

Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 19

**SPIRITUAL LEGACY OF
KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA**

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SPIRITUAL LEGACY OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Naiju Jose Kalambukattu CMI

Editor

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THEOLOGICAL STUDIES ON SAINT CHAVARA

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

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

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

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

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

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FOREWORD

Recent times, the last two decades in particular, have witnessed a phenomenal increase in the interest in the person and accomplishment of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara. This holds equally true both for ecclesiastical circles as well as the civil society. Voluminous record of things written and said about him and the series of programmes and initiatives highlighting his legacy are abundant proof of this. Increase in Chavara research followed increased interest in him. Consequently, Kuriakose Elias Chavara has been drawing more and more accolades: pioneer of social reforms, visionary in education, institution builder, leader with infectious energy, ecclesiastical and liturgical reformer, champion of women emancipation, leading figure of Renaissance in Kerala society, leading literary figure, etc.

Despite all the research on his accomplishments so far, Chavara continues to be an enigmatic figure for many. He evokes dismay since his accomplishments came surmounting the manifold handicaps that the time, place, social and cultural mores marked his birth. No historian with a scientific bent of mind would encounter a reason in the genealogical or sociological or cultural pathways that could explain Chavara's prodigious accomplishments. Hence, Chavara calls for an approach through an entirely different path.

Eulogizing Chavara for his social, educational, literary, institutional accomplishments does more distort than reveal his persona. For, such accolades, however noble and well-intentioned they may be, miss the facet in his person that defines him.

Given the many handicaps that his life context thrust upon him, his achievements in diverse fields are not just unique; they

far exceeded his potentials. This calls for a shift of focus from his achievements in the fields of education, social reform, literature, pastoral care, etc. to the defining mark of his personality. Chavara was a deeply spiritual, God-saturated man. In Christ, he had found a "key" he could liberally use to "open the treasures of God's wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). All his endeavours bore the stamp of wisdom and knowledge sourced with his spiritual key.

The right approach to Chavara's many accomplishments in the Church and in the society is to regard them not as his feats, but as what the Spirit accomplished in and through him. Spirituality is living a life where the Spirit can have his sway and find a fertile ground to bear his fruits (Gal 5:20-22). A spiritual person's mandate is to become the fifth Gospel and to witness through one's life that God's every word is reliable and effective to this day.

For a wide section of God-believing people, there is something about God that makes him a matter of inconvenience and discomfort. God is seen as someone who steals the fun from our life! So God gets reduced to human's desperate choice, when all other options run out. This is by no means a modern problem. Humans have always entertained a natural hesitation to get too close to God. God is often seen as playing a villainous role in our life. It was in response to the diagnosis of this spiritual problem that St Irenaeus of second century said that 'God's glory is in that humans be fully alive.'

Irenaeus' choice of the adverb is significant. He does not say that God's glory is in that humans be 'spiritually' alive. Rather, humans be 'fully' alive. 'Fully' should be taken to mean 'in all aspects' - physically, emotionally, intellectually, culturally, politically, etc. Close alignment with God does not

make us impotent or deficient in any sphere of our life. Instead, it magnifies every human potential.

The 'burning bush' episode in the Book of Exodus (Ex 3:2) is an indicator of what God-alignment can accomplish. Moses recognized God's presence in the burning bush since the fire was not seen to reduce the bush into ash. That is something fire would normally do. In this instance, however, the fire did not burn the bush to ashes, rather gave the bush a surplus glow and sparkle. A clear signal that the more one is aligned with God, a quantum jump in one's potentials and accomplishment gets assured.

This and this alone suffices to explain Chavara's supra-normal feats. To make the point clearer, what Chavara really accomplished was his unhindered faithfulness to the Lord. His material and historical feats are what the Spirit accomplished in him.

The life of Kuriakose Elias Chavara is no less a guidebook for anyone on a serious spiritual pilgrimage. Without right discernment, this pilgrimage can be hazardous. Many seeking God seriously turn back disillusioned and frustrated. Their grievance is that their faith does not pay off. It rarely dawns on them that the sterility and impotence of their faith is due to the misconception that a set of ideas and propositions can be faith. Diagnosing the greatest weakness of Christianity as practiced today, the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard writes, "Christianity still exists and in its truth, but as a teaching, as doctrine. ... what has been lost, what seems to exist no longer, is the ideal picture of being a Christian."¹ The missing content in Christian life he refers to is the faith incarnated in one's choices and conduct.

1 "The Point of View" in *Kierkegaard Works*, translated and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1998, 129-130.

What Kierkegaard bemoaned as the impoverished form of Christian life is the neo-Gnosticism that Pope Francis cautioned us to beware of. He called it “a purely subjective faith whose only interest is a certain experience or a set of ideas and bits of information which are meant to console and enlighten, but which ultimately keep one imprisoned in his or her own thoughts and feelings.”²

As far as faith is concerned, countering and containing a set of wrong ideas and doctrines with a set of right ones does not take us far enough. What faith calls for is its embodiment in our concrete living. That is precisely what is suggested by spirituality. Spirituality is a lifestyle where faith sinks down from ideas and doctrines to one’s dispositions of heart and concrete choices in life. Spiritual pilgrimage is a journey bridging the gap between one’s faith propositions and faithful living. When the gap is bridged, its truth will be pronounced and proclaimed by the dismaying display of one’s material and historical accomplishment. The life of Kuriakose Elias Chavara takes its place as a spiritual guidebook because his life with all its accomplishments is a convincing display of the Spirit’s working in him.

The many articles in this volume on the Spiritual Legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara offer a guided tour through the contours of Chavara’s spiritual pilgrimage. The seventeen articles in this volume together become a mosaic of his spiritual biography. As a mosaic, they make his life appear on our mental horizon in different colours – showing how his life perfectly fits into Biblical paradigms, how he employed his sojourn into the literary world for an effective catechesis, how his life exemplifies as a rich

2 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 94.

specimen in the line of Christian spiritual legacies of eastern and mystical traditions.

I am sure that as we reflectively go through these articles, we will get to hear the Lord's comment ringing in our ears, 'Only one thing is needed, and Kuriakose Elias Chavara has chosen the right thing' (Lk 10:42). May everyone who reads this book feel both inspired and compelled to choose the 'one thing needed' in life and become part of Chavara legacy of living life in its fullness and excellence!

15 August 2025

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PREFACE

The spiritual legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara is very rich and multifaceted, deeply rooted and grounded in Scripture, Eastern Christian traditions and an integrated life of contemplation and action. His spirituality was marked by intense love of God expressed in long hours deep prayer, contemplation, eucharistic devotion, meditation on the passion of Christ and Marian devotion. At the same time, his deep commitment to the works of mercy, service to the sick, aged and the orphans, promotion of education and catechesis, founding of the indigenous religious congregations and the first Catholic printing press and the promotion of communal harmony shows how he combined the prayer with service or active life.

The present volume titled *Spiritual Legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara* in the Theological Studies on Saint Chavara (TSSC 19) attempts to shed light on Chavara spirituality with its biblical, eastern and integrated contemplative-active spiritual vision. The volume is a collection of sixteen articles having different perspectives by various authors who delve deep into the spiritual legacy of Chavara.

As the work is in print, a word of appreciation to George Kulangara, Dean Faculty of Philosophy, DVK Bengaluru, for the beautiful and meaningful Foreword to the book, and Benny Thettayil, Joy Philip Kakkanattu, Tomy Thomas Kattampally, Josin George Kaithakulam, Bincy Thomas Thumpanathu, Joel Chiramal, Joy Philip Kakkanatt, Siby Kavattu, Annie Noel, Rincy Maria, Geo Pallikunnel, Grace Thomas, Ann Mary Madavanakkad, Jojo Pareckattil, Peter Kochalumkal and Sebastian Elavathingal, the contributors of the articles that were originally published in the *Herald of the East*, Sebeesh Vettiyadan CMI for the design of the cover page, Jestu for the necessary assistance, Dharmaram Publications for taking up the project for publication, and my confreres and friends for the support and encouragement.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

SPIRITUAL LEGACY OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Naiju Jose Kalambukattu CMI

The life and mission of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a versatile genius and a saintly person, was a song of praise for God's mercy, grace and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. He believed that holiness is a response to God's initiative of love, and not attained by human effort alone. St Paul highlights that salvation is a gift of God's mercy, not human merit, and that through the Holy Spirit, we are renewed and called into a life of grace and hope (Tit 3:4-7). Chavara, a man of solid faith, deep trust and true love, had the awareness and conviction that his mission and ministry – ecclesial and liturgical renewal, founding of religious congregations, pastoral and catechetical initiatives, social and educational reform, serving the poor and the marginalized, spiritual renewal of families – were not his doing alone. He often reflected on them with a generous and grateful heart and his writings reveal a total reliance on God's grace and mercy, not personal glory. God's mercy worked through his willing heart that loved God and the humanity.

Chavara's Scripture-centred Spirituality

Chavara integrated Biblical insights voluminously into his writings, teachings and spiritual discourses, for his spiritual life was firmly grounded in the Word of God. His profound understanding of the Bible and its application to Christian life are well reflected in his works. They serve as a rich reservoir of biblical insights, for they beautifully blend Bible with

practical guidance for spiritual growth, family life and social transformation. Therefore, as he swam against the current of his time, he could uphold the Gospel values of love, forgiveness and justice; and inspire countless believers to lead a life rooted and grounded in the Gospel values. Chavara read the signs of the times and interpreted them in the light of the Gospel to bring hope to the lives of thousands of people. He encouraged a deep personal relationship with Christ, highlighted the importance of Christian families as the foundation of faith, and he wrote extensively on the role of parents as spiritual guides and the need of daily family prayer.

Chavara's writings reflect and reveal his deep trust in God's providence, especially in the face of challenges. He exhorted, "Entrust yourself to the Divine Providence when you are faced with trials and tribulations, diseases and difficulties".¹ His letters and spiritual writings are full of exhortations for moral integrity and sanctification. "God's will always and everywhere," was the watchword of his spirituality. Chavara wished to be conformed to the will of God, for he was convinced of the fact that "God's will be done and will be performed."² He realized that the discipleship demands denial of one's self and will (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34). His letters register the same, "Our task is only to arrange for the work to be done. God will give us the money for it, because all this is God's work our competence here is only to work."³

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- 1 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Chavarul: Testament of a Loving Father*, revised and updated edition, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2018, Part 1:20.
 - 2 CWC, Vol. III, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, Mannanam: St Joseph's Press, 1990, 1.
 - 3 CWC, Vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/5, 81; Lucas Vithuvattickal, "A Life Full of Virtues," in P. Kalluveetil and P. Kochappilly, ed., *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 103.

Chavara's motto, "The Lord is my portion" (Ps 16:5), was a profound declaration of faith, devotion and commitment to the Lord. As the Psalmist experienced, he trusted and believed in God as his ultimate treasure, surpassing all earthly possessions and desires. To phrase it differently, for Chavara, God's love and promises outweighed all earthly possessions and desires. As his motto denoted, the Lord was his supreme good and he found his satisfaction and fulfilment in the Lord, and his detachment from all that is not God was key to his life. It also meant for him that God was the source of his happiness and blessing.

Chavara firmly believed that God was the source of his security, hope and inheritance; and his own words expressed the same: "Oh my God: You are my love, my joy, and all my fortune. If not in you, how could I live my life? You are my breath, my food and my drink. What a solace have I in you!"⁴ These musings of Chavara may have their basis on the Jesuan words: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5), and practised detachment from all that is not God. Kochumuttom comments: "Having God as one's possession, naturally one does not need anything else; in and through Him one indeed has everything. Hence, all else other than God become quite insignificant, and one spontaneously becomes detached from them, which certainly is the real spirit of poverty."⁵ Possessions constitute a formidable obstacle in a disciple's bid for the crown of salvation. Jesus reiterated: "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Lk 14:33). Jesus implies that to be his

4 CWC, Vol. II, *Atmanuthapam* (Malayalam), trans. Mary Leo, *Compunction of the Soul*, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1989, 2:141-146.

5 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2017, 111.

disciple is to relativise every other thing in life: family or wealth, prosperity or health or fame. He means that Kingdom of God must come first in the list of goals and priorities in a disciple's life.

Giving up the family inheritance and possessions, Chavara wished to be a genuine follower of the Lord and practiced the instruction: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all your possession, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, and follow me" (Mt 19:21). Chavara exemplifies himself to illustrate the seriousness and urgency of the teachings of the Lord and shows us how absolute and radical are the demands of discipleship.

Chavara's actions supported prayer and his prayer supported action. In the words of Pope Francis, the blending of both prayer and work is the ability to cultivate an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity (EG 262).⁶ Chavara could blend the contemplative life of Mary, who sat at the feet of the Lord (Lk 10:40) and the active service of Martha well in his life. As Pope John Paul II teaches, "The missionary must be a contemplative in action. He finds answers to problems in the light of God's word and in personal and community prayer" (RM 91),⁷ Chavara urges every Christian disciple to take up the challenging task of combining prayer with activities and activities with prayer, one leading to and enriching the other. Pope Francis reiterates, "Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with

6 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html; accessed on 16.01.2025.

7 https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html; accessed on 16. 01.2025.

the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out" (EG 262). Chavara, even in adverse and difficult moments of life, never lost the energy or fervour because he recognized the significance of deeper union with the Lord in prayer and adoration, and hence, he amalgamated both prayer and work. Though Chavara, during his era, felt the urgent need of throwing himself into the *work of the Lord*, he always gave priority to enter into communion with the *Lord of the work* in prayer. Through the life-example, he taught his followers that a true disciple needs to be both Martha and Mary, and he challenged their priorities so that the fellowship with the Lord was ensured by being with the Lord and hearing his Word before the work for the Lord was done. His readiness to cater for the spiritual needs of the people entrusted to his care even in the life-threatening situations⁸ reveals not only his spirituality of contemplation and action but also his close imitation of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11).

Chavara urged the people to imitate Christ's teaching to "Love one another" (Jn 13:34) and exhorted them to be charitable and respectable and to forgive the shortcomings of fellow brethren. He admonished, "Forgive the mistakes and shortcomings of each other. If you do so, you will experience peace on earth and eternal reward in heaven."⁹ His love knew no limits and condition, for he did not nurse any grudge against anyone, and in case, someone insulted him he made it sure that they were treated with love and respect (Mt 5:39, 41-42). An example of his heroic practice of the virtue of love was, as mentioned above, the administration of the sacrament of anointing of the sick to a person suffering from small-pox, although many dissuaded him from doing so

8 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 7.

9 *Chavarul*, 1:1.

due to the fear of contagion.¹⁰ He advised: "Days on which you have not rendered any good to others will not be reckoned in the book of life. Be desirous of others' love and respect than they becoming fearful of you. Let no beggar leave your home empty handed; likewise, don't hesitate, as much as you can, to give alms."¹¹ Chavara longed to be conformed to Christ who emptied and humbled himself (Phil 2:6-7) and became poor for the sake of the humanity, and to imitate Christ he had taken humility as the fourth vow.

Chavara's life and works displayed the biblical invitation to imitate Christ (1 Cor 11:1) and to live a life of Gospel values, love, humility and service. His life reflected Christ's forgiving love, sacrifice and obedience and his various ministries and initiatives of charity namely, old age homes, orphanages, and schools, embody the Gospel message to love and serve one's neighbour (Mt 25:35-40). The founding of two indigenous congregations for men and women as *Besrauma*, a house built on a hilltop for all to see, a *spiritual resort* or a *mirror of virtues* was a creative and positive response to the biblical ideal of Christian perfection (Mt 5:45; 1 Pet 1:16). He encouraged the faithful to read and meditate the Word of God regularly, for he understood the transformative power of the Word in personal and communal life; he insisted on the family prayer where all the members participate actively that echoes the biblical ideal of unity in worship.

Benny Thettayil explores the biblical ideal of *Bes-rauma*, an experience of 'a house on the hilltop', the spiritual and

10 Mareena & Benny Thettayil, "Theological Virtues in the Life of Chavara," in Benny Thettayil & Naiju Jose Kalambukattu, ed., *Father and Doctor of the Church: A Theological Reading of the Life and Writings of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications & Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2024, 285.

11 *Chavarul*, 1:14.

monastic ideal that the indigenous Carmelites of India lived and propagated. *Bes-rauma*, was an experience of 'a house on the hilltop', was enjoyed by the members, appreciated by the people, admired by the authorities and immensely benefitted by the people far and wide. It was not just a spiritual ideal, but also a physical expression realized in the various foundations of the early Carmelite monasteries in Kerala. The first part of the present study is an investigation into the ideal in the light of the various mountains appearing in the narratives in the Bible and their sacred significance in the Ancient Near East, both the Testaments of the Bible and in various faith around the world. The second part of the study is a closer reading of the life and works of the early members of the Carmelites of Kerala, in the light of their aspirations expressed in various ways. *Bes-rauma*, for them was a harmonious blend of both the contemplative and active aspects of religious life, following the example of Elijah on Mount Carmel bringing together social action and mystical experience.

Joy Philip Kakkanattu, in his article on the biblical foundations of Kuriakose Elias Chavara's vision and mission, explores the theme of God's Mercy in *Compunction of the Soul*, the poetic work of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. His literary works are soaked in Biblical concepts, metaphors, similes and other direct and indirect references. Kakkanattu makes a study of the theme of God's Mercy in relation to Chavara's vision of life, vocation and mission; and his Mariological understanding related to God's Mercy. Chavara is convinced that incarnation is the ultimate manifestation of God's Mercy.

Tomy Thomas Kattampally makes a study of the biblical vision of Chavara and focuses on the themes of divine sovereignty, human frailty, and God's providential care as presented in the first chapter of the *Compunction of the Soul*. Chavara's gratitude for

God's mercy culminates in his desire to offer himself completely to God. His life and writings invite the believers to recognize God's providence, respond in gratitude, and mould their lives in accordance with God's will. According to Kattampally, in the *Compunction of the Soul*, Chavara intertwines his personal experiences with biblical theology, highlighting God's mercy, human dignity, and the transformative power of faith, and further, invites the readers to deepen their relationship with God and embrace a life of holiness and gratitude.

Josin George Kaithakulam makes an exploration of Psalms as a powerful resource for spiritual growth. A soul who seeks and wants to live for God reveals the spirit of the Psalms, namely, praising God for who He is and what He has done and for His faithfulness and love forever while affirming the greatness of our God who is to be ever talked to, walked with in order to reach His house. Kaithakulam highlights the embeddedness of Chavara in the Psalms, and he proceeds with connecting the sum total of Chavara's spirituality with the purpose of Psalms.

Bincy Thomas Thumpanathu draws parallels between Chavara's prophetic dimension of leadership and the legacy of Old Testament prophets. Following their model, Chavara confronted the social and religious issues of his era through pioneering works in various fields. Thumpanathu demonstrates that Chavara's prophetic vision transcended social reform, aiming at a holistic transformation of the society. The author revisits Chavara's prophetic vision and mission, and invites the readers to reflect on the enduring relevance of his mission in promoting justice, uplifting the marginalized, and nurturing the communities in the Gospel values.

Joel Chiramal and **Joy Philip Kakkanatt** read through the Parable of the Prodigal Son in *Dhyānasallāpanāṁ*, where Chavara makes

a synthesis of the Sacred Scripture and his personal reflection. They analyse some passages from it to understand the inner dynamics involved in the way he quotes the Scripture. Chavara's presentation of this parable in a 'Three-Scene Perspective' shows his radical interiorization of the Sacred Scripture as well as a three-fold identification, namely, with the character in the parable, society of the nineteenth century and the culture of the time. Chavara presents himself before God and the community as a corporate personality; and the Sacred Scripture was the focus and foundation in his reformation pedagogy. Chiramal and Kakkanatt propose it as a paradigm for modern-day pastors. This method of radical interiorization and contextual interpretation is a challenge as well as scope for all those who wish to follow the footsteps of the Word Incarnate.

Chavara's Eastern Spiritual Dispositions

Chavara's spiritual legacy deeply rooted in the Scripture is enriched by Eastern spiritual and ascetic traditions. Eastern theology tends to prioritize harmony, balance, and the integration of the spiritual and material realms. The central themes often include the interconnectedness of everything in the universe fostering the unity of all creation, the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment or union with the divine, and an emphasis on mystical experience and practices such as meditation and contemplation. Eastern theological vision gives priority to spiritual experiences through meditation, prayer, and often reveres nature as sacred and fosters a deep respect for the environment and all living beings. According to Saint Ephrem, the right attitude and response to the nature are of wonder, gratitude, admiration, love and respect; and he delineates the sacramental character of the created world and the potential of everything in it to be the indicators of the creator. To see these hidden links an eye of faith illumined by the light of the Holy Spirit is a necessary requirement. Thus,

guided by faith, the early Syriac writers reflect the Semitic roots of Christianity in a special way and their mode of discourse is essentially in the tradition of the Bible, and it lacks the rhetorical overlay.¹² In the Syriac tradition salvation is re-entry into the lost paradise, a 'homecoming and a return to the Father's house' (*Hymns on Paradise* 14.7).

Chavara, a prominent figure in the Syriac Christian tradition, particularly within the Syro-Malabar Church was instrumental in spearheading renewal in the Church. He addressed both internal and external challenges, promoted unity and cohesion in the Church, and urged its members to deepen their faith through his loyalty to the Church and its liturgical life, theological heritage and spirituality. He embraced a life of asceticism, holiness and personal sanctification, for asceticism was a dominant feature of Christian life in the Syriac tradition and a motivational force of the ecclesial life. Drawing from eastern monastic traditions, he valued silence, detachment and simplicity. He regarded the purity of heart as the basic virtue, and the abiding compunction of heart prompted him to compare himself to the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-24) and lament his sins and plead for God's mercy. Nevertheless, Chavara, a brilliant paradigm of virtues and holiness of life, believed that each Christian at baptism is betrothed to Christ the bridegroom; and he could maintain the purity of the robe of glory put on at his baptism. He stated at his deathbed: "By the grace of God, I dare say that with their [Holy Family] help never had I experienced an occasion where I was deprived of the grace received in baptism."¹³ At the passing of

12 S.P. Brock, "The Syriac Orient: A Third 'Lung' for the Church?," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 71 (2005), 57.

13 Moolayil, *Positio*, 548. Quoted in A.M. Mundadan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, revised edition, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 392-393.

Chavara, the sisters wrote about his holy and inspiring life in their chronicle: "This Father of ours was a model and guiding light to all the Christians in Kerala. Moreover, he was a pillar that supported the Catholic Church because of the zeal he evinced in its expansion and in the protection of faith."¹⁴ He mirrored Christ and established the convents and the monasteries to remain as "the mirror of virtues and the "abode of saints."

The biblical simplicity is perfectly echoed in Chavara's writings, and they are steeped in the tradition of the Scripture, Fathers of the Church and the symbolic-poetic style of thought with a lot of symbolism, imagery and types. The symbolic-poetic approach of Chavara with the *heart's eye* (Eph 1:18) attempts to wonder at and be grateful to the mystery of Christ in the history of salvation. He advises: "Falling prostrate in the holy presence of God Almighty you must look at Him with *the eye of your heart* and worship Him."¹⁵ Chavara had *the eye of his heart*, and he could see God's providence in everything, and experience and enjoy the uninterrupted vision of God, for the *eye of the heart* suggests profound comprehension of the mystery of God beyond mere intellectual understanding of the depths of inner being. As a man of prayer, Chavara prayed truly, for according to the famous aphorism of Evagrius, "If you are a theologian, you will pray in truth; if you pray in truth, you will be a theologian" (PG 79, col. 1180B).

A careful study of his spiritual experience and the general picture of his writings, be it historical (*The Chronicles*), literary (*Compunction of the Soul, Dirge, Anastasia's Martyrdom*), spiritual (*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*) and the *Letters*, reflect and

14 *The Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent*, vol. 2, 2002, 23.

15 *Dyanasallapankal* in Chavara Achante Sampurna Kritikal, vol. 3, Mannanam, 1981, 25.

reveal the nature of his theology and spirituality. He was an apostle of the Eucharist who urged his confreres to love Jesus present in the most Holy Eucharist with all their hearts.¹⁶ With ardent love and deep faith, he longed to see the Lord and to have an enlightened understanding of the history of salvation and truth explained through his poetic logic and vision, committed to the service of the Church and its pastoral concerns, had tender devotion to Mother Mary and proudly described himself as a servant of Mary, and sought God's will always and everywhere. A re-visiting of the life and works of Chavara through the lens of Eastern/Syriac mind would help us to unveil the Eastern/Syriac theological vision enshrined in them.

Siby Kavattu, in his article, investigates the theological foundations and spiritual dispositions of Chavara within the framework of Syriac Christian tradition. According to Kavattu, the theological vision of Chavara was rooted in the Syriac tradition of sacramental understanding of God, humans, and the world. His writings reflect the unique characteristics of Syriac Christian tradition, i.e., the integration of revelation and faith as mystery, the experiential approach to theology, and the emphasis on biblical and liturgical foundations of theologizing. Chavara's profound love for the Church, and his special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary are key aspects of his spiritual legacy, which are also the characteristic traits of Syriac Christianity.

Annie Noel, in her article, delves into Chavara's spirituality through the lens of Eastern Christian mysticism and draws parallels with the wisdom of Saint Isaac the Syrian. Chavara's spirituality reflects Eastern Christianity's concept of God's unconditional love. Noel explores asceticism, virtuous life, prayer, and contemplation as means of experiencing the

16 *Positio*, 548.

divine love. Chavara's life illustrates detachment from worldly distractions and continuous dialogue with the divine as integral to experiencing God's love. Eastern Christian spirituality emphasizes prayer, contemplation, and embracing divine love amidst trials and suffering. Chavara dedicated himself to prayer and trust in divine providence; and his compassionate concern for others, especially the marginalized, reflects divine love in action. His life inspires everyone to embrace spirituality through asceticism, virtuous living, prayer, contemplation, and compassionate service.

Rincy Maria delineates the Eastern mystical paradigms in Chavara, and she affirms that his profound faith in Christ and deep love for the Lord had a transformative effect, shaping him into a vessel of divine grace. Inspired and strengthened by the Word of God, Chavara undertook extraordinary measures for his community. Constant communion with the Almighty not only cultivated a rich inner life within him but also impelled him to dedicate his life to the service of God. Through meditation, he established unity with God, and in and through his actions, he embodied solidarity with the marginalized and impoverished. Chavara emulated the fervour of Elijah, driven by an unwavering zeal for the living God. His teachings emanated from his own lived experiences. In the tradition of Carmelite mystics, Chavara embraced spousal mysticism, wherein the relationship between humanity and God mirrors a spiritual marriage—an intimate and reciprocal bond of love and commitment. Rincy Maria underscores the Abba (*appa*) experience as the core of Chavara's mysticism.

Geo Pallikunnel expounds the compunction of the heart as an ascetic ideal practiced both in the East and the West to reach the monastic way of perfection, and he highlights this Eastern ascetic ideal in the life and works of Chavara. The ascetic and monastic

movements were started both in Egyptian desert and in the Syriac Orient to flee away from the corrupted and corrupting world and to mourn for the sins of the self and of others. In the Syriac tradition, anchorites were called 'mourners' (*'abīlē*). Many spiritual authors witness to this ascetic ideal of compunction of the heart both in the desert and in the Syriac traditions. Focusing the research on *Atmanuthapam*, Pallikunnel establishes that Chavara follows the tradition of compunction of the soul.

Chavara's Integrated Spirituality of Contemplation and Action

Chavara's spiritual journey was rooted in intimate union with God in prayer, silence, and contemplation, which overflowed into concrete acts of love, service and reform of the Church and the society. Kochumuttom affirms that Chavara was indeed "a prayerful person of many undertakings...a *karma-yogi*, meaning 'a contemplative in action.'"¹⁷ Chavara's legacy reflects a heart fixed not on worldly achievements and success, but on the Kingdom of God and therefore hope in eternal life should lead us to invest our talents as the good and trustworthy servants (Mt 25:20-23; Lk 19:16-19). As the Parable of the Talents sheds light, God values not just the success but the commitment, consistency and above all faithfulness in what has been entrusted to us, and the investment of the talents for the renewal of the families, communities, society and the Church. As in Chavara, the renewal begins with a humble heart open to the Holy Spirit, for he was a man on whom there was an imprint of the Spirit that he could transform the lives by planting the seeds of God's love and truth. The constant awareness that salvation is the gift of God's mercy and love, unearned and undeserved, frees us from the pressure of performance, self-reliance or pride, but invites us to be humble

17 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 365.

servants with profound gratitude. "He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy" (Tit 3:4).

Chavara invites and rather challenges us to experience the depth and intensity of God's unconditional love (Jn 3:16) and live renewed lives rooted and grounded in God's mercy and love (Eph 3:17). To phrase it differently, make the life a response to God's gift, self-gift in love, drawing nourishment and strength from, and being anchored in the love of Christ. Chavara's deep contemplative prayer life kept him rooted in Christ's love and his works of mercy grounded him in the Gospel values. Chavara wrote, "Love of God is the root; love of neighbour is the fruit." He reveals the very foundation of Christian spirituality as a way of life that flourishes only with being rooted in God's love through daily prayer and sacramental life; and expressed in actions that are natural overflowing of true love of God into love of others, especially the poor, the suffering and the marginalized. St John admonishes, "Whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen" (1 Jn 4:20). Chavara rooted himself in deep prayer and contemplation and the celebration of the Eucharist and bore fruit in the forms of multifaceted ministries he had undertaken for the renewal and wellbeing of the Church and the society. In other words, his life deeply rooted in the love of Christ inevitably blossomed in love towards his fellow human beings.

Grace Thomas, in her paper, explores the kenotic spirituality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. Grounded in the Christian concept of *kenosis*, Chavara's life exemplifies total dedication to God and the humanity. His deep spiritual commitment, humility, and altruism shaped his identity as a "man for others," reflecting Christ's own pro-existence. His leadership was marked by servant-hearted humility, simplicity, and hard work, and he never sought for

recognition, even while holding high office. Chavara lived a life of detachment, choosing poverty, enduring suffering with grace, and cultivating a deep Eucharistic devotion. His kenotic lifestyle was not theoretical but actively lived in solidarity with the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. According to Grace Thomas, in a world increasingly marked by individualism, Chavara spirituality offers a countercultural model of Christian discipleship rooted in love, self-sacrifice, and faithful obedience to God's will. As the Church faces various challenges, the legacy of Chavara is a source of inspiration and renewal, urging the believers to embody Christ-like compassion and humble service.

Annie Noel, in her article, explores the familial spirituality of Chavara who saw the Christian family as a sacred space of divine love and holiness, for he profoundly valued the family as a Domestic Church, a place where faith is lived, love is embodied, and holiness is nurtured. Drawing inspiration from Trinitarian theology and the Holy Family, Chavara emphasized prayer, sacramental life, moral education, media discernment, and daily acts of charity as core pillars of family life. The saint advocates a home where every act becomes an occasion of grace. Parents, as primary educators, are called to model virtue, guide their children spiritually, and form homes that reflect the divine communion of the Trinity. According to Noel, Chavara's vision is deeply pastoral and prophetic, urging families to transform ordinary life into a holy offering. Chavara makes a clarion call in today's fragmented world to make every Christian family a sanctuary of love, where God's presence is made real through unity, forgiveness, and sacrificial love.

Ann Mary Madavanakkad, in her paper, expounds the spiritual treasures hidden in the *Chavarul* that offers pastoral directives to the families to form them Domestic Church. The document underscores the sacred nature of family, describing it as a

reflection of the Most Holy Trinity and an image of heaven, where members are bound by mutual love, respect, discipline, and a shared pursuit of holiness. *Chavarul*, in its first part offers precepts for fostering a God-centred family life grounded in prayer, peace, and sacramental living, and the second part focuses on the holistic upbringing of children in faith and virtue. Madavanakkad highlights that Chavara's insights remain relevant in the contemporary contexts, addressing moral and spiritual challenges that threaten the unity in the family. He emphasizes the need of spiritual communion, unity of mind and heart, and bonds of blood and affection, after the model of the Holy Family and rooted in divine love. The *Chavarul* is a pastoral guide to safeguard the spiritual integrity of the Christian families.

Jojo Pareckattil, in his article, explores Chavara's life, writings, and enduring legacy, focusing on how he serves as a patron and spiritual companion for those seeking reconciliation with God. His personal devotion to confession, illustrated profoundly in his mystical poem *Ātmanutāpam*, reveals a life marked by deep contrition, humility, and divine longing. The article examines his theological insights on repentance, his Last Testament, and his pastoral letters, especially to the nuns at Koonammavu, which highlight suffering as redemptive and every breath as a prayer. Chavara's teachings underscore the transformative power of sincere confession, not only as a means of personal sanctification but also as a way to restore the moral and spiritual integrity of the Church. According to Pareckattil, in an age losing its sense of sin, Chavara's life is a powerful reminder to the world, urging the believers to have spiritual renewal; for his personal sanctity and the writings are roadmap for the penitents, leading them towards divine mercy and inner transformation.

Peter Kochalumkal, in his article, delineates the characteristics of prayer in the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, a collection

of meditations. For Chavara, prayer was rooted in gratitude, humility, and an intimate friendship with God. His meditations reflect a deep sense of unworthiness and at the same time they are filled with gratitude for God's mercy. He emphasized sincerity in prayer with a pure heart that acknowledges one's weakness. His writings present prayer as a soulful dialogue with God, where the soul engages in conversation with God as if it were between the intimate friends. Chavara emphasized the necessity of self-awareness and repentance, as they are the first steps toward divine communion. He encouraged all to avoid even venial sins so that we might grow in spirituality. His meditations on Christ's Passion deepened his longing for reconciliation, highlighting confession as the gateway to divine mercy. According to Kochalumkal, the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father* presents prayer as a total surrender to God's will, achieved through adoration, repentance, and trust; and Chavara spirituality offers a roadmap for the believers who seek communion with God.

Sebastian Elavathingal, in his article, presents Kuriakose Elias Chavara as God's work of art. Everyone who successfully imitates Christ and reaches spiritual perfection is a "work of art". The human person becomes ultimately an "artwork" by transforming his/her physical materials into a spiritual or a transfigured body. It is against the background of this Biblical view of creative imitation of Jesus Christ that we try to understand the teaching of prayer that Chavara has laid out in his works. The four steps of prayer - reading, solitude, meditation, and contemplation taught by Chavara are aimed at the transformation of a praying person which can be compared to the formation of an artwork by the hands of the divine Artist. Chavara is an "artwork" that has attained spiritual perfection. He bears witness to the transfigured glory of Jesus who entered his glory through his suffering, death, and resurrection.

Chavara's spiritual legacy, a harmonious blend of fidelity to the Scripture and Eastern contemplative depth and ascetical practices, urges us to live and love more deeply and serve more faithfully for the glory of God and the good of His people. Chavara, whose subject of preaching, nutrition for his piety and soul of his spiritual undertaking was the Sacred Scripture, invites us to "be the doers of the Word, and not merely hearers" (Jam 1:22). He challenges us to seek holiness in daily life, by living the Word of God and embracing a spirituality of service, humility and communion that bridges between contemplation and action. Let the rootedness in Christ's love make us fruitful for the wellbeing of the Church and the society after the model of Chavara, a true son of the Church.

RIISING MOUNTAINS AND PROXIMITY TO THE DIVINE

Biblical Ideal of *Bes-rauma*

Benny Thettayil CMI

1. Introduction

The desire to live a consecrated life was at the heart of the founding fathers of the first indigenous religious congregation of India. Personally, each one of them had varied ideas of the life that they had dreamt of. However, their common understanding of consecrated life could be gleaned from the way they expressed their vision on the *style* of life, the *abode* of life and the *outcome* of life that they were going to live. In the local language, they termed the *style* of life that was in store for them as *vanavasa*, *othungiparkal* and *mintatakkam*. They also had a vision of the *abode* that they were to live in, and they called their future dwelling *bes-rauma*, *darsanaveedu*, *tapasubhavanam* and *punyasamketam*. They envisioned the *outcome* of the style of life that they lived the in abode as each of the members becoming a *punyathinte kannadi*.

2. The Monastic Ideal of *Bes-rauma*

Out of these, in the present reflection, we focus on their future dwelling that had to be a *tapasubhavanam*, which could be loosely translated as a 'house of austerity' where one learns, practises and lives the evangelical counsels of chastity (*brahmacharithvam*), poverty (*agathithvam*) and obedience (*cholvili*). By means of the practice of these evangelical counsels, they hoped to turn their abode into a *punyasamketam*, which translated is an abode of virtues. Their practice of virtues in turn, would make it a *darsanaveedu*, a house to behold the Lord, for themselves and

for others – for themselves as they live in continuous *darsan* of the Lord, and for others, as the visitors, who come in search of spiritual help and solace, could have a reflection of the *darsan* that the dwellers of the abode enjoy.

In this ideal, the community at Mannanam is envisioned as an interpretation of the categorical and defining statement of Jesus regarding his disciples: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:14-16). The life of the first community at Mannanam, according to Thomas Kochumuttom, was going to the interpretation of abovementioned gospel text in action.¹ One of the epithets employed for the abode of the consecrated ones is *bes-rauma*, a Syriac term which means “a house on high”, which has its reference to Mt 5:14, cited above.

3. The Biblical Shadows of *Bes-rauma*

Biblically, we do not have a reference to “a house on high” in the Scripture. However, there were “the high places” that the Israelites inherited from the Canaanites. In the prophetic times, these were condemned as they lured some people to fertility and other cultic practices. Josiah’s reform narrated in 2 Kings 22-23//Chronicles 34-35 includes the destruction of *the high places* both in the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. However, the fascination for the mountains, which were intimately related to the revelation of Yahweh on various occasions in their history, and the recognition of the

1 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 1), Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2017, xviii.

divine significance of the high mountains was maintained by the Israelites. Hence, Isaiah prophesies: "It shall happen in the latter days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills" (Is 2:2). Since in ancient Near Eastern culture, mountains were seen as the dwelling places of the gods, Isaiah pictures the mountain of the Lord as the highest, symbolizing the superiority of the God of Israel over all other deities.

The founding fathers chose a hill at Mannanam to establish the first house for the new community of the consecrated men to make it a *bes-rauma* both in the literal and spiritual sense.² They chose the hill for a few reasons. First of all, there is the visibility factor. Like the "city set on a hill", it is visible to all; it becomes a *darsanaveedu* for all the inhabitants around the hill. Secondly, there is the general notion of the sacredness attached to the heights, which is culturally and spiritually significant. And finally, away from the residential area, the community would have a literal experience of *vanavasa* and the joy of solitude. Jacob Kaniyanthara gives a narrative of the meeting they had with the bishop: "One day both of the Fathers, Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, having discussed the question of going for religious life, decided to approach the Very Rev. Bishop for permission. During a recreation time they said to him: 'Both of us would like to lead a withdrawn life. We beg to be permitted to do so.'"³

Like the custom prevalent in the biblical Ancient Near East, the early fathers knew that the hills and mountains held

2 *Complete Works of Chavara*, Mannanam (1990): 13-14; *Chavara Achante Sampurna Kritikal I*, Mannanam, (1981): 16-17.

3 Jacob Kaniyanthara, *History of the Foundation of Mannanam Monastery* (manuscript unpublished, available at the Archives of St Joseph's Monastery, Mannanam), 7-6.

an important spiritual and cultural significance in India. Their fascination for the mountains is deeply rooted in the scripture where they had read countless times the narratives of the divine revelation connected to the mountain as the locale where it majestically transpires. In the following discussion, we retrace the journey of the people of Israel and the disciples of Jesus and see how the various mountains and deserts played their role in shaping the spirituality of the people of God.

4. Ancient Mountains and their Sanctity

Down through the centuries, people of all races and civilizations have associated mountains and hills with heightened sense of spirituality. The Israelites were no different. In their worldview, the cosmos was a three-part structure consisting of the heavens, the earth, and the sheol, which was the dark spiritual place beneath the earth. The higher you rose in physical spheres, the closer you got to God. Hence, it made sense to the biblical people to draw closer to God by building temples, altars, and shrines on the high places such as hills and mountains. Moreover, throughout their history, various theophanies transpired on high mountains.

The people behind the Scripture were so natural that the nature was the only means for them to get close to God and in them, they saw God manifested. Hence, the Bible is strewn with magnificent references to the nature – from the flowing rivers to the still waters; from soaring trees to sprawling, fruitful vines. The starry skies stretched above them gave them thunder, rain, and lightning and vast expanses of wilderness and lush forests below with caves, hills and valleys; mighty waters that housed large fish and all of these complete the narrative of the Lord's creation seen in the Scripture.

None of the above inspired more awe in the biblical people than the high mountains, as they were close to them but were majestically high as one of them came to be immortalized as the dwelling place of the Most High, to which Micah called his people: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths" (Micah 4:2). Right from the story of the tower of Babel, the fascination of the people is evident for what is high like a mountain, because its peak is closer to God.

The association of the mountains with God was caused by the belief that the skies above are the abode of God. The Scripture has multiple references to the belief that heaven (the skies) is the place where God "dwells." The narrators of the various stories and experiences in both the Old and New Testaments referred to the heightened spiritual presence on the mountains (Is 66:1, Mt 6:9, 1 Pet 3:22). For this reason, it was natural for the people of Israel, after the building of the temple on Mount Zion, to develop a tradition of pilgrimage in which several times a year, they drew closer to God by scaling Zion, the holy mountain of God.

5. The Biblical Mountains

Mountains and hills played a very significant role in the spirituality of the biblical people. It is also a known fact that in the first part of the Book of Genesis, especially in the first nine chapters, neither mountain nor hill is seen. The purpose of God in creating the mighty mountain ranges has nothing to do with drawing humanity closer to Himself in physical proximity because he is close to the earth walking with them" (Gen 3:8-10). It is perhaps, the steadfast nature of the mountains and their physical immensity that filled the ancients with awe. The attraction of the mountains, especially their peaks is only symbolic; they further symbolize the awe-inspiring nature of God

and his transcendence and unattainability. The mountainous creation reveals the nature of its Creator – the mountains reveal the grandeur of God. The symbolism behind these majestically peaked formations has a potential to draw human hearts closer to him. The story of the mountain as the place of theophany and the people's faith that God is somehow more significantly present on high places and lonely places⁴ than in other locations made them seek the face of the Lord in these places.

The various events of theophany that unfolded the redemptive plan of God that transpired on the mountains involving the people of God, affirmed the faithfulness of God, the sovereignty of the Most High, and the all-surpassing might of the Creator. Above all, these events revealed the steadfastness of God in fulfilling his covenant promises. The following are the mountains that are related to the various divine revelations and covenants.

5.1. Ararat, the Mountain of Hope

Ararat is considered the mountain of hope. The mountain is associated with the mountain on which the Ark of Noah came to rest at the end of the great flood. Ararat, as a mountain, is sacred to the Armenians, who believe themselves to be the first race of humans to appear in the world after the great flood. The biblical story of the Mountain is related to the new creation with the family of Noah. Hence, the mountain is referred to as the mountain of hope. Ararat inspired hope because after the great chaos, it is here that the new Eden with the representatives of the entire creation was left by God to refill the earth.

4 Benny Thettayil, "The Lure of the Desert: St Chavara and the Attempted Flight from the World, in *St Kuriakose Elias Chavara: To the Desert and Back* (HE 12/2 (2016), 167-179, characterizes the vocation to religious life as the lure of the desert.

In creation, God brought order to the chaos that had existed. After the repeated chaos of the deep,⁵ which manifested in the flood, it is the mountain of Ararat that humanity was finally back on solid ground – a new creation! After Noah and his family emerged from the ark and stood upon the mountain,⁶ God gave them an everlasting promise, establishing a covenant. “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Gen 9:11). According to the biblical account, the family of Noah made burnt offering on the mount where the Ark settled. Ararat was the first of all the mountains or high places where an altar was made for Yahweh he was worshipped with a sacrifice (Gen 8:20).

There is a Persian legend that refers to the mountain as the cradle of the human race. In the Christian era, with the continued fascination for the biblical mountains, the Armenians built a monastery to commemorate St Jacob, who is said to have tried

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- 5 Ppazynych Wasyl, “Why Mount Ararat entered the Bible” in https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350689009_Why_Mount_Ararat_entered_the_Bible_EN, posted on 2021/04/07, accessed on 18.12.2024, in his research, argues that this second chaos, which is called the great flood at the time of Noah, was caused by a tsunami.
 - 6 Armen Petrosyan, “Biblical Mount Ararat: Two Identifications” in *Comparative Mythology* 2.1. (2016) describes the history of the biblical Ararat, the mountain on which Noah’s Ark was grounded. Petrosyan makes two general identifications of the mount: They are on the Armenian Highlands: the mountain of Corduene and Masis, situated respectively in the extreme south-east and extreme north-east of modern Turkey. According to the most ancient sources, Corduene was the object of identification. However, since the 12th century, Masis became more popular. Petrosyan deals with the myths and legends associated with these mountains and the history of identification of the biblical Ararat.

repeatedly but failed to reach the summit of Great Ararat in search of the Ark.⁷

The Bible never refers to *Ararat* as a mountain. However, probably as a later designation, Mount Ararat does exist as two volcanic cones named Greater Ararat and Little Ararat. Geographically, Mount Ararat is a snow-capped dormant volcanic mountain in the extreme east of Turkey, bordered by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran. Medieval Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi (410-90) wrote in his *History of Armenia* that Noah and his family settled in Armenia before moving to Babylon. Later, Japheth, his son returned to the area around Mount Ararat and established the roots of the Armenian nation.⁸ The Armenians consider Japheth the founding father of their nation. Mount Ararat is so sacred and significant in the history of the Armenians as a symbol of hope that it is depicted on the Armenian coat of arms.

Since it fell beyond the borders of the Promised Land, it seems not to have become a sanctuary for the subsequent generations of the Israelites. Moreover, unlike other high places and sanctuaries in the Promised Land, which were somehow related to one or the other Patriarch, Ararat was part of a narrative with a mythical colour and a mythical hero.

7 "Mount Ararat" in Encyclopaedia Britannica, updated: 11 Dec. 2024 in <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Armenian-people>; accessed 18.12.2024. However, it is to be noted that the biblical reference would indicate that the ark came to rest on mountains in an area called Ararat, which would mean either that Ararat was an area in which there was a mountain on which the ark came to rest, or it was a mountain range. 2 Kings 19:37 would indicate that Ararat was a land and not a mountain, and Jer 51:27, would rather recognize Ararat as one of the kingdoms.

8 Moses of Chorene, *History of Armenia*, B.P. Pratten (trans.), Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 2020.

5.2. Sinai, the Mountain of the Covenant

Mount Sinai is arguably one of the most sacred places mentioned in the Bible. There are only a few covenants in the Bible made by God with his people. The most significant of them is the Mosaic covenant, which took place on Mount Sinai. For the people and for the subsequent generations, this mountain became a symbol of the covenant and a reminder that the Lord had come down from heaven to meet with his people.

Although there is no firm consensus on where exactly Mount Sinai is located, it is assumed to be located between the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba in the Sinai Desert. According to Paul, Mount Sinai is located in Arabia (Gal 4:24). Stephen knew that Moses was familiar with the area since an angel appeared to him in a burning bush, "in Horeb, the mountain of God" (Ex 3:1), which Stephen refers to as "in the wilderness of Mount Sinai" (Acts 7:30).⁹

According to the Book of Exodus, Sinai was the place where the Lord interacted with the people in a spectacular manner. The Israelites came to the desert of Sinai and camped by the mountain and there, God spoke to Moses. The people washed their clothes and were consecrated and on the third day, the Lord came down on the mountain. On the third day, God descended on Mount Sinai with a terrible display of power - amidst thunder, lightning, cloud, and a loud trumpet, as the mountain was covered with smoke, the Lord came down in fire (Ex 19:18). The people were so frightened that they asked that God might speak to Moses and let Moses be the intermediary (Ex 20:19).

9 The majority of the scholars opine that Sinai and Horeb are two names for the same location, but there is a minority that holds that these were distinct places.

Moses was called up the mountain and was given the 10 Commandments on the mountain. On account of the presence of the Lord on the mountain, the holiness of God itself was attributed to the mountain. The people were warned to stay away from the mountain itself, for it would be holy ground. And if anyone even touched the bottom of the mountain, he/she would be put to death (Ex 19:12-13). Mount Sinai itself was not holy, however, it is the theophany on top of that mountain made it holy.

Sinai as the mountain of God became a unique place where a few privileged people were able to behold God.

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank (Ex 24:9-11).

God meeting with Moses and the leaders on this mountain in a collective theophany reiterated the designation of Sinai as the Mountain of God. The holiness of Mount Sinai was attested by the fact that it was here that God appeared to Moses for the first time although the narrative names the mountain Horeb. God asks Moses to treat the mountain as holy (Ex 3:5). Moreover, it was already recognized as "the mountain of God" (Ex 3:1).

The mount is also considered by the people of God as the mountain of great mercy. It was here that Moses encountered the burning bush and where God spoke to him and, out of his mercy for the slaves, sent him on a liberative mission to Egypt to bring them out of slavery (Ex 3:1-6). The mercy of the Lord was also evident in his act of the provision of the tablets of the 10 Commandments for a second time, after the destruction of the first set over the idolatry of the people. Throughout the Scripture,

Mount Sinai is associated with the reception of the law as was venerated as such. After the exile, Nehemiah recognized the mountain and publicly prayed to Yahweh: "You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments" (Neh 9:13). In the New Testament times, according to Paul, Sinai metaphorically represents the law and Old Covenant (Gal 4:24-25).

The presence of the Lord is so fascinating to the one who comes in contact with him that he/she becomes oblivious to the time and space – ecstasy. On one of his ascent to Mount Sinai, Moses stayed in the presence of the Lord for a long time – for about 40 days! So much so, that the people grew restless and began to think that Moses had perished. The lapse of time in the living presence of the Lord is not comparable to the measure of time in the ordinary world. It is this captivating and absorbing power of the presence of the Lord that kept people attracted to Mount Sinai.

Just as part of the holiness of God was attributed to the mountain, so the glory of the Lord that was manifested on the mountain was infectious. When Moses ascended the mountain for the second time, and spent an extended time in the presence of Yahweh, the glory of the Lord reflected on his face. When Moses came down the mountain, the people saw his face shining with the glory of God. The altered appearance of the face of Moses made the people afraid of him, so he put a veil over his face so he would not frighten the Israelites (Ex 34:29-35; cf. 2 Cor 3:7). Mount Sinai signified the glory of the Lord.

Sinai is also important in the tradition of the prophet Elijah, who has a direct relationship with the Carmelite tradition. Fleeing the threat of Queen Jezebel, Elijah travelled forty days until "he

reached Horeb, the mountain of God" (1 Kings 19:8). At Horeb/Sinai, Elijah sheltered in a cave where he met the Lord who spoke to him with "a still small voice", which the NRSV translates as a "the sound of sheer silence." (1 Kings 19:12). The parallels between the experiences of Elijah and Moses are significant. Both were sustained by God for 40 days and nights. Both were in the same place, meeting with God and hearing His audible voice.

5.3. Nebo, the Mountain of Vision

Mount Nebo is the highest peak of the Abarim mountain range that passes through Jordan and which culminates in the Arabian desert. The Book of Deuteronomy tells us that geographically, Mount Nebo is in Moab, an ancient kingdom in the land now known as Jordan. Located in Madaba, East of the Dead Sea, Mount Nebo is considered to be a revered sacred mountain. It borders to the north by the "valley of the springs of Moses". Mount Nebo holds great religious significance and as a sacred mountain, it is a place of pilgrimage.

From the biblical accounts we understand that Moses who had led the people of Israel in an exodus out of Egypt across the desert for more than 40 years, went up from the plains of Moab to the summit of Mount Nebo, which is opposite Jericho.

Then, the Lord showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negeb, and the plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. And the Lord said to him, 'This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, 'I will give it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.' (Deut 34:1-4).

God made Moses view the land. In the vision on Mount Nebo, Moses viewed a land, which would belong to the tribes

of Israel, rich with food and water and pastures and flocks and massive in its dimensions. Yahweh allowed him to see their earthly home.

We call Mount Nebo *the mountain of vision* for two reasons: First of all, what the Lord showed Moses was too vast a territory for Moses to see. It seems that God gave him a vision of what was to belong to his people; what he saw was something supernatural. Secondly, what he was shown was futuristic. He saw what was to become of the territory in the future. At the time of the vision, Israel had not crossed into the Promised Land. They had not yet settled there. Their tribal allotments were not made yet. And, although they had taken a census, yet technically, the tribal territories had not been demarcated as belonging to Gilead, Dan, Naphtali, Ephraim, Manasseh, etc.¹⁰ On these two counts, what Moses was shown was something similar to a prophetic vision.¹¹

According to the tradition, Mount Nebo also claimed the venerable remains of the prophet as Moses' life ended on the mountain and he was buried there.¹² For the Lord had said to

10 This understanding does not preclude the possibility of the biblical use of *vaticinium ex eventu*, which in historiography, is a prophesy written after the author already knew the events that were being "foretold".

11 Certainly, much of the surrounding landscape would have been visible as today, from the summit of Mount Nebo, you can have a view of the Dead Sea, the West of Jericho in the Jordan River valley, Bethlehem, and on a clear day, the city of Jerusalem and the hills.

12 However, there is no biblical reference to his burial on the mount and the exact location of the burial if Moses remains unknown. To make the issue more complex, there is also a tomb to the east of Jerusalem in the Judean wilderness that claims to be Moses' final resting place! Davide Bianchi, *A Shrine to Moses: A Reappraisal of the Mount Nebo Monastic Complex between Byzantium and Islam*, offers new insights into the memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo, one of the most renowned coenobitic monasteries in the Byzantine

Moses: "There on the mountain that you have climbed, you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people ... You will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel'" (Deut 32:48–52; Num 27:12–14).¹³ As the final resting place of the great prophet and the liberator, the sacredness of the mountain is doubled.¹⁴

It is owing to the recognition of the sacredness of the mountain that on the highest rocky outcrop of Mount Nebo we find the remains of a Byzantine church and a monastery, built in the 4th century in honour of Moses. The church continued to be a pilgrim centre for about 600 years. The church and monastery were unearthed in excavations in the 1930s. In 1993, the area was purchased by the Franciscans and once again, they converted

period in Arabia. Between 2012 and 2014, the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum carried out new archaeological investigations in the monastery and in the church. The excavation in the central nave unearthed an empty tomb adorned with alabaster marble, placed on the highest point of the mountain. See https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358115936_A_Shrine_to_Moses_A_Reappraisal_of_the_Mount_Nebo_Monastic_Complex_between_Byzantium_and_Islam.

- 13 Moses' prayer to see the Promised Land would certainly be answered, but he would not enter the land because of what happened when he struck the rock at Meribah Kadesh (Deut 3:23–28). Some traditions hold that it was because he did not uphold God's holiness among them. For some reason, Moses or the people had flared the anger of the Lord and Moses had to take the brunt of the ire, which prevented him from entering the Promised Land.
- 14 Although it is not specified in the Bible, some Christians have assumed that Moses was buried on the mountain. Hence, despite the fact that there are only two references to Mount Nebo relating to the final days of Moses in the Bible, as it is considered the final resting place of Moses, it is counted amongst the sacred biblical mountains.

it into an active monastery to continue the sacred legacy of the mountain of vision and have kept it open to modern-day pilgrims.

The idea of the sacred that is cherished by human beings is a combination of the transcendence and immanence - so close, and yet so far away. That may have been the experience of Moses as God showed him the Promised Land that his descendants would inherit, but he would never enter it himself (Deut 34:1-4) - so close, yet so unreachable.

5.4. Carmel, the Mountain of Zeal

Mount Carmel is in the northwestern Israel, with the city of Haifa is on its northeastern slope. It divides the Plain of Esdraelon (east) and Galilee (north) from the coastal Plain of Sharon (south). Its seaward point, Cape Carmel, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. The mountain's highest point is 1,791 feet above sea level.

Its name is derived from the Hebrew "Karem El" which means "vineyards of God." In Hebrew it also meant, "the garden" or "the garden-land." In ancient times, the area comprised of vineyards and rich grazing land. Carmel is also remarkable for its profusion of aromatic plants and wildflowers. In various places of the range, ancient wine presses can still be pointed out; but the vine is almost entirely extinct. Today, the slope of the mountain is covered with luxurious vegetation, including oaks, pines, and olives. The mountain later became a place of Christian pilgrimage and was the site of the formation of the Carmelite Order. The spiritual significance of Carmel is so great that it is considered sacred by the Jews, Christians and the adherents of the Bahá'í faith. Epiphanius, the Church Father in his *Panarion* (1:18) attests that the Essenes of the modern times consider Mount Carmel the spiritual stronghold of the northern Essene

movement.¹⁵ The remains of the Bahá'í Messiah, the Báb, was laid to rest within a shrine there. The Bahá'ís around the world venerate the mountain as a sacred place and made it a worldwide place of pilgrimage.

The fame of Mount Carmel was not triggered by the biblical stories. In ancient Canaanite culture, high places were considered to be sacred, and Mount Carmel was no exception. Human habitation there dates back to Neanderthal times, and its recorded fame as a sacred site may have reached as far away as Egypt and as far back to the 15th century BC. However, except the fact that it was a high place, we do not have any evidence for considering its sacredness prior to the biblical times. It is possible that like several other sacred sites in Canaan, the people of Israel took over the high place and adapted their traditions to it.

Carmel is first mentioned in the biblical stories as the location of Jokneam, a town conquered by Joshua (Josh 12:22). At the time of the division of the Promised Land among the tribes of Israel, Carmel was made the western boundary of the tribe of Asher (Josh 19:24). The place must have been strategic that King Saul established a victory monument there after his triumph over the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:12). The surrounding lands must have been a fertile area full of pasturelands that the wealthy, but foolish Nabal had his home there and it is there that David's wise wife, Abigail lived (1 Sam 25).

