kayattam* was to go back home like this? My God, you've led me by my hands through every single hurdle I faced. Would you forsake me now at this crucial juncture? Whatever it could be, God, I'm surrendering myself to your Will.”

After his prayer, Kuriakose felt much relieved. After receiving the blessings from his Malpan, he walked down the steps of the seminary along with his relatives to go home.

He went straight to the cemetery. There were fresh mounds of soil on top of where his family members had been buried. Kuriakose kneeled before them, and the sea of tears flew down wetting his clothes. He saw the scenes of the past fifteen years going through the mirror of his mind. He remembered everything he had received from his parents and elder brother. He was not aware of how much time had gone since he sat there, until his relatives helped him up gently.

When he reached home, younger brothers of his father, uncle and other relatives discussed with him all possible issues which were sure to come if he left the home abandoned. They told him that other than taking up responsibilities of the family, he had no other options left. Kuriakose was thinking that these were the same relatives who had convinced his parents to let him leave to join the seminary, now, they were asking him to leave the seminary and be a family man. Kuriakose immersed himself in prayers. He was sure that God would have some new plan for him.

“A waxen candle, lit, I held in sacredness
To bruit forth my virtue to the world at large
That I may not perish in ugly sin
Blessed salt I ate and sealed my strength.”
(Compunction 11:141-146).

Kuriakose spent some time in prayer and he was convinced that his Divine Call had no other purpose but walk closer to God.

He went to see his elder sister in *Edathua*. He discussed every issue at hand with his sister and tried to convince his brother-in-law about the things he was about to do. He made a deal with them, that until his niece grew up and got married, his sister and brother-in-law should look after the family house and property. As a reward for their service, he promised to give them his share of inheritance. When they accepted the deal, he felt God's hand leading him on once again. (*Positio* 57).

"Gold is cleansed in fire

So does the beloved of Christ in the furnace of suffering." (*Prabhashakan* 2:5).

Fr. Chavara was cleansed by God as gold was cleansed by fire. After coming back to the seminary, Kuriakose plunged deeper into studies, getting trained in his pastoral duties. As the years went by, the issues brewing at home had reached his ears. Encouraged by God, he was able to have a clear vision about the future of his family and his own future. But, only after Fr. Chavara was ordained as priest, was he able to find solutions to the demands put forth by his sister and her husband. Elder brother's daughter grew up into an adult. He decided that she should get married only to someone who would agree to stay with her at the family home and carry over the family name, 'Chavara'. When the person they found for her agreed to accept his decision, Fr. Chavara finally got freed from the shackles of family and relations. He had left his family only to become the father of an even bigger family, a monastery, and for that he treaded paths filled with

hardships and tears. He was tested for his tolerance many a time but holding on to the fingers of God he passed through every difficult situation happily. He found companionship with Christ who taught him to find happiness and tolerance even in trying times. He firmly held on to the words of Christ:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24).

He always held on to his hope in God and never gave in to any hardships he faced in life. He found happiness in whatever God had given to him.



REJECTION FROM THE SEMINARY AT VARAPUZHA

Blessed are you when men revile you and
persecute you on my account. Rejoice and be
glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

Mathew 5, 11

*While being nurtured in body and mind
Was I beloved too of God, my Father
Fast sped five years of my life;
And I was made to learn of a non Christian guru.*

*He sat by my side and with my finger bade me
Write on grains of rice spread afloor
Made me repeat every object by name
And I with humble accord obeyed him.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam I: 85-92

CHAPTER-5

REJECTION FROM THE SEMINARY AT VARAPPUZHA

St. Chavara had to face very unpleasant situations when he went to learn Latin. His self-esteem was badly shaken. But he took up the challenge and learned the language that later on helped him keep in touch with Rome directly and also to unroot the disunity inside Kerala Church. He realised that only by accepting the rejection of Good Friday he would enter into the happiness of Easter.

Another incident that happened in St. Chavara's life that gave immense pain and bruised his self was when he went to the Seminary at *Varapuzha* to learn Latin. In the Church, until the time of the 1st Synod of Vatican, the main languages used for worship were Latin, Syriac and Greek. Hence, the Churches based on different Rites were used to worship only in those languages suitable for their own Rites. Before the 19th century, the Rites that prevailed in the Indian Churches were in Syriac and Latin. Hence the priests in each Church used only the language of their own respective Rite. But the notifications that came from the Holy See, in Rome were always in Latin. To understand those information and declarations some priests started learning Latin. Fr.

Palackal decided to start sending some of his disciples to the seminary in *Varapuzha*, to learn Latin.

With the consent of Bishop Malesia, and with the help of Fr. Nicholas who was a Syrian professor residing there, Fr. Palackal took Chandy Mangalath, Joseph Pazhekadavil and Kuriakose Chavara along with him and got them admitted in the seminary at *Varapuzha* to study Latin. They got accommodation outside the seminary, in a room to the west side of the well. They were instructed to have food, sleep and do everything in that room. After making sure that they were settled down and doing fine, Fr. Palackal went back to *Pallipuram*.

When these youngsters entered the classroom the next day carrying their study books, they were stopped by the other brothers. When they stood helpless, others started making fun of them. They felt like vagabonds in the midst of those youngsters and feeling disgraced they had to go back to their room. Those moments of humiliation affected St. Chavara and his friends very deeply. Back in their room they sat saddened by the events they had to face. Even though they were at a young age, an age when an ordinary youngster's blood would have boiled to retaliate for being treated like that, they did not react at all at the shameful humiliation they had to endure from other seminarians of the Latin community.

One of the missionaries was kind towards them. He used to go to their room and teach them Latin for some time. They were forced to stay there until their

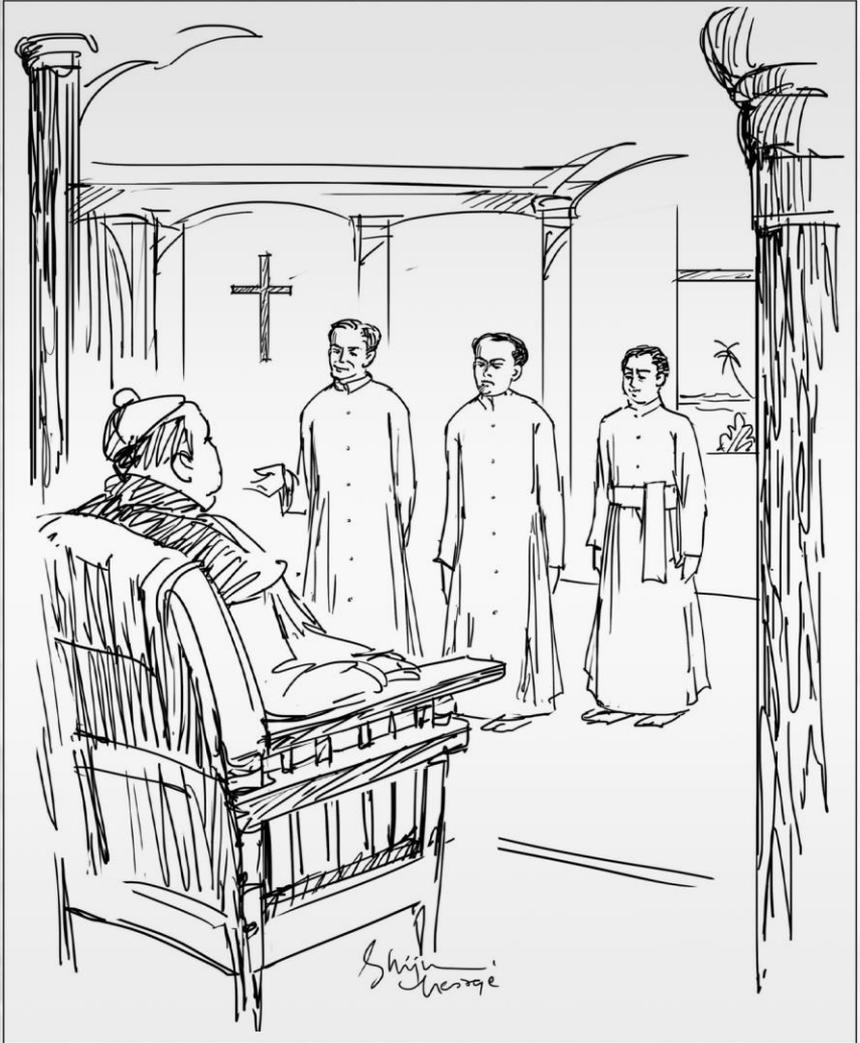
Malpan could come and pick them up. A sudden epidemic spread through that area at that time and the Malpan quickly came and took them away along with him. Fr. Chavara explained this incident in his Chronicles, "*Fr. Palackal had to suffer a lot because of us and also lost money over this. But none of his efforts fetched good results. In fact, we even forgot the Syriac language that we'd learned.*" (Chronicles 74).

Through his words we see that this incident caused so much misery, pain and shame to all of them. The other two who had gone to study Latin with him decided to discontinue their studies after this unpleasant incident happened. Again, the Malpan took the effort and sent St. Chavara to the Latin church in *Thangi*, where Fr. Mane, a friend of Fr. Palackal, was the parish priest. Without thinking for a second what if the same bad experience he faced at the seminary at *Varappuzha* could be waiting for him again, he gladly and readily cooperated with the instructions of the Malpan. (Chronicles 74,75).

At that time even though he had to deal with many hardships and received many blows to his self-esteem, the knowledge he gained in Latin language helped him immensely in serving God. Because of his knowledge of Latin language, he was able to write to the Holy See in Rome, in Latin itself, about the unscrupulous reign of Bishop Roccas's in Kerala. In 1861, a Chaldean Bishop, Thomas Roccas, came to Kerala from the Persian Church without going through the traditions and rules followed by the Church. The priests and people here were so fed up with the

unscrupulous rule of Latin Bishops that they immediately accepted him as their own bishop. Gaining the popular support and enjoying the power he himself had bestowed upon him, the bishop started interfering with the day-to-day affairs of the Church, much to the displeasure of its members he violated the rules of the Church. This caused unrest inside the Church, it was important to stop Bishop Roccas. To save the situation from going bad to worse, the bishop of *Varappuzha* appointed Chavara, as Vicar General, so that he could take charge of the situation. He understood the plan of God, and wrote everything in Latin, to inform the Pope in Rome of things happening in Kerala under the unscrupulous rule of Bishop Roccas. Pope then took necessary actions and called Bishop Roccas back to the Persian Church. Not only that, the Pope sent a congratulatory letter to St. Chavara for taking the leadership in the best possible way under a difficult situation. (Letters 5-8). By becoming a participant in Christ's leadership Chavara learned that God would transform any challenges into happy endings, that his trust in God grew stronger with every passing moment. He held fast on his faith.

So many questions for which he felt there were no answers had actually God's care and attention on them. Any challenges he faced and dealt with, always had a solution from the loving God. He learned that even those things which seemed impossible, when touched by God's hands became possible. For, only if you cross Good Friday, you will be able to reach the Sunday of Easter.



KURIAKOSE BEFORE THE SORROWING BISHOP

We are God's heirs and Christ's fellow-heirs,
if we share his sufferings now, in order to share
his glory hereafter.

Romans 8, 17

*Ten long years passed riotously by
And on that day of days, He called me back
Sowed in me a sacred seed of wisdom
A firm resolve, else what my fate had been I
No priest ordained among kinsfolk until then
Welcome tidings it came to all and sundry.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam I: 113-118

CHAPTER-6

THE SORROWING BISHOP AND THE ORDINATION OF ST. CHAVARA

St. Chavara's ordination was getting delayed even after living a saintly life and completing his studies excellently. The bishop who was supposed to ordain him was standing inside the defendant's box, stalling the whole process. Divine Call for St. Chavara was like a seed sprouting in fire. Even though his very own parish people had denied him minor order, they made his first Holy Mass a celebration.

The day for him to get his ordination was getting closer, for which he was longing for several months. Malpan Palackal was also preparing his other disciples with great care as they were all going to receive the orders together. Their relatives on the other hand were preparing themselves for the special event intensely and with diligence. There existed a clash of opinion between the two sects of Latin Catholics known as '*Anjoottikar* and *Ezhunoottikar*', which increased at the time of this important event.

Anjoottikar were considered as lower caste among the Christian communities, and not worthy of receiving the priesthood. *Anjoottikar* decided to

approach the newly appointed Bishop Sthabilini with a request that members from their community also should be considered for priesthood. The bishop felt, once accepting Catholic faith and living the life of a Christian, denying them the right for ordination on the basis of their caste was against Christ's teachings. After being convinced that he was doing the right thing the bishop accepted and acknowledged their petition.

Ezhunoottikar, another caste among the Latin Catholics, strongly objected to this decision by the bishop. All the efforts made by the bishop to pacify them failed. The bishop felt disappointed and sad with the whole incident. He refused to live among those who were not listening to him and to be in charge of that Diocese, as he was not being able to convince them to accept his decision. He decided to go back to Rome.

Just a few days before he took this decision, he had sent a letter to *Pallipuram* asking the Malpan to let him know if there was anyone to be ordained during the holidays of the Feast of The Holy Cross. Accordingly, Malpan Palackal and those who were ready to be ordained came prepared and reached the shore of *Varappuzha* at night, on September 10th, Brother Chavara was one among them. Only after they arrived, they had the news that the bishop was not ready to ordain anyone and that he was going to leave the country.

Is life a collection of unending challenges? Since he reached the last phase of studies and training Kuriakose was hoping for no more crisis in front of him.

Still, he was confident that if God was giving him challenges, He would also provide him with ways to come out unscathed. That night itself the group from *Pallipuram* reached the room of Fr. Thomas Porukara, who was the secretary of the bishop. They were told that whatever they had heard was true, bishop had already decided to go to Rome.

Next day morning everyone reached bishop's room. After kissing his ring, they stood politely waiting for his words. He told them: "Mentally I'm not feeling good. I did not celebrate Mass these days. Whoever has come for the ordination, please go back without feeling sad." Listening to his words they all felt sad, they wondered what could be the reason behind his misery. They wondered how much time would it take before the ordination ceremony could be conducted after he was gone and a new bishop took over the charge. The pain Brother Chavara was going through was visible. He was waiting all these years to celebrate his first Holy Mass.

Fr. Palackal and Fr. Porukara along with some others tried to find ways to stop the Bishop of the Syrian Church from leaving. They wrote a petition requesting him not to go, they suggested instead of staying at *Varappuzha* he could go to any other Syrian church he preferred. Fr. Palackal and others were even thinking of relocating the bishop to some other place so that the bishop's house and seminary were both in the same compound. *Anjootikkar*, came with another petition gathering 500 signatures, requesting the bishop not to leave them. In between he received a letter from Rome

(Holy Cee), asking the bishop to stay back until someone else could replace him.

Hence, they decided to move his stay temporarily to *Arthungal* church where the majority of families belonged to *Anjootikkar*. What made the bishop feel miserable was that, he asked the seminarians to coax the parents of *Ezhunoottikar* not to stand against the *Anjootikkar* from receiving Ordination, they neither supported him nor helped him with this. His actions of supporting the leadership of Fr. Palackal and others and working along with Syrian Christians, increased the animosity of *Ezhunoottikar* towards the bishop and the Syrians. All this made him leave the present place as the seminary and Bishop's house were in the same compound. (Chronicles 6-7).

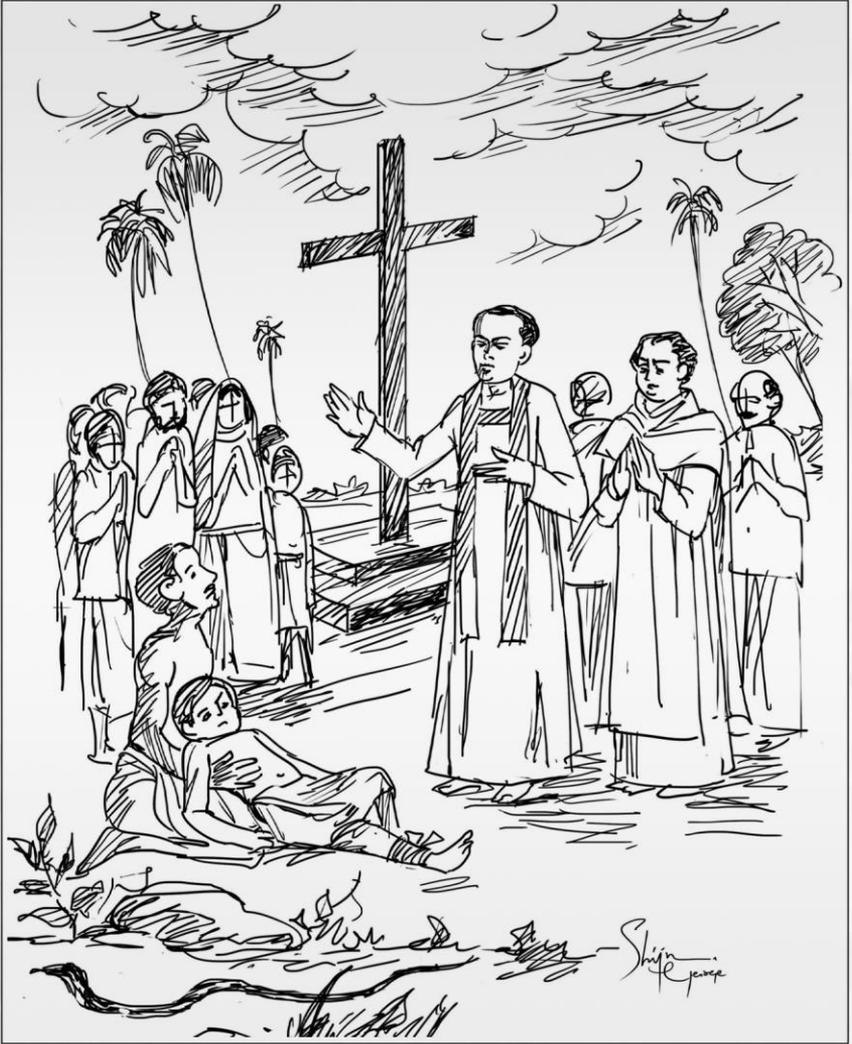
After a month of staying in his new residence at *Arthungal*, Fr. Palackal reminded the bishop about the postponed ordination ceremony. They all sat together and decided that it would take place at the *Arthungal* church on November 29th. Finally overcoming many difficulties Fr. Chavara fulfilled his life's wish and received his priesthood.

He had the most precious moment of his life when he received his ordination from Bishop Sthabilini; afterwards he celebrated his first Mass with him. St. Chavara forgot all the sorrows he had to face from the time he took the decision to join the seminary. With a grateful heart and prayers, he had placed everyone on the Altar of Sacrifice.

All the unpleasantness melted away. After placing all his intentions including the intention of establishing a religious congregation along with Fr. Palackal and Fr. Porukara in the hands of God, with overwhelming happiness he completed his First Mass.

There was a time when he could not enter his own parish church, he was disgraced by his own people and had to go back with a heavy heart. That same young Brother, now a priest receiving everyone's love, respect and acceptance, celebrated his first Mass in his own parish at *Chennamkari* on November 30th. (Chronicle 26).

St. Chavara not only crossed all the hurdles in the way of his Divine Call but also experienced the infinite care of the loving Father, his God, all through his life whenever he faced difficulties.



FR. PORUKARA BLESSES THE SNAKE BITTEN BOY

The saying is sure: If we endure with him, we shall also reign with him. Then they left the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus.

2 Timothy 2, 11

*With open arms the leader priest received him,
The bright-eyed boy, and 'gan tending him
Nourishing his soul, he was tutored in paths
Of virtue; to assist at the Holy Mass
Gently taught to tread the ways of holiness;
To shun all evils that's retard his onward march.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam I: 135-140

CHAPTER –7

A HOUSE BUILT ON SIGNS OF ASSURANCE

'Beth-Rouma', The House on Heights was the result of the trio's prayers, patience and hard work. Finally, they had what they prayed for, favourable reply from the authorities and a suitable place for the monastery, a place God had chosen through giving them miracles and signs. St. Chavara had learned that he would have to face difficulties and obstacles in the path of God.

The motivational force behind starting a religious congregation in St. Chavara's own words: "I see that a lot of good had not been done due to the absence of a *Thapasu Bhavanam* (House of Discipline) in Kerala even for priests, we wanted to start a *Darsana Veedu* (House of Vision) at least for priests." (Chronicles 1). God's spirit had chosen three loving and caring hearts who were sensitive about social problems, Malpan Thomas Palackal, Malpan Thomas Porukara and Fr. Kuriakose Chavara, to come together for a great cause. They recognised the miserable state of the affairs that existed in Kerala at that time. Though they stayed in different places, they were brought together to fulfil God's plan. Fr. Palackal was running the seminary at *Pallipuram* and was also working as a consultant to the bishop of

Varappuzha and offered advices to practical problems. Fr. Porukara was associated with the parish in *Kollam* area and was also appointed as secretary to the bishop of *Varapuzha*, and young Chavara Kuriakose came from *Kainakari* to the seminary. All these people came together with one aim in mind.

The seminary rector and secretary both were senior priests with enough spiritual and social experiences. They recognised the ways of the world and were feeling sad thinking about the pathetic state of the society they were living in. They wondered being in such a place, would they be able to save even their own souls. Socially, communally and culturally our country was far behind the time. At the political front, European colonies were competing with each other to defeat our country which was divided into too many princely states because of their own internal politics and competition with each other. War, conflicts and poverty were everywhere. In the Christian society differences and disagreements increased day by day. The education field was no better. In the 18th and 19th centuries, especially at the beginning of the 19th century, Kerala was going through lots of crises and miseries. It was God's intervention that made them realise the best way was not to run away from the issues but to stay together and face the problems. They were convinced that by doing so they could save their own souls too. They decided to bring together a group of priests with similar mindset. They also sought the companionship of Kuriakose who was just completing his studies in the seminary. When these trio met, they decided to build a

House of Vision (*Darsana Veedu*) which would also be a House of Discipline, (*Thapasu Bhavanam*) to cleanse the society as a whole and to purify themselves and also to spread goodness around the world.

But they needed the permission of the Church authorities, before they could start realizing their dream project. They intended to build a place solely for dedicated lives, a place for prayer, taking decisions and actions. They approached the bishop with the plan they had harboured from 1828. Clashes which existed between the Latin group's might have speeded up the actions taken by Bishop Sthabalini in favour of their request. Even though he had refused to give them a clear answer for their early enquiries, he gave them permission to start the monastery in 1829 November 1st. St. Chavara described these incidents in the first few pages in the Chronicles 1-4.

After getting the permission on November 1st to go ahead with the construction of a monastery, on 29th of the same month St. Chavara received his Priestly Ordination. After ordination, when he celebrated his first Mass along with the bishop, he prayed for God's blessings to help them build a Home of Vision, (*Darsana Bhavanam*) knowing that he had been called as a special messenger to the Kerala Church. Even though in the history of the Church in India, monasteries had been started in *Angamali* and *Edappalli* under the leadership of the Archdeacon's, nothing remained after the incident of "*Koonan Kurisu Sathyam*." (*Oath taken*

against the Latin bishops in front of the Cross at Mattancherry church).

The story goes like this: In 1653 there was a protest against the existing Bishop and some people decided not to obey him. Everyone who supported this decision stood holding on to a rope attached to the cross at *Manttanchery* church. It's believed that when the rope was pulled, the cross was slightly bent as the rope was tied to it. This incident was known as the Oath of *Koonan Cross* or *Koonan Kurisu Sathyam*. Hence, the monastery at *Mannanam* has become the most ancient monastery in the history of Indian Churches. We will never be able even to imagine the anxieties and difficulties those pioneers might have felt. How people were going to welcome a new movement that never existed earlier in history, would they get any support? Would anyone help in finding a suitable place and help them financially, if at all they built would anyone join them as members in this new movement... Hundreds of such questions were there for which they needed answers. Another question was whether Fr. Palackal who was running a seminary at *Pallipuram*, could leave that and take responsibility of this new venture and continue with it. They had to wait and see. They were going to make a leap into darkness without knowing what lay ahead. If this was the Will of God, His wish would be fulfilled, they believed firmly in this.

They shared their plan with a few other priests who were friends but they did not get a favourable response from them. Years went by, the

priests who had received the call started to have doubts, whether this was going to materialize or whether they were capable of making it happen. They had two things in front of them to tackle: First, a place with good accessibility on top of a hill as the House of Vision, *Beth- Rouma* (House Above) should only be built on a higher ground. Second was the need for enough money to buy the land and build the Home. There was only a capital investment of Rs.200 which was given to them by the bishop as a token to encourage them.

The three who ventured out were having serious financial issues on their personal side as well. The elder brother of Fr. Palackal who supported the family had died and he had financial difficulties at home. When the parents of Fr. Porukara passed away, being the eldest in the family he had to help his younger siblings to get settled in life. As far as Fr. Chavara was concerned, after the death of his parents and only elder brother, he had decided to give his share of inheritance to his elder sister so that she would take over the family's burden. In this situation, they had to depend solely on the support of the Church followers.

When it was taking too long to find a suitable land and start the building works, the priests with whom they shared their ideas started discouraging them. They told the trio not to go after things that could never happen. Even though hope seemed to be fading at times, they strengthened their belief that if this was the Will of God it would happen and went ahead with their plans.

Many months passed since they had been given permission to build their dream Home. After handing over the responsibilities of running *Pallipuram* seminary to Fr. Chavara, the other two priests started visiting other churches for fundraising, along with the search for a suitable land to buy. Their search was limited within the borders of the Syro Malabar Church, between the rivers of *Bharathapuzha* and *Pampa*. The trio continued their search for the land. Finally, at the beginning of 1831, they found a suitable land at *Pullarikkunnu*, near *Athirampuzha*. They started the legal process to buy the land. Soon they learned that many people who lived there were not in favour of having a Christian church near to the *Devi* temple there. They searched for almost a year to find this place but as the above issue dimmed their hopes, they felt sad. Their moral responsibilities quickly pulled them out of their sorrow, and a decision was taken immediately. Since it was a sensitive issue, they decided not to hurt the feelings of those people who belonged to a different religion. They started their search again in different places.

Before long they found another place known as *Mannanamkunnu* a little away from *Pullarikkunnu*. The land was accepted by all and it was also the most suitable for their needs. They were convinced that if you give value to fellowship, give consideration to other people's feelings, God would definitely lead and arrange everything in order for them. Above all, people from other religions also came forward to help. Within a few days, Tharakan Thayyil

and Perumalil Kochu Pothan donated their land on the hill. Soon after they started working on clearing the place. The first ceremony was to erect a cross where the building was going to be built. They made arrangements for that right away.

The people who lived in the surrounding areas and a few priests came together that evening for participating in that ceremony. Suddenly sunlight dimmed, dark clouds filled the sky, lightning sliced through the darkened skies and thunder echoed everywhere. It was as if rain would pour down any second. Everyone stood on their knees around the cross which was to be blessed and started praying intensely. What happened next was nothing short of a miracle. The evening sun was about to set on the Arabian Sea, crossing the back waters of *Vembanad*, suddenly glowed brighter. It painted the whole area with a beautiful golden hue. The blessing ceremony took place in an environment which was glowing bright. Fr. Chavara who was also a good singer, sang the litany of All Saints and the fellow priests and people who were present sang along with him. The name for this building which was going to be the abode of God also came out of his mouth, "*Beth- Rouma*".

Evening was nearing. People started their walk down the hill before the twilight faded. Just then they heard the wail of a child, who fainted within minutes. He belonged to the house of *Ullatuthara, Pala*. His sibling, who was also a seminarian was there among others who surrounded the child. People hurriedly tried

to carry the boy over to a local physician who could give treatment for snake poison. Fr. Porukara intervened and told them to move the child to the nearby shelter, and the people obeyed him immediately. He sprinkled on the child the holy water he had brought for the ceremony of hoisting the cross and prayed. He asked everybody else to leave. The unexpected incident made Fr. Chavara sad. He wondered if the accident was a sign of God's dislike of this place. He might have prayed for forgiveness if there were any inadequacies in their dealings in buying this land. He might have also felt relieved when he remembered what happened in the evening. By changing the dark thunderous clouds into bright glowing sky God actually was giving His consent pleased with the events. Regaining his hope, he turned back only to see the child getting up feeling fresh and energetic. Fr. Porukara realised that the same evil serpent that tried to tempt the first man and woman Adam and Eve, came here also with his evil tactics. He felt happy that with the holy water he was able to chain the evil one and throw him out. He was also convinced that as long as God was with them, they had nothing to be afraid of.

On the 11th of May 1831, the Vicar Apostolic Bishop Sthablini along with Fathers Palackal, Porukara, Chavara, Brother Jacob Kaniyanthara and many others laid the foundation stone of *Beth-Rouma*, at *Mannanam* hills, in the name of St. Joseph. It was the beginning of the first CMI Monastery, it was the most ancient Christian Monastery in the history of Churches in India. (Chronicles 8-24).

The House of Vision (*Darsana Veedu*) built on signs given from God, also gave a new message to St. Chavara, that hardships and trials were part of life of a true disciple of Christ.



UNEXPECTED TRANSFERS FOR KURIAKOSE AND PORUKARA

We even exult in our present sufferings,
because we know that suffering trains us to
endure, and endurance brings proof that we
have stood the test, and this proof is the ground
of hope. This hope is not deceptive, because
God's love is poured out in our hearts by the
Spirit of God who is given to us.

Romans 5, 3

*Yet, another gift, have I to sing about!
Numberless ones, there are, who wield their power
Kings, Chieftains, Yet others rolling in gold
Oh, how numerous, My Goodness Infinite*

*Had I but been one such magnate, high
In this world, what fate had been mine!
The middle path you granted me to tread
Hence I live thus in peace and joy*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam II: 89-96

CHAPTER-8

UNEXPECTED TRANSFERS

The founding fathers realised that obedience to the authorities was the way to find God's plans. It might have been the plan of the Evil One to scatter everyone from Mannanam. St. Chavara learned from his experience that God's plans could not be broken by evil human or nature's forces.

It was with great hope and expectation that Fr. Palackal, Fr. Porukara and Fr. Chavara had started the construction of the monastery at *Mannanam*. It was necessary to work hard to have a smooth start and avoid starting troubles. With an abundance of support from the people and from the parish priests, building works of monastery progressed steadily. Holy Mass was offered in the temporary chapel. The three priests and Jacob Kaniyanthara were doing all the works at the location. Fr. Palackal was unable to stay away for many days from his seminary at *Pallipuram*. Fr. Porukara was busy most of the time with fundraising activities. Hence the responsibility of taking care of matters of *Mannanam* rested chiefly on the shoulders of Fr. Chavara and Jacob. Even though there were many things to be sorted out everything was going on in a smooth pace.

Suddenly things changed. It was decided that Bishop Sthablini should go back to Rome. Losing the presence of that spiritual father, who was giving them all the support, necessary instructions and guidance from the very beginning of the monastery, was a huge loss.

Anger was growing among *Ezhunoottikar* in the Latin community towards the people at *Mannanam* as they believed they had been showing more interest in *Anjoottikar* who were their opponents. They were also not quite happy with the initiative taken by Fr. Palackal and Fr. Porukara to change the residence of the Bishop from *Varappuzha* to *Arthungal* church.

As a result of this, ten of the Latin Churches made an agreement in writing. It was like this: "Our Bishop's residence was moved to a different place under the leadership of the Malpan of *Pallipuram*, Fr. Porukara and Pascal Padre in order to give Ordination to the fishermen. From now onwards we should not invite them or any of their disciples for any of our pastoral services or retreat preaching in our churches or help them in any way." (Chronicles 27).

This incident put the senior Vicar General of *Varappuzha Nicholas* in a dilemma as he could only stand by the Latin people in this matter and felt miserable about that. Even though he liked the activities and the way of life of these three priests he could take only a neutral stand. It seemed that relations were being cut off one by one.

When things were at this crucial juncture, Bishop Francis Xavier came to take over the administration from the hands of Bishop Sthablini. The first thing the bishop heard were the complaints, so-called offences and accusations against these three priests. Starting with the accusation that they were working against *Ezhunoottikar* in the Latin community followed by an even more serious allegation that they collected money from people and churches to share it among themselves and with their families. Both these allegations were absolutely baseless. It's normal to expect lots of opposition and accusation when someone goes out with a genuine purpose of helping others or doing anything good for others. Still when accused of doing things that they never did, people would definitely feel torn apart. Fr. Chavara got transferred to *Pallipuram* church as part of the punishment. Anybody would think the aim of the bishop was to stop the works at *Mannanam* by giving such an order. It was Fr. Chavara who was staying at *Mannanam* supervising all the important works. By removing him from that place it was certain that the works would get stalled and that place would go back to its original state, a forest.