One cannot estimate how long before Elijah's time, there had been a sanctuary and an altar erected in honour of Yahweh

15 J. van Oort and E. Thomassen, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Bks II & III De Fide* (trans. F. Williams), Leiden: Brill, 2013. *The Panarion* is an important source of information on the Jewish-Christian gospels, early Christian heresiology, the Gospel of the Ebionites, and the Gospel of the Hebrews.

on Mount Carmel, that its ruins had to be repaired by Elijah as soon as it was safe enough to do (1 Kings 18:30). Elijah chose Carmel for the assembly of the people, because such assemblies were usually held at some holy place (1 Kings 18:19). Again, the custom of congregating to Carmel for the celebration of the new moon and of the sabbath (2 Kings 4:23), speaks volumes for the sanctity of the place. At the time of King Ahab, the sanctuary was devoted to Baal, probably the Baal-Melqart honored by nearby Phoenician rulers such as the father of Ahab's queen, Jezebel.

Biblically, the most spectacular event in the history of the sanctuary at Carmel was the face-off between Elijah the prophet of the Lord and the numerous prophets and priests of Baal and Ashera. The point of contest was the power of the gods. The underlying issue that triggered the contest was the question of why neither Baal, the God of agriculture nor Yahweh the most powerful, both believed to be capable of producing rain, had not done so during a long period of intense drought (1 Kings 18). Here, the mountain, located in a kind of coastal no-man's-land between Israel and Phoenicia, represented a strategic high ground where the Phoenician Baal and the Israelite Yahweh were locked in a battle for superiority. Elijah repaired the ancient altar of Yahweh, and in a dramatic manner, put the prophets of Baal to shame as he produced fire from heaven to consume his sacrifice to Yahweh, which the prophets of Baal had failed to make Baal do.

Proving the spiritual point that Yahweh was the true God, Elijah proceeded to make a physical conquest as he commanded the converted crowd of onlookers to slaughter the prophets of Baal in the valley below. He then prayed to the Lord to end the drought and in response to his prayer, a rain cloud appeared in the sky and the king had to depart promptly, lest he should be stopped by the rain. Mount Carmel became the mountain of zeal

because on the mountain, Elijah, on account of his unwavering faith in Yahweh, and his zeal for Yahwism, not only converted the entire people of Israel from Baal worshippers to Yahweh worshippers but also rooted out all the signs of apostasy from the land.

The zeal of Elijah was visible not only in the spectacular witness on Mount Carmel, but also in the prayers that followed depict the zeal of the prophet. After the sacrifice, the prophet "went up" again to the top of Carmel, and there he prayed fervently for the breaking of the drought. There, he naturally asked his servant to "go up and look toward the sea".¹⁶ This was repeated seven times as if the prophet was intensifying the prayer until a sign of the clouds appeared in the sea (1 Kings 18:42-44).

The zeal for the Lord was formerly found in the inhabitants of Carmel who refused to be subject to the foreign powers. The inhabitants of Carmel were numbered among the peoples whom Nebuchadnezzar threatened with destruction, if they denied him help in his present conflict with powerful enemies (Judith 1:8). There also we are told that despite his menaces, they all, "with one mind", refused to obey his orders, whereupon the Assyrian king swore to avenge himself of them (Judith 1:11-12).

The sacred mountain was the place of residence of Elijah (2 Kings 2:25). Elisha, the disciple and the successor of Elijah, who inherited a double measure of his zeal, later lived in Carmel (2 Kings 4:25), and according to the tradition, there was a guild of prophets and Jewish holy and zealous men who lived on Carmel

16 From the place where he prayed the view of the Mediterranean Sea was blocked by an adjacent height, which could be ascended by his servant in a few minutes and a full view of the sea be obtained from the top.

well into Christian times. The cave of Elijah, which was the centre of the School of the Prophets, is still found at Carmel.

Jeremiah (46:18) and Isaiah (35:2) referred to Carmel as a symbol of majesty and Amos spoke of the mountain as a place of refuge (Amos 9:3). Jeremiah would further predict that Israel would return from exile, and that Carmel would be known as a rich pastureland for the flocks of the people of Israel (50:19). The mountain had come to be depicted in literature as occupying a prime place in the hearts of the people as the lover of the Song of Solomon tells his beloved: "Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel" (Song of Solomon 7:5).

The sacred site was a reputable sanctuary in the first century AD. According to Tacitus, Vespasian, the Roman General, who later became the Emperor, went to Carmel during the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 AD and consulted an oracle there and reports that Carmel was the name "both of the mountain and the Deity. They have no image of the god nor any temple; the tradition of antiquity recognizes only an altar and its sacred association."¹⁷

Mount Carmel, as a sacred mountain, has a rich history of religious significance. It was sacred to the early Christians and so, Christian hermits settled there as early as the 6th century AD. Along with the already revered Jewish sanctuary, tradition has it that the Carmelite religious order was founded on Mount Carmel in the 12th century and became a global order.¹⁸ After the

17 Tacitus, "Hist." 2:78. First of all, unlike the Roman practice, according to the Jewish tradition, no image or stature of the deity could be seen in the sanctuary. Secondly, since the name of the mountain denotes "the vineyard of El", the name carries the name of the Deity.

18 The Carmelite Constitution of 1281 enshrines the following statement: "From the times when the prophet Elias and Eliseus dwelt devoutly on Mount Carmel, holy fathers both of the Old and

reformation of the order by St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, the Carmelite mystics, the Discalced Carmelites, who emerged from the reformed tradition, reoccupied the site and built a monastery there in 1853.

Mount Carmel is a spot where the nature, faith and history remain intertwined. Apart from the biblical stories that we have considered above, the area was the stage for natural human evolution. In 1996, the caves along the western slopes of Mount Carmel were granted UNESCO World Heritage Site status because these caves hold rich archaeological evidence of human evolution and prehistoric cultures dating back thousands of years.

5.5. Moriah/Zion, the Mountain of Faith

At the highest point in Jerusalem, outside the walls of the Old City, lies modern Mount Zion. Every year, thousands of pilgrims flock to this ancient and sacred mountain to visit the biblical sites like the tomb of David, the Last Supper Room and numerous other places related to the sacred history of the Jews and Christians. Biblically, Zion can refer to one of three places: the hill where the most ancient areas of Jerusalem stood; the city of Jerusalem itself; or the dwelling place of God.

Mount Zion is mentioned for the first time in the Bible in 2 Sam 5:7, in connection with the capture of the fortress of Zion by David. Later, the mountainous area came to be known as the city of David. However, the land that David captured and the mountain that he claimed for the Lord as Zion was the stage for yet another spectacular biblical drama mentioned in scripture well before David's conquest of the area. It is upon this hilly range of sacred land, where Abraham, motivated by his faith in

New Testament... lived praiseworthy lives in holy penitence by the fountain of Elias in a holy succession uninterruptedly maintained."

the Lord, agreed to do the unthinkable. He bound his only son, laid him on the firewood that the young boy had carried up the mountain and prepared him for a sacrifice that was demanded by God (Gen 22:1-24). We call the mountain *the mountain of faith* because God had demanded of Abraham the most extreme proof for his faith.¹⁹

This is the part of the hill that had become the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite where David saw the avenging angel standing between heaven and earth (1 Chron 21:16). David purchased²⁰ the threshing floor, built an altar to the Lord and made burnt offerings and peace offerings which the Lord consumed sending fire from heaven (1 Chron 21:26). It is on the same site that Solomon, son of David built a magnificent temple of the Lord (2 Chron 3:1).

When Zion was declared the spiritual and political capital of the whole of Israel, it also received a much larger identity based on the Davidic covenant. The consolidation of all the powers in Zion would transform the temporal mountain into an eternal city, the city of David (Ps 89:3-4, 29, 35-37; 132:11-18). The covenant is key in our understanding of the significance of Mount Zion. In the Sainaitic covenant with Israel, God established himself as the only king and Israel was to have no other king but God. Even with the introduction of the monarchy, a human king would

19 Mount Zion was formerly known as Moriah. The Jews know Mount Moriah as Har haMoriyah and Har haBayit, which was translated as Temple Mount. Mount Moriah, was the place that Abraham walked in faith, followed by God's provision. The events on the Mountain on that day so long ago were a foreshadowing of things to come. God would take His one and only Son, the Son whom He loves, and sacrifice Him so that we might live forever with Him.

20 There is a difference in narration between 2 Sam 5:7 and 1 Chron 21:26. While 2 Samuel claims that it was captured, 1 Chronicles will have the land purchased by David.

not replace God but represent God to the people. This covenant, foreshadowed in the blessing of Jacob (Gen 49:10), takes its full force when God furthers his covenant with David and establishes an everlasting dynasty (2 Sam 7:16). According to the biblical narratives, David was buried "in the city of David" (1 Kings 2:10) and today, it remains one of the most important pilgrim centres for Jews in Israel.

Far more than a sacred mountain and an important historical and spiritual landmark for Israel, from the time the Ark of the Covenant was moved into the city, and subsequently to the temple that Solomon built, Zion became a spiritual, social and political hub that represented the presence of God. This is what Prophet Isaiah sees as the future of his people in their relationship to Zion:

Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore (Is 2:3-4).

According to Prophet Joel, the people of God would come to "know that I am the Lord your God, dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain. So, Jerusalem will be holy, and strangers will pass through it no more" (Joel 3:17). And the psalmist presents it as the permanent dwelling place of Yahweh: "For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation. "This is My resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it" (Ps 132:13-14).

The eternal city and the eternal dynasty made the mountain loftier. In the post-Davidic era, Zion gathers an ethereal significance. The scripture has the word Zion used numerous times to describe the mountain as: the City of David (2 Sam 5:7, 1 Kings 8:1, 1 Chron 11:5), the city of Jerusalem (Is 33:20, Is 40:9, Ps 51:18), the entire Jewish nation (Is 33:14, Zech 9:13), the Millennial Jerusalem (Joel 2:32, Is 2:2-3) and the eternal or Heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22, Mic 4:7, Is 35:10). The meaning and symbolism of Zion can vary depending on the context.

The significance of Zion is not confined to the Old Covenant. In the Bible, the term "Zion" holds great significance and is used in both the Old Testament and, to a lesser extent, in the New Testament. According to the Book of Revelation, it is from Zion that all children of God can obtain an intimate and sacred view of the Almighty God – as He was, as He is, and as He will be (Rev 1:8). Zion is the essence, foreshadowing, the symbolism of the Kingdom of Heaven. Referring to Jesus, the eternal King who has laid claim to the eternal throne, the Book of Revelation further notes that the Kingdom of Heaven is real, a physical entity with a literal cornerstone. In a metaphorical sense, Jesus is the equivalent to that cornerstone, which is important to a Christian's spiritual foundation. He is the fulfilment of the Davidic Covenant that made Mount Zion into the real eternal city.

Here are some key aspects of the concept of Zion in the Bible: Mount Zion is a term that encompasses both a geographical location in Jerusalem and a range of spiritual and symbolic meanings. First of all, Zion is the symbol of God's presence, for it is considered the dwelling place of God (Ps 132:13-14). Secondly, it is the symbol of God's kingdom. The sacred mountain is associated with the foundation of God's kingdom on earth, and it is a symbol of hope for the future reign of the Messiah. Thirdly, Zion has a futuristic reference, especially in

the books of the prophets, which speak of Zion in a prophetic sense. These prophecies that refer to Zion often foretell a time of restoration and redemption for God's people, including the return of the Jewish exiles to Mount Zion, the Mountain of God and the ultimate fulfilment of plan of God. Finally, in the context of Christianity, especially in the Hebrew sense, Zion assumes a spiritual and symbolic meaning. It is associated with the heavenly Jerusalem and the assembly of believers in Christ (Heb 12:22-23).

As a temporal and a spiritual structure, Zion, the sacred mountain has played a significant role in the religious and prophetic thought of the biblical people, both in the Old and New Testaments and continues to hold importance in various religious traditions today. Associated with the Ark of the Covenant, presence of God, the future messianic kingdom and the fulfilment of His ultimate plan for salvation and redemption, Mount Zion represents the other-worldly reality.

5.6. Olive, the Mount of Transcendence

The Mount of Olives receives its name from the olive trees that covered the mount in the past. The mount rises up in the east of Jerusalem, separated from the city by the valley of Kidron. According to the data received from the archaeological surveys, the topographic structure of the Mount of Olives has remained almost completely unchanged over the centuries.

We call the Mount of Olives *the Mount of Transcendence*, because the place was the gateway to the transcendental dimension. As the gate to another dimension, the mountain became the burial site for people prior to and after the ascension of Jesus. The mountain was extensively used for funerary purposes in and around the time of Jesus. Vast necropolises, especially from the Roman (1st c BC - 2nd c AD) and Byzantine periods (4th - 5th c AD), are found on the mountain slopes. The burials dating

back to the Middle and Late Bronze Age, i.e., c1600–1200 BC could also be found there. More significant than these, is another funeral complex on the mountain slopes, which is traditionally called the *tombs of the Prophets*. The use of the Mount of Olives for funeral purposes continues to the present day.

In the Hebrew Bible the mountain is called Mount of Olives only once, as part of the end-of-days vision of Zechariah: "On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward" (Zech 14:4). The Bible refers to the sacred mountain also with other names. It is called "the ascent of the Mount of Olives" (2 Sam 15:30) and "the Mount of Destruction" (2 Kings 23:13). The Mount of Olives, "which is on the east side of the city" of Jerusalem is considered to be Yahweh's portal to and from heaven (Ezek 11:23; 43; Zech 14). Hence, this is the mountain of Transcendence.

The Jewish commentaries relate that for three and a half years, the Divine Presence dwelled on the Mount of Olives after having left the site of the Temple Mount in the expectation that the Jewish people would do repentance. The prophets Zachariah and Ezekiel prophesied that from there it would make its return to its proper place in the temple. In some of the references, the mountain symbolized the exile of the Divine Presence from Jerusalem. This is perhaps the background to the prophecy of Zechariah, which establishes the mountain as a place that also symbolizes the return of God into the city, at the time of the future redemption. The eschatological vision of Enoch ascribes somewhat similar significance to the mountain in the end of days (1 *En.* 26:1–3).

It is not very clear either from the biblical references or from the traditional use of the term, why the mountain was called Mount of Olives. Reasonably, one can assume that it was named so after the olive groves that grew on it from ancient times. The Rabbinic Literature holds Mount of Olives in great reverence. An alternate name for the mount found in the Talmud and the Midrash is the Mount of Anointment. It is perhaps on account of the anointing oil that anointed kings and high priests, was prepared from the olives that grew there on the mountain that this name was given to the mount.

Numerous generations of the Jewish people are buried on the Mount of Olives. This is attested to by the burial caves and the memorial tombstones dated to the First and Second Temple periods, that are scattered over the mountain. Various Jewish traditions make a connection between the burial on the mountain with the future resurrection of the dead. *Pesiqta Rabbati* attests: "The righteous will spring up in Jerusalem ... the Blessed Holy One provides for them tunnels ... until they arrive underneath the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and the Blessed Holy One stands over them and the land cracks open for them" (*Pesiqta Rabbati* 31.9).

In the Second Temple Period, the Mount of Olives became highly significant from the cultic point of view and was somehow related to the temple mount. The rabbinic literary sources refer also to the Mount of Olives as serving various needs connected to the temple cult. Partly because the mountain was a burial site, the sacrifice of the red heifer, which was intended to purify the Jews who had come into contact with a dead body, was performed on the Mount of Olives. According to the description in the Mishnah, a bridge was even built for this purpose between the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives, which served the priests engaged in the ceremony: "And they made a ramp from

the Temple Mount to the Mount of Anointing ... along which passed the priest who would burn the heifer, the heifer, and all its attendants" (*Mishnah Parah* 3:6-8).

The Mount of Olives played an additional role at the time of the sanctification of the New Moon in Jerusalem. During the ceremony of the light, the first torch was lit on the peak of Mount Olives initiating the process through which the word went out to the inhabitants of both the land of Israel and the Diaspora (*Mishnah Rosh Hashana* 2:2). In addition to these, on the eve of Passover, the time to abstain from leavened food materials was announced from the peak of the Mount of Olives (*bPes* 14a).

In the age of the Crusaders, more sacred buildings and monasteries were built. Among these are the tomb of the Virgin Mary and the remains of the church of the Saviour, which are located at the foot of the mount. In addition, the sanctuary of the Ascension on top of the mountain is from the period of the Crusaders. From the repeated and revered biblical references to the sacred mountain, we come to assume that although the Mount of Olives was not situated within Jerusalem, the mountain was considered a high place and a sanctuary.

We call Mount of Olives *the Mountain of Transcendence* also because Jesus' procession into Jerusalem began with his descent from the Mount of Olives (Mt 21:1-11). The mountain plays a prominent role as the place of Jesus' agony at the beginning of his passion. Matthew and Mark would have Jesus sitting "on the Mount of Olives" (Mt 24:3; Mk 13:3) from where he gave his apocalyptic discourse. However, Luke would note that Jesus gave his apocalyptic discourse first and subsequently, "went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet" *as he habitually did* (Lk 21:37). Only Luke presents Mount of Olives as a place where Jesus frequented. The night before his death, Jesus went out

with his disciples to the garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives to pray (Luke 22:43-44). This reference to Jesus' practice refers to the significance that the mountain had and Jesus' attraction to it. In the following chapter also, Luke notes that Jesus' repose in this location on the mountain was customary: Jesus "went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him" (Lk 22:39). Additionally, by describing the regular practice of Jesus on both these occasions, Luke is setting the stage for the arresting party to find Jesus and capture him.

The root of the appellation "Mountain of Transcendence" points to the ascension of Jesus narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. Since Mount Olives was the last place on earth Jesus walked before his ascension and is believed to be the location he will return to at the end of time, the Mount of Olives is considered a very sacred place. At the beginning of Acts, Luke states that after Jesus' ascension "they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount called Olivet" (Acts 1:12). Luke recognizes the mountain as both the mountain of the arrest of Jesus, initiating the process of his transcendence, and the mountain from where the risen Jesus ascended to his heavenly glory.

On account of the gospel stories related to the life of Jesus, Early Christian communities kept the memory and location of the gospel events on the mount alive creating various monuments. Emperor Constantine built the memorial church to mark the Ascension of the Lord. Tradition attests that there was a monastery founded on the mountain by Rufinus of Aquileia and Melania the Elder, a wealthy and devout Roman widow. It gradually became a monastic settlement that when the Persians arrived in Palestine in 614, they found numerous priests, monks, nuns and hermits of various nationalities living in churches and monasteries that were erected on the mountain. One of the

ruins of these settlements was excavated near the present-day sanctuary of *Dominus Flevit*.

After the ascension, the angels tell the disciples: "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). The disciples believed in the promise and knew Jesus will not only return, but He will one day return to that same spot on the Mount of Olives, according to the prophesy of Zechariah (Zech 14:4).

5.7. Hermon, the Mount of Transformation

Mount Hermon is a mountain cluster constituting the southern end of the Lebanon mountain range. It is located at the boundary of Israel, on the border between Syria and Lebanon, and is considered one of the most picturesque regions of the country. Mount Hermon was significant in the Bible for a few reasons. The mount marked the northern limits of the Promised Land (Deut 3:8; Josh 11:17; 12:1; 13:5). It also formed the northern boundary of the territory inherited by the half-tribe of Manasseh as well as the northern border of Israel in general (1 Chron 5:23).

"Hermon" is derived from the Hebrew *hrrm*, which means "sacred". It rises to 2,814 metres and is the highest point on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea and it is the second highest point in Lebanon. However, it was the highest mountain in ancient Israel, boasting majestic, snowcapped peaks. Along with melting snow and the abundant rainfall on Mount Hermon, large springs at the base of the mountain form the main headwaters of the river Jordan in which the Lord was baptised.

The mountain has been a sacred landmark since the Bronze Age and has a mention in the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, and as such, its sacred attributes predate the biblical stories. Biblically, in the Old Testament, it is the northwestern limit of Israelite

conquest under Moses and Joshua and in the New Testament, at a closer analysis, it is the mountain of the transfiguration of Jesus. The epithet "Mountain of Transformation" that we give the mountain refers to the transfiguration of Jesus that took place on Mount Hermon.

In the Bible, Mount Hermon has various names. It is referred to as *Hermon* by the Canaanite worshipers of Baal, as *Sirion* by the Sidonians and Phoenicians and *Senir* by the Amorites (Deut 3:9; Ps 29:6). The Seleucids occupied the area after 200 BC. At the base of Mount Hermon, outside the city of Caesarea Philippi, there is a sanctuary called Paneas. It has a cave and a spring that is sacred to the Greeks and god Pan is worshipped there since the time of Alexander the Great. The temples on its slopes bear Greek inscriptions dating from about 200 AD.

The ruins of several ancient sanctuaries have been found on Mount Hermon's peaks and slopes and at its base. Judges 3:3 calls the mountain Baal Hermon, meaning "Lord of Hermon" (cf. 1 Chron 5:23). Aliyan, a minor Canaanite god of fountains, may have been the deity worshiped at Paneas before the Greeks arrived. This might have been the god of fertility called Baal-Hermon, the Lord of Hermon, in Judges 3:3. The Ituraeans who developed a principality in the area, and the Herodian kings Agrippa I and Agrippa II considered the mountain sacred.

Mount Hermon was also revered by the Romans too. The high temple of the ancient world was built on the summit of the mount and is known today as Qasr Antar. The sacredness of the mountain is evident from the ruins of more than 30 shrines and temples that have been found in this geographical area giving the mountain its historical relevance. Beside the Jews, Christians and Muslims, the Druze community also considers it a sacred place and they occupy several villages that surrounds the mountain.

To heighten the sanctity of the mountain, the holy River Jordan has the two major sources at the foot of the mountain.

On the sacred Mount Hermon, the ancient civilizations created places of worship in harmony with the natural landscape. Today many local religious communities who are living in the area continue to experience the connection between the ancient worship and the nature. They go in processions toward the summit of the mountain in order to attain the religious experience that each group is looking for. The sacred mountain has served as a worship place for various kinds of worshippers, and it demonstrates the constancy of the divine presence in the world as various spiritual and religious cultures revered it in the remote part of the ancient Near Eastern world. Despite the countless wars and the occupation of the region by various peoples, the sacred Mount Hermon and its associated spiritual heritage has suffered little adverse impact over the years.

After the Greeks came to the Levant, Pan gradually replaced the earlier local fertility cult. Pan was the god of wild, desolate places, shepherds and flocks, music, fields, groves, and wooded glens. Pan was also linked to fertility, which influenced much of the art depicting the god in the classical world. He was not normally worshiped in the temples but in outdoor settings, like mountainous regions.

Some of the psalms praise Mount Hermon for its loftiness and majesty (Ps 42:6; 89:11-12). The psalmist compared God's people living together in unity to the dew of Mount Hermon falling on Mount Zion (Ps 133:1-3). This illustration is fitting, since the slopes of Mount Hermon, in the north, receive profuse amounts of dew. Mount Zion, in the south, is much drier. The psalmist compared the refreshing dew of Hermon to the blessings of unity in Israel, from north to south. Harmony among God's people is

life-giving. Mount Hermon is also noted for its abundant wildlife (Song of Solomon 4:8).

Some of the biblical scholars hold that Mount Hermon was the site of the transfiguration of the Lord, in which Christ appeared in his true glory as the Son of God, revealing his identity as Messiah and fulfilling the law and the prophets (Mt 17:1-8 / 2 Pet 1:16-18). At the transfiguration, Peter, James, and John – the members of Jesus' inner circle – were eyewitnesses to the Lord's divine glory. Both the accounts of Mathew and Mark note that Jesus led Peter, James, and John up a "high mountain." Although the traditional site for the Mount of Transfiguration is identified as Mount Tabor, as Matthew places the events leading up to the transfiguration in the district of Caesarea Philippi, geographically, Mount Hermon is the closest site for the event. It occurred most probably on Mount Hermon, a short distance to the north of Caesarea Philippi – in the area where Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say I am?"²¹ As Josephus, the historian notes, in those days, the summit of Mount Tabor was inhabited and surrounded by a wall, whereas Mount Hermon afforded enough privacy and seclusion "where they were all alone" (Mk 9:2).

The significance of the event of 'transfiguration' has to be seen in the light of the historical events that forged the relationship between Yahweh and his people. The *glory* of the Lord – the radiant, shining presence of God himself, the 'Shekinah' – had filled the tent of meeting in the desert (Ex 40:34), had appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex 24:16). When the temple of the Lord

21 The teaching of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mount Hermon, was accentuated by the massive mountain peaks behind him, its beautiful snow-clad slopes, its rushing streams, and its sacred character which made the local population revere the mountain as a sanctuary.

was built in Jerusalem, his glory had filled the temple (1 Kings 8:11). Later, it was seen leaving the temple (Ezek 10:18). At the birth of Jesus, the same *glory* of the Lord – the radiant, shining presence of God – appeared to the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem (Lk 2:9-20), indicating that God's presence had come on earth again. And it is that glory that was beheld by the community when the Word became flesh (Jn 1:14). In the event of the transfiguration of Jesus on the high mountain, the *glory* of the Lord – this radiant presence of God – appeared to Moses and Elijah, just as on several other historical occasions. However, in the present event, unlike all other events prior to this, on the mount of transfiguration, it was *Jesus* who reflected the *glory* of the Lord, which is taken to be the personal presence of God, in himself.

Mount Hermon was an ancient sacred place revered by the early Canaanites even before the Israelite conquest of Canaan. It also was one of the 'high places' during Old Testament times. It is covered with snow more than eight months of the year. It is quite probable that Jesus chose this special place to show his personal and unique relationship with God, in all the divine radiance on this resplendent mountain. He chose to have this extraordinary event witnessed by the most respected early leaders of the Jewish religion, Moses and Elijah.²² Although the name of the high

22 There is a tradition that holds that the 'transfiguration' took place after Jesus and his disciples returned from Caesarea Philippi to Galilee. If this were the case, the mountain referred to is Mount Tabor to the east of Nazareth. However, this location is unlikely, first of all, given the fact that Mount Tabor was the site of a Roman military camp at the time of Jesus and access to the mountain for Jesus and his disciples would have been hard to obtain. Secondly, Israel has plenty of mountains, but not many that can be described as high—at least not relative to the rest of the peaks in the land. Thirdly, Jesus and his disciples climbed a mountain near Caesarea

mountain is not mentioned by the evangelists, this site seems far more likely to be the location of Jesus' transfiguration than other possible places that are kilometres away.

The list of the biblical mountains, sacred or not, is long. In addition to the above seven famous and sacred mountains referred to be in the Bible, a cursory survey of the Old Testament would show that there are at least 29 named mountains that come to play their role in the historical narratives of the people of God. Some of them are more important for the present discussion than the others. Since the present discussion has exceeded the limit, these additional mountains and their significance in the light of the present reflection are a subject of further study.

6. Jesus and the Mountains

Mountains played a very important role in the life of Jesus and his ministry. Several of the key events in the life of Jesus occurred on the mountains. As an infant, Jesus was brought to the Temple Mount and was presented at the temple in accordance with the Law, where Simeon had been living in expectation to see the Messiah, and Anna the prophetess, led to Jesus by the Holy Spirit would come to behold him. At the age of twelve, Jesus was left behind in the Temple Mount after his parents left for Nazareth after the celebration of the Passover, and returning, they found him in the Temple talking with the great teachers, who had stood amazed.

Philippi. That narrows the possible area. Caesarea Philippi is located at the southwestern base of Mount Hermon. Finally, known today by its Arabic name, Jabal el-Shaiykh, meaning "snowy mountain," Mount Hermon's peaks are covered with snow most of the year and the mountain's rounded, snow-topped crests gleam in the sunlight, which gives a perfect setting for the dazzling white garments that Jesus appeared in at the moment of his transfiguration.

In addition to Mount Olives and Mount Hermon, we see Jesus in the vicinity of several other mountains. According to John the Evangelist, early on in his public ministry, Jesus visited the Temple Mount during the Passover and drove the moneychangers and other traders out of the Temple precincts. Later, probably during another Passover pilgrimage, Jesus healed a lame man at the Pool of Bethesda on the Temple Mount. Matthew, placing the temple-cleansing event at the end of the ministry of Jesus, records that he healed many lame and blind people who came to him while he was on the Temple Mount. Often, he retired to the mountains to pray and on the mountain slopes, he taught people.²³ The association of Jesus with various mountains highlights the enduring legacy of the mountains as places of revelation and divine presence, bridging the ancient past with the ongoing journey of faith.

7. Symbolic Significance of the Mountains

Sacred mountains are central to several religions and various spiritual traditions. Around these sacred mountains, many myths and legends are formed. For most of these traditions, the most symbolic aspect of a mountain is the zenith because, as we will note further down, it is believed that it is closest point on earth to heaven or other spiritual realms. As seen above, throughout the Scripture, in addition to the proximity to the divine, we find references to mountains used as symbolic imageries to describe steadfastness, trustworthiness, immovability, majesty, strength, and faith. The biblical fascination to the mountains is not something peculiar to the Israelites and the inhabitants of

23 Matthew, the evangelist, alone brings Jesus in touch with at least seven mountains. Since we are way above the word limit in the present discussion, these mountains are a subject of further exploration.

the Ancient Near East who were the immediate neighbours of the people of God.

Mount Zaphon was called the "mountain of assembly" by the Canaanites (cf. Is 14:13; Ps 48:2). It was a holy site for the Canaanites who believed that Baal Hadad, the storm god lived in Mount Zaphon where the gods sat in council. Mount Olympus was holy to the Greeks with Zeus dwelling at the top of that mountain. This fascination for the mountains and their connection to the Divine is not peculiar to the biblical people; it is a universal fascination.

On a global level, there are several sacred mountains that are recognized by the World Heritage List as sacred. Mount Athos of Greece, Tongariro of New Zealand, Machu Picchu of Peru, Mount Taishan, Mount Emei, Mount Huang Shan, and Mount Wuyi of China, Sacred Kii Mountain Range of Japan, Sacred Mountain of Kyrgyzstan and several others have been considered sacred by the natives. In addition to these listed sacred mountains, there are many more sacred mountains such as mount Kailas in Tibet, Mount Everest in Nepal, Otgon Tenger in Mongolia and so on. Many of these mountains are considered sacred by the people of these lands.

Several of these mountains have both national and spiritual significance intertwined in their veneration by the people. Mount Etna in Italy, is believed to have been the home of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire and the forge. Mount Tai Shan is a symbol of Chinese nation and ancient civilization and spiritual homeland of China, Mount Athos is a self-governing monastic Republic within Greece. It is a symbol and spiritual homeland of Orthodox Christianity and its civilization. Mount Fuji is the most symbolic mountain for Japanese nation and culture and spiritual homeland of Japan. As sacred mountains, they have exceptional

religious and cultural significance in connection with the worship practices and ritual ceremonies of the respective people.

8. The Indian Carmelites and their 'Mountainous' Predilections

It is in the light of the significance of the mountains both in the Old Testament, New Testament and on a global frame, that we come to explore the implications of the mountains and the mountainous atmosphere that Chavara and his companions chose to live in. The choice of solitude in some deserted place (*vanavasa*), was motivated by the ideal of *fuga mundi*. They wanted to leave the corrupt and the corrupting world and go into a secluded place where they could be in communion with the divine. In the choice of the geographical spots, they were in spiritual and geographical continuity with their ancestors in the Old Testament and the New Testament down through the Christian centuries.

From the writings of Chavara and the various kinds of literature that he has left for he posterity, we gather the stray thoughts of the founders of the first indigenous religious congregation of India, their thoughts regarding a life that is lived close to God in the mountains, forests and wilderness. There are various references, both implicit and explicit, to the idea that testify to their ardent desire to live a life of solitude. In the following reflection, we consider these references, which are often metaphorical.

8.1. *Vanavasa*, an Eremitic Life

The idea of a consecrated life was first seen in the two senior members of the founding fathers. Fr Thomas Porukara is attributed to have voiced his desire for religious life as a *vanavasa*, which literally means a life lived in the wilderness, forest or jungle. *Vanavasa* is not strange to the Christian mind.

Eremitical life that was led by hermits was one of the earliest forms of Christian religious life. The word 'hermit' comes from the Greek *eremos*, meaning wilderness or an isolated place, which in Indian ascetic terms is *vanavasa*, literally, a life in the forest. *Hermit* evokes images like John the Baptist living as a recluse in the desert, wearing a hair shirt, eating locusts and honey. The vocation of a hermit became popular among the early Christians, who, inspired by the biblical models like Elijah and John the Baptist, desired to live a life set apart and withdrew into the desert in order to live a life of prayer and penance.

Thomas Porukara speaks of *vanavasa*, as a means of securing eternal life.²⁴ The desire to be away from the society and be closer to God comes from the cultural and biblical world vision according to which, God dwells up in heaven and his creation has its place down here on earth. If this is the case, any place that is geographically high, is close to God and the higher and the more inaccessible the place, the closer to God. The farther from the society, the holier the place.

In his private deliberations, Thomas Porukara noted that life in the world was not very helpful in attaining sanctity of life. This thought was evident early on in the life of Porukara, for after his diaconate, he is said to have invited his friend Jacob Kaniyanthara, a young man of his home parish in the following words: "After my priestly ordination let us go and stay in some wilderness [*vācca-vana-vāsattinum poykalayām*]. For living in the world, it may not be easy to secure eternal life."²⁵ Certainly, as an associate of Porukara in later years, Chavara must have been influenced by the thought of *vanavasa*, for him to consider a consecrated life too.

24 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 81.

25 Kaniyanthara, *History of the Foundation*, 1.

Since there were several European missionaries who were consecrated men, and as they were giving leadership to the Church in Kerala, and as Porukara was closely in touch with them, he knew about consecrated life. Hence, the expression *vanavasa*, should not be taken literally, although the Indian mind, with a long tradition of *aranyas* (sanyasis of the forest), is inclined to take the expression literally. According to Thomas Kochumuttom, "What he meant for sure, was a life withdrawn from the worldly affairs so that he could serve God and His people without distraction."²⁶

Jesus retired into the wilderness occasionally, to be alone with the Father, and took his disciples there from time to time. It was in the wilderness that the ascetic John the Baptist appeared, and lived a life of asceticism. And perhaps, it is the same wilderness that Jesus retired for 40 days and 40 nights in preparation for the ministry of the Kingdom of God that he was to launch. It was to a deserted place that Jesus took his disciples for the much-needed rest and it is there that he gave them the deeper lessons of their ministry. It was to a place of solitude that Gethsemane was, that he took his disciples for the last time for prayer.

A life of solitude in view of a higher goal was always guaranteed by the life in the wilderness both literal and metaphorical. *Vanavasa*, a life of solitude was chosen by the pioneers as the ideal way of living a life of consecration.

8.2. *Darśanaveedu*, a Tent of Meeting

The monastery that the founders had in mind was a place filled with the presence of the Lord that anyone who lived there and anyone who entered there would have the presence of the Lord experienced. The primary objective of the house

²⁶ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 82.

where the consecrated people lived was the experience of God. Biblically, *darsanaveedu* is envisaged after the model of the tent of meeting that the Israelites pitched in the midst of the camp in the wilderness during their sojourn in the desert. The tent of meeting along with the Ark of the Covenant, not only signified the Presence of the Lord among the people, but also functioned as a place where Moses went in to consult Yahweh.²⁷

Only a select few would enter the tent of meeting. Moses, the leader and the mediator between Yahweh and his people, often went in, in order to meet and consult Yahweh, that the tent came to be called the Tent of Meeting. It was not to be pitched in the fashion in which other Israelite tents were built. The Book of Exodus narrates that before the tabernacle was constructed, God met with Moses in a temporary tent of meeting. "Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the 'tent of meeting.' Anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp... As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses" (Exod 33:7, 9).

God is relational in nature, and as the people of God, Israel was to live in a covenant relationship with Yahweh. The tent of meeting is erected for this very purpose. It was the location of divine interaction, a place where the people could place their needs before the Lord. The tent of meeting became a visual

27 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 84, would interpret *darsanaveedu* philosophically and note that such a dwelling is congenial for the religious who "should be people with clear vision (*darśana*) about life and the principles of life, regarding what to do and what not to do."

representation of the availability of God throughout Israel's journey to the Promised Land.²⁸

Darsanaveedu, according to the founding fathers, was the ideal after which the monastery was to be visualized.²⁹ With regard to the idea of religious life, Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukkara were like-minded. As Kochumuttom notes, Palackal's lifestyle, even before the foundation of a monastery, for all practical purposes, was that of a monk: "deeply spiritual, prayerful and contemplative, austere, ascetic, detached, committed to the continuous study and teaching of sacred sciences, and a spiritual guide and counsellor for all."³⁰ In a similar manner, "from his younger age Porukara cherished the desire for a life withdrawn from the world and family affairs."³¹ Both of them, propelled by the desire for the *darsan* of the Lord, would want a *darsanaveedu* to be established in their land. Hence, as Chavara notes, "He (Fr Palackal) and his most intimate friend Fr Thomas Porukara had

28 According to Sophy Rose, *darsanaveedu* denotes 'a house of *darsanam*'. "Darsanaveedu is a prayer house for religious; he (Chavara) calls the religious *darsanakkar* where they can have the vision of God. It means, the monks should see God with their eyes of faith (Vision of God) and see the realities other than God through the eyes of God (faith vision)." See Sophy Rose, "Consecrated Life: The Model of Saint Chavara", in Shaji George Kochuthara (ed.), *Living the Joy of the gospel Today: Challenges to the Family and to the Consecrated Life* (Dharmaram Chavara Studies 3), Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2017, 160.

29 Chavara's vision of a monastery could be found in the pages of the chronicle of the first monastery. The title that he gives to the entry is *Darsanaveedupani Varthamanam*. While he narrates the details of the search for the locale for the *darsanaveedu*, he uses *bes-rauma* and *tapasubhavanam* to refer to the same reality. See Sophy Rose, "Consecrated Life" 160.

30 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 83.

31 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 83.

yearned to establish a house of vision (*darsana-viṭu*).³² He further notes that since in the absence of such a house in Malabar, even for the spiritual leaders of the community, much good was left undone.³³

Chavara would see the *darsanaveedu* envisioned by his revered teachers as a facility established after the manner of the tent of meeting, where the presence of the Lord would be guaranteed for those who enter it and dwell in it.

8.3. *Tapasubhavanam*, a Centre of Austerity

The vision of the founding fathers regarding the consecrated life they had in mind, as noted by Chavara, involves a *tapasubhavanam*,³⁴ which could be interpreted and translated as a centre for spiritual discipline, asceticism, self-denial, abstinence, piety and simplicity.³⁵

Asceticism is the practice of the denial of physical or psychological desires in order to attain a spiritual goal. All religions have at least traces of some features of asceticism and religious austerity that involves practices promoting spiritual development in a person. In some religious traditions, it emphasizes spiritual disciplines and self-restraint. In others, it refers to self-denial through ascetic practices aimed at curbing

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

33 CWC (1990): 1; CSK I (1981): 1.

34 CWC (1990): 1; CSK I (1981): 1. See also Paul Kalluveetil, "Religious Life in Chavara's Vision", in *St Kuriakose Elias Chavara: To the Desert and Back* (HE 12/2 (2016), 181-182.

35 As Thomas Kochumuttom, "Chavara, Mystic and Mystical Theologian", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 213-214, notes, Thomas Palackal, the senior most of the founding fathers, was "an ascetic theologian". In that case, it is natural that they conceive the monastery as a center of austerity or a house of asceticism.

bodily desires and support spiritual advancement. Religious austerity is central to various paths leading to spiritual growth.

Tapas is a variety of austere spiritual meditation practices in Indian religions. In Jainism, it means ascetic practices of austerities and bodily mortification, in Buddhism, it denotes spiritual practices including meditation and self-discipline and in the various traditions of Hinduism, it means a spectrum of practices ranging from inner cleansing to self-discipline by meditative exercises.³⁶ Universally, the practice of *tapas* involves solitude, and it is a part of monastic practices that are a means to liberation and salvation.

In the biography of Thomas Porukara, Kuriakose Porukara, his younger brother and biographer notes the desire of Porukara: "Young Thomas lived in the seminary motivated by the desire to spend his life in the service of God without getting entangled in worldly and family affairs."³⁷ According to Kochumuttom, it is "quite natural then that Palackal and Porukara shared the aspirations for religious life in solitude."³⁸ Along with *darsanaveedu*, Chavara has recorded the common thoughts of his teachers about religious life in the following manner: Fr Thomas Palackal and Fr Thomas Porukara had yearned to establish a *darsanaveedu*, "since in the absence of a house of austerity [*tapasubhavanam*] in Malabar, even for priests, much good was left

36. According to Augustine Thottakkara, *Indian Philosophy, basic Concepts and Important Themes*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2015, 171, *tapas* is derived from "the verbal root *tap* (*tapati*), which means to heat up, to warm up, to burn up, etc. In biblical terms, *tapas* has to be understood in the words of Elijah who is "burning with zeal for God the Lord of hosts" (1 Kings 19:10).

37. Kuriakose Porukara, *Sthapaka Pithakanmar*, Mannanam, 1995, 1-2.

38. Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 83.

undone. They were sad at heart as there was no one to give them support, but they went on praying."³⁹

According to Kochumuttom, the ones who dwell in the *tapasubhavanam* should be "persons of austerity and ascetical practices (*tapas*), leading a life that is simple and austere."⁴⁰ By moving to such a house of vision and austerity the founders did not mean total withdrawal from the society or unconcern for the people and their needs. Instead, they wanted to do the 'many good things that in the absence of a *tapasubhavanam* were left undone."⁴¹

The regret of Fr Porukara that there is much good that could be done for the sake of the society, for such a long time on account of the absence of a *tapasubhavanam* and *darsanaveedu*, would indicate that neither *vanavasa* nor *darsanaveedu* must be taken in a literal sense. They are metaphors for the physical distance that is created between the mundane life and consecrated life.⁴²

39 CWC (1990): 1; CSK I (1981): 1.

40 Later, Chavara would undertake the *tapas* for which the house was envisaged. See Mareena and Benny Thettayil, "Cardinal Virtues in the Life of Chavara", in Benny Thettayil and Naji J. Kalambukattu (ed.), *Father and Doctor of the Church: A Theological Reading of the Life and Writings of Saint Suriakose Elias Chavara* (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 14), Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2024, 296.

41 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 84.

42 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 84, notes the possibility of an earlier thought of Fr Porukara as a seminarian. He might have entertained some such romantic idea of religious life led away from the society, which as a result of further reflection and consultation with Palackal he gave up in favour of a life of freedom and detachment from the worldly affairs and interests.

8.4. *Otungi Parkal*, a Life in Solitude

There are several words that are used by the founding fathers and others to describe the religious life that they had in mind. One of them is *otungi parkal*, which would denote either a modest life or a life of solitude.⁴³ This is yet another expression that they employ in order to describe their understanding of consecrated life. According to Kochumuttom, the phrase literally means “a withdrawn life, which in effect would mean a life in solitude, keeping their distance from the noisy and distracting world so that one’s contact with God, the prayerfulness, becomes easy. By this, they meant the recollected state of mind more than one’s physical isolation from the society.”⁴⁴

When the founding fathers expressed their desire before the bishop, he retorted: “If you, who are the only knowledgeable priests we have, go away to live in silence and solitude [minṭ-aṭakkanmāyi vāccaṭattum otunki pārtāl], who would lead the people?”⁴⁵ His solution to the predicament that he and the people would face in the event of their departure for an eremitic life was a monastery established in the midst of their people.⁴⁶ The notion of *otungi parkal* in a community would have been inspired by the promise of the Lord’s presence: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20).⁴⁷

Otungi parkal is a form of monastic life characterized by solitariness. In this style of life, the social dimension of human existence is totally or largely sacrificed in order to attain spiritual

43 CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

44 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 84.

45 CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3. See also Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 87.

46 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 87.

47 CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

experience. Christianity has traditionally regarded the life of solitude as one of the most perfect ways of life that is consecrated to God. Other forms of monasticism and religious life have strived to bring religious experience to bear on human relationships, a life of solitude has always been purely contemplative in its thrust. The recluses live only in order to cultivate their spiritual life in prayer, meditation, reading, silence, asceticism, manual work, and, perhaps, in intellectual pursuits. In a life of solitude, the monk goes beyond all social relationships and social interactions.

It is the idea of a literal *otungi parkal* that the bishop objected to. A monk who abstains from all social relationships and avoids all social interactions will not be as useful to the people of God as an active pastor in the parish is. And as the bishop surmised, the immediate need of the church in Kerala was adequate local leadership of the people. Hence, with a few conditions attached, he granted their request about which Chavara notes:

His Excellency, who was, like a mirror of virtues, spending days in fasting and prayer, and keeping vigils, heeded to their request. Hearing it, he who was thirsting for holiness, was as delighted as does a parched land in rain. He was delighted to grant the permission and issued an order appealing to all who seek to please God to support the cause by financial assistance.⁴⁸

The desire of the fathers for a 'modest life was not only granted by the bishop, but he also went out of the way in support of the project.

8.5. *Mint-aṭakkamāyi*, a Life of Silence

To most people, even for seasoned religious, silence is an elusive companion. They are always connected and tuned in, gulping

48 CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

insatiably from the incessant flow of modern social media feeds. Most of them want to stand out, speak up, find their voice and make it heard. The founding fathers, having realized the fact that there is more to life than all these, wanted to take another path in life – a life of silence! They wanted to live *mint-aṭakkamāyi*, i.e., in silence!⁴⁹

A life of silence requires discipline, time, and attention. There is so much noise in the world that is both visual and audible. People are so immersed in noise that often, they are unaware that silence is even possible. When the founding fathers aspired for a life of silence, they wanted the constant noisy interruption to be halted for at least certain times, in order to regain the composure of life and return to the centre, the true self. The ever-active minds had to be calmed.

When the founding fathers aspired for a life of silence, they were swimming against the current and were walking against the grain of most of their companions. The monastic bend of mind that could be detected in their request to the bishop, was designed to go in totally another direction. This way of silence was not for everyone, but had to be embraced by those whom it was given in order to find purpose in life.

Silence is all around us if and when we seek it out purposefully and pleurably. This is what the founding fathers were doing. Monastic silence in its fullest reality, at least to them, was not simply the absence of noise. It was the profound presence of a reality of the Presence that is too great for expression. They wanted to experience this reality in the silence of a mysterious depth, substance, density and richness. Kochumuttom further notes that the bishop admits that the kind of religious life they

49 CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

proposed included not only *otungi pārkā* (life in solitude) but also *mint-aṭakkam* (silence).⁵⁰

According to Kochumuttom, the bishop appreciated their desire for a consecrated religious life. However, like any leader who would want effective and faithful lieutenants available to be deployed, he was afraid that they were planning to withdraw altogether so that their service would not anymore be available both for himself and for the faithful. "It is remarkable that he admitted that they were among the few, if not the only, learned priests in the vicariate able to teach and guide the people. He could, therefore, hardly afford to lose their active service and pastoral ministry."⁵¹ Hence, as we have noted already, he proposed that their "life of silence" should be such that it would benefit not only themselves but also those who are in need: "If you... go away to live in silence and solitude, who else will be left to teach the people. If you like, you may establish a monastery so that all people can benefit from it."⁵² The bishop is not only pleased with the proposal of the Fathers to establish a religious community, but also, he acknowledges their learning, erudition and gift for pastoral leadership.

8.6. *Bes-rauma*, a House on the Hilltop

With the official permission for the monastery obtained, when the fathers approached the people, they were given a warm welcome and the people wholeheartedly embraced the idea. With the necessary funds raised they looked for a suitable spot to settle down and to live their heart's desire. Kochumuttom notes that the search for a suitable site was both long and strenuous, but the people, both the clergy and the laity alike, passionately

⁵⁰ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 87.

⁵¹ Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 86.

⁵² CWC I (1990): 2; CSK I (1981): 3.

cooperated with them.⁵³ Finally, they found a place on mount Mannanam, where a *darsanaveedu* and a *tapasubhavanam* might be established, their ideal of *vanavasa* could literally be lived and where they could pursue a life of silence in solitude.

The most significant aspect of the entire process was the choice of the place for the monastery. In keeping with the religious-cultural ethos of the country, in conformity with the biblical traditions of the various significant mountains where Yahweh revealed himself, in agreement with the invitation of Jesus to a deserted place, and in consonance with their own desire to be reasonably away from the noise of the general pastoral life, they found mount Mannanam a perfect place to launch their spiritual and ascetical monastic project. They significantly christened it *bes-rauma*, which is a Syriac phrase that meant "a house on hilltop."⁵⁴

Bes-rauma is highly symbolic. It symbolized the elevated nature of life and the height of sanctity that those who lived in the monastery should aspire for and strive to live, so that they would become a symbol of Christian life for the people around to look at and be inspired and be challenged by.⁵⁵ In the choice of both the place and the name for the place, the words of Jesus must have played a remarkable role. The Lord said: "a city set on a hill that cannot be hid ... and a lighted lamp is placed on a stand so that it gives light to all in the house. Let their light so shine before men that they may see their good works and give glory to their Father in heaven" (Mt 5:14-16).

Furthermore, in the words of the founding fathers, *bes-rauma*, the "house built on a hilltop" exists for all others to look at and

53 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 91.

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

55 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 91.

be inspired; it has to be a “mirror of virtuous life” (*punyattinte kannāṭi*) looking at which the neighbours and visitors and even the members of the community can learn what it means to lead a virtuous life. Similarly, *bes-rauma* is meant to be a spiritual resort (*punya-sanketam*) where all the seekers of God-experience can find refuge and are spiritually refreshed and revitalized.⁵⁶

The life in the *bes-rauma* is communitarian in its outlook. As Prophet Samuel instructed Saul, in the Gibeath Elohim (the hill of God) he was going to encounter a group of holy men. And as it came to pass, Saul met the “band of the prophets” who came down from the “high place” singing with musical instruments and as they prophesied (1 Sam 10:5), in their company the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon Saul transforming him into another person (10:6, 10). This is the transformative effect of a few spirituals living together. Kochumuttom observes regarding the life of the members of the community: “A basic factor of the life in Bes-rauma... was that it was communitarian. As members of a family they lived, prayed and worked together.”⁵⁷ As Chavara reminisces, this is what the first community in the *bes-rauma* did:

On 18 June 1840, the feast of Corpus Christi, Frs Thomas Porukara, Geevarghese Thoppil and I began living as a community in Bes-rauma [Mannanam]. We were already enjoying spiritual brotherhood; but we wanted to have unity in temporal matters as well. Therefore, following the example of [the early Christians led by] St Peter, we began to hold in common all our material goods and possessions, and to keep a common account.⁵⁸

56 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 23.

57 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 49.

58 CWC I (1990): 175-176; CSK I (1981): 208-209. See also Kalluveetil, “Religious Life in Chavara’s Vision”, 193.

A step further, the members of the community, according to Chavara, were called *koodepirappukal* or *sahodarangal* who are born of the same mother.⁵⁹ The religious community in the *bes-rauma* becomes a supernatural family. "What a family naturally is, the religious community must in the light of faith consciously becomes! This was the creditable achievement of the founding community of Bes-rauma in Mannanam."⁶⁰

So far, the talk has been made referring to the consecrated men and the *bes-rauma* that was established for them. Do all these pertain only to men? Despite the biblical stand on women from a cultural point of view, the founding fathers had a comprehensive view of consecrated life that was meant both for men and women and the good that could come from both the groups.⁶¹ In this regard, Kochumuttom notes that all that the founders had in mind while establishing the monastery, apply also to the convent:

The life in it is a withdrawn one (*vāna-vāsam*) in silence (*mint-aṭakkamāyi*) and solitude (*otunki pārkkaḷ*); it is house of austerity (*tapasu-bhavanam*) and vision (*darśana*): it should blend contemplation and apostolic work;⁶² trust in God and His people is the unfailing resource to meet all its needs; it

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

60 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 55.

61 See Jossy CMC, "Religious Women in the Testament of Chavara", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 305-316, makes an appraisal of the initiatives of Chavara for the sake of the women of his time, especially in the contest of the foundations of a religious congregation for women.

62 According to Kalluveetil, "Religious Life in Chavara's Vision", 189, "The concept of consecration involved two ideas - separation and service." See also Kochumuttom, "Chavara, Mystic and Mystical Theologian", 216-218.

is a house built on hilltop (*bes-rauma*); in it the basic rules of life are the spirit and practice of evangelical counsels and common life; among its members there should exist genuine love and family spirit; it is not man's work but God's, and, therefore, no human or natural forces destroy it while the members' neglect of the divine call can; they should yield fruits like humility (*elima*), obedience (*colvili*), charity (*upavi*), religious modesty (*sannyāsa-aṭakkam*) and genuine love of God (*pattāmgayulla-bkakti*); it should be a mirror of virtues (*punyāttinte kannāṭi*) and a resort of virtuous souls (*punyātmākkaḷuṭe samketam*); and its strength is in the members' zeal and virtue, not in the thickness of the walls.⁶³

In every sense of the term, the monastery at Mannanam, and every subsequent religious house that was established, both for men and women, was a *bes-rauma*, a house built on hilltop, to which all looked for light, direction and inspiration. It was a *punya-samketam*, a spiritual refuge for all kinds of people in the society. The priests used to frequent Mannanam for their spiritual needs. They came to the community at *bes-rauma* to spend a few days of quiet and prayer, to make their confession, monthly recollection and annual retreat and to take necessary guidance for life. The priests in need of correction or pastoral improvement were sent to the monastery by the bishop. They would spend time under the guidance of the members of the community there and return to him with a certificate of approval. The laity came to the monastery for the daily Mass, retreat and confession, and had the members of the community come for the anointing of the sick. The members of other faiths considered the activities in the *bes-rauma* as a catalyst of socio-cultural renaissance, and

63 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 101.

appreciated the social, educational and various other initiatives of the community.⁶⁴

In fact, it is to this kind of a life that the bishop was orientating the founding fathers. He wanted them to be in the midst of the people for them to look at, led by, learn from and thus grow in virtue. Kochumuttom notes that this expectation further points to the responsibility that the consecrated men and women of all times, have taken upon themselves, i.e., to be shining examples of Christian life in perfection.⁶⁵

After the model of Jesus, Chavara ascended the mountain, dwelt in the *bes-rauma* (house on a hill-top), entered into dialogue with the Lord in contemplation as Jesus did in the garden of Olives, to know the will of God and descended the mountain to be on the plain with the people to take care of their needs and to build up the Church in pastoral and social action.⁶⁶

9. *Bes-rauma*, a Desert in the City

In spite of all the desire that they had to flee the world to go for a *vanavasa*, for all practical purposes, they remained in the world. However, their life in the world could be compared to

64 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 184. See also Kripa Maria and K.A. Thomas, "An Integral Educational Vision: Chavara and the Present Educational Scenario", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 274-279, discuss the educational initiatives of the religious community founded by Chavara and his companions.

65 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 91.

66 See Cherian Thunduparampil, "Universal Call to Sanctity: Consecrated Life and St Kuriakose Elias Chavara", in Shaji George Kochuthara (ed.), *Living the Joy of the Gospel Today: Challenges to the Family and to the Consecrated Life* (Dharmaram Chavara Studies 3), Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2017, 246.

those disciples who 'were in the world but were not of the world' (Jn 15:19; 17:14). Or their life in the monastery was akin to the life of Elijah on Mount Carmel. Elijah had a profound mystical experience of the Lord in the cave as he was enjoying the solitude of the cave. However, he also had the same kind of an experience while he prayed to Yahweh and miraculously brought down fire from heaven consuming the entire sacrifice that he made. He did it in the full view of the apostate Israelites and the prophets and priests of Baal. It is a paradox that the prophet who had such a mystical experience would take recourse to a socio-religious action.⁶⁷ The phenomenal act of God for the sake of the people in answer to the prayers of Elijah in their midst brought the entire people back to God and the generally pacific prophet exhibited the zeal for God the Lord of hosts by which he was being consumed earlier in the cave. The life that the pioneers were called to live was not a naval gazing, self-centred spirituality but a lie that is other-oriented and altruistic.

The desert and the city are symbolic of the contemplative and apostolic life that the new community of consecrated men lived. Their life, on the one hand, had all that they desired to have – *vanavasa* in a *darsanaveedu*, which is lived in solitude. On the other, they would deliver what the ecclesiastical authorities expected of them, i.e., able leadership to the people.⁶⁸

67 Thomas Kadankavil, "St Chavara and the Mystic St Euphrasia", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 252-253, discusses the blend of "two Carmelite spiritual streams" that are "contemplation and action, and contemplation and silence." In a similar vein, Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2014, considers the spirituality of Chavara as a blend of interior life of mysticism and missionary work as its externalization.

68 Saju Chackalackal, "Holistic Integration of Mystical Aspirations and Social Commitment: Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the

The bishop's letter of recommendation⁶⁹ makes it clear to them that the pattern of life in the new community of men should blend contemplative prayer and active apostolic work. Kochumuttom summarizes the letter of the bishop in the following manner:

It is necessary that in this territory there are persons who are continuously engaged in *prayer* and *good works* for the greater glory of God and the edification of the Church. Even in places where the Gospel was preached much later, there are monasteries for men and women. But you, received the gift of faith from ancient times, do not yet have any of them, although you have requested the Holy Church to establish them among you. In order to open a door for religious life, these two priests, Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, desire to establish a religious house [*darśana-vitu*] with a church and other necessary provisions for those men who are willing to follow this blessed way of life... The religious will be free from all worldly affairs, and they will devote themselves entirely to spiritual things. By the zealous work of these elect souls, all possible blessings will be secured for the

Nineteenth Century India", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 204-207, would discuss the inclusive approach that was made by Chavara combining mysticism and socio-ecclesial action. See also Navya Maria, "Chavara, a Champion of Women Empowerment: Socio-religious Situation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Kerala", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: Man, Milieu and Message* (HE 10/1 (2014), 83-104. Suja V.J., "Chavara: A Milestone in Women's Case", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 317-324, who discusses the social intervention that Chavara made in order to empower women in Kerala.

69 Valerian Plathottam, *Malankarasabhamatavinte our Veerasanthanam Athava Vandya Divya Sri Chavara Kuriakose Elias Acchan*, Mannanam: 1939, 49-51.

Church and the entire world. Their example will instruct the ignorant. It is, thus, a community of religious “persons who are continuously engaged in prayer and good works for the greater glory of God and the edification of the Church... Free from worldly affairs they will devote themselves entirely to spiritual things.”⁷⁰

The bishop cleverly brought about a win-win situation from which both the parties have their objectives met. The founding fathers, from a contemplative point of view, although in an altered manner, received what they wanted.⁷¹ From a pastoral point of view, the bishop laid out the apostolic objectives of the new community: (i) to instruct the ignorant by means of good example, (ii) to receive into the Church those who are willing, (iii) to reunite the separated Christians, (iv) to enhance the growth and wellbeing of the Church, (v) to promote peace and harmony among the nations and world religions, and (vi) to realize on earth a community of those called for the eternal kingdom of heaven.⁷² These were the ministries that he wanted them to undertake, even as they lived in the monastery!⁷³

70 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 89-90.

71 It would not be entirely right to claim that all the founding fathers aspired for a purely contemplative life. In spite of the *vanavasa* and the related notions that they were talking about, at least some of them had a Dominican bend of mind, with active preaching and teaching as their future ministry. Moreover, the “much good that is left undone” because of the absence of a *tapasubhavanam* in Kerala, would point to some kind of active apostolate for the sake of the people.

72 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality*, 90-91.

73 This blend of ideals can be noted in the choice of the locale for the *bes-rauma*. As Chavara and his companions were looking for a suitable place for the *darsanaveedu*, he insisted that the *bes-rauma* should have *vallasaukaryam*. *Bes-rauma* would guarantee the much-desired contemplative life and *vallasaukaryam* (facility to travel by

10. Conclusion

Bringing about a harmonious blend of both the contemplative and active aspects of religious life, the community followed the example of Elijah on Mount Carmel bringing together social action and mystical experience. They followed the example of Jesus on Hermon, the transfiguration mountain, who, along with the disciples, had an otherworldly experience but came down for the sake of the people and engaged with them. The Indian Carmelite spirituality is a blend of prophetism and mysticism – one enriching the other.⁷⁴

Bes-rauma is inspired by the spirituality of the various biblical mountains. In a spiritual sense, *bes-rauma* is Ararat, the mountain of hope, where a new beginning is made by everyone who comes into it. It is Sinai, the mountain of the covenant in which people make a covenant with God consecrating themselves in his service and that of his people. It is Nebo, the mountain of vision, where one's horizon is expanded in such a way that you peer into the future for the sake of the people. It is Carmel, the mountain of zeal, where the consecrated people, in monastic and apostolic zeal are consumed in contemplation and action. The *bes-rauma* is also Mount Moriah/Zion, the mountain of faith where like Abraham, your faith is tested by both God and the confreres to get it consolidated. It is the Mount of Olives, the mountain of transcendence, living in which the consecrated people transcend

boat) would facilitate travel in order to reach out to people for the apostolic and pastoral activities. See Sophy Rose, "Consecrated Life", 160-161.

74 Benny Thettayil, "In Defense along the Ecclesiastical Frontline: Chavara and the Ongoing Struggle", in *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: For God and His People* (HE 11/2 (2015), 163-164, discusses the ecclesial action that Chavara and his confreres were engaged in, in defense of the Church in Kerala.

their limitations and to a great extent, themselves reaching a realm that is unattainable here below. Finally, it is Hermon, the mountain of transformation living where, the consecrated people are transfigured into the image of Christ, which is the ultimate objective of consecrated life.

The desire that was engendered in the founding fathers for an eremitic life (*vanavasa*) was equally inspired by the biblical mountain spirituality. The *darsanaveedu* that they envisaged after the model of the tent of meeting where one could enjoy the vision of the Lord was also a centre of austerity (*tapasubhavanam*) where they would live a life in solitude (*otungi parkal*) in monastic silence (*mint-atakkamayi*). All these ideals will be realized in the *bes-rauma*, the house on the hilltop, closer to God and in the full vision of the people.

The *bes-rauma* and what was begun in that house on the hilltop was enjoyed by the members, appreciated by the people, admired by the authorities and immensely benefitted by the people far and wide. As the fame of the good that the members of the community at the *bes-rauma* were able to do, people from various parts of Kerala began to invite them to make foundations of similar monasteries among them. In response, several of the subsequent foundations were made after the model of the *bes-rauma* at Mannanam. As far as possible, the monasteries were established on the top of a hill or a place that was away from the city. Of the seven early monasteries, at least at the time of the foundation, the monastery at Elthuruth was near the backwaters, at Mannanam, Vazhakulam, Pulinkunnu and Mutholy, the monasteries are on hillocks, at Ambazhakkad, it was well away from the villages. The monastery at Koonammavu in which Chavara spent his final years, could be taken as an exception to this trend. In the case of the subsequent foundations too, as far

as possible, *bes-rauma* was the pattern that was followed. The choice of these places for the foundations was in keeping with the original vision of the founders regarding the *bes-rauma* and its lofty ascetic and contemplative ideals.

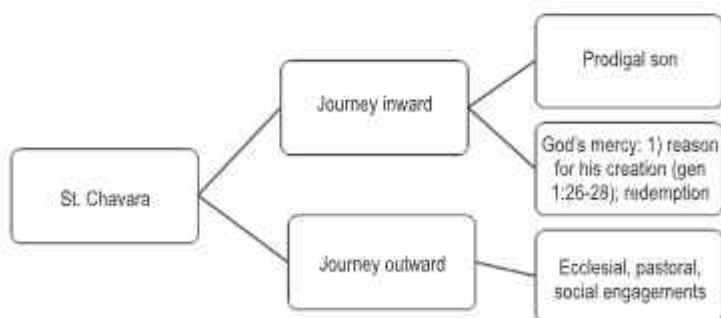
KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA'S VISION AND MISSION

Biblical Foundations

Joy Philip Kakkanatt CMI

1. Introduction

The inspiration behind this article stems from the profound amazement I experience each time I read the works of Chavara, especially *The Compunction of the Soul* and his *Meditations*. These works are impregnated with Biblical concepts, metaphors, similes and other direct and indirect references. The closer I read his works, the more I tend to say that we have not measure the unfathomable depth and richness of his theological as well as Biblical erudition expressed with poetic versatility and literary astuteness. Chavara's life and spirituality can be broadly outlined as follows:



His inward journey is mostly traceable from his literary works, especially from *The Compunction of the Soul* and *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*. Both of them are autobiographical in style.

2. God's Nature: Mercy

The more I read his poetic work, *The Compunction of the Soul*, the more convinced I became that his vision and life's strongest and most conspicuous foundation was his understanding of God's nature as Mercy. Hence, in this article, I try to look for his understanding of Mercy as God's nature in his poetic writing, *The Compunction of the Soul*. Over a century before Cardinal Walter Kasper¹ and various others emphasized God's Mercy as central to the Gospel and Christian living, and papal teachings, such as *Dives in Misericordia*, *Misericordiae Vultus*, and *The Name of God is Mercy*², brought this focus to the forefront of Catholic theology, Chavara had already discovered this biblical treasure. The centrality of Divine mercy is well reflected in Chavara's poetic line, "The Lord of mercy, the son of God, His glorious splendour I long to see; The fountain of mercy, God incarnate... I long to see."

The most significant theological vision of Chavara derives from his understanding of the nature of the God of the Bible as mercy. He applies Divine mercy both as an appellative of God and as an attribute to diverse situations and stages of life. We consider some of them.

3 Human Life: Gift of God's Mercy

In the very first stanzas of *The Compunction of the Soul*, we can notice Chavara's poetic skill in using the Genesis account of creation to refer to his birth. Of course, the added stress on the mercy of God as the basic divine character in creating him in

1 Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014).

2 Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy* (New York: Random House, 2016).

God's likeness can be named as Chavara's ability to derive the theological meaning of the word of God as *Dei Verbum* suggests.

He begins *The Compunction of the Soul* by referring to God's mercy as the reason for his birth. He writes:

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, it is your mercy only! (I, 1-4).

Chavara intertwines the divine creative power, as depicted in the creation of humans in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26) with God's mercy and relates it to his own birth.

Omnipotent your will, that me a sinner
You moulded truly great in your likeness
O God, despite my limitless unworthiness
You did show in it, your mercy boundless (I, 9-12).

Chavara eulogizes this divine mercy when he writes,

God of unbounded kindness, Holy Lord
O sea of mercy, of might, depth unfathomed
You did look on me with tender care
And tended me with unstinted love (I, 29-32).

In lines 25-28 he craftily presents God's mercy manifested in protecting him from illnesses associated with infancy and notes that if not for God's mercy, it would have been impossible for his mother to keep him healthy.

The baptism he received is also seen as sprouting from the saving grace of divine mercy which freed him from the clutches of the powers of the devil.

O Fount of Mercy, in your crystal streams of grace,
Was my soul once cleansed and spotless fair

Beauteous, bright, bedecked in gems of virtue
Through my baptism, a boon, a day of days. (I, lines 33-34).

Chavara uses various images and figures to highlight the power of Divine mercy operated at baptism. Baptismal water is poetically portrayed as streams of grace gushing forth from the fountain of Divine mercy. Here, one can draw a parallel with Ezekiel's vision of streams of running waters flowing out from the threshold of the altar of the reconstructed Jerusalem temple, watering the world and thus providing the elixir of life.

In Poem II, 105-110, Chavara presents his baptism as the benevolent gift of God's saving gaze of mercy (*nin karunayin kadakanninal*) which cleansed him from original sin and reinstated him to the status of divine sonship marred by sin. Poetically,

Then, your saving gaze of mercy fell upon me
And cleansing waters of Baptism I received
The dawn of grace led to growth in virtue
Sumptuous goodness swelled my soul as,
In sacred waters, I was lavishly laved
And cleansed from guilt, to divine sonship restored.

Here, Chavara's sacramental theology of baptism closely linked to the Pauline understanding is evident. That is, through the baptismal water, we are bidding farewell to the powers of death and sin and entering into life with Jesus Christ. The way he summarizes the role of Divine mercy in making him a Christian through baptism is captivating:

O Lord of infinite goodness,
Boundless mercy, giver of peace
You through your mercy infinite
Made me a being immortal (II, 160-164).

Chavara opens the second poem also with the title "Lord of Mercy" addressing the Father. He identifies God's compassion in entrusting him to the care of Mother Mary.

Chavara deemed it a great act of God's mercy that spared him from a deadly epidemic. While many others who are holier than he had succumbed to this pandemic, the only reason for him not to be infected with it was "the ocean of your mercy." He explains this ocean of mercy (*rehamim*) as an expression of divine boundless love (*hesed*). The influence of Biblical vocabulary (e.g., Lam 3:22-23) is quite apparent. Listen to his words:

Were I to die then, O God of Mercy
 In eternal misery, I, then, would have rolled
 Full worthy to be condemned, though I'd been
 Through his infinite mercy, was I saved (II, 43-46)
 Wafted aloft on the ocean of your mercy
 What reason was it your pity
 You did lavish on my ignoble soul, My Master
 What reason for such a grace, except your love! (II, 57-60).

It is inspiring to note that Chavara identifies his membership in the Church through baptism as the result of divine mercy (*daya*)³ (Line 73-76, Mal, 8). He uses the idea of "chosen people" usually associated with people of Israel to refer to the Church. He distinguishes the Church from other religions in its capacity to love Jesus.

Me, you treated with kind predilection
 Wedded to your dear chosen people
 What thanks shall I render thee my Lord
 For this your mercy, so unlimited? (II, 73-76).

3 The English translation uses various words like mercy, pity, kindness, etc., to translate the word *daya* used by Chavara, which basically belong to the semantic field of mercy.

Chavara credited God's compassion for protecting him from the hardships common in his time, such as hunger and epidemics. He writes,

How numerous they who penury bear!
 Such sufferings you did me spare
 All because of your tenderness (*karuna, rahamim*) my
 Lord
 To serve you, hence, how I'm bound (II, 85-88).

Interestingly, Chavara recognizes the touch of God's boundless Mercy (*maha karuna*) in his middle-class family background, which gives him peace and joy

Yet, another gift, have I to sing about!
 Numberless, there are, who wield power
 Kings, Chieftains, yet others rolling in gold
 Oh, how numerous, My Goodness Infinite [boundless
 Mercy]
 Had I, but been one such magnate, high
 In this world, what fate had been mine!
 The middle-class path you granted me to tread
 Hence, I live thus in peace and joy. (II, 89-96).

In lines Poem II, 97-100, Chavara mentions some danger that potentially endangered his life at an embryonic stage, but saved by the shielding of the promptness of Divine mercy.

While yet an embryo in my mother's womb
 Assiduous attempts the devil did make
 To blast me the bud; your blessed Hand
 As quickly then, in mercy, you did shield!

The poetic beauty in applying the birth of Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem to his own life finds its anchoring again in Jesus, the seat of Mercy (*Karunanidhi*) (II, 241). Chavara speaks of the

intercession of Mother Mary which saved him from punishment of various sorts, also in relation to mercy in lines 253-288. He writes:

As often as I God's ire merited,
Betwixt me and God's uplifted hand
Mother of God, a potent shield you raised
Pleading my cause, Oh, fount of Love
and Mercy (II, 253-256).

3.1. Vocation as Manifestation of God's Mercy

Chavara narrates the vocation he received at the age of ten as a strong resolve of divine mercy that snatched him away from the clutches of sin and waywardness. In Poem I, lines 113-140, he describes the stages of his vocation as an unfolding of the work of God's mercy. He writes:

Ten long years passed riotously by
And that day of days he called me back
Sowed in me sacred seeds 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. (I, 113-118).

His mother's response to Chavara's desire to become a priest is:

Emotions wrung her heart in sooth
That her son, one of two, God's own would be
Pain of parting a wrench foreseeing
She wisely prepared to the Holy Will to bow
She wooed detachment, her heart firm fixed on God
Praising Him for the infinite mercy He showed.
"Though a sinner, my unworthiness He redeemed
O wonder of wonders!", she cried, "Grace Supreme"
Your mercies will I sing for ever and ever!"

And forthwith to the seminary her son she sent.
(I, 123-132).

His mother understands Chavara's vocation to the priesthood as a vivid manifestation of God's infinite mercy. Thus, Chavara sees God's abundant mercy guiding his life to the priestly vocation.

4. Incarnation: Tangible Expression of God's Mercy

Incarnation is presented as the fulfilment of the pact God made in mercy after the original sin. The inflow of Biblical images picturesquely narrating the whole mystery of the incarnation is stupendous, practically versifying the Gospel account of incarnation (II, 160-186). He highlights God's mercy that led to the promise of sending his son to save humanity from the curse of original sin. To quote some of the lines,

A son of Adam, who by original sin
Destroyed ruthless, all that was good and fair,
Finding salvation as if by anticipation
From punishment I was saved, and so my kin
Besides through your sole Mercy
To send forth your son, you made a pact (II, 165-170).

After the description of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, Chavara makes a petition to the merciful Lord in beautiful poetry:

O God-man, my master, seat of mercy, Lord
Look with pity on me a sinner... (II, 241-242).

Chavara's vision of incarnation as enfleshing Divine mercy is further elaborated with brilliant poetic skill in Poem III. His desire to behold the glorious splendor of the Lord of mercy is a theological treatise on the infancy narrative. The very beginning of the poem sets the tone vividly:

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. (III, 1-6).

In this poem, he covers the life of Jesus focusing more on the Synoptic Infancy Narratives. From John's Gospel, he takes the miracle at Cana and the *ego eimi* saying of Jesus "I am the Good Shepherd." From the public life of Jesus, Chavara includes, in this poem, the baptism, the forty days of fasting in the wilderness and the call of the disciples. The beauty is that all these episodes express the longing of the author to witness Jesus, the Mercy Incarnate, in search of the lost sheep. He concludes the poem thus:

The Good Shepherd, seeking the flock
That had gone astray, I long to see
The Lord of goodness, proclaiming himself
As our loving friend, I long to see (III, 97-100).

However, as an Appendix to Poem III, Chavara completes the biographical sketch in Poem III, this time stressing a Biblical theological vision of Incarnation, accentuating Jesus as the tangible presence of God's mercy (Appendix III, 1-8).

Merciful Lord, Son of almighty God
O that I may see!
Sea of Mercy, seat of Compassion
Who effaced the stain of Sin
Who the imprisoned souls redeemed
O that I may see!
O source of all treasure, your eminence debased
From misery to save me.

In Poem IV, reflecting on the incarnation of the Logos, understood by Chavara as "Infinite Goodness and fountain of Mercy" (IV, 37) in Mary's womb, Chavara compares it with keeping of the tablets of the Law in the tabernacle of the Jerusalem temple, and writes:

In this tabernacle he placed the Tablet
Inscribed with the commandments divine
So, in your scared womb immaculate
The adorable Deity, calmly dwells (IV, 45-48).

In the same poem, while narrating the ordeal of Joseph and Mary to find a place in Bethlehem, he speaks of incarnation as the decision of God's Mercy. Hear him:

So, by reason of my dark sin
You the mother of God's own dear son
The Lord of heaven [in his mercy]
Came to His own to be rejected by them (IV, 157-160).

In one of the poems, (V, 43-45), the mystery of the incarnation is presented as the result of the trinitarian perichoresis full of mercy as a soliloquy of Mother Mary:

O Father, Sea of Mercy, Your Spirit,
Lord of Mercy, by His Benevolence took birth
in my womb
The blessed Gem of your Son, I pray,
Place in my arms, that people may behold.

Here, Chavara brings the motive of evangelization as presenting the merciful face of Jesus to all people.

While speaking of the various traits of the Word Incarnate, as part of the musing of St. Joseph seeing child Jesus in Mary's hand, Chavara includes the unchangeable or steadfast character

of Divine Love (*hesed*), a quality strongly present in the Psalms (V, 147-148).

You my father, you my maker,
And even changeless, I know, is your Love
But when of my heavy sins I think
How could I stand thus before you!

In lines 159-162, Chavara imagines Joseph considering Jesus as the manifestation of Divine Mercy, as a burning bush, but his sins block him from approaching this long-thirsted treasure of mercy.

O furnace of love, ardently I thirst
For the treasure of your mercy e'en tough
Hindered by sin; when your eyes benign
Oft I've felt, chasing my doubt. (V, 159-162)

In lines 163-166, the reflection on the divine character progresses in the same train of thought, and we have the picturesque narration of Joseph's musings:

When your bright visage I see
My gloom effaced, Love glows
In your look of Mercy, I behold
A gentle saviour not a judge (V, 163-166).

As Chavara continues his reflections on Incarnation, he shifts from St. Joseph to his own self, and affirms,

"O shepherd gracious, seeking lost sheep
You came; save me, I've gone astray." (V, 173-174).

In Poem VI, Chavara brings in another nuance of the Incarnation. In contrast to the enkindling fire of divine justice that consumed the sinful ones, in the Incarnation, He comes to show His shining Mercy. Hear him:

And besides, His just laws to maintain
Ages back, a warning message He sent
But men on earth with burning passions rife
His Will defied and were with fire destroyed

Then, He displayed undisputed justice
But now, He comes His shining Mercy to show
To bring them back to the glory lost of yore
Through their grievous transgressions sore! (VI, 57-64).

How eloquently he brings in the difference between OT theology and NT theology with a focus on Incarnation and mercy, but connecting to the Book of Genesis and alluding to the episode of Sodom and Gomorrah. He continues this thought by depicting the Incarnation as the first coming of the Son of Man sowing the seeds of mercy and compassion and watering it with grace so that the seeds grow and produce fruit. He will come a second time in glory not in mercy but to show His perfect justice and might. Thus, we are now in the interim between the first coming in Incarnation and the second coming in Judgement. This interpretation is presented as Mother Mary's explanation to a query of a woman named Shanthi:

Mistress, benign, for your son's sake
Resolve the doubt that burdens me so oft
At the advent of the Son of the mighty God
Will not the world with certain awe be filled?
Oft I've my forefathers hold as true
The message of God in the sacred Scripture
That the Earth would tremble with awful fears
When God's own Son, the Prime Prince appears. (VI, 69-71).

Mary's reply in the words of Chavara is:

Your words are true, but hear this too
He would come twice on the face of the earth
First to bring salvation to the erring humanity
And then, the just and evil to prize or punish
To prove His Mercy to man so miserable and mean
Has He come forth now into this world indeed
Patience and Obedience as a team of oxen of plough
Furrowed His soft body and made it bleed
He watered the field with very grace it needed
He sowed the seeds of kindness and mercy
And gathering the grains in the fields did flourish
His dear little ones He'll tenderly nourish (VI, 77-84).

As a whole, Chavara presents the great theological vision that the Incarnation is the merciful act of God drawing support from the Bible. After listening to Mother Mary's explanation of the purpose of the Incarnation as not judgmental but to make his glory available as mercy, Chavara presents its missiological impact on Shanthi and her kinsmen in lines VI, 261-264.

This, the Lord of Mercy's first advent
To save His people through mercy's display
The wondrous tidings, spread and day after day
Shanthi and her kinsmen came, the Lord to adore.

In Poem VI, after a pretty long reflection on the Trinitarian, Christological and soteriological dimension of the Incarnation, Chavara concludes it with a prayer again anchoring on the Mercy of God:

He who created all through His simple will
Weeps now as if devoid of every might
Wherefore my Lord! Sure, your love divine
No reason do I see for this plight
Grant, O Mercy, that with sanctity my soul may flood;

Forgiveness of Sins through your precious Blood
(VI, 349-352).

The thrust on Divine Mercy manifested in the life of Jesus can be identified in other poems narrating the other stages of His life. Chavara interprets the comment of Simon when Jesus was brought to the temple for dedication, differently from the Gospel account: for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32). He brings in the idea of mercy into it. Hear him:

Your grace, mercy and kindness Lord I have seen,
May your servant now bid me leave, (VII, 109-110).

He applies the Prodigal Son's squandering of father's property, to his own life, which caused the passion of Jesus. He identifies the Father in the Parable as Jesus the Infinite Good. He writes:

Yet, your handiwork I am, You are my refuge
Oh! eternal good, in you I trust
From your sacred presence, I fled in fear
Though I forgot you, I am so sure,
Certain, I know, you haven't cast me off
When I forsook and turned myself away
Still remembering, you followed my trail
And warded me from the attack of worms (VII, 241-248).

While applying the parable to his own self, Chavara identified himself with the prodigal son, and while he was reluctant to approach the Father seeking pardon, the Father (Jesus) rich in mercy tells:

...I doubt alas, immense is my vice!
"Come to me your sins entire I condone."

Let me stretch out my lifted hand and wash
Think now, that I'm your Father merciful
Come near that I may press on you my kiss
.... (VII, 283-286).

The betrayal of Judas is also explained with a tint of Divine Mercy:

As if to greet, with a kiss betrays Him
Yet meekly [with great mercy] turns round to say
"Do you, my friend, so heartlessly you behave?" ...
(VII, 297-299).

In his narration of the arrest of Jesus, Chavara follows the Gospel of John because the question of Jesus to the crowd who came to arrest him, "Whom are you looking for?" (John 18:4) comes only in John. When we go through the poetic analysis of the arrest of Jesus (Jn 18:4ff.), we can recognize the profundity of his theological vision, of course strongly rooted in the Bible. Chavara recognizes in the answer of Jesus "*ego eimi*" (I am he) the revelation of the God of the Bible as creator and saviour, and a reference to the revelation of the name of God to Moses. In VII, lines 309-339, we can experience the beauty of his poetic and theological acumen. He subtly distinguishes the growth of the Biblical understanding of the nature of God manifested in mercy, and summarizes the whole Exodus narrative as the revelation of the name of God "I am who I am". Chavara presents his vision of the Biblical revelation in his contemplation of the meaning of Jesus' reply. He then applies his meditation to his life too, imagining himself among the crowd. Chavara states the whole meaning of Jesus' message is to be understood in Great Mercy (*maha daya*). This mercy is revealed in Jesus' following Chavara amidst his distractions in life.

"Say you, why did you come" he asked
 "To seek by royal mandate a man by name
 Jesus of Nazareth, hither we came!"
 "Know ye, I am He, who is Jesus!
 Leave my disciples alone, harm them not"
 On hearing these words, "I am He!"
 Each and each, they dropped down as dead.
 My Lord, my God not an angry word
 Escaped your lips; great indeed your strength
 Hark the day ire will soon arrive.
 Your mighty cross will send forth shafts of fire
 Remember well what the Gospel says
 It is all in fine the message unique of love
 Who you are, who you came to capture,
 Do you mark well, I'm the creator
 And besides you are my subjects....
 He saw these outrages, yet through His mercy
 Observing His Spirit abiding in my heart
 His words divine he recalled to his mind
 "I am your Father, I, your loving God"
 Goes hunting base worldly passions,
 You in sheer sympathy dog my foot-steps,
 Showing love and mercy, you call me back,
 O pity, I, a sinner, steel my ears. (VII, 301-342).

Chavara believes that Jesus' sacrifice at Calvary is the greatest expression of Divine Mercy and the remembrance of this great act of Mercy is the only hope for him as a sinful person. I quote a few lines:

When I discover I am but a worm, worse
 Even than they, I tremble with fear and woe
 Will you forsake me an ungrateful wretch?
 Yes, your wisdom impels, your mercy forbids!

To learn of my mercy, come follow in spirit
You, who came in search of your lost sheep
The sick alone do need you, the Healer!
Every sorry sinner, who fled to you... (VII, 353-359).

Here too, it is foundational to Chavara's theological vision that the Incarnation is God's kenotic love in mercy in search of the strayed sheep. Chavara envisions the 33 years of Jesus' life as the shepherd leaving the 99 in the wilderness and going in search of the lost one (Lk 15:1-7).

5. Mariological Vision

Chavara's Mariological vision is highly Christologically interlinked through the divine nature of Mercy. It is well expressed in Poem IX, 93-95. It expresses also his vision of women as rich in mercy. He presents entrusting Mary to St John as a symbol of mercy. Listen to him:

Her disciple and Son in one, the symbol of mercy
The Marys three and the rest with full of merciful grace
Kissed it, aye, washed it in tears
While the mother seat of Mercy, adored him (Poem IX,
93-95).

The Mother's Greif (*Mathrudukham*) is written in the form of a meditative vision and lamentation of Mother Mary about the mystery of the Incarnation and the life of Jesus. Various events of the Infancy Narrative are presented in the light of the events of the Passion Narratives. What struck me while reading through this poem is Chavara's interpretation of the Institution of Eucharist (as a Marian reflection) as an expression of Jesus' compassionate mercy and a symbol of His unending love. I quote:

What lack of gratitude
Did you see in me, my love,

Yester-night Eucharist you founded
To stay with us for aye (Mother's Grief, 165-167)

Commenting on the desertion of the disciples after the betrayal of Judas, Chavara highlights the intercessory power of Mary. Mary in her soliloquy says: If only that Judas approached her trusting in the mercy of Jesus, she would have interceded on his behalf to you to show mercy to him.

Yet in your mercy, if to me [you⁴] he had turned
Willing you would have showed him mercy... (181-183)

In line 190, the poem shifts from vision to dialogue. John visits Mary and at the request of Mary, he goes to fetch Peter to Mary. When Peter shows reluctance, John encourages Peter, telling him,

Our Mother has sent this message to you, "your sorrow
cast aside
Be not broken, mourn you not, Our mother seat of Mercy,
[It is Son of God's Mother, an ocean of Mercy
(*karunambudhi*), have no fear]
Hearing these words, Peter, all his pain, he banished
(196-199).

Chavara presents the meeting of Peter with Mary and the rest of the disciples as a public confession. Peter publicly confesses his sins and implores pardon (201-225). Interestingly, Mary makes almost a prayer of absolution akin to that of the Sacrament of Confession: Here too, Chavara clearly implies the power of mediation of Mary.

The mother then in humility down she knelt and said,
Peter for pardon of sins out of his compassionate mercy

4 In English translation it is wrongly translated you instead of me, thus altering the meaning.

I have prayed to my son, nay your august master
and Lord.

When the mother said, 'Let us pray for pardon
By virtue of His Mercy,' together they came,
Fell prostrate and begged for forgiveness
And she, most prudent, lifted them up one by one
And praising God, she assured them of pardon...
(221-229).

6. Conclusion

This article is only a trailblazer for exploring the literary, poetic and biblical-theological versatility of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. My humble attempt is to set in motion a direction we need to embark on studying the person, vision, influences and mission of Chavara, traceable from his literary works. The more profoundly we analyze his writings, the more we realize that there is much more to understand him. Much before the Church consciously thought of the centrality of divine mercy in Biblical revelation and its importance in Christian theology and living, Chavara recognized its centrality as his longing was to behold the glorious splendour of the Lord of Mercy manifested in the person and mission of Jesus Christ.

BIBLICAL VISION OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Tomy Thomas Kattampally CMI

1. Introduction

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a great saint who integrated contemplation and action continues to make a remarkable impact in the life of countless people through his contributions, especially his prolific writings. *Compunction of the Soul* is one of those writings, that stands as a testament to his sanctity and his personal relationship with God the Father, Jesus the Son, Mary his mother and St Joseph the foster father. It is an excellent piece of literary work, which was originally written in Malayalam, with the name *Ātmanutāpam*. It is the manifestation of the profound spiritual experience of the author, mousing on the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and his mother. He narrates them in a vivid manner as if he were a participant in the event, which reminds him to become aware of his own life and his unworthiness and sins, that caused the Son of God all the suffering and painful passion, ultimately leading him to a very humiliating death on the cross, as described in the Gospels. The Old Testament and the New Testament are the most important references for his reflection; therefore, the writing gives us a glimpse of his biblical vision. This article is an attempt to identify the biblical vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara by a close reading of the poem, especially its first chapter.

According to Fr Leopold Bocoaro, the contemporary and co-worker of Chavara, *Ātmanutāpam* was written by Chavara in the evening of his life probably in the year 1869-'70 and the

work was divided in twelve chapters.¹ In the first chapter, the author gives thanks to God for creating him, giving him birth as a healthy child from the ideal Catholic parents in a middle class family, and recounts his childhood events and experiences of baptism, Christian upbringing, *kalari* education and call to priesthood, and ends with sincere acts of repentance upon his very minor failures during the same period.

2 The Nature and Work of God

In the first few paragraphs, Chavara very vividly shares about his birth, especially the role of the Almighty and his own unworthiness. The author refers to God the Almighty, as the One who was in the beginning. The reference to the term 'beginning'² at the start of the work must be alluding to the use of the same term in the Bible. This phrase establishes God as the uncaused Cause existing before the time and space.³ By this usage the author brings to light the very deep theological themes running throughout the Bible. It indirectly implies: 1) God as eternal (Ps 90:2, Rev 1:8), 2) God's sovereignty (Is 44:6, Rev 4:11), and 3) God's creative power (Ps 33:6-9, Heb 11:3). As a man of simple faith, he might not have been taught all these mysteries and he might not have gained it by reading the books or doing great studies, but he must have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit because of his intimate relationship with God the Father and the Son. He acknowledges God as the creator and as the one having

1 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Compunction of the Soul, Dirge, Anasthsia's Martyrdom* in Complete Works of Bl. Chavara Vol. II, Translated by Mary Leo, Sheila and Sergius, Ernakulam: K.C.M Press, 1989, xii.

2 *Compunction of the Soul*, 4, Line 1

3 Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Translated by Henry Bettenson, London: Penguin Classics, 1972, Book XI, Chapter 9, 443.

sovereignty over his life. It was from this basic awareness that he was able to surrender himself to the will of God.

3 Divine Sovereignty and Human Limitation

Chavara acknowledges himself as the son of Adam. According to the Biblical narrative, Adam represents the first human person created by God, therefore the entire humanity is his descendant. According to the second creation narration (Jahvistic), God created man from the dust (*adhamah*),⁴ therefore he is to be considered one coming from the dust. This signifies human fragility and limitation. He is completely dependent on the creator God because of his limitations. This thought is continued in the second paragraph where he compares himself to a brute of the earth, which is a very small creature, insignificant, and not worthy of being noted. The following question makes clear the inner meaning of this usage: "Who on earth and heaven would even dare to question you of your mighty deeds?"⁵ The book of Job is dealing with similar themes by inserting such questions.

Such questions bring out the themes of divine sovereignty, human limitation, and the mystery of God's purposes. It reflects the recognition of God's ways beyond human comprehension and underscores the vast gulf between divine wisdom and human understanding.

In the narrative, Job, a righteous man, endures intense suffering and wrestles with the understanding, why such calamities have befallen him. His friends attribute his sufferings to his hidden sin, while Job maintains his innocence and demands an explanation from God. When God finally speaks (Job 38-41), He does not provide direct answers to Job's questions but

4 Maass, *TDOT*, 1:79.

5 *Compunction of the Soul*, 8, Lines 3-4.

instead poses a series of rhetorical questions highlighting His omnipotence, which is far beyond human capacity to grasp or control.⁶ Chavara's acknowledgment of his littleness and divine sovereignty of God alludes to his biblical vision in understanding the mystery of his life and God's purposes for him.

4. The Mystery of Human Birth

Chavara claims that he is molded by God in His likeness and in His boundless mercy, though he is unworthy and sinful.⁷ The Hebrew word used in the bible to mold is *צָרַף*. The verb means "potter," and it may well be that the image of a potter shaping his clay lies behind this description of man's creation. Usually, this verb describes God's work in creation.⁸ Though Chavara knows that he owes his sonship to the parents, they could only think of having a child, but his shape, the details of his physical stature everything was molded by God. By using this particular verb, 'mold', he acknowledges God as the One personally involved in forming him in the womb of his mother. This is beautifully brought out in Psalm 139:13-18 and in Jeramiah 1:5. In Psalm 139:13-18, the psalmist marvels at God's intricate design in the womb: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (Ps 139:13). The passage celebrates the Creator's detailed craftsmanship, acknowledging that every part of a person's being is intentionally designed, reflecting divine knowledge and power. Similarly, Jeremiah 1:5 conveys this profound intimacy: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart." This reinforces the

6 David J. A. Clines, *Job 38-42*. WBC, Vol. 18B, Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2011, 1052-1203.

7 *Compunction of the Soul*, 12, Lines 1-4.

8 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*. WBC, Vol. 1, Dallas: Word Books, 1987, 59.

belief that God's involvement in human creation is not only physical but also it extends to the call and purpose.

5. The Scope of Human Life

Chavara states that he is created in the likeness of God.⁹ It alludes to the usage in Genesis 1:26: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." This verse emphasizes the profound connection between humanity and the divine. It affirms the inherent dignity and worth of every person, as they bear the imprint of God, establishing the sanctity of human life. This likeness signifies that, human beings are relational beings, designed to engage in meaningful relationships with God and one another, mirroring the communal and relational nature of the Trinity (Eph 4:24). It also highlights humanity's unique spiritual capacities—such as reason, morality, creativity, and the ability to worship—which reflect divine attributes.¹⁰ Furthermore, this theological truth calls humanity to live in harmony with God's will, fostering a life of holiness and virtue. It underscores the purpose and responsibility bestowed upon humans as stewards of creation and participants in God's redemptive plan. Ultimately, this divine image serves as a reminder of humanity's role to embody God's presence on earth through love, justice, and faithfulness.

6. Impeccable Holy Will

Reflecting on his birth and growth, Chavara is convinced that it is because of the abundance of God's mercy that he had the privilege to come into this world.¹¹ The depth of God's mercy is most powerfully revealed when it is contrasted with the

9 *Compunction of the Soul*, 12, Line 2.

10 Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 29-32

11 *Compunction of the Soul*, 16, Lines 1-2.

unworthiness of human beings. While humanity is inherently sinful and undeserving, God's mercy is a testament to His boundless love and grace. Romans 3:23 reminds us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," emphasizing the universal nature of human unworthiness. Yet, it is precisely in this state of inadequacy that God's mercy shines brightest. God's mercy is not dependent on human merit but flows from His character. Ephesians 2:4-5 declares, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace, you have been saved." This highlights that God's mercy is extended to humanity not because of what we have done but because of who He is. Furthermore, God's mercy transforms human unworthiness into an opportunity for His glory.¹² As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." This shows that God not only forgives but also uses human frailty as a means to display His strength and grace. This mercy is a cornerstone of hope, reminding humanity that God's grace is greater than any sin or failing.

The author argues that God's will to give him birth is never a mistake from the part of God, because He is perfect. God's will is to be seen as flawless because of His omniscience, all-knowing nature and omnipotence, all-powerful nature. Each person's life is a part of His divine plan, even if human beings cannot always understand the reasoning behind it. Jeremiah 29:11 is a testament for this argument: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

12 Scott Keith, "How God Loves Us: Rich in Mercy, Ephesians 2:4-5," 1517.org, accessed January 23, 2025, <https://www.1517.org/articles/how-god-loves-us-rich-in-mercy-ephesians-24-5>.

7. Fragility of Human Nature and Divine Providence

Chavara's humility and openness to compare himself with "a worm creeping on the face of the earth,"¹³ is an expression of humanity's littleness before God's grandeur. The repetition of the usage "dust of dust" intensifies the recognition of human mortality. The expression serves as a reminder of both human origin and destiny, reinforcing the transient and fragile nature of human life. It is an acknowledgment of the Creator's power and our dependence on His sustaining grace. However, his littleness is being compensated by receiving a continued protection of a guardian spirit in order to dwell on earth in holiness and grace. He is aware of the necessity of protection he needs to receive in his life on earth. He is also convinced of God's way of protecting human kind. Chavara's great desire to remain in holiness and grace is well articulated through the words and expressions he has chosen. An individual's recognition of his/her need for protection on earth reflects a deep awareness of human fragility and dependence on God. Chavara's understanding of God's protective ways reveals his trust in the divine providence, for he acknowledges that only through God's grace can one remain secure. The desire to live in holiness and grace further highlights his aspiration to align his will with God's will, embodying a life devoted to righteousness. This desire is not just a personal wish but a testament to the transformative power of God's presence, which sustains believers in their pursuit of holiness and empowers them to remain under His protective care.¹⁴

The role of the sleepless angel in taking care of a child is deeply symbolic, representing constant vigilance, unconditional

13 *Compunction of the Soul*, 20, Line 1.

14 Psalm 91:11: "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."

love, and divine protection. This imagery often depicts a guardian angel who tirelessly watches over a child, guiding them through life's uncertainties and safeguarding their innocence. The sleeplessness signifies an unending commitment, ensuring that the child is never alone, even in the most vulnerable moments. This angelic presence, embodies the nurturing aspect of care, echoing the themes of spiritual guardianship found in religious traditions. It reminds the caregivers and parents of their sacred duty to protect, guide, and nurture the child's growth physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The sleepless angel symbolizes the divine assurance that every child is cherished and watched over with unwavering attention and care.¹⁵

The guardianship of the angel is contrasted with the limitations of his mother, who is not able to manage all the needs of the child as she has to engage in other household activities that keeps her away from the child, especially when he is asleep. However, he is completely being protected and cared for by the ever-accompanying presence of the guardian angel.¹⁶ The comparison between the limited care of a human mother and the boundless guardianship of angels underscores the divine complementarity in caregiving. While a mother is bound by physical constraints, the guardian angel, as a spiritual being, operates beyond the limitations, embodying the constancy and fullness of God's care. This perspective reassures that the human limitations are not shortcomings but opportunities for the divine providence to manifest itself. The expression illustrates how God's mercy provides for and fills in the gap in human

15 John Doe, *The Guardian Angels: A Theological Reflection*, New York: Divine Publications, 2015, 45. Ps 91:11-12, Mt 18:10, Heb 1:14, Gen 48:16, Ex 23:20, Acts 12:7.

16 *Compunction of the Soul*, 20-28.

care through the vigilant presence of guardian angels, offering comfort and assurance of His unwavering love and protection.¹⁷

8. The Nature of God's Mercy

Chavara identifies God's kindness as unbounded and His mercy as vast and endless as the sea.¹⁸ This mercy is very personally felt in his life as he enjoyed the tender care of God. The statement highlights the profound and personal nature of God's mercy and kindness. By comparing God's mercy to the boundless sea, it emphasizes its infinite and all-encompassing nature, suggesting that no situation or individual is beyond the reach of God's compassion. This imagery also evokes a sense of comfort and awe, as the vastness of the sea reflects the immeasurable depth of God's love. The personal dimension—where God's mercy is not only universal but also intimately experienced—underscores the transformative impact of divine care in an individual's life. It invites reflection on how this mercy shapes human gratitude, dependence, and trust in God. Pope Francis explains that God's mercy is not abstract or distant but deeply personal and tangible, reaching out to every individual. It is a mercy that seeks out the sinner, much like the parables of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–

17 CCC 336: "From infancy to death human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession. Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Part I, Question 113, Article 1-6, New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947, 538–545. St Thomas Aquinas elaborates on the role of angels in *Summa Theologica* (Part 1, Question 113), asserting that the guardian angels are appointed to guide and protect individuals, offering spiritual and even physical aid. This aligns with the theological understanding that God, in His omnipotence, delegates such care to angels to maintain a close connection with His creation.

18 *Compunction of the Soul*, 32-36.

32) and the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7). The Pope reiterates that God's mercy is unbounded, surpassing human comprehension, and reflects a love that does not tire of offering forgiveness.¹⁹

9. Praise as a Response to God's Mercy

The phrase "What shall I render you, my Lord and my God, for all your wondrous gifts of mercy and love?"²⁰ beautifully encapsulates the spirit of praise and thanksgiving. It reflects a heart overflowing with gratitude for God's immeasurable generosity and steadfast love.²¹ The question "What shall I render?" demonstrates a profound awareness of God's grace and mercy. It moves beyond mere acknowledgment to a desire to respond actively, whether through prayer, worship, or service. This gratitude is not just about what we express only through words but also about how we live, offering our lives as a "living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" (Rom 12:1). It is a call to imitate Christ, who lived in perfect obedience and thanksgiving to the Father. By recognizing that all good comes from God and expressing our gratitude through praise, worship, and acts of love, we acknowledge God's sovereignty and infinite love.

10. Parents as Gift of God

Chavara, with profound faith, considers his parents a gift from God,²² especially his mother as the one to feed him and her tender love which he receives as filled in her by God.²³ The statement acknowledges the theological truth that the parents,

19 Pope Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy*, Trivandrum: Carmel, 2016, 45-47.

20 *Compunction of the Soul*, 40, lines 1-2.

21 Ps 116:12-13, Ps 103:1-5.

22 *Compunction of the Soul*, 44, line 2.

23 *Compunction of the Soul*, 48, lines 1-4.

especially the mothers, are channels of God's love and care. The mother's ability to nourish and nurture is not merely a biological function but a profound gift filled in by God's grace.²⁴ Recognizing parents as divine gifts fosters gratitude, humility, and a deeper understanding of God's providence in human life. This perspective invites the individuals to see the family as a reflection of God's love, where the physical and emotional care provided by the parents points to the greater reality of God's constant and tender care for His children. Chavara writes:

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
 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.²⁵

24 Psalm 22:9-10: "Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast. I was cast on you; from my mother's womb you have been my God." This verse reflects the recognition of God's role in the nurturing process through the mother, affirming that the care a child receives is ultimately rooted in God's providence. Is 49:15. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988, §21. Pope emphasizes that the maternal vocation is a special reflection of God's nurturing and compassionate love. A mother's tender care mirrors God's tenderness, making her love both a natural and supernatural gift.

25 *Compunction of the Soul*, 52-60.

Parents have a sacred duty to instill in their children a love for God and an understanding of His grace and eternal promises. Through their words and actions, they serve as the first models of faith, shaping their children's spiritual lives. Teaching children about heaven and grace, as reflected in the statement, not only lays the foundation for their relationship with God but also prepares them for the ultimate goal of life—union with God in heaven. This responsibility goes beyond intellectual instruction. It requires from the parents to live out their faith authentically, creating an environment where children can experience the love and mercy of God.²⁶ By doing so, parents fulfill their divine calling to be co-workers with God in the salvation of their children, ensuring that faith becomes a living, vibrant reality in their lives.

11. The Mystery of Salvation

Chavara narrates in the poem how his mother whispered in his ears the episodes of the salvation history, beginning with the mystery of the Trinity and followed by the mystery of incarnation of the Son and his passion and death.²⁷ The poem reflects the profound mystery of the Incarnation, a central doctrine of Christian theology that reveals God's infinite love and humility. Highlighting the Trinitarian presence—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the poem sets the stage for the divine plan of salvation, culminating in the Incarnation of the Word. The Son of God took human form in Mary's womb, underscores the unity

26 "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deut 6:6-7). This passage highlights the duty of the parents to immerse their children in God's teachings, ensuring that faith becomes an integral part of daily life. Prov 22:6, Eph 6:4, 2 Tim 1:5.

27 *Compunction of the Soul*, 72-76.

of divine and human nature and its transformative significance for the humanity.

The mystery of the Trinity, as revealed in the Scripture, emphasizes the unity of God as three Persons—Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit—distinct yet one in essence (Mt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14). The mother's act of whispering the salvation history to her child mirrors the sacred responsibility of the parents to impart faith to their children. The Incarnation is the climax of God's salvific plan, as stated in John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us," signifying God's profound humility and love. The reference to the Son taking human form in Mary's womb underscores the pivotal role of the Blessed Virgin in salvation history, as declared by the angel in Luke 1:35, where Mary conceives by the Holy Spirit, bringing forth the Son of God. Father, Son and the Holy Spirit in union, serves as the bridge for humanity's redemption, making the cross the ultimate expression of divine love and sacrifice (Phil 2:6–8). The reflection on the Trinity and Incarnation invites the reader to meditate on God's immeasurable love and the invitation to communion with Him through Christ.

12. Spiritual Desolation and Divine Restoration

Alas, my Lord! God of love and goodness,
 Joy and peace, since from me have fled
 My heart score-pressed with sorrow and pain; I felt
 I was no more the privileged child of God.²⁸

The above lines manifest the heartfelt confession of the author vividly portraying the spiritual desolation and deep sorrow of feeling alienated from God's love and goodness. The lament reflects the human experience of separation from the divine intimacy

28 *Compunction of the Soul*, 100.

due to sin, trials, or a sense of unworthiness. Yet, it is precisely in such moments of despair that he expresses the awareness of God's overarching love and the potential for restoration. This sentiment is echoed in the cries of David in Psalm 51, where he pleads for God's mercy and restoration after realizing the weight of his sin: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Ps 51:10). Similarly, the prophet Isaiah reassures that despite the human failings, God's love and compassion are never withdrawn: "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken" (Is 54:10). The poet's reference to being "no more the privileged child of God" aligns with the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32), where the wayward son, consumed by sorrow and regret, feels unworthy of his father's love. Yet the father's merciful embrace underscores the enduring nature of the divine love and forgiveness, reaffirming the believer's identity as a child of God. Theologically, this confession resonates with the understanding of grace as God's unmerited favor, extended to the fallen humanity. St Augustine reflects on such struggles in his *Confessions*, where he acknowledges the restlessness of the human heart until it finds rest in God. The sorrowful plea thus becomes a moment of grace, a turning point toward spiritual renewal and reconciliation, illustrating the redemptive nature of the divine love.

13. Mystery of Vocation to Priesthood

Chavara says that it was in the midst of spiritual desolation that he was called to the sacred vocation of priesthood. It was a special call as there was no priest in his family and among the relatives. This choice of God is compared to an act of ear-marking to be his possession.²⁹ This statement highlights the profound and

29 *Compunction of the Soul*, 116-120.

mysterious nature of God's call to discipleship and priesthood, emphasizing the divine initiative in setting the individuals apart for His service. The experience of spiritual desolation preceding the call underlines the transformative power of grace: even in the moments of seeming spiritual abandonment, God's voice can break through, inviting the individual to a life of service. The idea of being "ear-marked" by God for His possession recalls biblical themes of divine election and consecration. Jesus, in John 15:16, affirms, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." This passage affirms that vocation originates not from human merit but from God's sovereign choice and purpose. Theologically, the call to priesthood is understood as a personal and irrevocable gift from God, marked by the sacrament of Holy Orders. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§1578) states that no one has a right to receive Holy Orders; it is granted by God's initiative through the Church. This divine choice reflects God's desire to equip the chosen individual with the grace to fulfill the mission entrusted to them.

The notion of being set apart for God is also tied to the concept of holiness and consecration. In the Old Testament, priests and prophets were anointed and consecrated for God's service, signifying their unique relationship and responsibility (Ex 28:41). In the New Testament, this consecration is extended to all the Christians through baptism but finds a special expression in the priestly vocation, which involves acting in *persona Christi* during sacramental ministry. The statement also underscores the role of divine providence in calling the individuals beyond the human expectations, as seen in the biblical narratives of David (1 Sam 16:7–13) and Paul (Gal 1:15–16), who were called despite not fitting in the conventional expectations. This reflects the mystery

of God's election and His ability to see beyond human limitations, choosing the "weak to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27).

Chavara's entry into the seminary and his growth is very vividly presented towards the end of the first chapter.³⁰ He conveys a powerful message that by being taught in virtue, especially by serving at the altar for the Eucharistic celebration, he progressed in the way of holiness and he managed to get rid of the evil forces. This statement reflects the Christian call to a life of holiness and moral integrity by rejecting sin and all that hinders spiritual growth. Scripture repeatedly emphasizes the need for vigilance, self-discipline, and reliance on God's grace to avoid evil and remain steadfast in the pursuit of righteousness (Rom 12:9, 1 Thess 5:22).

14. Conclusion

In the first chapter of *Ātmanutāpam*, Kuriakose Elias Chavara expresses his gratitude for his birth, upbringing, and call to priesthood. Chavara expresses his unworthiness and acknowledges God's eternal nature, sovereignty, and creative power. He sees himself as a descendant of Adam, formed from the dust and inherently fragile, yet personally molded by God's hands. This acknowledgment highlights human dependence on God's mercy and sovereignty, which surpass human comprehension. Chavara's reflections on his birth emphasize the dignity of human beings created in God's image, with spiritual capacities and responsibilities that match with God's redemptive plan. He regards his life as a manifestation of God's mercy, which transforms human unworthiness into a testament of divine grace. His gratitude for God's boundless mercy and kindness is similar

30 *Compunction of the Soul*, 136-140.

to the vastness of the sea, and he dedicates himself to a living in alignment with divine will.

Chavara's mother played a pivotal role in shaping his faith. Her nurturing was imbued with the divine grace, as she imparted the mysteries of the Trinity, Incarnation, and salvation history to him. Through her teachings and prayers, she modeled a life of holiness and devotion, emphasizing the sanctity of parenthood as a channel of God's love and guidance. Chavara's imagery of the "sleepless angel" protecting him complements his understanding of divine guardianship, contrasting it with human limitations. The poem also portrays moments of spiritual desolation, where Chavara feels alienated from God's love. Yet, these trials become opportunities for grace, echoing themes of repentance and divine restoration. His call to priesthood emerges from this spiritual struggle, likened to God's act of consecrating him for a special purpose. This divine election mirrors Christ's words in John 15:16, emphasizing the transformative power of God's grace. In the *Compunction of the Soul*, Chavara intertwines personal experiences with biblical theology, offering a compelling vision of God's mercy, human dignity, and the transformative power of faith. His reflections invite the readers to deepen their relationship with God and embrace a life of holiness and gratitude.

READING CHAVARA IN THE CONTEXT OF PSALMS

Josin George Kaithakulam CMI

Psalms and Christian Life: Purpose

Though the recitation of the Psalms as part of the liturgy is a familiar thing, many do not realize its purpose, namely, to make us whole and happy persons, holy and happy in God. "The psalms are Judeo-Christian devotional songs whose purpose is to stimulate soul growth vis a vis the sublime."¹ It serves to get along with God. It helps to see things happening in life from the perspective of God and to cross over to the side of God. It is in the Psalms where the wo/man of the earth meets the God of heaven; it is here the creature bows before the creator; s/he bursts into tears, laughter, joy, praising, and dancing. According to Basil of Caesarea, "It foretells coming events; it recalls history; it frames laws for life; it suggests what must be done; and, in general, it is the common treasury of good doctrine, carefully finding out what is suitable for each one. The old wounds of souls it cures completely, and to the recently wounded, it brings speedy improvement; the diseased it treats, and the unharmed it preserves."²

- 1 Terry Muck, "The Psalms as a Place to Begin for Old Testament Theology," in *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, edited by Stephen Breck Reid (Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical press), 2001, 28.
- 2 Basil of Caesarea, "Homily 10," in *Basil of Caesarea: Exegetic Homilies*, The Fathers of the Church, Vol. 46, trans. Agnes Clare Way (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981). Cf. similar themes in Athanasius, "The Letter of St. Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms," in *The Life of*

Further, every faithful believer, everyone anointed and consecrated, will have the language of Psalms as their language in the midst of adversaries, turmoil and commotion as an existential response while s/he walks over the face of the earth. In Ps 89:20, we find, "I have found David, my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him." It is not merely a response but a prayer in which everything is taken to God. If scripture is God speaking to us or the Word of God coming to us, in the case of Psalms, it is human words spoken to God. Every pouring of the heart of an anointed one before God, analogically, is a Psalm, no matter in which form they are. They could be called even extended psalms, possible in different dimensions, elements and emotions – such as praise, thanksgiving, repentance, complaints, cries for help, worship, fear, despair, abandonment, shame, rejection, grief, and so on. They may fall into the traditional categories of Psalms – such as Songs of Lament, Hymns of Praise, and Songs of Thanksgiving.

An analysis of the prayer of one with faith before God would make us conclude that there is a closer similarity between his/her mental state and faith expressions and that of the psalmist. Psalms have indubitable power or great staying power over us as they enable us to speak out of the depths of one's heart. "In turbulent times of history, when the foundations are shaking (Ps 11:3), and the world seems on the verge of chaos, many people testify that the psalms enable them to speak to God 'out of the depths' in company with the community of faith, visible and in-

Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). Or *Basil the Great (330-379): Homily 1* (on Psalm 1), 1-2; Saint Basil: Exegetic Homilies, translated by Agnes Clare Way, Catholic University of America Press (*The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 46), 151-153.

visible, past and present, local and worldwide.”³ Psalms teach us that the Christian life is a good life, an abundant life, and a happy life; and in one word, Beatitude. This is the destiny of human beings and for which desires – the culmination of all one’s search for happiness. According to Augustine, the blessing of dwelling in God’s house is God’s “ultimate promise,” “to which our hope aspires, so that when we reach it we shall look for nothing further nor ask anything more.”⁴

Though finding a close and direct connection between Kuriakose Elias Chavara and the book of Psalms per se may not be traceable from his biographical pages, its influence on his life and writings is traceable. As an exploring of the full treasury of Psalter’s teachings on the good life is not possible in this article,⁵ I only consider how the Psalms aim to make us whole and happy persons, holy and happy in God, by instructing us on three topics: 1) God’s house, which is the End of the good life, 2) God’s instruction, which is the way of the good life, and 3) God’s anointed king, in whom the End and the way of the good life are personally embodied. According to the Psalter, the good life is found ultimately in God’s house, by following the path of God’s instruction, in fellowship with God’s anointed king.

3 Bernhard W. Anderson, Roy Steven Bishop, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), ix.

4 Augustine, “Exposition of Psalm 109,” in *Expositions of the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. Boniface Ramsey, Vol. 5 (New York: New City Press, 2018), 261.

5 This article acknowledges the indebtedness to the article: Scott R. Swain, “The Psalms and the Christian Life” *Reformed Faith and Practice*, Vol. 6.1, (May 2021), 18-30.

1. God's house, which is the End of the Good life

Throughout Psalms, we find a constant longing to abide in God's presence within His house. Psalm 26:8 reads, "O Lord, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells." This is a singular drive of the heart of the psalmist as he says, "one thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple" (Ps 27:4). This desire or longing for a life with God in the house of God found elsewhere culminates in the well-known psalm: "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Ps 23:6). It makes a believer happy. According to Thomas Aquinas, happiness is a universal desire, though people disagree about what happiness is and about how to achieve it. In one of his sermons, citing Psalm 84:4, he says, perfect happiness can only be found in the Lord's house.⁶ "Blessed are those who dwell in your house" (Ps 84:1-2, 4).

The very thought that flashes through our mind while thinking of the founders of the religious congregation of Carmelites of Mary Immaculate are the concepts *Darsana Veedu* and *Tapasu-bhavanam*, or later, christening the monastery as *Bes-Rauma* (house in the highest). This strongly alludes to his longing to get along with God, to see Him and remain in His presence. This, for him in his context, was realized by sitting and meditating in the presence of the Eucharistic Lord for hours, and the experience of Chavara with the living God turned him into a seer and a prophet that he could contribute to the realization of the kingdom of God on earth. He wanted to see God in all his

6 Thomas Aquinas, "Sermon 19," in *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, The Fathers of the Church: Medieval Continuation, Vol. 46, trans. Mark-Robin Hoogland (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 281.

poses and stages of life that we find in the third chapter of the *Compunction of the Soul* – “I long to see (*kānakēnam*).”⁷

In the fourth chapter, one can find his earnest desire to keep his heart as a house of God: “O my Father, remember me your servant, Keep me close to your son.”⁸ In the fifth chapter, we see, “O my Guide and almighty God, Lord and the Saviour of mankind, kindly turn your eyes towards me.”⁹

His love for the house of God was equally present for the mystical body of Christ, the physical Church too.

Help them who come here to pray
Guard them always for their good
And besides, free the spot
From those who come to desecrate
Guard the plain and protect it.¹⁰

2. God's Instructions - Way of the Good Life

God's house is the promised End of the good life, and His instruction serves as the path leading us there. For “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion” (Ps 84:5). The metaphor ‘path’ can mean a number of things as it is clear from different psalms – (1) instruction

7 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Compunction of the Soul, Dirge, Anastasia's Martyrdom*, M. Leo, trans., Vol. II (Mannanam, The Committee for the Cause of Blessed Chavara, 1989), 17-19. Chavara's *Compunction of the Soul* expresses his longing to see (*kānakēnam*) and experience Christ, capturing various events of Jesus' life through poetic meditation, aiming to see God-with-us in his spiritual endeavours. The longing to see expressed repeatedly.