Fr. Porukara and Fr. Palackal sent Fr. Chavara over to meet the bishop to try and explain to him the matters in detail, and to express the difficulties he was facing. If the Bishop did not accept his plea, they told him to obey his orders. From the beginning Fr. Palackal, Fr. Porukara and Fr. Chavara had a dream of having a monastery, a bud of dream was also growing in their mind for building a beautiful *Darsana Veedu*. Through

realising that dream, they were hopeful of doing many good things for the Church. The Home they cherished in their mind with the help of God, seemed crumbling down. Not knowing what would be the response of the Bishop, Fr. Chavara went to bishop's house in *Varappuzha*.

After meeting the bishop, he poured out his heart to him, explained the reality of things one by one. He told him in detail what would happen if works at *Mannanam* were stopped and how much would be the loss. He also told him about the dreams they all had about this Home. Without listening to any of these matters the impatient Bishop retorted back, asking Fr. Chavara if he would do only things he liked. Was he disliking or disobeying the bishop? Scared to death, thinking he had done a grave mistake, he went back to *Pallippuram* and took over the responsibilities. He felt the excruciating pain of his heart being torn out of his body when he had to pull himself away from *Mannanam*.

The news he heard next was even worse. Fr. Porukara was appointed as Vicar at *Kayamkulam* and *Pallithop* in *Kollam* area. Those two came to Malpan Palackal together at *Pallippuram*. Tears ran down their eyes as they felt helpless and unable to face the difficulties they had to face unexpectedly. The memories of the cause for which they all had come together boiled over in their mind. Thoughts they had harboured in their mind for years, discussions and prayer done alone and together, the several trips they

made to get the bishop's permission, all of which culminating with the warm support of Bishop Sthabalini. The first attempt to collect money and the success that followed. A search that lasted for almost one year and a half to find the best suitable land until they reached *Mannanam* hill, calling their dream Home, "*Beth-Rouma*", meaning the House on Heights. The water source they found miraculously while clearing the forests, the miracle healing at the time of hoisting the cross, the Holy Mass celebrated at the makeshift chapel in a hurry which was attended by more than fifty priests and a huge gathering of people. They were sure that through miracles and signs God was approving their desires and actions. Is it proving to be otherwise? Were they to realise that God's plans were different? They felt paralysed for some time. Then Fr. Porukara himself found an answer to that: "The order of the bishop's might be the Will of God; it could even be a testing of our humility or our trust in the Divine Call. Since we don't know anything for sure, I feel we should go without feeling sad or make any complaints." (Chronicles 27-29).

Even though they all knew that God was working behind them and they were also trying to cooperate with God's Will, the feeling of loss of those cherished dreams and hopes made them weep, when each of them walked to take over the responsibilities they were ordered to obey. When Fr. Chavara left for *Pallippuram*, Fr. Porukara to *Kollam*, tears blinded their way. Soon they received the results of obedience. They firmly believed that what God had started no one could stop.

Even though Fr. Chavara had to face hardships all his life, he believed only in the infinite care of God. He held fast his faith in the providence of God.

The Will of God would never go futile. We have to wait patiently to recognise God's Will and no one can destroy God's will. Towards the end of his life, he sent a circular to the members of his community. His own words are added here:

“Beloved brethren, this humble community of ours is not founded by humans, but by God himself. He had founded it miraculously; you are all witnesses to the truth that God had nurtured and brought it up. Hence persecutions by humans, objections or obstructions by creatures cannot destroy it. But one thing can annihilate it, that is if we forget the meaning of our Call, forsake the responsibilities of our religious life and fail in humility, obedience, charity, religious discipline and genuine devotion and are satisfied with appreciating them in words and not in deeds.” (Letters 90).



CHAVARA SOLVING THE PROBLEM WITH THE HELP OF FR. PALACKAL

After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish and strengthen you. To him be the dominion forever and ever.

1 Peter 5,10

*With suff'ring intense caused by sin
My eyes sank in depth of despair and pain
Severed from you, my God my only good
What joy, peace or well-being can be mine?*

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

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam II: 139-146

CHAPTER- 9

BITTER EXPERIENCES ALSO CAN TEACH LESSONS

It's natural to have problems in life, but the success lies in how one faces them and solves. St. Chavara had learned through painful experiences how to deal with issues from colleagues and unfavourable responses from authorities. His experiences are good examples to follow in such situations in our life.

Fr. Chavara took over the office as Vicar at *Pallippuram*. Malpan Palackal's elder brother's son Varkey, who had been recently ordained and was a member of the parish was also at *Pallippuram*. With the permission of the Malpan, Fr. Varkey was sent to *Mannanam* to help Jacob Kaniyanthara who was at *Mannanam* supervising the works going on there.

After entrusting the Vicar's duties with Fr. Varkey, Fr. Chavara went to *Mannanam* for a few days. Those were the days of 'three day' fasting. Fr. Varkey was leading the 'offering meal' of the three days fast. In the middle of the 'offering meal' time, when everybody was present, Itty Kurisungal a vain- glorious and uncouth fellow who belonged to that parish, did something that made Fr. Varkey beat him. The incident

brought great shame on his family and to him. Unfortunately, Fr. Palackal was not there at that particular time. Itty's family expressed their grievance to the bishop through a letter, which went like this: *"Our Fr. Vicar who's supposed to live within the parish premises left here to stay in Mannanam, to take care of the works of constructing a 'Darsana Veedu'. He handed over the church's responsibilities to a new inexperienced young priest. I was leading a decent life and Fr. Varkey beat me up unfairly in front of everyone present at the time of the feast, causing much misery and pain to my family and myself."* This was the content of the grievance letter.

Bishop right away sent out an order; *"From now onwards without written permission from me, Fr. Chavara should not leave his parish church, Pallippuram, where he is serving as a priest. He should not live anywhere outside the premises for more than eight days. He should also address and solve the grievance of Itty and his family."* This made Fr. Chavara sadder. The few chances he managed to find to go to *Mannanam* were gone. The parishioners also turned against him with this incident. No matter what, it was not right to beat up someone who was elder to him. He happened to be a prominent person in that area. The only possible way out from the issue created by the mindless action of the young priest was to ask for his pardon. A priest should be kind and should have patience. Even young priests should set an example of how a priest should conduct himself. It was necessary to comfort Itty and his family. He had to correct the petulant Fr. Varkey

through love. He should be made to ask for pardon even if it meant discreetly. Being humble is the best thing to practise. Fr. Chavara made things calm down somehow, the rest of the matters he left to his Guru, Fr. Palackal.

Palackal stepped in and solved the issues with that family. Fr. Chavara was thinking about finding a way to go to *Mannanam*. He believed God himself had entrusted him with this job and was ready to bear any humiliation or sacrifice to get a chance to visit *Mannanam*. With that in mind he set out to meet the bishop again. If he would be reprimanded, he would accept it, if punished that also would be accepted. Somehow the construction of monastery should be finished as soon as possible and start functioning. It was necessary to get rid of all the difficulties lying ahead and get the blessings of the bishop.

Fr. Chavara stood humbly in front of Bishop Francis Xavier and kissed his hand. Bishop's face turned hard, ignoring that Fr. Chavara started saying: *"Kindly relieve me of my duties as Vicar, otherwise works at Mannanam might be stalled. Priest Varkey is capable of running a parish efficiently. If at all he needs any help, Malpan would be there to help him out. Kindly appoint him as the Vicar."* He did not even think that he was talking in favour of an accused, and requesting the bishop to give him the power, he implored like a child. The influence of the inner call of God inside his mind was that strong. Authorities expressed God's decision through their words, knowing their mind was equal to understanding the will of God. Bishop gave him a sharp

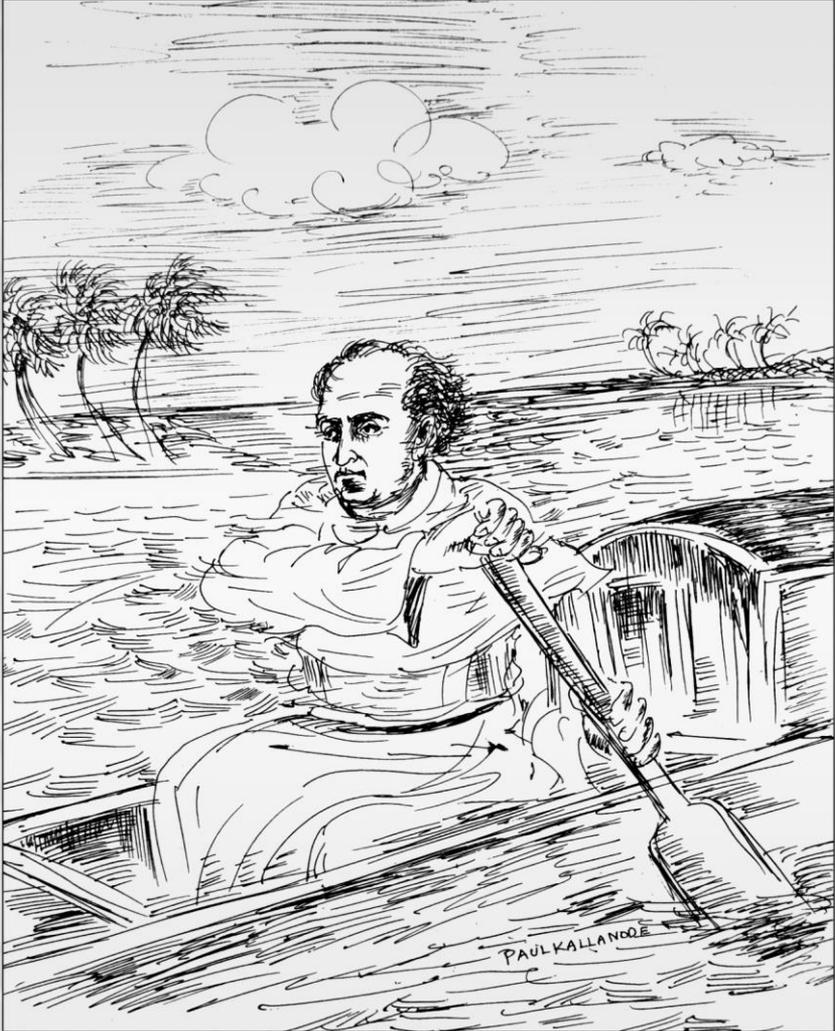
look and said, *"You should leave."* He felt all his hopes came crumbling down. He repeated in great distress, *"I need to go to Mannanam. Fr. Varkey knows how to administer the sacraments."* Hearing his words, the bishop shouted in anger: *"At such a young age are you being stubborn like this? Do you want to be relieved of your priesthood?"* Bishop's words scared him and quickly kissing his hand Fr. Chavara got out of his room. He reached *Pallippuram* and as per the order of the bishop, sent Fr. Varkey over to him. He regretted about his mindless actions of repeatedly talking about building the monastery.

But soon his sorrow turned to joy when he learned that bishop had appointed Fr. Varkey as the Vicar, and had given permission to Fr. Chavara for going to *Mananam* to continue his work. Fr. Chavara thought about the paths of mental agony and difficulties through which how God miraculously led him. He did not lose his heart and he depended on God stronger than ever. (Chronicles 29-32).

Fr. Chavara always tried to learn from the experiences he had. It was only a few years since he was ordained, and he had a lot to learn from his life. At the time of the feast, even though Itty's interference was unwanted and made others irritant, it was not right to punish someone elder to him by beating him. He was convinced that a priest should be wise.

The reprimand from the Bishop, made him be more alert in life. He also learned how to behave in front of the authorities even though he knew in his mind

the wish he had was noble and great. While correcting the young priest in a loving manner Fr. Chavara also learned how to correct his own mistakes. Even if someone is standing with hatred and stubbornness, if you interact with him in a soft and kind way, and is ready to be humble he would be transformed. It was a lesson taught by Itty. The biggest knowledge in Fr. Chavara was the realisation of turning past experiences into books of good lessons. When he constantly made the initial years of his priestly life a centre for learning, a great saint was coming up through Fr. Chavara.



CHAVARA LOST HIS COMPANIONS IN HIS SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Consider that the sufferings of this present time
are not worth comparing with the glory that is to
be revealed in us.

Romans 8, 18

*Your promise to fulfil, come your son
Assumed human form, on the earth
True man and true God you came from above
And on earth sojourned our Elder Brother*

*And besides, every sorrow and pain
Of the earth you patiently bore
Ransomed me, ave raised me to Heaven,
For which your sweat had sufficed, O King of Kings!*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam II: 169-176

CHAPTER-10

LOSS OF COLLABORTORS: A GREAT BLOW

Several novel things had been started by the trio, but two among the three left in the beginning stage itself. The loss and the pain along with shouldering bigger responsibilities were not easy. But God's caring hands moulded St. Chavara out of all those difficulties amazingly.

Once he started living in *Mannanam* Fr. Chavara restarted the works with newer hope and renewed energy. Soon after Fr. Porukara who was appointed as Vicar in the areas surrounding *Kollam*, was also relieved of his duties. When he joined Fr. Chavara at *Mannanam*, everything started moving more efficiently. They finished the construction of the ashram which was a two storied building. Malpan Palackal thought a little more practically and used to visit them on and off. For the monastery to function well according to the monastic discipline, he felt it would be better to have a seminary attached to it. For the smooth flow of the liturgical functions and to lead group prayers, it's good to have the seminarians in the monastery. Even though Fr. Porukara was opposed to the idea in the beginning, later on he also yielded to the plan of having a new seminary.

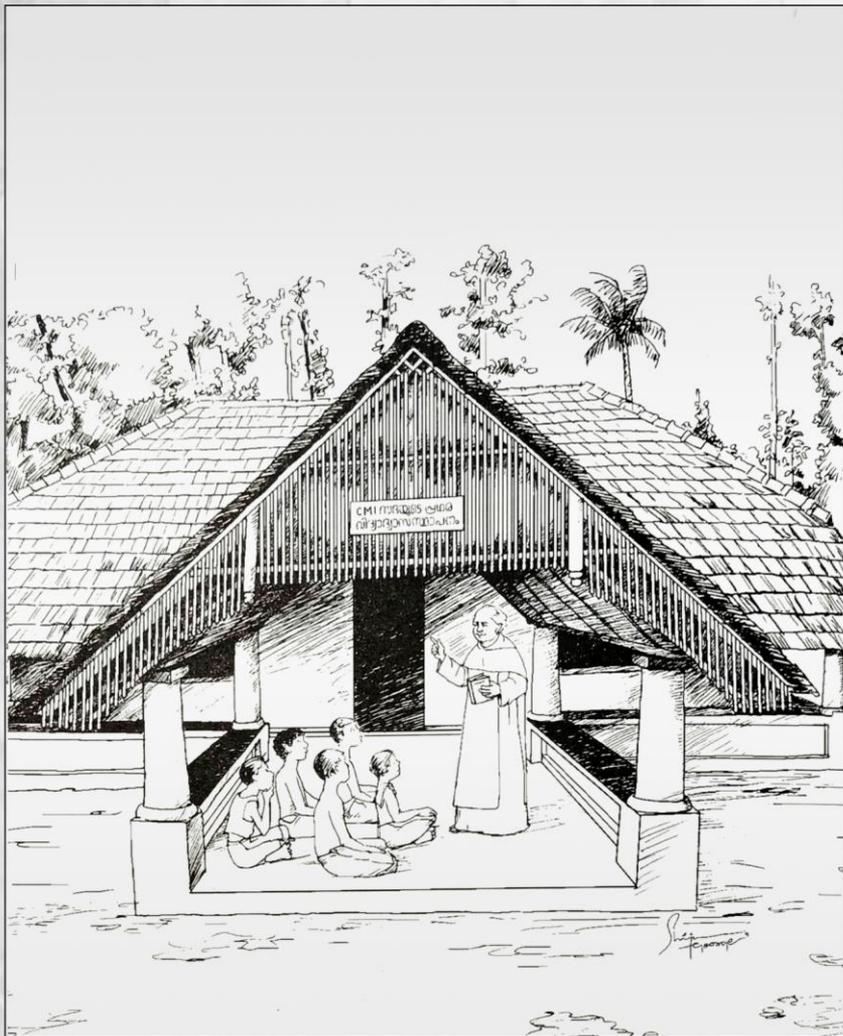
The construction of the church was almost finished. The seminary for parish priests and for religious priests started functioning smoothly. Some parish priests and youngsters came to join as new members. Priests from *Mannanam* started visiting other parishes for retreat preaching. When things were going on fine and in order, Palackal Thomas Malpan passed away in 1841, causing great sorrow to Fr. Chavara. They had just started their religious life; clarity was needed on several things. His Guru Palackal was leading everything from the start, when he vanished behind the curtains. The burden of responsibilities fell on the shoulders of a single individual, Fr. Chavara.

From the beginning of the monastery and the seminary at *Mannanam*, *Pallipuram* seminary and *Mannanam* seminary both worked together like a single unit, but the whole responsibility of *Pallipuram* seminary was with Fr. Palackal. After his untimely demise things came to a standstill. To solve the problems that originated by the establishment of the *Padroado* system in Kerala in 1838, Fr. Porukara paid most of his attention towards the southern areas. At this juncture Fr. Chavara had to go through so many difficulties. In the end he had to wind up *Pallipuram* seminary and transfer all its members to *Mannanam* seminary. The hardships Fr. Chavara went through during that period are indescribable.

The only remaining companion and help, Fr. Porukara also fell sick. From June, 1843 he became extremely unwell due to being diabetic and was not able to do anything. He was undergoing different treatments

but none of them helped him. It became Fr. Chavara's responsibility to take care of Fr. Porukara and move ahead with all the other activities. On 8th January 1846 his close supporter Porukara breathed his last. He had to take care of the monastery, seminary, the new press, new Sanskrit school, new members joining the monastery, preparing the priests to visit other parishes for giving retreats, giving yearly retreats to the priests. The list was long. He had to learn first the basics of the religious life, then impart that knowledge to his disciples, so that they would be of help for various requirements of the Holy Church. When the task was so huge, he also had to bear the pain of losing two of his seniors.

It was natural for him to falter, but he adapted the knowledge and experience he had received from those two spiritual masters, who had been also his fellow workers, and with more strength he took over the leadership of the new congregation by leaning on God stronger than ever. Until then this trio were working together but later on, he was probably getting help in abundance from heaven from those two, helping him get over the starting troubles. (Chronicles 34, 54, 55, 76)



STARTING THE SANSKRIT SCHOOL - A NEW VENTURE

Though our outward nature is wasting away, our
inner nature is being renewed every day.
For our troubles are slight and short-lived, and
their outcome is eternal glory which far
outweighs them.

2 Corinthians 4, 16

*Crying aloud for warmth from winter's chill
Your infant arms, helpless you held aloft
Shiv'ring in the breeze and severe snow
The door ajar, that should shield you warm!*

*Poorest of the poor, a Prince of dire poverty
In a filthy manger, wrapt in swaddling clothes
And your mother a humble Jewish maiden,
Sung by Isias, born of David's tribe.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam II: 197-204

CHAPTER-11

THE BATTLE AGAINST DARKNESS

St. Chavara who had gone out to solve the limitations in the field of education had to face unparallel obstacles. As it took his whole life to lead his people from being blind with ignorance to the light of knowledge. It became a period of renaissance.

With great hope Fr. Chavara pooled his energy to establish the religious congregation and he had to work so hard to make it happen. The number of members kept increasing and he took them along with him and actively worked in the spiritual fields. When they went deep into the life of people, especially the Catholics, Fr. Chavara realised that they had mainly two limitations in their life. The Protestants were working vigorously. They had entered the field with English education. They used education as a tool for spreading religion. Along with that they started spreading rumours against Catholic faith through printed materials. The newly gained knowledge through education and the propaganda through published materials started affecting the Catholics seriously.

Thinking of what he could do in those areas became the main object of thought and study of Fr. Chavara. When the Church authorities declared a ban

on learning English by the Catholics, he understood it would take a long time before they could learn English. Two challenges rose in front of Fr. Chavara. The British were turning the kingdoms in our country into their colonies one by one for purely business purposes and their efforts in spreading English education was a sign of their trying to change our Indian culture into Western culture. Fr. Chavara realised that even more dangerous was the spread of the Protestant religion. He realised that the Catholic faith which existed from the first century was soon going to be thrown out of the window. It was simply impossible for him to be a mere onlooker. He just couldn't stand and watch the destruction of our Indian and Catholic cultures formed through thousands of years of following spiritual traditions. People needed to be nurtured in the field of knowledge too. It was necessary to bring the backward classes to the frontline. He found a way to solve this issue by introducing Sanskrit education; it was also his way of giving importance to the Indian culture.

He decided to go ahead hoping for a new outcome. Even among the Indians Sanskrit was being learned only by the upper class, Brahmins and the warrior class. If at all anyone from the lower class happened to hear this language, there was a saying to melt down lead and pour it inside his ears. Seeing a bigger destination ahead, he decided to overcome all the difficulties. He indeed had to overcome many.

He might have faced stiff opposition when he started a Sanskrit school in *Mannanam* in 1846, in a

small building inside the compound of the monastery. Breaking the boundaries of caste and colour, many who belonged to different faiths, upper castes and lower castes, came together and had their study along with the priests. The presence of priests reduced the objections from others considerably. What was taking place there was something about which people couldn't complain. It was the beginning of a social reform. A person called varier from *Trichur*, was brought to teach Sanskrit. Whenever he got time, Fr. Chavara took the opportunity to revive his knowledge of Sanskrit he had learned from the *Kalari* at the primary level. At his free time, he sat in a chair at the back of the classroom listening and watching others learning Sanskrit which made Fr. Chavara immensely happy. Fr. Chavara believed that, Sanskrit education would help people enter deeper into the Indian culture and not the English education. (Varkey Parappuram, History of the congregation, *Mannanam*).

Fr. Chavara saw that new paths were opening up through education; he saw the people reaching heights with the help of education. He forgot all the hardships he had gone through earlier. He did some experiments in the education field in the years 1858, 1864 and 1868. With each experiment he had to go through lots of mental agonies. He learned that education would help in overcoming difficulties. These were his words: *"Without eyesight it's not possible to see the outside world, without having the light of education it's not possible to learn about the other world and about God who lives in it. Those who did not have education were*

blindfolded and without knowledge.” The words of Jesus, *“If the blind lead the blind both will fall into a pit,”* also strengthened his activities. (Letters Chavara 129).

He felt very happy when he started the Sanskrit school as he felt it was time to say farewell to the class differences. But the objections from the upper class made him close down the Sanskrit school soon after. In a society where class differences prevailed strongly, the idea of equality was hard to sell. Even though his aim was to do good, he did not want to encourage any actions that would wound others’ feelings, especially the feelings of the majority. This could have been the reason why he did not want to continue with the Sanskrit school. He never let his ego grow and never let being affected whenever he tried to do good and was met with adverse results. He was never bothered by failures or limitations and never took revenge upon anybody. Each experience of failures he accepted as part of God’s plan in finding better ways for success. That’s the reason why he did not lose his peace of mind and continued his search for finding new ways in doing good.

He realised that it was not easy to make changes over night in the ways of thoughts that existed in the society. He had already taken the initiative to go ahead with the process of starting schools attached to the churches. Fr. Chavara understood with much agony the limitations of Keralites, especially of the Catholics who had not come up in the field of education. So, he took the bold step which became instrumental in starting

schools through the management of every church in 1864. His circular letter was so strong, he clearly stated that those churches not ready to start schools attached to them should be closed down. He might have reached this decision owing to the objections he had faced when he was trying to make the people aware of the importance of education. Seeing things started moving the way he had wished for one after the other, he might have felt very happy. He paved the way for women's education and boarding schools soon after in 1868. The happiness derived from the results were more than the pain he had to take to initiate things.



FIRST PRINTING PRESS OF THE SYRO-MALABAR CHURCH

Come to me all who labour and are burdened
and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you
and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly of
heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my
yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Mathew 11, 28

*Who every better shelter denied you then,
Shining Quilts, mattress and cots to boot
Silken pillows wrought by crafts-men skilled
And flowery cushions your sacred head to rest.*

*Linen coverlets, woven in yarn, purest
Blankets gem-decked on your body soft
Are'nt these your rank most fitting my Lord,
And yet, you welcomed abject Poverty's lot.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam II: 205-212

CHAPTER-12

'A MAD MAN' BEHIND THE PRINTING PRESS

Even though St. Chavara had been labelled as a 'Mad man' toiling after impossible things, later on he became the uncrowned king in the field of missionary works. All the insults, sufferings, and rejections by the people, turned to be reasons for the overall growth of a group of people. He accepted sufferings as part of doing good.

A believer is hurt the most when his religious feelings have been wounded or when he is rejected on account of his faith. In the first half of the 19th century, when the Protestants started extensive campaign to spread English education, and used published materials for religious propaganda, Fr. Chavara very well understood the dangers lying ahead. He realised that if he did not take a strong stand against the Protestants' teachings, the results would be either an increase in conflicts in the society or the Catholic faith getting affected severely. This made Fr. Chavara think of having a press for publications. When people start getting published materials at home, in due course each home would look like a school, a mini library. There were only two printing presses in Kerala during that time. The press in *Kottayam* belonged to the Church Mission Society, a group of the Protestants and the other was the

government press in *Thiruvananthapuram*. Without acquiring the knowledge even to build a press, it was of no use thinking about publishing. Fr. Chavara decided to enter even inside the enemy camp to get that knowledge. He went twice to *Kottayam* to enquire about this. We have this record: "From the period of *Chingam* 14th, I had my mind set on learning the techniques of publishing books. Two times I went to *Kottayam* but they did not let me see anything. Then I started my experiments with whatever I heard and sought help for details from those who had experience in being around a press." (Chronicles 44)

When Fr. Chavara realised that he could not learn directly from the CMS press at *Kottayam* he did not feel disappointed. Instead, he discreetly learned the techniques of running a press with the help of some Catholics who were working at the government press in *Thiruvananthapuram*. Fr. Chavara sought the help of Fr. Paulose Parambil, *Muttuchira* who was an expert in arts and crafts. With his help he made a model of the press out of a banana plant and showed that to the carpenter and made the first wooden press.

Fr. Chavara faced the next hurdle when it was time to make types for the press. There were no one around experienced in making printing press woodblock. He again secretly approached and sought help from the CMS press though they pushed him out almost literally. When they gave him more and more difficulties whenever he tried to make a press in *Mannanam*, he decided to bring Sivaraman from

Thiruvalla, a Tamil carpenter good at carving printing types and kept him secretly in the house of his uncle, Kurian Kuruvila Thoppil. Threats from the enemies were that severe. Finally, he got carved the types in wood blocks while staying at that hiding place. (CMI in the first centuries; Fr. Bernard 1989-27).

Similarly, his efforts for obtaining licence from the government to start the press also were mixed with painful experiences. At last, in 1846 July 3rd, he got the permission from the government through the help of the then British Resident Mr. Cullen. (*Chavarayachan Oru Rekhachithram*; 6 Malayalam 2004-61). Next in the lane of obstacles came in the form of ink and paper and finding money to buy them. The adventures he had undertaken are written in detail in his Chronicles. (Chronicles 44,45). The words and thoughts of his contemporaries seemed valid when they said: “Fr. Chavara had gone mad while trying to make the impossible, possible.” The main topic of discussion among people during this period was explained in ‘*Deepika*’s special jubilee edition, a magazine published in 1946, during the centenary of the press at *Mannanam*.

Fr. Chavara was convinced that, if this was the plan of God, He would make it happen, only he had to cooperate with Him in His every step. He also firmly believed in the providence of God in taking care of everything, holding on to that trust he overcame each and every obstacle that stood in the way of making a press. The ink and paper were exported from Europe for

which he had given an order worth hundred rupees. The sellers took the stand that they would make only wholesale deal, leaving Fr. Chavara helpless. He tried to arrange money from people in *Kochi* through a *Kuri Chitty* (instalment payments) and by borrowing. Finally, he was able to get ink and paper and arranged a cart to bring them all the way to *Mannanam*. He did not have any money left to pay for the transportation expense. He did not know what to say to the one who was riding the cart all the way from *Kochi*, as he did not have any money left to pay him.

With a burning heart he went to the church. He prayed to his guardian angel and to St. Joseph and let them know about his helplessness. His own words about the ordeal: *“God’s special help came in the form of Itty Nellipuzha, a member of Cherpungal parish. When I met him at the door steps, he said he had with him 500 Chakram and if we send someone over, would send another 500 Chakram too. He simply offered his help without any introduction. Hearing this I was able to breath easily.”* (Chronicles 45)

The press started functioning. A *Tamil* book translated into Malayalam under the name of *‘Jnanapeeyusham’*, a book of catechism containing the dogmas of faith came out as the first book from his press. Fr. Chavara had forgotten all the hardships he had faced until then. Fr. Chavara became the founder of the first Catholic press in Kerala, and also became the first *Malayalee* who printed the first Malayalam Catholic book from his own press. When Fr. Chavara became the

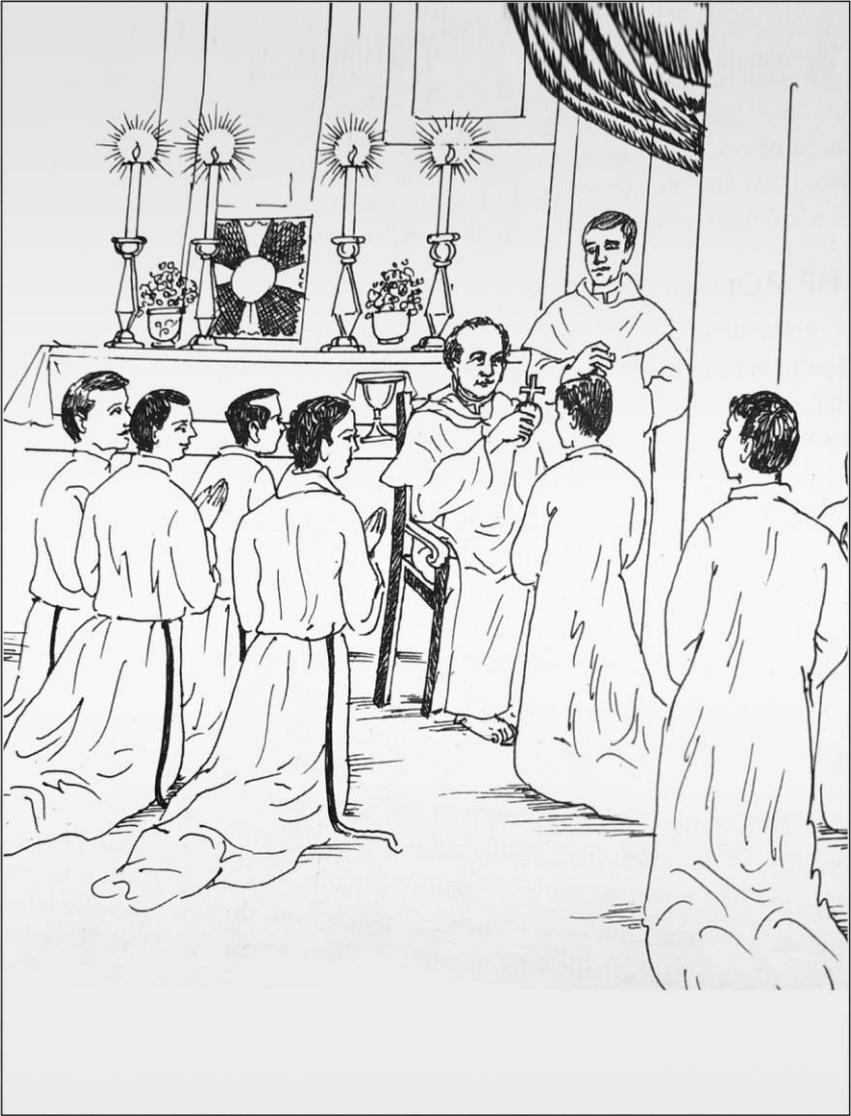
reason behind the spread of the gospels and the truths of the Holy Church, he was indeed becoming a 'Mad man' in his love of God and love for all men.

Fr. Chavara founded the first press, St. Joseph's Press in *Mannanam*, in 1846. This press printed for more than a century all the books needed for the liturgical celebrations of Syro-Malabar Church. Sitting in his place in heaven Fr. Chavara might have realised the role he had played in this historical truth and that he became an instrument in the hands of God to spread the Good News. It was through this press that the first Malayalam daily newspaper, '*Nasrani Deepika*' came out smudged with the printing ink. He might have noticed sitting up in heaven how '*Deepika*' took the leadership during the times of both the world wars, giving updates and informing the people about the day today events that affected our society and giving guidelines on how to manage the situation.