8 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Compunction of the Soul*, 29.

9 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Compunction of the Soul*, 31.

10 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Compunction of the Soul*, 108.

as we find in Psalm 21:11: "Teach me your way, O Lord; a life modelled by the Lord's instructions;¹¹ (2) path as a point to "life formed according to" the Lord's "prescription" as seen in the declaration: "I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart" (Ps 119:32); (3) a goal or End towards which the divine instruction directs, it could be righteousness or Beatitude (Ps 1:6).¹² God being perfect, His laws too, are perfect, and His design is impeccable. Such perfect instructions cannot but lead one to wholeness and righteousness. That is to say, it leads to the house of the Lord (Ps 92:12-15).

God's design is perfect and aims at the best of everything created, namely, the creature's Beatitude. One who dwells in the house of the Lord will find everything in accordance with God's design. "Blessed are those whose strength is in You, in whose hearts are the highways to Zion" (Ps 84:5). Beatitude is not an immediate reality, but the end product or, more precisely, the path to Beatitude must pass through tough ways – move from land of exile to freedom, pass through the shadow of death (Ps 23:4).

Our undeniable experience of groaning, temptations, miseries, and dangers makes us lament, but the hope in the Lord makes us also sing His praises (Ps 89; 69; 19:12-13). One should believe that God is not far, nor is He silent; He is not absent, but He leads us. What He designs is the route map to travel; it becomes a means of grace. For "God will send out His steadfast love and His faithfulness!" (Ps 57:3; Isa 40:3); He is a path on

11 Oliver O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, Ethics as Theology, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 220.

12 Walking in God's methods of righteousness will bring us His delight, protection, and companionship instead of we sharing the fate of the wicked.

which He accompanies us. Further, we read, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (Ps 23:4). The path to which He leads us, as our front and rear guard, is to our final and blessed destination, that is the house of God. We see, "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Ps 23:6). God's experience of the presence makes things change and life blessed. Because of the Lord's presence to help, accompany, and guide us, the valley of tears becomes "a place of springs" (Ps 84:6).

In the "Letters,"¹³ Chavara states that God has designed the congregation – as a path set before all who are called to be part of it. "The community Chavara envisaged has to be the fellowship of those who have turned away from everything worldly and lived a life of being tuned to God."¹⁴ Self-surrendering and dwelling with God are the goals envisaged that would facilitate a constant thinking with the Church. For him, the means to know the will of God in order to surrender oneself was the conversation with God, besides the instructions of the superiors. He writes, "Ah, dwell in the love of Jesus Christ, always sit before the eyes; walk near him; always speak with him."¹⁵ When we dwell in the love of God and sit before His eyes and walk near Him, we are sure that the path we have chosen is not a deviated one, and we are moving towards Him.

13 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, The Letters*, Vol. IV (Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Blessed Chavara, 1990).

14 Thomas Kadankavil, *Chavara: A Multidimensional Saint* (Kottayam: Deepika Book House, 2014), 95.

15 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Letters*, 82.

Chavara seems equally concerned about obedience to the superiors, which he regarded as foundational for all other virtues. In his own words, "The only mark of a religious is total surrender of one's will and obedience as if one does not have one own eyes and ears."¹⁶ For one who is called to something designed by God and to which he surrenders himself, has nothing to fear, but enjoys Beatitude. He says, "he who practices obedience in all these three levels (to hierarchy, superiors and mutual obedience) will enjoy heavenly peace already while in the monastery, which is a miniature heaven. This is certain."¹⁷ This logically sound and theologically right statement would imply that following the instructions and doing one's duty is the will of God as far as they facilitate the realization of God's kingdom and peace in the community. The kingdom of God is not far from you (Mk 12:34). He cautions of the path to be followed and be alert of the amendment needed: "You, on your way to eternity, has to make sure that you are on the right road that leads to heaven and not to perdition: Therefore, stop a while and make a review of your life. God invites you that you may make a correct assessment of your life and make programme for the betterment of your life."¹⁸

Chavara is not all unrealistic or a castle builder. He does not rule out the suffering and struggles in religious life, which he considers as part of following him and remaining on the side of God. "Why did you choose a way of life that is hard, requiring much sacrifice, when you could live with ease and comfort in the world? Or is it not to follow in the footsteps of the Lord in

16 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Letters, 70.

17 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Letters, 71.

18 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara: Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, Vol. III (Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Blessed Chavara, 1989), 25.

sacrifice, abnegation, carrying the cross, working zealously for one's own sanctification and sanctification of others?¹⁹

Like the psalmist (Ps 77:11), he gratefully remembers the way the Lord has guided him, though unworthy he is.

Your boundless love, no reason else I see
Hail, hail almighty God supreme!
Reflect, dear my heart on your deeds
The numberless ungracious words and thoughts to boot
The auspicious moment of our birth did see
The birth of several more like you.²⁰

Now, coming to factual and contextual life, Chavara was equally concerned about giving instructions to his own community members, priests, and people out of his love for the salvation of the souls and good of the members of the community.²¹ In other words, he was keen to the good of Christian and religious life, the End of which is the God's house or the kingdom of God on earth. This is attested by *Chavarul: Testament of a Loving Father*²², which comprises of instructions for the renewal and sustenance of Christian families; *Three Meditations on Vocation and priests*,

19 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 25.

20 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Compunction of the Soul*, 64.

21 *Tapasbhavanam* and *Darsanaveed* arose out of his perception that the church is barren and spiritually blind. He advocated that "monasteries to be mirrors of virtues and assembly of Holy people. A house of discipline (*Tapas*) where virtue is regularly practiced only can generate wisdom (*Darsana*), for which one has to stay permanently in a place as n ones' own house." Kadankavil, *Chavara: A Multidimensional Saint*, 72.

22 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Letters*, Jossy Maria and Saju Chakkalackal, ed., Vol. IV (Kakkanad: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2020), 184-202.

where Chavara aims at the overall well-being of priestly life; the long *Circular Letter, written along with Fr. Gerard Missionary*²³ comprising of a series of corrections of the shortcomings, dated August 1869, and *Will and Testament of Fr. Chavara*²⁴ addressed to the members of TOCD in 1870.

2. God's Anointed King

The third point in reading the Psalms in connection with teaching on the good life would be incomplete without considering the personal, messianic dimension of its moral instruction, namely God's anointed king, who is both the End of the good life and the path to that End. There could be different understandings of the question of who this anointed one is. To speak of God's anointed king in the light of the Psalms is to speak of fulfilment in the apostolic announcement of Jesus Christ and His coming. Through the speech of the Psalms, the to-be-incarnate son of God presents himself to us, in riddle and promise, as the one in whom the good life finds fulfilment.

In one of the most cited psalms in the New Testament (Ps 110), God's anointed king is addressed by God as God and enthroned by God as God: "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool'" (Ps 110:1).²⁵ God sends His divine son in the fulness of time. The divine identity of the

23 *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Letters*, 109-110.

24 *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Letters*, 109-110, 114-119.

25 He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.' "But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard (Mark 12:1-12, 35-37). "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship" (Gal 4:4-7).

anointed king would answer to the promise of God as help, light, and guide us on the path of God's law to the Beatitude of God's house. Further, He is the supreme good and final End to which that path leads us. By His beauty and majesty, He causes His name to be "remembered in all generations" and nations to praise him "forever and ever" (Ps 45:17). He is our supreme good and final End. In the words of St Augustine, "When we reach Him, we shall have nowhere further to go, and so he is called the 'end' of our journey."²⁶

Chavara, on the day of the reception of the tonsure adopted Psalm 16:5 as his motto - "The Lord is my portion" (Ps 16:5). True to his baptismal name 'Kuriakose,' which in Greek means 'one who belongs to the Lord,' he always tried to remain on the side of God. Jose Eroorickal states that "this conviction of belongingness to God becomes still more explicit through the mystical experiences [...] in his colloquy with the heavenly Father. [...]. The life of intimacy with God prompted Chavara to work so hard for Christ and for his Church."²⁷ For him, God was everything - the path, the light, the help, and the destination. Later, we find him singing "oh my God you are my love, my joy and all my fortune. If not in you, how could I live my life? You are my breath, my food and my drink. What solace have I in you?"²⁸

The feeling of God always beside and becoming one with Him was his own experience that is visible in his Letter to the sisters:

26 Augustine, "Exposition of Psalm 45," in *Expositions of the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. Boniface Ramsey, Vol. 2 (New York: New City Press, 2018), 310-311.

27 Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Chavara* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014), 222.

28 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Compunction of the Soul*, 10.

Even for a moment He is not away from you. He wants you to make happy and he wants only that you love him. He tells you that he can give you everything that you want. All that he wants of you in return is you must love Him. [...]. Ha, Jesus, until we become one with you, do not depart from us.²⁹

Elsewhere, Chavara identified himself with the lost sheep and he mystically experiences Jesus saying to him: "In search of you I wandered along forest and hilltops, seas and mountain, because I loved you and had resolved to take you to my royal house."³⁰ He is led and guided by Jesus as he is the path and life. Yet another experience makes him see the anointed one as the promised in the history who for Chavara is both the End of the good life and the path to that End. "To find you out I stepped down from My throne – that you may have no fear of Me – I was born as a baby for your sake."³¹ This makes him see or long to realize him in the appellations found in the scripture as he writes in the *Compunction of the Soul* with the refrain *kānakēnam*.

Lord of Mercy, the son of God, His glorious splendour, I long to see! ...How Jesus Anna's grandson was hunger-smitten, I long to see! And with the Pharisees, He discussed the law in His twelfth ear, I long to see! The good shepherd, seeking His flock that had gone astray, I long to see. The Lord of goodness, proclaiming Himself as our loving Friend, I long to see.³²

29 *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Letters*, 131-132.

30 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 10.

31 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 10.

32 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Compunction of the Soul*, 17.

4. Chavara and Psalms: An Analogous Understanding

While one might argue that drawing parallels between Chavara and the psalmist involves a degree of eisegesis, it is clear that the spiritual insights and practices of Chavara were significantly influenced by the rich tradition of the Psalms. This connection highlights the timeless relevance of the Psalms in shaping the lives of saints and Chavara alike, guiding them towards a deeper relationship with God and a more profound sense of fulfilment in their spiritual journeys. His attitude and life attest to this as better proof.

1. Ps 55:22 "Cast your cares on the Lord, and he will sustain you; He will never let the righteous to be shaken."

A similar attitude is found in his *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*:

"My dear Father and patron, I entrust myself to your care and protection. [...]. I certainly trust in His mercy and lasting love for me. Still, I am disturbed and shaken by many things. Help me to remain in the divine virtue of hope."³³

2. Ps 102:17 "He will respond to the prayer of the destitute; he will not despise their plea."

"When Fr. Leopold and I were in great trouble, we requested the prayer of sisters; they prayed for it, reciting with O Remember, O Most Virgin Mary and Hail Holy Queen. What emerged as hill, disappeared like smoke."³⁴

3. Ps 23:1-2 "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters."

33 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 19-20.

34 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 24.

While speaking to sisters over the construction of the convent quickly with trust in God as only capital, he says, "See, how he provides us everything we need. Look at the affair of this convent. From the moment it was established, it is God who runs it. He fulfils all our needs without allowing even the smallest inconvenience. The Word of God, "Seek, you shall find is true."³⁵

4. Ps 130:7 "Hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption."

Expressing his hope in the Lord for making him what he is despite his unworthiness, Chavara writes,

"I am a beggar attending wedding dinner without a proper outfit. However, one who called me, the Lord of Mercy is capable of giving me a royal robe, i.e., higher degrees of prayer and sanctity, provided I am enough to ask him."³⁶

5. Ps 103:1-2 With my whole heart, with my whole life, and with my innermost being, I bow in wonder and love before you, the holy God!

Chavara repenting on the feeling of lack of sincere love of the Lord, prays before him. This attitude is reflected throughout his colloquies. "How long shall I wait, O my soul, to love the Lord wholeheartedly." "Oh, infinite Love, I love you with all my heart."³⁷

6. Ps 128:4 speaks of a family framed out of fear of the Lord:
"Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in obedience to him. You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and

35 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Letters*, 138.

36 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 1.

37 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 39-40.

prosperity will be yours. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Yes, this will be the blessing for the man who fears the Lord."

Chavarul is the guideline for families to grow in the fear of the Lord and to walk as children of God. The norm of relationships and dealings in the family and with neighbors is the fear of the Lord. "The most valuable possession of a family consists in fear of and devotion to the Lord. A family in which the fear of the Lord pervades will enjoy the fruit of divine blessings in this world as well as in eternity."³⁸ Making the fear of God as a framework of good family, he admonishes, "do not contract relationships with the disorderly and who have no fear of God. For it is not the rich who bring blessing and joy to your family, but the orderly, God-fearing relatives."³⁹ Conceiving family as God's blessing and a vibrant reality, he insists on the role of God-fearing people; therefore, he warns, "don't entertain all sorts of people in your house, but receive only those who are well-mannered and God-fearing."⁴⁰

7. Ps 51:1- "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions."

Chavara in his *Compunction of the Soul*, displays the plight of a sinful person who seeks God's mercy with a repentant heart as in the case of Psalm 51. It can be seen both as a form of repentance

38 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Chavarul: Testament of a Loving Father*, revised and updated edition (Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2018), 25.

39 Chavara, *Chavarul*, 16.

40 Chavara, *Chavarul*, 17.

and an act of contrition. Presenting himself as a sinner, he trusts the merciful God.

"Alas what a grief! I have torn into pieces the purity, the innocence of heart of those days."

"O Master God-man, source of mercy, Lord, look with eyes of pity on me, a great sinner."

"Master, Lord, Saviour of mankind, Lord, look with pity on me a sinner."

"Grant me, O source of mercy, forgiveness of sins through your blood."

"In your look of mercy, I behold A gentle saviour, not a judge. [...]. Abide with me, save me from troubles Guard me, O Your grace draws me. Devoutly I pray, in the words of David Your blessed ancestor thus: The sins of my youth, remember not."⁴¹

5. Conclusion

The Psalms claim that the Christian life is the good life. They seek to make us whole and happy persons, holy and happy in God, by directing us to the End of the good life, which is to dwell in God's house, and by directing us to the path of the good life, which lies in following God's instruction. They present to us the supreme good and final End of the Christian life by directing us on the path that leads to that supreme good and final End of Christian life - the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6) - that is, God's anointed king, Jesus Christ our Lord. For Chavara too, a good Christian family is the image of heaven, where members live together by the bond of blood and affection, duly respecting

41 See, *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Compunction of the Soul*, # II: 115-116; 241-242; V:141-142; VI: 351-352; V:163-66, 179-83.

and obeying the parents, walking peacefully before God and people, seeking eternal salvation, according to each one's proper state of life. For him, "monastery is a miniature heaven." Salvation of soul was his concern, the barren Church his pain. His concern was for house of the God and for family, the domestic Church. He longed to see God and he could see things from the perspective of God that is clear in his works composed out of his most profound experiences.

PROPHETIC LEADERSHIP OF CHAVARA

Echoes of the Old Testament Prophets

Bincy Thomas Thumpanathu CMC

1. Introduction

The notion of prophecy holds a distinct and profound place within the biblical tradition and the wider currents of Christian spirituality. Prophets, particularly in the Old Testament, were uniquely chosen by God to convey the messages imbued with heavenly wisdom to the people of Israel. As noted in the glossary of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a prophet is understood to be one dispatched by God to prepare the people of the Old Covenant with a hopeful anticipation of salvation. This definition emphasizes the unparalleled significance of prophets in moulding the spiritual and ethical core of Israelite society.

A key hallmark of the Old Testament prophets was their deep historical consciousness.¹ To live with such an awareness is to possess a profound sensitivity to the socio-political and moral fabric of one's time, recognizing the pressing concerns, dilemmas, and yearnings of the people, and offering a divinely inspired response to those realities. In times when material prosperity birthed moral decay, inequity, and social imbalance, where a few revelled in excessive luxuries while the masses weakened in hardship, the prophets raised their voices with urgency. Their proclamations were designed to awaken the society from its ethical lethargy, urging a return to moral integrity and spiritual wholeness.

1 The prophet's role as both critics and witnesses of their time; see, Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, Harper & Row, 1962.

Though the epoch of biblical prophecy has ceased, the messages pronounced by the prophets have endured throughout time. The prophetic voice, which boldly decries oppression, injustice, and spiritual corrosion, has found renewed resonance in various individuals throughout history. Christian spirituality, in particular, has been marked by figures who embodied a prophetic ethos. Much like the Old Testament prophets, these figures discerned the divine call and the pressing need for reform within their own historical contexts.

A striking example of such a figure is Kuriakose Elias Chavara. Just as the ancient prophets fearlessly confronted the social and political injustices of their era, Chavara keenly perceived the challenges and inequities that plagued the 19th century Kerala society. Witnessing social disparities, religious stagnation, and moral degeneration, Chavara responded with a wake-up call for renewal and reform. His initiatives to advance education, elevate the underprivileged, and revitalize the Church's spiritual life mirror his prophetic concern for justice, righteousness, and the collective well-being of the community.

While direct comparisons between Chavara and the Old Testament prophets must be approached with caution, given the vast differences in time, geography, and culture, the thematic similarities are undeniable. This article seeks to explore Chavara's life and contributions through the lens of the prophetic tradition, highlighting the traits he shared with biblical prophets. By examining these parallels, we deepen our appreciation of Chavara's role as a prophetic figure and the lasting significance of his message. His life serves as a reminder that the prophetic tradition is not confined to a specific time or place but is a timeless call to justice, compassion, and spiritual transformation. Before delving into Chavara's prophetic legacy,

we must first turn our attention to the role of prophecy in the historical narrative of Israel.

2. The Impact of Prophetic Voices in Israel's Historical Evolution

The historical evolution of Israel cannot be fully comprehended without acknowledging the significant role of prophetic voices. The designation 'prophet' finds its etymological roots in the Greek term *prophetēs*, linked to the Hebrew *nabi* and the Akkadian *naba*, which signify 'to summon,' 'to name,' or 'to declare.'² Thus, at its core, the concept of a prophet encapsulates one divinely summoned to serve.³ Prophets are those called by God for a mission to articulate his will and execute his commands, operating as critical mediators between the divine and the people - a framework that is indispensable for understanding the integral position of prophets in Israelite history. The prophetic proclamations are contextual, challenging, critical and creative.⁴

The evolution of the Israelites from nomadic tribes to settled communities fostered the formation of a tribal and covenantal identity centred on a collective relationship with Yahweh. This identity emphasized moral and ethical obligations within the community. As these tribes transitioned into stable societies, they faced external threats, internal moral decay, and extensive social injustices. During these moments of turbulence, prophets emerged as indispensable voices of guidance and correction.

2 J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963, 1; J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1966, 5.

3 John L. McKenzie, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009, 85.

4 Thomas Vallianippuram, *Jeremiah: A Prophet of the Modern World*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2012, 10.

Moses, for instance, defied Pharaoh's oppressive regime and led the Israelites to freedom, while Elijah boldly confronted the 450 prophets of Baal, demonstrating the unwavering commitment of prophets to their divine mission.

Prophets, by their very nature, became advocates for the marginalized, voice of God, relentlessly defending the vulnerable - orphans, widows, foreigners, and the deprived. In essence, they had a sense of the ground level perception of their people. As Pope Francis recognizes they were shepherds also knew the smell of the sheep.⁵ Their message consistently urged the society to exercise compassion and equity particularly toward those on the fringes. In the prophetic texts like Isaiah and Jeremiah, a resounding call for societal reform is apparent, prioritizing the equitable treatment of those who lacked the means to advocate for themselves. Prophets such as Amos and Micah directly addressed the deep-rooted corruption and injustice rampant among the ruling elite. These elites mistakenly equated their material success with divine favour, turning a blind eye to the suffering of the impoverished. Their wealth, built upon systemic manipulation and corruption within the judiciary, greatly disadvantaged the underprivileged, who were unable to engage in bribery and thus remained vulnerable.⁶ Prophets persistently reminded the people that true worship of Yahweh could not coexist with exploitation and moral decay.⁷

5 See, P. A. Chacko, "Prelates, Be Prophets: Role of Shepherds in India Today," *Indian Currents* 35.24 (2023): 12.

6 See, Sebastian Kizhakkeyil, "Calls to Repentance in the Minor Prophets," *Journal of Sacred Scriptures* 18.1 (2024): 14.

7 Goran Eidevall, "Rejected Sacrifice in the Prophetic Literature: A Rhetorical Perspective," *Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok* 78 (2013): 40; Larry J. Rector, "Israel's Rejected Worship: An Exegesis of Amos 5," *Restoration Quarterly* 21 (1978): 172; Bincy Thomas Thumpanathu, *Communication and the Role of the Lord in Amos: Their Development*

A just society, they insisted, was fundamental to sustaining a meaningful relationship with God. Their bold proclamations served as a wake-up call to the people and their leaders, urging them to realign their actions with divine expectations.

A defining trait of every prophet was their unwavering allegiance to God's commands, often in the face of severe adversity.⁸ Old Testament prophets frequently found themselves in direct opposition to influential figures such as kings, priests, and other power brokers. Their remarkable bravery in confronting authority, even at great personal risk, remains one of their most admirable qualities. For instance, the prophet Jeremiah, who, despite being imprisoned and shunned for his prophecies (Jeremiah 37-38), continued to deliver God's message with undeterred conviction.

Prophets not only criticized but also provided guidance to leaders, acting as mentors regarding Yahweh's divine will.⁹ Their messages were often twofold: warnings of judgment alongside promises of God's mercy for those who sincerely returned to Him. This blend of admonition and hope was central to the prophetic vocation.¹⁰ Isaiah, in particular, is renowned for

and Their Implications for the Text-Immanent Reader, Utrecht: Eburon, 2019, 170-171.

8 For example, see, Thumpanathu, *Communication and the Role of the Lord in Amos*, 230-231.

9 Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Nathan not only confronted leaders for their moral failings but also provided direction for following God's covenant and intentions for justice. See, Klaus Koch, *The Prophets: The Assyrian Period*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983, 19-22; Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2001, 89-92.

10 How prophets balanced warnings of impending judgment with assurances of God's mercy for those who repent, see, Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 61.

his messianic prophecies, foretelling the advent of a Redeemer who would usher in an era of peace and salvation. These hopeful proclamations provided solace to the Israelites during times of despair, assuring them of Yahweh's everlasting covenant and unwavering love.

Through their fearless pronouncements, prophets not only shaped the ethos of their own eras but also left an enduring legacy that continues to influence contemporary dialogues on ethics, justice, and faith.¹¹ With this foundational understanding of the prophetic role in Israel's societal formation, we explore the parallels between the Old Testament Prophets and the prophetic legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara.

3. Chavara's Prophetic Leadership:

Aligned with OT Prophets

To be a prophetic leader is to embody the spirit of the Old Testament prophets: a figure who courageously champions what is just, often amid resistance, urging others to embrace a higher moral and spiritual calling. As Brueggemann describes, such leadership seeks to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture.¹² Prophetic leadership is not just about foreseeing the future; it is about being deeply rooted in the present, understanding the needs of the time, and calling for a change. This role entails confronting systems of injustice and inspiring a vision of hope anchored in God's promises, inviting communities to undergo transformation through a steadfast commitment to God's covenant. Prophetic leaders, therefore,

11 See, Chacko, "Prelates, Be Prophets," 11-13.

12 Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

serve as harbingers of change, guiding others toward a life steeped in divine justice and compassion.

Chavara embodied the concept of prophetic leader.¹³ His leadership was not confined to administrative or doctrinal concerns alone; it was basically prophetic in nature.¹⁴ His prophetic leadership is characterized by keen attentiveness to the voice of the Spirit and a corresponding commitment to action. Chavara's birth, life and leadership were profoundly shaped by the Holy Spirit's guidance.¹⁵ His leadership was deeply spiritual, yet practical and is qualified with his farsightedness, clarity of thought, daring, innovative and systematic thinking.¹⁶ He was unafraid to challenge the status quo, push for reforms, and care for the marginalized, making his life a model of prophetic leadership.

The essence of Chavara's prophetic legacy lies in his ability to recognize the needs of his time and address them with bold, transformative actions. Whether it was promoting education for all, fighting for social justice, or revitalizing religious communities, Chavara's mission was one of deep conviction and

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- 13 See, Owen Phelps, *The Catholic Vision for Leading Like Jesus*, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2009, 13. Jesus exemplified servant leadership. Chavara's mission too marked by servant leadership, stewardship, and pastoral care, and it was through the embodiment of these principles that he achieved success in his ministry.
 - 14 See Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2008, 426-430; Jennifer Campbell, *The Way of Prophetic Leadership: Retrieving Word and Spirit in Vision Today*, UK: Paternoster, 2015, 160.
 - 15 See *St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Man of the Spirit*, Kottayam: Congregation of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, 2014, 55.
 - 16 Thomas Mampra, *Dreams of St. Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2022, 99.

foresight. He saw a future where everyone—regardless of social standing—could grow in faith, knowledge, and dignity.

In the following section, we will explore the various dimensions of Chavara's prophetic leadership, examining the multifaceted ways he embodied and expressed his divine mission. Like the Old Testament prophets who sought the welfare of the people of Israel, Chavara's actions were deeply rooted in a commitment to the spiritual and social uplift of his community. Through this exploration, we will uncover the profound depth of his vision and the enduring legacy of his life's work, which continues to resonate with the timeless call for justice, compassion, and faithfulness.

3.1. Prophetic Pastoral Mission

A central aspect of prophetic leadership is the call for spiritual renewal, and Chavara exemplified this through his pastoral mission. Like the prophets of the Old Testament who urged the Israelites to return to God, Chavara's message emphasized the need for spiritual revival and renewal within the Church. His focus on spiritual discipline extended beyond individual piety, rooted in his belief that a spiritually strong community would be more effective in serving the society and resisting moral decline.

Realizing the significant role of catechesis in faith-life, Chavara organized the parishes and ensured that each parish had a catechism school attached with it, and he personally monitored the development. He also emphasized the importance of a proper seminary system for the formation of priestly candidates, seeking to cultivate zealous and holy shepherds to guide the faithful.

Chavara's dedication to maintaining unity within the Church was particularly evident in his efforts to prevent schisms.¹⁷ A key example of this was his decisive opposition to the Roccas schism, a significant conflict that posed a threat to the unity of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala.¹⁸ Many Syro-Malabar Christians were misled into following Bishop Roccas, mistakenly believing he had been sent by legitimate ecclesiastical authorities. In response, the Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly appointed Chavara as the Vicar General with the task of countering the schism and preserving unity within the Church.¹⁹ Chavara's sincere efforts were successful in preserving the Church's integrity and reestablishing ecclesiastical unity.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's prophetic mission was marked by a comprehensive pastoral vision aimed at renewing the Church and nurturing a vibrant Christian community. His lasting pastoral initiatives and his commitment to ecclesiastical unity, underscore his impact on the Catholic Church and its mission in India.

3.2. Prophetic Mission of Religious Life

Chavara was a visionary leader whose prophetic insights were instrumental in founding religious communities for both

17 In discussing servant leadership as essential for today's context, Jacob Peenikaparambil notes that a true leader encourages collaboration and cooperation among members, fostering a sense of belonging and team spirit. Such leaders view themselves not as masters or owners but as stewards of their community. See, Jacob Peenikaparambil, "Servant Leadership: Need of the Hour" *Indian Currents*, accessed 4 November 2024, www.indiancurrents.org.

18 See Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 180-81.

19 See, Paul Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly and the St. Thomas Christians in 1867: Kuriakose Elias Chavara Unworthy of Episcopate?*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2018, 17.

men and women in the Syro-Malabar Church. His dedication to creating these orders reflected his belief that monastic communities were crucial for the Church's spiritual and social renewal at a time when, despite its long-standing history, the Church seemed spiritually barren.²⁰ Chavara recognized that these communities would become sources of renewal through their prayerful lives and active service to the society. From the establishment of the Mannanam monastery, members engaged directly with parishes, conducting retreats, preaching on Sundays and holy days, teaching foundational Christian doctrines, and addressing the spiritual needs of the faithful. Thus, religious communities became central to Chavara's mission to revive and reform the Kerala Catholic Church. Chavara was confident that dedicated and principled leaders would naturally bring about a transformation in the social order.²¹

Chavara's vision for religious life was deeply rooted in his understanding of the purpose and function of monastic communities. He referred to religious communities as *Tapasa Bhavanam* (House of Austerity) and *Punyavanmarude Sanketham* (House of Virtues), emphasizing the spiritual essence of monastic life. According to Chavara, monasteries were not merely places of retreat or isolated contemplation, but rather environments where virtues could flourish. He taught that the true strength of a monastic community did not lie in its physical infrastructure,

20 Francis Thonippara, "Historical Setting of the Syro-Malabar Church and the Unique Position of Chavara," in *Father and Doctor of the Church: A Theological Reading of the Life and Writings of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 14, eds. Benny Thettayil and Naiju Jose Kalambukattu, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2024, 58.

21 Maryann Madhavathu, *Humble Minister of the Living Mystery: Liturgical Vision of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2023, 141.

such as the thickness of its walls, but in the virtuous lives of its members. The cultivation of virtues—love, compassion, humility, obedience, and other Christ-like qualities—was, in his view, the bedrock of religious life and essential for witnessing to Christ in the world.

Chavara also reflected on the causes of decline in some large monastic communities in Western countries.²² He observed that these communities often collapsed because they lost their focus on virtuous living. When virtues were neglected, the spiritual foundation of the community crumbled, leading not only to the demise of the monastic institution but also to broader social decay. Chavara warned that the weakening of a 'house of virtues' would turn the surrounding region into a 'land of wildlife,' symbolizing chaos and moral decline. This profound insight highlighted his belief in the interconnectedness between the spiritual health of religious communities and the moral fabric of the society at large.

In addition to his emphasis on virtuous living, Chavara also introduced a fraternal dimension to monastic life. He referred to the members of the monastic community as *Koodapirappukal* (siblings), a term that reflected his belief in the importance of love and unity within religious life. This familial bond was central to his vision of a harmonious and spiritually vibrant monastic community. For Chavara, the sense of brotherhood and sisterhood among religious members was not just a relational ideal, but a necessary condition for the growth and sustainability of monastic life. The love and mutual support within the community, he believed, were essential for its spiritual vitality.

22 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Complete Works of Chavara, Volume IV: Letters*, eds. Lucas Vithuvattickal and K. C. Chacko, trans. Mary Leo, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Blessed Chavara, 1990.

Chavara's prophetic vision also extended to the broader role of monastic life in the service of the society. He inspired the members of his religious communities to live a genuine spiritual life, balanced with a sincere commitment to the well-being of others. For him, the charism of religious life was one that integrated prayer and service in a seamless, interdependent relationship. He proposed a spiritual model in which prayer led to service, and service, in turn, deepened one's prayer life. This approach not only reinforced the spiritual foundation of monastic life but also ensured that religious communities remained actively engaged in addressing the needs of the society around them. Through this vision, Chavara sought to create communities that were both contemplative and socially engaged, contributing to the transformation of society through their spiritual witness and acts of service.

In summary, Chavara's prophetic vision of religious life was characterized by his emphasis on virtue, fraternal love, and the integration of prayer and service. He envisioned monastic communities as houses of spiritual growth and moral integrity, where members would cultivate virtues that would not only strengthen their religious life but also positively influence society.

3.3. Championing Social Justice

Prophetic leaders often serve as advocates for the marginalized, and Chavara was no exception. Like the prophets Amos and Isaiah, who championed justice for the oppressed, Chavara's prophetic mission was deeply rooted in a commitment to social justice and harmony, which he realized through several initiatives. In Chavara, we see a man of great courage, unwavering in his commitment to the truth and capable of effecting significant

change in a caste-ridden society in 19th century Kerala.²³ Untouchability, social marginalization of women,²⁴ economic inequality and illiteracy deeply affected the social and religious life of the Kerala society.²⁵ It is in this context the social reforms initiated by Chavara stand as insightful and impactful with a prophetic resonance in the society.

One of Chavara's most notable prophetic activity was the establishment of the *Pallikkoodam* system, which integrated educational institutions with local churches. This initiative sought to provide education to all segments of society, breaking the traditional barriers that limited access to education to the privileged classes. Particularly significant was his founding of a *Sanskrit* school at a time when the study of *Sanskrit* was largely reserved for the upper castes. By opening this educational avenue to a broader population, Chavara promoted educational inclusivity and social justice and harmony.²⁶

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- 23 This same courage is essential today as we confront societal injustices. Historical figures like Gandhi, Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated that without courage, there would be no free India, no liberated South Africa, and no progress toward racial equality in America. Courage, therefore, stands as a key quality in the enduring legacies of these leaders. See, Athar Qureshi, "Courage: The Quality Most Needed Today to Fight Corruption," *Fr. Agnel's Call* 59 (2024): 16-17.
 - 24 Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2014, 99-100; Thomas Kadankavil, *Chavara: A Multidimensional Saint*, Kottayam: Deepika Book House, 2014, 31-32.
 - 25 K.S. Radhakrishnan, "Founder of Modern Civil Society in Kerala," in *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, ed. John Mannarathara, Delhi: Viva Books, 2015, 42.
 - 26 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mumbai: St Paul's, 2014, 250; Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 257.

Chavara's concern for social welfare was further reflected in his innovative response to food scarcity. Observing the widespread poverty and malnutrition, he introduced the concept of *Pidiyari*, where small amounts of rice were collected from households and distributed in schools as lunch. This initiative ensured that impoverished children received at least one nutritious meal per day, addressing both hunger and education simultaneously.

In addition to his educational and welfare reforms, Chavara institutionalized his care for the poor, destitute, and elderly with the establishment of the *Upavisala* (House of Charity) in Kainakari in 1869.²⁷ This institution became a concrete expression of his universal love and compassion, further demonstrating his deep commitment to social justice and support for vulnerable populations.

Chavara's advocacy for fair labor practices is particularly evident in his writings, especially in *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* (The Instructions of a Good Father). He stressed the importance of paying just wages, reflecting his broader concern for economic justice and ethical treatment of workers. He emphasized that do not withhold or postpone the fair wages owed to workers, for such an act is a grave sin that cries out to God for justice. Likewise, never demean or mistreat those who are poor, for God will hold you accountable for their suffering and tears. This concern for social justice aligns with the teachings of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where the Pope emphasizes the need for a prophetic voice when human rights and Gospel values are threatened.²⁸ The dignity of the human person and the common good must be

27 John Mannarathara, "The Light That Transcends Time," in *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 230.

28 *Evangelii Gaudium*, 218.

prioritized over the privileges of a few. When these values are endangered, Christians are called to speak out and take action. Chavara's life and actions demonstrate this approach well in advance of the modern Church's call for social engagement.

Chavara's vision also extended to opposing both societal and ecclesiastical divisions. His establishment of the Sanskrit school and his efforts against heresies within the Church were driven by a desire to promote unity and prevent fragmentation. His work sought to bridge divides within society and the Church, advocating for a more cohesive and harmonious community.

Chavara's prophetic vision and mission in social justice were marked by innovative approaches to education, welfare, and ethical practices. His commitment to inclusivity, equitable treatment, and community development underscores his lasting legacy as a champion of social justice, unity, and harmony.

3.4. Prophetic Mission of Women Empowerment

Chavara's life and work must be viewed in the context of 19th-century Kerala, a time marked by significant gender inequality and discrimination. Women were often marginalized, with limited access to education, social mobility, and independence.²⁹ In response to these societal challenges, Chavara, driven by a strong sense of social justice, took pioneering steps to empower women.

Chavara's dedication to women's empowerment is exemplified by his founding of the first indigenous religious congregation for women in the Indian Catholic Church.³⁰ In collaboration with the Italian missionary Leopold Beccaro and with support from the local bishop, he established what would

29 See Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, 121-122.

30 *Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent*, Vol. I, 1.

become the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC).³¹ This initiative was groundbreaking, offering women not only spiritual growth but also social uplift³² during a time when they were largely denied basic rights such as education and property.³³ It provided a significant space for women's religious and social leadership within the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church.³⁴

Chavara's vision for the congregation extended far beyond spiritual guidance. His letters to the members of the community consistently articulated his strong belief in the necessity of women's empowerment. In these writings, Chavara emphasized the importance of independence, education, and social commitment for women, advocating for a life where women could actively participate in societal transformation. He envisioned the members of the congregation not only as religious figures but as leaders and educators who could influence the wider community.

The legacy of Chavara's vision is evident today in the continued growth and influence of the CMC congregation and it plays a crucial role in the education and uplift of women, particularly through its numerous educational institutions.³⁵ These institutions, which include schools and colleges offering higher education, have provided countless opportunities for young women to pursue academic excellence and personal

31 *Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent*, Vol. I, 10.

32 Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, 263.

33 Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1870, 209; Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, 95-103.

34 Joseph Pathrapankal, "An Iconoclast in His Own Right" in *The Life of and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 241.

35 Navya Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, 292; Jossy Veliyan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: The Founder of the Women TOCD in Kerala*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2015, 353-358.

development. Through these initiatives, Chavara's mission of promoting the dignity and empowerment of women has been realized, and the congregation continues to be a beacon of hope for the betterment of women in society. By promoting education and leadership among women, Chavara laid the foundation for a more just and equitable society, and his contributions continue to inspire generations of women in Kerala and beyond.

3.5. Elevating Sacred Families

Chavara recognized the valuable role of the family in shaping the moral and spiritual fabric of society. His teachings on the Christian family were not just directives for his time but remain profoundly relevant today. In an era where familial structures face unprecedented challenges, Chavara's insights emerge as both prophetic and practical, offering a roadmap for building strong, faith-centered homes. His vision for Christian families echoes deeply with the modern world, where love, unity, and spiritual integrity are becoming degraded. His prophetic aspiration to uplift families is embodied in his magnum opus, *Chavarul*, or *Testament of a Loving Father*.³⁶ This foundational work is a testament to his divine mission, providing deep revelations on the essence of family life.

Chavara's prophetic foresight identified the potential dangers that could erode the values and sanctity of Christian families. His belief that a good Christian family mirrors the unity and love of the Holy Trinity is particularly striking in its theological depth. Chavara emphasized that the family is not just a social unit but a divine institution, meant to reflect heavenly virtues. In a world where families are increasingly fragmented

36 Magna carta of the theology of family life and it lays a solid and sound foundation to the renewal of families and the upbringing of the children.

by individualism and external pressures, his assertion that love, order, and peace should be the defining features of the family remains profoundly prophetic.

A key element of Chavara's contribution was his concept of value-based parenting. He advocated for a holistic approach to the formation of children, encompassing spiritual education, social justice, and ethical living.³⁷ His teachings emphasized the formation of a virtuous environment within the family, steering clear of harmful influences like toxic friendships or the allure of a lavish lifestyle. Chavara's focus on children's education was profound. He recognized education as not solely an intellectual pursuit but a means for the holistic cultivation of a child's moral, spiritual, and mental faculties. His prophetic concern for preserving children's purity and innocence in the face of a morally permissive society resonates acutely today, where the threats posed by secular and relativistic values grow ever more pervasive.

Chavara's call for vigilant parenting finds particular relevance in contemporary concerns over the role of media, technology, and peer pressures in shaping a child's values. His firm belief that parents serve as the primary educators of their children remains a timeless reminder that moral and spiritual nurturing begins within the family unit. His teachings persistently echo through time, urging parents to safeguard their children's spiritual formation amidst an ever-shifting cultural landscape.

37 In *Chavarul*, Chavara discusses the parental duty of raising children to be spiritually strong and mature individuals. Though written 150 years ago, his keen observation, sharp intellect, and deep love for family have provided us with a testament that remains as relevant and precious today as it was in his own time. See, Mampra, *Dreams of St. Chavara*, 81.

His emphasis on forgiveness as a foundational principle for family life mirrors the Gospel's call for unconditional love and mercy. In a world where families often grapple with unresolved tensions and conflicts, Chavara's teachings on forgiveness offer an invaluable lesson: it is not a sign of weakness but rather a profound strength, essential for maintaining familial unity and love. He opposed pride, ostentation, and the pursuit of power, advocating instead for humility and simplicity as core tenets of family life. Rooted in Gospel values, his teachings call families to embrace love, service, and unwavering faith in God over transient material pursuits.

Chavara's teachings on family values, value-based parenting, and the integration of spiritual and daily life are both timeless and prophetic, offering profound insights for modern families. His vision of the family as a domestic church, grounded in love, humility, obedience, and forgiveness, is strikingly accurate in addressing the challenges faced by families today. As the pressures of modern life threaten to undermine the spiritual integrity of the family, Chavara's call to return to the foundational values of faith, piety, and mutual respect is more relevant than ever. His prophetic insights continue to inspire and guide Christian families, encouraging them to live out their vocation with love, humility, and a deep sense of God's presence in their daily lives. Through his teachings, Chavara remains a beacon of wisdom for families striving to embody the values of the Gospel in a complex and ever-changing world.

4. Conclusion

Chavara's writings and actions were not confined to his present reality; they were imbued with profound spiritual foresight, anticipating both the potential and challenges faced by the Church, society, and the family unit. His legacy as a prophetic

leader is most evident in his enduring impact on social justice, moral reform, and spiritual renewal. His primary focus was on the spiritual renewal of the Kerala Church, which he achieved practically through the establishment of religious congregations. These communities became central to the Church's renewal and played a crucial role in societal welfare, including the empowerment of women.

Chavara's commitment to maintaining the unity of the Church, particularly in confronting schisms and heresies, underscores his prophetic leadership. His dedication to building a just, educated, and moral society during a time of great social inequality was revolutionary. His advocacy for social justice, harmony, and education marked a significant transformation in Kerala's society. Chavara's deep communion with God empowered him to effectively communicate the Gospel message to a wide audience, including religious leaders, laypeople, and the general public. While his life may appear quiet and contemplative, his actions reveal a profoundly active and revolutionary spirit. The visionary initiatives he began and the teachings he shared continue to influence the Church and society today, solidifying his place as a transformative figure in history.

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON IN *DHYĀNASALLĀPAÑNAḌI*:

An Example for the Hermeneutics of Chavara

Joel Chiramal CMI
Joy Philip Kakkanatt CMI

1. Chavara: 'An Indian Hermeneutic'

Seeing hermeneutics as a science of the rules of exegesis¹ and the way of understanding and appropriating a text,² we find an eminent hermeneutic genius in the person of Kuriakose Elias Chavara as he could understand and appropriate the biblical narratives in a unique manner in his writings and life. A humble attempt is done here to investigate the hermeneutics employed in the biblical narrations of Chavara, especially in his *Dhyānasallāpañnaḍi*.

While considering the approach employed by Chavara, he has a unique approach which is Indian, communitarian, personal and mystic. As Surgirtharajah notes:

Indian biblical interpreters have also been borrowing from the Indian tradition of storytelling. This method has been used by religious teachers to instruct their followers. Hermeneutics for them is not the re-reading of old texts but the re-telling of old stories for a new context. ... their hermeneutical attempts do not conform to the ground rules set by western academics, and their endeavours are likely to

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- 1 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by Denis Savage, London: Yale University Press, 1970, 54.
 - 2 Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Introduction to a Hermeneutics of Identity," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (January-March 2011), 3.

be condescendingly dismissed as lacking in "methodological rigour."³

Here, we would like to present the biblical interpretation of St Chavara in this line of thought. Chavara, who was a proud son of the soil, was exemplary to retain the smell of the soil in all his apostolic endeavours. The Indian culture of storytelling and profound integration of the value system into the personal life resulting in an integral personality is seen in his life. The following analysis throws light in this line.

2. Scriptural Interpretations in *Dhyānasallāpannaḥ*: Lk 15:11-32 in Detail

Chavara cited scriptural verses profusely throughout the *Dhyānasallāpannaḥ*, in the Indian mode of storytelling as mentioned above by Surgitarajah. Among them, his articulation of Lk 15:11-32 is worth expounding.

2.1. The Parable of the Younger Son and the Merciful Father

God's mercy for the sinners is thrice illustrated⁴ in the fifteenth chapter of the gospel according to St Luke. They are given through the parables of the shepherd who abandons the ninety-nine sheep to save one, a woman who tries her level best to recover the lost coin, and the evergreen story of the lost son. To call it the story of "The Prodigal Son" alone is to emphasize the first half of the parable (vv. 11-24) to the neglect of the second half (vv. 25-32).⁵ The question of an apt title is a disputed discussion.

3 R. S. Surgiratharajah, "Introduction, and Some Thoughts on Asian Biblical Hermeneutics," *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994), 254.

4 Raymond E. Brown, et al., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Bangalore: TPI, 1990, 706.

5 Culpepper R. Alan, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, in vol.

Nolland seems to attribute the title to all the main characters of the parable. He tells, "The shape of the parable has been disputed in terms of the best title to be given for such a story. Does the story focus on the father, the prodigal, or the elder son?"⁶ For St Chavara, his attention falls with equal importance to the younger son and the father, where the elder son is in oblivion. Hence, in this perspective, the parable could be titled as the 'Parable of the Younger Son and the Merciful Father'.

2.2. Three-Scene Perspective of Chavara

The three-scene perspective of Chavara is the result of spontaneous overflow of a subjective evaluation of this parable, where Chavara is a subject among the other subjects, the son and the father:

According to Culpepper⁷ the parable can be broadly divided into two, vv 11-24 and vv. 25-32, whereas Wiersbe,⁸ use the following structure:

vv. 11-16: Rebellion – He went to the far country

vv. 17-19: Repentance – He came to himself

vv. 20-24: Rejoicing – He came to the father

vv. 25-32: The joy of forgiving

4, eds. Neil M. Alexander, et. al. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 300.

6 John Nolland, "Luke 9:21-18:34," in *Word Biblical Commentary*, in vol. 35b, eds. David A. Hubbard, et. al. Texas: Word Books, 1993, 781.

7 David R. Alan, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," In *The New Interpreter's Bible*, eds. Neil M. Alexander, et. al. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 301-303.

8 Warren W. Wiersbe, "The New Testament: Matthew - Galatians," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, in vol. 5, Andhra Pradesh: OM Books, 2005, 234-238.

This parable evokes in the readers the knowledge of the two brothers' stories of the OT in which the younger brother triumphs over the elder as we see in the accounts of Esau and Jacob (Gen 25:27-34; 27:1-36); and Joseph and his brothers (Gen 37:1-4).⁹

Ringe wishes to see this parable from a two-scene perspective:

The complexity of this parable is remarkable, especially in comparison with the two preceding ones. Instead of the simple movement from lost to found, resulting in a celebration, this parable is developed through two scenes, one featuring each of the two brothers.¹⁰

Here, the three-scene perspective of Chavara becomes a unique interpretation of this parable. All three scenes are oriented on the hinges of relationality: relationality of the son to himself, the son to the father, and the father to the son.

2.2.1. Scene One: Younger Son's Reflection; Lk 15:17-19

These are the verses where the younger son reclaims his lost identity.¹¹ These verses record the interior monologue of the younger son. He is planning to return to his father. In the gospel, we see the three acts the son adopts at this juncture. One is that he came to himself (v. 17), then he plans to get up (v. 18) and go to the father (v. 18). He comes to this realization when he happens to be in the piggery and starves for the food. There, he resolves to say to the father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands" (vv. 18-19).

9 Brown et al., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 706-707.

10 Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, 208.

11 Alan, "The Gospel of Luke," 302.

The same passage has details which can be identified in twelve clauses in the account of Chavara given in *Dhyānasallāpanaḥ*.¹²

- i. Younger son remembers the face of the father seen long ago.
- ii. He realises that the wealth received from the father is scattered.
- iii. He serves an 'immoral one.'
- iv. He keeps someone else' "porks."
- v. He starves for food.
- vi. He became physically unfit because of hunger.
- vii. The gifted attire of the father is thrown away.
- viii. He has no sufficient dress to cover shame.
- ix. Now, he wears a dress made of waste cloth.
- x. He decides to appear before father in this manner.
- xi. The desire to meet his father is now an existential exigency where the delay can cause his death.
- xii. Decides to go to the father with his entire riches of a wild stick and hat of palm leaves.
- xiii. Consoles himself thinking of the fortunes of the servants of the father.
- xiv. Consoles himself trusting the graciousness of the father who forgets deeds of disloyalty.

2.2.2. Scene Two: Younger Son's Confession; Lk 15:21

Here in v. 21, the younger son sincerely starts his rehearsed speech:¹³ "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." We also see in the

12 Chavara Kuriakose Elias, *Cāvarayaccanṇe Sampūrṇakṛtikāḥ*, vol. III: *Ādhyātmika Kṛtikāḥ*, ed. Z. M. Muzhoor, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1986, 16.

13 Alan, "The Gospel of Luke," 302.

Lukan narrative, that, the son is unable to continue the prepared speech because of the unexpected intervention of the father. It can also be taken as the dramatic presentation of the author, where, now a clear scene talks nonverbally than the prepared speech of the son.¹⁴ Here, Chavara states and continues the confession in *Dhyānasallāpannaḥ* in a 'qualified way'¹⁵:

- i. The father is addressed with 'possessive nature'.
- ii. The presence of the father is considered 'holy.'
- iii. Being addressed as the son is a 'glorious' title.
- iv. Getting identified with one among the servants of the father is a matter of 'great fortune.'

The subjective mode of textual analysis and the relationality are more evident in the further reflection Chavara makes on the text.

- i. Chavara identifies himself with the repented son.
- ii. Even in the sinful state, the relationality with the father is firm, which helps to address him "father."
- iii. The father in the story is identified as Jesus and God the Father at the same time. Chavara reminds Jesus that "the command to call him 'father' is received from him."¹⁶
- iv. The possessive address to the father is repeated with the addition of the quality of being bountiful.
- v. Chavara reiterates the confession of the younger son in the story as his own confession.

14 Nolland, "Luke 9:21-18:34," 785.

15 Elias, *Cāvaraṇyaccante Sampūrṇakṛīkaḥ*, vol. III, 17.

16 The mystic of Chavara identifies Jesus and God the Father to make this argument. But we see in Mt 6:9-13 that Jesus told us to call God 'Father', not to call himself as 'father'.

2.2.3. Scene Three: The Father; Lk 15:22-24

Through this third scene, Chavara tries to show the mind of the father reflected through his actions in Lk 15:22-24. In these verses, we see that the father is acting out forgiveness towards his son.¹⁷ The developments in vv. 22-24 indicates what was already entailed in the wordless scene of v. 20b.¹⁸ In the details, we understand that Chavara recalls this story through the eyes of the father.¹⁹

- i. Father welcomes the son to his embrace.
- ii. Tells the son that he is a loving father, and repeats the invitation.
- iii. Gives courage to the son to face the father.
- iv. I have descended from my throne to meet you.

After this address of the father to the son, Chavara goes to an elevated reflection. He explains the descent of the father from the throne²⁰ on the backdrop of three biblical narratives, namely, incarnation, good shepherd, passion narrative and the institution of the Eucharist.

2.2.3.1. The Descent of the Father on the Backdrop of Incarnation

The father in this parable pictures to us the attitude of our Father in heaven.²¹ The evangelist John presents the mind of the Father in sending Jesus, which is the love towards the whole creation²² and clarifies that the words of Jesus shows that he and

17 Brown et al., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 707.

18 Nolland, "Luke 9:21-18:34," 785.

19 Elias, *Cāvaṛayaccante Sampūrṇakṛtīkaḷ*, vol. III, 26.

20 Elias, *Cāvaṛayaccante Sampūrṇakṛtīkaḷ*, vol. III, 26.

21 Wiersbe, "The New Testament," 235.

22 Jn 3:16 "God so loved the world that he gave his only son."

the Father are one.²³ This is the starting point of the reflection of Chavara regarding the descent of the father in the parable, on the backdrop of incarnation. Here, we have a mystical dialogue where the 'Father' speaks to the 'younger son' who is Chavara.

- i. "I have born as one of the creatures like you so that you may not get afraid"
- ii. "You and your mother had a good house, mat and pillow, when you were born"
- iii. "You and your mother had servants to assist"
- iv. "But, when I was born, my poor mother and I had only a cattle shed"
- v. "... as well as, rock instead of bed, and borrowed hay instead of mat and pillow"
- vi. "In this manner I was born"

Here, the subjective and relational mode of seeing the Scripture is well evident. We also witness a profound blending of Christology, incarnation theology, contextualized reflection seen in the use of household materials of the Keralite culture such as *pāyūṁ talayīṇayūṁ* and a personalized interpretation of the Scripture.

2.2.3.2. The Descent of the Father on the Backdrop of Good Shepherd, Passion Narrative, and Eucharistic Mystery

We have the descent of the father first on the backdrop of the imagery of the good shepherd illustrated in John 10:16. It is one of the major Johannine mission texts that shed significant light on Jesus' messianic consciousness during his earthly ministry.²⁴

23 Jn 10:30 "I and the Father are one."

24 Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Jesus the Good Shepherd Who Will Also Bring Other Sheep (John 10:16): The Old Testament Background of a Familiar Metaphor," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12.1 (2002), 67.

This mission of the good shepherd giving his life²⁵ gives us an image of the passion of Jesus.²⁶

The genius of Chavara blends these two imageries with the parable in Lk 15:11-32 in *Dhyānasallāpannaḥ*.²⁷ This search of the father indicates the motive of Jesus presented in the fourth gospel of preparing rooms in the dwelling place of the Father.²⁸ Chavara proceeds this to the suffering that the good shepherd has to undergo which is linked to the prophecy of the suffering servant whose wounds would heal us.²⁹ Following this, his reflection culminates in the fullness of life achieved through the Eucharistic mystery.³⁰ This is presented as the continuation of the 'father's' talk to the 'younger son' Chavara.

- i. "I wandered in search of you in the forest, fields, oceans and hills." (Ref. Jn 10:16)
- ii. "I came in search of you out of the love for you, so that I may take you to my palace and make you joyful." (Ref. Jn 14:6)
- iii. "This became known by your enemies under whom you were in slavery"

25 Jn 10:18 "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."

26 Köstenberger, "Jesus the Good Shepherd," 68.

27 Elias, *Cāvaṛayaccante Sampūrṇakṛtikal*, vol. III, 26.

28 Jn 14:6 "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

29 Is 53:5 "But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed"

30 Jn 6:53 "So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

- iv. "Your enemies caught me, beat, wounded, and killed me." (Ref. Jn 10:18)
- v. "Using that wounds and bruises as medicines for your sickness, I healed you." (Ref. Is 53:5-6)
- vi. "To nourish you, I fed you with tasty food and drink, made of my sweet blood." (Ref. Jn 6:55)
- vii. "Why are you afraid to come to my presence even after seeing all these?"

In addition to the relational aspect, here we see a theological interpretation of the parable. The descent of the father in the parable reflects the salvific motive of God the Father which was accomplished through the suffering of Jesus. The son in the parable represents the whole of humanity, and Chavara presents himself before the Divine as a corporate personality representing the whole of the people of God. The 'father' here is a motherly figure who gives life, provides medicine through suffering, and nourishes with nutritious blood.

3.1. Characteristics and Uniqueness of the Chavara Approach

Chavara's subjective mode of textual analysis, relational way of presentation, solid reflection with inter-testamental references, mystical as well as intuitive reading, rooted in and blended with theological doctrines, and a tasteful way of articulation in the culture and context, reflects a person who truly interiorized the Sacred Scripture in the history of then and now. His approach has similarities when it is compared with the scholarly Scripture analysis of today, even though St Chavara wrote not with an academic intention.

3.1.1. Radical Interiorization of the Sacred Scripture

The radical interiorization of the Sacred Scripture here refers to a deep, personal, and transformative engagement with the biblical

text. It is an approach to the Sacred Scripture that asks us to go beyond the surface-level understanding and to seek a more profound understanding that touches the heart and transforms the inner person as we learn from the life and works of Chavara. It can be seen as the result of two factors, as enumerated below.

3.1.1.1. Lack of Availability of the Sacred Scripture in the Vernacular

Chavara's acquaintance was not restricted to any one of the books of the Bible, but to the whole Bible. We also must see that it is very unlikely for Chavara to have constant touch with any of the Malayalam versions of the Protestant Bible available at his time. The reasons to be pointed out are:

- i. There is a significant difference in the vocabulary used by Chavara to quote the Biblical references³¹ with that of the Ramban Bible, Benjamin Beyli's Bible, and Gundert's Bible.
- ii. Catholic missionaries were hostile towards the Protestant Church of that time. Hence, the education provided by the Protestant missionaries was denied to the Catholics.³² Chavara, working under the Catholic missionaries, there is less chance that he was using the Bible provided by the Protestant missionaries.
- iii. During Chavara's time, Protestants did not translate the complete Bible. But Chavara quotes in Malayalam even from the books that were not yet translated by the Protestants.³³

3 A clear example is the designation of the younger son. Ramban, Gundert as well as Beyli used *mutiyanāya* (മുട്ടിയനായ) whereas St Chavara uses *dhūjicc* (ധൂളിപ്പ).

32 *Fr Emmanuel TOCD*, 17.

33 In comparison with the Ramban Bible, Gundert Bible and Beyli's Bible.

This points to the radical interiorization of the Sacred Scripture that he had based on the versions available in foreign languages. His interiorization of the Scripture verses is radical, in that it was easy for him to switch spontaneously in context to the vernacular, that too from various books of the Bible.³⁴

3.1.1.2. Other Contextual Exigencies

On the other hand, the contextual exigency is not restricted to the lack of availability of the text. The illiteracy of the people whom he served³⁵, the presence of misleading leaders in the Church,³⁶ and the inability of the clergy to guide the people³⁷ also add to the exigency he faced. This can be seen as pressure from outside urging the 'good shepherd' in the heart of Chavara to radically interiorize the Sacred Scripture to provide spiritual nourishment for all under his care.

3.1.2. Threefold Identification

About the parable of the 'Younger Son', we can point out a three-fold identification of Chavara, namely, with the Biblical characters, vulnerable in the society and the listeners. But, these identifications are not restricted to this parable alone. We see them elsewhere also in the *Dhyānasallāpaṇṇaḥ*.

We see that he identifies himself with the younger son, attributing himself as the prodigal one³⁸ in the passage dealt with in the previous section. In the other instances of *Dhyānasallāpaṇṇaḥ*,

34 In *Dhyānasallāpaṇṇaḥ* we can find more than 40 references from 17 books of the Bible.

35 Mathias Mundadan, *St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 28.

36 Gregory Neerakkal, *si em ai sabhayuṭe caritra saṅkṣēpaṁ*, Trichur: St Joseph's IS Press, 1970, 38.

37 Mundadan, *St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 220.

38 Elias, *Cāvarayaccante Sampūrṇakṛtīkaḥ*, vol. III, 16-17.

he identifies himself with the Patriarch Jacob³⁹, the soldier who beat Jesus,⁴⁰ the good thief,⁴¹ Zachaeus,⁴² and John who stood beneath the cross.⁴³

While being identified as the younger son of the parable, he describes his appearance as a member of the agrarian society. The areca leaf cap⁴⁴ and the wild stick, typically symbolize a farmer. It goes in hand with the historical fact, that the then society in which Chavara lived was primarily an agrarian society.⁴⁵ They were vulnerable to natural calamities, and exploitation from the landlords, uneducated, and had a life that was considered at the lower strata of society.⁴⁶

The vocabulary he used give some indications about his audience. It is a sign of effective communication.⁴⁷ Even

39 "I will not leave your feet as Jacob told to the angel."

40 "It is your hands that beat on his cheeks." He uses here second person singular as a reflective personal pronoun.

41 "Being crucified on the cross of the thief who was crucified on your right, I plead with the fervent voice of that noble man."

42 "You came to my home of heart, which is full of dirt of sinfulness and cruelties, without considering that I myself am more unclean and sinful than Zachaeus."

43 "You entrusted this poor Kuriakose as son to your mother, by telling her that 'Here is your son.'"

44 In the vocabulary of St Chavara we read *toppippāla* (തപ്പിപ്പാല). This protective hat on head was in use till recently in Kerala among the farmers. Refer O.K. Santhosh, "Politics of the Studies on Folklore," *Malayāḷappacca*, 01 (2015), 15.

45 Mundadan, *St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 412.

46 Sophy Rose, *A Pillar and Guiding Light: Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a Theologian of the Church*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2020, 40.

47 More light on this can be found in the deliberation on the *Form of Life* in the *Philosophical Investigations* of Ludwig Wittgenstein

though it is necessary for every communication, it was all the more necessary at a time, when the audience was illiterate. Furthermore, this identification is seen in his choice of mode of articulation. To articulate the 'sublime' matters of spirituality, Chavara did not go for the 'sublime' language of that time, Sanskrit. P.K. Rajasekharan states:

His poems and sermons represent the interventions he made in the life of his community in particular and in the life of his society in general. While he insisted with an almost divine obstinacy that every church should have a school attached to it and went on to start a school for teaching Sanskrit more than a hundred and fifty years ago. In his poetry and prose, he chose to make his way through the bylanes of poetry, rather than along the highway of Sanskrit.⁴⁸

This is clear in the *Dhyānasallāpanaḥ* where we scarcely come across a Sanskrit word, making it possible to read the work legibly even after one and a half centuries of its creation. He follows a diction that the common people of that time followed. Rajasekharan continues:

His poems [*Compunction of the Soul, Martyrdom of Anastasia and Dirge*] were written in an age when neo-classical traditions in poetic diction reigned supreme. Yet these poems were written in a diction which was closer to the spoken idiom than to the highly ornate, Sanskrit-riddled neo-classical style.⁴⁹

where he discusses fundamentals of communication. Marie McGinn, *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations*, New York: Routledge, 1997, 50.

48 P.K. Rajasekharan, "The Grace of the True Vernacular," in *The Life and Legacy of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, ed. John Mannarathara, Kochi: Viva Books, 2015, 45.

49 Rajasekharan, "The Grace of the True Vernacular," 45.

3.2. Impact of the Scripture-Based Reformation: Re-birth of a Society Conscientized of its Identity

Chavara's recognition of the true identity was in the context of ambiguous identity. This illusionment of identity was a result of various factors such as a life in a pluralistic religious society, caste system, foreign invasion etc., that characterised nineteenth century.⁵⁰ When society was craving for an identity, we find Chavara, as one with the conviction of his identity. His first poem in *ātmānutāpam* clearly shows how one person and society get their identity from the Divine⁵¹ which he explains through the Genesis account of creation.⁵² He could find all men and women as the sons and daughters of one God and treat them as his own tracing his origin back to the Genesis account, and not to that of Matthean. This is reflected in the Chronicles he wrote, where people of other religions and especially the lower castes are mentioned with utmost gratitude about the cooperation they rendered with the construction of the monastery at Mannanam.⁵³

The apprehension that, the society was well informed of their identity through him, is gathered from the fact that of the tedious efforts they rendered to remain to the truth. Chavara's conferrers rendered a commendable job under the successor of Chavara,

50 E.R. Hamby, *History of Christianity in India*, vol. III: *Eighteenth Century*, Bangalore: The Church History Association of India, 1997, 22.

51 Z.M. Muzhoor, *Ātmānutāpam: Chavarayachan*, Thevara: Janatha, 1990, 1.

52 Chavara Kuriakose Elias, *Cāvarayaccanṇe Sampūrṇakṛtikāḷ*, vol. II: *Sāhityakṛtikāḷ*, ed. Z. M. Muzhoor, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1986, 1.

53 Valerian, *Viśud'dha Cāvara Kuryākkōs Ēliyās Accan*, rev. ed. Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 245-259.

Fr Kuriacose Porukara TOCD⁵⁴ in eradicating a schismatic trend that arose in the community. As well, the Congregation had the pain of losing its seven beloved members due to the ex-communication they faced for the request for an indigenous bishop.⁵⁵ Even though the Thomas Christians of Malabar had a heritage of nineteen centuries, we see that it emerged as a *sui iuris* Church within some decades after the death of Chavara.⁵⁶

The all-India jurisdiction,⁵⁷ sprouting of a number of indigenous congregations, and a huge number of vocations to religious and priestly life that the present Syro-Malabar Church enjoys, trace back its root to her identity that was re-established through the person of Chavara. The reunion movement which was very well coordinated and guided by the spiritual sons of Chavara could add the Malankara Church to the Catholic communion.⁵⁸

All these point out the deep-rootedness and strong conviction of the person of Chavara with regard to the identity that one has with relation to the Divine, evolving from the Sacred Scripture.

3.3. Radical Interiorization as the Scope for the Modern-Day Pastors

As *The Interpretation of Bible Today* asks to complement the Historical-Critical Method with the contextual meaning of the

54 Neerakkal, *si em ai sabhayuṭe caritra saṅkṣēpaṁ*, 40.

55 Mani Pius, *daivavum manušyarum ivarkk svantam*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2020, 155.

56 Paul Pallath, *The Liturgical Heritage of the Syro Malabar Church*, Changanassery: HIRS Publications, 2019), 280.

57 With the document, *Tamquam viti palmites* by which Pope Francis erected the Diocese of Shamshabad on 9 October 2017. Cf. Joseph Antony, *Hierarchical Authority in the Indian Church*, Kottayam: Paurastya Vidyapeedam, 2022, 14.

58 Neerakkal, *si em ai sabhayuṭe caritra saṅkṣēpaṁ*, 50.

Sacred Scripture,⁵⁹ this reading looks forward to its implication for today. Even though the radical interiorization that Chavara is not a New Age movement in the strict sense, it has the feature of personal experience which is not at the cost of dogma or the practice of religion.⁶⁰ Before Indians become seriously infected by the European trend of embracing the new-age movements,⁶¹ modern-day pastors can take, adapt and introduce this experiential approach of Chavara, to the mainstream in an attractive manner.

It is a paradigm for modern-day pastors who are entrusted to seek and find the lost sheep to bring them to the fullness of life (Jn 10:10), also, a challenge as well as scope for all those who wish to follow the footsteps of the Word Incarnate.

4. Conclusion

The hermeneutics of Chavara is rooted in the radical interiorisation of the Sacred Scripture. It is not restricting the interpretation to the realm of mere intellect. On the other side, it shows that hermeneutics is more experiential, as well as a ground for inspiration. The life of Chavara shows us the co-relatedness of his hermeneutics and the *ortho praxis*.

It is beyond words to describe the genius of Chavara, who could articulate the scriptural passage in a truly interiorized manner. His hermeneutical and exegetical approach is unique. It is imaginative as well as intuitive, since his intertwining of

59 Joseph Ratzinger, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1994, 24.

60 Chris Crews and Bron Taylor, "Religion, COVID-19, and Biocultural Evolution: Introducing a Special Issue focusing on Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 415 (2022), 6.

61 Crews and Taylor, "Religion, COVID-19, and Biocultural Evolution," 7.

the Biblical verses and theological concepts is fusing with the history of salvation and the mystery of divine-human encounter. He, who was courageous enough to confess that he never lost his baptismal innocence, presents himself in the position of a repentant son⁶² showing that he represents before God in prayer as a corporate personality, representing the people under his care and the weak human nature.

62 Rose, *A Pillar and Guiding Light*, 112.

SYRIAC THEOLOGICAL VISION OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Siby Kuriakose Kavattu CMI

1. Introduction

Theology as a concept, method and practice is an attempt to comprehend and interpret 'divine revelation' and 'faith response' based on Sacred Scripture and Tradition. The purpose of theology is deification, or *theosis*, which results from divine human encounters of revelation through creation, incarnation and resurrection; and faith through the sacramental celebrations, especially baptism and eucharist in the Church. The 'Syriac theological vision'¹ of God, humans and the world is sacramental in nature and transformative in effect. The theological vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara², present in his own writings and writings about him, resonates with the Syriac theological vision. One of the dictums of Chavara, 'God's will be done always and

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- 1 Syriac theology, a branch of Christian theology is present in the writings of the Fathers of the Church who wrote in Syriac language, which is characterized by its resonance with semitic cultural and religious ethos and its particular thrust on scriptural and liturgical theology. Syriac theology in the past was left in oblivion and remained dormant, but is now actively influencing the theological milieu with translations of the writings into modern languages and its interpretations and application in context.
 - 2 The names Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Cyriac Elias Chavara are interchangeably used by different authors. The name Kuriakose was his baptismal name whereas the name Elias was chosen by Chavara when he made his religious vows and Chavara was his surname/family name. In this paper we make use of the surname Chavara.

everywhere'³ is echoing his sacramental and transformative theological vision in theory and in practical implications. Psalm 16:5 was Chavara's favourite verse in the Bible: "Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure." The sources of the above-mentioned dictums often appearing in the writings and sayings of Chavara seems to be inspired by the phrase in the Lord's prayer, 'Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt 6:10) and in the verses of the Psalm 62:1-2, "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken". They present a beautiful blending of Scriptural, Semitic (Jewish) and theological visions of the reality of the Syriac Christians present in the theological vision of Chavara.

The life and activities of Chavara were in conformity with this conviction, and every aspect of his life was permeated with its fragrance. Being a child of God and thus a faithful son of the Church, he could go beyond the limiting beliefs and enticing trends of his time to fulfill the mission entrusted to him by God for His glory and the good of the people. In the words of Fr. Leopold, the most outstanding virtue of Chavara was his love for the Church: "Among his virtues, the most outstanding was his ardent faith in and the devotion to the Holy Catholic Church and the Holy Father. ... Never did Chavara hold himself back from any work, of fight shy of any difficulty, as he was always prompted by two motives: obedience to the bishop and the salvation of souls."⁴

3 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, trans. Jose Chittilapilly, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 15.

4 Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccardo*, Mannanam, 2003, 13-14.

Chavara's spirituality was deeply rooted in faith, hope and charity, and he practiced the virtues of humility, obedience and forgiveness in a heroic manner. He was able to understand and translate the mystery of God and the mystery of life in loving compassion towards human beings and towards nature and he lived this mystery gracefully in the Church through the celebration of the sacrament. Thus, Chavara can be called a true son of the Church and a man of God for others.

This paper is a humble attempt to search for the salient features of the Syriac theological vision present in the life and writings of Chavara. The life and legacy of Chavara are open to the public through many biographies and his own writings.⁵ The main sources of this research are the books of Chavara himself: *Atmanuthapam* (*The Compunction of Soul*), *Dhyanasallapangal* (*Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*), *Anastasiyayude Rakthasashitvam* (*Anasthasia's Martyrdom*), *Nalagamangal* (*Chronicles*), and *Kathukal* (*Letters*) and some of the studies that have sought to understand and find the legacy of Chavara.

2. Theological Vision of Syriac Christians

Syriac theology represents a remarkably unique trend in Christian theology, inspired by its semitic background, Syriac culture and the particular historical vicissitudes of different Syriac churches. The idea 'the East was the cradle of Christianity' has gained general historical consensus, and this accord gives a legitimate and valid testimony to the importance of Syriac theology. The people among whom Christianity was born, first spread and developed set the mark of their own genius on its first forms of expression.

5 Z. M. Muzhoor, *Chavara Achante Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vols I, II & III, Mannanam, 1981. Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *Chavara Achante Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vol IV, Mannanam, 1982.

What makes the thought of the early Syriac theologians so attractive is its universal/catholic amplitude, joined with its triumphant eschatological tone. The constant object of their contemplation was the mystery in all the glory of its unity. In creation, God inaugurated the salvific plan, and through incarnation and resurrection, it was fulfilled and perfected. It continues in the Church with the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh, which points to the 'already and not yet' eschatological vision of the Church, as St. Paul puts it in Ephesians 1:10, 'God all in all'.

The sources of theology and the process of theologising are integrated realities in the East. John Meyendorff says in this regard, as follows:

Theology should be based on the Scripture, on the doctrinal decisions of the Church's Magisterium, or on the witness of the saints. But to be a true theology, it must be able to reach beyond the letters of the Scripture, beyond the formulae used in definitions, beyond the language employed by the saints to communicate their experience. For only then will it be able to discern the unity of revelation, a unity which is not simply an intellectual coherence and consistency, but a living reality experienced in the continuity of the Church throughout the ages.⁶

Robert Taft speaks of Eastern theology as follows: "It is an integrated world in which liturgy, spirituality, art and architecture comprise an integrated, harmonious whole in a way unthinkable in the west, with its clash of competing methodologies and philosophies."⁷ Today, the Syriac/Eastern/Oriental way of theologizing receives much importance and momentum. While

6 John Meyendorff, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 13.

7 Robert Taft, "Eastern Catholic Theology: Slow Rebirth after a Long and Difficult Gestation," 75.

there have been translations of Syriac writings into German and French, these have remained relatively inaccessible to those who read only English. As a positive sign, Robert Murray, Sebastian Brock, Kathleen McVey, Thomas Kollamparampil and a few others are making the genius of Syriac Christian writings and authors better known to English readers through their commendable efforts.

3. Salient Characteristic Features of Chavara's Syriac Theological Vision

In 1805, Chavara was born into the rich and complex socio-cultural and politico-ecclesial context of Kerala as one who was a special envoy from God for the restoration of the society and Church of his time. Chavara was called by God with a special charism for the renewal and growth of the Church in India, especially the Syro-Malabar Church⁸, as acclaimed by many.⁹ The particular socio-cultural and ecclesial circumstances of that time have influenced tremendously the life and mission of Chavara, and that is evident in his writings. He was faithful to the Church and her teachings and defended them with courage and fortitude, especially the tradition, beliefs, customs and practices of the St. Thomas Christians. St. Thomas Christians of his time were particularly in a phase of growth that necessitated order, discipline, new initiatives, testimonies of faith, moral uprightness as well as turmoil, uncertainties, intrusions. etc. Chavara could function as a catalyst to manage the situation gracefully for the glory of God and for the good of the people, with an absolute

8 The now, Syro-Malabar Church was called Saint Thomas Christian at the time of Chavara, which remained faithful to the Catholic faith under the guidance of Chavara, amidst the attacks of Roccas Schism.

9 CD Valerian, *Vannya Divya Sree Chavara Kuriakose Eliyasachan*, Mannanam, 1939, 6.

trust in God and unwavering commitment to the cause of the people of God.

The salient characteristic features of the Syriac theological vision, such as revelation and faith as mystery (*raza*), experience of heart and mind, symbolism and typology, biblical and liturgical foundation, poetic mode of expression and divinization/*theosis* as purpose of revelation and faith, are directly or indirectly present in the theologizing of Chavara as it is seen in his life and expressed in his writings.

3.1. Understanding of Reality, both Sacred and Secular, as Mystery (*Raza*)

The concept of mystery is central to understanding Syriac theology. The human experience of reality, both sacred and secular, is made possible through encounters with words (verbal symbols) and/or gestures and actions (non-verbal symbols). The sense of mystery (*raza*) permeates the symbolic and typological expressions used by the early Syriac authors to express divine realities. The Syriac noun *raza* is used to mean type, figure, sign, symbol, likeness, mystery, sacrament, the Holy Eucharist, Trinity, Christ, Church, etc.

In the Bible, *raza* connotes the salvific plan of God, which is centred on the incarnate Lord. Syriac theologians Ephrem and Narsai have always emphasized the sharp divide between the creator and creation and recognized in their writings that human being is unable to grasp fully the 'divine hidden-ness' through intellectual scrutiny. Ephrem sings, "Lord, your symbols are everywhere, yet you are hidden from everywhere."¹⁰

10 Ephrem, *Hymns of Faith* 4:9, see also, Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1985, 55.

Syriac theology does not rule out reason and investigation in the theological method. Contemplative theology is not the product of mere imagination; it considers the mystery of God, human being and the world revealed in the Scriptures and manifested in nature with the help of reason. Therefore, a true theologian is one who has intense God-experience obtained through liturgical celebration. The most striking aspect of eastern theology is that it is permeated with an attitude of reverential awe. For an eastern Christian, his humble parish Church is the heavenly sanctuary where men and women, according to their capacity and desire, are caught up in the worship of the redeemed cosmos, where dogmas are no barren abstractions but hymns of exulting praise.

Chavara's life and activities were always permeated with a sense of mystery. As a child, he was spiritually oriented and showed a keen interest in learning the prayers, which were mostly in Syriac.¹¹ As he grew up, he cultivated a genuine prayer culture and considered prayer to be a true virtue.¹² His parents were of excellent virtue, especially his mother, who sowed in his tender heart the seeds of the spirit of prayer. In *Ātmanūthāpam*, it can be noticed as follows:

Through baptism's grace you made me your cherished
son
And showed me heaven's joys to tend me grow
Gave me parents grounded in faith secure
And faith in me engraved full firm, besides
A mother to feed me while yet feeble babe
To shield me from pain and sorrow and tend me soft

11 Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 38.

12 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 214.

To pour that tender love you filled her with
 That nectar, unto my tiny blissful heart
 Mixed with 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
 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.¹³

After joining the seminary in the first year, he learned Syriac, the liturgical language of the Malabar Christians,¹⁴ and as a brilliant student, he learned Latin and Portuguese besides Syriac.¹⁵ Chavara's confessor and spiritual director, Fr. Leopold, writes about his seminary life as follows:

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

13 Cf., Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Compunction of Soul*, trans. Mary Leo, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1989, 2-3.

14 CD Valerian, *Vannya Divya Sree Chavara Kuriakose Eliyasachan*, Mannanam, 1939, 31.

15 Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 39.

his companions, as was usual among the young, but always kind and charitable towards them.¹⁶

Chavara adopted the motto 'the Lord is my portion' (Ps 16:5) for life at his reception of the minor order of tonsure. The experience of God that Chavara enjoyed and liked to enjoy is expressed in his own words as follows:

Oh my God, you are my love, my joy, and all my fortune.
If not in you, how could I live my life?
You are my breath, my food and my drink.
What a solace have I in you!¹⁷

Chavara was a man on fire, a mystic in his core, who experienced the mystery of God, humans and the world, which was evident in his prayer and celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. He used to spend many hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament conversing with God. His exterior life was the mirror of his interior life.¹⁸ Chavara used to exclaim, 'What a bliss it is for us humans that God allows us to converse with Him.'¹⁹ Fr. Marceline Alackapally writes:

According to the first constitution [of 1863] the duration of the evening meditation was one full hour. Fr. Prior spent the whole time on knees, absorbed in ecstasy, continually shedding tears. ... at the end of the meditation he had to be reminded by others that the time was up. ... during the

16 Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 5.

17 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Compunction of Soul*, 10.

18 Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 5.

19 *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, Vatican, 1997, 623.

adoration of the blessed sacrament it was a delight for others to watch him lost in contemplation.²⁰

Chavara is an exemplary mystic and missionary who integrated the principles of both contemplation and action into his life.²¹ His mystical experiences were theocentric and self-transcending for the union with the divine.²² There are many instances recorded in the biographies of Chavara about his fervent prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament or in the cemetery.²³ Fr. Leopold makes the following observation:

The admirable dignity, devotion and recollection with which he celebrated the divine liturgy, made a great impression upon those who participated in it. Besides the usual visit to the Blessed Sacrament enjoined by the rule, he used to spend long hours on his knees, immersed in prayer before the tabernacle.²⁴

Contemplation and action are very talked-about aspects of Catholic spirituality, especially in the eastern tradition.²⁵ Chavara is an exemplary mystic and missionary who integrated

20. *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, 561.

21. *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, 6.

22. *Positio super Introduction Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata*, 6.

23. Valerian Plathottam, *Very Reverend Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mannanam, 1939, 242.

24. Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccato*, 13.

25. Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccato*, 5.

the principles of both contemplation and action into his life.²⁶ From the life of Chavara, one can learn love, hope, compassion and authenticity, the genuine fruits of deep mystical life and practice.²⁷

One of the most attractive features of early Syriac theology is its symbolic character. The early Syriac fathers used images and symbols to expound the truth of salvation.²⁸ For instance, Ephrem uses the metaphor of clothing to understand the mystery of the incarnation. Everything in the created world, and in creation as a whole, is a symbol.

On the human level, all modes of logical patterns are necessary and applicable. But as one is invited to approach the divine level through divine revelation, the medium of analogy and the symbolic mode of perception have to be sought. At such a level, the vehicles are types, symbols, images and mysteries of salvation in words and deeds. Symbolic theology does not look for 'the logical sequence' and does not jump directly into conclusions.

In the sacramental vision, the natural world stands side by side with Scripture as a witness to God. Everyone, literate or illiterate, can read and understand the book of nature. The approach of the early fathers of the Church to nature was one of wonder and reverence, not greed and exploitation.

Chavara was aware of the mystery aspect of reality, both divine and secular and he had great admiration for the revelation

26 Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 6.

27 Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 6.

28 For a detailed study in this regard see, Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 53-84.

of reality through the mediums of Scripture and nature. In his writings, there are instances where this aspect is evidently presented. While speaking about his vocation, he writes in *The Compunction of Soul* verses 118-120:

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 parenting.²⁹

3.2. Experience and Expression of God with Heart and Mind than with Head and Intellect

In Syriac Christian context, theology is not just information and systematic knowledge about God and divine matters attained through epistemological endeavour; rather, it is the lived experience of God of the faithful on personal and communitarian levels, attained through faith and liturgical celebrations. While speaking on the specific characteristics of Syriac theology in the decree on ecumenism, Vatican Council II refers to the most important sources of theology in the East:

With regard to the authentic theological traditions of the Orientals, we must recognize that they are admirably rooted in Holy Scripture, fostered and given expression in liturgical life, and nourished by the living tradition of the apostles and by the writings of the Fathers and spiritual authors of the East; they are directed towards a right ordering of life, indeed toward a full contemplation of Christian truth.³⁰

For a long period in history, the importance of a genuine and authentic personal experience in the elaboration of theology had not been recognized by theologians. This was mainly because of

29 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *The Compunction of Soul*, 4.

30 *Unitatis Redintegratio* 17.

the fear that Christian faith would be reduced to mere feelings. For eastern theologians, contemplation of God is the very basis of theology. Pope John Paul II stated in his 'Sunday Angelus' message on September 29, 1996: "Today's prevailing scientific culture puts an enormous quantity of information at our disposal; but every day it is apparent that this is not enough for an authentic process of humanization. We have greater need than ever to discover the dimensions of the heart." He pointed out that eastern spirituality makes a specific contribution to authentic knowledge of human being by insisting on this perspective of the heart.

For Chavara, faith is the 'heart's eye', an expression present in the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians 1:18.³¹ Chavara advised his readers in *Dhyanasallapangal*: "Falling prostrate in the holy presence of God Almighty, you must look at him with the eye of your heart and worship Him."³² In fact, Chavara had the eye of the heart always wide open so that in every event of life—small or big, delightful or painful—he would easily see God's hand, and thus, he could enjoy uninterrupted vision of God.³³ *Dhyanasallapangal* presents Chavara's personal encounter with God, in which one can find his profound *Abba* experience.³⁴

Chavara's life of prayer was inspired by a close and intimate relation with God the Father, whom he called '*ente appa*' (my

31 So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.

32 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, trans. Jose Chittilapilly, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 25.

33 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 235.

34 Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 29.

father).³⁵ Making the sentiments of the prodigal son his own, Chavara states:

Oh, its long time since I saw my *appan*, I squandered all he gave me. Now I am working for an unjust employer, feeding his pigs. ... Oh, my soul, your *appan* is so bounteous as to forgive and forget every act of ingratitude of yours. ... How can I approach such an august presence and seek forgiveness? Still *ente appan* is so generous and full of love that I needn't entertain any fear. ... Oh, *ente appa*, I cast myself on my knees before your throne of mercy.³⁶

Chavara indeed experienced God's hands in everything that happened to him and around him. It was inspired by the divine wisdom of faith. He looked at all things with his heart's eye.³⁷ Chavara instructed the inhabitants of *bes-rauma*, the 'vision house', to possess a pure heart and clear conscience so that their intentions may be purified, and they can do everything for the greater glory of God and the good of the people.³⁸

3.3. Biblical and Liturgical Foundations of the Syriac Theological Vision

The early Syriac ecclesial tradition and its theology represent the authentic Semitic world out of which the Bible sprang. The theologians of the East depended primarily on Sacred Scripture for theologizing. The writings of both Aphrahat and Ephrem

35 Cf. Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 329.

36 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, trans. Jose Chittilapilly, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 4-5.

37 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 299.

38 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 105.

demonstrate an intimate familiarity with the Bible, and their writings are packed with biblical citations, images and allusions, especially from the Old Testament. The early Syriac theologians approach Scripture as the book of faith, and their interpretation of the biblical texts is both spiritual and practical. For instance, Ephrem regards Scripture as the incarnation of God in human language. The reading of the Scripture was for the fathers, synonymous with conversation with Christ.

Historical exegesis of the scripture was not the primary concern of the early Syriac fathers. Rather, they emphasized the spiritual exegesis that proceeds from faith. The inner meaning of the scripture can only be perceived by the inner eye of faith.

Early Syriac theology is liturgical theology. Liturgical theology refers to the theology that is present in the liturgical texts. Basically, when the liturgical texts are analyzed, the Trinitarian and Christological dimensions of human salvation can be found in them. When theology is said to be liturgical theology, the liturgical prayers are the source of theologizing, taking inspiration from the axiom, *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer establishes the law of faith). In the liturgical celebration, one encounters the mystery of God, which theologians try to articulate. Thus, liturgy is the natural root of theology, and the theological thinking of the Church should be verifiable in the liturgical text of the Church. Pope John Paul II states in his encyclical, *Ecclesia De Eucharistia* # 1: "The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church."

The Word of God was for Chavara, food and drink. His sermons and other teachings are mostly based on the Sacred Scripture, and he learned the mysteries of God by meditating

on the Word of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.³⁹ His approach to the Word of God is far from academic; it is spiritual and personal. In a spirit of faith and an attitude of reverence, he attentively listens to the Word and zealously responds to it with docility and awe.⁴⁰

In *Dhyanasallapangal*, there are 43 explicit citations from the Bible and 70 implicit or allusive ones. Then there are seven texts that Chavara interprets by way of expressing, explaining and translating them. "His whole personality was an expression of the Word of God ... He could explain the Bible in his own life situation ... thus the Word of God became his own word."⁴¹

The liturgical renewal that Chavara initiated in the Church and its after effects are positively experienced by the Church today. The first thing that Chavara did in this regard was the compilation of the divine office of his Church.⁴² The daily divine office that was in use those days was too lengthy and available only in manuscripts, and the priests tended to ignore its recital. After having discussed this with several *malpans* assembled at Koonammavu, he prepared a handy book of divine office in 1862. It is to be noted that this was the divine office that was in use until the late 1960s, when the breviary in Malayalam was introduced.

39 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 238.

40 Cf. Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 246.

41 Paul Kalluveetil, "Chavara the Dynamic Hermeneut of the Word" in Paul Kalluveetil & Paulachan Kochapilly eds., *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 294-311.

42 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 32.

The Holy Eucharist was the centre of the spirituality of Chavara. To use his own terminology, he preferred to shut himself up in the tabernacle with Jesus. He wrote to the nuns, "Behold I have locked up your hearts in the tabernacle of Jesus. I have done the same with mine as well. Let us stay there until the day of resurrection."⁴³ Fr. Leopold gives an unambiguous testimony of Chavara's devotion to the Eucharistic as follows:

The admirable dignity, devotion and recollection with which he celebrated the Sacred liturgy, made a great impression upon those who participated in it. Besides the usual visits to the Blessed Sacrament enjoined by the rule, he used to spend long hours on his knees, immersed in prayer before the tabernacle.⁴⁴

Chavara also made sure that the Holy Eucharist was celebrated in an orderly manner. As the available missal lacked the correct rubrics, priests, while celebrating the Holy Eucharist, followed customs and practices that were different from place to place. To remedy this, Chavara wrote a book called *Tukasa* containing the rubrics of the Syrian Mass and got it printed for the use of priests.⁴⁵ This book, reprinted in 1926, was in use until 1962, when a new missal with an *ordo* was promulgated by Rome.⁴⁶ That means, for almost a century, Chavara's *Tukasa* served as the only means of ensuring an orderly manner of eucharistic celebration in the Syro-Malabar Church.

43 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, trans. Mary Leo, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 85.

44 Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccardo*, 13.

45 Bernard TOCD, *Malayalathinte Ka. Ni. Mu. Sa Sabhayude Charithra Samshepam*, Mannanam, 1908, 136.

46 Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 268.

The restoration and updating of the liturgical calendar of the Syrian community was also a great contribution that Chavara actualized. For many years, the Syrians used the Latin Rite calendar, which naturally enjoined Latin practices and ignored the Syrian one, such as the division of the year into specific liturgical seasons of the Syrian Church. With much dedication and difficulty, Chavara prepared and printed the Syrian rite liturgical calendar. This pays testimony to Chavara's knowledge of his Church's ancient traditions and his concern to preserve them. Along with the liturgical renewal, Chavara also introduced retreat preaching and pastoral care for the faithful, especially the sick and the poor.

The practice of preaching homilies during the Holy Eucharist and annual retreat in the parishes were also initiated and made popular by Chavara. He also introduced and promoted religious practices and devotions such as adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the office for the dead, the way of the cross, the rosary and scapular, novena prayers, etc. Even though they are neither liturgical prayers nor originally Syrian practices, with their introduction and promotion, Christian life among the Syrians became lively and more appealing, responding to the legitimate emotional needs of the common people.

3.4. Poetic Mode of Expression of Theology

Theology in poetry and theologians as poets may sound like contradictions to the modern mind. Syriac fathers employed poetry as the principal vehicle of their theologizing. It is not because they were unable to pursue the prosaic medium, but because they found the poetic way doubly useful. Poetic medium can equally handle conceptual matters usually carried by prosaic medium, and personal sensorial experiences usually effected mainly by poetic medium, at the same time. The poetic

medium can effectively handle the seeming paradoxes and contradictions in the divine-human engagements in the history of salvation. The language of poetry can express spiritual reality more successfully. Doctrines and teachings, when given in a poetic manner, contain the needed flexibility, fluidity, dynamism and personal applicability. But when doctrines and teachings are given at the logical and rational levels alone, they will remain more hardened by losing adaptability and dynamism.

Chavara was a great poet. He found the poetic medium apt for communicating matters of faith, spirituality, and morals, as it was for the early Syriac fathers. Chavara's God-experience is well expressed in his poetic writings, which he calls spiritual canticles (*atma-geetangal*), spiritual colloquies (*atma-sallapangal*) and spiritual union (*atma-vismruti*).⁴⁷ All his writings contain a poetic style, especially *Atmanuthapam*, *Anastasiyayude Rakthasashitvam* and *Maranaveettil Padunna Pana*, which are written in poetic metres.

In one of his correspondences, Chavara, the mystic, depicts a moment of divine love using a style and language that closely resemble the poetic and spiritual expressions found in the *Songs of Songs* and the *Spiritual Canticle*:

When the human spirit is in the delightful solitude, the Lord Jesus Christ comes to meet His beloved in that lovely solitude. He begins to speak with her sweetly, at first, she does not clearly understand His language and intentions. Then He takes her to the wine cellar and pours her some wine, initially a little. Having enjoyed it she begins to understand His language; yes, she understands His love. Then this lover of hers begins to speak more distinctly, and opens His heart

47 Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 30.

so as she realizes how great His love for her is. Her love too increases. He becomes pleased with her, adorns her with precious ornaments. This is how the affair begins and then it doesn't ever stop.⁴⁸

3.5. Divinization, the Purpose of Revelation and Faith

Syriac fathers conceived that the very aim of the incarnation was the deification of human beings. In his *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem states, "He clothed himself in the likeness of man in order to bring man to the likeness of Himself."⁴⁹ In the theology of the salvation of the Syriac fathers, divinization is seen as the result of a downward movement—'divine descent'—and an upward movement—'human ascent'. God's love for humanity is so great that God took the initiative, in revelation, to bring humanity back to paradise.

The life, activities and writings of Chavara were focused on one and only purpose: the salvation of the soul, primarily his own soul and the souls of others. In his letters, there are instances where his confreres, sisters and lay faithful are instructed and encouraged to strive for salvation.

Chavara's prophetic role and enormous contribution in fighting the Roccas schism are a testimony to his noteworthy zeal for the Church and the salvation of souls. In the book, *Stapaka Pithakkanmar*, it is noted as follows: "If there were not the Ark of Noah during the flood no single human being would have been spared; similarly, if there were not the Prior and this religious community, it is quite reasonable to think that all Syrian churches would have been lost in schism."⁵⁰

48 Cf. Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, trans. Mary Leo, Ernakulam: KCM Press, 1990, 85.

49 Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, II:6-7.

50 *Stapaka Pithakkanmar*, Mannanam, 1995, 28.

3.6. Devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary

Devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary is one of the characteristic features of Syriac theology. Hymns and treatises on Mary are abundant in Syriac writings. Chavara too had a great devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary. Chavara's approach to the Blessed Virgin Mary was one of filial and spontaneous, whom he addresses as 'ente amme'.⁵¹ He spoke eloquently of her glories to others and tried to inculcate in them the true devotion to her.⁵² The most impressive testimony of Chavara's Marian devotion is the foundation of two indigenous religious congregations in her name. Concerning his trust in Mary, he writes, "Till now I have never had to draw the net empty after casting it in the name of our holy Mother."⁵³ About Chavara's filial love and trust in Mother Mary, Fr. Leopold has testified as follows:

His devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was characterized by a genuine filial love. He spoke eloquently of her glories to others and tried to inculcate in them the true devotion to her. Very often when the thought of death came to his mind, he would recall the kindness and mercy of the Blessed Virgin, whom he used to call 'Mother', to overcome fears and temptations associated with the fateful moment.⁵⁴

51 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 250.

52 Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 13-14.

53 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, 55.

54 Lukas Vithuvettickal, ed., *A Short Biography of Blessed Chavara by Fr. Leopold Boccaro*, 13-14.

4. Conclusion

Chavara was a luminary of the Church, and he shines bright with his theological vision founded on the Syriac Christian tradition and he opens new horizons for understanding and interpreting the Christian doctrine and praxis. His theology is permeated with the salient features of the Syriac Christian theological vision, and there are parallels in understanding, experience and expression of it in his life, activities and writings. For Chavara, theologizing was not merely an academic exercise but a sacramental and transformative engagement with divine revelation and faith, grounded in the Sacred Scripture and Tradition. His favorite biblical verse, Psalm 16:5, "Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup" encapsulates his deep trust in God's providence, reflecting the Syriac theological emphasis on God's will and the mystical union between the divine and the human. Chavara's theological outlook was significantly influenced by the socio-cultural and ecclesial context of Kerala, his devotion to the Church, and his deep spiritual life. His writings, including '*Atmanuthapam*' and '*Dhyanasallapangal*', among others, reflect the Syriac Christian tradition's unique characteristics, such as the integration of revelation and faith as mystery (*Raza*), the experiential approach to theology, and the emphasis on biblical and liturgical foundations of theologizing.

Central to Chavara's life and teachings was the exploration of the concept of *theosis* or deification, as the purpose of God's revelation and human response in faith, which facilitates divine-human encounter and effects salvation. His admiration of Blessed Virgin Mary and the affection he shows towards her, the praises he showers on her and his adherence to her intercession are akin to the Syriac traditions, where the Mother of God adorns the first place among the saints. He also heroically practiced the virtues of humility, obedience and forgiveness and gave inspiration and

impetus to the Church today for a holy life and radical following of Jesus. The purpose and resolve of the call and mission of every believer in Christ are the same: radical following of Jesus Christ and being a true and faithful child of the Church to obtain one's own salvation and to invite everyone for the same.

EMBRACING DIVINE LOVE

Eastern Christian Spirituality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara

Annie Noel CMC

1. Introduction

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's significance in Eastern Christian spirituality lies in his reflective teachings on love, prayer, and the pursuit of a virtuous life. He emphasized the inseparable connection between the love of God and the love of neighbour, advocating for a spirituality that transcends individual contemplation to actively engage with and serve the community. Kuriakose Elias Chavara emerges as a beacon of divine love. His spirituality deeply rooted in the mystical tradition of Eastern Christianity, reflects a harmonious blend of contemplation and compassionate service. Through his writings and exemplary life, Chavara continues to inspire individuals to seek a deeper connection with God, practice love and compassion, and engage in selfless service for the betterment of society. This article explores deeply into the teachings of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, with a primary focus on the theme of love within his spiritual viewpoint. To illuminate the profound resonance of his teachings with Eastern spirituality, we turn to St Isaac the Syrian¹, an eminent

1 St Isaac the Syrian, also known as Isaac of Nineveh, was a prominent figure in early Christian monasticism and Eastern Christian spirituality. He lived during the 7th century in present-day Iraq. St. Isaac is renowned for his profound spiritual writings, which explore themes such as the nature of God, the soul's ascent to divine union, and the transformative power of love and humility.

mystic of the East whose insights enrich our understanding of divine love and union with God. In this exploration, we delve into the spiritual legacy of Kuriakose Elias Chavara through the lens of Eastern Christian mysticism, drawing parallels with the timeless wisdom of St Isaac the Syrian.

2. Understanding Divine Love

At the heart of Kuriakose Elias Chavara's spirituality lies a profound recognition of love of God as the cornerstone of the Christian journey. That is, the love of God is the central point of his spirituality. As in Eastern Christian spirituality, he understands the divine love as a lived experience that shapes his spiritual journey. It was the foundation of his relationship with God and the driving force behind his pursuit of holiness and union with the divine. In the depths of his spiritual journey, he came to a profound realization: that God's essence, His very nature, is love. Through his contemplation and personal experience, he understood that God's love knows no bounds, extending infinitely to all beings. Reflecting on this divine truth, he proclaimed, "*ente appan* is most merciful, abounding in love and maintains the compassionate love, which is His very name."² In these words, he encapsulated the essence of his understanding - that God's mercy and love are inseparable, woven into the fabric of His being. For Chavara, God's love was not merely a benevolent attribute but the very essence of His identity. It was a love that surpassed human comprehension, encompassing all beings with its boundless embrace. St Isaac

His writings have had a lasting influence on Christian mysticism and Eastern spirituality.

2 Cf. Z.M., Moozhoor, ed., *Chavarayachente Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vol. III, *Adhyatmikakruthikal*, Mannanam: CMC Prasadhaka Committee, 2014, 17.

the Syrian beautifully articulates this truth, describing God's act of creation and governance as manifestations of divine love. He says, "In love did He bring the world into existence; in love is He going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state, and in love will the world be swallowed up in the great mystery of Him who has performed all these things; in love will the whole course of the governance of creation be finally comprised."³

2.1. God's Unconditional Love and Mercy

Divine love in Eastern Christianity is characterized by its unconditional and selfless nature. It is freely given by God to all creation, regardless of merit or worthiness. This love is not constrained by human limitations or conditions but flows from the overflowing goodness and mercy of God. God is good, and He results everything for us in order to set us on the upright path. There is no end to the good things He gives. But there is an end to every painful thing He allows.⁴ The Scripture says, "I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth" (Jer 9:24). God loves with an everlasting love, and He is continuing His faithfulness to us (Cf. Jer 31:3). The mercy and love of God is the door which is opened (Cf. Rev 4:1) for all to heaven. It is an open door which no one is able to shut (Cf. Rev 3:8). It is a great door (Cf. 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12) and a door of faith (Cf. Acts 14:27) which enables the whole human beings to experience the eternal glory with the Lord.⁵

3 S. P. Brock, tr., *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian) 'The Second Part,' Chapters IV-XLI*, CSCO, Vol. 555, *Scri. Syri.* 225, Lovanii: Peeters, 1995, 38/2, 160.

4 Cf. Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 39/15, 169.

5 Cf. Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 5/4, 7.

God is so merciful that "He pours over us (His) immense grace that, like the ocean, knows no measure."⁶ Contemplating the boundless mercy of God, Kuriakose Elias Chavara also found himself awash in gratitude and wonder. In the depths of his soul, he recognized the infinite grace bestowed upon him by the Lord of mercy. With each passing moment he reflected, 'the Lord of mercy has bestowed on me His choicest graces.'⁷ These gifts, bestowed upon him without reservation or limit, filled his heart with profound joy and gratitude. In the face of such abundant mercy, he couldn't help but marvel at the magnanimity of the divine. In moments of prayer and reflection, he lifted his voice to the heavens, expressing his gratitude in words that echoed with sincerity and reverence. 'O Lord,' he exclaimed, 'Your ocean of mercy unstinted lavished on me, how happy am I!'⁸ These words were not merely an acknowledgment of blessings received but a heartfelt recognition of the sheer magnitude of God's benevolence. For Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the mercy of God was not just a theological concept but a living reality that infused every aspect of his existence. It was a source of comfort in times of trial, a beacon of hope in moments of despair, and a constant reminder of the divine love that encompassed him.

All the actions of God are directed towards the single eternal good.⁹ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, throughout his life, witnessed how all of God's actions were directed towards the single eternal good. Just as the Scripture proclaims, he understood that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him

6 Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 40/13, 177.

7 Cf. Z.M., Moozhoor ed., *Chavarayachente Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vol. II, *Sahithyakruthikal*, *Athmanuthapam*, Mannanam: CMC Prasadhaka Committee, 2014, II:57-58.

8 Cf. *Athmanuthapam*, II: 57-58.

9 Cf. Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 39/3, 163.

and are called according to His purpose (Rom 8:28). He believed that God's actions, whether they brought relief, joy, or grief, were ultimately aimed at our advantage and directed towards the eternal good. He recognized God's compassionate nature, always seeking to lead humanity towards righteousness and salvation. He experienced firsthand God's immense grace, as an ocean without measure, pouring over him and showering him with mercy and love. Through his life and teachings, Chavara exemplified the profound love and mercy of God, inviting others to experience the boundless grace and compassion that he himself had encountered.

In the realm of Eastern Christian teachings, particularly exemplified through the experiences of great mystics, lies a profound understanding of divine protection and providence. It is firmly believed that all individuals are encompassed under the benevolent shield of the merciful God. Isaac the Syrian narrates this care of God:

Often it happens that a man unwittingly travels a road where there lies a wild beast, or murderers, or something of the kind. But the universal providence of God delivers him from injury, either by delaying him on his way for some reason until the dangerous beast has gone off, or by an encounter with someone, to make him turn aside from the road. And again, sometimes a venomous serpent is found lying in the road yet out of sight, but God, not willing to surrender the man to this trial, suddenly makes the serpent hiss and withdraw from the place, or slither out in front of him, and the wayfarer when he sees it is put on his guard, and is saved from it, even though he is undeserving on account of his secret sins, which only he knows; yet God still rescues him, for His mercy's sake. And again, it often happens that a house, or a wall, or a stone is about to fall, and it slips from its place with a splintering sound, but people are found sitting

there, and in His love for men God commands an angel to hold it back, and to keep it from falling until they rise up from thence; or else, under a certain pretext, He leads them out, so that no one is found underneath. But as soon as they go out, He straightway lets it fall. And even if it happens that someone is caught, He works the matter so that they are in no way hurt. By this, God wishes to show the infinite magnitude of His power.¹⁰

God protects and guides us all the time, but we can see this protection better when we keep away from sin and focus on God alone. Chavara also believed this and he emphasized the importance of purifying oneself from sin and focusing solely on God. He saw divine providence as a radiant thread woven into the tapestry of life, particularly evident to those who faced challenges in pursuit of truth. He believed that during trials and tribulations, those who maintained unwavering faith in God experienced His presence more tangibly, finding solace and sustenance in His care. For him, purity of heart and devotion led to a deeper experience of divine favor and guidance. He experienced God's providential care as a constant presence, offering comfort and support to those who walked the path of righteousness. That is, God's providence is most clearly perceived by those who live in accordance with His will, remaining steadfast in faith and devotion even in the face of challenges. He emphasized the importance of purity, devotion, and unwavering faith as pathways to experiencing the intimate care and guidance of divine providence in one's life.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's spiritual journey, much like that of Eastern mystics is marked by a profound realization of the boundless mercy of God. In contemplating the magnificent na-

10 Isaac of Nineveh, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Miller D., tr., *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, Boston: HTM, 1984, 7, 65.

ture of divine mercy, he, too, stands in awe of its incomprehensible depths. He marvels at the vastness of God's forgiveness and mercy. In echoing Isaac the Syrian's sentiments, Chavara finds solace and wonder in the unyielding mercy of the Creator. He acknowledges that like a powerful spring that remains unaffected by a small amount of dust, the mercy of God continues to flow ceaselessly, unaffected by the imperfections and mistakes of His creations.¹¹ This profound understanding permeates his spirituality, shaping his perspective on repentance, forgiveness, and the transformative power of divine love. For him, the mercy of God stands as an immutable force, capable of washing away even the deepest stains of sin and offering redemption to all who earnestly seek it. In this shared experience of divine mercy, he bears witness to the unfathomable depths of God's love for His creation, inspiring others to turn to Him with contrite hearts and unwavering trust in His boundless compassion.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's encounters with the boundless love and mercy of God are beautifully articulated throughout his writings. He teaches that divine love is the source of spiritual nourishment, sustaining and nurturing the soul, leading to spiritual growth. He humbly acknowledged humanity's limitations, comparing it to the simplicity of worms, yet marveling at God's tender care, reminiscent of a mother nourishing her children even in their sleep.¹² His faith in God's constant presence and benevolence was unwavering. He believed that the Lord stood beside him always, eager to fulfill his needs and desires without even needing to be asked.¹³ He found immense joy in God's

11 Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 51, 244.

12 Cf. Leo Mary, tr., *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Vol. IV, The Letters*, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1990, VII/10.

13 Cf. *The Letters*, VII/6; VII/10.

blessings, both worldly and spiritual, declaring that his happiness stemmed from the divine goodness and grace.¹⁴ Moreover, Chavara attributed the growth and success of the Congregation not to human efforts but to the miraculous workings of God, who nurtured it with divine intervention and marvels.¹⁵ He acknowledged that all achievements were not due to his own abilities but rather the work of God's hand, despite feeling unworthy. Through these writings, his experiences of God's boundless love, mercy, and providence resonate profoundly, portraying his unwavering faith and reliance on the divine.

2.2. Eternal and Unchanging Love

In Eastern Christian spirituality, divine love is depicted as timeless and steadfast, never subject to alteration or decay. It existed before time began and will continue for eternity. Unlike human emotions or affections, which may fluctuate or fade over time, God's love remains constant and unwavering. It is a steadfast and enduring force that sustains and upholds the universe. Hence with much affirmation Isaac the Syrian says, "For if it is believed by everyone that the creation came into existence as a result of the Creator's goodness and love, then we know that this original does not ever diminish or change in the Creator's Nature as a result of the disordered course of creation."¹⁶ God is complete in His love, and His love is steadfast in nature. From very eternity this love is same and without change. The Scripture says, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart" (1

14 Cf. *The Letters*, VII/2; VII/7.

15 Cf. *The Letters*, VI/1.

16 Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 38/5, 161.

Kings 8:23). From every eternity God is one and the same and "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases" (Lam 3:22).

The spirituality of Chavara resonates with the eternal and unchanging nature of divine love as described in Eastern Christian spirituality. Just as Isaac the Syrian emphasizes the immutable nature of God's love, his teachings highlight the eternal constancy of God's love for humanity. In his understanding, divine love transcends the limitations of human emotions, persisting unchanged throughout eternity. This steadfast love of God forms the cornerstone of his spiritual foundation. God's love can be experienced as unwavering to those who walk before Him with sincerity and devotion. Chavara could affirm the perpetual nature of God's steadfast love, which endures beyond the confines of time and space. Wrapped in the celestial embrace of divine devotion, his verses resound with the profound conviction that his existence finds purpose and sustenance solely through the boundless love of God, as he eloquently proclaims: 'My love, you are my happiness, how can I live unless you stand by me, you are my breath, you are the drink of life, where can I find comfort except in you.'¹⁷ This poem beautifully encapsulates his deep spirituality, portraying a profound sense of devotion and reliance on a higher power, often interpreted as an expression of love for the divine. In these lines, he poetically articulates his inseparable connection to his beloved, who symbolizes the source of his joy, sustenance, and solace. The opening line, 'My love, you are my happiness,' immediately sets the tone of affection and adoration. Here, 'love' transcends the human realm, embodying the divine presence. This love brings profound joy and fulfillment to Chavara's life, emphasizing the centrality of divine love in his spiritual journey. The subsequent lines, 'how can I live

17 Cf. *Athmanuthapam*, II: 143-144.

unless you stand by me, you are my breath,' further illustrate his dependence on the divine. Just as one cannot survive without breath, he implies that his existence is intertwined with the presence of his beloved. This dependence signifies a deep spiritual connection, where the divine is not just an abstract concept but an essential aspect of his being. 'You are the drink of life' evokes imagery of sustenance and nourishment. Here, Kuriakose Elias Chavara portrays the divine as the source of spiritual nourishment, essential for his sustenance and growth. This imagery resonates with the concept of spiritual nourishment and the idea that divine love is what truly sustains and fulfills the soul. The next line, 'where can I find comfort except in you,' summarizes the essence of his spirituality. It reflects his belief that true comfort and solace can only be found in the divine presence. This line underscores the idea that the ultimate source of peace and contentment lies in a deep and intimate relationship with the divine. That is, Kuriakose Elias Chavara affirms that his existence is upheld by the everlasting and immutable love of God.

3. God's Love Revealed in Jesus Christ

The ultimate revelation of divine love in Eastern Christianity is found in the person of Jesus Christ. The main and only reason for the coming of Jesus on earth is not human sin but divine love. The Scripture says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). For Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Jesus Christ was the epitome of divine love. He understood Christ's life, teachings, death, and resurrection as profound demonstrations of God's love for humanity. He believed that Jesus, as the Incarnation of God, showed the depth of divine love by experiencing human life firsthand and sharing in our joys and sorrows. He viewed Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross and subsequent resurrection as the ultimate expression of God's

love and mercy. He believed that through these events, God demonstrated His willingness to go to extraordinary lengths to reconcile humanity to Himself and to restore harmony between humanity and the entirety of creation. Through the Incarnation, God revealed Himself to human beings to the highest degree. In turn, human beings are called to respond to this revelation of love with their own love for God. It is the result of Incarnation that human beings are able to attain such a state of love when he becomes like God.¹⁸ Isaac the Syrian describes the great privilege of contemplating God and hearing His Voice that human beings got with Incarnation:

The Word Who became man clothed Himself in it, and therewith He spoke to us in our body. Every man who has been clothed with it has truly been made like unto Him Who came down from His own exaltedness, and did the splendour of His majesty, and concealed His glory with humility, lest creation should be utterly consumed by the contemplation of Him. Creation could not look upon Him unless He took a part of it to Himself, and thus conversed with it, and neither could it hear the words of His mouth face to face.¹⁹

Kuriakose Elias Chavara applied these ideas in his life through his deep understanding and personal experience of the significance of the Incarnation and its call for a response of love towards God. He believed that God, in His infinite mercy, chose to reveal Himself fully to humanity through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. In response to this profound revelation of love, he endeavored to cultivate a deep and sincere love for God in his own life. He expressed this love through prayer, devotion, and

18 Cf. H. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, CSS, 175, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2000, 49-50.

19 Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 77, 381.

service to others, as he recognized that responding to God's love involves not only words but also actions. He understood that through the Incarnation, human beings have the potential to attain a state of love and likeness to God and believed that by embracing the teachings and example of Jesus Christ, he can grow in holiness and become more like God in his thoughts, words, and deeds. Hence, he sought to emulate the humility, compassion, and selflessness of Christ in his own life, striving to embody the love of God in all his interactions with others. He cherished the privilege afforded to humanity through the Incarnation, which allows for contemplation of and communication with God. He understood that through Jesus Christ, God condescended to speak to humanity in a language they could understand, reaching out to them with words of truth, grace, and salvation. So he valued prayer and meditation as means of communing with God, seeking to listen to His voice and discern His will in his life.

The crucifixion and death of Jesus was the peak point of the sacrificial love of the Divinity. Incarnation refers to this peak point. When reflecting on this mystery, Isaac the Syrian sees the Cross as the bridge to the peaceful abode and the crown of thorns (Cf. Mt 27:29) as the helmet of salvation (Cf. Eph 6:17). With these delightful thoughts, Isaac the Syrian utters this heart-touching prayer which reflects God's great love:

May the Cross of shame which You mounted for my sake become a bridge to that peaceful abode; may the crown of thorns with which Your head was crowned, become for me the *helmet of salvation* on the heated day of battle; may the spit which Your face received prepare me to have an open face before the tribunal at Your advent; may Your holy body which was exposed on the Cross crucify me to this world and its lusts by means of love for You; may Your clothing

for which lots were cast tear asunder before my eyes the garment of darkness with which I am inwardly clothed; may the water and blood which came forth from You become for me a document granting liberty from the ancient state of servitude; may Your Body and Your Blood which have been mingled with my body remain within me as a pledge that I will not be deprived of the constant sight of You in that realm which has no end.²⁰

Kuriakose Elias Chavara's deep connection with the embracing love of God was nurtured through meditative reflection on Jesus' ultimate sacrifice on the Cross. This contemplation served as a source of spiritual comfort and inspiration, deepening his understanding of divine love and strengthening his faith. He regarded Jesus' journey to Calvary, His crucifixion, and His death with profound reverence and spiritual significance. In his mystical reflection on Jesus' journey to Calvary, he envisions it as a grand procession, the royal journey of the Divine Bridegroom towards the sacred marriage tent, the *kalyāna pantal*. Adorned with a crown of precious diamonds by His mother, Jesus eagerly anticipates the nuptial procession, dressed in resplendent attire and accompanied by joyful melodies and well-decked comrades. Along the way, He is refreshed with sweet drinks, ensuring His strength for the journey. Finally, as the procession reaches Calvary, the sacred mount, the nuptial ceremony climaxes as the Bridegroom enters His bridal chamber, the Cross.²¹ For Kuriakose Elias Chavara, this journey symbolizes not just suffering but a profound act of love and union, where Jesus willingly embraces His destiny for the sake of divine love, ultimately finding union with the Cross in a sacred marriage.

20 Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 5/25, 16.

21 Cf. *Atmanuthapam*, VIII.

4. Paths to Divine Love

Eastern Christian spirituality emphasizes the importance of asceticism, virtuous life, prayer and contemplation as means of experiencing divine love. Through disciplined spiritual practices, one cultivates intimacy with God and open themselves to the transforming power of His love.

4.1. Asceticism

Asceticism, or the practice of self-discipline and self-denial, plays a central role in Eastern Christian spirituality. The Eastern Fathers view asceticism as a means of purifying the soul from sinful passions and attachments that hinder the experience of divine love. By renouncing worldly pleasures and practicing silence and solitude, fasting, vigil, obedience, and other such activities, one creates space in his life for God's grace to work and for divine love to flourish. The ascetic life, characterized by self-denial and detachment from worldly distractions, creates space for the soul to be filled with divine love. If a man in his mind is unbound with the world, Isaac the Syrian considered that as a virtue.²² He says that liberation from the world precedes the bond with God.²³ Abandonment of the world itself is the basement for the experience of love. It is followed by solitude which provides the possibility to converse with God and the constant converse results the experience of love. He illustrates:

From genuine prayer, the love of God is born, for love comes of prayer and prayer from the practice of seclusion. We have need of seclusion that we may have the possibility to converse with God by ourselves. But seclusion is preceded by the abandonment of the world. For, if a man does not first abandon the world and abstain from all therein, he will not be able to dwell in solitude.

22 Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 1/6, 4.

23 Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 1/29, 7.