Today, if the people of Kerala love the habit of reading, are educated, had turned each house into libraries through thousands of publications, then, most of its credit goes to Fr. Chavara who was one of the forerunners of print media in Kerala. It was Fr. Chavara who started making words immortal on paper through his printing press. When he started the process of making a press, he had to face several obstructions, he had been disgraced by others, his self-esteem was wounded.

Fr. Chavara had learned from his Divine Guru that, behind each and every act of goodness there

would be sacrifices, insults and tortures. That knowledge helped him never to lose his courage or falter from doing good. He has also given us a lesson that the result of doing good would certainly be acknowledged and appreciated later on.



FIRST TIME, A RELIGIOUS PROFESSION IN INDIA AT MANNANAM

He has delivered us from the dominion of
darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of his
beloved Son

Colossians 1,13

*O God-man, my master, seat of mercy, Lord
Looks with eyes of pity on me a sinner
Scant worth have I, your look to claim
Being a votary of your mother fair.*

*You, my sole hope, Oh Virgin Mother
Contrite, that I deemed you not such
But forget it not that my mother you are
Your mercy in me I bear, behold*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam I: 241-248

CHAPTER-13

WAITING FOR A WRITTEN RULE AND THE CANONICAL APPROBATION

On December 8th 1855 the CMI congregation finally started its religious life in the canonical way after waiting for 24 long years. St. Chavara had to accept a rule of life which was totally different from the unwritten laws and the way of life they had formed and followed until then. He was able to walk ahead wiping the tears of many by the grace of God.

Varappuzha Vicar Apostolic Bishop Maurelius Sthablini had given the blessings to start the monastery in 1829. *Mannanam* ashram was started in 1831. Many kept coming to join as members. They always cooperated fully with all the bishops who were in charge until then. They never violated their instructions and always obeyed the unwritten laws and lead a mature life fit for a monastery. Under the leadership of Fr. Chavara, members of the congregation were doing a lot of good things to the Church and to the society. The bishop had appointed inmates of *Mannanam* monastery as the preachers of the Word of God in churches all over Kerala. From different parts of Kerala priests and others kept on coming to the hill of *Mannanam* offering land and help in building the monastery. Though Fr. Chavara

requested several times, the members were not allowed to profess the religious vows. Many a time he had approached different bishops in different times and requested for a written religious rule and for canonical approbation, yet it did not yield any results.

It took 24 years for the monastery at *Mannanam* to get started, even after having several signs, cooperation and spiritual awakenings among the whole society. Fr. Chavara still wondered if it was indeed God's wish he was trying to follow as he couldn't solve the difficulties that kept coming repeatedly. Still, he never reduced his prayer. By doing good and making others do good, and without raising any objections or breaking the discipline he let the days go by.

In 1855, Bernardin Baccinelli, Bishop of *Varappuzha*, asked Fr. Chavara to write in detail the religious rules they were following at the monastery in *Mannanam*. Thinking that they were going to be accepted finally, he wrote in detail all the religious rules and the rituals they followed at the monastery and gave it to the bishop. (Chronicles 77).

Until then they were following the spiritual life, giving more importance to Holy Mother, reciting rosary several times a day, chanting the canonical prayers, reading spiritual books and meditating on the same, performing many acts of faith in the name of St. Joseph, offering the Holy Mass faithfully, holding the Indian culture and the Oriental traditions closer that gave importance to solitude and silence...All these they were following every day. They welcomed their guests with

respect and as and when needed they would go out of the monastery for pastoral services, and they were following a discipline which helped them keep up with their activities. (*Parappurath* 18; Bernard 39-40).

But the bishop sent through a *Carmelite* missionary priest, Marcelin, an even stricter and entirely different Rule to be followed. The new Rule they had to follow was made by making some changes in the Rule of the *First Order of Carmelites*, the Rule that their missionaries and bishops were following, and added more fasts which were completely different from the Syrian traditions.

The representative of the bishop, Fr. Marcelin, gathered together all the members of the monastery. He read aloud the new rules sent by the bishop. Everyone sat stunned. They were entirely different from what they were following until then and the rules had nothing to do with the Syrian traditions. It was stricter and rigid. Everyone stared at Fr. Chavara. He sat unmoving as if out of breath. He knew the saying 'The word of the King is the King of words'. Still, he tried to let Fr. Marcelin know about the displeasure of the congregation through hints. He suggested to change some of the hard rules which were totally opposite to the traditional customs of fasting and were not easy to follow in our specific climatic conditions. Based on his suggestions an evaluation was done. In the end, after making some corrections it was declared that the Rule had come into effect. The whole experience was painful and scary for Fr. Chavara and for other members. This

was a drastic change in their life style which they had built up taking one step at a time! This new Rule was also so detached from the ideas of the other two founding fathers, Fr. Palackal and Fr. Porukara. A congregation which went ahead with various activities for the overall growth of the society as a whole, was being controlled by this new Rule. It was trying to control them from interacting with others. (Chronicles 77-81).

Fr. Marcelin read the new Rule repeatedly for everyone to hear. He also suggested that whoever did not want to live by this Rule could leave the congregation. Everyone started praying and entered into the eighth day of the retreat with fear. They had to take a final decision soon because by the eighth day of the retreat they should take a decision on their religious profession. Fr. Chavara carefully observed the situation. Many were weeping. Fear had gripped them all. Would it be possible to live by this new Rule? How many would be ready to make the profession along with him? Tears started flowing while he prayed for getting strength from God, for giving courage to his companions.

In the morning of December 8th, a group of two priests, eight brothers, and a candidate approached Fr. Chavara to inform that they were leaving. They said they did not have the courage to withstand and asked for forgiveness. (Chronicles 77). Fr. Chavara sat stunned. Half of the members in the group were backing out. It could have been the same shock he had felt while listening to the untimely demise of his parents and

brother due to the epidemic. These were the people who came to him with great hope and desire, the same ones who had participated with him in all the activities and training with enthusiasm. Fear and sorrow had made them back out. He was going to surrender himself wholly to the Almighty and to the people, through dedicating himself through the profession. The pain that went through the leader of that small group was indescribable. He himself might have faltered when he saw so many members going back, wondering if he could go ahead at all.

That loving father comforted those who decided to leave. He asked them to pray for him and also for the other 11 who had decided to commit themselves to the profession of religious vows. He also suggested that they should help them in the services that were going to take place soon as they took the vows as the Servants of Mary Immaculate. Everyone came together and helped and the function ended beautifully. They witnessed the first members of the first profession of India's first indigenous religious congregation of priests. (Parappurath Fr. Varkey 30,31).

Even at that moment Fr. Chavara's mind was hovering around the bed of Fr. Thomas Nellisseri who had been bedridden and paralysed. Fr. Thomas was one among the 12 who agreed to take the profession and started the retreat. On the second day of the retreat, he fell at the altar while celebrating the Holy Mass and became sick. (Chronicles 83,84). He was sad that Fr. Thomas was not able to walk and kneel down to make

the religious profession. Taking up the role of a father, and as a leader of the group when he had to get involved in these situations, he might have felt like eating fire. But the fire was filled with the Holy Spirit, so instead of feeling the burning heat, he was filled with the warmth of hope, kindness, patience, and wisdom, above all he was fully aware of God's care and protection. Next day he went near the bed of Fr. Thomas and accepted his profession and dedicated the life of the twelve to God and thanked Him for the gift of this congregation. After waiting for more than 25 years when the 12 individuals stood in the place of twelve apostles, Fr. Chavara crossed the first stage of his life in the congregation by embracing both happiness and bitterness together.



FIRST FRUITS BECAME FIRST FRUITS OF THE CONGREGATION IN HEAVEN

In Christ our redemption is secured, our sins forgiven, through the shedding of his blood.
Herein is the richness of the grace he has lavished on us, which brings all wisdom and insight.

Ephesians 1, 7-8

*"Though undeserving of your kindness, think
Nourished by your mercy he was nurtured
For the sweet sake of your mother
And the womb that bore you long months nine
Those sacred breasts that gave you suck
The arms and knees that bore you Lord with love.*

*"And with tender care watched your growth,
Save your humble servant from severe lot!
Thus arose for me her fruitful prayer
Hence you forgave my sins and cursed me not?"*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam II: 279-288

CHAPTER-14

BLESSINGS OF THE FIRST FRUITS FROM HEAVEN

St. Chavara started the works along with many others but several of them had embraced death within a short period of time, giving him immense pain. The first fruits became the first fruits of the congregation in heaven. They all had a peaceful death and it gave so much inspiration to St. Chavara. He realised that the congregation was progressing day by day.

It seems like the Lord's plan to give plenty of burden to those who are willing to bear more. In the life of Fr. Chavara also the same happened. When he was a child, his mother dedicated him to Holy Mother. After losing his own mother at a very young age, he dedicated himself completely to the Holy Mother and became Her servant. He was happily preparing to dedicate his congregation to Holy Mother Immaculate by taking the three religious vows on December 8th 1855, on the first anniversary of the declaration of Holy Mother's Immaculate Conception. But for that he had to accept a Rule which was not desired by the community and had lost 11 members of his group as they could not accept the new law. One disciple was lying down paralysed. He was just overcoming each difficulty one after another

and had received the title of Fr. Prior, the superior of the congregation, and had taken the situation under control. But now Fr. Jacob Velyara, also a family member, fell seriously ill.

Fr. Jacob Velyara celebrated solemn Holy Mass on December 8th on the feast of Mary Immaculate. He was one among those who had taken the religious profession along with Fr. Chavara. On 9th some people from *Muttuchira* church came looking for him. The church's sacristan was down with small pox and he wished to see Fr. Jacob. It was the last wish of someone at the edge of death. Without paying heed to others' warnings, obtaining the permission of Fr. Chavara, Fr. Jacob went, met him and prepared him make his last confession and offered him the Sacrament of Anointing before he passed away. Fr. Jacob returned to *Mannanam*, and on the 12th, he started having severe fever and vomiting. Different treatments were given without having any results. In the end Fr. Velyara passed away on 24th morning. (Chronicles 78,79).

Soon after the community in *Mannanam* started canonically, came the time for Christmas celebration. Everyone was running around preparing to celebrate that day beautifully. But Fr. Jacob passed away on the eve of Christmas. It seemed like Fr. Chavara was given one cross after another and he was not getting freed from crosses on his shoulders. One of the first fruits from the religious congregation fell off within 16 days, and it was in the same month itself that 11 others also left the congregation.

Fr. Jacob Velyara used to share in the sufferings of others and it was such experiences that had transformed his behaviour. He was just becoming a promising orator of the Word of God, but it was nipped in the bud. Memories of Fr. Jacob broke the dam and flew down the face of Fr. Chavara like little streams. Velyara was related to the Chavara family. He did his religious training at *Mannanam* from 1838 to 1848 along with Fr. Chavara. From the time he was ordained, with so much enthusiasm he participated in all the activities. Still, sometimes he had to be reprimanded and corrected. His work among the sick had made great changes in his life. Fr. Chavara had noted down his memories of him like this: *“None of you or even he had any idea when he had gone through the transformation, but I know him from his young age. I used to scold him several times even after his ordination. Around this time, the cook at Mannanam monastery was suffering from severe piles. It was so severe that it prolapsed and was teeming with maggots. He was left in a room near the barn as it was difficult for people to go near him due to the stench coming from him. It was difficult to give him the sacraments or hear his confession. Fr. Velyara took care of this severely sick person and helped him have a happy death. But after his death for several days Fr. Velyara was not able to keep anything down his stomach and was continuously vomiting for days. In those days he tried to roast rice and eat, I came to know about all this only later on. That incident transformed him into a new person and he went into retreat after that. Later on, he was sent to various churches for*

preaching spiritual retreats and I never had to scold him for anything again.” (Chavara Letters 160,161).

Fr. Mathai Kalapurackal was one of those who made the religious profession with him. In 1852 when the people at *Elthuruth* arranged everything to start a monastery there, along with Fr. Kochupurackal, Fr. Mathai also was sent over to stay there and find if that place was suitable. But he had to return to *Mannanam* soon when he had malaria fever. After taking the religious vows most of the time Fr. Kalapurackal was visiting parishes for retreat preaching. He became a Guru of retreat preaching. When the monastery at *Koonammav* was started in 1857 he was sent there to oversee the works. When the monastery at *Vazhakkulam* started in 1859 he was the one selected to go and help Fr. Kanat. He helped Fr. Chavara prepare a report after studying certain issues that were going on in some churches, and sent the report to the bishop. (*Elthuruth Vazhakkulam Chronicles*).

It had been noted that some priests had seen Fr. Kalapurackal when he was in meditation with a transformed face caused by the intense spiritual ecstasy he was feeling and he looked as if he was talking to God. Fr. Mathai did his last ministry at the monastery at *Plassanal* which was newly acquired. Fr. Chavara had sent Fr. Kalapurackal to *Plassanal* as per the bishop's instruction, but the place was near a forest and was not inhabitable. He caught malaria fever while he was there and though taken back to *Mannanam* he passed away. (Varkey Parappuram; History of congregation 199-215,

633-639). When the life of Fr. Kalapurackal was lost, they lost someone who could have been of great help to them in future. All these were trying times for Fr. Chavara.

Fr. Chavara thought about the past. The life of Fr. Mathai Munjanath also shared the same story. He was also with Fr. Chavara in all his earlier activities from the beginning. Fr. Mathai Munjanath joined *Mannanam* in 1853; he was from *Pala*. The monastery started at *Koonammav* for Latin Christians was taken under the wings of *Mannanam* as its second monastery in 1857 on the request of the bishop. Fr. Chavara took over the monastery by sending Fr. Munjanath along with three brothers. Two children who belonged to the *Koottingal* family had an accidental fall in water and died while they were going to climb the *Malayattur* Hill on a pilgrimage. He reached *Koonammav* after visiting their home to pray and console the bereaved family. It was he who brought the scholastics who were at *Manannam* to *Koonammav* in 1859. When Fr. Thoppil needed an urgent help at the monastery at *Elthuruth*, Fr. Munjanath was sent over there for help. But the proximity to the cole fields and the cold windy climate made him sick and he passed away in 1861. (Fr. Varkey Parappuram 185-251, Fr. Bernardin).

Out of the 12 who had started the religious life along with Fr. Chavara, four passed away. He thought each one of them was the best among whom God had chosen who were good enough to lay the foundation of the congregation. But God had called them back before

they could start their work in their field. Fr. Chavara had always in his mind the names of those who had died. But even though they were gone they became showers of blessings from heaven.

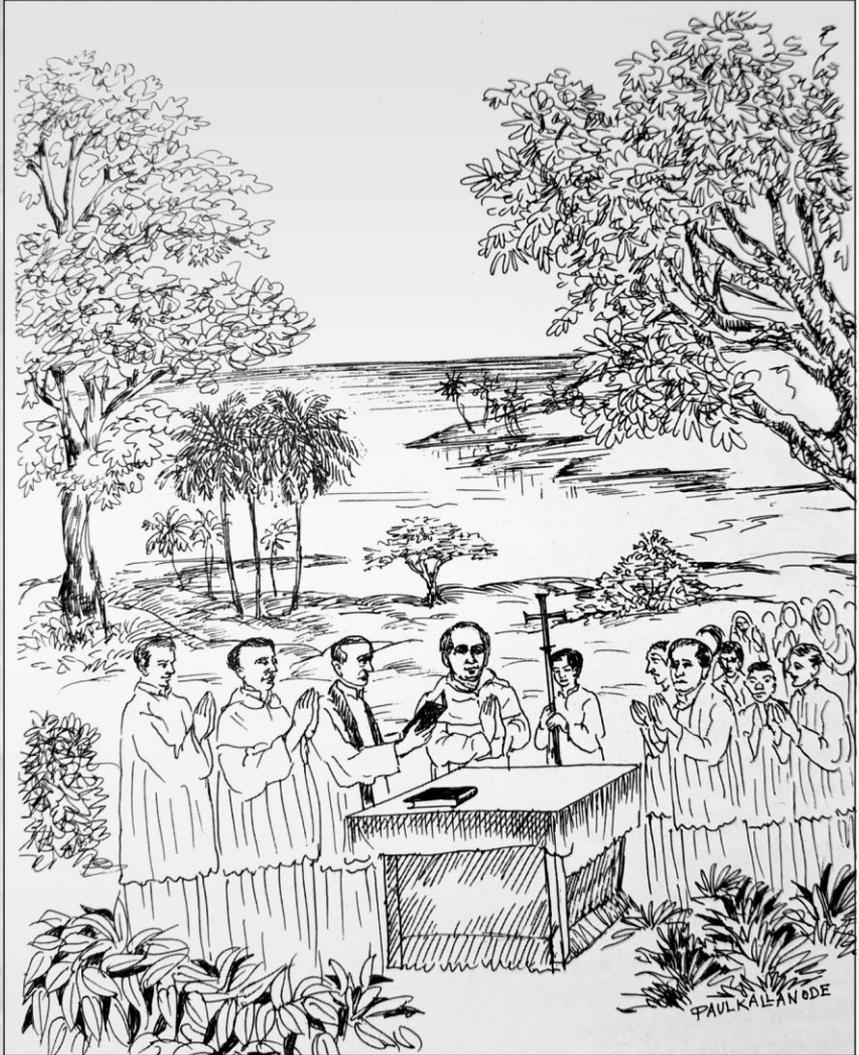
Fr. Chavara took everything as testing times and his mind or feet never faltered. What sprouted in the fire would not wither in the sun. After a fire the soil gives double yield, *Mannanam* monastery only grew bigger in size and the institution branched out to many places. Even though in the beginning Fr. Chavara had lost some of its members, he started gaining more and more. As St. Paul said: *"I can do all things through Him who gives me strength"*, Fr. Chavara's faith helped him overcome every difficulty. He held Him more and more strongly. Holy Mother had never forsaken him and was always there helping him. He said: *"Somehow, whenever I laid the net in the name of Mother, it never went in vain."* (Letters 81).

Fr. Thomas Nellisseri, Fr. Mathai Kalapurackal, Fr. Mathai Munjanath and Fr. Jacob Velyara were among the first born of the CMI congregation. Fr. Nellisseri fell sick and was in a paralysed state for about 12 years. Fr. Chavara himself helped patients suffering from smallpox and helped them prepare for a happy death. Quoting the words of St. Theresa of Avila, he wrote to his brothers, *"I'm actually afraid of those houses with no sick patients, because the presence of Jesus Christ will be in those houses where there are patients. He will be happier in those houses where sick people are being cared for and comforted."* (Letters 72).

It was his memories of sick people whom he had met and who had passed away with peace of mind that encouraged Fr. Chavara to start in 1869, a *Confraternity for "Happy Death"* and a Home of Charity at Kainakary.

St. Chavara encouraged the people there to offer their service to the poor. *"Nursing the sick is very difficult, it could be unpleasant, detestable and mean ingless to the world, but it is very precious before God. For many have been sanctified by serving the sick."*

By the grace of God, St. Chavara could visualise the project and witnessed it getting implemented; he also prepared a by-law for the administration of the same. (Letters 158-163). His project for a shelter for the sick, aged, street beggars, poor and destitute to have a place to stay when they reached the final days of their life, became the first of its kind in India.



DELAYS IN STARTING THE MONASTERY AT ELTHURUTH

Through him God chose to reconcile all things to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood on the cross.

Colossians 1, 20

*The eyes you gave such sights to see and muse
And wisely turn to you my Eternal Good,
With countless ills I hurt you sore my Lord,
I made them tools to insult you, withal.*

*The ears you gave me words of wisdom to hear
Yes, with them I myself abused and my mind
And the feet you gave me to reach your Holy Presence
The hands in devotion to worship you, my God!*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam II: 337-344

CHAPTER-15

DIFFICULTIES AND DELAYS IN STARTING THE MONASTERY

The fragrance of the religious congregation which bloomed at Mannanam, spread all over. People started asking for such ashrams near their surroundings too. But St. Chavara had told them that more fruits would yield only if one waited with patience. The best example for this is the starting of the ashram at Elthuruth. The path from conflicts to unity is the path of God.

As days went by new members kept coming to join the monastery at *Mannanam*. All those who had the formation who joined first were all very good preachers. Those priests at *Mannanam* became very active in preaching the Word of God. The priests were divided into groups and they started visiting the parishes for retreat preaching. Until then even parish priests did not have any particular programmes for their spiritual renewal. Priests and the people of God grew together in the Spirit. People began to be greatly impressed by the monastery at *Mannanam* and by the priests who lived there.

Even other parish priests started visiting the monastery at *Mannanam* for their spiritual retreat in solitude. In 1848 Fr. Anthony, the Vicar of

Kandassamkadav parish, came to the monastery for retreat. Attracted by the way of life of the inmates of the monastery and their daily routine, he lived there a few more days than he had previously planned. He wished to have a monastery just like the one in *Mannanam* in the northern areas too. He went back and inspired his fellow priests and people for making this happen. Malpan Mathew, of *Kalparamb* seminary, and the Malpan *Edakkalathur* also got interested in this and took the initiative. They acquired the land at *Elavathuruth*, near *Aranattukara*, from the government after getting permission from the bishop, to start the monastery. With the help from others, they built a chapel and a small building with two to three rooms. This happened in 1852.

After getting everything ready, the land, chapel and a building, the group of representatives reached *Mannanam* and met Fr. Chavara and revealed the reason of their visit. After evaluating the matter, he sent Fr. Mathai Kalapurackal over there. The prospect of having a second monastery in the history of Kerala made Fr. Chavara and other members very happy. But the bishop did not grant formal permission to start the monastery yet.

Elavathuruth, as the name denotes, was an island surrounded by low lands. It was more like marshland and was not suitable to live. Priests had gone there and started their work. Before long Fr. Kalapurackal got malaria and he had to go back to *Mannanam*, and soon Fr. Kochupurackal also went back to *Mannanam*.

The unexpected events made Fr. Chavara sad. (*Elth uruth*, Chronicle volume 1).

Fr. Chavara was hopeful that the situation would become favourable, and the priests and people were ready to cooperate with him. Years went by, priests and people of the parish at *Aranattukara* continued their efforts in maintaining the land and the building. Fr. Chavara was interested in sending priests over there again but the bishop was not letting it happen. People from that place appealed to the bishop many times but he did not give a favourable response. He kept on repeating that the time was not ripe.

Spending money by the people from their own pocket to maintain the land and the building was impossible. It was almost certain that the proposed plan might not happen. Whoever cooperated started leaving one by one. The idea of starting a monastery there did not exist anymore. The hopes of Fr. Chavara and others faded considerably. The priests and other people had donated this land and the building with so much enthusiasm, hoping for a monastery and Fr. Chavara felt sad in disappointing them. Only if more and more monasteries are established along with the growing number of members there would more possibilities for expansion. The chance for the priests of the northern area, who used to come to *Mannanam* for retreat, to have a monastery near their place, was not yet realized. No one had an answer to the question why the bishop was standing against the wishes of the people. In fact, a lot of questions were left unanswered. They left

everything to God. Years went by. Finally in 1858 *Elavathuruth* got a new life. After retrieving the old place, they started the monastery right there. Fr. Chavara changed the name of *Elavathuruth* to, '*Elthuruth*', which meant God's Island. Later on, the monastery was given the name of 'Mother of Assumption' and played an important role in the history of Kerala Church in the 19th century.

During the time of the schism of Roccas, there were lots of threats from the opposing groups against the monastery at *Elthuruth*. There were threats of physically handling the members of the monastery and taking over the place. Fr. Chavara started visiting the churches to talk against the schism, and he was trying his best to send away Bishop Roccas with dignity. He accepted with a heavy heart all the problems which were happening around him. On the one side he was trying to comfort the members who were under threat from the enemy and trying to give them courage, on the other side, forgetting everything, he leaned on God and stood for the unity of the Church in Kerala. Even though in the beginning they had turbulent times, Fr. Chavara was lucky enough to watch *Elthuruth* transforming into a centre of hope for those in the northern areas. He did not live to see the Syrian Churches getting the Vicariates and their own bishops. However, it was at the monastery at *Elthuruth* that the announcement of the establishment of the Vicariate of Trichur took place in 1886. (*Elthuruth* Chronicle volume 1).

Fr. Chavara's memories of *Elthuruth* which was the second monastery of the congregation, were filled with experiences of darkness and light. The priests and people entrusted him *Elthuruth* with hopes of starting a monastery, even though there was only one small building. But for six long years, the bishop denied permission to start, saying the time was not yet ripe. Even though they couldn't understand what were the reasons behind his stand, nobody could question it. Finally, the permission was given and, at the time of constructing the basement, they were instructed to make a basement different from the plan Fr. Chavara had for the building. That too he accepted without arguments. The permission could have been the result of all the preaching of retreats by Fr. Thoppil and Fr. Chandy, in the churches in the northern areas. Then came Rocco schism. They tried to abuse the priests physically and tried to take over the monastery. One could only imagine how sad the saintly Chavara might have felt. He kept on inspiring the members to depend on God and to stand always for truth. He was immensely happy when he saw his efforts gave good results. God was always with him, turning his severe agonies into moments of ecstasies.



CHAVARA ACCEPTED THE FORESAKEN MONASTERY AT PLASHANAL

In this is love, not only we loved God but that he
loved us in sending his Son to be the
sacrifice which takes away our sins.

1 John 4, 9-10

*The Lord of mercy, the son of God
His glorious splendor, I long to see
The fountain of mercy, God Incarnate
Who, the ugly form of man assumed
To uproot him from the slush of sin
The Redeemer of human kind, I long to see*

*He concealed in his form
The effulgence that dims the stars
The nativity of God the highest
From mercy, the virgin, I long to see*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam III: 1-10

CHAPTER-16

PRICE PAID FOR UNCONDITIONAL OBEDIENCE

Plassanal ashram was the result of a challenge taken by Anthony Kudakkachira. Later St. Chavara had to include this neglected place among the ashrams of Mannanam, paying the price of giving the life of a member.

Within a few years after starting the seminary in *Mannanam* in 1833, Brother Anthony Kudakkachira came from nearby *Pala*, to study there. He had experience of seminary education under different Malpans before arriving there. Due to his particular nature, he left each place after a fight with them.

The same happened in *Mannanam* too. In the earlier times, seminarians for parish ministry and seminarians for religious life both had been given accommodation together. But this shared accommodation was not helpful for the training for religious community life. Hence, they were given separate accommodation on the ground floor and the first floor of the building. The candidates for the religious life were given accommodation in the first floor. Br. Anthony Kudakkachira's pride was hurt by this division and he left the seminary in anger. He walked down the steps of *Mannanam* monastery with a challenge that he would start a

religious congregation of his own, which could be a thatched roof building, but the first saint would come out from his seminary. Kudakkachira was very good in creating conflicts and Fr. Chavara was sad that he was unable to turn him into an asset for the Church. Along with creating conflicts among the seminarians, he managed to create misunderstanding between the authorities too. The seminary was in the beginning stage, Fr. Chavara went through severe mental struggles as he had to make sure that both groups were not getting hurt.

After completing his priestly studies from different places, just like he had challenged earlier, Fr. Anthony, through some crooked games managed to have a small building in a place called *Plassanal*, a place in the parish of *Aruvithura*. He started a religious monastery in the name of St. Anthony; some people also joined. Since he had admitted the seminarians without getting proper permission from the authorities, the bishop refused to ordain them. That made him part ways with the bishop of *Varappuzha* and he went in search of a bishop from Persia. He went to Bagdad to find a Syrian bishop and passed away while he was still there.

Gradually, everyone who had joined the monastery at *Plassanal* dropped out. The functioning of the monastery seemed to stall. Since the monastery was near a forest the living conditions were not healthy. According to the agreement between Kudakkachira and the church, the monastery could not continue as such, if

there was no one to run the monastery, and it had to be given back to the church of *Aruvithara*.

Even though the monastery had been started without his permission, the Archbishop of *Varappuzha* felt since, it was functioning for some time as a monastery, it was not fair to attach it back to the parish. He insisted Fr. Chavara to take up this monastery as a new unit of *Mannanam* monastery. After studying the situation well, he let the archbishop know that as the climatic and living conditions were not favourable, it was not a good idea to take over this monastery. But in the end Fr. Chavara had to take over the monastery at *Plassanal* due to the pressure from the bishop.

Fr. Chavara sent Fr. Kurian Kochupurackal and Fr. Mathai Kalapurackal to *Plassanal* to reopen the monastery. It had been made in a haste and was in a dilapidated condition. After doing some repair works to make it suitable for living, Fr. Kochupurackal gave Fr. Mathai the responsibility of running the monastery and returned to *Mannanam*. Its proximity to forest, the winds and very cold climate made Fr. Mathai sick with malaria. It was only when his father went to *Plassanal* to enquire about his wellbeing did Fr. Chavara, at *Mannanam* come to know about the state of Fr. Mathai who was living alone and was down with malaria. Immediately he sent Fr. Chandy Kattakkayam to bring back Fr. Kalapurackal. When Fr. Chandy reached *Pala*, the family of Fr. Mathai had already brought him up to *Pala*.

Even though he was very sick once he reached *Mannanam* he felt relieved. But soon conditions worsened. After being anointed by Fr. Chavara he passed away quickly. Fr. Chavara might have been really sad thinking that he alone was responsible for his death.

It was he who had sent Fr. Mathai to the uninhabitable forest area. He had sent him there as it was his duty to obey the bishop, but because of that he had lost one more member from his community. One more person who had taken the vow along with him to start the religious life passed away within the last five years. He let his tears flow in front of the altar and found solace in that. Realising that a true religious person should be someone with absolute obedience, should be blind and deaf to the external matters that bothered him, Fr. Chavara surrendered to the Will of God. God blessed him more by giving him plenty of new Divine Vocations. (Chronicles 87, 92, 93).



CHAVARA ANSWERS COMFORTING HIS FOLLOWERS

Be humble, gentle and patient, putting up with one another lovingly sparing no effort to preserve the unity the Spirit gives you, whose bond is peace.

Ephesians 4, 1-5

*Remember me, entercede with your son
Grant me a happy death and Salvation
Unto you this body and Soul of mine
I offer. I entrust them to you alone!
In you, my hope entire I place
All my sins and due penalty efface!*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam IV: 209-214

CHAPTER-17

DIGGING THE VERY BASEMENT?

St. Chavara tried to accept patiently when the authorities made constant changes even to the extent of changing the congregation's name. By placing the Holy Mother in front, he tried to answer the questions of his followers and comforted them.

What makes a religious congregation stand apart from other congregations, are its constitutions, way of life, official habit and name. With regard to the Church in India, it grew up from the first century itself in its distinctive love for the Mother of God, Mary, our traditions bear witness. The founding fathers of CMI, Fr. Palackal, Fr. Porukara and Fr. Chavara, were staunch devotees of the Holy Mother. Fr. Chavara had placed the Holy Mother in place of his biological mother and declared himself as her servant from a very young age and had become her great devotee. On December 8th, 1855 on the first anniversary of the declaration of the Immaculate Conception as dogma of faith, the religious congregation at *Mannanam* was canonically started with the name of *The Servants of Mary Immaculate*. It was nurtured from the beginning by the Dominican spirituality and had accepted the Holy Mother as its

mediator. They used the white cassock and leather belt similar to the dress code of St. Dominic.

The new constitutions they received through Bishop Bernardin before their profession of vows, was accepted only half-heartedly, but later on they all got adjusted to it; but the community was in for yet another bigger change. After the profession, the interference of the bishop of *Varappuzha* and other Carmelite missionaries became more intense. They were not allowed to do anything without their instructions. One by one the laws of Carmelite Order were getting added into the law they had been given. The name of the congregation itself was changed to *Congregation of the Immaculate Mother of Mount Carmel*. The newly founded congregation had accepted the constant presence and involvements of the Carmelite missionaries only with respect. Fr. Chavara tried his best to accommodate everything that had come his way. But it was not easy for other members to readily accommodate the new changes.

In 1859, they had received an order from the bishop saying that from December 25th onwards, they should wear a scapular over their cassock which was in accordance with the dress code of the members of Carmelite Order. The members were really angry at being ordered to make changes in their habit which they had designed and was using officially. If they made changes in the habit, it would lose their identity of the Dominican dress code. The members were so upset that they had never been consulted even once before

making such a serious change and they expressed their displeasure to Fr. Chavara, putting him in dilemma. He was worried about what to do, neither was he able to oppose the authorities nor was he able to pacify the members. (Chronicles 89).

Fr. Chavara depended only on the mercy of God. The Carmelite scapular was considered a symbol of protection of the Holy Mother. Fr. Palackal was a devotee of Mother Carmel. Not knowing what new changes could be coming their way, Fr. Chavara tried to console the members. He comforted them by saying that, behind everything that was happening, there was the infinite Providence of God, and everything would turn out for good in the end.