And again, abandonment of the world is preceded by patient endurance. Patience is preceded by hatred of the world, and hatred of the world is preceded by fear and yearning. ... If the mind has not first acquired patience, a man will be unable to choose a wild and desolate place, bereft of any inhabitants. And if he does not choose for himself a life of seclusion, he will be unable to persevere in prayer. And if he does not constantly converse with God and continue in those deliberations and ruminations which are conjoined to prayer, and in the various forms of prayer's teaching, then he will never gain experience of love.²⁴

Kuriakose Elias Chavara emphasized the importance of detachment from worldly distractions and attachments as a necessary step towards deepening one's relationship with God. He believed that by freeing oneself from the influences of the world, one could create space in their hearts and minds to focus on God's presence and guidance. He viewed the abandonment of worldly concerns and desires as foundational to experiencing divine love. It is his vision that by letting go of worldly pursuits and placing God at the center of one's life, one could open themselves up to the transformative power of God's love. For this, he valued solitude and considered it a means of fostering intimacy with God. He believed that withdrawing from the busyness of the world allowed one to engage in meaningful conversation with God through prayer, reflection, and meditation. In the quietude of solitude, Kuriakose Elias Chavara found that one could experience God's presence more deeply and listen attentively to His voice. He says:

When a soul delights in solitude, Jesus Christ will come to converse with it in solitude and begin communing with it.

24 Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 63, 303-304.

At first you will not understand the language. Then it is that the Lord will lead you to the wine-cellar and pour out some wine for you - a little at first. In course of time you will begin to understand the language. When your spouse sees that you understand His speech, He will speak more and more distinctly and show you the magnitude of His love. Then the bride will love more and the bridegroom will rejoice over it and adorn her with ornaments. Thus commences the divine union.²⁵

Kuriakose Elias Chavara advocated for a life characterized by continuous dialogue with God. He believed that maintaining a constant awareness of God's presence and actively engaging in conversation with Him throughout the day nurtured a vibrant and enduring relationship with the Divine. Through this ongoing communion with God, one could cultivate a deep and abiding experience of divine love. In the spirituality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the journey towards experiencing God's love is intricately linked with the process of detachment from the world, seeking solitude for intimate conversation with God, and fostering a continuous and heartfelt relationship with the Divine. These principles guide one on a path of spiritual growth and transformation, leading to a profound encounter with God's boundless love and grace.

4.2. Virtuous Life

In Eastern Christian spirituality, the importance of living a virtuous life as a means of embracing divine love is foundational. Virtue is seen as essential for spiritual growth and union with God. By cultivating virtues, individuals align themselves with the divine will and open themselves to the transformative power of God's love. Isaac the Syrian says that without attaining perfection in

²⁵ *The Letters*, VII/8.

virtues, no man can acquire purity, which is the requirement for perfect love.²⁶ Chavara also believed that attaining the divine love is intimately connected to the cultivation of virtues in daily life. As individuals cultivate virtues, such as, humility, repentance, compassion, forgiveness, purity of heart and obedience their lives become radiant with the transformative power of divine love, influencing their interactions and relationships. They provide a framework for living a life that is aligned with the teachings of Jesus Christ and reflective of God's love and grace.

4.2.1. Humility

Humility is considered the mother of all other virtues by the Eastern Church Fathers, both Greek and Syriac.²⁷ Kuriakose Elias Chavara, known for his holiness and dedication to serving God and others, exemplified humility in his life and teachings. He understood humility as encompassing love and compassion, reflecting God's own model. He recognized that true humility expresses fervent love and respect towards one's neighbor, seeking their good above one's own interests. He emphasized that humility entails honoring and respecting others, acknowledging their dignity as fellow creations of God. By showing honor and respect, one cultivates gentleness and humbleness, mirroring the attitude of Christ. He believed that by embodying humility, individuals contribute to reconciliation and healing in relationships and communities, fostering unity and peace. He understands humility as an inner virtue that requires genuine love and spiritual insight. It is not merely outward humility but springs from a heart filled with love and understanding of God's

26 Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 34, 157.

27 Cf. T. Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook*, Gythiel A. P., tr., CistSS, 79, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986, 88.

will. He emphasized the importance of meekness and kindness, even towards those who provoke or mistreat us. True humility enables individuals to respond with patience and grace, reflecting the character of Jesus Christ in challenging situations. The life of Chavara teaches that true humility enables individuals to see others through the lens of God's boundless compassion and it involves recognizing the potential for goodness and redemption in every person, regardless of their current moral condition. He understood that those who acquire true humility are blessed, as they are continually drawn close to Jesus' heart. Humility opens the way for a deeper communion with God and participation in His divine love and mercy. Even animals can sense this sort of genuine humility. At the sight of a humble person, their ferocity will calm and they will approach him as he is their own master. Isaac the Syrian asserts:

The humble approaches the beasts of prey and as soon as their eye rests on him, their wildness is tamed and they come to him and accompany him as their master, wagging their tails and licking his hands and his feet. For they smell from him the smell which spread from Adam before his transgression, when the beasts gathered near him and he gave them names, in Paradise - the smell which was taken from us and given back to us anew by Christ through His advent, which made the smell of the human race sweet.²⁸

Kuriakose Elias Chavara professed humility as his fourth vow and was humble in all his words and deeds. He embraced humility as the foundation of all his virtues. He exemplified humility through his acts of service to others. He tirelessly worked

28 Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatises*, Wensinck A. J., tr., *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*, Nieuwe Reeks Deel 23.1, Wiesbaden, 1969, 82/577, 386.

for the welfare of the poor and the marginalized, considering it a privilege to serve those in need. His life was a testament to the belief that true greatness is found in selfless service. Despite his significant contributions to the Church and society, he remained humble and unassuming. He never sought recognition or praise for his works but instead directed all glory to God. His humility was evident in his simple lifestyle and his willingness to embrace the lowliest tasks. He treated everyone with respect and kindness, regardless of their social status or background. He humbly interacted with people from all walks of life, showing compassion and empathy towards their struggles. His gentle demeanor and humility endeared him to many, making him a beloved figure in his community. Humility was a central theme in Chavara's personal prayer and reflection. He constantly sought to cultivate humility in his own heart, recognizing his own limitations and dependence on God's grace. His deep humility was rooted in his profound sense of God's presence and providence in his life. He embraced God's will with humility and trust, even in the face of adversity and suffering. He saw every trial as an opportunity to grow in humility and faith, surrendering himself completely to God's plan for his life. The life and teachings of Kuriakose Elias Chavara exemplify the transformative influence of humility in the spiritual path, enabling him to wholeheartedly embrace divine love.

4.2.2. Repentance

In Eastern Christian spirituality, repentance is seen as the gateway to divine love, as it opens the heart to receive God's grace and mercy. Through sincere repentance, individuals are restored to communion with God and are empowered to live lives characterized by love, humility, and virtue. Central to the concept of repentance in Eastern Christianity is the belief in God's boundless mercy and forgiveness. Repentance has given

to human beings as a grace beyond grace. It is a second birth in God. That of which we have received by Baptism, we receive by means of repentance.²⁹ Isaac the Syrian says, "Repentance is a second grace; it is born in the heart from faith and fear. Fear is the paternal rod which guides us up to the spiritual Eden."³⁰ This world is an ocean, and we have to cross this ocean to reach the divine love. Repentance, which is the ship and fear, the pilot helps us to cross over the sea of this world to God.³¹

The life of Chavara epitomized repentance as he continually sought spiritual purification and renewal. His journey was marked by a profound humility, acknowledging his own shortcomings and sins before God. He embraced repentance not as a one-time event but as a daily practice, recognizing the need for ongoing conversion of heart and mind. His genuine sorrow for past mistakes and steadfast dedication to improvement were clear signs of his contrite spirit. As a man deeply immersed in the mysteries of Christ, he humbly regarded himself as the most ungrateful of creatures, feeling undeserving even of the title of humanity. He referred to himself as a sinner in numerous instances, acknowledging his shortcomings and faults. Moreover, he expressed his unworthiness by describing himself as a great sinner and the most unworthy one, emphasizing his profound sense of inadequacy. He saw himself as the wicked one and devoid of inner light, highlighting his recognition of his own moral frailty. He considered himself the least among others, devoid of abilities, and likened himself to one who is deaf, dumb,

29 Cf. Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 43, 210.

30 Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 43, 210.

31 Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 46, 224-225.

blind, idiotic, and destitute, illustrating his deep humility and self-awareness.³²

Through repentance, he found solace in the mercy of God, fervently seeking reconciliation and communion with the divine. His life serves as a testament to the transformative power of repentance, inspiring others to embrace humility, seek forgiveness, and strive for spiritual growth.

4.2.3. Compassion and Forgiveness

In Eastern Christian spirituality, compassion and forgiveness are deeply rooted in the theological understanding of God's mercy and love for humanity. The concept encompasses both the divine compassion extended to humanity and the call for believers to embody compassion and forgiveness in their own lives. God's boundless compassion and love for humanity is exemplified in the Incarnation of Christ, who enters into human suffering to redeem and reconcile humanity to God. The example of Christ's self-sacrificial love serves as a model for believers to follow, inspiring acts of compassion and forgiveness towards all people, regardless of their actions or beliefs.

As human person is the image and likeness of God, a compassionate heart is the reflection of God's own compassion and mercy. It is God's own love and mercy flowing through human hearts. Isaac the Syrian says: "There is nothing which brings the heart as near to God as mercy."³³ It enflames knowledge in the soul as oil feeds the flame of the torch.³⁴ A person with a merciful heart always shows compassion towards his neighbour and does not venture to repay for the sufferings caused by them. Isaac

32 Cf. *Athmanuthapam*, I:129; III:55; II: 242; VII:162.

33 Hansbury, tr., *St. Isaac of Nineveh on Ascetical Life*, New York: SVS Press, 1989, 4/77, 76.

34 Cf. Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 46, 221.

the Syrian claims: "Merciful is he, who shows his compassion towards his neighbour not only in gifts, but who after hearing or seeing anything that causes suffering to any one, cannot withhold his heart from burning; who, even if he receives a blow on his cheek from his brother, does not venture to repay him even with a word and so cause him to suffer intellectually."³⁵ He has compassion on all without making any distinction.³⁶ It makes him more and more in the likeness of God. His mind as well as his body becomes immerse in spiritual things spontaneously. Isaac the Syrian describes this Gospel way of a merciful man:

And further, a man must not merely with joy suffer injustice as regards his possessions and the rest of the external things which come upon him, but he must also lay down his life for his brother. This is the merciful man, and not he that simply shows mercy to his brother by giving him something. And whoever burns within his heart when he sees or hears of something that grieves his brother, such a one is truly merciful, as is also the man who being slapped by his brother does not act shamelessly and answer abusively, thus grieving his brother's heart.³⁷

The life of Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a living testament to the profound intertwining of compassion and forgiveness. He embodied the essence of mercy by forgiving his debtors, rising above the narrow path of retribution to maintain tranquility and radiance throughout his being. His compassion extended far beyond material possessions, encompassing a willingness to surrender his very life for the sake of others. He understood that true mercy involves not only giving but also enduring

35 Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 4, 30.

36 Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 6, 54.

37 Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 4, 30-31.

injustices with joy, following the Gospel command to give without expecting in return. His compassion, rooted in the likeness of God's own mercy, propelled him to become a healer of souls, offering himself as a living sacrifice for the salvation of others. He approached every individual with a heart full of empathy and understanding, recognizing the inherent dignity of each person as a beloved child of God. His commitment to forgiveness mirrored God's unconditional love, as he extended grace and reconciliation even to those who had wronged him. His life was a testament to the transformative power of forgiveness, demonstrating that true strength lies not in holding onto grudges but in embracing the healing freedom found in pardoning others. His compassion knew no bounds, as he tirelessly worked to alleviate the suffering of the marginalized and oppressed, showing kindness and solidarity to all. Like a true martyr, he implored mercy on the world, sharing in the suffering of all humanity, whether righteous or sinful. His life exemplified Isaac's vision of the merciful man - a deliverer, a soother, a defender, and ultimately, a living martyr for the cause of love and redemption.³⁸ Kuriakose Elias Chavara's compassionate and forgiving nature shines through various instances: he patiently taught Syriac to Philipose, a forty year old seminarian despite challenges, praised the ascetic practices of Antony Kudakachira's monastery despite past conflict, and showed love and sympathy to Antony Thondanad, aiding his return to the Church despite his previous involvement in troubles. Despite facing rejection and humiliation from his own parish, he responded with forgiveness and love. He never harbored ill-feelings and continued to serve and support the parish.³⁹ These examples illustrate his

38 Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 64, 312-314.

39 Cf. T. Panthaplackal, "Blessed Chavara A Brief History," *Journal of St. Thomas Christians*, 16, 1 (2005), 15.

embodiment of the love of God through his service to others, regardless of their circumstances or past actions, showcasing his unwavering commitment to forgiveness and compassion. Kuriakose Elias Chavara found profound comfort and meaning in the embrace of divine love, a journey marked by forgiveness and compassion. Through these virtues, he opened his heart to the transformative power of grace, experiencing spiritual growth and enlightenment.

4.2.4. Purity of Heart

Purity of heart in Eastern Christian spirituality signifies the inner cleanliness and integrity of one's thoughts, desires, and intentions, aligning them with the will of God. Rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ, it involves a constant pursuit of spiritual cleansing through repentance, prayer, and ascetic practices, aiming for freedom from worldly attachments and distractions. This single-minded devotion to God fosters a deep communion with the divine, leading to the transformative experience of union with God. Purity of heart encompasses a holistic transformation of the entire person, guiding individuals towards inner harmony and wholeness as they journey towards the ultimate goal of spiritual perfection. According to the Eastern tradition, the disposition of the constant loving awareness of God is stemming from the purity of heart.⁴⁰ To keep purity in our mind and heart, we need to create hatred towards sin and must ready to uproot the origins of passions from within.⁴¹ Hence Isaac the Syrian warns: "Set every small desire at naught, that you may not ponder upon the vehemence of its burning. For patience, shown for a short time with respect to small matters disperses the danger of great ones.

40 Cf. S.P. Brock, "The Prayer of the Heart in Syriac Tradition," *Sobornost* 4/2 (1982), 141.

41 Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 32, 151-152.

It is impossible to overcome great evils, if you do not subdue with lesser."⁴² As long as we carry evils in ourselves, we shall not be able to perceive their malodour, and if we do not hate them, we cannot smell the stench of their activity. Isaac the Syrian says, "Withdraw from evil, and immediately you will comprehend its malodour. For if you do not withdraw, you will never learn it, nay rather, you will put on its stench like a beautiful fragrance, and you will reckon the nakedness of your shame to be a veil of glory."⁴³

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, characterized by his purity of heart, exemplifies a life liberated from worldly affairs, directing his mind towards God and divine matters. Through an unwavering commitment to purity, he cultivated an increasing love for divine mysteries, recognizing the necessity of detesting sin and eradicating passions within. He understood that withdrawal from evil unveils its foulness, enabling spiritual growth and the bearing of new fruits in Christ. For him, the heart remained the focal point, a vessel for constant awareness of God and contemplation of divine mysteries. This purity of heart not only enabled him to participate in God's purity but also guided him towards perfection. On his deathbed, Kuriakose Elias Chavara expressed gratitude for God's grace, acknowledging that he was able to maintain the purity bestowed upon him through baptism. For him, purity served as the conduit through which he could fully embrace divine love, allowing its transformative essence to permeate every aspect of his being.

4.2.5. Obedience

In Eastern Christian spirituality, obedience is a transformative practice essential for embracing divine love, as it fosters humility,

42 Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 32, 154.

43 Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 32, 152.

trust, and self-emptying. By submitting to the will of God as expressed through spiritual authorities, individuals dismantle barriers of pride and self-centeredness, opening their hearts to receive God's grace more fully. Obedience nurtures trust in the providence and wisdom of God, as individuals learn to rely not on their own understanding but on the guidance of those who are spiritually more advanced. This trust deepens the bond of love between the individual and God, as it reflects a willingness to submit to divine guidance even when it may be difficult or challenging. Furthermore, obedience cultivates a spirit of self-emptying and sacrifice, mirroring the example of Christ who humbled Himself and became obedient unto death on the cross. By imitating Christ's obedience, individuals participate in His self-giving love, which leads to a deeper communion with God and a fuller experience of divine love. In Eastern Christian spirituality, obedience is not merely a matter of external compliance, but a profound spiritual discipline that shapes the heart and soul, enabling individuals to embrace and embody the divine love more fully in their lives. Through humility, trust, and self-emptying, obedience becomes a pathway to union with God, where divine love flows freely and abundantly into the hearts of those who seek it.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara exemplifies the profound connection between obedience and embracing divine love in Eastern Christian spirituality through his life of devotion and submission to the will of God. As a man deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, he understood obedience not as a mere adherence to external rules but as a spiritual discipline aimed at aligning his will with the Divine. Through embracing obedience to his spiritual mentors and superiors, he nurtured humility, trust, and self-emptying, thereby opening himself to the boundless love of God. His steadfast adherence mirrored Christ's obedience

even unto death, illustrating a profound submission to Divine guidance and providence. His commitment to obedience served as a channel for his profound communion with God, allowing divine love to saturate his entire being. As he submitted to the will of God through obedience to his spiritual authorities, he found his path illuminated by the radiant presence of divine love, guiding him ever closer to union with the Divine. His obedience was not merely an obligation but a transformative practice that infused his life with the richness of God's love, leading him on a journey of spiritual growth and fulfillment.

4.2.6. Meditative Reading of the Scripture

In Eastern Christian spirituality, Scripture plays a central and indispensable role in embracing divine love as it serves as a primary source of revelation and guidance for understanding God's nature, His will, and His love for humanity. Through the reading, meditation, and contemplation of Scripture, individuals deepen their understanding of God's love as revealed through the life, teachings, and salvific work of Jesus Christ. Scripture serves as a living word that nourishes the soul, leading individuals into deeper intimacy with God and fostering a personal relationship with Him. Through the study, meditation, and contemplation of Scripture, individuals are invited into a sacred dialogue with God, wherein divine love is encountered and embraced. By immersing oneself in Scripture, individuals cultivate a deeper intimacy with God and a heightened awareness of His abiding love, thereby facilitating a profound embrace of divine love in their lives. Isaac the Syrian asserts: "The reading (of Scripture) manifestly is the fountainhead that gives to prayer - and by these (two things) we are transported in the direction of the love of God whose sweetness is poured out continually in our hearts like honey or a honeycomb, and our souls exult at the taste which the

hidden ministry (of prayer) and the reading (of Scripture) pour into our hearts."⁴⁴

Chavara's embrace of divine Love was deeply rooted in his constant meditative reading of Scripture, a practice he held dear for its transformative power. Through the Scriptures, he found a pathway to keep his mind dwelling continually in heaven, fostering a perpetual conversation with God in every moment. This habit acted as a barrier, blocking the door of his mind against worldly distractions, smoothing his journey towards God with an illuminated path free from darkness. Reflective reading of Scripture ensured purity in his soul, enlightening his prayers and guiding him towards contemplation. For him, making a habit of reading Scripture regularly was like keeping a light shining in his soul. He believed it helped him remember important things, like staying away from things that could lead him away from God, and it also strengthened his connection with God through love and prayer. To him, Scripture was akin to an ocean of spiritual wisdom, its depths holding pearls of meaning that captivated his heart and soul, compelling him to forsake the world's distractions. The enlightenment gained from these mysteries fueled his inclination towards the love of God, leading him to forget worldly concerns and focus solely on understanding and embracing divine love.

In resonance with the traditions of the Eastern Fathers, Kuriakose Elias Chavara's spirituality resonates deeply with the teachings of Scripture. His literary works are imbued with profound biblical allusions and references, showcasing a devout adherence to a Scripture-centered approach to spirituality. Drawing from the rich wellspring of Biblical wisdom, he weaves together theological insights and practical guidance, inviting his

44 Brock, tr., *The Second Part*, 29/5, 131.

followers to engage deeply with the sacred texts as a source of spiritual nourishment and guidance. Through his writings, he underscores the timeless relevance of Scripture in shaping one's spiritual journey and fostering a profound connection with the divine love.

4.3. Prayer and Contemplation

In Eastern Christian spirituality, prayer and contemplation play vital roles in embracing divine love. Through prayer, individuals engage in direct communion with God, expressing their love, gratitude, and desires. This dialogue fosters a deepening of the relationship between the individual and the divine, creating an intimate connection characterized by trust and surrender. Contemplation, on the other hand, involves quieting the mind and opening the heart to receive divine guidance and illumination. Through contemplative practices such as meditation, individuals seek to align their will with the will of God, allowing divine love to permeate every aspect of their being. By cultivating a life of prayer and contemplation, according to Eastern spirituality, individuals can experience the transformative power of divine love, leading to spiritual growth, inner peace, and union with God. Isaac the Syrian says, "From genuine prayer, the love of God is born, for love comes of prayer."⁴⁵ Isaac claims that it is only by constant converse with God, continuous meditations and reflections on things which are conjoined to prayer and by various forms of prayer's teaching that one can attain the experience of love.⁴⁶

Constancy in prayer is an attitude of the soul towards God, which shows her intimacy and nearness with Him. Isaac writes: "Sit before his face at all times, thinking of him and recollecting

45 Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 63, 303.

46 Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 63, 304.

him in your heart. Otherwise, if you only come to see him after a long interval, you will not be able to speak freely with him because of your sense of shame. Freedom of speech is born from constancy; such constancy among men concerns only the things of the body, but with God, it is the attitude of the soul, and the nearness brought about by prayer."⁴⁷ As a swimmer dives into the sea until he finds a pearl, one has to keep constancy in prayer, until he finds in himself the Pearl, Jesus Christ, the love of God.⁴⁸ Constant memory of God generates love in the heart. Constant prayer in the heart is the continuous expression of this love. Contemplation is a highest mystical stage, which leads the soul towards the love of God. In Isaac's view, it is an experience of the departure from this world and participation in the world to come.⁴⁹

Kuriakose Elias Chavara was known for his profound dedication to prayer and contemplation. He emphasized the importance of prayer, meditation and contemplation as ways to experience God's love and deepen one's relationship with Him. For him, prayer was not merely a ritualistic act but a profound conversation with God, where he poured out his heart, expressed his gratitude, and sought divine guidance. Through prayer, he cultivated a deep intimacy with God, nurturing a relationship built on love, trust, and surrender. He engaged in contemplation as a means of deepening his spiritual connection and understanding of God's will. In moments of quiet reflection and meditation, he sought to quiet his mind, allowing space for divine wisdom and illumination to penetrate his soul. Through contemplative practices, he opened himself to receive insights

47 Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 5, 48.

48 Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 48, 231-232.

49 Cf. Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, 226.

and guidance from the divine, leading him closer to the heart of God. Through meditation, he experienced God's mercy and compassion profoundly. He saw Jesus as his Master and Teacher who taught him to pray and to meditate. He addressed Jesus as 'Appa' (Father) in his meditation, symbolizing a close, filial relationship with God.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara was deeply devoted to prayer and contemplation, showing a strong preference for being alone to focus on his spiritual connection. He symbolically portrayed his desire for a solitary union with the divine by likening the act of enclosing his heart within the tabernacle of Jesus.⁵⁰ He listened attentively to the voice of Jesus, whom he considered his beloved spouse.⁵¹ He observes that in prayer and contemplation, love creates an environment where communication flows effortlessly, guided by an inherent wisdom within the heart. Even in moments of uncertainty, when love unites two souls, dialogue flourishes and they are drawn together naturally. In his work 'Colloquies,' the concept of meditation is beautifully expressed as a dialogue with God, a heartfelt conversation between intimate companions united with the divine. He portrays this communion as akin to friends sitting closely together, effortlessly finding endless topics to discuss out of their mutual love. In this profound relationship, words become secondary as the heart itself communicates in its own language. The mere presence of these friends, without the need for verbal exchange, brings comfort and warmth to the soul, illustrating the depth and richness of meditative prayer.⁵²

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a man deeply devoted to contemplation, infused his every moment with prayer and

50 Cf. *The Letters*, VII/9.

51 Cf. *The Letters*, VII/7.

52 Cf. *Colloquies*, 2.

communion with the divine. His spiritual practice was not confined to designated times or places but permeated every aspect of his being, as he saw the sacred in the ordinary and the mundane. Inspired by his commitment to prayer, he entered into a covenant with God, a sacred pact wherein he dedicated every heartbeat, every blink of his eyes, every breath he took, and even the smallest sounds of nature as offerings to the divine.⁵³ This was not merely a superficial gesture but a profound union of his entire being with the works of the Lord. In his view, every aspect of existence was an opportunity for prayerful connection, an avenue through which he could express his devotion and seek divine presence. His prayer life was characterized by a continuous dialogue with the divine. With each breath, he whispered the mantra, "O Lord, do not separate from us until we are one with you,"⁵⁴ a constant invocation of unity and oneness with the divine presence. This mantra was not just a repetition of words but a heartfelt plea for spiritual union, a desire to dissolve the boundaries between himself and the divine until they became one. Through his unwavering commitment to prayer in every movement, he embodied the essence of contemplative spirituality. His life serves as a testament to the transformative power of prayer, reminding us that true communion with the divine is not limited by time or space but can be found in the rhythm of our breath, the beating of our hearts, and the very fabric of existence itself. He writes to the sisters: "Above all learn the art of loving Jesus Christ. Stay constantly in His presence. Walk along with Him. Converse with Him continuously."⁵⁵

53 Cf. *The Letters*, VII/3.

54 *The Letters*, VI/6.

55 *The Letters*, VII/6.

5. Finding Divine Love amidst Trials

In Eastern Christian spirituality, embracing Divine love in trials and sufferings involves surrendering to God through prayer, finding solace in mystical union with Christ, and understanding the redemptive power of the Cross as the ultimate expression of divine love. Individuals cultivate patience, endurance, and compassion, trusting in God's providence and serving others amidst their own struggles. Anchored in the hope of the resurrection, they find strength and transformation, knowing that even in the midst of adversity, God's love sustains and ultimately redeems all suffering, leading to eternal communion with Him. Suffering borne from free will is a manifestation of love. Isaac the Syrian says, "A little trouble for God's sake is more excellent in God's eyes than much service without suffering."⁵⁶ Thus suffering serves as an excellent means to embrace the love of God. God opens His door of mercy, reveals His mysteries and boosts up with His love to those who endure trials and tribulations for His sake.

The experience of feeling abandoned or undergoing spiritual desolation is also serve as a means to embracing divine love in Eastern Christian spirituality by deepening one's reliance on God's grace and fostering a more profound spiritual intimacy. This stage of spiritual darkness prompts individuals to surrender their ego and self-will entirely to God, allowing divine love to fill the void left by the absence of familiar comforts. By embracing the darkness as a sacred space for encounter with the divine, individuals can cultivate a more profound trust in God's providence, leading to a transformative union with divine love that transcends the limitations of human understanding. Thus, the experience of abandonment becomes a path to deeper

56 Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 34, 150.

communion with God, wherein individuals discover that divine love remains steadfast and unwavering, even in the midst of apparent darkness. Isaac the Syrian claims, "Let us not be troubled when we are found in darkness, especially if the cause of it is not in us. But reckon this as the work of God's providence for a reason which He alone knows."⁵⁷

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, embraced divine love during his trials and sufferings through a life dedicated to prayer, service, and complete trust in God's providence. Despite facing numerous challenges, facing physical ailments like rheumatic fever and loss of vision, as well as mental sufferings such as the opposition of his parents to his divine calling, the loss of his family to epidemic, familial pressure to abandon his vocation after the death of his parents and brother, and the threats posed by the schism in the Malabar Church, his faith in divine providence remained unshaken. Despite facing impediments during the construction of the monastery and the risk of losing monasteries to forceful occupation by schismatics, he found refuge in his unwavering trust in God's plan. Through these trials, he maintained steadfastness in his faith, demonstrating resilience and reliance on divine guidance despite overwhelming challenges.⁵⁸ He maintained unwavering faith in divine providence. He found solace and strength in his deep prayer life, relying on God's guidance and grace to navigate difficult situations. His suffering became a source of sanctification and a testament to his trust in God's love and mercy. His firm trust in divine love enabled him to persevere through adversity with humility, patience, and compassion, leaving a profound legacy of faith, holiness, and service to inspire others in their own journeys of embracing

⁵⁷ Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 50, 241.

⁵⁸ Cf. Panthaplackal, "Blessed Chavara A Brief History," 18.

God's love amidst trials and sufferings. His motto 'The Lord is my portion' reflects his unwavering trust in God's providence and his willingness to surrender to God's will even with personal loss and challenges.

6. Compassionate Concern for Others

Eastern Christianity teaches that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, showing compassionate concern for others is not merely a moral duty but also a recognition of the divine presence in each person. By loving and caring for others, individuals honor the image of God within them. Through the Incarnation, God revealed His boundless love for humanity. Compassionate concern for others is seen as participating in this divine love, as individuals are called to imitate Christ's selfless love and compassion for all. It is the contemplation in action. At the same time, it is the fulfillment of the commandment of love.⁵⁹ Isaac the Syrian explains: "I mean the love of God, and what He taught to be the like of this: love unto His image. The possession of the former is the aim of spiritual contemplation; that of the second, of contemplation and practice."⁶⁰ The excellent love of neighbour illumines one's mind by constant contact with and love unto God.⁶¹ Through external deeds one expresses this love openly. It is love in practice.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, known for his deep spirituality and commitment to serving others, shared divine love through compassion and concern for others in various ways. He recognized the importance of education in uplifting society and promoting the dignity of every individual. He initiated to establish schools to provide education, especially to the marginalized and

59 Cf. Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 81, 381.

60 Isaac, *Mystic Treatises*, 81, 381.

61 Cf. Isaac, *The Ascetical Homilies*, 4, 32.

underprivileged sections of society, regardless of caste or creed. Through education, he sought to empower individuals to fulfill their potential and contribute positively to society. He was a strong advocate for the empowerment of women in society. He established religious congregation for women, providing them with opportunities for education and spiritual growth. He was deeply committed to promoting social justice and equality. He spoke out against social evils such as caste discrimination and worked to create a more just and equitable society. He advocated for the rights of the poor and oppressed, providing them with practical assistance and support to improve their lives. As a spiritual leader, Kuriakose Elias Chavara inspired others through his exemplary life of prayer, humility, and service. He lived a simple and austere life, dedicating himself to prayer, contemplation, and the pursuit of holiness. His life of holiness and virtue attracted many followers, who were inspired by his love for God and neighbor. He demonstrated compassion and care for the sick, the elderly, and the marginalized. He personally tended to the sick and suffering, offering them comfort and solace in their time of need. Generally, Kuriakose Elias Chavara shared divine love through his compassionate concern for others, particularly the marginalized and vulnerable members of society. Through these he taught that genuine love for God manifests in acts of service and charity toward others, embodying the selfless love of Christ. He dedicated himself to God through acts of love and service, sharing his divine experiences with others. He saw his actions as expressions of his devotion and understanding of God's will, striving to guide others towards spiritual growth and union with the divine.

7. Conclusion

The spirituality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara, viewed through the lens of Eastern Christian tradition, unveils profound insights

into the essence of divine love, mercy, and providence. Rooted deeply in the mystical tradition of Eastern Christianity, Kuriakose Elias Chavara's teachings resonate with the timeless wisdom of Eastern mystics like St Isaac the Syrian, highlighting love as the cornerstone of the Christian spirituality. His spirituality emphasizes the inseparable connection between the love of God and the love of neighbor. Central to his spiritual journey is the realization of God's unconditional and eternal love, epitomized in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through contemplation on Christ's sacrificial love, he finds inspiration and solace, viewing the crucifixion not as mere suffering but as a grand procession towards union with the divine. His spiritual legacy underscores the transformative power of divine love, nurturing the soul and leading to spiritual growth and fulfillment. Through his writings and exemplary life, Kuriakose Elias Chavara exemplifies the profound impact of experiencing God's boundless love, mercy, and providence, inspiring others to cultivate deep relationships with the divine.

In essence, Kuriakose Elias Chavara emerges as a beacon of divine love, inviting individuals to embrace the transformative power of love, live lives rooted in compassion and service, and journey towards union with the divine. His spirituality offers profound insights into asceticism, virtuous living, and the meditative reading of Scripture as pathways to divine love, guiding individuals towards spiritual renewal and a fuller experience of God's boundless love. Through prayer, contemplation, and compassionate concern for others, his life exemplifies the resilience and transformative power of divine love, reminding us that true fulfillment is found in embracing divine love and the overflowing of divine love as actions towards humanity, echoing the profound spirituality of Eastern Christianity.

EASTERN MYSTICAL PARADIGMS IN KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Rincy Maria CMC

1. Introduction

In various major religious traditions, a central conceptual theme revolves around the imperative of purifying and transforming the individual to facilitate the integration and maturation of one's personality with the divine. While the methods employed for this purification vary across different cultural and religious contexts, a recurring motif is that of an inner and outer journey. Throughout the history of mysticism, it has been widely acknowledged that the mystical path encompasses distinct stages of progression, ultimately leading to heightened levels of consciousness.

A longstanding tradition within mysticism underscores the necessity for the individuals to undergo inner transformation, involving a relinquishment of selfish attitudes and limited ways of relating to the world. Hence, the major religious traditions emphasize the importance of a path focused on purification and transformation to achieve the integration and unification of the individual's personality with the divine. True mystical experiences are characterized by an immediate sense of contact with the transcendent, signifying a profound connection beyond the ordinary realms of existence.

Pseudo-Dionysius, a fifth-century Syrian Monk, is credited with gathering-up the patristic mystical heritage and definitively introducing the word "mystical" into the Christian tradition. Following Gregory of Nyssa in particular, he used the word to

refer to the deeper meaning of scripture and the sacraments, in which God's love is revealed and through which the Christian participates in this mystery.¹ The present article is an attempt to understand and underscore the various dimensions or paradigms of mysticism in Kuriakose Elias Chavara who relentlessly sought the will of God in contemplation and action for the glory of God and the good of the people.

2. Mysticism: A Total Submission to God

Our faith in Christ is a gift of God and a voluntary commitment on our part. Understanding fully the meaning, relevance and the beauty of this faith is our real commitment. This quest is a difficult one, filled with many crises. Its aim is surely not to weaken the faith but to make it a living experience. Mysticism is often regarded as an encounter that transcends the boundaries of religion, intellect, imagination, and the senses. Mystical experiences are deemed the most elevated and purest form of knowledge, and those who embark on the mystical path attain the richness of life by forsaking worldly desires - a realm beyond the grasp of the ordinary people. One of the aims of all religions is the union of the soul with God, which is the highest form of mystical experience. Christian life is much more than a natural human life. A Christian-the saint, according to St Paul, accepts God's invitation and strives to attain the supernatural goal to which human being is elevated and ordained through grace. This acceptance of God's invitation implies the submission of human being's intellect to truths which are beyond discovery by the natural light of reason. It also implies reliance on the superior power that helps him/her to attain the divine distinction. Above

1 J. Welch, "Mysticism", in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Joseph A. Komonchak (chief ed.), Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, 695.

all, the acceptance is a symbol of the total and loving dedication of the whole being of man to that supreme God.²

Kuriakose Elias Chavara exemplified a life fully immersed in and enriched by his faith. He recognized the distinctive role of his family in nurturing his spiritual journey. His connection with God was deeply personal, allowing him to address the divine with an intimate term "Abba", signifying a close, fatherly bond. Naturally, Chavara used the affectionate expression "ente appa" to address God, reflecting a heartfelt and personal connection. As he grew up, Chavara's relationship with God and fellow humans retained a profound sense of maturity and intimacy. His spiritual journey was characterized by a harmonious blend of deep devotion and a close, personal connection with the divine and those around him. The strong and vibrant faith in Christ and deep love towards Him transformed Chavara to a man of divine graciousness.

The 19th century was, in many respects, a period of crisis for the Catholic community of Kerala. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was the man sent by God to help the people tide over the crisis successfully. The secret behind such wonderful achievements was that Chavara was a man of great interiority, living in constant union with God and dedicating his life and activities to His service. On his deathbed, he proclaimed that he had preserved his baptismal innocence throughout his life. History venerates him as a devout servant of God, a contemporary prophet, and a man of unwavering faith with a profound vision. Chavara dedicated himself to the spiritual, social, and cultural well-being of God's people, demonstrating extraordinary courage in confronting the challenges of his era. Like the mystics such as John of the

2 K. C. Chacko, *Lead Kindly Light*, Kakkanad: A Beth Rauma Publication, 2014, 111-112.

Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Catherine of Siena, who encountered the most intimate and sublime ecstasy in their union with God, Kuriakose Elias Chavara experienced this mystical connection in his spiritual journey.

2.1. Mystics: Persons for Others

Mysticism is a profound and unique encounter with the divine reality, a gift freely bestowed by God, leading to a deep sense of union and knowledge. Authentic mysticism invariably engenders a heightened capacity for generous love towards others and is often observed among Christians who devote themselves to prayer and remain attuned to God's presence in their lives. In the perspective of Indian sages, mysticism serves as an experiential and intuitive pathway to access the realm of the ultimate Being. Within the mystical experience, the highest level of knowledge and profound encounter is attained through the pinnacle of intuition, marking it as the foundational and paramount experience.

Understanding Christianity is best achieved through the lives of its notable figures rather than its doctrines and dogmas. The credibility of doctrinal formulations and authoritative declarations within the Church is primarily derived from the character of Jesus Christ. Even when delving into the dynamic and transformative mystical experiences, a more profound grasp is gained through the lives of mystics who have been touched by the divine essence embodied in Jesus Christ, nurtured within the Christian community. Furthermore, a Christian mystic is not someone dwelling in an isolated ivory tower of Christ-consciousness. Christ consciousness, at its core, is inherently focused on others. In Jesus Christ, we encounter a figure who willingly surrendered his own self for the sake of others, ensuring abundant life for all (Jn 10:10). From this standpoint, a Christian

mystic is an individual whose consciousness undergoes a deep and fundamental transformation through Christ-consciousness. Such a mystic continues to dwell in a state of profound awareness of the Divine, effecting change within their own life and contributing to the transformation of others.³

The constant experience of the indwelling presence of the Father not only turned Chavara into a person of profound interiority and helped him to live in continuous mystical union but also to dedicate his life and activities to His service. On his beatification on 8 February 1986 at Kottayam, Kerala, Pope John Paul II said:

The Church throughout the world rejoices with the Church in India as Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara is raised to the rank of the Blessed in the great Communion of Saints. This man advanced to great heights of holiness through his wholehearted cooperation with the grace of God. He possessed an ardent love of God. All his 65 years long earthly life, Blessed Chavara laboured generously for the renewal and enrichment of Christian life and growth of the Church. His deep love of Christ filled him with apostolic zeal, which has helped him in a special way to preserve and strengthen the unity of the Church. With great generosity he collaborated with others, especially his brother priests and religious in the work of salvation.⁴

Theological engagement is deemed incomplete without the essential essence of Mystery, and within this context, mystics are

3 S. Chackalackal, "Holistic Integration of Mystical Aspirations and Social Commitment: Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Nineteenth Century," *Herald of the East* 11, 2 (2015), 182.

4 T. Panthaplackal, *A Pearl Truly Indian*, Ernakulam: The CMI Generalate, 2005, 60.

revered for their role in illuminating profound realities inherent in all Christians. These mystics possess a conscious awareness of the divine love story unfolding within the intricate themes and subplots of their lives. In their mystical encounters, there exists a seamless coordination of both intellect and will, both fervently directed towards God - the ultimate and perfect objective of their endeavours. Mystic contemplation, as observed, serves to deepen the entire personality, imbue character with richness, and foster the development of virtues within the individual. Kuriakose Elias Chavara's writings are replete with such elements, portraying his mystical experiences as a profound connection with both God and humanity. Chavara emerges as a mystical personality wholly devoted to both God and humankind.

2.2. Mysticism: An All-Embracing Experience

According to Underhill, "Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment."⁵ Chavara's life and writings exemplify a seamless integration of mystical aspirations and a deep commitment to societal well-being. The mystical dimension, in his perspective, entails a comprehensive merging of seemingly conflicting aspects within the created world and human constructs. Chavara's writings distinctly echo his mystical core rooted in his profound Christ (*Appa*) experience. He encountered God as the embodiment of love and joy, sustaining him like nourishment and vital as his very breath. Despite the trials and tribulations he encountered while nurturing his communities, his heart rejoiced solely due to the profound awareness of the divine presence within. Reflecting on this experience, he sang:

5 Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, New York: J M Dent & Sons Ltd., 2006, 7.

Severed from you, my God my only good
 What joy, peace, or wellbeing 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 a solace have I save in you!⁶ (Canto ii/141-146).

Central to his vision is the Church's primary mission of disseminating this Christic consciousness. Chavara actively pursued this goal by establishing religious communities, nurturing dedicated and holistic pastors, and conceptualizing transformative projects. What stands out is his inclusive approach, evident in initiatives fostering self-respect and self-reliance. All these endeavours collectively contribute to the continuous establishment of the Kingdom of God within the entirety of creation. A genuine mystic does not establish rigid boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Instead, they embrace a perspective that transcends individual traditions, viewing the mystical realm as an integrative attitude. This holistic perception of reality is nurtured in the enduring awareness of the ultimate consciousness. Practical theology takes on a holistic dimension when it evolves into a more experiential framework. For Christians, the quintessential model for life and mission is found in the embodiment of Jesus of Nazareth. His life is characterized by a seamless integration between his teachings and actions, as well as a dedicated focus on addressing various human needs. This coherence is evident in the way Jesus approached his mission. Similarly, the life of Chavara serves as a vivid illustration of this integrated and holistic vision. In examining his life, one can observe a harmonious blending of

6 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara: Compunction of the Soul, Dirge, Anasthasia's Martyrdom* (CWC), Vol. II, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Chavara, 1989, 10.

various elements, mirroring the unity between his spiritual teachings and his practical engagement with the diverse needs of humanity. Chavara's holistic approach provides a compelling example for those seeking a balanced and comprehensive perspective in theology and practical application. Thomas Kochumuttom precisely puts this idea:

While thinking of the establishment of a religious house their intention, obviously, was to be able to do the many good works for that would otherwise be left undone in the Church and society- it should be a "house built on hilltop (*bes-rauma*)" for all others to look at and be inspired, a 'mirror of virtuous life' (*punnyattinte Kannati*) looking at which all can easily learn what it means to lead a virtuous life, and 'spiritual resort' (*punnya sanketam*) where all are welcome to come and be spiritually refreshed and revitalized.⁷

2.3. Passion for Seeing God

Chavara's spirituality is characterized by an intense yearning to behold God, a longing for the *darśan*, or vision, of the divine. This sentiment is vividly expressed in his *Compunction of Soul*, a lengthy poem spanning 168 lines, wherein he pours out his profound desire to witness the Lord in every aspect of His existence – from every stage of His life to His full glory, beauty, and magnanimity. The refrain that punctuates every other line echoes this fervent longing: *kāṇākeṇam*, ("I long to see you!"). In this book we see:

The Lord of mercy, the Son of God
His glorious splendour, I long to see!
How he stayed for nine months
In the womb of His mother, I long to see!

7 T. Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 23.

Born in her womb, how to Bethlehem he came
 To obey mighty Caesar, I long to see!
 How Jesus, Anna's grand son
 Was hunger-smitten, I long to see
 And with the Phrases discussed law
 In his twelfth year, I long to see!
 The Good Shepherd, seeking his flock
 That had gone astray, I long to see;
 The lord of goodness, proclaiming Himself
 As our loving friend, I long to see!⁸

Chavara's longing stemmed from profound meditative prayer and a profound awareness of the ever-present Divine. The pinnacle of religious experience lies in this yearning to witness the celestial manifestation. The fervent aspiration to behold God revolutionizes one's existence; and upon the fulfilment of this longing through a divine encounter, the beholder deems nothing else of value. Feeling the assurance of being God's cherished child, Chavara found the courage to come back to Him, much like the prodigal son. Embracing the same emotions as the prodigal son, Chavara prays:

Oh, it is a long time since I saw *enṭe appan's* divine face. I squandered all He gave me. Now I am working for an unjust employer, feeding his pigs. I am so famished that I wish I could feed on the food the pigs eat... Further delay is suicidal. So here I am on my feet to return home with my jungle-stick and country cap (*toppi-pāṭa*)... O my soul! Your *appan* is so bounteous as to forgive and forget every act of the ingratitude of yours... Would He not be furious with me, would He even deign to look at me? Can I go into His presence without permission?... How can I approach such

8 CWC II (1989), 17-19.

an august presence and seek forgiveness? ... Still, *enṭe appan* is so generous and full of love that I needn't entertain any fear... Behold, the doors are wide open! There, *enṭe appan* is coming out!... O *enṭe appā!*, I have sinned against heaven and before You... I am not worthy to be called Your son... My heart, however, tells me to call You by no other name than *enṭe appan*... Therefore, *enṭe appā*... forgive me... O *enṭe appā*, I cast myself on my knees before Your throne of mercy...⁹

Chavara possessed a keen perception of the heart, one that remained ever vigilant. In the tapestry of life, whether woven with threads of joy or sorrow, he discerned the hand of God with effortless clarity. Thus, his gaze upon the divine remained steadfast and unbroken, transcending the fluctuations of circumstance.

2.4. Mystics: Persons of the New World

Mystical experience is a kind of pilgrimage. The starting point of this pilgrimage is flight from the world, with attention and a life of silence, so that they may listen to God. They enter the living temple, man's heart, where they encounter the living God. St Ephrem says: "O glorious God who dwells in ineffable silence, you have built for my renewal a tabernacle of love on earth where it is your good pleasure to rest, a temple made of flesh and fashioned with the most holy sanctuary oil. Then you filled it with your presence so that worship might be fulfilled in it, indicating the worship of the eternal persons of your Trinity."¹⁰

Once an individual traverses into the depths of one's own heart, he/she finds himself/herself within a treasure

9 *Colloquies* in CWC III (1990), 4-5.

10 S. Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and Spiritual Life*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987, 349.

house that holds the key to witnessing the celestial riches. The humble discovers the treasures within, and the staircase to heavenly realms is concealed within the chambers of the heart. Sustaining a profound fervour necessitates dwelling within oneself, engaging in introspection, envisioning a new world, and nurturing thoughts and emotions aligned with the aspirations of a renewed existence.

If mysticism may be defined as the experience of a loving knowledge of God, then mystical theology is systematic reflection on that experience. The Eastern Church has never maintained a sharp distinction between the experience and its theory. Experience and doctrine mutually condition one another so that the Eastern theological tradition is essentially a mystical theology. The Fathers of the Church and early writers do not identify spirituality as a discipline distinct from their normal theological endeavours. The mystics are viewed as persons who illumine the deepest realities present in all Christians. The mystery upon which the human rests the centre toward which the soul journeys, is in love with us and desires for us what we most deeply desire ourselves.¹¹ As a man of essential mysticism, Chavara is a practical mystic. The history of the universal Church records that only those men and women who led a life encircled by the Divine Spirit could make remarkable and lasting contributions to the Church in its formative years. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was definitely a social reformer, a brilliant educationalist, a great litterateur, an able administrator, a knowledgeable liturgist, a promoter of inter-religious understanding, an orator and linguist, and above all, a very holy man. He pioneered several new initiatives for the spiritual,

11 J. Welch, "Mystical Theology," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Joseph A. Komonchak (chief ed.), Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991, 693.

religious and social uplift of Kerala society, and in that way was a man ahead of his times.

Standing in the great line of Christian mystics, Kuriakose Elias Chavara had a unique vision of God and humankind. The spirituality of Chavara was a combination of Indian, Eastern/oriental and Carmelite features of mysticism. Rooted in these age-old traditions, Chavara and his companions took to a life of contemplation that led them to intense apostolate.

2.5. Mystical Roots of Kuriakose Elias Chavara

2.5.1. Biblical Root

The primary source of Christian spirituality is the Bible which invites and makes us enter into the mystery of salvation unfolded in it, especially in the person of Jesus the eternal Word and the Son of God become man. Chavara was a religious who was transformed by the divine love and in turn, transformed the society in which he lived with his firm conviction of the gospel values. He fostered a profound filial bond with Jesus, affectionately addressing Him as “ente appa” or “my beloved father.” In contrast to many other spiritual figures who perceive their connection with Jesus in terms of a bride and bridegroom relationship, Chavara was deeply influenced by the parable of the Loving Father (Lk 15:11-32). In this parable, he found resonance with his own spiritual journey, seeing himself as the prodigal son returning to the loving embrace of the all-encompassing father, who he recognized as Jesus himself. This “appa experience” symbolized the culmination of an intimate and lifelong filial relationship that Chavara nurtured with Jesus.¹²

12 S. Chackalackal, “Holistic Integration of Mystical Aspirations and Social Commitment,” 191.

In a scientific study of *Dhyanasallapangal*, the contemplative colloquies of Chavara, by the prominent biblical scholar Paul Kalluveettil, we see Chavara emerges as a figure labelled as a “dynamic hermeneut of the Word,” portraying him as a true disciple of Jesus and an exceptional interpreter. Kalluveettil’s analysis suggests that *Dhyansallapangal* is deeply rooted in biblical principles, with both its thematic content and stylistic presentation drawing inspiration from the Bible. Expanding on his observation, it is evident that Chavara embodies not just dynamism but also a mystical interpretation of scripture. His engagement with the Word of God transcends mere academic pursuit, delving into the realms of spirituality and personal connection. With a profound faith and reverent demeanour, he immerses himself in attentive listening to the Word, and fervently engages in response. This is not a detached study, but a deeply personal communion marked by a mystical aura.

2.5.2. Oriental Root

According to one of the pioneers of Christian mysticism Evagrius Ponticus (ca. 345–399), theology is “knowledge of God gained from first-hand experience. It comes not from books, but from prayer.”¹³ Evagrius respects the value of reading, of study, of reason; he did not doubt the profound value of dogma, liturgy, and ecclesiastical authority. But for him, theology in the strict sense is the “encounter of the praying mind with God.”¹⁴ To those who raise their hearts to God, He comes down to meet them, speak to them and entrust them with certain duties. This call echoes in the depth of one’s heart. To listen to it, one needs to

13 W. Harmless and R. R. Fitzgerald, *The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The Skemmata of Evagrius Ponticus*, *Journal of Theological Studies* 62 (2001), Oxford University Press, 498.

14 Harmless and Fitzgerald, *The Sapphire Light of the Mind*, 498.

descend to the realm of the heart. The Christian spiritual tradition presents the response of human being to the call of God in this manner. The Fathers of the Church, especially the Fathers of the Christian East have encountered this call with great interiority.¹⁵

Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a revered saint of the Syro-Malabar Church, was deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of his native Kerala, India, which indeed have Oriental roots. Here are some aspects of Oriental spirituality that influenced Chavara:

2.5.2.1. Syriac Christian Tradition: Chavara belonged to the Syro-Malabar Church, which traces its origins to the early Christian communities in India. The Syriac Christian tradition, with its rich liturgical and spiritual heritage, deeply influenced Chavara's spirituality. This tradition emphasizes asceticism, prayer, and community life.

2.5.2.2. Syro-Malabar Liturgy: Chavara was immersed in the liturgical practices of the Syro-Malabar Church, which incorporates elements from the East Syrian (Chaldean) liturgical tradition. The liturgy emphasizes the mystical participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, fostering a profound spiritual connection with God.

2.5.2.3. Monastic Influence: Chavara was a founding member of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), a religious congregation rooted in the Oriental monastic tradition. Monasticism has been a significant feature of Oriental Christianity, emphasizing prayer, meditation, and asceticism as means to draw closer to God.

2.5.2.4. Eastern Christian Mysticism: Chavara's spirituality was shaped by the mystical traditions of Eastern Christianity, which include practices such as hesychasm (the practice of inner

15 H. Thottakkara, *The Prayer of the Heart*, Alwaye: Star Publications, 2004, 10.

stillness and contemplative prayer) and the Jesus Prayer. These practices aim at cultivating union with God through prayer and inner purification.

2.5.3. Indian Root

We see the mystical experience of Chavara, which are expressed in his *darsanam*, *vasam*, and *sallapam* by means of which he practiced the Christian spiritual values in the Indian society. The Indian Philosophical systems and Hindu-Indian religious traditions offer a rich tapestry of paths toward liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Among these, three classical paths stand out: *Karma-marga*, *Jnana-marga*, and *Bhakti-marga*. Chavara exemplified the essence of *Karma-yoga*, or *Karma-marga*.¹⁶ This spiritual path involves the pursuit of enlightenment through selfless actions, coupled with devoted worship of God and constant contemplation of transcendent truths. Throughout his life, Chavara embraced this path with sincerity and courage.

Chavara's lifestyle, spiritual practices, and mystical insights closely mirror the fundamental teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita* advocates the path of detached action, emphasizing the performance of duties without attachment to the outcomes. It encourages the individuals to fulfil their responsibilities while relinquishing selfish desires and maintaining equanimity in success or failure.¹⁷ This philosophy promotes a spirituality rooted in active engagement with the world—an ethos that resonates deeply with the life and teachings of Chavara.

16 A. Thottakkara, "Saint Chavara, A Karma-Yogi: A Paradigm of the Mysticism of Active Ministry," Keynote Address in the Workshop on Theological Studies on St Chavara, Kakkanad: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2019, 1.

17 A. Thottakkara, "Saint Chavara, A Karma-Yogi: A Paradigm of the Mysticism of Active Ministry," 4.

2.5.4 Carmelite Root

The spousal mysticism is the principal theme in the writings of Carmelite mystics basically accepted by Chavara. Just as Theresa of Avila and other mystics, Chavara perceived God as the Bridegroom and the soul as the bride. As George A. Maloney puts it, "the mystics surrender themselves in their own unique energies to those of God. A new communion of love is reached as we seek to 'do' not according to our inner words and desires, but according to God's Word. Our impulsiveness and self-centredness which isolate and insulate us, change to active receptivity in our openness to cooperate with the graceful energies of God operating at each moment in each event."¹⁸

Chavara epitomized a man of God, steeped in contemplation and mysticism. His profound intimacy with the Lord mirrored that of his master, Jesus, allowing him to maintain an inner freedom akin to that which Jesus embodied. This freedom empowered him to traverse freely among people, bearing a message of love. In his transcendence, Chavara shed the shackles of attachment – be it to possessions, acclaim, or even the very success of his divine mission. His detachment extended even to his own life, for he was wholly surrendered to the will of God. Such boundless trust in the divine endowed him with a freedom without limits.¹⁹ Often, he would linger in rapturous communion before the Eucharistic Lord, spending extended periods in ecstatic devotion. Through these moments of profound connection, he drew sustenance and guidance, emanating a spiritual presence

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

19 M. Maniampra, *Psycho-Theological Paradigms in Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, (Theological studies on Saint Chavara 3), Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2019, 10.

that touched the lives of those around him. In his *colloquies*, he wrote with much passion: "O My Father (*Ente Appa*), my heart however tells me to call you by no other name than my Father..."²⁰

In his Letter to the sisters, he articulates his inner feelings when he reads about the noble status of the consecrated virgins:

O this is a great blessing! When I read a part of the book, *Monacum Sanctae*, written by Saint Liguori for religious sisters, I was jealous of you. This is true. This is verily true. You are blessed. O queens of my Lord and my God, how great and praise worthy is this state of life you have ascended. Only on the day of judgement you would understand that so many earthly queens have been jealous of your treasures.²¹

In letter, VII/6, Chavara borrows the words of Christ the Bridegroom who has fixed His gaze on His beloved brides who are attracted to the worldly joys and things. He trained early members of the community of sisters to live in the ever-abiding presence of the divine Bridegroom and to keep constant communion and communication:

Ha! Live in the love of Jesus! Remain always in His presence. Walk by His side; converse with him always. When you feel desire, love or attraction towards something, the loving Lord turns towards you and tells you, "Look at me, will that thing make you happier than I will? Is it sorrow or trouble? Then why are you troubled? I can liberate you from your troubles and make you happy. Is it not enough for you? Even for a

20 CWC, vol. III, *Colloquies in Meditation*, 5.

21 CWC, vol. IV: Letters, VII/2, Bangalore, 2020, 124.

moment He is not away from you. He wants you to make you happy and he wants only that you love him.²²

In one of his letters, he wrote: "O Lord, do not be separate from us until we are one with you."²³ He could listen to the footsteps of the Lord who accompany him in his soul. He therefore began to see his project as God's projects. Gratefully and with a sense of unworthiness he recalls how he was wonderfully cared, taught and trained in a good path by the special love of God that accompanied him always.²⁴ He continually experienced God as a loving friend accompanying him. His works were natural expressions and extensions of his intimate God experience and lived mysticism. Mystical experience is the mark of a person who is close to God in sanctity. Chavara's profound connection with Jesus, nurtured through prayer and austere spiritual disciplines, infused every aspect of his being with a divine essence, allowing him to perceive the world through Jesus' eyes. In his actions and responses, there was a constant yearning to align with God's will, characterized by a spirit of servitude and humility. This intimate communion empowered him to extend care, comfort, forgiveness, and ministry to those in need, reflecting the compassion and love of Jesus Himself. In his *Colloquies*, Chavara writes, "In order to grant all my heart's desires, and permitting me to ask without any hesitation for whatever favour I like to have, He deigns to dwell day and night continuously very close to my room."²⁵

The Carmelite tradition in the Christian spirituality lays great emphasis on the virtue and wisdom that can be acquired through the practice of silence. Thus, the ancient rule stipulates:

22 CWC, vol. IV: *Letters*, VII/6, 131.

23 CWC, vol. IV, *Letters*, VII/6.

24 CWC, vol. II, *Atmanuthapam*, 1:130-140.

25 CWC, vol. III: *Colloquies*, 19.

"Each one of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers unless attending to some other duty. The practice of prayer is to be fostered in silence. The mystical intuitive experience is 'a ray of darkness' due to the excess of light. It leads one to mystic silence.²⁶ Chavara was very fond of silence and solitude. He invited the sisters to keep this valuable silence: "If you love reading, you will love solitude. When a soul delights in solitude, Jesus Christ will come to converse with it in solitude and begin communing with it."²⁷

3. Conclusion

Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a man of contemplation and action. The time that he spent in prayer especially before the Blessed Sacrament boosted his life for the action. One can be a mystic in the sense that one is habitually in personal union with the Lord. Chavara's personal union with God kept ever deepening, never diminishing, and this is what qualifies him for the title of a mystic. In meditation, Chavara found unity with God, while in action; he found unity with the poor and underprivileged. His relationship with God filled him with merciful love, reflecting in his amiable, compassionate nature, always available to others. Drawn irresistibly to the Eucharistic Lord, Chavara learned of divine mercy. His humility, contrition, and self-surrender stemmed from the profound belief that he was insignificant before the Lord. Like the prodigal son, he embarked on a journey towards his loving Father.