Another change after addition of the scapular to their religious habit followed. The message was clear, from now on, they were not going to be an independent religious congregation with a separate constitution. They will be known as the *Third Order of Carmelite Discalced (TOCD)*. They were informed by Archbishop Bernardin that this decision had been taken in Rome by the General of the *First Carmelite Order* in 1860. They were also told that henceforth a representative of the General would take over the direct governance of this congregation. (Chronicles 90).

This was a great shock for Fr. Chavara and to his fellow religious. It has been about 200 years since the *Carmelite* missionaries started working in India. They had never admitted an Indian into their order. They did not encourage anyone to become missionaries and do

religious works in India either. And now, when the children of this land established a religious congregation, for doing good for the people of this land, a congregation which was equal to the *Carmelite Order*, it had been downgraded as a Third Order. This unfair supremacy was something that even the saintliest individual could not accept. All these were trying times for Fr. Chavara. Earlier he did not understand why they were asked to make changes in their official habit. Now all understood everything. Everything was clear to them. There was little or no chance of being known as the religious congregation started in India by the Indians. They were having the same fate that befell the Syrian Catholic Church of Kerala in the earlier times. As seen in the history, the moment they started having a relation with the Persian Church, from then onwards they were governed by the bishops from Persia. Likewise, the congregation started by the children of India, in the name of Mary Immaculate was made the Third Order of the *Carmelites*.

Things did not end there, a *Carmelite* missionary, Leopold, who came to India in 1860 and was ordained only after he reached India, was appointed in 1862 as the master of novices and delegate of the bishop. Without delay he confiscated all the copies of the constitution they were following and put them into fire. They were given a new constitution and right away put that into practice. The new constitution was different from the Syrian Christian traditions that they were following. They did all this to make it look like the CMI congregation had its origin through the *Carmelites*. (The

above-mentioned information was provided by the previous historians of the congregation).

Fr. Chavara was fully aware that a religious institution was established and governed by God. It was not manmade. He believed that his community stood for glorifying God, to take the congregation to its heights, and for renewing the Church. He was convinced that the involvements of the missionaries were insignificant. When he stood firmly in this awareness and trust, he understood that none of the recent incidents would make barriers in his way to his destination. This could be the reason, when we go through history, why we never see Fr. Chavara working against the missionaries.

But on one occasion we see him reacting in disagreement. Fr. Scaria Ephrem Kalathil asked for permission to visit his uncle, a parish priest, who was sick. Fr. Leopold the delegate was not willing to let him go. Fr. Chavara insisted that since his monastery was not isolated from the outside world, he should be given permission to go. When the difference of opinion came between Fr. Leopold and Fr. Chavara, Fr. Leopold suggested to have voting to reach the final decision. All members voted in favour of the visit except Fr. Leopold. What made the group think ideologically different from the missionaries was the way they had been nurtured till then, by meeting the pastoral needs. St. Chavara knew that the decision caused distress to Fr. Leopold, but he had to take a stand to establish the pastoral duties of his community. (*Parappurath*). Fr. Chavara always stood for tolerance and cooperation, but he was

also very careful in safeguarding his fair share in the formation of the charism of the congregation. The CMI would not have existed today if St. Chavara had not maintained a healthy relationship with the missionaries all the time.

The members found it hard to accept the actions of the missionaries and conflicts started among them because of this. In order to stop further conflicts, Fr. Chavara had given some directions in his Last Testament: *“My beloved children, by the special grace of God we had been called to become members of the Carmelite Order, most dear to our Mother of God. This happened by the will of God not by the will of man. When I read the words written in this paper, I’m convinced of this reality more than ever. Very Reverend Fr. Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, the beginners of this congregation, had prayed and made arrangements to become members of the Dominican congregation. That’s why they started wearing white cassock with a belt which was not the practice of that time in the place. But seeing our weakness the Holy Mother embraced us in her special care and love. Loving children we, you and I, have not become real religious people yet. The only proof of a true religious person is by having blind obedience, through the absolute renunciation of one’s will.”* (Letters 99).

In this way St. Chavara soothed the minds of his followers. By giving more importance to the providence of God he was able to provide a solution for the conflicts in our daily life.



CHAVARA COMING OUT TO FIGHT AGAINST THE SCHISM OF BISHOP ROCCOS

If you love those who love you, what reward shall you have? Do not the pagans do the same? You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Mathew 5, 44

*" Found mercy in you in the fullest measure
They who with penance for sins made amends
In perfect confidence, they draw near to you
But I a sinner, am pressed with the weight of sins!*

*To turn an ascetic, I lack the needed strength
I can muse upon your sacred passion
And seek my hope in your precious blood
All else is beyond my power, my Lord!*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam VII: 361-368

CHAPTER-18

UNITY MORE IMPORTANT THAN A MONASTERY

The fight against Roccas schism had put the lives of St. Chavara and his fellow members at risk. St. Chavara's only aim was to safeguard the unity of Kerala Church and its relation with the Universal Church.

Fr. Chavara considered God as a loving mother. A mother is always alert about her baby even when the baby is sleeping. A mother could sense her baby's hunger even if he is asleep and she wakes her child up from his sleep to feed him. God is like this, and Fr. Chavara's views about the Holy Church was also not different from this. The Church was like his mother and he was like a mother in the Church's life. Fr. Leopold was with Fr. Chavara for ten years, and Fr. Chavara saw him as his spiritual Guru. Fr. Leopold gave his testimony that the brightest holiness in Fr. Chavara was his unwavering trust and love towards the Holy Church and towards the Pope. (Leopold 11,12).

Fr. Chavara formed the religious congregation mainly for the spiritual renewal of the Kerala Church. He couldn't even think of any conflicts taking place inside the Church of Kerala or people going away from the supremacy of the Pope. Under the leadership of Fr.

Chavara and his community, spiritual awakening and unity was steadily growing up inside the Kerala Church. At this time Bishop Roccas entered the scene; he was invited from Bagdad by the authorities of a conflicting group and started his unauthorised activities in Kerala. It was clear from various evaluations that Bishop Roccas came to Kerala and started his rule without the permission of the Pope. Fr. Chavara believed that not having obedience to the Pope was equal to forsaking one's own mother, and he was deeply saddened by the actions of Bishop Roccas. Creating conflicts and disputes inside the Church meant the beginning of a great destruction. He felt sad.

On 1861 May 9th Bishop Roccas reached *Kochi*. On June 8th Archbishop of *Varappuzha* appointed Fr. Chavara as the Vicar General of the Syrian Catholic Church. With the power of his new authority Fr. Chavara and his followers went to all the churches and preached that Bishop Roccas was not sent by the Pope and he was using his authority to create schism. After recognizing Fr. Chavara's abilities, popularity and acceptance in the society, Bishop Roccas secretly let him know that if Fr. Chavara stood by him, he could make him a bishop. Offering him the position of a bishop meant recognition of him in front of the world. It was a testing time to see if he was selfish or selfless. Chavara had never let selfishness peep out any time in his life, even the acceptance of the Vicar General title was because of his unwavering obedience to the Pope. His response to Bishop Roccas was that he did not wish to get the

position of a bishop; all he ever wanted was the redemption of his soul. (Chronicles 191).

Bishop Roccas understood that Fr. Chavara was his greatest opponent and with the help of his group members he started torturing Fr. Chavara and his congregation. When Roccas came and took over the rule of *Thaikkattusseri* church, Fr. Chavara along with his fellow workers went to meet Bishop Roccas to evaluate the situation, and Bishop Roccas tried to have them arrested by the police. He said later on he had a tactical escape from the hands of the police.

Fr. Pallaat, a parish priest, was helping with the construction of the monastery at *Elthuruth*, and he was seduced by the supporters of Bishop Roccas and made him part of the enemy camp. At the same time Fr. Chavara, along with Fr. Chandy Kattakkayam, and Fr. Gheverghese Thoppil, was preaching against the schism in the churches in the northern areas of *Elthuruth*. In the midst of all this, there was an attempt under the leadership of Fr. Pallat to capture the monastery at *Elthuruth*, and the priests who stayed there had to endure even physical abuse. The situation was brought under control only after the Chief Revenue Officer from *Trichur* got involved.

In the same way Roccas had also given instructions to his supporters of the schism to capture *Mannanam* monastery. Besides this Roccas also prepared a letter to be circulated in all the churches against the monasteries. “*See that Fr. Prior and his disciples had dishonoured me and the Patriarch who*

sent us, and by doing so they had put their own soul in severe danger. It's our responsibility to let you all know about this so that you would not be doomed for ever by listening to their evil teachings." (Chronicles 100).

Through Roccas, out of the 154 Syrian churches in Kerala, 86 completely and 30 partially fell to the schism. If this continued like this the unity of the Syrian Catholic Church in Kerala under the leadership of the Pope would not have existed. All the construction works of the monasteries in different places that were going on with the help of people's contribution and co-operation had been stalled. Torturing was going on so much that the inmates of the monasteries started getting threats to their lives. The priests who stood by Fr. Chavara were mainly the ones who had their priestly training from *Mannanam*.

His love for the Holy Church and the Pope, made Fr. Chavara forget all the hardships he faced. He thought about the monasteries he had built and nurtured and the priests staying in them and the loss caused by all these issues, the rumours being spread about him ...At this juncture if he only went around trying to defend the priests and protect the monasteries, the Kerala Church might end up like one more Ancient Church cut off from the unity of the Holy Catholic Church.

Fr. Chavara felt like he was being burnt alive. He wrote to the Pope after collecting signatures from many priests, *"Our Vicar Apostolic Archbishop Bernardin clearly stated in his pastoral circular that it was against your mind and command that the Patriarch on his own*

wish sent the above-mentioned Bishop, over to Kerala. Hence, whoever had received or was given Priestly Ordination from him should be ousted from the Church. But at the same time Bishop Roccas also claimed that, the Patriarch had sent him to Kerala with your permission and command too. So Holy Father, we humbly request you with tears falling down our cheeks to kindly let us have clarity on this matter and let us know the truth of this". (Letters 06).

Those days the pain Fr. Chavara underwent was indescribable. He travelled extensively to meet the supporters of Roccas and visited every church to preach about the reality of the situation, losing his sleep and meals for several days. He was accompanied by rheumatic fever often. He walked all over with an oozing foot badly affected by filaria. He didn't have to take any of these hardships, if he was ready to utter one word in favour of Roccas. If Roccas suggested, the Patriarch would have easily made Fr. Chavara a bishop. The power they had lost in India for the past two centuries over the Church could have been easier to regain from the office of the Propaganda of Faith in Rome; and other opportunities were also many. Fr. Chavara did not let these thoughts linger on his mind even for a minute. He was ready to die for the unity of the Church. Whenever he heard about miseries happening anywhere in the Holy Church he would be praying with tears. Whenever he heard about the success of the Pope, he cried with tears of joy; that was the kind of man he was. (*Sthapaka Pithakanmar* 33-35).

It didn't take too long for the miseries to turn to joy. Fr. Chavara's prayer and actions yielded results. Bishop Roccas repented and went back to his native place. Fr. Chavara sent him off happily in a ship; he even paid for his travel expense. He let the tears of joy flow free and thanked God when every church and people that had fallen into schism returned to Catholic Unity within 18 months' time. (Chronicles 96-115).



CHAVARA PRODUCED THE LETTER FROM ROME TO BRING THE UNITY

With Christ I am nailed to the cross; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And though I am still living this mortal life, my real life is the faith I have in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me

Galatians 2, 20

*Master, punish this sinner as you will
Mother, my mistress, I've caused you distress
Great indeed my offence; why this penance
To repair the sins of this ungrateful wretch*

*Had I sinned a little less. I see
Your suff'rings too would have been less
I sinned in every limb of my body
Hence, you suffered in every inch of yours!*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam VII: 469-476

CHAPTER-19

THE STORY OF TEARS REACHED THE POPE

The sufferings that St. Chavara experienced in his efforts for removing the rift that had been created inside the Church of Kerala by the actions of Fr. Anthony Kudakkachira, Antony Thondanatt and Roccas were indescribable. The tears he had shed in his efforts in maintaining the status of unity between the Church of Kerala and the Holy See had reached as far as at the feet of the Pope in Rome.

The teary story of the Church of Kerala started long ago. There were no significant stories of religious persecution, bloodshed, or stories of external forces. Then one might wonder from where did the heaviness of sorrow come from. When the international navigator Vasco Da Gama reached India from Portugal through the sea route in 1498, it marked the arrival of the Portuguese in India. The Catholic missionaries came to India for missionary works. They couldn't understand fully the rich culture and traditions of India or of the indigenous Catholics who had an apostolic tradition going all the way back to St. Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus. The interferences of those Latin missionaries slowly crept inside the worship and

administration of the Church causing conflicts of interest.

The Kerala Church that grew up under one Rite from the beginning of 1st century to the 16th century started the process of splitting. First it parted into two groups, one Syrian Rite and the other Latin Rite under the Catholic Church. Then came the Jacobite Church. By 19th century the Church was divided into more denominations and many new forms of religious practices came to exist and each one considered the others a threat to its own survival and tried to safeguard its own interests.

Fr. Chavara entered the scene when the Kerala Church was being divided into too many sects and was losing its unity. It was the time when *Varappuzha* Vicariate was under the 'Propaganda Fide' and was clashing with the *Padroado* system of rule which was a part of the Catholic administration in India.

Like the saying, catching fish from muddy water, the Persian Church was trying to get back their power from *Propaganda* and *Padroado* systems of administration, with the help of Fr. Anthony Kudukkachira and his followers.

Fr. Anthony Kudukkachira used to act and take decisions always on impulse. If someone had not done what he wanted, he would right away find someone else to do the job. If one bishop was not willing, he would find another bishop who would be willing. To regain the relationship with Baghdad he collected some signatures

on a petition and went to Baghdad. The result was Bishop Roccas's arrival creating conflicts inside the Syrian Church.

Fr. Chavara bore all the sorrows and miseries. With an oozing leg caused by rheumatic fever he walked around the churches to preach against the schism of Roccas. With the help of a letter from the Pope explaining the truth, he brought back everyone who had gone after Roccas, under the unity of the Church. Another chapter of sufferings and conflicts was over. But if that chapter would be reopened, things could go out of hands. Fr. Chavara knew this only too well and decided to let the Pope know about the seriousness of the situation. Fr. Chavara wished to let the Pope know about the pitiable story of sufferings of the Syrian Church for centuries which he himself also was facing directly, through the Congregation of Propagation of Faith. He wrote that until there was some change made in the decisions, this state of calmness would not last long. He argued that the root cause of all the problems was the lack of having a bishop of the land. He wrote to the head of the Holy Congregation of Propagation of Faith, *"We are Christians belonging to St. Thomas tradition, who had received the faith directly from the Apostle Thomas. For years we did not have a bishop of our own. But even those who had only recently accepted the faith were having their own bishops. People have started thinking that if only they depended on Babel, they would get a bishop who belonged to their own Rite. Influenced by such justifications they might again go to Babel or at least their letters would reach Babel. Hence,*

Your Eminence, let me write about something I felt would solve the issue at hand. It would be good to have two native bishops here, one for the Latin Church and another for the Syrian Church. This would fulfil their wish of having their own bishop and would stop their relations with Babel. This would really help. Not just that, the non-Catholics known as the Jacobite who are mostly our own blood relations and distant relations, would come back to the unity of the Catholic Church and leave the schism.” (Letters of Chavara 29).

This letter that Fr. Chavara wrote to Rome in 1869 did not have any immediate response. His prediction came true when, in 1873 Bishop Melus came from the Persian Church without the permission of the Pope, just as Bishop Roccas had come. Just like what had happened in 1861 many priests and people started following him. Fr. Chavara had passed away before the arrival of Bishop Melus. The intense resistance by the members of the CMI congregation and other priests made Bishop Melus finally go back to Persia. But a sect near *Trichur* moved away from the unity of the Church and formed a group. Their descendants are known as the “*Surais*.” To avoid the repetition of such an ill fate, seven priests from Fr. Chavara’s congregation wrote a letter again to the Pope requesting him to let the Syrian Church have its own bishop. In that letter they also mentioned the letter Fr. Chavara had written in 1869, raising the same issue. But there was a disciplinary action against them for writing a letter directly to the Pope without the knowledge of the bishop and the bishop of *Varappuzha* asked the superior to expel them

from the congregation. As a result, the common prior Fr. Porukara Elisha had to oust them from the community. The Apostolic Visitor, Archbishop Meurin, who came to study about the issues, has given them a name, '*The Seven Sorrows*' as they were the seven innocent victims of the Syro-Malabar Church. The result of the letter written by Fr. Chavara in 1869 came in the form of great sacrifice of the '*Seven Sorrows*' in 1887. Even after the Syrian Church got two vicariates in *Trichur* and *Kottayam*, they had to wait for ten more years, till 1896 to have their own native bishops. In 1896 *Ernakulam*, *Trichur* and *Changanassery* vicariates had their bishops from Kerala. The Bishop of *Ernakulam Mar Louis Pazheparambil* was one of the '*Seven Sorrows*'. These bishops were like a posthumous award for St. Chavara. He might have enjoyed from heaven watching the developments that took place in the Syro-Malabar church. The efforts of these bishops yielded results. Today it had grown into archiepiscopal status.



AT THE REQUEST OF THE BISHOP CONVENT BUILDING CONVERTED TO A SEMINARY

Let each of you have the humility to think others
better than himself, and study the welfare of
others, not his own

Philippians 2, 4

*Long sharp thorns I rudely pressed on you
Had I my eyes and ears held bridled
The pricks less sharp and painful had been
Loving Father, me with eyes you gifted.*

*Was it for this that your eyes were pinned?
Had I but in my infancy died
Or you punished me, each time I sinned
The thorns less rudely had pierced your head.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam VII: 527-536

CHAPTER-20

A CONVENT IS CONVERTED INTO A SEMINARY

The convent building started in Puthenpally was the result of 30 long years of prayer and hard work. During the time of schism of Roccas the convent building had to be converted into a seminary much to the disappointment of St. Chavara. But later on, he felt happy that his dream project, a convent was established in Koonammavu.

It was in 1829 that Fr. Palackal, Fr. Porukara and Fr. Chavara with so much hope, obtained permission from the bishop for the construction of a monastery for priests. They informed the bishop that, as even the priests did not have a place to live together it was hindering their efforts to take collective decisions for making the society a better place, they expressed their bottled-up feelings regarding this. Even with the rich heritage of having an apostolic tradition directly from St. Thomas, the Church in India did not have a monastery of their own either for women or for men to carry out their apostolic ministries and for renewing the activities of the church and the society.

To begin with, they wished to have at least a monastery for priests, and put all their efforts into it to

make it happen. The result was the monastery in *Mannanam*. They had to wait for almost 25 years to get the canonical approbation for that. Though not exactly the way they wanted, they had at least now a monastery for men to start with. Lot of people had joined and through their community prayer and community activities plenty of positive things were taking place in the spiritual level and in the society too.

Next step was to have a convent for women in a similar way. In *Koonammav* there was a small church in the name of St. Philomena and some land along with it and a small building. Bishop Bernardin started a monastery there for Latin Catholics similar to the monastery at *Mannanam* for Syrian Catholics, but it did not last long. Whoever joined gradually dropped out. In this situation the bishop asked Fr. Chavara to take over that place as part of the *Mannanam* monastery, and he took it up in 1857 and *Koonammav* monastery became the second monastery under the leadership of Prior Chavara.

There was a wish that had been buried for a long time in Fr. Chavara's mind, to start a convent for nuns. To fulfil his desire, he had to find a suitable place for that and construct a building, and also had to find women willing to lead the religious life. Since the new convent was meant for women, the building had to be built strong and safe to live in. The building and land should be closer to a church too. Once the monastery started in *Koonammav*, it brought Fr. Chavara closer to it and to *Varapuzha* Bishop's house. Since he was

frequenting those areas Fr. Chavara started looking for a place near *Koonammav*. He wanted to have a place not too far from the monastery at *Koonammav*, and also acquire the land through donation. When he sat thinking of all this, he heard about a suitable place at *Alangat*, which was the property of the parish. There was only a wayside chapel there. The place was almost deserted, and there were not many families settled nearby. The church had no immediate plans for building any institutions there either.

Alangat was a historically important place. The remains of Bishop Joseph Kariyattil were laid to rest in the church there. He was Syrians own bishop whom they got after waiting a long time. Many meetings of historical importance had taken place in *Alangat*. A place known for its history and fame, would have witnessed another historical event, as the location of the first convent for nuns, first of its kind in Kerala, if the parish members had cooperated. Fr. Chavara searched for all possible options. A favourable response seemed almost certain. But after consulting others, he decided to give up that place. The nuns had to have the Holy Mass every day. The place was a little far from the church, and it was on a hill top, and there was a forest nearby. Such a place was not suitable for women. Hence Fr. Chavara decided not go ahead with that place. Fr. Varkey, a contemporary of Fr. Chavara who also lived with him at the monastery at *Koonammav*, has mentioned Fr. Chavara's plans for starting a convent in the hill of *Alangat* and why he gave up that idea. (*Parappurath* 657).

Fr. Chavara continued his search. It was in the middle of such a search that he heard about a land near the parish church in *Puthenpally*. The place was between *Koonammav* and *Varappuzha* and there was a boat jetty nearby; not only that, it was level land and closer to the parish church.

It was in 1857 that the bishop gave *Koonammav* to the religious at *Mannanam*. In 1858, Bishop Bernardin was promoted from the office of the administrator of *Varappuzha* to the office of Vicar Apostolic. Fr. Chavara discussed with the bishop his wish to start a convent. He never did anything without first consulting the authorities.

As it is clear from the letters exchanged between Bishop Bernardin and Fr. Chavara the former was in agreement with most of the ideas and suggestions of the latter, (Letters 37-48). A decision was taken after consulting parishioners about starting a convent in the land that belonged to *Puthenpally* church. In 1859 January 4th the land was transferred to the name of the bishop. *“To start a convent of the Mary Immaculate Mother of Carmel, we are giving three parts of the land on the eastern side of Attiperu Angadi belonging to the parish church on lease and the lease money shall be paid to the church.”* The assurance was given by the Vicar Apostolic Bernardin to *Puthenpalli* church. (History of *Puthenpally* Seminary).

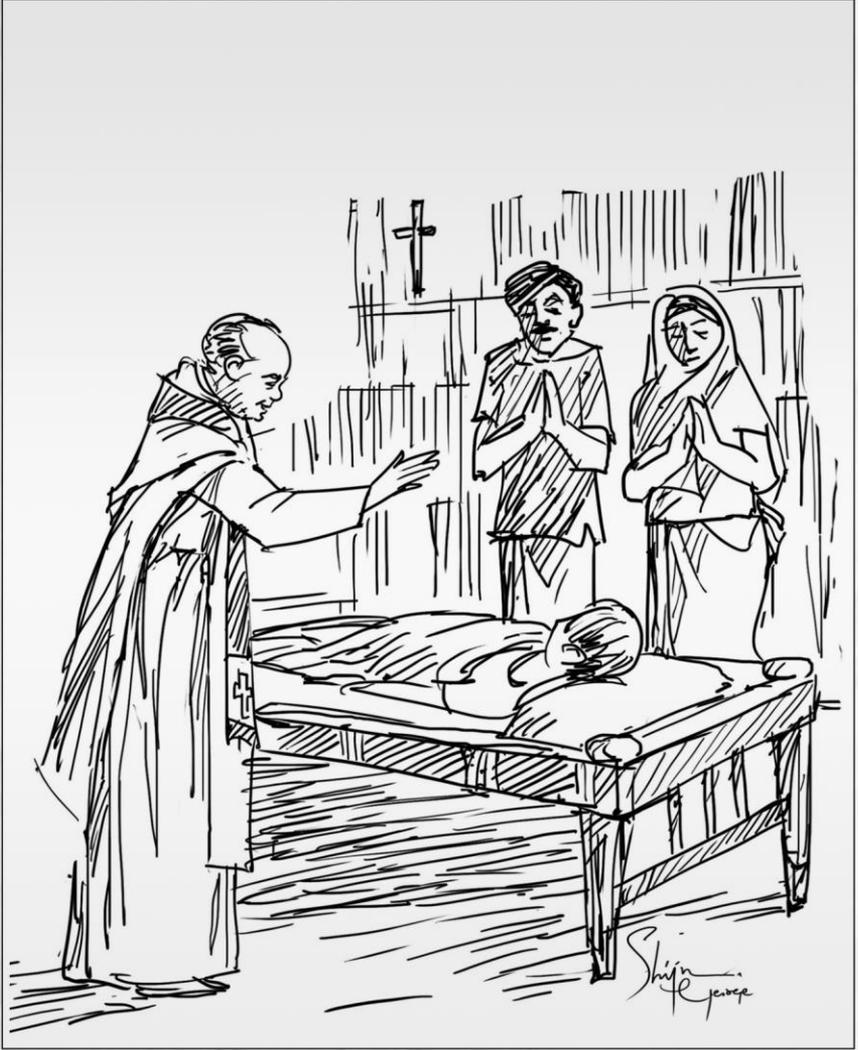
Fr. Chavara was immensely happy as his long-time wish was being realised. The building and compound should be secure as the inmates would be

women. As per the instructions of bishop, they built a huge wall around the compound. The construction of a two storied convent was getting finished. Suddenly the situations changed. Everyone's attention turned to the schism of Roccas. In 1861 Bishop Roccas came from Persia unauthorised and started ruling the Syrian Church. Gradually one by one priests and people started joining him. Fr. Chavara was appointed the Vicar General of Syrian Catholics and he tried his best to bring things back under control. He thwarted Bishop Roccas's plans of intrusion.

Fr. Chavara again turned his attention back to the convent. Then Bishop came up with another new instruction to be followed. According to him, for the time being it was more important to have a seminary to train good priests than a convent. Most of the priests who had fought against the schism of Roccas, had received training from the common seminary at *Mannanam*. Hence such trained priests are needed to fight against such calamities in the future. Unity and uniformity could come only from a common seminary. Otherwise, there would be chances of more schism. Everything the Bishop said was true. Still, a dream which was being developed over a period of 30 years was crumbling down. He was left with no choice but to start the seminary. But at the same time, to bring women out to the forefront of the society, to pay attention to the education of girls, to work for the renewal of families, the presence of nuns in the field was also necessary. Already in the European countries the nuns were efficiently running the activities of the Holy Church.

Thinking of all such possibilities Fr. Chavara felt very sad. The loss would be huge if that idea for the convent is given up now, all his efforts would go futile.

God's Will alone is important; He knows everything, He would implement His plans through others from time to time. Anxiety is a part of selfishness too. When Fr. Chavara thought like this; immediately he felt calm. He was not someone who gave importance to his "will", but believed only in God's Will. Since his capital was his faith in God, it did not take much time for him to overcome any difficulties. Afterwards his thoughts were streamlined and he was thinking about how to set up the seminary instead of convent, and in what ways he could help the bishop in this. The result was the beginning of a third major seminary, other two seminaries being one in *Varappuzha* and the other one in *Mannanam*. In 1866 August 13th a seminary for the members of Syro-Malabar Church was started in *Puthenpally*. (History of *Puthenpally* seminary 3-5, Chronicles 126). Even though the plans for the convent was temporarily put on hold, it was more important to thwart the possibilities of a thousand-fold loss caused by conflicts and schism inside the Church. This knowledge made Fr. Chavara move closer to God and to the authorities.



WHEN CHAVARA SHARED LOVE AND CONCERN, INSTANTANEOUS HEALING BY GOD

Though his nature is from the first divine, he did not count his equality with God as something to be jealously guarded; but he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant and born after human fashion.

Philippians 2: 6,7

*Jesus of Nazareth, a man of little worth
Posing a king, caused dissension among persons
As per royal mandate, for muddling all
Should be hanged on the cross for certain*

*To show to the world His sonship divine
As king of Jews on olive branch huge
In His hand, He was led in pomp
As if denying Tiberius Ceasar his tribute*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam VII: 569-576

CHAPTER-21

THE MENTAL AGONY AND THE INSTANTANIOUS HEALING

St. Chavara was always committed in safeguarding friendship in all his relationships. When he shared love and concern with each other, God Himself came down into their midst with His healing miracle.

The bishop had given permission to start the monastery in 1829, November 1st. Afterwards they searched for a suitable location everywhere. At last, they liked a place, at *Pullarikkunnu* near *Ettumanur* but even after completing all the necessary procedures to get the land, they had to drop the idea in order to maintain a good relationship with the Hindu community in that area as they had a temple near the land they were going to buy. Again, the search for the land continued. While travelling to *Athirampuzha* via *Mannanamkara*, they noticed *Mannanam* hill.

They met Kurian Tarakan Thayil and his younger brother Kochu Pothan Tharakan living at the downhill of *Mannanam*. While talking to them they came to know that *Mannanam* hill belonged to them. They said: “*You should not go anywhere else searching for a place, we are ready to give this land for building the monastery.*” Fr. Chavara and his disciples felt like whatever they

were looking for bumped into them. They went up the hill and had a look around. After consulting Fr. Palackal, *Mannanam* hill was chosen as the location of the monastery.

From that day onwards a special bond was developed with the Thayil Perumalil family. Some parts of the *Mannanam* hill were donated by them. This family helped generously with everything ever since they started the work of the monastery. When they were clearing the property, they used to give food for the workers. Being a prominent family in that area their help made things easier for many things. When the monastery and church were established, this family acted like a close relative and they received a lot of favours from them. The son of Tharakan Perumalil helped them like a caretaker. (Chronicles 15,16;18-20).

Until 1864 when Fr. Chavara was in *Mannanam* everything went on smoothly. Sometime after he shifted to *Koonammav* he came to know that Perumalil family was keeping a distance from the monastery. The reason was unclear. He came to know that the eldest son of Perumalil had been dismissed from his job as the caretaker. This made Fr. Chavara feel really sad and all the old stories went through his mind one by one.

After the monastery started, in the first four to five years it was Perumalil Tharakan who sent 12 towels for the twelve individuals who were representing the twelve Apostles of Christ, during the ceremonial service of washing of feet on Maundy Thursday. Besides, during the 25-day fast before Christmas and 50 days fast during

the Lent, he used to provide food for the people after the fast was over. In 1843 on the 10th annual celebration of Maundy Thursday service at *Mannanam*, Thayil Kochupothan donated an oil lamp with twelve wicks to hang in front of the church as part of his vow. (Chronicles; 43). Likewise, the monastery had received many favours from that family. He couldn't believe how ignorant the priests at *Mannanam* monastery could be. Fr. Elisha Porukara was the superior and he was fully aware of the family's involvement with *Mannanam* monastery ever since it started in 1831. Then what could have happened? Under normal circumstances there was no way the young man from Perumalil would be dismissed; something serious might have happened. He trusted the wisdom of Fr. Porukara and hoped he would do something about it.

Fr. Chavara again thought, if the family members were not attending that church closer to their home but walking all the way to *Arpookkara* or *Athirampuzha* for attending the Holy Mass, how bad they could be feeling. This made Fr. Chavara really sad. The church was supposed to be a home for all. There was no reason to believe that Fr. Porukara had done anything wrong. Fr. Chavara decided to go all the way to *Mannanam* and find out what had happened.

Some urgent matter came up and Fr. Chavara had to go to *Alappuzha*. He went to *Mannanam* from there. He gathered all the members and asked about their wellbeing, he enquired about the problems and came to know that it was a matter of misunderstanding.

After giving them necessary instructions and suggestions, he went straight to *Perumalil*. Fr. Chavara knew that the issue was all because of a misunderstanding. Still, he had to deal with the matter prudently.

Tharakan was lying on his easy chair; as soon as he saw Fr. Chavara he got up. He couldn't do otherwise. Fr. Chavara got into the matter smoothly. The family was facing another burning issue at that time. The eldest son of that family was in his death bed. Doctors had given him up. The only hope was in God. Fr. Chavara knew about this situation. He entered the house asking: *"Where is your son, I just came to know about his illness."* Fr. Chavara saw him in his room lying exhausted and tired. His mother was sitting at the edge of the bed. He went near him and held his hand. He was having high fever. He was slurring his words. With all the blessings and gifts of the Holy Spirit he had received from his priestly ordination, Fr. Chavara placed his hand on his head and prayed. He went out to the veranda after making the sign of cross on his forehead and sat on the chair. Tharakan also followed him to the veranda. Fr. Chavara started to talk. He asked, *"What happened, Tharakan, I heard that you were not attending Holy Mass in the monastery church. Don't worry about your son, he would be alright. You know Fr. Porukara from the seminary days, he doesn't have any ill feelings towards you. If he had taken some decisions regarding your son, then it's only for his own good. He was having some behavioural issues, and being a priest, it was his duty to correct him. It caused you all great pain, but it's*

okay. People at Mannanam hill had so many good memories about this family, I have written down everything in the Chronicles. Most of the priests there also witnessed everything that happened in the past.” Tharakan stood silently. Fr. Chavara slowly explained to him whatever he had heard about the situation in detail. Only then Tharakan came to know about the real picture and with tears in his eyes he asked for forgiveness. At that time his wife came out and let them know that their son was feeling much better and his fever was gone too.

Oh God! Fr. Chavara exclaimed in relief. Both the issues had been solved. The misunderstanding this family was harbouring towards the priests was solved. Why the priests did not visit this family earlier is not clear, but that could be the reason why the family was in pain so long. Whatever it could be, everything looked fine now. Saving one’s own soul and the wellbeing of all, was the very meaning of his divine call and of the religious congregation. Thanks to God, the trip was successful. Fr. Chavara walked down the steps after blessing the family.

As a continuation of these incidents Fr. Elisha Porukara had noted down in the Chronicles like this: *“After the youngster from Perumalil was dismissed from the caretaker position at the monastery he became seriously ill and the family was not in talking terms with the inmates of the monastery. Fr. Prior on his way to Alapuzha went to their home and met them. Once realising the truth behind the misunderstanding, they*

asked for forgiveness and patched things up. Their son who was seriously ill was healed miraculously.”
(Mannanam Chronicles 91-111).



CHAVARA PREPARES CLARA PUTHENANGADY FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE

He humbled himself and became obedient to
the point of death even death on a cross.

Philippians 2.8

*O Cross, Beloved, open your arms wide.
And in your loving embrace quickly close me
Let me present before my Father Beloved
The sons of men, the loved ones of the world.*

*From atop your altars let me offer
Myself as a gift of love and reparation
O how long have I been waiting in love
With zeal have I tarried, oh, how long*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam VIII: 13-20

CHAPTER-22

SERIES OF TRIALS IN STARTING THE CONVENT

The convent in Koonammav was the result of the total transformation of St. Chavara as he went through trial by fire. Here St. Chavara realised that in the secret ways of God, suffering was the most crucial part.

The disastrous effects of the schism of Roccas finally got settled down. The process of converting *Puthenpalli* convent in to seminary was going on. The construction works of monasteries which were stalled during the time of schism restarted, and more members were joining the novitiate at *Koonammav*. The difficulties in establishing the administrative systems of the *Padroado* and the *Propaganda* had been sorted out. Everyone was allowed to continue with the administrative system of their choice.

In general, there was a calm atmosphere. Fr. Chavara turned his attention and interest back again to establishing the convent. In the interest of both the Bishop of *Varappuzha* and his delegate Leopold missionary, the residence of Fr. Chavara as the Prior of the congregation as well as the Vicar General of the Syrian Catholics was shifted from *Mannanam* to *Koonammav* in 1864. The monastery at *Koonammav*

continued being the novitiate of the congregation. Fr. Leopold was the Novice Master and his spiritual father. The unfulfilled wish in Fr. Chavara's mind to establish a convent for women came back again. He understood that some of the women were interested in living a spiritual life. He mentioned to Fr. Leopold the earlier efforts taken in this matter. At this time some favourable situation came up. Fr. Leopold also learned about some women who wanted to lead a religious life. It was after exchanging their knowledge in this matter that for the third time the process for establishing a convent for nuns started again. The desire Fr. Chavara had which was hitting the rock until then started looking promising. It was the right time to fulfil the wish. Fr. Leopold discussed with Fr. Chavara the case of a Latin Catholic widow who used to visit him for confession, Vaippisseri Eliswa and her daughter Anna. Fr. Chavara was also aware of another widow from *Vaikom*, Puthenangadi Eliswa, wishing to lead a spiritual life.

They came to the decision to start a convent with these women as the first members. But now they needed land and building. Anna had half of her father's family property as her share. Having consulted with her family, they came to know that the place had a lot of liabilities attached to it. If they paid off the liabilities of the land, they could use it for building the convent. Some of the family members raised some objections but none was serious enough. With the help of donations from many, the liabilities of Anna's property were paid off. Now they had to build a small house. Someone had given an amount to Chavara towards paying off his

religious obligation to God; he also donated Rs.10. Somehow Fr. Chavara managed to add another Rs.8 to that, making a total of Rs.18. With that Rs.18 in hand, they made a small bamboo house with three rooms. They also fixed the date for the official entrance to the convent; it was February 13th 1866. They managed to arrange temporary rooms for the first three inmates.

Fr. Leopold had already met the widow Eliswa and her daughter Anna directly and prepared them to join the convent. As Fr. Leopold was particular about meeting them all personally before they could join the convent, Fr. Chavara let Eliswa know about this in advance. She came from *Puthanangadi, Vaikam*, with her sleeping mat, and a box containing other things necessary and reached *Koonammav* on 11th itself along with her uncle Ittup and the Vicar of *Vaikam Church*.

When things had come this far, Fr. Leopold recommended another member: she was the sister of Vaippisseri Eliswa, with the name Theresa. On 12th Fr. Leopold met Theresa. He heard her confessions along with Elisaw and Anna. Even though he had met already Eliswa from *Puthananagadi*, he did not let her join the convent on 13th. He suggested one more meeting with her before that. This incident caused Fr. Chavara immense pain. She had come prepared with a lot of hope. She had overcome all the objections from her family and came with a strong determination. Since she was under the impression that according to the invitation of Fr. Chavara she was supposed to enter the convent officially on 13th, she came prepared to stay.

Not only that, the parish priest from *Vaikom* had accompanied her along with her uncle. Fr. Chavara didn't know what explanation he could possibly give to all these people. She came early on 11th and was staying in a house outside only because she was told to have a direct meeting with Fr. Leopold before she could enter the convent.

Theresa also had come for the first time only on 12th but after her first meeting with Fr. Leopold, she was allowed to join the convent on 12th itself. If Eliswa also was accepted all of a sudden, where could they find a room for her? Was it possible to make one more room in such a short notice? Still Fr. Chavara was able to solve the problem without much confusion. But Chavara could not understand why Eliswa Puthenangadi was denied her entry on the 13th. Leopold had come to Kerala by the end of 1859, as a sub-deacon. He stayed at *Koonammav* monastery and was taught Malayalam by Fr. Chavara's own students. Next year when Leopold was given diaconate and the priestly ordination, Fr. Chavara was also present there. Fr. Leopold was younger to him by 32 years. As a founding member of the congregation and as the one who had selected many men to his community, was he not capable of recognising a divine call? It had been proved during the times of the Roccas schism that the people indeed accepted his words and evaluations. Yet, someone like him was being belittled here as a person not capable of selecting a candidate.

Hundreds of such thoughts might have flashed through Fr. Chavara's mind. He contained all his mental stress in a few words in the Chronicles. He wrote: *"All this caused a lot of pain and sorrow."* Those words expressed Fr. Chavara's control over his inner feelings. He gave prime importance to obedience towards the authorities. Only saints have the ability to suppress sorrows like these and get over the difficulties faster.

The hours that followed gave a different kind of ecstasy and satisfaction in the life of Fr. Chavara. He might have asked forgiveness of Eliswa Puthanangadi and her family and asked them to wait for one more day. After making them feel comfortable he turned his attention fully towards the preparations for the convent entrance ceremony which would take place next day.

The small convent was made of bamboo. The everyday things needed for a home were not ready yet. Fr. Chavara quickly walked over to the monastery and sought the help of the priests and brothers there to collect all the necessary things for the convent. They started collecting the items one by one, waking bell of the Novitiate, lanterns, holy pictures, wooden crosses, vessels for keeping holy water, cups, plates, spoons, carp, knife, water jug, hammer, nails, rosary beads for making rosaries, metal wire, scissors, needles, thread... They collected everything that was needed. They also collected materials for writing: ink, ink bottle, feather, pens and paper and also bed, sleeping mat, sheet, small table, bench for each room.

As planned, on 1866 February 13th morning, after prayer at the monastery church, Eliswa, Anna and Theresa stood there waiting, having done all the preparations. When it was time, they were led towards the convent through a new path made just for the convent. They stood in order in the prayer room. Fr. Leopold came and stood in front of them wearing his official vestment, surplice and stole. He gave them their temporary official religious habit and a small scapular. Then Fr. Chavara sang hymns in Syriac and Fr. Leopold sang in Latin. Fr. Chavara had forgotten all the recent miseries and felt immensely happy. They witnessed the formation of an indigenous religious congregation of nuns, first time in Kerala, under his leadership. He praised the Lord for letting him see the completion of his long-cherished wish.

Fr. Chavara had to wait even more. Next day on 14th Fr. Leopold invited Eliswa Puthanangadi and heard her confession and also had an interview with her. Afterwards there was no response from him until 4pm and Fr. Chavara wondered what could possibly come out of the missionary's mind. At 4pm Fr. Leopold and Fr. Chavara went to the convent and enquired about their wellbeing. He asked them if they would be fine with having one more member joining the convent. Fr. Chavara did not understand the need or meaning of this kind of behaviour. Then Fr. Chavara was asked to call Eliswa, she came in and kneeled in front of Fr. Leopold. He told her: *"If you are willing to stay here ministering others until your death, then humbly request the Mother to accept you as a servant on your knees."*

Fr. Chavara understood the reason behind Fr. Leopold's intention of degrading her and making her a second-class member in the convent. At least from 1829 he had seen and experienced personally the efforts made by the European missionaries to establish their supremacy and power over the Indians. Anyway, Eliswa was made a member of the convent by giving the habit and a scapular and 'Clara' was the new name given to her. When all these had taken place Fr. Chavara forgot everything else. With the thought that Christ was the master of his life and all the glory should go only to Him, Fr. Chavara managed to overcome all the difficulties and sorrows he had experienced. (Chronicles 126-129, 231-241).



ONE OF THE SOURCES OF FUND FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CONVENT AS PIDIYARI

The Jews look for signs and wonders, the Greeks for wisdom; whilst our preaching is Christ nailed to the cross- a stumbling block to Jews and stupidity to gentiles; but to those who are called, Jews and gentiles alike, this Christ is the power and wisdom of God.

1 Corinthians 22-24

*Constantly she held in mind
The passion and suff'ring of her son
His agony, pillar and scourge
And the sharp crown of thorns*

*The mother not alone remembered
But felt at heart the intense pain
On the cross, he suffered; indeed,
No cross, no salvation!*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XI: 57-64

CHAPTER-23

FUND RAISING EFFORTS AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NEW CONVENT

St. Chavara's sufferings found meaning when he was able to admit the first members in a new and strong building under the protection of the Immaculate Mother of Carmel.

The convent started at *Koonammav* was the result of the prayer for a long time hopefully waiting, and suffering. Even though the convent was made of bamboo and coconut leaves; Fr. Chavara felt great happiness that he was finally able to start it. Fr. Chavara along with Fr. Leopold kept on providing all the necessary training to the first four members of the convent, Eliswa, Anna, Theresa and Clara; in their spiritual and material matters. The aim of this congregation was to lead young girls in the path of spiritual life and help them get educated and bring them to the mainstream of the society.

It was hard to find a suitable person to teach them handiworks. After searching for some time at last they found an elderly woman from *Anchutheng* near *Thiruvananthapuram*, who knew enough to teach the inmates. The youngest among the nuns, Anna, the

daughter of Mother Eliswa, turned out to be a quick learner which made Fr. Chavara very happy.

The convent building was a temporary arrangement made of raw coconut wood and areca nut palm tree. As anytime it could be destroyed by the attacks of termites, something was needed to be done soon, especially so as the inmates were all women. But before getting anything done, three questions needed answers. The bamboo convent had been established on the property that Sister Anna had got as her family's inheritance and it was far from the monastery church. Therefore, it was necessary to find a place closer to the church. Since the convent was the first of its kind in Kerala, it should have enough space and facilities for the sisters to stand on their own from the beginning. So, money had to be raised to buy land and construct a proper and stronger building. Problems like these were many.

Fr. Chavara's mind faltered when he thought about the expenses, he thought if they were able to get reasonable amount of money all the issues would be solved. He thought about different solutions. He prayed in the presence of God. He asked the sisters and inmates of the convent to pray. At this time Fr. Ghevarghese Thoppil, tried to evaluate the trial that had turned out a success in *Pulinkunnu*, '*Pidiyari Scheme*', an experiment by every family of reserving a handful of rice every day in a pot. They made a plan for this scheme, and appointed agents for collection. The plan was like this, give a bowl to each home with a sticker on it with

this writing, "Collection for Infant Jesus, Infant Jesus kindly bless us." Each time a mother takes out rice to cook, she would deposit a handful of rice in that bowl. Fr. Chavara printed beautifully from the *Mannanam* press the sticker to be pasted on the '*Pidiyari bowl*' and those bowls were distributed to each home. The responsibility of depositing rice this way was given to the mother of the house. The parishioners were divided in to separate wards and were given the responsibility to different individuals to collect '*Pidiyari*'. As little drops of water make the mighty ocean, it became a source for fundraising. But Fr. Chavara knew this would not bring the required money immediately.

He decided first to buy land for the convent. If a piece of property from the monastery was attached to two pieces from the nearby owner, things would be manageable. Letting Fr. Leopold lead from the front, Fr. Chavara got his plan executed. He had to arrange accommodation for those who had given up their land. Money was borrowed from the monastery and all necessary things were done.

To solve the next problem, they had to find money. The bamboo convent had been started with only Rs.18 in hand but to build a strong building with necessary facilities would need more money. For collecting money, Fr. Chavara and Fr. Leopold started visiting the churches in *Mannanam*, *Pulinkunnu*, *Chennamkari*, *Muttam*, *Arthungal* and *Edathua*. Other members of the monastery, Fr. Thomma, Fr. Scaria, Fr. Ephrem, Fr. Chandy and Fr. Jacob Kanat all went to

different places. In the first trip itself they were able to collect Rs.2200.

They started work on a one-story building on Saturday, June 22nd 1866. The first day itself they levelled the land and finished up to the basement level by laying about 5000 stones. But the money they had collected was over soon. Work had to be halted. Those were the days of the eight-day fasting, preparations of the feast of the Holy Mother's birth, and everyone was in prayer. After September 8th, they went out for collecting money again. It was the experience of Fr. Chavara that whenever he had spread the net in the name of the Mother, he never had to pull that in empty. Priests went to different churches with letters requesting for money. Fr. Chavara and Fr. Leopold also did not sit idle. Everyone collected more than they expected. They had high hopes now. Fr. Chavara and Fr. Leopold sat together and discussed the future, they needed a plan for the future. Members would definitely increase and it's not possible to keep on building according to the need. The building should be made foreseeing the requirements of the future. They fixed the basement for a two-story building. They decided to make large halls for boarding house and school. Once the decision was made works progressed fast. Again, they found themselves short of money. They were short of Rs.200 for an emergency work. Fr. Gheverghese Thoppil who was an expert in fundraising was sent out with the task. He asked several people and all of them generously donated. Back in the monastery he counted the money and found that he had got more than Rs.400

instead of the required amount Rs.200. He let Fr. Chavara know that since they got more than what they wanted the excess amount should be returned to those good people, as they always helped them in times of need.

Fr. Thoppil kept aside Rs.200. He sat down and went through the receipts to find out how many people had given him money. Then according to the amount each one had given he put aside the money that had to be returned. In the morning he went to each of those houses and told them, since the money collected was more than needed the balance amount was being returned. He said farewell to them saying, if needed he would come back again. Then he quickly reached the monastery and gave the money to Fr. Leopold and explained to him what had happened and he congratulated him. Fr. Chavara felt proud of his disciple and thanked God.

Once they started the work of the convent Fr. Chavara was only thinking of finishing it as soon as possible. Earlier, he had gone to several churches in the *Malayatoor* area for collecting money. He had been suffering from rheumatic fever from childhood. Whenever he had fever, his feet would get swollen, and if the fever lasted longer then the swollen feet would fester with pus oozing out. The pain at that time was unbearable. He went out for collecting money with his feet in that condition. It was the beginning of the rainy season. At *Cheranellur* his fever got worse and he lay down unconscious for two days in a church there.

Whatever possible treatments they could they did and when he regained consciousness, he was brought back to *Koonammav*. Sometimes he walked, sometimes they carried him and travelled in boat at times; somehow, he reached back at the monastery. His disciples who were preaching retreats at the nearby churches helped him reach there. When Fr. Chavara was unable to go out, other priests went out for collecting money. Whenever they extended their hands, they were given generously. The works progressed ahead of time, and the other facilities needed for the convent were also getting done faster. (*Mannanam* Chronicles volume- 111:131,141).

Everything was getting ready for the convent. They had separate ponds for drinking water and for bathing along with bathroom, toilet and facilities for washing clothes. They decided to buy every household item for the convent too. When they calculated the whole expenses came to around Rs.8000. Everything was donated by others. By 1867 March 25th all the works were complete. On 27th after the blessing ceremony, the sisters were brought from the bamboo convent and they entered the new convent amidst much celebration.

The missionary Fr. Leopold told the sisters with a tinge of jealousy that they started the works for the convent with just Rs.18 and now the cost exceeded Rs.7000. They had also got the best place through proper legal process. He told them: "*Even though you are not very rich you are blessed with abundance. Even*

the Whites, the Europeans or even we do not have what you have, the abundance of wellbeing and happiness.”

Fr. Chavara felt contented. This was the result of at least 38 years of hard work and desire. How beautiful was God’s care? He was thinking, the work for the convent at *Puthenpally* was almost done and they had built a huge compound wall too. They were ready to start the convent any time and that was when they had to abandon the idea and change the convent to a seminary. It had made Fr. Chavara very sad at that time but, now both the seminary and the convent were ready. The seminary had enough space for several people to study together and the two storied convents had 13 rooms with enough facilities for school and boarding house. The women who were destined to remain inside the kitchens became good enough to lead a spiritual life and they also acquired enough qualification to teach others. Fr. Chavara thought, “Are you good enough for anything, absolutely not, but God’s Will make anything possible, only His will.” Fr. Chavara felt fulfilled. (Chronicles 126-134, *Chronicles Koonammav* convent 44-54).



FR LEOPOLD OCD VOTED AGAINST THE MIND OF THE MEMBERS

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

John 12. 24

*Mother mine, supreme among women
The stain of Sin was never in you
When the Trivine God pronounced you His own
And loved you from your very birth*

*With resounding words, he joyed His Mother
And said, "You my lovely queen
Full pure you are, all bright
You alone, untainted by sin".*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XI: 213-220

CHAPTER-24

AN INSIGNIFICANT FIGHT FOR A NOBLE CAUSE

St. Chavara had designed his religious congregation in such a way as he combined prayer and activities complementing each other. Even though the over interference of the Carmelite First Order was a challenge to him, with a balanced mind he was able to maintain the unity of all members.

Fr. Chavara was moving on with his routine very happily and contently. No issues were there that called for immediate attention. All the institutions they had started were going very well. *Mannanam* monastery was taken care of very well by Fr. Kuriakose Porukara. The seminary was also going on in a well-disciplined manner. Carmel Monastery at *Vazhakkulam* was being run by Fr. Jacob Kanat efficiently. The issues that happened in *Elthuruth* in the name of schism were all settled down. Works of the monastery at *Pulinkunnu* were getting almost complete. The difference of opinions with Ittup, at *Ambazhakkad* was also over. In general, they were having a very peaceful time.

Since there were enough priests, it was not difficult to divide them into groups and send them out

for retreat preaching. Ever since the introduction of the Forty Hours Adoration more and more people were coming in the path of faith. The parish churches were divided into different zones and priests were appointed as deputies. Parishes, schools and renewal programmes were going on excellently. Regular family visits and pastoral care helped to reduce the conflicts inside the families considerably. Everything in Kerala Church was in general calm and peaceful.

The most important need in that period was to start a monastery for Latin Catholics. Those who had joined the seminary, especially the members of the OCD order were studying at *Koonammav* monastery. The missionary fathers took the initiative and Fr. Chavara also cooperated in starting a monastery at *Manjummal* for the Latin Carmelites. With separate monasteries for Latin and Syrian religious people they would have more freedom and less conflicts.

Another unfulfilled wish had been a convent for women; Fr. Chavara also succeeded in making that wish come true. The convent for nuns that started in a small bamboo building now had a strong two storied building. They were also running everything well.

In general, the atmosphere was almost peaceful for Fr. Chavara. So, he turned his attention more into the liturgical renewal. There were few things he thought that required urgent attention. The canonical prayers for priests had to be printed for priests with the permission from Rome. A calendar for the liturgical year got printed adhering to the Syrian traditions. Rules for

liturgical practices needed to be prepared. Office for the deceased had to be prepared. There was no solemn sung Mass celebrated as they did not have hymns for that. Fr. Chavara got himself busy with all these activities.

At this time a small issue popped up. An uncle of Fr. Scaria Ephrem was in his final days. Fr. Scaria wanted to visit him. Being a member of the religious community, he had to get permission from the authorities. He approached Fr. Chavara and explained to him the matter. Visiting the sick was considered a holy act. Fr. Chavara did not have any objections. Still, since the missionary Delegate was with them, he thought it was proper to get his permission too and sent Fr. Scaria over to him. Soon after he returned with a long face. He was told that religious people visiting their relatives did not suit their religious spirituality. When he heard this Fr. Chavara felt sad. He went to Fr. Leopold to discuss things directly. Fr. Leopold stood his ground arguing that there was no such practice in the Carmelite tradition. Fr. Chavara did not yield. He said when priests went out for pastoral duties and retreat preaching, they used to stay sometimes for more than six months away from the monastery and they used to have the practice of house visit from the beginning. He also gave an example. After Fr. Kuriakose Porukara became a member of the community he was sent to visit his aging and sick mother on and off and he used to stay at home for a few days.

Fr. Leopold reminded him of another incident. It was because of the fact that inmates of the monastery were not supposed to get involved in outside matters that he himself had instructed to sell off most of the land in *Kariyil* near *Mannanam*. He took the stand that they just had to accommodate the spirit of the Carmelite tradition since they were now the TOCD members.

When Fr. Leopold revived the old painful memories Fr. Chavara decided not to continue with his arguments, instead he suggested to go for voting so that all the inmates of the monastery also will have their say in this matter as they also had a responsibility. Fr. Leopold nodded in agreement. All the priests were gathered together. Fr. Leopold who was also the delegate explained the matter in detail. He shared the need of Fr. Scaria and then went on to explain how they had to safeguard the congregation's spirit to the extent of telling them about the various aspects of the traditions of the Carmelite Order.

In the end they decided to vote. White colour token meant 'Yes' to Fr. Scaria's wish and black colour token meant 'No'. Each one was supposed to choose the token of his preference secretly. Fr. Leopold who was the delegate Superior decided to cast his vote first. He took a black token, while everyone was watching and dropped it into a vessel with a lid. Everyone recognised his wish. Then Fr. Chavara dropped a white token in the similar way so that everyone could see his preference too. After that the rest of them did the same. When it was over the tokens were counted, all of them were

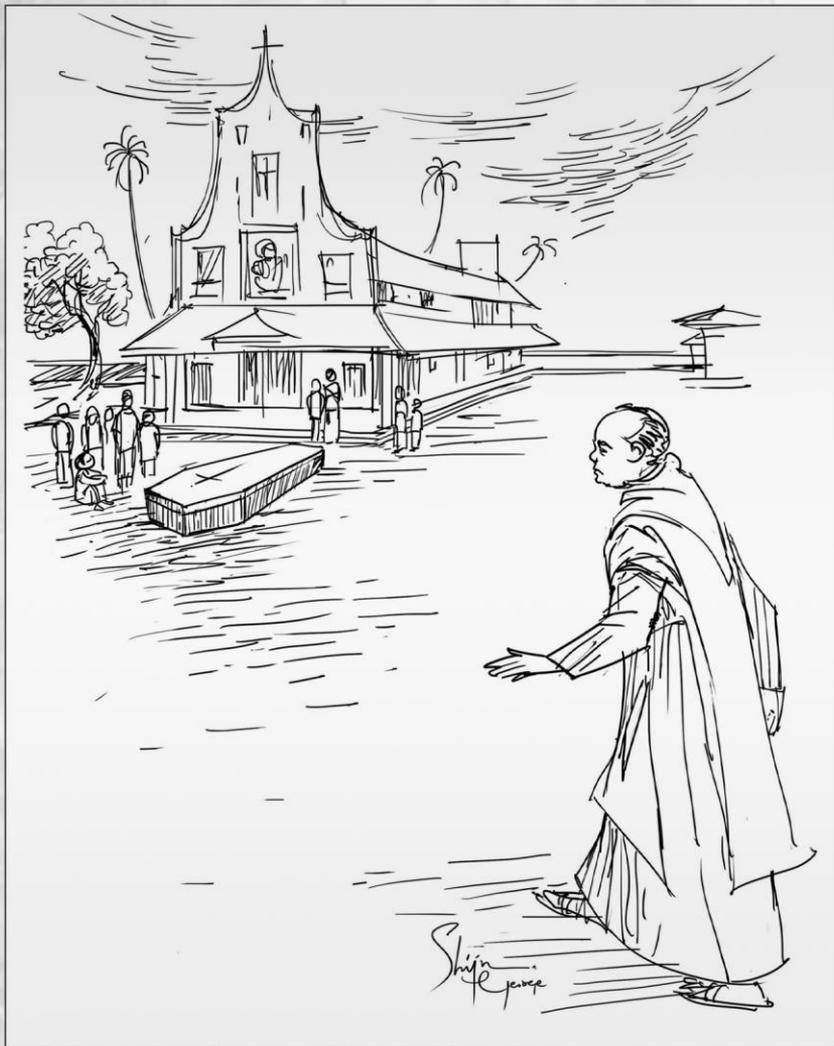
white except for one. In short it was decided that the members of the monastery could indeed visit the sick at their relatives' homes too. (*Parappuram*).

It was easy to guess the tension of the situation at the time. Even though everything happened to his desire Fr. Chavara was hurt by the whole incident- a pain which he could not hide or contain within himself. For the first time he acted against the authority. It was a big shock to Fr. Leopold also, as it was a public insult to him. Fr. Chavara tried to find justification for his action and other priests also gave him their own justifications for their action. It was to continue a noble tradition of the community, still Fr. Chavara asked Fr. Leopold for his pardon for causing him pain.

They shared their thoughts among them. The spirit of the Carmelite First Order was to avoid outside activities and lead a contemplative life. But from the beginning Chavara's community followed a spirit that had given equal importance to both prayer and activities. They lived and acted according to that tradition. After 1860, they were made the Third Order of Carmelites in India by the Carmelite First Order. The CMI congregation was established to act according to the existing needs of the Holy Church as an active congregation.

Fr. Chavara's distress in showing his objection to Fr. Leopold gradually got reduced. Fr. Chavara foresaw the various requirements of that period especially for renewing and improving the society and for this they needed a lifestyle different from being enclosed inside a

monastery. After this incident his own disciples encouraged him to get involved more actively in different areas of the Church in Kerala. At the same time, he did not fail in his relationship or responsibilities with Fr. Leopold. In fact history proved that there was a loving relationship between them which grew stronger day by day.



END OF A DISPUTE BY THE INTERVENTION OF ST. CHAVARA

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow.

Luke 14. 26,27

*Behold the hand-maid of the Lord
Be it done as he wills
Let us thank Him who ever does well
Let us together thank and bless Him*

*For't is meet and just to extole Him
And for that your help, I need!
At these words, all Heaven in Unison
Offered Him praise with the queen.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XI: 281-288

CHAPTER-25

THOUGH THE BODY WEAK THE SPIRIT WAS READY

St. Chavara had suffered physically and mentally when he was working for the spiritual and material progress of the society. He had suffered in the same way when he was working hard for the unity of the Churches.

The biographers of Fr. Chavara during the 20th and 21st centuries, have neglected an important aspect of his life: the agonies he went through in his life. Fr. Chavara never let others see his mental or physical sufferings; he did this through extreme self-control, and he never complained to anyone. This could be the reason behind that. The biographers who had known him personally and had witnessed the incidents of sufferings and his acts of mercy had written about them. But they were all scattered here and there, and mostly remained unnoticed. If the incidents in his life had been arranged in order, like the incidents of his illness, the treatments he had taken and their failures and success and the levels of sufferings he had gone through during those moments, it would have revealed the holiness of his life and that he was a person who had gone through extensive sufferings. Those incidents alone would have had enough content in themselves to make a book.

There is no doubt that this would have opened a path for new discussions and studies on those lesser-known facts of his sufferings.

In Fr. Chavara's life he had a companion all through his life from childhood to his last day at the age of 66: rheumatic fever. When his parents had shown indifference to send Fr. Chavara to the seminary with Thomas Malpan at the age of 11, it was not just because of their difficulty in parting with their young child. Historians have noted that they were worried also about his health. They have said that he was suffering from rheumatic fever from a very young age. They also have hinted at his having mild filaria too. Considering the climate and the geographical condition of *Kuttanad*, this was very much possible. The reason for the on and off attacks of rheumatic fever also was due to this.

Most of the time when Fr. Chavara got rheumatic fever, it stayed for a long time, and in those days, he also used to have swollen legs. If the fever stayed longer, the swelling would burst with pus oozing out. He had to endure excruciating pain during those days. The Chronicles written by him give us proof of his several trips to hundreds of places between *Trichur* which then belonged to the *Cochin* area, and *Trivandrum*, by boat, by walking or by cart. From the time of his seminary days in 1828, he had started travelling. The Chronicles say that he used to travel even when he was suffering from rheumatic fever. It's common knowledge that travelling could make fever get worse.

When he moved among the people, he recognised their various needs. Realising their needs, he hastened his efforts in finding solutions for those issues. He went around giving the real picture of what was happening at the time of Roccas schism, established schools and presses, provided poverty ridden Dalits with clothes, food and education facilities, started a House of Charity for destitute, visited many places for fundraising when the construction for convent had started, found suitable places for monasteries and bought the plots, started catechumenates for the education of the poor and the Dalits... These activities required him to walk a lot; moreover, on certain occasions when his presence was needed, he increased the speed of his walk and such occasions were many. This mostly resulted in getting fever and then swelling on leg, followed by the painful oozing with puss. Walking hurriedly in the hot sun often triggered the attack of rheumatic fever.

Fr. Chavara had to take huge efforts to send Bishop Roccas back to Persia. One after another all the churches came back after leaving the schism and the atmosphere became in general, very calm. Once, Fr. Chavara was at *Muttuchira* as they had invited him to participate in the festival of *Combriya*. A few important people from *Kadathuruthy* like *Kokki Vaidyar* and his relatives, who were in favour of Roccas schism, and their opposing group *Theruvuparambanmar*, both went at the same time to celebrate the festival at the old church. At that time a dead body was brought there for funeral ceremonies. The quarrelling people did not allow them to conduct the funeral services; so, they

complained to the police. This incident was brought to the attention of Fr. Chavara. In the scorching noon sun, he had to run to *Kadathuruthy*, around 4 to 5 kilometres away, carrying the burden of mental and physical agony as well as the rheumatic fever he was suffering from. The Chronicles reveals the seriousness of that issue: *“They were bent on making it a police case and started fighting to make it happen, hence our Prior had to run in the hot mid-day all the way to Kadathuruthy”*. (Chronicles 115-116).

Another incident that made Fr. Chavara run around intensely was when the works of the convent in *Koonammav had* started under his leadership. For raising fund for this purpose, he went around all the churches in and around *Malayattur* in the beginning of the rainy season in 1867, when he was very sick. This incident has been narrated in detail in the Chronicles. After visiting many churches when he finally reached *Cheranallur* church, fever and swelling on leg became severe. He was lying unconscious for two days inside the church. Fr. Thattasseril and others who were giving retreats in the nearby church, came to help him. They all stood worried wondering what to do to save him and tried to give him different medicines. Fortunately, he regained consciousness after two days and was taken back to *Koonammav*. Since details of that trip are not found we can only imagine. Upon reaching *Koonammav* the severity of fever caused the swelling burst out and it started oozing. Probably to spare him from this excruciating pain, God had made him unconscious for two days inside the church. In the remaining parts of the

Chronicles, it'd been written that once he started feeling slightly better, his attention again turned back to the ongoing works at the convent. For the time being he continued his work by sending members of the monastery to those priests who were his disciples for fundraising. (*Mannanam* Chronicles volume- 111,131-140).