Chavara indeed exemplifies a profound spiritual perspective, one that sees the hand of God in every aspect of life. Viewing the

26 T. Kadankavil, *Chavara- A Multidimensional Saint*, Kottayam: Deepika Book House, 2014, 192.

27 CWC, vol. IV: Letters, VII/8.

world through the lens of divine providence, he found peace and acceptance in all circumstances, recognizing them as expressions of God's will rather than mere chance or chaos. His deep faith allowed him to maintain equanimity in both joyful and challenging times, knowing that all experiences served a higher purpose ordained by God. This unwavering trust in divine providence not only brought him tranquillity but also empowered him to navigate life with grace and resilience. By surrendering to God's will completely, Chavara cultivated a sense of inner peace that transcended external circumstances. His steadfast belief in the guiding hand of God provided him with a foundation of strength and serenity, enabling him to remain composed and centered amidst life's storms. In emulating Chavara's attitude of acceptance and trust in God's providence, one can strive to cultivate a similar sense of peace and tranquillity in one's own life, regardless of the challenges one may have to face.

EASTERN CHRISTIAN ASCETIC IDEAL OF "MOURNING" (PENTHOS) AND THE ATMANUTHAPAM OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Geo Pallikkunnel CMI

1. Introduction

Asceticism is a transformative path toward the union with the divine both in the East and in the West. Asceticism became a mass movement in the East, especially in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts and its east in the 3rd and 4th century, which we later called monasticism. At the heart of Eastern Christian asceticism lies the profound ideal of "compunction of the heart/soul" – remorse and mourning over the past sins. This concept, deeply rooted in the spiritual and monastic traditions, is one of the important ascetical ideals in the spiritual progress, leading to deep repentance, humility, and a transformative journey toward the Divine. Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871) is a modern ascetic and monk in Kerala, India, in the Thomas Christian (present Syro Malabar) tradition, which is part of the larger East Syriac tradition. Deep repentance and compunction marked his spirituality, and his work *Atmanuthapam*¹ aptly present this theme in a vivid way. In this article, we try to explore the eastern Christian ascetic ideal of "compunction of the heart" and the resulting "mourning" and tears in the desert fathers and Syriac spiritual writers very briefly in order to understand the

1 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, vol. 2, translated by Mary Leo, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1989. Quotations from the *Atmanuthapam* used in this article are taken from this translation.

compunction of the soul in the spirituality of Chavara. First of all, let us understand the concept of mourning in the Eastern Christian ascetical literature briefly and then examine it in the *Atmanuthapam* of Kuriakose Elias Chavara.

2. Terms and Concepts

Compunction (of the heart/soul) is an ascetic ideal in the Eastern Christian spirituality. We here briefly describe the terms used in order to get an idea of their use in the Eastern Christian ascetical literature. The third beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount can be considered the biblical basis of compunction: "Blessed are those who mourn (πενθουντες/ *pen-thou-ntes*), for they shall be comforted" (Mt 5:4).

Penthos (πένθος) is the Greek word (or its derivatives) that the spiritual authors used in their writings to denote compunction. *Penthos* means grief, sorrow (from *pentheo*, means bewail, lament, mourn) etc.² According to the linguists, this word has the same origin/root with the words *pathos* (πάθος), meaning suffering, passion, etc., (though it is not its primary meaning), and *apatheia* (ἀπάθεια) means passionlessness,³ an ascetic ideal in the East. According to I. Hausherr "a synonym, or nearly that, of *penthos* is *catanyxis* (κατάνυξις)."⁴ But this word is more of "that

2 Liddle-Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edition with a revised supplement, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 1360.

3 "It [*apatheia*] is not an attitude of passive indifference and insensibility, still less a condition in which sinning is impossible, but it is on the contrary a state of inner freedom and integration, in which we are no longer under the domination of sinful impulses, and so are capable of genuine love." Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?" in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, Oxford: OUP, 1998, 12.

4 Irénée Hausherr, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East*, translated by Anselm Hufstader, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian

pricking of the heart, or conscience, which acts as a catalyst to repentant thoughts and deeds. It is an essential component of the whole process of mourning for sin, and may be distinguished from *penthos* in that it tends to refer to a particular moment of awakening, the physical sensation of the heart being pricked, whereas mourning is more of a continuous movement."⁵

In the Syriac ascetic literature the common word used for mourning/sorrow is 'abilūtā/abiltā' (ܐܒܝܠܘܬܐ/ܐܒܝܠܬܐ, from the root ܐܒܠ means 'to mourn').⁶ The one who is a mourner is called 'abīlā' (ܐܒܝܠܐ) and in the Syriac tradition such a person is an ascetic or a monk (*iḥidāyā*).

Atmanuthapam is the Malayalam word (from Sanskrit) used by Kuriakose Elias Chavara to denote the compunction of the soul/self, and it is a composite word. *Ātma* is self or soul or even spirit. *Anuthāpam*, which itself is a composite word of *anu* (after, following, under) + *thāpam* (heat) is the word used for repentance or remorse.⁷ *Anuthāpam* is the intense heat emanated from the depth of the self by remorse to the unholiness, i.e., sin.

Penthos/ 'abilūtā/compunction is a necessary practice in the ascetic life. According to Hannah Hunt, it is a process than a state in the spiritual life:

Penthos is a process, not a static condition. It is the remorse of the sinner as much as the charism of the perfected spiritual

Publications, 1982, 7.

5 Hannah Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief: Tears of Contrition in the Writings of the Early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers*, Leiden: Brill, 2004, 16.

6 See, J. Payne-Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1903, 2.

7 See, V.S. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, vol. 1, edited by P.K. Gode and C.G. Karve, revised edition, Poona: Y.G. Joshi, 1957, 88-89, 94.

athlete. In the life of the mourner, godly grief—as opposed to its more secular form—expresses a Trinitarian dynamic. It is prompted by the movement of the Spirit within the heart of the mourner; its living out enables him or her to participate in the sufferings of Christ; it restores the penitent to kinship with the Father.⁸

There is no moving forward to the spiritual perfection without the penitential attitude and the resulting compunction.

3. *Metanoia* and Compunction - Biblical Basis

The concepts of *metanoia* and compunction play a vital role in the narratives of the conversion stories of individuals in the Bible. *Metanoia* and compunction are not two complete different concepts, but at times, they are used interchangeably, though there are subtle differences. Rooted in the Old and New Testaments, these ideas form the foundation for understanding the transformative nature of redemption and the pursuit of a deeper relationship with the divine.

3.1. *Metanoia*: A Change of Mind and Heart

The Greek term *metanoia* (μετάνοια)⁹ in the New Testament, means ‘to change one’s mind,’¹⁰ is often translated as “repentance.” However, it is more than mere remorse or sorrow for sins. *Metanoia* implies a profound shift in one’s thinking and a corresponding change of heart. This biblical term involves turning away from sin and embracing a new direction aligned with God’s will, a complete turn-around to God.

8 Hannah Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief*, 3.

9 See, TDNT 4: 980-89, 999-1006.

10 G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961, 855-858.

The concept of *metanoia* is rooted in the Old Testament,¹¹ where prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah called upon the people to turn away from their sinful ways and return to God. Isaiah 55:7 captures this sentiment: “Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.” Throughout the Bible this turnaround and repentance is portrayed as a pathway to restoration and reconciliation with God. Psalm 51, attributed to David after his sin with Bathsheba, is a heart-breaking expression of repentance. In verse 10, David pleads, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” His plea captures the essence of repentance—a longing for inner transformation and renewed communion with the divine.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist heralds the message of *metanoia* as he prepares the way for the coming of Messiah. In Mathew 3:2, he declares, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This call to *metanoia* sets the stage for Jesus’ ministry, emphasizing the transformative power of a changed mind and heart. First proclamation of Christ (Mt 4:17) is also the same. The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 further illustrates the theme of *metanoia*, which Kuriakose Elias Chavara illustrates also in his *Atmanuthapam*. The wayward son, having squandered his inheritance, returns to his father in humility and remorse. The father’s response reflects the mercy and grace awaiting those who turn back to God. The parable highlights the transformative power of repentance, portraying it not as a burdensome obligation but as a liberating journey back to the Father’s embrace.

11 The Hebrew word *shûb* (means to turn around, return etc.) used in the OT can be considered equivalent to the concept of *metanoia*. See, *TDOT* 14: 461-522.

We understand that repentance is the turning point in the spiritual journey. Repentance, almost same as *metanoia*, involves acknowledging and confessing sins, accompanied by a genuine desire to have a change. It signifies a turning point in the spiritual journey, a deliberate choice to forsake the ways of the world and embrace a life in accordance with God's ways.

3.2. Compunction: Sorrow that Leads to Transformation

Compunction (πένθος),¹² often synonymous with the sorrow related to contrition, refers to a deep sense of remorse and grief for one's sins and often leads to tears. It goes beyond the surface-level guilt, including a heartfelt recognition of the gravity of one's sins. In the biblical context, compunction is an essential component of genuine repentance. According to Bultmann it is the "passionate grief which leads to corresponding action."¹³

The story of King David serves as a vivid example of compunction leading to conversion. After having committed the adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, when confronted by the prophet Nathan (2 Sam 12:1-15), David's heart is pierced with compunction. Psalm 51, attributed to this moment, expresses the depth of his contrition. Verse 17 declares, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." David's compunction becomes a catalyst for repentance and, ultimately, for the restoration of his relationship with God.

The Apostle Peter's journey also exemplifies the transformative power of *metanoia*, repentance, and compunction. Despite his bold declaration of loyalty to Jesus, Peter denies him three times during Jesus' trial. The weight of his betrayal

12 See, TDNT 6: 40-43.

13 TDNT 6: 42.

hits Peter with deep compunction, leading to tears of genuine remorse (Mt 26:75). Later, after the resurrection, Jesus reinstates Peter, asking him three times, "Do you love me?" (Jn 21:15-17). Each time, Peter responds affirmatively, and Jesus commissions him to feed His sheep. Peter's journey from denial to restoration exemplifies the redemptive path of *metanoia*, repentance, and compunction. The Apostle Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, writes about the transformative nature of godly sorrow. In 2 Corinthians 7:10, he states, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." Here, Paul distinguishes between two types of sorrow – worldly sorrow that leads to despair and death, and godly sorrow that results in repentance and salvation.

Compunction, with its emphasis on deep sorrow for sin, challenges the superficiality of remorse and guilt. It calls one to confront the gravity of their transgressions and approach God with a contrite heart. The Apostle Paul's distinction between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow serves as a guide, reminding everyone that a transformative sorrow leads to repentance and salvation.

3.3. Compunction and Tears

Compunction leads to tears. The sinful woman at the feet of Jesus, and Peter after the denial of Jesus are examples from the NT. The Woman with the Alabaster Jar (Lk 7:36-50), an unnamed woman with a sinful reputation approaches Jesus during a meal. Overwhelmed with compunction, she weeps at Jesus' feet, washing them with her tears and anointing them with costly perfume. Jesus acknowledges her genuine repentance, stating, "Your sins are forgiven" (Lk 7:48). This touching moment illustrates how compunction, expressed through tears, opens the door to divine forgiveness and redemption.

Another compelling example is Peter's denial of Jesus during His trial (Mt 26:69-75). As Peter realizes the gravity of his betrayal, he experiences compunction, and the Gospel of Mathew records, "And he went out and wept bitterly" (Mt 26:75). The tradition witnesses that later in his life whenever he heard the cockcrow he wept over his denial of the master. Peter's tears symbolize not only his deep remorse but also the beginning of a transformative journey that leads to his restoration by Jesus after the resurrection.

4. Compunction in the Desert Fathers

Compunction of the heart is a constant theme of discussion in the sayings of the desert fathers (*Apophthegmata Patrum*). According to them compunction and weeping over the sin could be considered a monk's constant occupation.¹⁴ It is the way for an ascetic one to avoid sin and purify his or her heart: "A brother asked Abba Poemen, 'What can I do about my sins?' and the old man said to him, 'Weep interiorly, for both deliverance from faults and the acquisition of virtues are gained through compunction. He also said, 'Weeping is the way that Scripture and our Fathers have handed on to us.'"¹⁵

One can weep only while living in this world. Those who do not weep in this world will weep eternally in the next world:

It was said of him [Abba Arsenius] that he had a hollow in his chest channelled out by the tears which fell from his eyes all his life while he sat at his manual work. When Abba Poemen learned that he was dead, he said weeping, 'Truly

14 Graham Gould, *Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, 129. See the note 97.

15 Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984, 195. Cf. also saying 119 on page 184.

you are blessed, Abba Arsenius, for you wept for yourself in this world! He who does not weep for himself here below will weep eternally hereafter; so it is impossible not to weep, either voluntarily or when compelled through suffering.¹⁶

Compunction is actually a gift from God. "A brother questioned Abba Matoes saying, 'Give me a word.' He said to him, 'Go, and pray God to put compunction in your heart, and give you humility.'"¹⁷ According to Abba Poemen, it is also a spiritual protection: "Compunction has two sides: it is a good work and a good protection."¹⁸ One cannot become a monk without acquiring compunction.¹⁹

According to Evagrius Ponticus, who had a profound influence on later Greek and Syriac spiritual authors, compunction is a predisposition for pure prayer. In his *Chapters on Prayer*, nos. 5-8, he discusses this notion. For example no. 5-6 says: "Pray first for the gift of tears so that by means of sorrow you may soften your native rudeness. Then having confessed your sins to the Lord you will obtain pardon for them. Pray with tears and your request will find a hearing. Nothing so gratifies the Lord as supplication offered in the midst of tears."²⁰ Commenting and summarizing on the Evagrius' discussion on the tears related to pure prayer, Robert E. Sinkewicz says:

16 Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 18.

17 Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 145.

18 Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 172. Cf. also the second saying of Abba Peter the Pionite on page 201.

19 Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 177.

20 Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos, Chapters on Prayer*, translated by John Eudes Bamberger, CSS 4, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981, 56.

Evagrius proposes that the monk pray first for the fundamental disposition of compunction manifested in the gift of tears. Tears thus arise from a profound awareness of one's weakness and sinfulness, together with the acknowledgement of one's dependence on God's forgiveness and gracious assistance. Tearful compunction is then a remedy for the soul's 'wildness,' that is, its propensity to be moved towards anger; further, it instils an attitude of humility that preserves the monk from the dangers of pride and the mental imbalance to which it can lead.²¹

Evagrius differentiates godly sadness and demonic sadness reminding us of the distinction given by St Paul (2 Cor 7:10). "Demonic sadness darkens the soul and may arise either with no apparent cause or from some unusual cause. Godly sadness, in contrast, calls the soul to repentance in tears, reminding it of death and subsequent judgement. The repentance of godly sadness eventually gives way to spiritual joy with its acceptance of death and judgement."²² And Evagrius reminds the ascetics, "Do not forget that you have fallen, even if you have repented, but hold on to the memory of your sin as an occasion of compunction that leads to your humility, so that thus humbled you will by necessity disgorge your pride."²³ Later Greek spiritual writings

21 Robert E. Sinkewicz, tr., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford: OUP, 2003, 186.

22 Introduction in Robert E. Sinkewicz, tr., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford: OUP, 2003, 25. Cf. *Antirrhetikos* 4.74; *Eulogies* 7.

23 *Eulogies* 14. Robert E. Sinkewicz, tr., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford: OUP, 2003, 40.

like *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*²⁴, *Philokalia*²⁵, etc., also treat this subject very elaborately.

5. Compunction on the Way to Perfection in the Syriac Tradition

Repentance and compunction are recurring themes in the Syriac ascetic and spiritual tradition ever since the Proto-monastic²⁶ period. The Proto-monastic tradition of the Syriac East (2-4 c.) was an ascetic movement contemporary (or earlier?) to the Egyptian desert monastic tradition. In Egypt, Antony (+356) was considered the father of monasticism. But in the Syriac tradition, such prominent figures were not known, though Julian Saba²⁷ (+367) was surely one among them who organized monastic community in the Syrian desert. The Syriac father Aphrahat (+345), a senior contemporary of Ephrem the Syrian (+373), was a witness to the proto-monasticism.²⁸ Writings of Ephrem and the ascetic writing *Liber Graduum* (*The Book of Steps*) also dealt with this theme in the 4th century. For example the 18th *memra* of *Liber Graduum* deals on prayer with tears. Later monastic/ascetic

24 For example, the 7th step of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* of John Climacus (+649) exclusively treats this subject.

25 It is a collection of the writings of many spiritual authors and fathers of the Church. See, G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, ed. and tr., *The Philokalia*, 5 vols., London: Faber and Faber, 1979-2020.

26 For a study on the (Proto) Monasticism in the Syriac tradition, see, Shafiq AbouZayd, *Ihdayutha: A Study of the Life of Singleness in the Syrian Orient: From Ignatius of Antioch to Chalcedon 451 A.D.*, Oxford: ARAM Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies, 1993.

27 Joseph Patrich, *Sabas, Leader of Palastinian Monasticism: A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism, Fourth to Seventh Centuries*, Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995.

28 His 6th Demonstration on *Bnay/Bnat Qyama* (Sons/Daughters of the Covenant), an ascetic group in this tradition, is an example.

authors like John the Solitary [of Apamea] (5th C.), Philoxenos of Mabbug (+523), Isaac of Nineveh (+700), Joseph Hazzaya (b. 710), and John Dalyatha (+780) also dealt this theme constantly.

5.1. Compunction and Tears in the Syriac Ascetical Way

Compunction with tears is part of the ascetical way of life and early Syrian monks are not an exception. Theodoret of Cyrrhus (+466) in his *History of the Monks of Syria*²⁹ gives many instances of compunction with tears. For example, he mentions of a monk called Marcianus, who was "glorious in every virtue and always shedding tears of compunction."³⁰ Another monk who lived in the Syrian desert, called Theodotus, "night and day he poured forth tears of compunction."³¹ About Amma Domnina's constant tears, Theodoret Comments: "For it is fervent love for God that begets these tears, firing the mind to divine contemplation, stinging it with pricks and urging it on to migrate from here."³²

In the east of the Syrian deserts bloomed many ascetic and monastic individuals and communities, in Edessa, Nisibis and the East of Euphrates, depicting a clear and distinct ascetical way in the Syriac tradition. Christian asceticism is basically a going away from the corrupted and corrupting world, and do penance for one's own sins and the world. Compunction and tears are part of this penance and the spiritual authors often deal with them for the benefit of other ascetics and monks. For example,

29 See a recent study on this work: Sunil M. Alexander, *The Concept of Ihidāyā in Theodoret's A History of the Monks of Syria: A Study in Comparison with the Ancient Egyptian Monasticism*, Kottayam: OIRSI, 2023.

30 Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, translated by R.M. Price, Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1985, 44.

31 Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 61.

32 Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 187.

Liber Graduum describes the mournful tears of prayer in its 18th *memra*:

There are tears that come from sadness and tears that come from joy. As our Lord said, 'You shall weep and mourn and grieve, and the world will rejoice; but later your tears shall be changed to joy' (Jn 16:20). A person weeps on account of his sins and he [thus] acts well, as it is written, 'Sorrow on account of God is remorse that leads to life' (2 Cor 7:10). There are some who have defeated sin, and have transcended sins and have done good deeds, weeping with joy on account of their love for their Lord who has dealt very kindly with them and has removed them from the servitude of death and made them free because they have lowered themselves and have kept his commandments.³³

Generally in the later early Syriac ascetical and spiritual tradition the way of perfection is divided into three: levels of body (*paḡrānūtā*), soul (*naphšānūtā*) and spirit (*ruhānūtā*). Compunction of the soul can be considered part of the second level, level of the soul. John the Solitary [Apamea] says:

I will begin by speaking about compunction of soul, in which of the three levels it is found. It is not at the level of the body, nor at the level of the spirit. It is not in people at the level of the body because their reflection is evil. It is not at the level of the spirit because joy elevates them above this suffering. But compunction of soul is only /among those at the level of the soul because the one at the level of the body is moved

33 *Liber Graduum* 18.1. *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum [Ktābā d-masqātā]*, translated by Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F.G. Parmentier, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2004, 177.

by the fear of God which leads him to grieve over his deeds; and from sorrow for his sins is born compunction of soul.³⁴

For Isaac of Nineveh also "Tears are to the mind the sure distinction between the bodily and the spiritual state, between the state of apperception and that of purity."³⁵

5.2. Sweet Tears: A Sign of a Burning Heart and Pure Prayer

Compunction and tears of repentance will lead to higher levels spirituality, may be in the Syriac spiritual path of perfection, the level of the spirit (*ruhānūtā*). This is a movement from the attitude of repentance to the humility and wonder emanating from the infinite love and mercy of God. Here, according to Isaac of Nineveh, "a fervent heat burns in the heart and ineffable joy arises in the soul. Further, sweet tears moisten the cheeks; spiritual exultation makes the mind drunk; inexplorable consolations are received by the soul; hope supports the heart and strengthens it. Then it is to him as if he dwelt in heaven..."³⁶ According to Sahadana (Martyrius), "if the commencement of our prayer is wakeful and attentive, and we wet our cheeks with tears which stem from the emotion of our hearts, then our prayer will be made perfect in accordance with God's wish; being without blemish, it will be accepted in his presence, and the Lord will be pleased with us and have delight in our offering."³⁷ This pure prayer is the most delightful offering to God. This type of

34 *John the Solitary on the Soul*, translated by Mary T. Hansbury, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013, 36.

35 *Mystic Treatises of Isaac of Nineveh* [Part I], translated by A.J. Wensinck, Amsterdam: Uitgave der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1923, 164.

36 *Mystic Treatises of Isaac of Nineveh*, 372.

37 Sahadana, *Book of Perfection*, 2.8.20. Translation by Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987, 210-211.

genuine prayer, according to Shimeon d-Taybuthe, "which issues from a pure mind so refines the heart that groans and tears of joy involuntarily flow forth, and the soul stretches itself out towards God. Blessed is that soul which has tasted its sweetness."³⁸ Joseph Hazzaya "On the Stirrings of the Mind in Prayer" says:

Every time they [immaterial impulses consist in the hidden spiritual knowledge] are revealed to the mind during prayer, they give a sweet taste to the mind's palate, like honey-comb, and they kindle all the faculties of both soul and body with their warmth, so that *tears* without measure pour down from a person's eyes whenever these impulses are set in motion in his mind. These are not *tears* stemming from the passions or from sorrow because of wrongdoing, but rattier they arise from joy and delight, and from a sense of wonder at God's creation, His compassion and care for everything - at how His compassion is poured out abundantly over us human beings ... being continuously raised up with Him in an understanding of His mysteries and in the glorious vision of Him.³⁹

Remembering God's greatness, love and mercy, one's mind is stirred and heart is burned, and the prayer in this state is pure and acceptable to God. This is also one of the signs of the Holy Spirit working in you:

The third sign of the working of the Spirit within you consists in the kindness which represents within you the image of God, through which, when your thoughts extend to all people, tears flow from your eyes like fountains of

38 Translation in: Sebastian Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012, 142.

39 Translation in: Sebastian Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition*, 148-149.

water, as if all people were dwelling in your heart, and you affectionately embrace them and kiss them, while you pour your kindness on all.⁴⁰

When one embraces the whole humankind (and the creation) in his heart by the power of the Holy Spirit "goodness and kindness are born in your heart, so that you do not utter anything unkind to anyone, nor does your thought think evil of anyone, but you do good to all people, both in your thought, and in your actions."⁴¹

5.3. Ascetic/Monk as a "Mourner" ('*abīlā*)

In the Syriac tradition, an ascetic/monk (*iḥidāyā*⁴²) is also called a 'mourner' ('*abīlā*) because of his/her constant life in compunction and tears. According to Arthur Vööbus, Syriac monasticism is against laughter of monks, but their basic attitude is sadness and mourning.⁴³ So they are called '*abīlā* (mourner):

He [Ephrem] assures them that this sorrow is the sign of perfection in the Christian life. This is the '*abīlūtā*, in the hymns of Severus called 'the blessed sadness,' according to

40 Abdisho [Joseph] Hazzaya, *Book of Questions*, translated in *Early Christian Mystics*, edited by Alphonse Mingana, Woodbrooke Studies 7, Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1934, 166.

41 *Early Christian Mystics*, 166.

42 The Syriac word *iḥidāyā* (ܝܚܝܕܝܝܐ) means single, only-begotten, solitary, etc. See, J. Payne-Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 191. Christ is the *iḥidāyā*, the Only-Begotten of the Father. Those who follow Christ the solitary single-mindedly are also *iḥidāyē*. Generally ascetics and monastics are known as *iḥidāyē* in the Syriac tradition. The Greek word *monos* (the word *monachos* comes from this root) has the same sense and meaning.

43 Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, vol. 2, CSCO 197, Subsidia 17, Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1960, 281-283.

which the monks were called 'abīlē. In ascetic understanding, this was identified with the genuine symptoms of true piety. Under this 'abīlūtā, the Syrian monks did not understand a mere psychological disposition without concrete outward and physical signs. On the contrary, it was supposed that a genuine fright at the thought of punishment must be so intense that the heart is pierced with such vehemence that the inner pain and affliction find a vehicle in tears ... Sadness and mourning were inseparable connected with weeping.⁴⁴

For example, St Symeon the Stylite was known as the 'chief of the mourners.' The author of the life of St Symeon gave the title of his life as "Heroic Deeds of Mar Symeon, Chief of the Mourners",⁴⁵ though its translator, Frederick Lent, puts it as "The Heroic Deeds of Mar Simeon, the Chief of the Anchorites."⁴⁶

6. *Atmanuthapam* of Kuriakose Elias Chavara

Atmanuthapam is one of the main works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara. This is both a literary and spiritual work in Malayalam, the language of Kerala, India. The exact date of its composition is not known, but it is believed that it was composed during the last years of the author's earthly life at Koonammavu. A part of it was published together with the author's biography by Fr Leopald Beccaro OCD, the spiritual father of Chavara, on the year of Chavara's death in 1871. The title of the work was *The*

44 Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, 2:283.

45 *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, vol. 4, edited by Paul Bedjan, Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1894, 507.

46 Frederick Lent, tr. "The Heroic Deeds of Mar Simeon, the Chief of the Anchorites," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 35 (1915), 111. For a study on the *abīlūtā* of St Symeon, see, Hannah Hunt, *Joy-Bearing Grief*, 171-223.

*Concise Biography of the Saintly Soul who Wrote these Devotional Poems.*⁴⁷

This poetical work has fourteen cantos/chapters. Among these the last two cantos are very short ones. The first two cantos comprise mostly autobiographical illustrations of the author, which contains the materials related to compunction. Chapters 3 to 8 are illustration of the life of Christ, where we see an attitude of a penitent, especially when he illustrates Infant Jesus and the passion of Christ. The Chapters 9 to 13 illustrate the life of Mother Mary from the moment she stood under the Cross till her death, and the last chapter is a concluding prayer to Mary. Mary's life was taken from a Spanish mystic of 17th century, namely, Sr Mary of Jesus Ágreda's, *Mystical City of God*.⁴⁸

7. Compunction in *Atmanuthapam*

The basic attitude of *Atmanuthapam* is "compunction," as the name of this work indicated. The author pours out his heart to the heavenly Father, Jesus Christ and Blessed Virgin Mary, and he does it with a genuine compunction of heart.

7.1. Reasons for Compunction

Compunction and tears are indications of spiritual growth and transformation of the person. It could be considered 'godly grief.' Reasons for this redemptive grief in *Atmanuthapam* is discussed here very shortly.

47 *The Complete Works of Father Chavara* [Malayalam], vol. 2, edited by Z.M. Moozhoor, 3rd Edition, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 2014, xi.

48 For an English translation of the work *Mística Ciudad de Dios, Vida de la Virgen María*, see, Mary Agreda, *Mystical City of God*, 4 vols, translated by Fiscar Marison, Hammond, IN: W.B. Conkey Company, 1902.

7.1.1. Holiness/Greatness of God the Father and His Son Jesus

God's holiness and greatness is one of the reasons for the awareness of human lowliness and sinfulness. In the vision of Isaiah (Is 6:1-7) on heaven where God enthroned and the Seraphs sing thrice "Holy" he was well aware of his own unholiness and lowliness, and uttered: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" The attitude of Chavara is almost the same.

Creator and creation are completely two different levels of being. Almighty God in his loving kindness created him and sustained him. Chavara starts his work mentioning this fact:

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. (1.1-4⁴⁹)

God is "omnipotent" (1.9), "perfect" (1.13), "boundless mercy" (1.12, 29), "Holy Lord" (1.29), "sea of Mercy, mighty depth unfathomed" (1.30), "fount of mercy" (1.33) and "you, my Lord and my God" (1.37). "You [God] created me" (1.18), "granted me a guardian spirit" (1.19), "shield me from dangers" (1.22), "beside me each passing moment to guide and guard me" (1.23-24). "Through your sole mercy" you "send forth your son" and made a covenant with us (2.167-68), and made him our "elder brother" (2.169-72). "You, my loving Father, aware of my lot, draw me close to your beloved Son" (4.201-203). In

49 Citation here as 1.1-4 means Canto/Chapter 1, lines 1 to 4 of *Atmanuthapam*. The English translation (used here) often misses the beauty (and at times meaning) of Chavara's work in its original language.

the presence of this infinite love and greatness, Chavara feels his utter lowliness and sinfulness.

For Chavara Jesus is the "Fount of Mercy" (7.477), "My God, my love, my master" (8.1), "the blessed Bridegroom" (8.105), and "my master, my lord, my king" (8.106). He is the "Son incarnate in Mary's purest womb" (1.72), "God of love and goodness" (1.99), "Lord of Mercy" (2.1), "boundless love" (2.61), "my almighty God, Supreme" (2.62), "You my love, my joy, and my good fortune" (2.143) and how can I live without you, "my very breath, my food, my drink" (2.144-45). He is the "fount of virtue, God of all creation, wedded to kindness eternal, giver of peace," and "a being immortal, infinite great" (2.159-60), became "poorest of poor, a prince of dire poverty in a filthy manger, wrapt in swaddling clothes" (2.201-202). "O God-man, my master, seat of mercy, Lord, look with eyes of pity on me a sinner" (2.241-42). With the awareness of the greatest mercy of God towards him, Chavara is full of gratitude and at the same time remorse for his sinfulness.

7.1.2. Innumerable Blessings Received in Life

Chavara received numerous blessings from God in his childhood, and the very thought of them makes him grateful to God for His greatness and at the same time they are the cause of compunction when he thinks of his ungratefulness to God: "You moulded truly great in your likeness" (1.10), "He gave me a mother, though "frail," but "a sleepless angel, vigilant" etc. (1.25-28), "gave me parents grounded in faith" (1.43), "faith engraved in me" deeply (1.44), "gave me a mother to feed me" (1.45), a mother "to shield me from pain and sorrow and tend me," and "to pour that tender love you filled her with" (1.46-47), a praying mother even in the long hours of night and with milk she filled him with thoughts of heaven and words of grace (1.49-50). God cleansed him through

his grace of baptism (1.33-36), through “your wondrous gifts of mercy and love cleanse my soul and it became holy, spotless and fair” (1.38-39), “through baptismal grace you made me your cherished son” (1.41), “showed me heaven’s joys to tend me grow” (1.42), “he called me back from [filth] and sowed in me a sacred seed of wisdom” (1.114-115), and vocation to priesthood (1.116-140). In Pallipuram, Malpan Thomas Palackal (“leader priest”) received him, “nourishing his soul, he was tutored in paths of virtue, to assist the Holy Mass, gently taught to tread the ways of holiness, to shun all evils that would retard his onward march” (1:135-140). Further blessings he received in the subsequent years and his ungratefulness are remembered in the following chapters of *Atmanuthapam* and asks for forgiveness with a tearful heart. Chavara’s life in the following years up to his death was a marching towards holiness and perfection through the practice of asceticism and charity.

7.1.3. Love of God the Father and the Saviour Jesus Christ

Chavara’s love of God is often found overflowing in most of his works. He addresses and invokes the heavenly Father as “*Ente Appa* [my (dear) father/dad]”, especially in his *Dhyanasallapangal* (Colloquies with the Heavenly Father), which also expresses the remorse to sin and compunction of the heart and deep filial love towards the heavenly Father.

Through these colloquies Chavara expresses the deepest feelings in spiritual life: gratitude to a loving God for all the abundant blessings showered on him and sorrow for the smallest lapses in personal life. His most intimate feelings reveal his childlike innocence. He continuously addresses God and Jesus Christ *Appa* (‘father’), *Ente Appa* (‘my father’), which has the endearing and intimate meaning of ‘father’ reserved exclusively to the children ... Though the soul may be sunk in remorse the

father-son relation lifts it to sublime heights. So his spirituality ever remains lofty, being absolutely free from any feeling of inferiority.⁵⁰

Before his loving heavenly Father, he stands like a prodigal son: "Your boundless love," no other reason [saved me from death] (2.61), "You [are] my love, my joy, my good fortune" (2.143), and "how can I live without you, my very breath, my food, my drink" (2.144-45). Even at times Chavara calls Christ as father: "Alas, my father, my creator, my Lord, in utter shame I bend down my head" (7. 334-35), "like a father, patiently followed my trail, whispered unto my heart 'You are my love'" (7.343-44), but "I pierced your [Christ's] palms, punched you by nails, tore your tender flesh through sin" (7.229-32) and "when I discover I am but a worm, worse even than they, I tremble with fear and woe" (7.349-50). His ardent love for the heavenly father and the Lord Jesus Christ is the reason for his acute remorse and compunction. His ardent desire to see (*darśan*⁵¹) the divine in its various forms comes from this love of God. The third canto of *Atmanuthapam* expresses this passionate longing.

7.1.4. Awareness of One's Own Sinfulness

The fundamental reason for the compunction of heart is one's awareness of the sinfulness of human nature. Generally, all the saints sustained this awareness throughout their lives. Chavara's

50 A. Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 369-370.

51 *Darśan* is more than mere seeing through the external sense of the eye, but seeing through spiritual eye or luminous eye (*ayna shafytha*). Chavara called the first monastery he founded at Mannanam a *darśanaveedu* (house of/for *darśan*). This reminds the ascetics in the *darśanaveedu* that they are called to the higher perfection which is the goal of monastic life.

awareness of his sinfulness is very intense and we experience it right from the beginning of *Atmanuthapam*:

Omnipotent your will, that me a sinner
 You moulded truly great in your likeness
 O God, despite my limitless unworthiness
 You did show in it, your mercy boundless
 Perfect One, it was your Holy Will
 Impeccable, that let me be born on earth
 A human being, me, impoverished you raised
 To the highest skies, Your Abode.
 A worm creeping on the face of the earth
 You created me from dust of dust
 Granted me a guardian spirit so pure
 That I may dwell on earth in grace and ease. (1.9-20)

Chavara confesses that though God created him in His likeness and image and granted a guardian angel, due to "infinite unworthiness" impoverished and became like "a worm creeping on the face of the earth." God's boundless mercy and love even at one's human unworthiness and sinfulness lead his/her to strive for higher perfection in the spiritual life. Remaining parts of this work, especially the first two cantos, are the descriptions of the theme.

From (at the feet of) his mother he learnt the matters of sublime faith (1.53-54) and up to the age of five he was the beloved to God the Father (1.87). But he is remorseful of his following years (before entering the seminary) where he mixed himself with the non-Christians [Pagans]: "I have indulged in deeds of pagan blindness" (1.97-98) and "mingling free with those my dizzy friends" (1.103). So, according to him "when I grew up my fervour dimmed" (2.25), "my infant piety I gently forsook" (2.26), "I thought and spoke unseemly, unholy words

in heedless speech, a profligate life, willowing in vice, plunged in untruth, sore estranged to grace" (2.27-30). He calls himself as "an unrepenting lad I failed to seek heaven's salvage through a contrite heart, a giddy headed lout, woe to me, verily a prodigal son" (2.31-33). These years of living in a non-Christian environment and friends is the main cause of his remorse in the later years and the main reason of compunction in his whole life. Though the baptismal grace that he had received at his baptism was not lost until his death⁵², the minor offences and childhood follies were reasons of continuous 'godly sadness' on his way to perfection, which further led him to pure and transformative prayer and spirit-filled life (*ruhānūtā*).

When Chavara remembers the numerous blessings he received from God and his ungratefulness to Him, Chavara's heart is filled with repentance and with pain and he craves for God's pardon (2.364). He says: "It pains me deep, on my sins to reflect ..." (4.197-98), "When I recall my sins their sole cause, a fear, horrible, also grips my soul" (7.151-152) and as "the prodigal son I am yearning for mercy" (7.218-19). "When I discover I am but a worm, worse even than they, I tremble with fear and woe" (7.349-50), and "to turn an ascetic, I lack the needed strength ..." (7.365-366). The lack of strength was his strength in God to pursue the path of spiritual transformation and thus he became a model ascetic in the Church of modern times.

52 "He could declare before his death that he had never lost the baptismal innocence," wrote his spiritual father, Fr. Leopold Beccaro OCD. Leopold Beccaro, *A Short Biography of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, ed. by Lucas Vithuvattical CMI, Mannanam: Postulation of the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 2003, 17.

7.2. Praying with Tears

Tears may be of repentance with compunction remembering the great mercy of the heavenly father or of joy and happiness in the Spirit, as a symbol of pure prayer. Anyway it is considered the closeness of the person to the Divine in the transformative way to perfection. Many of the confrerers of Chavara witnessed him praying with tears. For example, one such eyewitness is Fr Louis of Manjummel, who testifies: "According to the first Constitutions [of 1863], the duration of the evening meditation was one full hour. Fr Prior [Chavara] spent the whole time on knees, absorbed in ecstasy, continually shedding tears ... During the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament it was a delight for others to watch him lost in contemplation."⁵³

8. Conclusion

Compunction of heart is an ascetic ideal in the ascetic and monastic way of perfection both in the East and in the West. The ascetic and monastic movements were started both in the Egyptian desert and in the Syriac Orient to flee away from the corrupted and corrupting world and to mourn for the sins of the self and of others. Hence, in the Syriac tradition anchorites were called the 'mourners' (*'abîlê*). Kuriakose Elias Chavara is a true ascetic in line with Eastern Christian asceticism. His compunction of heart and tears of repentance reflected in *Atmanuthapam* and in real life as we learn from the witnesses, he could be considered a real ascetic and monk in line with the ascetic and spiritual tradition of the Syriac Orient. Compunction of the heart, one of the significant ascetic ideals of the Eastern Christian spiritual path was the

53 *Positio super Introductione Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio concinnata* (Vatican 1977), 561. Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2017, 227-228.

basic and recurring attitude and theme in the life, prayer, and writings of Chavara. It led him further to the pure prayer, heroic practice of the love of God and charity to his fellow beings, and thus became a true ascetic and monk according to the tradition of the Syriac Orient. The above discussion is only an attempt to comprehend the theme of compunction of the soul in Chavara in line with the Eastern Christian ascetic ideal of *penthos/abīlūtā*, which could open the door to further researches on the topic.

KENOTIC SPIRITUALITY OF KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

Grace Thomas CMC

1. Introduction

The present scenario is increasingly characterized by individualism and ego-centeredness in social as well as religious realms. This is particularly true in this age of globalization and secularization with its marks of market economy and profit-orientation. Pro-existence, inter-personal relationship and altruism¹ are concepts that are being widely used in our times in order to emphasize and promote the need of an authentic and meaningful life in the world. The meaning of human existence as pro-existence is one of the leading thoughts that have a sway in the contemporary theological discussions. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the leading theologians during the period of the Second World War, is generally credited with characterizing Jesus as the 'man for others.'² The life of Jesus involved a radical kenosis and altruism so that his only concern was totally to be for others. Jesus is the embodiment of the ultimate and unconditional love of God, and in him there was no trace of egoism. Christ renounced his divine position and became human so that humans might

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- 1 Altruism is a term used to describe a behavior characterized by acts with no apparent benefit for the individual who performs them but that are beneficial to other individuals. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/altruism>.
 - 2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York: Macmillan Company, 1953, Revised Edition in 1967.

become fully human.³ In this article we delve into the various elements of the kenotic spirituality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara.

As we know the concept of *kenosis*, or the kenotic motif, is a basic tenet of Christian faith. God redeemed humanity by entering creation accepting the limitations inherent in human existence. Kenotic theology expresses a theological understanding of the self-emptying action of God, in Christ, in the incarnation. At times, kenotic theology has met with dogmatic issues. However, new paths have emerged within an understanding of the sovereign freedom in the love of God. This includes an understanding of God as an excess of being, in freedom to love and suffering in Christ and absorbing the suffering of evil. This is the challenge that poses in theologizing the God of the cross.

In the letter to the Hebrews we read the purpose of the coming of Christ into the world, "a body you have prepared for me ... I have come to do your will, O' God" (Heb 10:5-7)⁴. In a similar vein in the gospel according to John we read: "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (Jn 6:38). Similarly during his prayer at Gethsemane Jesus said to his Father: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42).⁵ Thus Jesus showed his readiness to do the will of the Father and committed himself to Father's will. The meaning of

3 See my book Moly Thomas, *Christology in Context: Kenotic Perspectives*, New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 2005, 214.

4 All biblical references are from The Holy Bible, The New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2021.

5 In the book of Psalms also we see the same eagerness of the Son of God to do the will of God "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." Ps 40:7-8.

these passages is clear from what happened on the night when he was betrayed with its climactic statements: "This is my body that is broken for you. And this cup is the new covenant in my blood. ...Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24-25). In Jesus Christ, God has become a God of human beings in a human way. As we have already noted, in the words of Bonhoeffer, Jesus the man-for-others unveils God's pro-existence for human beings. According to Jacques Dupuis, Jesus Christ is the human face of God and in turn, he is the symbol and image of God's personal dealings with the humankind.⁶

The focus and orientation of the entire humanity of Jesus was in terms of his altruism and pro-existence and he commanded his disciples to be at the service of others. "The image of God inscribed in the face of Jesus is that of a God who has freely chosen to empty God's self (*Kenosis*) in self-giving. In Jesus, God has become 'God-of-human-beings- in-a-human-way.'"⁷ According to Pope Francis, the Gospel is the living "book of God's mercy that must be continually read and re-read, that has many blank pages left. It remains an open book that we are called to write in the same style, by the works of mercy we practise. ... St Chavara is one of those who heard the invitation to continue the work of Jesus and to fill the blank pages of the 'incomplete' gospel with love and total commitment."⁸ Today it is our duty to respond to the invitation of the Pope and continue the work of charity sharing in the problems of the people around and helping them. As he announced the year '2025' as the 'Jubilee Year' he requested

6 Jacques Dupuis, *Who Do You Say I Am? Introduction to Christology*, Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994, 170.

7 Joseph Xavier, *Mercy in Practice: Theological Reflections on the Life of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 66.

8 Quoted in Joseph Xavier, *Mercy in Practice*, 66.

us to be the pilgrims of hope where we observe that the signs of hope are becoming meagre around. Chavara was an apostle of hope who committed his life totally and made himself available to all, and hence he became the hope of the hopeless.

2. Total Availability and Dedication

Life becomes meaningful when we live it fully for others. As a true follower of Jesus Christ, Chavara dedicated his life totally and fully for others. His life was both God and man-oriented, a man for the Other and for others, an altruistic person, not only for his own time, but for the people of all ages. His baptismal name 'Kuriakose' in Greek denotes 'one who belongs to the Lord.' Indeed, belonging to the Lord made him a compassionate person. He realized the mercy of God as the ultimate expression of his love. He was a person pertained to the Lord totally and completely so much so that on his death bed he could testify that he never lost his baptismal sanctity of union with God. His belonging to the Lord prompted him to work hard for Christ and for his Church. He was convinced that service to God is rendered through service to humanity.⁹ He experienced the joy of belonging to the Lord. He was an exemplary model of divine intimacy. "Living in constant fellowship with Jesus remains as the fountain spring of the spirituality of Chavara. He ascended every day to the hand of the heavenly Father and descended every day to the needs of the people. He could grow vertically to the

9 Discipleship is an invitation to witness Christ and to serve humanity. As a religious Saint Kuriakose was very much dynamic and sensitive to the surrounding world. "Religious life will continue to have meaning and therefore a future as long as it is directly involved in the critical issues of our time." Inigo, "The Response of Religious to Multi-Faceted Reality of India," CRI National Assembly Report, Chennai, 10-15 January 2000, 123.

presence of God and horizontally to the needs of the people.”¹⁰ This produced enormous energy to transform the world. Being touched by the Divine he could not but dedicate himself to God and his people and to serve them in a totally different manner in accordance with the sublime beauty and love he had experienced. He was an ordinary man with an extraordinary way of spiritual life, who spent long hours in front of the Holy Eucharist, before he could interact with the people, particularly the poor and the needy who came to him. It is to be noted that this is true in the case of everybody who was touched by God. When Holy Virgin Mary received the Word of God she went to the house of Elizabeth to be with her and to serve her (Lk 1:39-40).

Chavara was so grateful to God that every blessing he received from God was an incentive for him to commit himself for his brethren. The altruistic life of Chavara is an example for us to imitate and live our life meaningfully. This is very clear in the words of Archbishop Mathew Kavukatt, “He was a priest who dedicated himself to love and serve the Lord. At the same time, he committed himself totally with the same love, to love and serve humanity.”¹¹ Chavara never projected himself and was always at the background or behind the curtain. His life was an inspiring and edifying story. From the very day he was ordained as a priest he devoted his whole life to God and worked piously for the social, cultural and educational uplift of his fellow beings. He advised and practised: “Days on which you

10 Augustine Mlavarayil, “Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Fruit Bearing Branch of Jesus,” *In Christo* 53 (2015), 61. See also K.C. Chacko, *Lead Kindly Light: A Voyage into the Sainly Life and Vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kakkanad: A Bethrauma Publication, 2014, 17.

11 Augustine Mlavarayil, “Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Fruit Bearing Branch of Jesus,” 61.

have not rendered any good to others will not be reckoned with as days in your book of life."¹²

According to Chavara, spirituality is not being with God alone in the chapel but also reaching out to the needy in their difficulties. As Pope Francis reminded us we should go to the marginalized people, to the periphery, to those who are deprived of everything. He was always ready at the service of the children of God whenever they sought for his help. His charitable mind manifested in various ways and his selfless services were numerous. He was convinced that the aim of evangelization is the total transformation of people and the society. Therefore he started many pioneering apostolates which show his concern for the well-being of others. His contributions in the field of spiritual renewal, education, family apostolate and mass media were motivated by the desire to see growth in others.¹³ He extended his services even to those who were hostile to him. As a pioneer in many revolutionary and progressive activities, he had many enemies during his life time. But he was always kind and considerate to them. He was magnanimous enough to seek out those who tried to hinder his work or to humiliate him and promised all sorts of encouragements and co-operation in all their work. His charitable activities include social welfare, restoration of faith, and salvation of souls.¹⁴ What prompted him to do so was his motto "God is my inheritance." He left

12 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Testament of A Loving Father*, ed., Thomas Panthaplackal, Kakkanad: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2014, n. 13.

13 Joseph Xavier, *Mercy in Practice*, 68-69.

14 Magi Maria, "Challenges of the Social Apostolate as Followers of Blessed Chavara," *Herald of the East*, Vol. VI (2004), 100.

everything, his dear ones and patrimony, and he resolutely held on to this determination till the end of his life.¹⁵

3. A Man of Universal Vision

Chavara's heart was so broad that he forgot himself and his needs, and even neglecting his own health he worked for the welfare of others. According to him, everybody is God's child and we belong to one family. The sense of this universal brotherhood made him work for the good of others. The social reforms and the mission he undertook, in view of the other, were indicative of his intimacy with God.¹⁶ "It is this selfless service and self-gift to others that exalts humankind. Consecrated life has its relevance and worth in this self-sacrificing love. The greatness of consecration is this self-gift and availability."¹⁷ Chavara was a man with a clean heart and pure conscience, and his life was the experience of divine compassion. As the Lord reminds us, "it is more blessed to give than to receive," (Acts 20:35) the leading principle of his life was to give everything whatever he received from God to everybody those who are in need. In the present context, people are interested in amassing wealth and everything for themselves but Chavara was a generous man who gave up everything for others. The Scripture says, "Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with

15 Santhi Rose, "Behold the Man! The Person of Chavara in His Letters," *The Lord of Heaven & Earth: Chavara Studies in Honour of Fr. Lucas Vithuvattickal CMI*, Paul Kalluveetil & Paulachan Kochappilly eds., Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 321.

16 Sebastian Mullooparambil, "The God-Experience of Bl. Chavara," *The Lord of Heaven & Earth: Chavara Studies in Honour of Fr. Lucas Vithuvattickal CMI*, Paul Kalluveetil & Paulachan Kochappilly eds., Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 266.

17 Shanthi Rose, "Behold the Man! The Person of Chavara in His Letters," 320.

the poor" (Prov 22:8). Moreover, the Gospel tells us to give in abundance "take heed what you hear: the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given to you" (Mt 4:14). Therefore he imparted in abundance the gift of divine love and compassion to his brethren without any reserve. At the time of his beatification in February 1986 Pope John Paul II rightly said:

See the innumerable charism and activities came upon from his [Chavara's] dynamic leadership and deep spirituality. Schools, seminaries, printing presses, public awareness centres, religious instruction centres, etc., have all come up from that multifaceted charism. He has compiled and improved the Syro-Malabar Liturgy. He could popularize the devotions to the Holy Eucharist and the Holy Family throughout Kerala. Understanding the importance of the role of families in the Church and society, he exhorted and strengthened the Christian families through his writings and sermons.¹⁸

Chavara was convinced of the fact that our life is a gift from God and it should be freely spent for the good of others. The fulfilment of one's life depends on this conviction. He shared everything he had at his disposal with others. It is sure that he literally practised what Saint John says in his first Letter Chapter 3:18: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

18 Augustine Thottakara, "Saint Chavara, A Karma-Yogi: A Paradigm of the Mysticism of Active Ministry," Keynote Address delivered on the Workshop on Theological Studies on Saint Kuriakose Chavara (29-30 June 2019, CMI Prior General's House, Chavara Hills).

4. Attitude of *Nishkamakarma*

One can be a *karma-yogi* by doing *nishkamakarma*, selfless service to God and humanity.¹⁹ Doing service to others without expecting anything in return is called *nishkamakarma*.²⁰ In other words, it is to do one's duties without attachment, renouncing sense passions, detaching oneself from selfish motives and with an attitude of indifference to the outcome of the actions. It can also be said that doing duties without any desire for the fruits thereof is known as *nishkamakarma*. It is the means for liberation. What is renounced here is not action, but only the attachment to it. Thus *nishkamakarma* is not abstaining from action. But abandonment of selfishness is the essential condition for entering the path of action. A seeker has right only to do his duties and that he should not aspire for the results. This was the spiritual path earnestly and bravely followed by Chavara during his earthly sojourn. He gave credit to God for all his successes and achievements that made him humble and free of attachments. This is the defining mark of a *karma-yogi* which shows his spiritual maturity and it was his personality trait. His attitude was like St John the Baptist who said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). "His deep sense of humility and detachment was unparalleled, as it was clear from the concluding words of the letter of Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation

19 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kakkanad: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2017, 154-155. See also Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 324.

20 This is what Jesus meant as he said, "When you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'we are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" (Lk 17:10). Chavara was such a person who was disinterested or not concerned about the fruits of his actions.

of *Propaganda Fide* dated 15 June 1861."²¹ He recommended Chavara to be consecrated as the auxiliary bishop but his comment was that he might not accept it because he had taken the vow of humility, and even if he had not taken that vow, he would not accept such a character and dignity without a formal command. Service without expecting anything in return was the characteristic mark of Chavara.

4.1. A Man of Concern and Compassion

Chavara was a man with a passion for God and a passion for humanity. This led him to be the pioneer of many innovations in the field of spiritual, educational, and social reforms. His contributions in these areas show his concern for the well-being of others. After the foundation of the Congregation for women he said, "Almighty God, I believe that you allowed me to live so long so that I may be able to see this and feel all the more obliged to you. Greater praise be to you and now forever."²² Chavara was grateful to God for making him an instrument in accomplishing this great event. He stood as a champion for the cause of women, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the marginalized, the poor, the Dalits, etc. His contributions for the liberation of these people were noteworthy. He took pain to bring the 'untouchables' to the mainstream of the society and rendered them opportunities to get educated. The seeds that he sowed in these fields bear lasting fruits even today.²³ He followed Jesus Christ in serving others.

21 Thomas Kochumuttom, "A Contemplative in Action," Paul Kalluveetil and Paulachan Kochappilly, eds., *The Lord of Heaven & Earth: Chavara Studies in Honour of Fr. Lucas Vithuvattickal CMI*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 138.

22 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol. I, *The Chronicles*, trans. P. J. Thomas, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. 1990, 117.

23 Sergius, "Relevance of Blessed Chavara Today," *Herald of the East*, Vol. VI, 3 (2004) 32.

The basis of his ecclesial service was that he willingly submitted himself to become a perfect instrument in the hands of God. Thus he acted and responded being fully available and responsive to the will and plan of God.²⁴ His life was a manifestation of God's love, concern and compassion. He was a father to all and everybody could relate with him easily. In his dealings with the people, he could radiate loving presence of the fatherly figure of God.

4.2. A Servant Leader

Chavara had a clear vision of an ideal superior and in this regard he was indeed ahead of his time. The unity and well-functioning of the community depend much on the superior. The Second Vatican Council restored the concept of service as the major characteristic of leadership in the Church and effected a paradigm shift, away from "triumphalism, clericalism and juridicism."²⁵ The Church was presented by the Council as an instrument of Christ's service. Hence authority in the Church should be understood primarily as service. True authority derives its power from the crucified Lord. Hence any authority is meaningless unless it is supported by the example of the humble, poor, weak and servant Jesus. Moreover, authority must be exercised diaconally as Jesus did, with due respect as between brothers and sisters and not as between lords and subordinates.²⁶ All the leaders must realize the teaching of the

24 Mathew Thenamkalayil, "The 19th Century Kerala Church and the Leadership of Bl. Chavara," *Herald of the East*, Vol. VI (2004), 125.

25 Joseph Comblin, *The Meaning of Mission: Jesus, Christians, and the Wayfaring Church*, translated by John Drury, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977, 69.

26 Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, translated by John W. Diercksmeier, London: SCM Press, 1985, 61.

Lord that greatness is not in the rank or position but in service. He makes it clear that love is the basis of true leadership and it must be issued in service.²⁷ Chavara imbibed the mind of the Council almost a century before. As Pope Francis said, he was a shepherd who had the 'smell of the sheep.' He was well aware that authority was for humble service and he considered himself a servant leader who never acted arrogantly or arbitrarily.

God was the focus and sum of all his activities and his rule was therefore a conscious effort to share the love of Christ more by example than by precept. Holding the position of authority for twenty five years, as Prior and Prior General, he never made his term a burden or infliction on the community. He was always calm and quiet and characterized by a smile that penetrated everybody's heart. He secured the confidence of all by love and kindness.²⁸ He was a concerned, understanding and paternal superior, loved and respected by all. There were many instances of his care and concern towards the subordinates. One of the examples of his tender love for the members is found in sending to the monasteries the special, sweet, delicious mango which he had received from someone. He wanted that this rare variety of mango to be planted in the compound of every monastery and be called 'our memory.' And they complied with the desire of Chavara and the mango was eventually called as '*Prior Manga*'. Similarly he sent the chillies which he had grown in a pot at his window to the sisters in honour of the Mother of God.²⁹ Indeed he was a fruit bearing tree and he was generous enough to share everything with everybody. His love and concern towards the community of sisters he founded in Koonammavu was

27 Moly Thomas, *Christology in Context*, 240.

28 Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 148.

29 CWC, Vol. IV, *The Letters*, trans. Mary Leo, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1990, VII/8, 84.

obvious. As Patriarch Jacob had a greater love for his younger son Benjamin, so also Chavara loved the sisters, and brought them up with special care and protection, providing for all their needs, as a mother takes care of her children.³⁰ He used to address his confreres as *sahodarankal* or *kutappirappukal* (those born of the same womb/mother). In the testament he even calls them as *priyamulla-kunjunkal* (beloved little children). In many of his letters also he addresses them likewise.³¹ He was so much concerned about his spiritual sons and daughters that he was always sensitive to their needs.

4.3. Spirit of Love and Forgiveness

According to Chavara, Christian love is forgiving love. Even though one is doubly insulted, one should not retaliate, but tolerate, forgive and be generous to the offender. His concern for the poor is clearly expressed in the letter he wrote to the people of Kainakari Parish. We can find such expressions in his writings, especially in his last two exhortations – *Nalla Appante Chavarul* (1869) and *Chavarul* (1870). Here he invites his readers to transcend their selves through heroic love and charity.³² He encourages his confreres not only to love but also to help even one's enemies as the expression of Christian charity. He opines that, "even animals are capable of wreaking vengeance on those who cause pain and displeasure to them. To be un-affected by such ill-doings and to forgive them completely is a mark of great strength and prudence."³³ It is important to note that he is able to see the wrongdoers not as enemies, but as persons who need

30 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mumbai: St Paul's Publications, 2014, 78.