We can point out one more incident that clearly shows the clarity of St. Chavara's intentions and the importance he gave in considering others. It's the story of his last long journey he made to *Mutholy* to find a suitable place and to take the final decision to build a new monastery there. It also talks about his efforts in solving the issues of *Anakkallu* church (*Bharananganam*). Since there is a detailed description of the journey in the previous chapter that part is omitted here. The distance from the river *Meenachil* to the hill was about 300ft. It still remains a mystery how someone with rheumatism could climb all the way up the hill that too through a temporarily cleared path. He had defeated physical pain and sufferings through self-control. He only let others carry him down the *Mutholy* hill was because of his hesitancy in making others worry about him. He was so sick that he almost met with death face to face at that time. He was feeling sad thinking about the trouble he was giving to others. (*Mutholy* Monastery Chronicles, Chavara Chronicles 1-159).

After returning from *Mutholy* to *Koonammav* he became bedridden. From the sources we know that

after this the only time he walked was to the convent. From the beginning of October in 1869, he used to vomit and had severe headache often. Whenever he got relief from the pain, he used to help the nuns by sending short notes of instructions and suggestions to help them manage their spiritual and community life. He used to let them know about his health conditions too this way. Through this the sisters came to know about his sickness and about his inability to visit them in person. Later on, it was through these little notes that the historians came to know about his health conditions.

Once he wrote: *“Rest of my days might be spent in giving too much of trouble to others. Stench from the oozing wound in leg and my inability to walk is giving others so much difficulty.”* Another time he noted down: *“From 4am there was dizziness and vomiting. Will let you know about my condition when God will allow me to.”* Another note was this: *“After walking about four to eight feet I felt dizzy and was suffering from severe gastric issues. I took a few ayurvedic tablets for that and by midnight I got some relief. I bid my final farewell to Christ yesterday as I felt everything was going to end.”*

Later on, the sister who was writing the Chronicles, wrote down like this: *“He had written several such notes. If going to talk about all of those it would be too long... From the month of October in 1870 he was suffering from dizziness, headache and migraine. Migraine and headache made him unable to face any kind of light and he was not able to read.”* At the height

of migraine, he felt like fire coming from his eyes, he tried to meditate with the images of the crown of thorns being fixed on the Holy Head of Christ. *“When I open my eyes, I can see angels flying around and if I look at others, I can see their faces shining like stars.”* These words show the heightened degree of his spirituality. (Chronicles of Convent volume- 11,6-8).

He tried to read and learn about the life of saints. When reading increased his pain in the eyes also increased. For about three months he had fully lost his eye sight and was not at all able to contain the excruciating pain. If he happened to look at the light, the pain, he had was indescribable. The different methods of treatments he underwent for eyes may not be understandable today. One of the methods was letting leeches bite his eyes in order to draw bad blood out, these leeches were grown in stagnant waters where cattle used to be bathed. When Fr. Jerard witnessed the horror of such treatment and the pain Fr. Chavara was undergoing, he stopped that crude method of treatment, though it had yielded some results.

As part of another treatment his eyes were covered with specially made ayurvedic medicine; but this caused burns around his eyes and forehead and skin started peeling off from those areas. Even though those were hard times some significant results came out of it. Though it took some time for the pain to subside, through the burned parts some unwanted liquids got drained out and he was lucky he to get his eyesight restored. Credit must be given to Dr. Gedru who came

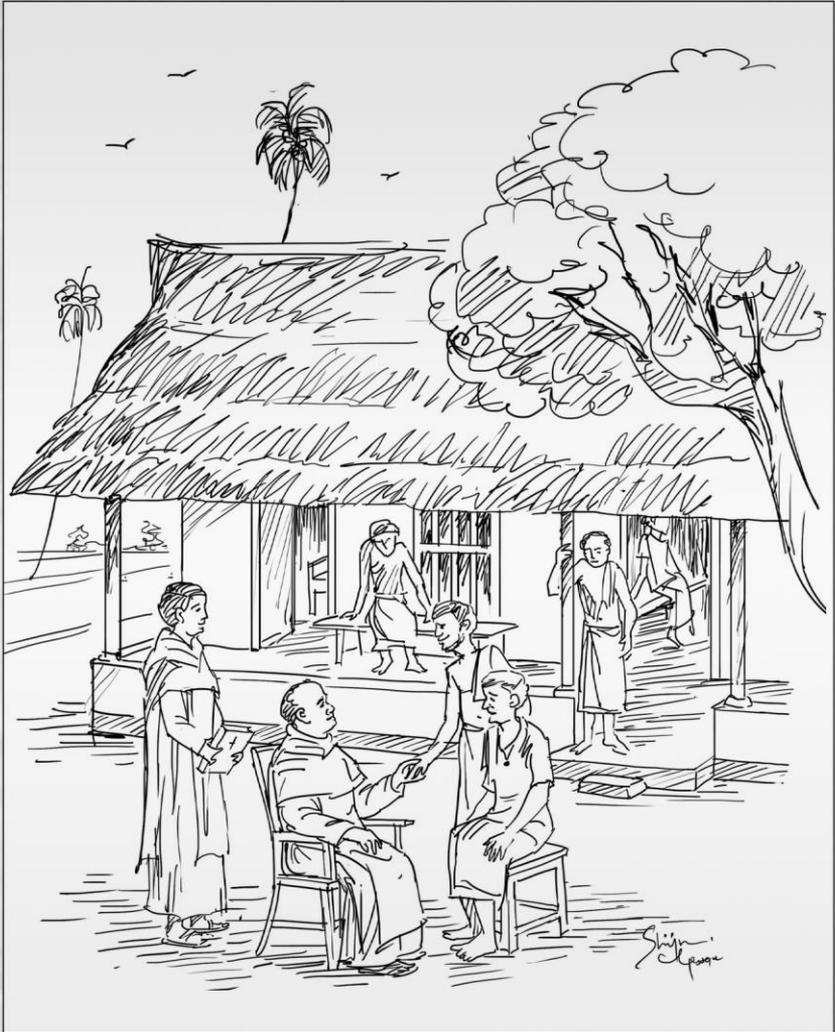
from *Ernakulam*. He rightfully deserved all the praises showered upon him for his efforts at this time. (Year of Death, Varkey Parappurath 1409-1420).

Fr. Chavara had severe rheumatism during his last days which affected him badly. Veins in his body used to crunch together making his limbs shrink. The pain caused by this pulling of veins was not humanly possible to measure. Most of the times he was in bed, and he had to jump up suddenly out of breath, again he would try to lie down. The agony he was having at that time will be described in another chapter. There was no limb of Fr. Chavara that was not affected; all had been affected by one or another illness.

A written notice was put up outside the door to stop those who used to come for getting permissions and to discuss earthly matters. But he always welcomed those who came to talk about spiritual matters. Direct witnesses had noted that, during those times; he never tried to let others know about his pain or complain about anything; in fact, those who visited him went back feeling more peaceful and happier. He fervently wished to be a saint, that was why he liked to read a lot of books on the lives of saints and also liked to listen to such stories. As he was unable to participate in community prayers, he participated in them from his room. As he had byhearted the hymns of the canonical prayers, he used to recite them loudly from his room. To get relief from the agonies he used to look at the Holy face of the crucified Lord and meditate on that.

(Leonard Parappuram, Chronicles of the Convent volume- 11,6-8).

Fr. Chavara wanted to participate in the physical and mental sufferings of Christ in order to save the souls in purgatory and for the conversion of sinners.



A HOME OF CHARITY FOR THE DOWNTRODDEN AND DESTITUATES

And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a
father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 6.27

*"Co-redemptrix of man on earth
I, of the holy Church, the Head
And you, its benign mistress who sealed
Her holiness by my Blood*

*" Of the Mother Church on earth
I, of the Holy Church the Head
Let me now bid fare well and go"
The mother in accents sweet replied.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XI: 397-404

CHAPTER-26

FROM THE MEMORIES OF DEATHS TO NEW RAYS OF HOPE

The memories of the happy death of Frs. Velyara, Nellissery, Kalappurackal and the sacristan of Muttuchira prompted St. Chavara to start the 'Home of Charity' for the destitute, beggars and the old and the sick.

Death is a little thief. Nobody knows when he would appear. At the same time death differentiates mortality and immortality. Death is the moment that decides the way towards either infinite blessings or infinite hell of miseries. Memories of death had touched Fr. Chavara's mind and thoughts very deeply. Memories of three deaths were in his mind like stagnant water. One was of a patient seriously ill with smallpox. Fr. Chavara overcame the objections raised by others and was able to go to him and prepare him for a happy death, and experienced watching death as it embraced him. Jacob Velyara was the second member to die of smallpox. Death caught of him quickly when he went to treat someone who had smallpox. He was one of the first members of *Mannanam* monastery, and Fr. Chavara watched him getting a blessed death, he was only 32 years old. The third member was significant as he was

one among the first who prepared to take his vow along with Fr. Chavara. Fr. Thomas Nellisseri had become paralysed and bed ridden for twelve years and one day while having food, he passed away with a smile on his lips. Fr. Mathai Kalapurackal was another victim of malaria but he had a happy end.

In each of these four experiences Fr. Chavara went through immense pain which was echoed through him for some time. From his religious congregation four of its first born were gone. They were supposed to become strong pillars of this congregation who were brought up and nurtured with so much care and interest. Their blessed death became an inspiration to many. One of them who passed away with smallpox made his family and those around him drowned in sorrow. He was a prey to the epidemic which had gripped the whole of *Kuttanad*. Fr. Chavara's memory of not being able to see his parents and brother for a last time before they vanished inside a mound of soil was an experience powerful enough to wound his memories.

Their life and death had created huge ripples in the life of Fr. Chavara. Nellisseri and Velyara were the inmates of the monastery. They had been taken care of very well and had passed away in peace. But what about the third member? What would have happened, if Fr. Chavara hadn't gone to him taking a huge risk? He took care of him and poured a few drops of water on his tongue and gave him blessings in the name of God, also gave him absolution from sin and anointed and blessed him before he passed away in peace. If it was not the

case, he would have been left to die in the midst of pain and rejection. Only God's grace changed things different. It was his memories of these sick people whom he saw them dying peacefully that encouraged St. Chavara to start a *Confraternity for a 'Happy Death'* and a *'Home of Charity'* at Kainakary in 1869.

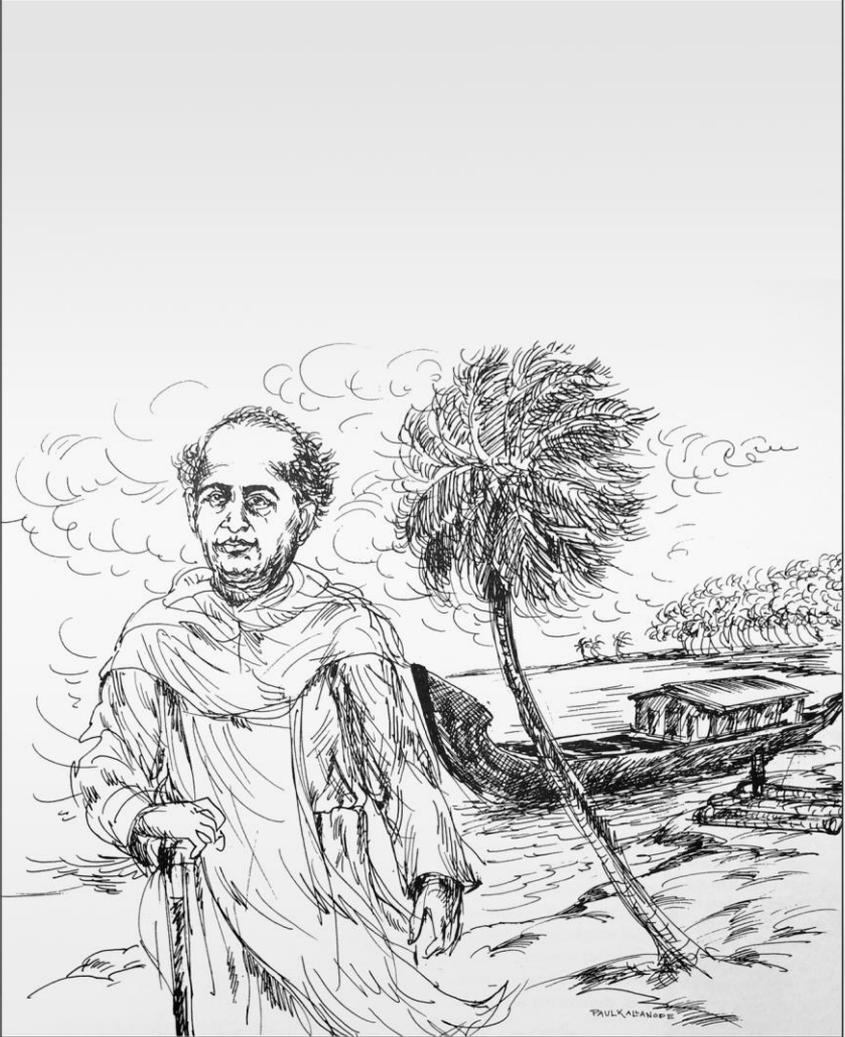
Man was created in the image of God; he should never be left to die unattended or without getting treatment. Nobody in this world should remain strangers; he shouldn't be left to die without being attended to. He may die only after receiving care and spiritual attention. Nobody should die experiencing sufferings, loneliness and helplessness. Fr. Chavara took a firm decision. The great master of experience taught the people and helped them to form a confraternity for good death. Thus, he started a voluntary organisation called *'Confraternity of St. Joseph for Happy Death'*. He made his family members and members of his parish in Kainakary to join this group. Their main responsibility was to form a separate centre, a home of charity to shelter the sick, old, destitute, and street beggars. St. Chavara told them, *"Build a small house near your chapel (at Kainakary), having at least two rooms enclosed with bamboo ply on both sides of the veranda and thatch its roof with coconut leaves supported by bamboo frames and call it a 'Dharmashala' (Poor Home) or 'Upavisahala' (Home of Charity). Let the destitute, sick, old or beggars from the street come and stay there and you take care of them. There is no doubt that it will remain as the first Home of Charity in the history of Kerala."* (Letters 162)

In 1869, they completed the task given by Fr. Chavara. They formed a group and, as he had suggested, planned for programmes for fundraising and gave the responsibilities to its members. Even though it was small and made of bamboo, nevertheless they made a home in *Kainakari*, the first charitable institution in the history of India, for the orphans, destitute, for people who are sick and for elderly people to come and live, the first of its kind of a systematic healthcare centre of the present day.

In order to convince his parishioners St. Chavara wrote a letter. Here are some excerpts from it: *“The help one receives at the end of one’s life time is very precious and rewarding. The act of helping the dying at the end of their life is also equally rewarding and pleasing to God. This is the biggest of all good deeds... If one embraces good death and reaches heaven through saving his soul by listening to someone else’s advice and encouragement then, by that very act the person who caused that transformation is also guaranteed saving his own soul... Look around and understand how much God likes us ministering the sick... Nursing the sick could be very difficult, unpleasant, detesting and meaningless before the world; but it is very precious in front of God. For many have been sanctified by serving the sick.”* (Letters 153-162).

The streams of God’s love come alive when you support the poor. Fr. Chavara was trying to make his life perfect by performing his duties all his life. Whenever he tried to start schools for Dalits, gave clothes and food

to those who were going to give up their studies due to lack of opportunities. For the untouchables and those who had been side-lined in the society, he was giving a chance to walk in the path of God's love, and was opening new opportunities for the poor. He wished to have the orphans, the outcasts or anyone born as human to have peace and calmness at least at the time of their death. He wished for everyone irrespective of being rich or poor, without the boundaries of caste or creed to come together in a vision of universal brotherhood. His followers listened to his suggestions of helping the unfortunate ones to die with dignity, and they were ready to extend their hands to help. When Fr. Chavara realised this, his happiness knew no bounds.



CHAVARA'S LAST JOURNEY FROM MUTHOLY TO KOONAMMAVU

And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a
father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1.14

*Can I, your slave, thank you enough
For this grace? Behold your hand-maid
For my brethren, the dwellers of the Earth
Plead for them yet, I pray!*

*That they may love you as you deserve
They, my brethren, human kind,
That they may know you as their God
And their gratitude express.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XI: 453-460

CHAPTER-27

THE END OF A JOURNEY AND THE BEGINNING OF YET ANOTHER...

For those who had placed St. Chavara in their heart, his words were the first and the last to solve all their problems. His painstaking last journey proved the reality that he was always willing to give up his life for doing good to others.

The last journey of Fr. Chavara was from *Koonammav* to *Mutholy* and back from *Mutholy* to *Koonammav*. There were two reasons for taking this trip. One was to select a suitable place near *Pala* for building another ashram. The other was to solve the issues among the parishioners of *Anakkallu* church.

Archbishop Bernardin had realised very well the adverse effects of Roccas schism. It was to solve this issue that he had appointed Fr. Chavara as Vicar General and also had written to Rome in 1861 to appoint him a coadjutor bishop to help him. He had personally witnessed the effective leadership of Fr. Chavara that helped an easy way out for Bishop Roccas to go back to Persia followed by the return of people and churches back to unity. He also realised the churches, priests and people who had resisted the temptation of schism and did not fall in it, lived around the monasteries. Seeing

how they were able to withstand the temptation, he decided to start more monasteries in different parts of Kerala.

Around that time a few people and priests came with a request that they wanted a monastery at *Pala*. But some of the people and priests in *Pala* were in favour of the *Padroado* administrative system. In the absence of complete cooperation in this matter, Arch bishop Bernardin did not take a decision immediately. Before long he passed away. Then a written petition with the signatures of 24 priests and 36 lay people was given to the new Archbishop Leonard Mellano. Their need was the same: they wanted a new monastery. Their request came with the willingness that they would find a suitable place for the monastery and would also bear the cost of building it. Meanwhile another incident happened. The priest and people at the parish at *Anakkallu* joined both the *Padroado* and *Propaganda* and the two groups were constantly fighting with each other. Nobody was willing to take charge of the issue at hand and lead a peaceful way to settle things. Hence, the fights increased day by day. At last, the people decided that Fr. Chavara from *Konammav* should come and hear them out; afterwards whatever decision he would take would be accepted by all. Fr. Philipose and Fr. Jerard took interest in this. Even though very tired, Fr. Chavara could not ignore this issue. He did not realise then that this would be the last of his long journeys. Bishop had left for Rome after giving him the responsibility to look after everything. He also had to look into the matters of the missionaries. He was

becoming weaker as days went by; rheumatic fever was getting stronger and he was also suffering from eye problems.

Fr. Chavara's health conditions were not favourable for a long journey. But he couldn't disappoint the people who were waiting for his decision; besides Bishop had asked him to find a suitable place for the monastery too. Hoping to do both things in one journey, he started early. He was accompanied on his way by missionary Fr. Jerard. They started off in a boat and halted at *Mannanam* to take rest. Afterwards they went to solve the issues at the parish at *Anakkallu*.

Today the church is known as *Bharananganam*; it was earlier known as *Anakkallu* church. It could be to recall its authentic historic name they are still retaining the huge statue of an elephant near the church. Today *Bharananganam* is known all over the world as the place of the tomb of St. Alphonsa.

All the members of the parish who were fighting with each other gathered in the church's courtyard when they heard about Fr. Chavara's arrival. The long travel and the already deteriorating health conditions had made Fr. Chavara exhausted; still he sat on the chair they had arranged for him in his usual demeanour.

People were ready to listen to him forgetting their differences with each other. More than the voices of objections they waited to listen to his response. By presenting the example of their love, respect and

happiness towards him, he tried to send them a message that conflicts wouldn't help in maintaining happiness. He gave them a message that since the Pope had withdrawn the *Padroado* system, it didn't seem good in continuing with that. He concluded his words: "*Just like the happiness you are sharing now, let the thought of unity make you happy in the other world too.*" These words shattered the disunity among them.

The memories of disunity inside the churches always made Fr. Chavara unhappy. Especially about the growing conflicts from those who had deviated from the common instructions of the Pope. Only a few churches like *Anakkallu* were still following the *Padroado* system. When they also came back to be united as one, Fr. Chavara felt immense happiness and he felt energetic forgetting his sickness. He was worried if he would be bed ridden when he came but when he returned, he was walking to the boat without any aid from others. He made a stopover at *Lalam* Church to take rest.

The next step was to respond to the petition given by the people of *Pala*. Fr. Chavara's state at that time was: even though his spirit was ever ready his body was getting weaker. Fr. Jerard and a few other priests along with the laity went to look for few locations around *Pala*. They returned and explained things in detail and got ready for yet another search; this time the destination was *Mutholy*. On November 6th 1869, they reached up to *Panthathala* by boat at around 10am. *Mutholy* hill was near *Meenachil* river. From the river shore the location was about 300 feet above.

When Fr. Chavara heard about the arrival of the palanquin of Taluk Revenue officer to carry him over to the hill, he felt hesitant. He had climbed even taller hills in *Mannanam* and *Vazhakkulam*, and he couldn't accept the thought of people carrying him. He maintained his stand that he was going to walk up the hill along with others. He overcame the pain in his legs and the poor health condition and started climbing the hill.

He walked through the temporarily cleared walkway and reached the hill and briefly took rest in a makeshift shelter. He walked around and observed the place. Feeling exhausted he came back to rest for a while again. This place belonged to *Mannur* family. He accepted the written documents from the family regarding their willingness to donate this land for starting a new monastery.

Even though he had a hard time travelling he was filled with the happiness of closing two very important matters. One more monastery was going to be born in the southern region. Those good people were ready to bear any hardships for a new monastery. They were fully aware of the effects of monasteries in other places; the interest they were showing was based on that. Fr. Chavara lying in an easy chair thought about *Mutholy*; it means pearls flowing from the springs; he wished for pearls of spirituality to flow from this hill. God had given the apt name for this hill in advance. "*Oh My God, Thank you! It was your wish that made all these priests and people take great interest in this and*

bring me here with a warm welcome,” he sighed with happiness.

On the one side he was extremely happy about the new monastery which was going to come soon, and on other side he felt so weak that he was not able even to get up from the chair. He felt he was tired because he refused to listen to those who had been waiting for him with a palanquin to carry him to the hill. He felt bad that in his present physical condition he would be causing more trouble to them. He would reach *Koonammav* also, he felt, both mentally and physically exhausted.

The people recognised his state of mind, his face also revealed his exhaustion. They humbly told him that descending this hill was harder than ascending. They asked him to let them carry him down to the river. Half-heartedly he agreed. They took this laborious work willingly as if performing something sacred. But Fr. Chavara was in great pain. He had displayed courage several times. He never let others know about his pain or hardships. Right now, he was completely exhausted and all he wanted was to reach *Koonammav*. He prayed zealously. Without bothering others much he wanted to reach home, maybe he was also thinking of reaching the heavenly abode.

It's not sure whether he realised, he was at the beginning of his last journey on earth. Others carried him to the shore. Until he reached *Koonammav* his thoughts wandered all over... They started from the trips with his playmates at *Kainakari* to the several trips to *Chennankari* church and the surrounding areas,

seminary at *Pallipuram*, at *Thangi* church at *Varappuzha*, in front of the altar at *Arthungal* church, several times climbing up and down the *Mannanam* hill, for the purpose of starting a monastery travelling around *Travancore* and *Cochin* areas, preaching against Bishop Roccas in all the Syrian churches, trips to console those who had small pox, ran all over for fundraising for the convent at *Koonammav*, delivering a eulogy at the funeral of Archbishop Bernardin, giving retreats, going for forty hours adoration, several trips to teach Dalits about the Christian faith... When he looked back many were the moments which had the touch of God's fingers, and he felt grateful for all those never-ending incidents. He believed he was able to do at least something for Jesus. When they reached the shore of *Koonammav* he had a sigh of relief. When lying in bed at the monastery, he felt relief came over him but, in his mind, he'd noted down that it would be his last journey. The journey ahead would not have human companions. Only angels and saints would accompany him in that journey. He decided it was time to reduce communication with humans and increase the communication with God. Preparation days before death seemed nearby.



CHAVARA WRITING HIS WILL AND TESTAMENT

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created in heaven and on earth, created through him and for him. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Colossians 1. 15

*So as to grant rare graces in love
The Church's Regime she took to herself
To praise His Holy name for aye
His will to do on High as well*

*This world shall not change until
All on earth proclaim your worth
The Truth that is 'you ' in the world
Hence, your mercy protect it, I pray*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XI: 477-484

CHAPTER-28

LAST LETTER BEFORE REACHING THE HORIZON

St. Chavara's love for the spiritual and apostolic growth of his religious congregation and his uncompromising devotion to the Holy Catholic Church are depicted in his Last Will and Testament.

When someone prepares his/her Last Will and Testament, it would include many important points that had touched his/her life. A few examples of these: he would be handing over to someone the responsibilities he was holding, entrust someone else on behalf of him to pay off his debts or talk things out, give instructions on what to do with the inheritance, entrust someone to finish off something he started but could not complete, revealing inner secrets, give corrections and encouragements, connecting with others so that the relations won't cease to exist once he was gone, give testimony that he did not have any revenge or hatred left in him, entrust someone to return the favours that he couldn't... The list could be longer.

The most important content in a Will and Testament is the handing over of certain responsibilities to an individual very close to him or to a group of individuals or to his family. This document reveals new

discoveries, it's also about taking up new responsibilities. The contents of such documents usually make those who are close to the person concerned very emotional or at times very inspirational. Sometimes it creates lot of respect and admiration towards the deceased and at times the exact opposite too.

Here are our reflections on Fr. Chavara's Last Will and Testament. This is an official document meant for the next generation to make new discoveries; it's also about taking over of lot of responsibilities in a continuing process. It reveals Fr. Chavara's awareness of his mission, anxiety and hope concerning the members of the congregation. Above all it reveals various emotions of his innocent personality and his intense thoughts regarding souls.

The religious congregation was going through the first stages of growth. In the first stage itself Fr. Chavara and the first members of the congregation were fully aware of their aim and the purpose and they had a clear stand too regarding this. They wanted to safeguard the tradition and spirit of the Apostolic Church in India. The goodness they noticed around them, through their internal and external eyes, they wanted to increase through organised activities. On the basis of this, members had already stepped into different fields of activities. Being attracted by their activities many had come to join the congregation. According to the requirements of the Church and the society they were increasing the number of ashrams and also were adding more and more rooms to

accommodate new members. On the one hand there have been a lot of positive thoughts, happiness and satisfaction. On the other hand, Fr. Chavara also recognised increase in obstacles, objections, difference of opinions and clashes of ego between the Carmelite missionaries and his followers. Both had their own justifications. The members were sad that their uniqueness, freedom and possibilities for activities were being controlled by the missionaries. They felt that they were being controlled by the *First Carmelite Order* and was also being led by their spirit. They also thought that they were not being accepted as equals of the missionaries and were being forced to implement their decisions. Fr. Chavara's agony increased and all he wanted was to bring both groups together and move ahead. He knew God's Will and our happiness would be complete only when there was mental unity and peace. At the same time both sides needed to be restrained too.

Fr. Chavara felt that his days were numbered. He stopped travelling and gave the responsibility to those who were healthy enough to travel. Signs of illness also popped up. His reduced eye vision and pain were becoming more severe. His inner voice was telling him that there won't be much time left. He was the leader of an extended family which was novel, special, different and needed unification and also was growing bigger. It was time to let his last wish known and to give necessary instructions to the members. If he failed to give that on time then his responsibility as the leader would go in vain.

Fr. Chavara took the quill, ink bottle and paper. First in the list was the need to reduce the difference of opinions between the members and the missionaries. Their thoughts were justifiable, there was no doubt about that but if they made the missionaries upset at a time when Fr. Chavara was no more, the decisions they take could affect the very existence of this congregation. When Fr. Chavara started writing his Will and Testament, his joy was mixed with pain. He wanted to pacify the members and cool down their negative feelings against the missionaries. Fr. Chavara's narration of this incident in his own words: *"You all know how we started this: it was in the name of our Holy Mother that we started this congregation. It was only through the providence of God that Mother of Carmel came into our midst and you have to see the interferences of missionaries only in this way. Their presence had helped us grow a lot. Move ahead by respecting and accepting them."* This was also a reminder to members that in front of the power of the missionaries they were nothing. He also tried to argue that what they'd designed and what the others had given them both were the same, just like the Immaculate Mother is the Mother of Carmel.

Secondly Fr. Chavara's attention turned to the unity and strength of the congregation. The deepest relation in this world is between a mother and her children. His community members should be like siblings born of the same mother. Abundance of institutions or distance should not affect the loving relationship among members. He even instructed the

members that they should be a step ahead in helping one another and in enquiring about each other's wellbeing. He realised that lack of obedience towards the authority and co-operation would affect the relations inside a community. Addressing the members as '*Brethren*', (*Koodappirappukal*) children of the same mother, he made his last wish intense.

Presenting the first Christian community as the model he asked them to be a single unit in spirit through fellowship, and be together in the community as a single family and work intensely for the wellbeing of the public and for the cause of saving souls.

He believed that Lord Almighty had chosen them to try hard for the spiritual renewal of Christians and for saving souls. He was anxiously interested in accepting more members who were committed to the cause and to start new ashrams wherever needed for doing better service. His life's happiness was found in this.

Another wish in Fr. Chavara's life was to establish convents for women and bring them up as leaders. He felt fulfilled seeing everything progressing as he had wished. He had one more thing needed to be done. Women were coming out of kitchen into the public fields in Kerala for the first time, so they would need spiritual help and support for their future planning. Members of the monastery should help them out as if they were siblings. But everyone need not be involved but only a few who would be designated should do the job.

Two noble thoughts in Fr. Chavara's mind were the idea of loving one's enemy and to remain thankful always. There were many who had given troubles in his mission. Human beings are generally vengeful in nature. He wondered whether after his death his followers might turn vengeful. He had written down in his Testament that forgiving the enemy was not enough but needed to do good to his family members as well. He also noted down the names of those who could be included in the list.

In a period of forty years, eight monasteries came into existence. It's possible that the history of its beginning would be lost to the generation to come. The congregation had developed with significant helps from many; forgetting them would be ungrateful. He noted down the names of those who should be included in this category. He reminded each monastery to keep alive the memories of those related to them and also to be thankful always. Fr. Chavara always remembered the mercy of God for giving him a human life when he did not even deserve the life of a worm. He could never forget those who had helped him. He said that those foreign missionaries had come to India leaving behind their home and their comforts to help the Indian church grow. Hence, he suggested not to give too much importance to the unpleasant experiences from them.

Fr. Chavara believed that the best way to rectify the community was by taking the blame upon himself. He had written a document and had given it to Bishop Sthabilini saying that the purpose of establishing the congregation was solely for the stability and goodness

of the country as well as the whole world. Members of the congregation should also work intensely. Their actions should not lack anything. He had noted like this, *“When our congregation was formed, I was the first to take the religious profession and I became the first Prior. I was responsible to follow the constitution as per the rules but I was not able to set a good example in doing that. I request you all not to take into consideration my bad example but try to correct the flaws that came through me. Please work zealously for attaining the goals of the congregation and also pray for me as I’m a weak human.”* Fr. Chavara ended his Testament with this request. This loving advice of the chieftain of the big family based on the laws of Christ was an inspiration to all.

This Testament was prepared before August 1870; soon after he became seriously ill. He arranged those notes he had written in order and kept them inside a sealed envelope. He gave it to Br. Leopold, who had studied at *Koonammav*. He instructed him to give this envelop to the delegate missionary Fr. Leopold the day after his demise.

The letter astonished and surprised Fr. Leopold when he read it. Each line clearly revealed Fr. Chavara’s clarity of life, purity, awareness of responsibility and his total surrender to the Holy Church. He wrote down, *“Honourable soul please pray for me,”* in his diary on the day of Fr. Chavara’s demise. *The “Last testament”* was a collection of the memories of the sufferings and ecstasies in Fr. Chavara’s life. (Letters 98-103).



LAST MEETING OF CHAVARA WITH THE SISTERS

Once you were darkness, now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of the light, for the fruit of the light is all that is good and true. Therefore it is said, 'Awake, sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light'.

Ephesians 5, 8

*Loving sons, Christians, keep
In love and reverence his dear command
Spread abroad his living world
In diverse parts of the wide world*

*From the place where we lived and worked
He brought us here, the Christ our Lord
He's power divine by miracles proved
And brought several to his fold.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XII: 57-64

CHAPTER-29

HIS SPIRITUAL CHILDREN POURED RAIN OF SORROW

The sisters shared a special bond with St. Chavara. They experienced the love of a spiritual father from him. Even when he was going through extreme agonies, he tried to meet them like their loving father in heaven. They realised that the love of a spiritual father towards his children was greater and more powerful than the love of the biological father.

When the convent for nuns was founded in 1866 at *Koonammav*, it was the first convent for nuns under the Syrian Church established in India by St. Thomas the Apostle. Fr. Chavara was holding the most important place in their mind as he had been the one who took the initiative to establish the convent. He helped them in the religious life they were going to start by being with them in every possible way. He was doing everything he could and more. It was a matter of great sorrow for them when they knew that within a few days their loving father would be taken away from them. He had been troubled by signs of many diseases from 1869 itself but by the middle of 1870 he became very weak. When they realised that his presence with them would

become lesser by each passing day, words could not express their sorrow.

They had been until then women who never stepped out of their kitchen except to go to the church. In these last four years Fr. Chavara had taught them many things by talks and through the help of written notes. He had taught them how to educate the girls who were brought to the boarding house which he called, “*Educantat*”, and also how to nurture them with discipline. He had made arrangements for them to learn how to make rosaries, stoles and decorative items. He helped them in making the illiterate sit inside a class room and teach them... He had taken care of so many things like these. All their needs were met. Sometimes he used to visit the convent several times a day and give them necessary corrections, advices and laid the foundation of a religious life for them. But now Fr. Chavara could barely walk. He had pain in his eyes, reduced eye sight and was not able to do anything without someone else helping him. It’s clear from the notes he used to send over to them that he was still thinking that there were many unfinished works that remained to be done for them, especially his wish to nurture them in spirituality.

By August 1870, symptoms of illnesses increased more and more. He was taken to *Ambazhakkad* for treatment but before long he was taken back to *Koonammav*. For easier treatment facility he was shifted to an outhouse of the monastery. Even after different treatments there was no relief for him. By the beginning

of October, he started having severe dizziness and vomiting. One day from four in the evening till midnight he had dizziness. Considering it was his last day, he said farewell to Christ and to others too. He managed to say this to the nuns: *"This is my present condition, I have dizziness, headache, vomiting and migraine"*.

When he felt a little relief from the pain in his eyes, he wrote to the nuns: *"I'm suffering from severe migraine now and I am trying to meditate thinking of the Holy Head being adorned with the crown of thorns. Whenever I open my eyes, I see angels flying around and if I look at others face, I see them like stars."*

October 15th was the feast of Mother St. Theresa of Avila, the special patron of the convent. To make them happy he reached the convent in the morning itself, and returned after sometime, but he came back again in the afternoon around four. The nuns wrote this in the Chronicles: *"This made us very happy. But seeing his tiredness our happiness changed to sorrow. The severity of the disease made his body look extremely tired, even his facial expressions had changed. He was not able to walk because of his fatigue, still he came with the help of others."* They made him sit in a chair in the west side of the convent. He couldn't talk anything because of the shortness of breath after the short walk to the convent. Afterwards when he felt a little better, he said, *"When I look at you all, all I'm seeing are shining stars, cannot recognize anyone."*

Taking all the troubles to reach there was to teach them the chant on the glories of Mary to be sung

in the church. They learned how to sing that song very well without missing the tune. But it's clear from their words that they were disappointed that they couldn't sing that in church in his presence as he had passed away before they did this. He brought thread for stitching and colours to dye, after explaining to them how to dye the thread, he got up to leave by around six in the evening. His next words shattered their heart: *"My children I came to say my last farewell. What if I wouldn't be able to do so later on. Today I said the Mass as I felt little relief."* After saying this he blessed them and went back to the monastery.

When he said farewell that day, none of the sisters had the hope of meeting him again in the convent. The nuns have written in the Chronicle a heart-warming and very intense emotional story of one more meeting. It was on Friday, October 28th around four in the evening. The monastery superior Fr. Joseph John and a helper carried Fr. Chavara in a chair to the convent. Seeing this sight, the sisters started sobbing. They eased him down in front of the steps to the convent. Fr. Superior held Fr. Chavara and helped him walk slowly towards the front courtyard, as other men were not allowed to enter the premises. When they reached the steps Fr. Chavara asked: *"Is this our convent?"* Responding 'Yes' the sisters opened the door of the boarding house and let him inside the room. When the sisters saw him struggling to walk, they all started weeping with great sorrow.

When he was seated in a chair, they stood lined up in front of him starting from the freshers. As he was unable to recognise anyone, he asked each of them for her name. Usually whenever he visited, he used to call each of them by her name. Seeing that he had to ask their name to recognise them, made them realise that he had gone totally blind and the nuns started crying. When they heard his next words, their tears flew down like rivers. He had taken the trouble of coming just to bid farewell. His high fever was causing him great tiredness. To cool it down they had taken a decision to take him to *Manannam*. He had to leave the next morning; the superior of *Mannanam* monastery had already arrived to take him along.

The sisters tried to raise their objection to this idea. If he was taken to *Mannanam* they might never see him again and this was their main concern. While being there if something happened to him, they wouldn't get permission to go and see him. Even though he was living in the monastery close by as he was sick and blind, the rule forbade them to go and visit him. They could very well imagine what would happen if he was taken away from here. If he was here, they could at least get updates on his wellbeing every day. The sisters started their arguments; they said since he was Fr. Prior who had control over everyone, he could easily stay here if he wished so and not go away.

He replied like this: *"Do I have a will of my own? I have no particular interest to go there or stay here. Whatever the authorities ask me to do, I'd do happily,*

I'm here for that. I don't have a mind to do anything as my mind wishes."

The Bishop had gone to Rome after entrusting the responsibilities of the monastery to Fr. Jerard who was also the younger brother of Fr. Leopold. He did not have any interest to send Fr. Chavara to *Mannanam*. When Fr. Chavara came back from the convent to the ashram, the decision was changed according to the instructions of Fr. Jerard. It was as if the sisters' prayers were answered and they felt calm. When Fr. Jerard asked Fr. Prior if he'd like to go to *Mannanam*, his answer was this: *"Father, do I have a different mind. Whatever you order I'm obliged to do that."* With that the plan of travelling to *Mannanam* for treatment was dropped.

But they continued with different treatments for him at *Koonammav*. He was totally blind; still, he wrote notes to the sisters with the help of others. His last note ended in two sentences: *"Dear ones, let Christ bless you, loving children let us pray for His mercy."*

The severity of his illness kept him in bed for almost three months. If the eye sight is lost it is natural for anyone to feel differently with sorrow, anger, being pathetic and helpless. But this kind of behaviour was never seen in Fr. Chavara; he was always seen with a smile. His face never reflected the sufferings he was going through. (CMC chronicles volume- 11,8-16).



CHAVARA BEGAN TO INTERIORIZE AND PLAN FOR AN ETERNAL ABODE

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he be dead, shall live. And he who lives and believes in me shall never die.

John 12, 25

*Then to the gath'ring she spoke:
As Christ my son has taught me
I love you; Love each other-
For in love is our joy and salvation*

*I'll remember you sure
In that Kingdom of Love. At this
Overcome with grief all fell on earth
Weeping profusely, kissed the ground.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XII: 129-136

CHAPTER-30

SHUTTING HIS EYES TOWARDS EXTERNAL SIGHTS

St. Chavara realised that his days were numbered. He had been constantly bothered by all kinds of hidden diseases and was in agony. Then he had decided to close his external eyes to the world and open his internal eyes towards God.

When Fr. Chavara and his companions started a religious house, they called it *Darsana Veed (House of Vision)*. Their aim was to do as much good as they could. To find goodness in everything around, in God and in humans, one should have good external as well as internal visions. This is possible only to those who can see God in everything. The ability to get involved in the day-to-day requirements of the people under the guidance of God, is a gift from God, when they had been presented before God in prayer. This is a vision that one attains through the inner eye. Fr. Chavara spent sixty-four years like this by doing everything good for others. Then it was time for him to stop listening to the external calls and pay heed to the voice of the inner calls. God prepared him for this stage mainly in two ways: one by giving him signs of old age and the other by his chronic eye disease along with other sufferings.

It was when Fr. Chavara was tired and was taking rest that bishop of *Varappuzha* had to go to attend the First Vatican Council, in August, 1869. He appointed his Vicar General Philipose missionary as the Pro-Vicar Apostolic and in place of Fr. Leopold missionary who was accompanying him, appointed his young brother, Fr. Jerard as the supervisor of the monastery. Still, the bishop had instructed them to do everything only after consulting Fr. Chavara.

As per the request of Fr. Chavara the bishop came to *Koonammav* monastery before going to Rome. Everyone gathered together and gave him a farewell greeting in writing. He instructed Fr. Prior to look after everything well and told him to give necessary instructions to Fr. Philipose and Fr. Jerard to get things done. Knowing very well what kind of responsibilities were awaiting him, he gave a letter he had prepared and kept in his pocket to his fellow priest Fr. Leonard. It was a poem, and it read: *"It's a matter of great sadness that such a huge responsibility is being placed on me when I'm not even able to do my daily routine. Taking my spiritual Father (Fr. Leopold) along with you whom I was hoping to be with me at the time of my death, is also sad."* The poem was recited emotionally and when it reached the role of 'Mother' Fr. Chavara's face changed and his voice started shaking. His eyes started welling up with tears. Everyone stood stunned and surprised for some time. The comforting words of the bishop broke the silence. Realising his days were numbered in this world, he was eager to give up all his

material spaces. (Leonard, *The Last Days of Chavara* 1923).

Bishop Leonard and Fr. Leopold went to Rome. Days went by. Fr. Chavara's illnesses increased one by one. Pain in his feet became unbearable, the state of not being able to do anything on his own was getting deeper. Meanwhile, Fr. Jerard got interested in teaching the young priests Italian. In the collection of books in the monastery most of the good books were written in Italian. In order to read about the lives of saints and also to read other books, acquiring knowledge of Italian became necessary. Fr. Chavara also took interest in learning this language. It helped him forget his pain and sufferings. When the missionary was reading the books on saints to the brothers, Fr. Chavara also took interest in listening. He used to call brother Joseph Elia, who was an expert in learning new languages, into his room whenever he got time and tried to learn Italian language. There weren't many good books available in Malayalam to read, and the missionaries had Italian books with them. Reading good books would help in leaving the previous activities behind and elevating one's mind to the presence of God; this was the aim of Fr. Chavara. He taught others not to eat without working hard for their food, so Fr. Chavara worked hard to get spiritual food. Even though he was tired he tried not to waste time.

The damp climate of *Koonammav* was enough to make even the healthy ones sick. The priests at the monastery discussed with the missionary about shifting

Fr. Chavara to *Ambazhakkad* ashram for a few days. Everyone thought it was a good decision. Complying with the strict orders of the missionaries, Fr. Chavara decided to go to *Ambazhakkad*. But he was worried what would happen if he left *Koonammav*. Would it be against the wishes of Bishop and Fr. Leopold? Would it be disobedience or even worse, would it set a bad example? Like the saying, *scalded cats fear even cold water*, he was thinking of what happened to Fr. Kurian Kochupurackal when he had gone to *Ernakulam* seeking treatment. He passed away while he was still there. In order not to set a bad example to other priests he was buried accordingly in *Ernakulam* itself. This incident remained fresh in Fr. Chavara's mind. Even though he went to *Ambazhakkad* upon the insistence of others, since there were no significant changes in his health, he was taken back to *Koonammav*.

Eye disease increased day by day and the pain was unbearable; he couldn't even open his eyes. Not being able even to recite his canonical prayers was a disappointment to him. Different treatments yielded no results and this information was passed on to *Mannanam*. Hearing about this, Fr. Varkey Muttathupadath, who was an eye doctor, along with Fr. Joseph Chavara, who was Fr. Chavara's nephew, came to *Koonammav*. Fr. Varkey was a staunch devotee of Fr. Chavara, and had studied at the seminary in *Mannanam*. One day when the barber was cutting Fr. Chavara's hair, Brother Varkey collected a few strands, tied them up with golden thread and kept it safe as a holy remnant. Fr. Varkey gave his share of treatments

too but none of them worked and he insisted on taking Fr. Chavara to *Mannanam* and continue the treatment there. Though he got permission from the authorities Fr. Chavara did not agree. He took the stand: *“My conscience won’t let me go to Mannanam as the Bishop and the others had left after entrusting with me the responsibility of this monastery”*. Fr. Varkey returned to *Mannanam* after deciding to send his brother and an expert in eye diseases, Epen *Vaidyar*.

Fr. Chavara had excruciating pain and along with that had lost his eye sight. For easier access of treatment facilities, he was shifted to a small bungalow at the eastern side of the monastery, but this experience made Fr. Chavara feel as if he had been dismissed from the monastery. Even though this decision was taken on the insistence of Fr. Philipose and others for Fr. Chavara’s own good, he was so sad as he felt he was being removed from the community of his brothers. He was sad that he was no longer able to participate in the prayers and activities of the community. With the help from others, he tried to chant the canonical prayers that he had learned. But, seeing his deteriorating health conditions, Pro-Vicar Apostolic strictly told him to chant only the prayer of *“Being in the skies...”*

Meanwhile, Epen *Vaidyar* came and tried different treatments on him with no results. As a last resort he let leeches bite on his eyes to draw unclean blood, and it gave him a little relief. Fr. Jerard and others felt disgusted with this kind of treatments and they expressed their disgust in front the *Vaidyar*. Seeing

no results even from this treatment, Epen Vaidyar stopped his efforts and left. Other doctors came and tried different methods of treatment but none gave him relief. Not just that he started getting newer diseases too. Even when he had to bear all kinds of sufferings, with exceptional patience and courage he accepted all with great endurance. During the times when he felt slightly better, he invited children, priests and brothers to sit with him and read to him the spiritual books of retreats and books on the lives of saints. Whenever possible he accepted Holy Communion. (*Leonard, The End-of-Life 1923*).

When his external eyes had stopped functioning, he was only too eager to open his internal eye. Founder of convents and monasteries, Vicar General of Syro-Malabar Church, the first Prior General, the all in all superior of all the monasteries, the judge who solved interpersonal issues, the guide for families... He got involved in all these and had become an influence and answer to many. He realised the Will of God. Fr. Chavara realised the future plans of God for him, though He had taken away his eye sight for the outside world. He made a note to hang on the door of his room: *"Only those who want to talk about spiritual matters should come in, others who want to talk about material matters or for obtaining permission for those matters should not come in."* He just needed the vision of God, for that he wanted others to read to him from the spiritual books, stay with him and pray. Fr. Chavara closed his external eyes and opened his internal eyes and waited for the vision of God, waited to hear His voice in solitude.



CHAVARA ENTRUSTED HIS CONGREGATION TO THE HOLY FAMILY

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake,
and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking
in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that
is, the church.

Colossians 1.24

*Oh, you, the mother of mankind and my mother
Thy Son our King and you our august queen
The God, the Spirit, in my sorrows my solace
His loving spouse, oh you, forever my queen.*

*The trivne God severally uttered these words
And crowned her with the bright diadem of glory
Now came the loud acclamation from the realm
Of Heaven, to affirm this honor, eternal.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XIII: 41-48

CHAPTER-31

THE QUEST FOR THE SPIRITUALS BY FORGETTING EVERYTHING WORLDLY

St. Chavara prepared himself for a happy death that leads to eternal bliss. Before that he entrusted his young congregation to the Holy Family.

Fr. Chavara was getting closer to his last days. In December 1870 his symptoms became worse and he became very sick. There is strict daily routine in the life of a religious. Any change in that routine requires permission from the Superior. Fr. Jerard missionary was in the next room, and Fr. Chavara did not remember where the Delegate Fr. Leopold had gone. He tried to reach Jerard missionary's room which was about fifteen feet away. He struggled to move and almost crawled all the way. He asked Fr. Jerard permission for going to bed early. Sensing his exhaustion, he asked, "You need Jesus, don't you?" Fr. Chavara responded, "Yes I do, and I need the Holy Sacraments of the Church too." With the help of Fr. Jerard he reached back at his room. Sickness and tiredness kept on increasing.

Next morning before going to the convent for the Holy Mass Fr. Jerard visited Fr. Chavara and in the middle of chitchats asked him, "I'm going to the convent for the Mass, do you have anything to convey to the

sisters?" Fr. Chavara said, *"It's the beginning of a new year. Please tell them to review the spiritual exercises and along with celebrating the birth of Christ let them also renew their lives. Please tell them my blessings are always with them."* After the Mass Fr. Jerard gathered all the sisters together and conveyed to them Fr. Chavara's message and he also told them how serious his health condition was. They listened to everything he said with tears in their eyes and then sent him off.

One more day went like that. Next day Fr. Jerard sent a note to the convent to let them know about Fr. Prior's health condition, it was deteriorating day by day, and he asked them to go right away to the chapel to pray for him for half an hour. The sisters prayed with a heavy heart. They wrote like this in the Chronicle: *"We prayed with tears to God if it's His will kindly heal Fr. Chavara and give him relief but God probably had some other plans and did not grant our wish."*

The missionaries kept on providing the sisters with information on Fr. Chavara's health condition. Due to shortness of breath, for the past few days he kept on jumping up from the bed as he felt difficult to breathe while lying. Though they were hearing about all this they did not have the permission to go and see him in person. They knew exactly what was happening even though the fathers were telling them only half of the real story so that they wouldn't be devastated. Even though the monastery was only a stone's throw from the convent, they were unable to gather any information directly. They wished to say a few words of

consolation and remind him that they were constantly praying for him.

On January 1st Sunday night Fr. Chavara asked for holy Communion and for anointing the sick. Fr. Jerard asked in which Rite he would like to have it. From the look on Fr. Chavara's face he understood that he was expecting to accept them from Fr. Leopold who was his spiritual master. He never showed stubbornness, held the wishes of authorities always above his own wishes. He replied that any ritual was fine but he would like to have it in his mother tongue so that he could respond to that. It was the only wish he had. When it was 2am, Fr. Ouseph of St. John of the Cross, Superior of Koonammav monastery, heard the confession of Fr. Chavara, and Fr. Jerard gave him the holy Communion.

Later, Fr. Jerard told the sisters at the convent, *"While giving holy Communion I felt like looking at his face, and I looked carefully. I've seen a glorious and bright face that I'd never seen before."* Before receiving the sacrament of anointing Fr. Chavara made a little speech to his brethren who had gathered around him. It is written down like this in the convent Chronicles: *"Before receiving the sacraments, it looked like he wanted to talk about giving a homily on Jesus Christ's sufferings and how to give glory to His Holy Mother. It was amazing listening to his words."* Whatever the missionaries had told the nuns about this incident was scribbled in the Chronicles.

After receiving the Holy Communion consciously, he fell unconscious for some time. After a while Fr.

Leopold asked him, “*Father, are you happy now, do you have peace of mind?*” Fr. Chavara responded with folded hands, “*Father, I’m having great happiness and peace,*” even at this time he was being bothered about the flaws in him. He said, “*Father last week I did not attend the Mass,*” and the response was, “*It was not because you did not have the mind to attend the Mass, you were simply obeying the orders.*” He felt calm when he thought he was just being obedient. A few hours went by calmly.

In the afternoon on 2nd, things changed; he started gagging and vomiting more than usual. Fr. Nicholas who had been with Fr. Chavara many years in *Koonammav*, and was now a member of *Manjummal* monastery had treated Fr. Chavara earlier. He came and started treatments, but it did not give Fr. Chavara any relief. As they thought it was the last hour of Fr. Chavara, the missionaries and his spiritual children gathered around his bed. Everyone kneeled down to receive his last blessing. When there was a chance to share spiritual matters, sickness usually took a back seat, as happened in the previous morning. He was in his normal sense and was getting ready to accept the sacrament of anointing but, seeing all his loved ones around him, he forgot all about his sufferings and became talkative. Fr. Chavara felt strong enough to talk about Jesus and the Holy Mother.

As if he had found new energy, leaning on the headboard of his bed with the support of others, he started talking. One of the topics he chose was

spirituality of the religious community and the other was about himself. His words of advice had the seriousness of the last words of the founder of that religious congregation. He said: *“God is capable of everything and gives never ending showers of blessings. Soon God will bring you a new Fr. Prior better than me, who would do better for the congregation for all of you and to each one of you. All of you should safeguard and follow the laws of Regula and the instructions of the authorities always. Love Jesus wholeheartedly who comes in all his glory in the Blessed Sacrament. Drew the living water flowing from the Sacred Heart, as the Holy Spirit says. Every member of the congregation, especially the superiors should help each other in sisterly charity. If you do all these, this congregation would prosper day by day and through this congregation you would save souls and give glory to God.”* With utmost care everyone accepted the last words of Fr. Chavara.

He shared comforting words with so much courage with the brethren who were on their knees gathered around his bed with tears in their eyes, *“Why are you being sad? Everyone has to die one day, and it’s my time to go. By the grace of God, even though it was not easy, I was making preparations for some time for this. My parents who were great devotees of the Holy Family, reminded me in many ways about that great family of ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph’, and just like this I kept that family, (he pointed towards the picture of the Holy Family that was on his table where he could see it always) always close to my heart to remember and to venerate. Their blessings always saved me. By the grace*

of God, I can say with all honesty and courage that I never spoiled the blessings I received at the time of baptism, especially the innocence. I'm dedicating our humble congregation and all its members to this Holy Family. Surrender yourself to the Holy Family. Let that Holy Family govern your hearts. Don't be sad about my death but surrender yourselves to the Will of God."

The community of St. Chavara bowed their head asking for blessing. Fr. Chavara raised his hand and blessed them. He then asked for 'oprusuma' anointing of the sick. He wished to accept this sacrament from the hands of Delegate Leopold missionary. Fr. Leopold was crying like a child in the next room unable to watch the death of Fr. Chavara. When he was told about Fr. Chavara's last wish, he felt even more distressed and let them know about his helplessness. In the past two days he went to Fr. Chavara's room only rarely. He was not able to prepare himself to accept the departure that was awaiting him.

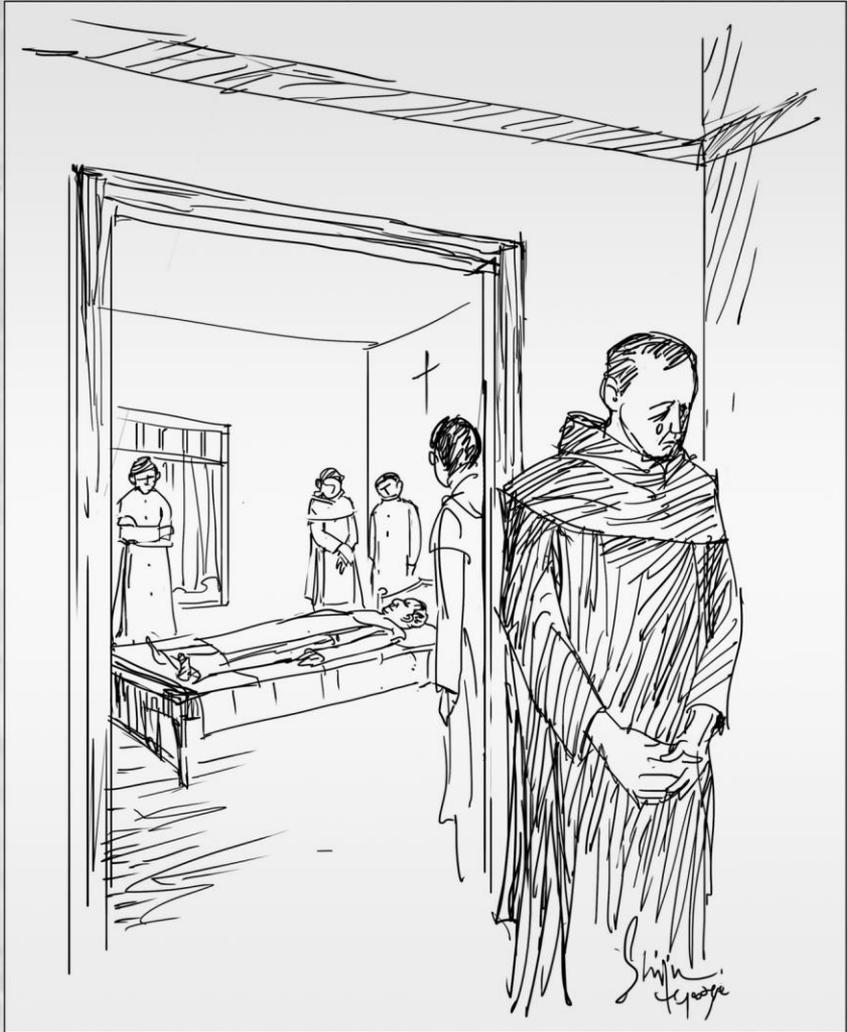
Later on, as per the wish of Fr. Chavara, the monastery superior Fr. Joseph anointed him by seven in the evening. Fr. Chavara said the prayers with full clarity; these were the last words he said in this world. Slowly he fell unconscious as if everything was complete. Still, the gagging and vomiting continued on and off. They had sent someone to fetch Aranattukara Tharakan Vaidyar in the morning, and he arrived by eight at night. His medicines gave Fr. Chavara some relief from gagging. Still, he was getting weaker and weaker. He was unconscious all the while and started

wheezing. Realising that at this time there was no use for treatments, Tharakan Vaidyar left. When he had treated him earlier for his eye disease Fr. Chavara had told him that he would have to come once more as if he had a vision. Fr. Chavara might have been waiting to let him know that his death was near. It was as if he was invited to come for a second time to certify the last hour of Fr. Chavara's life on earth. He responded to calls occasionally and opened his eyes, and from the movements of his lips it looked like he was trying to repeat the prayers he was listening to.

After midnight he was feeling miserable for about an hour; then wheezing stopped and he was breathing normal. On 3rd morning around 5.30 he felt much better. All this time most of the members were with him. In the morning some of the priests went to the church to celebrate the Mass and some of the brothers went to participate in it. Fr. Leopold had sent them off asking them to pray for Fr. Prior at the Holy Mass. Everyone came back after the Mass. By around 7.30am they saw a significant change in Fr. Chavara. After exhaling the last breath, he peacefully dedicated his soul in the hands of God. (Brief History of the Last Days of Chavara, Convent Chronicles volume-11,16-22).

Chavara had mentioned four friends in his poetical work, '*A Poem to be Sung in the Bereaved House*'. He remembered these four friends always, they were: the world, the body, selfishness and good works. Among this, only the good actions would help one enter into eternity and also into the world of God. Even in the

moments of suffering excruciating pain physically and mentally, spiritually he was standing closer to God and with his fellow men doing good. As he had described all over in *Athmanuthapam*, *“God, there are still a lot left for being grateful to you, there are still a lot left to do good and in setting examples to the brothers but will finish it at least after reaching Heaven.”* Fr. Chavara left this world feeling contented that he was able to safeguard the blessings he had received at the time of baptism, which had helped in rewriting the belief that Kerala was barren and unable to produce a saint from her soil. *“If there was a day without doing any good, that day wouldn’t be counted in the Book of Life”*; he had always practised these words in his life and had also told others to follow. This was his last message to the world.



FR. LEOPOLD IDENTIFIED THE GREATNESS OF A SIMPLE SOUL

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God

1 Corinthians 1.18

*Our mistress beloved, queen of all the world
Queen of us all, elevated above all, supreme
Joyously reign over all, for all eternity
Rule over us forever this greatness hold!
Singled out, the prime from among mankind
Your duty performed aright to attain the fold.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XIII: 49-54

CHAPTER-32

IDENTIFYING THE GREATNESS OF A SOUL

Even though Fr. Leopold was with St. Chavara for about 12 long years, he had not understood him in the true sense; he was late in identifying the core of St. Chavara. When he finally identified him, he found in him a saintly soul.

Head felt as if on fire; fever and pain in the eyes were getting intense. It'd been about three months since he'd lost his eye sight. Treatments were still going on and couldn't be said to have been totally in vain. Fr. Chavara used to attend community prayers and canonical prayers with the help of others. But he was asked to chant only '*Our Father, who art in heaven*' instead of all other community prayers. He was exempted from everything as he was not well. He had a lot of pain when he was shifted from the monastery to stay in an outhouse, but he accepted it as part of his treatment. Now, he was sad when he was not allowed to join the community. But the thought, '*Obedience is nobler than sacrifice,*' made him feel happy.

In the meantime, Archbishop Mellano who had gone to Europe to participate in the First Vatican Council, returned along with Fr. Leopold. Fr. Chavara felt relieved that he was able to see them before his death.

After reaching *Varappuzha*, Fr. Leopold came to *Koonammav* the very next day. Their meeting was tearful and overwhelmed with the happiness of meeting again. After asking others to vacate the room, they talked for about two hours. Fr. Chavara gave his spiritual father a detailed picture of everything that had happened there in his absence. He didn't forget to share his sorrow in not being able to be part of the life in the monastery. As if a curse had been lifted off, Fr. Leopold decided to let Fr. Prior stay in the monastery and continue his treatments there. He also gifted Fr. Prior a few things he had brought from Europe but he accepted only a few grapes and felt contented with that.

The day after Fr. Leopold visited him, Archbishop Leonard came to *Koonammav* along with three new missionaries to visit Fr. Prior and he welcomed them gratefully saying that, he was glad to see him again and gave glory to God. To this the Archbishop responded saying, he had gone to Rome giving his word that he would come back and meet him again, and thanked God for letting him keep his word, and prayed in the words of Simon the Prophet, in the temple. The Archbishop and Fr. Leopold had gone to Rome after giving him a lot of responsibilities and Fr. Chavara felt relieved that this weight has now been lifted off from him.

This meeting made Fr. Chavara more energetic. It's natural when the mind feels free, the body also gets relieved of its restraints. Treatments started giving better results. The eye sight got better and he was able

to recognise people even though slightly blurred. He was also able to walk slightly better.

Fr. Leopold and Fr. Chavara made plans to visit the convent one afternoon in December. Fr. Nicholas, procurator, was given the responsibility of taking Fr. Chavara to the convent. Fr. Leopold started off a little early to let the sisters know about the surprise visit of Fr. Prior. All of them had tears of joy in their eyes. They remembered the last time when he visited them to bid farewell. He walked out the steps to go to *Mannanam*, and they were devastated thinking that they wouldn't be able to see even his dead body. They believed it was only because of their intense prayers on their knees that made Fr. Jerard change his decision to shift Fr. Chavara to *Mannanam*. They sobbed thinking about the scene of him being carried over to the monastery in a chair. They thanked the Lord who raised even the dead, for giving them an opportunity to meet their saintly father and waited patiently for his arrival.

At around five Fr. Nicholas brought Fr. Chavara to the convent. They made him sit in a chair in the eastern side of the courtyard. All the nuns and the girls from the boarding house, gathered around him. One by one they kissed Fr. Chavara's scapular to express their respect. With a smile on his face that they were so familiar with, he made everyone stand in front of him. He looked at all of them carefully and said, "*Last time when I came, I was not able to recognise any of you, now I'm happy.*" At that time Fr. Leopold said boastingly, "*Before going to Europe I had given my word*

that he wouldn't pass away until I'm back. My prophecy helped you all to see your father again. If any of you had believed me, you could have avoided going through all that pain." Everyone had a hearty laugh.

At this time Fr. Chavara's mind went to the girls from the boarding house, who were supposed to spend their lives only inside the kitchen. These girls of different ages, had not known how to read or write, and had nobody to teach them either. He looked at their faces and found them to be very happy now. They had already learned to make rosaries, stitch stoles, and also to make decorative products. The pride of being able to read and write was visible in them. Fr. Chavara went through a trance. He had seen inside his mind some of these girls' becoming nuns and taking leadership in the society. A few of them studied well and became government servants and a few others worked alongside their husbands for the development of their family... He envisioned all of them taking important roles and coming to the mainstream of the society. A mother is the lamp of the house. The lessons of values she gives her children would become tools for doing good things for the society when they grow up. Fr. Chavara saw that the special instructions he had given for nurturing a family and for the creation of a good society were being used as their leading light. Feeling content, he smiled internally.

Soon he felt tired of sitting there for so long. He had a long face when he realised that there might not be

another visit like this again. Fr. Leopold instructed that it was time for him to go to the monastery.

Fr. Nicholas helped Fr. Chavara get up from the chair. Fr. Chavara had nothing more to say. With a smile reflecting hope and humility he turned to look at the sisters, then in an unusual way he bowed his head down and raised his hand to bless them and then tried to walk away in an effort to hide the tears in his eyes. The distance from the convent to the monastery was about 200 yards, and it was the last long journey of Fr. Chavara. Hanging on the shoulders and arms of Fr. Nicholas and Fr. Leopold, not being able to think about anything else, he somehow reached back to the comfort of his bed. Even though he was feeling so tired unlike any other days, he gave a smile of gratitude to Fr. Nicholas and Fr. Leopold. It seemed as if he was offering his gratitude to all those missionaries who have been helping him walk by holding his hand in his journey from 1831. He folded his palms from lying on his bed. It was a farewell to the beginning of a new journey. (Leonard, *The Last Days*, CMC Chronicles volume 11, 18-32).



SWEET REMEMBRANCE OF A MANGO TREE –PRIOR MAVU

You were ransomed from your futile ways with
the precious blood of Christ. Through him you
now have faith in God, who raised him from the
dead and gave him glory, so that you would
have faith and hope in God.

1 Peter 1, 19

*At the time grant that your name I repeat
Your sacred name, my mother, with gratitude
The patron, illustrious of my source of salvation
The Church, as well as my good angel guardian*

*At death's moment, by which my life I surmount
The life, me, a sinner lived in this blessed house
At the feet of hosts of sons who followed the Lord
With purpose steadfast, oh mother grant*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XIV: 61-68

CHAPTER-33

SOME EXTRAORDINARY INCIDENTS

St. Chavara was a man who lived an ordinary and simple life, but he had an extraordinary spirit that turned everything adverse into his favour. He was someone who turned all his agonies into ecstasies filled with peace and happiness.

When an incident happens out of the ordinary, we call it an extraordinary incident. In the life of Fr. Chavara many such extraordinary incidents happened. Most of those incidents had taken place when he was alive and a few after he had passed away. Being a people's priest, the vast experience of being a priest for about 42 years he had earned quite a large number of disciples. Most of them were serving as Vicars in the churches in and around central south Kerala. During the time of Roccas Schism Fr. Chavara had visited all the churches to preach, hence most of the people knew him personally. In central Kerala there were seven monasteries standing majestic which had been founded by him. Because of his popularity as a priest of the people, as soon as the news of his illness went out, priests and people started streaming into *Koonammav* to see him a last time. The news of his death shattered the whole surge.

PREISTLY VESTMENT IS REMOVED

On January 3rd morning after 7.30, the church bell at the *Koonammav* monastery tolled signalling the news of death. Whoever listened to that bell recognised the death of Fr. Chavara. Through them the news spread like wild fire. From the churches people and priests carrying *Muthukkuda*, (church umbrellas) and decorated crosses started flowing into *Koonammav*. In the meantime, monastery members had prepared Fr. Chavara's dead body with the religious habit and adorned him with the official holy liturgical vestments and then they laid him down in the coffin before the rush of the people started coming in. The coffin was placed in the middle of the church for the public to view and pray. The missionaries started whispering with each other. They raised the question why he was dressed in the priestly vestment, instead of the religious habit. The Vicar General Fr. Philipose came to know about this. He gave orders to remove all other adornments except the religious habit. He took a stand that Fr. Chavara was first and foremost a religious, the rest came only after that. He instructed so to set an example to follow for all the religious when they pass away.

Since a lot of priests and people kept on coming for prayer, kissing the feet of Fr. Chavara and letting their rosary touch his body, members had to wait till late at night to remove his priestly vestments. When the crowd was reduced, they removed the surplice and *urala* and left only the religious habit on the body. The one who had passed away was not aware of anything

that was going around him but to the living members this was a very painful experience and they considered this a very wrong doing. In the hearts of many Fr. Chavara was already an unanointed bishop, he was a noble priest and the Vicar General of all the Syrian Catholics. Whoever came to know about this removal of official vestment, felt really pained by all this.

On January 4th by early morning itself the church and the surrounding areas of the monastery were filled with priests and people. Hundreds of people were holding solemn crosses and *muthukkuda* that made it difficult to keep them opened. The rush was to see the Reverend Father one last time. When it was time, the funeral service started. The function was led by Fr. Chavara's nephew Fr. Joseph and Fr. Kuriakose Porukara. Fr. Mathai Kappil gave the eulogy. He started with, "We had lost the flag of Malayalam, it fell down today..." Several people broke down in tears and sobbed. The service ended with the funeral procession. In front of the altar in the middle of the church he was buried. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they had placed a lead piece inscribed with a short description of his life history inside the coffin, with the signature of Fr. Kuriakose Porukara . It's not sure if such an act had happened in the history before in the case of anybody else. (*Mannanam* Chronicles 379).

TRANSEFRING THE MORTAL REMAINS TO MANNANAM

It's as equal to waking up someone from his eternal sleep, when a body is shifted from one tomb to another. There is mention of another incident that happened in

relation to the transfer of the property of St. Philomina Church in *Koonammav*. The land of the church was donated by the Vicar Apostolic of *Varappuzha*, Bishop Bernardin Bachinelli, in 1857 to *Mannanam* monastery. But in 1887, when a separate Vicariate was formed for the Syrians apart from that of *Varappuzha*, the Latin Vicariate insisted to have the church and the land in *Koonammav*. Accordingly, they were handed over in 1889. However, with proper permission the tomb of Fr. Chavara was opened and his mortal remains were brought to *Mannanam* monastery church, and reinterred there on May 24th 1889. Later on, people at *Koonammav* started claiming that it wasn't Fr. Chavara's tomb that was opened but that of someone else and it was the remains of someone else that was taken to *Mannanam*. But the lead sheet taken out from the tomb in *Koonammav* and kept safely at *Mannanam* proved them wrong. This lead sheet became a testimony to prove that it was indeed the remains of Fr. Chavara kept at the *Mannanam* monastery church. Even though this would not have hurt St. Chavara, his spiritual children were deeply affected by this. Conflicts in the name of a Saint's tomb reached the court. This was against the unity of the Christian brotherhood. But the truth prevailed. (Varkey Parappurath 697-8).

BY LEARNING ABOUT GREATNESS ONE BECOMES GREAT

History proves that the words of Christ, "The truth will set you free," became so true in the life of Fr. Leopold. He reached Kerala in 1859 as a subdeacon and became

a priest in 1860. He reached here as an Italian missionary and got his basic training from the monastery at *Koonamav*. In 1862 he became the delegate of the bishop of *Varappuzha* and took charge of the congregation of *Mannanam*. He had the firm idea of bringing this congregation under the full control of the Carmelite First Order. The constitution they were following from 1855, was corrected against the wishes of the founding fathers, and he gathered all the copies of the earlier constitution and put them to fire.

He prepared another constitution through which he made the congregation into the Third Order as the exact replica of the OCD First Order. When the letter came from Rome asking his opinion on appointing Fr. Chavara as an auxiliary bishop, Fr. Leopold responded without a touch of honesty that he was a useless old man. We have seen in another chapter that when the convent was first started, in order to make sure that the upper hand should be given to the Latins, he accepted Eliswa Puthanangadi as a nun in an entirely different name. History points out how much all these had affected Fr. Chavara and his community.

But once Fr. Leopold got to know Fr. Chavara more deeply and started interacting with him regularly as his spiritual father, his attitude was transformed completely. He learned the truth from close proximity. The humble priest Chavara, who had helped Fr. Leopold get ordained was elder to him by 30 years, the founder of all the monasteries and was leading them from 1831, the Vicar General of all Syrian churches who was

accepted by all alike, still Fr. Chavara came to him on and off begging for pardon from sins in confession and received advice standing on his knees. When he recognised his pure heart and conscience, that truth set Fr. Leopold free.

Life of Fr. Leopold with Fr. Chavara afterwards was in an entirely different spiritual level. As a result, as soon as Fr. Chavara passed away he wrote his biography and sent its copies along with the copies of his Will and Testament that was written for the members of the congregation and sent to every monastery. He collected several items that was personally used by Fr. Chavara and sent them to all the monasteries to be kept as holy remains. Fr. Leopold believed that Fr. Chavara's holy body remained intact, he even wanted to open the tomb to see that. Fr. Leopold moved his actions faster to start the procedures of his canonization. Leonard, Archbishop of *Varappuzha*, saw that Fr. Leopold was getting too close to the Syrian church and to *Mannanam* monastery and thinking this could hamper the survival of Latin missionaries, he decided to send Fr. Leopold back to Italy in January 1876. If it did not happen that way the Indian Church could have a canonised saint, St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, even before 1900s. (Valerian, Life History of Chavara 1939, 331-334).

Later events testified that there was indeed no change in God's plans regarding Fr. Chavara. The Church in India was established in the first century itself, but even after crossing 18 centuries, there was not even a single canonised Saint native from India. This thought

had often made Fr. Chavara sad. His own words about the situation: *“Kerala received Christianity directly from one of the twelve apostles of Christ, St. Thomas, but it remained barren when other countries and islands which accepted the faith only recently, had their own Saints.”* (Chavara Chronicle 173).

THE FIRST EVER SAINT FROM KERALA

Chavara had found his own reasons for not having saints from Kerala till then. According to him, being ungrateful and disobedient towards the authorities of the Church and to God’s Will were the main reasons. Being grateful meant a lot to him and he had given so much value for that in his life. He believed only God’s Will would be accomplished and he was determined to do only God’s Will. From the Churches in India, Fr. Chavara was the first to be elevated as a Venerable, in the process for canonization to sainthood in 1984.

Fr. Chavara was always sad that the Kerala Church though an ancient Church, had not grown up in holiness as expected and this made him live a holier life. He was convinced that ‘God would not join with the heart of a sinner’. Hence, he was always involved in finding what was needed to have holiness in the lives of three groups with whom he had interacted regularly, the priests, the religious, and the families and to bring them closer to God. He always wanted to set an example of living a pure life, and this thought brought him closer to God. The Kerala church which was barren and was unable to produce a single saint earlier, is now having several individuals in the list of saints and several

others on the path to sainthood. St. Chavara is sure to be happy seeing all this from heaven.

HAIR THAT BECAME A RELIC

Keeping the hair as a relic which had been cut off from a normal human being when alive, might be the first incident in the history of the world. Those pieces of hair kept as a relic inside a reliquary as a historical testimony is telling a very significant story to us. When Fr. Chavara was the rector at the *Mannanam* seminary, Brother Varkey Muttathupadathu was a student there. He used to interact with Fr. Chavara almost every day and had seen Fr. Chavara living in the community always with fidelity. He was absolutely convinced of his holiness. He kept his holiness all through his life. Then one day when the barber came to cut Fr. Chavara's hair, Brother Varkey went near him and with great respect collected a few strands of the cut hair from the floor and kept them safely. Usually, people feel disgusted with the cut hair as they see it as something unclean. But Brother Varkey saw it as something very respectful like a relic. He believed that someday Fr. Chavara would be called '*saint*' and that time he could pay respect to this relic. So, he kept it in a small box in his room. After some years Chavara passed away. Every year on Fr. Chavara's death anniversary like a ritual he used to exhibit this relic to other priests. If a disciple in the seminary felt like keeping his cut hair with great respect, one could imagine how much fragrance he might have spread during his life time. Years went by, Brother Varkey became priest and reached old age. His nephew Fr.

Joseph took the relic and kept it with great respect. After the declaration of Chavara as 'Blessed', Fr. Joseph handed over this relic of hair to *Mannanam* community and it is now preserved in the Chavara Museum at *Mannanam*.

THE MEETING OF TWO SAINTS

St. Alphonsa was suffering from various illnesses between 1935 and 1946. The novice master of the saintly Sister, Fr. Louis Perumalil of CMI suggested to her to pray to Fr. Chavara as her mediator. He also gave her a small prayer card with Chavara's picture printed on it. In 1871, Chavara had passed away after spreading the fragrance of holiness all around. By 1930 his sanctity started reaching out to the people around and they used to receive many favours from God through his intercessions. Thus Fr. Louise requested Fr. Joseph Muttathupadath, who was the uncle of Sister Alphonsa, to kindly send the hair kept in the reliquary to her for a few days and then told her to keep it in her room and pray to Fr. Chavara.

Between 1935 and 37, Fr. Chavara appeared three times to Sister Alphonsa and healed her from her illnesses three times. Once cured of her illness she went to *Mannanam* to pray at his tomb for hours. She had written down about these blessings she had received through the intercession of Chavara. The letter is still kept safely at the *Mannanam* archives. When incidents like this happened, the priests at *Mannanam* requested Fr. Joseph to donate Fr. Chavara's hair to *Mannanam*. As per their request Fr. Joseph handed over the relic

with a written note on how the relic had come into his possession and that now he was handing that over to *Mannanam*. When we understand that all this happened 25 years before the beginning of the official procedures for declaring Fr. Chavara as a saint, we have to admit that, it was indeed an extraordinary event of the meeting of two saints who had lived in two different centuries. (*Mannanam Archives*, K.C. Chacko, Fr. KEC 1959 187-200).

St. Chavara was born in 1805 and St. Alphonsa was born in 1910, when these two saints met and communicated with each other it was already 65 years after Fr. Chavara's demise. God had given these two gifts to the Church of Kerala and also to the Universal Church. In the history of the world there are no incidents like this, and on the 40th anniversary of their spiritual meetings on 1986, February 8th on the same day, same hour, another holy man, Pope St. John Paul came to Kerala to declare them as the first two Saints of Indian Church during their beatification. This was another extraordinary incident in the life of Fr. Chavara.

THE PREIST WHO HAD BEEN DRAGGED INTO THE COURT

The paddy field lying close to *Kumarakam* area on the eastern side of the backwaters of *Vembanad*, has an important story to tell. The swamp land called *Kari*, known as *Cheppungal* today was an uninhabitable place. There is a stream called *Pennar* that originated from river *Meenachil* and joined *Vembanad* backwaters. The name *Cheppungal* is derived from the arrangements

set up to control the boats on one side to levy tax upon the boats. Fr. Chavara had many different plans like, creating employment opportunities for the poor, convert muddy lands into agricultural lands, increase the production of rice, produce enough rice for the consumption of *Mannanam* monastery, create service oriented cooperative societies... He had many such ideas when he tried to convert areas of *Kari* into agricultural fields.

For this purpose, he partnered with two rich people in the area and bought about 300 acres of land in three shares. One share was for *Mannanam*, and other two were given for cultivation. But later, he learned that joint cultivation was causing huge loss and decided to separate the share of *Mannanam*, and took over the responsibility of that directly under the monastery. The land was given to some farmers on lease since it was difficult for the inmates of the monastery to go there every day and look after the fields which were about 12 kilometres away. Most of the land was given for lease to a supposedly very honest person, a parishioner, Muttuchira Mathan Manjooran Kalapurackal. Gradually he stopped paying even the yearly lease money and he acted as if the land belonged to him. When the efforts of solving the issues amicably failed, it became necessary to file a case against him. As far as Fr. Chavara was concerned, he was never in favour of taking things up to the court, and was completely against family members going after one another to the court... And Mathen was working against *Mannanam* community. He claimed that the ownership

of the land belonged to him and filed a fake case against the monastery and also against Fr. Chavara. The whole incident was very painful. Being a priest, he couldn't bear even thinking going to a court for cases. This news was sure to defame the good name of the priests; it was not sure if a Catholic priest ever had to step inside a court before.

Notice was sent to Fr. Chavara to attend the *Alapuzha* magistrate court. Fr. Chavara stood in front of the judge in the court. Matters were evaluated. The judge recognised the good human in him and his truthfulness and did not hear a word of intolerance from his mouth against his opponent. The case was moved to *Ettumanur* court and the verdict was to give appropriate punishment to Mathan. Not just that, after the court was adjourned, the judge talked to Fr. Chavara for some time and left saying he wished to see him and talk to him again.

Years went by and Fr. Chavara realised he was nearing his death. He wanted to hand over all his responsibilities in this world and give suggestions for the good nurturing of his much-loved congregation. He had noted down everything he wanted to convey to his spiritual children in his last Will and Testament. Having known the miserable condition of Mathan's family at that time he added this in his last wish, "The members at the *Mannanam* monastery should help this person's family in whatever way they could. He said that would make them an example of being the first of the closest disciples of Christ, by loving their enemy." By doing this

he had given that person a loving gift... He taught the biggest lesson of loving one's enemy to that person who had filed a fake case against a priest and forced him to step inside a court. Tolerance and love should go together. Both have very different meanings but only a human can bring them together, turning enmity into love. He had set an example of that principle with his own life. (*Parappuram* 1023, Letters Chavara Valerian 289).

GOD AT ARMS LENGTH

Mannanam hills is a place of miracles. That place was selected as the location of Home on Heights, through signs of miracles. The forest was cleared to lay the foundation stone for the monastery. They wanted to place a wooden cross there. The preparation of the foundation was ready. The people and priests gathered together for the erection of the cross. The impending storm made way to the music of lightnings and thunders and the cloudy skies began to pour drops of rain. They started singing the litany of All Saints with unconditional faith. Soon the sky was cleared and the sun came out brighter, thunder and lightning vanished. Priests blessed the cross and erected it on the spot they had decided. Right after this a child was bitten by a poisonous snake and was about to go unconscious. Fr. Porukara requested the people not to hover over the child, he then blessed the boy with Holy Water and prayed for him, immediately he was healed. They did not have to give

him any medicine. These two incidents happened right there at the *Mannanam* hill.

It took the hard work and help of a lot of people to clean the forest area and make it suitable for living and also for the construction of the church and other buildings. The founding fathers had been blessed with getting everyone's cooperation irrespective of caste or religion. But they didn't find any source of water there and it was the biggest problem they faced. They needed drinking water and once the works started, they needed plenty of water for the construction works too. When this land was taken over from the families of Perumalil Thayyil the thought of provision for water or the need for water did not occur at all. If water had to be carried up the hill, it had to be carried all the way up from the valley itself, either from the house of Echarachar or from Tharakan Perumalil's house. When so many people were working together plenty of water was needed for their drinking and cooking purposes, and it was not easy to carry water up from the bottom of the hill. Fr. Chavara felt saddened by this. He might have thought about Jesus walking at noon time through Samaria, hungry and thirsty and reaching the well of Jacob. He had given the water of life to those who were drawing water for quenching their thirst. In his helplessness in not being able to find a solution for the lack of water, Fr. Chavara prayed, "God, please give us water from somewhere nearby." He had written in the Chronicles about the intervention of God from an arm's length, "If we could find a spring while clearing this forest it would have saved a lot of efforts for us, let God help us in

this.” After praying like this within two days the workers found an unused well in the midst of the bushes. They started working around it to get access to it. When they started that work, he went back to *Pallipuram*.

A well with plenty of water was found at the top of the hill, it was also close to the place they had planned to build the monastery. There were no signs of a home anywhere in that forest, so the existence of that well only meant it was given by God, Fr. Chavara had no doubts about that. The well provided plenty of water for hundreds of years, it was ‘*Our Well*’ for Fr. Chavara. For him, his God was always there at arms’ length, anytime he called, God would be there for him. He realised that God would pour the living water on anyone who called out to him. *Mannanam* hill became a spring of goodness for many. (Chronicles 19,21,22).

HEAVENLY MESSAGE AND HEALING

What follows is an account of the messages that two persons received during the same night almost at the same hour and the healing another person had. From 1857 to 1890 the CMI congregation owned St. Philomina’s monastery at *Koonammav*, which was its second monastery after the mother house at *Mannanam*. Then it functioned also as the Novitiate of the congregation where both Syrian and Latin young men were being trained. The monastery was a three-storied building behind the Latin parish church. The Archdiocese of *Varappuzha* had donated the church and its surrounding land as property to the monastery.

In 1890 following the introduction of separate administration for the Syrians and the Latins, this monastery along with its land was surrendered to the Archdiocese. The Latin members got merged with the *Carmelite First Order* and the Syrians had to vacate the place. For about 50 years the monastery building was unoccupied and it became dilapidated.

In 1949 the Archdiocese of *Varappuzha* decided to demolish the monastery building. It was in the first room in the first floor that St. Chavara had lived from 1864 to 1871 and in which he slept in the Lord on 3rd January 1871.

The demolition of the unused monastery building started and it came to the room in which St. Chavara had stayed. The next day that room was to be demolished. However, during the night something happened both to the Archbishop of *Varappuzha* and the Vicar of St. Philomina's church, *Koonammav*. Here is the personal account of the layman Joseph Rocki, *Antikkad, Koonammav* who was bedridden due to swelling on the thigh and severe pain for many days: "I am a carpenter. An evening in the month of April 1749 I had swelling above the knee of my left leg. This caused me pain and tenderness in my left leg. Though I took several medicines they had no results. I lay down on the bed for eighteen days and could not get up even for primary needs.

On 19th evening my uncle, Thomas Kochappu, came to see me. It was he who had taken the contract to demolish the old monastery building. During our

conversation he told me that the archbishop had given instructions to stop the demolition of the old monastery building after a vision. It was in this building that Fr. Chavara had stayed and died. He had already demolished the building up to the next room where he had stayed. The archbishop had sent a written order to stop demolishing of the building, because he had been suddenly inspired by a vision. The Vicar, Father Joseph Pattathussery, reminding the archbishop by sending a note asking whether the room in which a saint had lived, should be demolished. He had sent the note because he had a vision during the previous night.

Then all those who were in the room started talking about the virtuous qualities of Fr. Chavara that they had known. Though I had severe pain I listened to their conversation attentively. Since then, I had great respect and devotion for him, and started praying- One our Father, One Holy Mary and One Glory be to the Father...And also made a promise that, in case I had the favour of healing, I would clean up his room for two days without wages.

Half an hour after this prayer I was in deep sleep. Next morning when I got up at about four, not only I did not have any pain, I was able to get up on my own without the help of others. The swelling I had in the left leg had disappeared. In the morning I had a bath, got ready, and went to the church. I went to the room in which Fr. Chavara had lived, knelt down and prayed. All those who had known that I was bedridden with pain, asked me with wonder what had happened to me.

When I told them how I was cured, they confirmed this miracle by asking me several questions.” (Archives, *Mannanam*).

It is Divine Providence that there would be some lasting evidence for His interventions in the history of salvation. If the Archbishop and the Father Vicar had not been moved by God’s intervention, the Kerala Church and society would have lost the room in which a saint had lived for the last seven years of his life and did several services for the church and the society in Kerala. If this room had been demolished as planned in 1949, the natives of *Koonammav* would have forgotten Fr. Chavara. As his holy remains had been taken to *Mannanam*, the natives of *Koonammav*, could have lost him completely. On the other hand, ever since even from very distant places, people still come in large numbers on pilgrimage to *Koonammav*, kneel in this room, pray for the Saint’s intercession and receive favours.

THE GOSPEL OF ‘DUKRANAN’ MANGO TREE

The mango tree is a symbol of goodness. It gives shade from the scorching sun, spread coolness through its leaves, when it’s heavy with fruits it wouldn’t hesitate to bend down, it gives fruits to both humans and animals, letting its space for birds to make nests, not complaining when it gets stoned, it gives sweetness and sweet memories that can be shared and if needed the mango tree could also turn into wood for making a coffin for funeral. It gives in abundance, receives in abundance, never talks about loss or gain and never shows high and

mighty attitude, that's what a mango tree is. If that's the case, it also gives out a message to humans, the Gospel of a Mango Tree. Fr. Chavara turned that to a gospel of memories for humans.

Fr. Chavara got an opportunity to turn the mango tree into a memory of the gospel. By 1870 he realised that he was nearing the last days of his life. People start at one point and have to end at another point. The limited time he gets in this world should be spent in doing good before he is gone from this place. Sometimes even when one does good, in return he might get stones instead of flowers and he might go through testing times of his tolerance. If one understands this truth then he will be a winner. Fr. Chavara wanted to remind people of this truth and was wondering how effectively he could make them understand this. Exactly at that time as if reading his mind somebody had sent a box of ripe mangoes to him.

During the beginning of 1870, a community leader Tharakan Paarayi sent a gift of the best mangoes available in India at that time to *Koonammav* monastery. Fr. Chavara had shared a few of them with the nearby convent too. Everyone got to taste the sweet mango. He also took some of their seeds and planted it near the monastery's front yard. Fr. Chavara had a very creative mind, he had sent some mango saplings to the prospective Fr. Prior (General) Fr. Kuriakose Elisha Porukara along with a letter, *"A memory which is more lasting and will produce sweet fruits, humans are weaker than this and bound to be fickle minded, to*

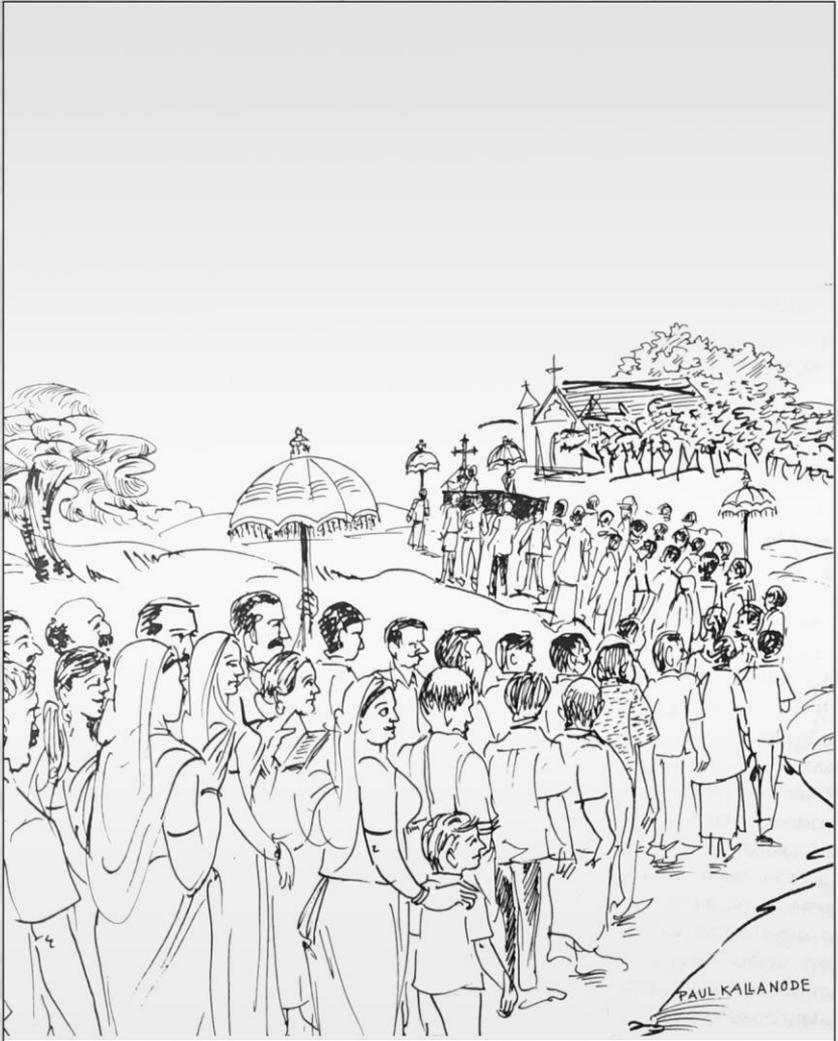
remind all the monasteries of this, plant one of these sweet mango trees in each of our monasteries, and call it Dukran, as a memorial”.

Just like Fr. Chavara took away the attention from him to the mango tree, many times he'd reminded others not to have any other memories of him in their minds. He was afraid of only one thing in life. It was the testing times at the time of his death. He was afraid of his mind faltering in front of the tricks played by Satan at that time. It wasn't his fear of death, he said he had lived with the blessing he received at the time of his baptism until the time of death, but was only afraid of the powerplay of the evil one at that time.

The mango saplings Fr. Chavara had sent out to monasteries kept growing, but he passed away within a year in 1871. Fr. Chavara had called the mangoes '*Dukran*' or '*Memory*', and later on the mangoes got the name of *Prior Mangoes* by adding Fr. Chavara's official name to it. Over a period of 116 years this special breed of mangoes started being known as *Prior Mangoes*, and the saplings are available in the nurseries only in that name.

The mango tree at *Koonammav* at the age of 102 years went dry. In 1975, the Prior Fr. Melesus Palat who was there at the *Koonammav* monastery, with the permission of Philomina Church, got the dead tree cut down and made small pieces of its trunk and sent a piece each to all CMI, CMC ashrams and convents. These pieces are kept respectfully as if these are relics safeguarding the memories of Fr. Chavara. (Letters of Chavara 70-71, 115-116).

The mango tree may be considered a symbol of St. Chavara. He was the tree that gave shade to the church of Kerala. Many a times when the people around him went through burning issues, he always provided the cool shade of his peacefulness. He knew seven languages, and he produced plenty of written texts like fruits of love and companionship and shared the sweetness of mangoes with everyone irrespective of their religion or caste. Just as a mango tree becomes a safe home for the birds to settle down in the evenings, his heart also had a place for all, especially for the destitutes and orphans. A mango tree full of mangoes is prone to get stones thrown at it. Similarly, when Fr. Chavara went around and raised his voice for the common good, he also had received many stones thrown at him by crooked people. For the unity of the Holy Church and to save souls he was ready to become dispersed like the chopped pieces of that tree trunk. Just like *the Prior mango tree* is sending out a gospel to humans, St. Chavara Kuriakose Elias is sending out the Gospel to the world through his life. Even though there were no extraordinary events to point out from his life, there were many extraordinary events that had happened with his involvement which became an essential part of the history of the Church and the society in Kerala. Above all, St. Chavara teaches everybody how to convert the agonies experienced in life into ecstasies of eternal life in God.



IN CHAVARA'S HEAVENLY JOURNEY THE PEOPLE ACCOMPANIED HIM

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering,
persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of
the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Romans 12. 12-13

*That calling upon your holy name, I may
Entrust my soul unto the hands of your Son
When my eyes are closed upon the whole world
Grant O Lady, I may see the face of your Son.*

*Pour forth your benison on me your lowly servant
That I may live in joy and love and grace
O benign mistress succor me, I pray
At the hour of my death, save me with care.*

St. Chavara, Athmanuthapam XIV: 69-76

CONCLUSION

There are three phases in the life of a human: physical, mental and spiritual. He may have to face sufferings from all these three phases in his life. When sufferings are accepted as meaningful, he gains relief and hope. Meaninglessness of life creates blocks in one's life. Hence, he rushes to reject his own life, a life in which he can find no meaning.

Let's take the example of a mother. When a mother gives birth to a baby, she has to face excruciating pain. During her pregnancy, physically she had to face lot of difficulties. She had been restrained from doing many things like free movement and inability to eat what she enjoyed. As the months go by, she had to carry an extra weight inside her body. The thoughts about how her baby might look, will he/she be normal looking ...All these could aggravate her worries. Labour pain is supposed to be the worst kind of pain in the world. Still, the fact of having a baby of her own makes her forget the pain and worries she had until then. The willingness of a mother who has gone through such pains to face the labour pain again is only because of the fact that she would be getting one more child of her own. The belief that she had got a child in the resemblance and image of God, makes her feel spiritually fulfilled.

The faith that any type of sufferings one has to go through in this world, always has a reward in the end always gives meaning to these sufferings. According to the meaning a person has, he turns sufferings into love, happiness and peace. The ability to do this by the humans is indescribable. There are mainly two things that makes a person happy and peaceful. The first is, when one experiences freedom with God and humans, he never becomes slave to the acts of evil or fall into the temptations of committing sin, as these two take away the happiness and peace from one's life. The second is, the experience of feeling others are getting happiness and peace because of the actions of him, or through the cooperation of him, not only increase his own happiness and peace but increase others happiness and peace as well.

It's here that one recognizes the spirituality and theology of suffering. It is to make suffering meaningful that God became incarnated, became a subject to sufferings. Thus, he gave us life, that too in abundance. For experiencing this one has to become selfless and should be able to dedicate one's own self for others. To make others understand this easily, Christ, the image and likeness of God, was incarnated as a human. When we relate our life with the life of Christ written in the Gospel, the sufferings in our life become enjoyable. It's identifying ourselves with the sufferings of Christ that gives complete meaning to our life and sufferings.

St. Chavara tried his best to live this theology of sufferings through his own life until his death. He found a way to accomplish this by self-purification and

dedication of his life to the salvation of the souls. For this, he embraced the physical, mental and spiritual sufferings he had to go through from his childhood until his death. He never tried to get rid of his sufferings. Instead, without any complaints he dedicated all the sufferings to God and in return experienced ecstasies. He filled the love of God in his thoughts, words and actions and shared this love with others around him, he made this his life's aim. He was determined never to have a day in his life without doing something good to others. This book which has 33 chapters can also be considered a biography, as it is filled with the occasions in which he had utilised the talents God had given him to alleviate the sufferings of others and do good to them.

St. Chavara had turned agonies into ecstasies in his life, and became a model and inspiration to all who are going through physical, mental and spiritual sufferings irrespective of their age or status in life. Those who explore his life carefully will find in his life a book for learning. There are two things that we find very important in this book: First, all people from children to the elderly, will have sufferings. Secondly, the Christians usually have to live through one of the three different states of life: The family life, the religious life and the priesthood. Fr. Chavara's life is a guiding light to all of them. In short, he was a genius and a legend, especially in the act of turning agonies into ecstasies.

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