31 CWC, Vol. IV, *The Letters*, VII/2, VII/6, VII/7 and VII/11.

32 Joseph Xavier, *Mercy in Practice*, 25-26.

33 CWC, Vol. IV, *The Letters*, X/6, 104.

his support and helping hand. Such an attitude would help the transgressors to recognize their mistakes and, it offers them opportunities to return and be reconciled with dignity. It is more than just forgiving and forgetting. Moreover, here mercy takes the form of empathy that tries to see the other person's perspective.³⁴

In order to love one's enemies one should rise above the natural feelings and love the person from the supernatural perspective of faith and consider all as children of God. Therefore, forgiving love is the real Christian love. He practised this kind of love and wanted his followers also to practise such a love.³⁵ For example, when intruder bishop Roccas decided to return to his country after the excommunication he was greatly in need of some money for his return journey. Then Chavara out of his generosity reached out to help him by providing his travel expenses. He treated him very friendly without having any grudge towards him. He had a special grace to forgive others and he always tried to reconcile with his adversaries. In the same manner, he treated the trouble makers, Fathers Antony Kudakkachira and Antony Thondanat (Audiso). He was very generous towards them and even relieved them from the punishments imposed upon them by the bishop.³⁶

4.4. A Life of Simplicity and Hard Work

A religious who professes the vow of poverty should not refrain from hard work. He/she should not be exempted from the

34 Joseph Xavier, *Mercy in Practice*, 29.

35 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 67-68.

36 Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 175.

universal rule of work, rather should work hard at least for their own livelihood. The first command of the Creator: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Gen 3:19). In the words of Saint Paul, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thes 3:10). Taking the advantage of the hard work of the rest of the community would be an injustice. By refusing to work hard, one turns out to be a parasite in the community. One should also support those members of the community who are unable to work. Hard work is the sign of poverty which the religious should certainly bear in mind. The religious should help the poor around them not merely by distributing what they receive from generous people, but also from the fruits of their own hard work. It is mandatory that the religious should bear the sign of poverty, namely, hard work, and share the lot of the poor people.

The poor have not only to work hard but also to face all the associated ordeals like humiliations, rejections, denial of rights and so on. This was true in the bitter life experiences of the Fathers during their prolonged effort to set up the press. The motivating force behind it was the love for and loyalty to the Church, thereby to strengthen and ensure her wellbeing. They had to work hard for the realization of this project for three long years. For this purpose, they had to undertake difficult and long journeys. It was a tiresome business because those days there were no good roads and comfortable vehicles and communication facilities as today. Sometimes the climatic conditions were also not favourable. In spite of all these adverse factors and even health problems the Fathers undertook frequent journeys to fulfil their goal. Moreover, they had to undergo all sorts of humiliations and embarrassments, they had to take time and be patient, sometimes their faith in God was tested and tried, they had to depend on so many people, and beg for money and sometimes they were rejected and disgraced. However, they did not lose heart or give

up their trust in God or stop seeking help from people. Finally, with God's blessing and the cooperation of generous people they realized their goal.³⁷

5. Identification with the *Kenosis* of Christ

According to Chavara, in order to be conformed to Christ who emptied himself and became poor for our sake, and identified with the suffering humanity, one should live a life of humility. As part of the self-emptying, he has taken humility as the fourth vow. Following the life example of Jesus, Chavara, throughout his life in all his various endeavours, was alert and remained on the right track of redemptive *kenosis*. His holistic understanding of life and ministry took a two-dimensional practical understanding of the commandment of God, namely, love of God and love of neighbour (Mt 22:37-39).³⁸ Two aspects of the self-emptying act of Jesus are suffering leading to the crucifixion and the mystery of the Holy Eucharist.

In the meditations of Chavara, we find a passion for Jesus and the crucifix has a prominent place. He meditated on the crucified Jesus for long hours before the Holy Eucharist with his eyes filled with tears. He considered his own soul as the bride and the crucified Jesus as the spouse in the bridal chamber of Calvary. He always depended on the crucified Jesus in his days of suffering and mental agony. "It is his contemplation on the crucified Jesus that enabled him to find meaning in times of trials and tribulations."³⁹ He could overcome all the troubles

37 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 160-161.

38 Mathew Maniampra, *Psycho-Theological Paradigms in Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore; Dharmaram Publications, 2019, xx.

39 Shanthi Rose, "Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A *Bes Rowma*," 113.

and he was constant in following Jesus in his experiences of self-abandonment. As Jesus became the bread to satiate the hunger of the people, so also Chavara became the source of love and compassion for those whom he met. The Holy Eucharist was his source of strength to serve and work for his people. He was convinced that God's will always be done, and God loves us so much that he cannot remain passive without involving in the lives of his fellow beings.

5.1. Kenotic Experiences in the Life of Chavara

Suffering is part and parcel of the life of every human being. When one accepts sufferings as a participation in the sufferings of Christ, it becomes conducive to his/her salvation and sanctification and partaker with Jesus for the salvation of others. When one accepts suffering with this vision, it becomes an experience of love.⁴⁰ "It is not a question of the person having so many extraordinary experiences of God, but being able to convert every little experience of life into a God-experience. This contemplative character of the person is proved beyond doubt in the face of painful experiences, as it happened in the case of Chavara."⁴¹ He could do it because of his deep God experience and he accepted everything from God with a faith vision.

At a young age in his priestly career, he was affected by rheumatic fever, that was a constant companion of his life till his death. Moreover, during his life time he had to undergo numerous physical illnesses and sufferings. In all his sufferings, bodily as well as mental, emotional, or intellectual, he could recognize the will of God and he submitted himself to it. "He bore his sufferings with manly courage and attitude of a spiritual man.

40 Thomas Panthaplackal, *Kuriakose Elias Chavara: Great Soul of India*, 19.

41 Thomas Kochumuttom, "A contemplative in Action," 136-137.

Hence his sufferings and problems are seen today as precious treasures of gold. The grain of wheat falling to the ground has to die to produce a harvest."⁴² More than the bodily pains what could have affected him most were his mental sufferings. For example, his loving parents stood in the way of his divine call in the beginning, his parents and the only brother died due to the epidemic in the region, the family itself became an orphan by the death of his parents and brother, etc. In this context, his uncles concerned about the family's lineage, took him back from the seminary and strongly advised him to give up priestly studies and take charge of home affairs. At this crisis situation, he turned to the all sufficing God and we find him on knees before the blessed sacrament with full trust in the divine providence and he held on to his motto: "The Lord is my chosen portion" (Ps 16:5) which he had taken as he received tonsure in 1818 from the then Bishop Peter Alcantra of Varapuzha. It implied his detachment from all that is not God. This was the guiding force all throughout his life and it is to be seen as a key to his whole life. Thereby he decided to follow the Lord, accepting the sorrows submitting to the will of God and dedicating repeatedly to the Mother of God.

Chavara had a very humiliating experience from his own parishioners and parish priest, when the traditional official entry to the church after receiving the tonsure was denied due to certain misunderstanding. This was a customary practice of the seminarian visiting home and the home parish - and a solemn reception, in his case, the parish of Chennankari. The parish priest, members of the parish council and the parishioners welcome the seminarian in the parish and thereafter grand

42 Dâis Maria, "If the Grain of Wheat Falling to the Ground Dies...", Elizabeth William & George Zachariah, Editors, *The Legacy of St. Chavara*, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2014, 111.

celebration hosted by the family of the seminarian. But instead of giving him a warm welcome he was refused entry into the parish church. The probable reason behind this rejection was that he went to the seminary without the knowledge and permission of the parish council. The existing custom was that the parish council takes the decision and inform the *Malpan* in charge of the seminary. One who wishes to join the seminary should get the *desakuri*⁴³ or formal approval from the parish *Yogam*. But in the case of Chavara, he was directly recruited to the seminary by Fr Palackal and he forgot to inform this in the parish. All these happened unintentionally, but the parishioners were not happy with it. Chavara was ignorant of it and it was a self-emptying and humiliating experience for him. Those who follow Christ have to face sufferings, humiliations, trials and tribulations (Sirach 2:5). All glory comes from these troublesome experiences.

The relatives were very much angry on the incident, but Brother Kuriakose being a man of God, pacified them and took them to the Holy Cross church at Alappuzha where the ceremony was conducted. Afterwards instead of keeping any grudge towards them he, by his own initiative visited the parish priest of Chennankari, stayed with him and had meals with him. Later on he donated to this parish church a beautiful statue of St

43 The recommendation of the *yogam* or the parish assembly of the local representatives and the local clergy. Usually, it is the parish assembly that selects the candidate for the priesthood and they had also certain responsibilities during the period of training in the seminary, e.g., to meet the expenses of his studies. But in the case of Kuriakose it was met by Fr Palackal. The candidate also had certain rights, i.e., to get a share of the *pasaram*, after he had received the sacred orders. Kuriakose had difficulties to get this share may be because he was not promoted by the parish *yogam*. See Mathias Mundadan, Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara, 54.

Joseph, which he received as a gift from Europe.⁴⁴ More than that he decided to go to that parish for the parish feast every year and deliver the sermon and he fulfilled it until his death. In his life he never mentioned about this rejection experience. Moreover, he considered the parishioners as his own people, and addressed his parting message called 'Testament of a Loving Father' to the members of Kainakary parish, which was originally part of Chennankari.⁴⁵

Another incident was at the time of his ordination which was decided to take place sometime around the feast of the Holy Cross on 14 September 1829. Deacon Chavara and other deacons of the vicariate with their *Malpans* arrived at Varapuzha for the ceremony. But displeased with the quarrel between the *Anjoottikkar* (Five-hundreds) and *Ehzunoottikkar* (Seven-hundreds) Bishop Mauritius Stabilini, cancelled all the programmes and decided to return to Rome. So the ordination was cancelled. One can easily understand the mental and spiritual agony he had undergone during this period. Later the ordination was conducted on 29 November 1829 in Arthunkal parish.⁴⁶ He might have had so much distress on this occasion of the indefinite postponement of his ordination for which he had come from a distant place with all the preparations. But there was no indication of any complaint from his part. All of them cooperated with their *Malpans* wholeheartedly and pacified the prelate and resolved the crisis in an edifying manner.

44 Thomas Kochumuttom, "Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Man of God's Thoughts," *Herald of the East: Dharmaram Journal of Chavara Studies*, Vol. 10, 1 (2014) 49-50.

45 Thomas Kochumuttom, "Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Man of God's Thoughts," 50.

46 Thomas Kochumuttom, "Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Man of God's Thoughts," 51.

5.2. A Man of Humility and Detachment

Chavara was a man of many eminent qualities both inborn and cultivated, of both mind and heart. Being born in a noble family of exemplary parents he inherited so many natural virtues like goodness, piety, righteousness, uprightness, integrity, honesty, probity, decency, etc. As Fr Kuriakose Porukara commented, Chavara from his childhood onwards excelled in humility, pleasing manners, modesty, piety, intelligence and eloquence and he was loved by both God and people.⁴⁷ He was a shining example of the virtue of humility, which is not a discounting of reality but a confession that all glory and honour are due only to God Almighty. In order to be conformed to Christ who emptied himself (Phil 2:5-8), and became poor for our sake (2 Cor 8:9), and identified himself with the suffering humankind, one should live a life of humility.⁴⁸ As part of the self-emptying he has taken humility as the fourth vow and he dedicated himself to God as an *agathi*⁴⁹ and he was determined that there should not be anyone more humble than himself. His confessor and spiritual director Fr Leopold says: "It is more proper to say about Fr Chavara that he did these virtuous things more by his sanctity and good example than by his advice and authority. He

47 Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 449.

48 Thomas Kadankavil, *Chavara: A Multidimensional Saint*, Kottayam: Deepika Book House, 201.

49 It literally means 'having no means to live.' The religious vow of poverty means to have no possessions of one's own so that for anything and everything one depends on God's providence and the people's charity. That is to renounce freely the right of private property and surrender the right of ownership of all things of monetary value. Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 139.

commanded the obedience and respect others by himself being humble, charitable and obedient to his superiors."⁵⁰

Chavara was never influenced by any worldly attractions of praise, prestige, position, name and fame. He was a man of profound humility, assuming always a low profile, self-effacing and never showy or presumptuous. He never sought for any position or dignity in the Church and in the congregation. He adhered to this all throughout his life.⁵¹ Fr Leopold who had high appreciation for his God-fearing habits, detachment from the world, and the spirit of service, said: "He was detached from all disorderly affections for earthly things and persons, which was all the more true in the last days of his life."⁵² According to Chavara, asceticism was a means to get closer to God. Through penance and sacrifice he tried to attain a complete obliteration of self-centredness and freedom to serve only the Divine Master. "This was his life style – a life of detachment, freeing the soul from everything that could come between itself and God, a life style contrary to the modern way of total self-centredness."⁵³

5.3. Humiliating Experiences

There were many instances in the life of Chavara illustrating his deep sense and practice of humility. He was one of the three students who were sent to the Latin seminary to study Latin language. But being Syrians they were denied permission to sit in the same class with the Latin Rite students and therefore he

50 Valerian Plathottam, *The First Indian Saint: Blessed Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Revised New Edition, Mannanam: Sanjos Books, 43.

51 Mathias Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 464-465.

52 Leopold Beccaro, *A Short Biography of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, translated from Malayalam and re-printed by the Postulation of the Cause of Bl. Chavara, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Monastery, 2003, 8.

53 Shanthi Rose, "Kuriakose Elias Chavara: A Bes Rowma," 111.

was brought back to Pallippuram. It was an incident of disgrace, waste of time and money, and it caused the three students even to forget the Syriac language they had learned. But he gracefully accepted the humiliation, and did not keep any ill feeling towards anybody involved in it. Likewise "he bore with equanimity the rejection at the hands of the people in the press at Kottayam where he went twice to see and learn the workings of a printing press."⁵⁴ As we have already noted when he was appointed as the vicar general for the Syrian community of the vicariate of Varapuzha, the archbishop had to order him under obedience that he would accept the position. It was indeed the highest position a Syrian of that time could achieve. Thus he became the first among the Syrians to be officially in the church's administration, in those troubled days of Roccas schism and he did his duties perfectly well to the satisfaction of all including the Holy See; and even Pope Pius X sent a personal letter of appreciation to him. However, it is surprising to note that he never mentions or signs any of the documents with the title of vicar general.⁵⁵

Another occasion of proving his humility was the practice of obedience as a sure means of discerning the will of God as well as the only mark of consecrated life. In his testament he states: "The significant mark of a true religious is total negation of their self-will and perfect obedience as though he had no eyes nor ears of his own. One who possesses such virtue is a true religious."⁵⁶ Chavara and all the founding fathers practised

54 Thomas Kochumuttom, "A Contemplative in Action," 137.

55 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 222.

56 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Vol. IV, The Letters*, Rev. Lucas Vithuvattical CMI & Chev. K.C. Chacko, eds., Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1990, 70.

this kind of obedience and according to them "an order from the local ordinary is God's will, which, therefore, should unconditionally be obeyed." He narrated some of the events that hurt his feelings when he was humiliated by the authorities. Monsgr. Francis Xavier, the successor of Bishop Aurelius, was not in favour of the activities of the three fathers and the plan of religious community because he was misled by some of the priests. The Bishop assigned them with new responsibilities that really affected their future plans.⁵⁷ Chavara was transferred from Mannanam to Pallipuram during the construction of the monastery at Mannanam and Fr Porukara, the backbone of the whole project was transferred to Kayamkulam as the parish priest. It was a great blow to their future plans. Chavara approached the archbishop and humbly explained the matter and begged to reconsider the order of transfer, but the archbishop was not willing to accept. Then he obeyed it without any hesitation.⁵⁸ "To submit without a word of protest to the will of God, how much Fr Chavara must have suffered, how much sacrifice he must have made!"⁵⁹ For him it was sure that often the will of God is given through human agents and he was confident that he belonged to the Lord and that he was only an instrument in the hands of the Lord to execute it. He trusted in the Lord and the Lord offered his servant an opportune time to continue the work.⁶⁰

57 Jose Eroorickal, *Mystical Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 177.

58 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 223-224.

59 Dais Maria, "If the Grain of Wheat Falling to the Ground Dies...", 110.

60 George Kaniarakath, "'The Lord is My Portion' (Ps 119:57): A Key to the Spirituality of Bl. Chavara," *The Lord of Heaven and Earth: Chavara Studies in Honour of Fr. Lucas Vithuvattickal CMI*, Paul Kalluveetil &

Once when the archbishop reproached him severely for no fault of his own; he did not protest, but graciously accepted the accusation as a paternal correction and was grateful to the prelate for not punishing him. Likewise there were many incidents which thoroughly tested and proved the spirit of obedience and humility of Chavara and the founding fathers. They had to wait patiently almost 25 years for the canonical approval of the congregation. After the formation of the Mannanam community, although it had all the requirements of the canonical approval, they had to wait long indefinitely for the approval without any apparent reason.

It was not an easy task and it was a hard time of stress and strain for Chavara. "On several occasions and in several ways he requested the bishops for it [canonical approval]".⁶¹ In 1850 according to the direction of Archbishop Martini he submitted to him a petition but there was no response. Again in 1855, Chavara presented to Archbishop Bernardine the rule of life practised in Mannanam. Instead of giving them approval the archbishop imposed on the community the Carmelite rule without much change. The way of life and spirituality they had spontaneously developed were ignored. Chavara presented to the archbishop their observations and request for adaptations of rules to their reasonable needs and honoured traditions but he mercilessly refused everything. As a mediator between the community and the archbishop, Chavara had to suffer a lot. All the proposals were rejected, he was humiliated and questioned by the archbishop. It was a self-emptying experience for him. The Congregation had to put on a habit that was not originally

Paulachan Kochappilly, eds., Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 256.

61 Leopold Beccaro of St. Joseph, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 8f.

designed for them.⁶² Moreover, by affiliating the Congregation to the Carmelite Order, as their Third Order, the Prior, Chavara, lost his authority. When the Congregation juridically came under the Superior General of the Discalced Carmelites, even the founders of the Congregation lost their identity, privileges, and autonomy. The Superior General of the first Order became the legitimate authority who governed the Congregation through his delegate. Many of the members of his religious family were quite unhappy about this change of authority. However, Chavara as a man of sanctity and humility, accepted it as coming from the hands of God.⁶³ All of them tolerated, forgave and cooperated with the authority. Chavara could see the divine providence in all these, and he stated it in his Testament: "Dear children, due to the special grace of God we have been called as Carmelites, the most dear to the Mother of God. But we are most certainly convinced that this has been not according to the counsel of men but according to the counsel of God."⁶⁴ The archbishop refused to mitigate and adapt the rule to the local conditions and needs and the honoured Syrian traditions and the founders' ideals. For some of them the proposed rules and regulations were too hard and many of the members opted out without making profession of religious vows. Although Chavara informed the archbishop about this unfortunate development, his response was rather disgusting: "Only those of good will and determination need to be admitted. Don't worry about the dropouts. I shall pray for the

62 Thomas Kochumuttom, "Blessed Chavara: A Man in God's Hands and Moved by God," 78-79.

63 Jossy Veliyan, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara: The Founder of the Women TOCD*, 206-207.

64 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol. IV, *The Letters*, 99.

remaining few!"⁶⁵ The withdrawal of 11 candidates at final stage from making the profession of religious vows, the affiliation of the Congregation as the Third Order of the Carmelites Discalced, the humiliations and the insults at the hands of the supporters of Bishop Roccas, his transfer from Mannanam to Koonammavu where he had been about 35 years, the occasions when his close associate and spiritual director Fr Leopold apparently disregarded him were distressing experiences for Chavara.⁶⁶

5.4. Kenotic Personality

The exemplary life of Chavara was indeed a model for everyone. He was magnanimous to count others greater than himself. He had great reverence and love towards Fr Leopold, and sought his suggestions in matters he was not clear. As already mentioned, the life and spirituality of Chavara could be summarized in the biblical verse, "The Lord is my chosen portion" (Ps 16:5; Ps 119:57). As his name signifies, when he declared the Lord to be his portion, it meant a radical and close following of Jesus (Mk 10:28; 1:8; Lk 5: 11). Moreover, it is becoming like Jesus always seeking the will of the Father. He states, "Oh my God! You are my love, my joy, and all my fortune. If not in you, how could I live my life? You are my breath, my food and my drink. What a solace have I in You!"⁶⁷ It is a full and complete abandonment of oneself to the Lord in faith and trust. It is to love the Lord for his sake alone, that is to say, a genuine and disinterested love and commitment. Such a person is neither attracted to any rewards

65 Valerian Plathottam, *The First Indian Saint: Blessed Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 18.

66 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 224.

67 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol. II, *Atmanuthapam* (Malayalam), translated by Mary Leó, *Compunction of the Soul*, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1989, 2:141-146.

nor detracted by pains. It is the creator himself the guarantor and sustainer of those possessed by him.⁶⁸ It is a new orientation in life, a reversal of the accepted values by denying one's self to have life, those who desire to be first will be the servant of all; and the meek will inherit the land. The Lord has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly (Lk 1:52). Thereby the Lord becomes one's portion forever. It is a turning towards Jesus to the point of denying one's being and having, everybody and everything, in short whatever possessions one has on the earth.⁶⁹ He/she is filled with gratitude towards God and for such a person as Saint Teresa proclaims God alone suffices. As Jesus the Son of God 'who emptied himself and took the form of a slave (Phil 2:7) and humbled himself, becoming obedient even to death, death on the cross' (Phil 2:8), Chavara was always ready to come down to the level of a servant to fulfil the mission entrusted to him following the footsteps of Jesus.

When Chavara stated the Lord as his portion it was very much significant in his life, as he lost everyone dear to him very early in his life. As it is written "I have come to do your will" (Heb 10:9), from his childhood he was always enthusiastic to fulfil the will of God. His whole life and mission revolved around this guiding principle. He was a man of manifold activities like spiritual guidance of the people entrusted to his care, administration of temporalities, administration of the Church and the Congregation, new foundations of monasteries, etc. But all these flowed from the sensibility and sensitivity, "The Lord is my portion", nothing else really counted. It meant a total and radical detachment from everything that does not pertain to God

68 George Kaniarakath, "'The Lord is My Portion' (Ps 119:57): A Key to the Spirituality of Bl. Chavara," 252.

69 George Kaniarakath, "'The Lord is My Portion' (Ps 119:57): A Key to the Spirituality of Bl. Chavara," 257-258.

and total attachment to the love of God. The Lord as his portion, he could declare confidently at the end of his life that he never lost his original sanctity.

Fr Leopold had always the spirit of arrogance and superiority complex, which is characteristic of the missionaries of that time, sometimes failed to give due respect and recognition to Chavara. A lucid example of it can be noticed in delaying the admission of Sr Clara, a Syrian candidate. Chavara knew her well for years, had already tested, interviewed and approved her willingness and readiness to join the community to be inaugurated and at his decision she had arrived in Koonammavu well-prepared with all the required things on 11 February to join the new community. But Fr Leopold, only because of the fact that he had not personally tested and interviewed her, refused to admit her in the same day along with others. Then after testing and interviewing her personally, Fr Leopold admitted her only on 14 February. He could have trusted and respected the wisdom, experience and holiness of Chavara. This caused great 'sorrow and disturbance' not only to Sr Clara and her people but also to Chavara himself.⁷⁰ For him it was an experience of humiliation and even a public insult. "But he and all those who were under his guidance kept 'holding firmly on to obedience', in a spirit of faith."⁷¹ He accepted it without any complaint and in a spirit of dignified obedience.

Conclusion

Following the path of *kenosis* is surely not an easy task, but the life of Chavara shows that it is possible and that will be life giving both for oneself and for others. It calls for greater intimacy and

70 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 328. See also *The Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent*, Volumes I & II, 26.

71 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 328.

identification with the Lord, *kenosis par excellence*, which is the goal of all discipleship. The mission of the Church is evangelization and in fulfilling it our focus shall be the Lord, never ourselves. Our mission is to witness to the love of God among the whole human family. The life, spirituality, ministry and other significant contributions of Chavara enabled the Syro-Malabar Church to keep up her own apostolic faith and traditions, and to renew her life according to the signs of the times. However, today, when the Syro-Malabar Church traverses through a critical period of troubles and tribulations and is in need of renewal, an overview of his life, spirituality, insightful teachings and contributions are very much relevant since the Saint was a strong pillar and mirror who initiated and guided the formative period of the Malabar Church in the 19th century, a crucial time in her quest to regain her identity and autonomy, while keeping intact the unity of the Universal Church. He was a faithful and Spirit-filled son of the Malabar Church who emptied himself in order to make him available for others.

SANCTUARY OF LOVE

The Familial Spirituality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara

Annie Noel CMC

1. Introduction

In a world increasingly fragmented by noise, individualism, and spiritual dryness, the family stands as both a sanctuary and a battlefield. The Christian family, when lived according to its divine calling, becomes a radiant icon of love, communion, and holiness. This article seeks to delve deeply into the familial spirituality of Kuriakose Elias Chavara - a prophetic voice and spiritual reformer of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church - whose vision for the family was not only theological but profoundly pastoral, practical, and rooted in divine intimacy. Though, a celibate religious, Chavara recognized the family as the sacred place of sanctity and civilization. His insights continue to echo the heartbeat of the Church's Magisterial teachings, Biblical paradigms, Trinitarian theology, and the lived holiness of the Holy Family of Nazareth. This article explores his vision through seven interwoven themes: the family as a domestic church, the centrality of prayer and sacraments, Trinitarian love in daily living, the imitation of the Holy Family, foundational principles of familial life, and the prophetic relevance of his message today. We aim to unveil not merely theoretical concepts but vibrant spiritual reflections that touch the soul and stir the heart. The Saint's legacy does not belong to history alone - it breathes within every Christian family that dares to love sacrificially, forgive relentlessly, and pray unceasingly. In these pages, we hope to illuminate a path of holiness that begins at home, echoing the divine call: "Be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet 1:16). Let us journey

with Chavara through the thresholds of Nazareth-like homes, where ordinary life becomes extraordinary through grace.

2. Family as a Domestic Church

Chavara envisioned the family as a sacred dwelling where God lives and breathes through the ordinary rhythms of life. For him, the home was not just a place of shelter, but a sanctuary of divine presence—a sacred space where love becomes prayer and daily life becomes liturgy. The Catholic Church affirms this vision by defining the family as the “Domestic Church” (CCC 1656–1666), where faith is first received, nurtured, and passed on. Vatican II, in *Lumen Gentium* No. 11, beautifully echoes this truth, affirming that Christian families are reflections of the universal Church, living in faith, hope, and charity.

Chavara gave this theology a pastoral and deeply practical expression. In his spiritual writings, especially in his *Testament of a Loving Father*, he urged the parents to foster a spiritual atmosphere at home through regular prayer, moral instruction, and acts of mutual love. He taught that the family is called to be a ‘miniature Nazareth,’ where Christ is at the center, and each act of love mirrors the presence of the Holy Family. “A family without fear of God,” he warned, “is like a home without a roof”¹ - open, vulnerable, and without protection. For Chavara, familial spirituality meant that every aspect of family life should be infused with the awareness of God’s presence. Meals, conversations, chores, sacrifices, and celebrations all become occasions of grace. The family altar is not limited to a prayer corner but extends to the dining table and the threshold of the home. The Holy Spirit is invoked not only in formal prayer but in every gesture of forgiveness, every act of self-giving, and

1 *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara*, Vol. IV, *The Letters*, IX/6, 1990.

every moment of unity. When a family embraces this calling, it becomes more than a biological unit - it becomes a living icon of God's Kingdom. The warmth of such a home radiates spiritual light, echoing the quiet beat of heaven. This is the heart of familial spirituality: a life lived together in God, where faith is not only taught but incarnated in love.

3. Prayer and the Sacramental Life

Chavara, a prophetic voice for the Christian family, passionately upheld daily family prayer as the heartbeat of a holy home. For him, prayer was not a mere duty, but the soul of Christian living - an intimate encounter with God that wove divine love into the very fabric of daily life. Inspired by his deep sacramental spirituality, Chavara saw the family not only as a social unit, but as a sacred temple where heaven touches earth. Echoing the call of *Familiaris Consortio*, No. 61, which proclaims that only with prayer will the family be able to live out its vocation, Chavara taught that family prayer sanctifies, heals, and unites. It is the sacred thread that binds hearts together in divine intimacy. The home, in his eyes, was to be a radiant reflection of God's dwelling - where every corner resounds with whispered prayers, every table becomes an altar of self-giving love, and every act is offered in faith.

To nurture his vision of the family as a sacred dwelling of God, Chavara gently but firmly prescribed a daily spiritual rhythm that would root households in divine grace: morning and evening prayer together as a family, daily participation in the Holy Eucharist, regular confession and self-examination, meditation on Sacred Scripture, veneration of holy images, and the faithful recitation of the Rosary. These practices were never mere rituals, but living pathways to holiness, transforming the ordinary spaces of home into realms of grace - kitchens into

places of communion, bedrooms into sanctuaries of peace, and living rooms into havens of joy, forgiveness, and unity. The family home is a 'temple of God' and the dining table is an 'altar of love,' capturing the deep, sacramental beauty of a life centered on Christ and shaped by daily prayer.

In such homes, the Holy Eucharist does not remain confined to Sunday liturgy but overflows into daily life. The spirit of the Holy Eucharist is echoed in shared meals, mutual service, and loving sacrifice. As the incense of prayer rises from humble home altars, it sanctifies the family with the fragrance of heaven. The simple, consistent and heartfelt rhythm of prayer draws down divine presence, transforming routine moments into sacred encounters. Through prayer, the family becomes what Chavara envisioned: a miniature Church, a living icon of God's Kingdom, radiant with love, mercy, and peace. In this domestic sanctuary, children first learn to trust, to believe, and to love. In the warmth of the family's spiritual life, God is not a distant idea but a daily companion. His message remains timeless: A family that prays together not only stays together but also grows together in grace, becoming a beacon of divine light in a weary world. When a home is built on the foundation of prayer, it becomes heaven's echo on the earth.

4. Trinitarian Communion and Family Love

In the luminous vision of Chavara, the family is not merely a social structure but a sacred icon of the Most Holy Trinity - a living reflection of divine communion. Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell in an eternal exchange of love, so too is the Christian family called to mirror that intimate unity through self-giving, mutual respect, and sacrificial love. For him, the home was a holy circle where the divine rhythm of the Trinity found earthly expression: parents embodying the tender providence

of the Creator, children responding with loving obedience, and all members bound together in the gentle dance of forgiveness and fidelity. This vision transforms family life into a spiritual sanctuary where the mystery of God's love becomes visible and tangible. Each act of service - be it a mother's quiet endurance, a father's gentle leadership, or a child's sincere affection - becomes a reflection of heaven's grace. In moments of patience and reconciliation, in shared joys and silent tears, the pulse of the Trinity beats softly within the home. Chavara believed that in such families, the walls themselves breathe peace, and the air carries the warmth of divine presence and such a Christian family resembles the heavenly eternal salvation.²

To live familial life in this spirit is to step into the eternal embrace of the Triune God. It is to make love visible through small, sacred acts that echo the heart of heaven. In every family that chooses unity over division, mercy over pride, and prayer over indifference, the mystery of the Trinity unfolds anew. Through such homes, the divine love story continues—and the family becomes not only just a reflection of God, but also a vessel of His very life.

5. Holy Family as Paradigm

For Chavara, the Holy Family of Nazareth was not simply a model to be admired from afar - it was a living template to be imitated in every Christian home. In the quiet rhythms of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph's life, he saw a sacred blueprint for building up holy families. Nazareth, in his eyes, was not a distant memory but a spiritual reality waiting to unfold again within the four walls of every household. In their hidden life - marked by silence, labour,

2 Cf. *Chavarayachante Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vol. IV, *Kathukal*, IX/6, 2011.

obedience, and unceasing prayer - he discovered the secret of sanctity that could transfigure the ordinary into the divine.

Chavara invited families to draw deeply from this holy wellspring; to let Jesus be the loving elder brother guiding each step; to welcome Mary as the tender mother shaping hearts in purity; and to look to Joseph as the quiet guardian, steady and righteous. The family, he taught, is sanctified not by grand gestures but by daily acts of love rooted in humility, obedience, and trust in God. Just as Christ was "obedient to them" (Lk 2:51), so too are children called to respond with reverence and love, while parents lead with compassion and integrity.³

To live like the Holy Family is to let the light of God shine through the simplicity of life - through shared meals, spoken blessings, whispered prayers, and the embrace of forgiveness. Chavara believed that when a family dares to love like Nazareth, heaven bends low to dwell among them. Their home becomes a cradle of peace, a school of virtue, and a sanctuary where God's presence is both known and felt. In the quiet beauty of such a life, God no longer seems far away - He is near, as near as the beating hearts within the family circle.

6. Practical Pillars of Familial Spirituality

A holy family life does not emerge by chance - it is nurtured through intentional choices, quiet sacrifices, and everyday acts of love. Chavara believed that the home must be a living workshop of virtue, where children are formed not only by instruction but by the radiant witness of their parents.⁴ In such a home, learning is guided by truth, media is approached with discernment, and charity becomes as natural as breathing. It is a space where joy is

3 Cf. *Kathukal*, IX/6.

4 Cf. *Kathukal*, IX/6

safeguarded by unity, and forgiveness becomes the melody that restores harmony. Through these sacred rhythms, the family becomes a sanctuary of grace and a mirror of heaven.

6.1. Early Formation and Parental Witness

For Chavara, the path to holiness begins not in grand cathedrals but in the quiet cradles of the homes. He believed that the soul of a child is like soft, sacred soil - ready to receive the seeds of faith sown by the tender hands of a loving mother and father. In his own life, he treasured the memory of his mother, who, with gentle devotion, taught him to lift his eyes toward heaven and to love the Blessed Virgin with childlike trust.⁵ To him, this maternal witness was not merely sentimental - it was sacred. The mother became the first catechist, the father a living homily of virtue.

In his *Testament of a Loving Father*, Chavara urges that the children should learn from their parents and their example is the first school of holiness.⁶ With these words, he reminds every parent that their everyday choices - how they pray, forgive, serve, and love - etch eternal lessons into the hearts of their children. It is through whispered prayers at bedtime, the sign of the cross made before meals, and the patient correction of little faults that the Gospel is first preached. That is, parents are the primary educators of faith. To raise a child, for him, was a sacred calling - a reflection of the divine gardener who lovingly tends each soul. The family, then, becomes God's first vineyard, and parents, His gentle labourers. In the sanctuary of the home, they do not merely teach about heaven - they help their children long for it.

5 *Chavarayachante Sampooru Kruthikal*, Vol. II, Sahithykruthikal, Athmanuthapam, 2011.

6 Cf. *The Letters*, IX/6.

6.2. Moral and Spiritual Responsibility of Parents

Chavara consistently reminded the parents that they are not only providers of food but caretakers of souls. Parenthood is a sacred stewardship of immortal souls. Faith formation is not optional - it is a sacred duty. He warned that neglecting this duty would result in spiritual harm not only to the children but to the society at large. He reminds: "The soul of your child is entrusted to you - neglect it, and you fail before God."⁷ He says, "Where there is no fear of God... that family is like a house without a roof."⁸ Chavara's familial spirituality reflects that parenting is a liturgy of love. In raising the children, parents participate in God's creative and redemptive work.

6.3. Education, Literacy, and Media Discernment

As the founder of the first Catholic printing press in India, Chavara was not only a pioneer in media and education but also a prophetic voice for the spiritual formation of families. He believed that education was not merely for academic growth, but a means to cultivate holiness, especially within the family unit. Literacy, for him, was a sacred tool - a way to empower families to live virtuously, stay rooted in truth, and resist the moral dangers of the world. He warned, "Avoid immoral books. They are like fire on haystacks,"⁹ recognizing how easily harmful ideas could penetrate homes and shape young minds.

Chavara's vision is deeply relevant in today's digital age, where families are constantly exposed to a flood of content. Just as he worked to shield the youth from morally corrupt literature of his time, today there is an urgent call to foster media discernment

7 *The Letters*, IX/6.

8 *The Letters*, IX/6.

9 *The Letters*, IX/6.

within the home - to teach the children not just to read, but to read wisely and choose the content that uplifts and aligns with the Gospel values. Education, literacy, and media discernment were, for Chavara, not merely social tools but spiritual ones - key pillars of familial spirituality. He saw the family as the 'first school' where holiness must take root through daily practices of prayer, reading, and right living. In that light, his legacy calls for the modern families to become domestic churches that discern and choose what is true, good, and beautiful - not only in printed words but in every digital voice that enters the home. The mind is a sanctuary - what enters it either sanctifies or defiles. Families must guard this gate vigilantly.

6.4. Charity as a Daily Practice

Chavara firmly believed that charity was the heartbeat of Christian life - a calling not just for the few, but for every believer, every day. For him, charity went far beyond giving alms; it was a way of living, woven into the ordinary rhythms of life: listening patiently, forgiving freely, offering a helping hand, or even speaking a kind word. He powerfully declared, "A day without doing good to another is a day lost in God's sight,"¹⁰ reminding us that each day is an opportunity to reflect God's love through simple acts of compassion. This daily commitment to charity was not meant to be practiced in isolation but was to be lived out within the family, the 'domestic church.' Chavara taught that the home is the first school of love, where children learn to be generous, kind, and selfless by watching and imitating their parents. In his vision, familial spirituality is rooted in this spirit of charity - where love is shown not just in grand gestures but in everyday choices: sharing a meal, caring for the sick, comforting the sorrowful, or putting another's needs before one's own.

10 *The Letters*, IX/6.

By encouraging families to perform at least one act of charity each day, Chavara was shaping a culture of holiness built on habitual love. This habit forms hearts that are attentive to others, especially the suffering and the poor. It also nurtures unity within the home, turning ordinary family life into a continual offering to God. In a world often driven by self-interest, Chavara's call is both countercultural and deeply healing. He invites every Christian family to embrace charity as a daily mission, transforming homes into beacons of love where Christ is made visible through each act of kindness. Love must flow outward. A family grounded in Christ becomes a spring of living water for a parched world.

6.5. Unity, Forgiveness, and Joy

Chavara envisioned the Christian family as a dwelling place of peace, where God's love is made visible through unity, forgiveness, and joy. His approach to familial spirituality was not harsh or ascetic, but deeply human - rooted in tenderness, understanding, and reconciliation. He knew that conflicts and weaknesses are part of every family's journey, but he believed that what sets a holy family apart is how quickly they return to love. He urged the families to forgive swiftly, to avoid the poison of gossip, and to never go to bed with anger in their hearts.¹¹ This practical wisdom echoes St Paul's teaching, "Bear with each other and forgive one another... Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col 3:13). For Chavara, forgiveness was not optional - it was the glue that held relationships together and the grace that kept homes whole. He advised that our home must never echo angry or indecent words. It should be filled with peace and laughter.¹² These words capture the essence of his vision: a joyful

11 Cf. *The Letters*, IX/6.

12 Cf. *The Letters*, IX/6.

home where peace is more than the absence of conflict - it is the presence of love, laughter, and mutual respect. In such a home, parents embody patience and humility, while children grow up discovering that true joy springs from unity, not from perfection.

Unity, forgiveness, and joy are not just values to be admired - they are daily choices to be practiced. Chavara believed that when a family lives these virtues consistently, the home becomes a sacred space, where God's presence dwells. It is here, in the everyday moments of sharing, forgiving, and rejoicing, that familial spirituality comes alive. In a world often marked by division and bitterness, his message is refreshing and vital: Holiness begins at home, - not in extraordinary deeds, but in simple, daily acts of love transformed by God's grace.

7. Church Unity and Witness in Society

Chavara, a visionary of holistic Christian living, viewed the family as a sacred space where divine love is nurtured and lived out daily. For him, the family was not merely a domestic arrangement but a 'domestic church' - a living cell of the greater Church, deeply united with her mission and communion. Rooted in his unique vision of familial spirituality, Chavara believed that families are called to be schools of faith, holiness, and unity. They are not isolated individuals walking alone, but united witnesses, entrusted with the sacred task of guarding the Church's fidelity and radiating the light of the Gospel into every corner of society. In such families, the love of Christ is made visible, and the unity of the Church is made tangible.

7.1. Family as Guardian of Church Unity

Chavara, a prophet of ecclesial fidelity and familial holiness, saw the family as more than a household - it was a sacred ground where faith is nurtured, unity is preserved, and the Church finds

its living heartbeat. His unwavering commitment to Church unity shone brightly during the Roccas Schism, a time of deep confusion and division within the Syro-Malabar Church. Amid the turmoil, he did not appeal first to priests or institutions, but to families - those domestic churches where the seed of faith is first sown. He called them to stand firm in loyalty to the Pope and the universal Church, not out of institutional allegiance, but from a place of deep love for Christ, who is inseparably one with His Church. For him, fidelity to the Church was a sacred inheritance - a living flame passed reverently from parent to child, from one generation to the next.

The family is not a private enclave of faith, but a missionary community, a bulwark of unity, and a witness of divine light in a divided world. It is within the embrace of the family that love for the Church is first breathed, and it is from the family that the Church receives its strength and sanctity. Chavara's familial spirituality invites every home to become a sanctuary of truth, love, and unwavering fidelity to Christ and His Church. Today, more than ever, the world needs such families - united in prayer, rooted in faith, and radiant in witness. As he envisioned, these families are the golden threads in the tapestry of the Church's unity and mission, shining like lamps upon the lamp-stand, never hidden, but always pointing to the Light that is Christ.

7.2. Missional Role of the Family

For Chavara, the Christian family was not meant to remain inward-looking or confined to personal sanctity - it was inherently missional, a living testimony of God's presence in the world. He envisioned each family as a lamp set on a stand, casting rays of faith, hope, and love into a world darkened by division and despair. Rooted in his deep sense of familial spirituality, Chavara believed that the family is the first and most effective missionary

ground. Its witness flows not from preaching, but from daily acts of prayer, mutual love, discipline, charity, and unwavering fidelity to the Church. Through such simple yet profound practices, the Gospel is preached silently but powerfully. In a time of moral confusion and fractured relationships, families grounded in Christ become countercultural signs of unity and holiness. They stand firm as beacons of peace and mercy, drawing others to the beauty of a life lived for God. He calls every Christian family to embrace this mission - to become a visible Gospel, written not on paper, but in the hearts and habits of its members, and read by the world.

8. Relevance to Contemporary Families

Chavara's familial spirituality is deeply relevant and transformative for contemporary families. This spirituality offers a profound and timely response to the struggles faced by today's families - disconnection, moral confusion, and spiritual weariness. He envisioned the family not merely as a domestic unit, but as a sacred community called to reflect God's love, unity, and holiness. In an age where screens often replace conversation and busyness overshadows prayer, his emphasis on daily family prayer, shared meals, forgiveness, and spiritual discipline becomes a blueprint for healing and renewal. His wisdom encourages parents to become the first teachers of faith, forming homes where the Gospel is lived joyfully and authentically. By fostering an atmosphere of love, dialogue, and digital discernment, families today can reclaim their role as domestic churches, radiating Christ's light in a fragmented world. Chavara's familial spirituality is not only relevant - it is revolutionary, calling modern families to be living witnesses of unity, mission, and divine love.

9. Conclusion

In an age marked by fractured relationships, hurried lives, and spiritual fatigue, the vision of Chavara shines as a timeless beacon—a call to rediscover the sacredness of family life. His familial spirituality, deeply rooted in Christ, draws from the wellsprings of Scripture, the Church's tradition, and the living example of the Holy Family. Though a celibate religious, he spoke to the heart of family life with profound tenderness and divine insight. For him, the family is not merely a social unit - it is a domestic church, a sanctuary of love, and a training ground for holiness. His wisdom reminds us that prayer at the family life, patience in parenting, forgiveness in conflict, and joy in daily living are not trivial acts but eternal offerings. When lived with intentionality and grace, these moments become sacraments of love. Today, his message is more urgent than ever. In a digital and distracted world, he calls families to pause, pray, discern, and love deeply. He reminds us that holiness begins not in distant monasteries, but around kitchen tables, in quiet forgiveness, and in the steadfast witness of unity. Chavara's legacy lives not only in history books or religious congregations - it lives in every family that chooses to live as a mirror of the Trinity, a reflection of Nazareth, and a radiant lamp on the lampstand. His voice continues to echo: *Be holy. Begin at home.* Let us, then, take up his mantle - cultivating homes where God dwells, children grow in virtue, and love becomes the daily language of heaven. In doing so, we do not merely honor a saint; we become saints in our own homes.

SPIRITUALITY OF CHAVARA IN THE *CHAVARUL*

Ann Mary Madavanakkad CMC

1. Introduction

Kuriakose Elias Chavara is a spiritual giant whose wisdom continues to guide the Christian families even today. One of his most profound contributions to the family and spiritual life is encapsulated in the *Chavarul*—his *Testament to the Families*. This remarkable spiritual and moral document reflects Chavara's deep concern for the integrity, unity, and holiness of the Christian family. Written with pastoral insight and prophetic clarity, the *Chavarul* remains strikingly relevant for contemporary families facing moral, spiritual, and relational crises. It serves as a spiritual guidebook that instructs the families on how to live a God-centred life grounded in love, peace, order, and charity.

At the heart of the *Chavarul* lies the conviction that the family is a divine institution—a Domestic Church—meant to reflect the love and unity of the Most Holy Trinity. Chavara wrote this spiritual testament not merely as advice, but as a safeguard against the spiritual and moral deterioration of the families. He sought to instil a God-conscious order in homes, emphasizing that when the fear of God, charity, peace, and discipline are absent, the very fabric of the family begins to unravel.

2. *Chavarul*

The *Chavarul* is composed of forty directives in two parts, offering a comprehensive spiritual framework for family life. The first part consists of 24 precepts, which Chavara considered essential for establishing family structure and nurturing interpersonal

relationships. These guidelines emphasize spiritual virtues—particularly piety, prayer, devotion, and the reception of the sacraments.

The second part of the *Chavarul* focuses on the upbringing of the children. It addresses various dimensions of formation, including faith, intellectual, psychological, and moral development. In these directives, Chavara's farsighted vision and fatherly concern for children become evident. He regarded children as sacred treasures entrusted by God to the parents. Rooted in a biblical vision of upbringing, he provided detailed guidance for the holistic formation of the children.

Although the *Chavarul* contains few direct references to Bible, its precepts are profoundly influenced by biblical teachings and values. This biblical rootedness is evident in all the writings of Chavara. His counsel is intensely practical, grounded in his lived experience as a pastor, spiritual father, and reformer. His insights anticipate many of the challenges modern families face today, especially the loss of spiritual direction and the erosion of moral values in the wake of post-modern ideologies. The definition of family presented in the *Chavarul* clearly shows that, for Chavara, the family is deeply rooted in spirituality.

3. Definition of Family in the *Chavarul*

In the introduction to the *Chavarul*, Chavara offers a profound definition of a Christian family, highlighting its social, spiritual, and interpersonal dimensions. According to Chavara, "A good Christian family is the image of heaven. The *raison d'être* [purpose] of a family is that the members live together by the bond of blood and affection, with children duly respecting and obeying their parents, walking peacefully before God and each one, seeking eternal salvation according to his or her proper

state of life."¹ This vision aligns with the Catholic teaching that the family is the domestic Church. Just as the Most Blessed Trinity is a communion of love, so should a Christian family be a community united in love and holiness.

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- 1 *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* (Malayalam), translated as *The Testament of a Good Father* or *Chavarul*, was written by St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family (1805–1871) on 13 February 1868 to the members of his native parish in Kainakary. A devoted follower of the Holy Family, Chavara was the founder of the CMI and CMC Congregations. *Chavarul* offers concrete suggestions and proposals on how to lead a good Christian family life within the context of Kerala society. It was published in English in 1910 under the title *Testament of a Good Father*. Although the title *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* was not formally given by the author himself, it aptly expresses the spirit of the letter—as a heartfelt testament from a loving father to his children. *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol. 4, *The Letters*, Edited by Lucas Vithuvattikal and K.C. Chacko, Translated by Mary Leo, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1990. Hereafter, the *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara* is referred to as CWC, *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul* as *Chavarul*, and St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara as Chavara.

Chavarul, "Introduction," 184. *Chavarayachante Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vol. 4, *Kathukal* (Malayalam), Edited by Lucas Vithuvattikal, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 1982, 133. Nalla Kristyānikudumbam ākāsmōkshathinte sādrisyamākunnu. Kudumbathinte nyāyam enthennāl chōrayālum, snēhathālum thammilthammil kettapetta pala ālukal kāranavanmārude nēre āchārayum kēzhvazhakavum anusarichu thampurānōdum manusyarōdum samādhānamāyi nadakayum, avaravarude anthasinu thakathinvannam nithyagathiye prāpikunnathinu prayatnam cheythu kūtamayī jeevikukayum cheyyunnathākunnu. *Chavarayachante Sampoorana Kruthikal*, Vol. 4: *Kathukal* (Mal.), 133. The *raison d'être* of family means the purpose or aim of the family. Hereafter *Chavarayachante Sampoorana Kruthikal* is referred to as CSK.

3.1. Good Christian Family as the Image of Heaven

The divine dimension of the family is emphasized by describing it as an image of heaven.² A family truly reflects heaven when its members are deeply connected to one another and willingly fulfil their responsibilities with mutual respect and loving service.³ The focus here is on the sacred nature of the family.⁴ Chavara regarded the family as the *sanctum sanctorum* of the society.⁵ His definition of the ideal family is rooted in a theological vision. For him, God is the Father of the human family. However, when he addresses "My Father," he refers to both God the Father and Jesus Christ.⁶ In Chavara's spiritual family, the role of the mother is held by Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom his earthly mother had dedicated him.⁷ He embraced all humanity as his brothers, sisters, and children.⁸

2 *Chavarul*, "Introduction," 184; CSK, Vol. 4: *Kathukal* (Mal.), "Introduction," 133.

3 Mampra, Thomas, "Chavarul of Chavara: A Precious Gift to Families," *Vinayasadhana* 9, 2 (2018): 7-13, 10.

4 Mampra, "Chavarul of Chavara: A Precious Gift to Families," 10.

5 Latin word *sanctum sanctorum* refers to 'holy of holies.' See Ann Elizabeth, "Chavara: Visionary and Karmayogi of Families," 124.

6 CWC, Vol. 3: *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, Edited by J. Chirayil and George H. Ambooken, Translated by Jose Chittilappilly, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1990, 9-12. "Father, I did sin against your goodness. Punish me as you will. The love of my corrupt body was instrumental in disfiguring your whole body," CWC, Vol. 3: *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 11. Here, Chavara calls Jesus as Father.

7 CWC, Vol. 2: *Compunction of the Soul*, Dirge, Anastasia's Martyrdom, Translated by Mary Leo, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1989, 4-8, 6. See also Kochumuttam, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 390-93.

8 Kochumuttam, Thomas, *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Theological Studies on Saint Chavara, 1, Bangalore: Dharmaram

The Christian family is envisioned as a kingdom where Christ reigns supreme, for Jesus came to bring us into the family of God (Jn 14:1–3). He grants us participation in the sublime communion of the Trinity. We are called to live in communion with God and with one another, imitating the unity of the Divine Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Jn 17:11–21). This dynamic and life-giving communion finds its most profound earthly expression in the Holy Family.⁹ Therefore, Chavara presents the Holy Family as the model of an ideal Christian family—united in mutual love, respect, and self-giving—a transformed image of heaven.

3.2. Unity of Mind and Heart

In his definition of family in the *Chavarul*, Chavara exhorts “that the members live together”¹⁰—*kūtamāyi jēvikukayum cheyyunnathākunnu*,¹¹ in unity, love, and mutual respect. Chavara emphasized that the supreme rule of the Christian family is mutual love, which fosters unity of mind and heart. Reflecting on unity from a biblical perspective, the Yahwistic account of creation (Gen 2:24b–25) clearly affirms that the union of man and woman as husband and wife is the foundation of every human family. The Priestly account, which presents man and woman as being created equally in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:27) underscores the divine intention that they live in harmony respecting their equality while celebrating their differences. Every marriage must be centred on this reality of communion and companionship. Upon seeing the first woman,

Publications, 2017, 396.

9 Athappilly, Sebastian, *Christian Images of Salvation*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 33.

10 *Chavarul*, “Introduction,” 184.

11 *Chavarul*, “Introduction,” 184. The word unity is not mentioned in the English translation. But it is cited in the original Malayalam version. CSK, Vol. 4: *Kathukal* (Mal.), 9/6, “Introduction,” 133.

Adam exclaimed, "This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). This profound physical and relational commonality explains why the Scripture declares, "a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24).

Firstly, becoming "one flesh" reveals God's purpose of marriage: the sacred union of man and woman as husband and wife, established by divine design. Secondly, procreation and the continuation of the human race are essential aspects of marriage. Following the creation of man and woman, God blessed them saying, "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28)—another divine purpose for marriage is instituted from the beginning. Thirdly, the creation of the woman from man's ribs (Gen 2:21-23) is a symbolic expression of the deep and intimate relationship between man and woman. It reveals that they are made for one another, destined to live in a bond of mutual love and support.¹² Since marriage is divinely instituted, it is intended to be both heterosexual and monogamous, reflecting God's original design for human relationships.¹³

When Chavara emphasized the need for the unity of heart and mind, he expressed a desire for deep communion between the spouses, as well as an intimate and loving relationship between the parents and the children, qualities he regarded as essential virtues of family life. His profound devotion to the Holy Family helped him to grasp the secret of true familial unity. Within the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph undoubtedly differed in age, gender, temperament, needs, preferences, and personalities;

12 Mathias, Patric, "No to Divorce (Mt 19:3-9): An Exegetico-Theological Perusal," Page 33-58 in *Marriage and Family at the Cross Roads*, Edited by Patrick Mathias, Chennai: Don Bosco Publications, 2017, 35.

13 Gangal and Bramer, *Genesis*, 30.

yet, they were perfectly united in love.¹⁴ Chavara's focus on living together in unity of mind and heart underscores the necessity of spousal unity and close, affectionate relationships among all family members. For him, this kind of communion stands as one of the most vital virtues in Christian family life.

3.3. Bond of Blood and Affection

Chavara's definition of the family as the "living together" of its members is complemented by the idea of the "bond of blood and affection": "The *raison d'être* of family is that the members live together by the bond of blood and affection."¹⁵ For Chavara, the family is a *koinonia* - a communion - of individuals united by both blood and love. This highlights the central importance of communion within the family: a profound and unbreakable bond formed among those who are related by blood and sustained through mutual affection.¹⁶

In the context of consecrated life, Chavara offers a profound instruction to his confreres regarding the kind of love that should exist among them. He advises them to love one another as if they were children born of the same mother. He writes: "The number of monasteries be any, you must have a genuine love for one another, as if, born of the womb of the same mother, nurtured by the milk of the same mother. This should never weaken instead, it should become stronger daily. Remember this as a special piece of advice."¹⁷ This reflects the type of love that members of a

14 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 54–55.

15 Chavarul, "Introduction," 184.

16 Thekkekara, George, "Degeneration of Family and Familial Bond Today," *Encounter: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Reflections of Faith and Life* 9. 2 (2018): 69–82, 69.

17 CWKEC, Vol. 4: *Letters*, 6/5, 115; CWC, Vol. 4: *The Letters*, 6/3, 71; CSK, Vol. 4: *Kathukal*, 6/3, 100.

religious community should cultivate in their relationships, like that of siblings who know how to enhance joyful moments and ease times of difficulty. While friction may occasionally arise, each member has a unique role in strengthening communal bonds and celebrating life together.

Chavara continues, "The strength of a monastery does not consist in the thickness of its walls, but in the virtue and religious zeal of the monks who dwell in them."¹⁸ Here, he emphasizes that a community's true strength lies in the virtuous lives of its members, lived out in mutual love and communion. It is this fraternal love that fosters a deep sense of belonging in religious life. Reflecting this family spirit, Chavara frequently addressed his fellow members in endearing terms such as "beloved brethren," "loving sons," and "sons"¹⁹ and he addressed sisters as "my dear little children."²⁰

In Catholic sacramental theology, the highest meaning of marriage is love.²¹ Marital love shapes and influences all other dimensions of marriage, including sexual intimacy and procreation. The love shared between Christian spouses is understood as a reflection of God's love for humanity. As Walter Kasper writes, "The love that exists between man and wife is an epiphany of love and faithfulness of God that was given once and for all time in Jesus Christ and is made present in the Church."²² In marriage, a communion of persons is realized

18 CWC, Vol. 4: *The Letters*, 6/1, 65.

19 CWC, Vol. 4: *The Letters*, 6/1, 61; 65; 66.

20 CWC, Vol. 4: *The Letters*, 7/2, 76; 7/7, 83.

21 Häring, Bernard, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Vol. 2 of *Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity*, New York: Crossroad, 1978, 534.

22 Kasper, Walter, *Theology of Christian Marriage*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, 30; Kochuthara, Shaji, *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure*

when two individuals freely give themselves to one another and receive each other in love. The fruit of this union is their children.²³ This communion finds its most sublime expression in the Holy Trinity. According to Christian belief, God is a Trinity, a community of persons, where each of the three divine persons is eternally united in boundless love, forming a perfect unity.²⁴ This divine pattern is mirrored, in a finite and limited way, in human community, especially in the family. True love, therefore, is expressed most authentically in the mutual self-gift of the spouses.²⁵

According to Chavara, the unity of the Holy Trinity serves as the ideal to be replicated, realized, and personalized within our families. True love is found precisely in the mutual self-gift of the spouses to one another.²⁶ This self-giving love begins in the sacrament of marriage, which is understood as a communion of life and love, a covenant aimed at the realization of total personal fulfilment.

3.4. Respect and Obedience to Parents

Chavara affirms that a good Christian family is a small community in which “with children duly respecting and obeying their parents.”²⁷ This emphasis on filial respect and obedience directly reflects the spirit of the Fourth Commandment. Chavara’s own life

in the Catholic Moral Tradition, Roma: Editrice, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2007, 387.

23 Curran, *The Moral Theology of John Paul II*, 164–65.

24 Kochumuttom, *Spirituality of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 54–55.

25 Curran, Charles E., *The Moral Theology of John Paul II*, 164–65.

26 Curran, *The Moral Theology of John Paul II*, New York: T & T Clark, 2005, 164–65; Kochuthara, *Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Moral Tradition*, 434.

27 Chavarul, “Introduction,” 184.

exemplified this principle, particularly through his unwavering obedience to his parents and to ecclesiastical authority. His writings to his fellow religious offer a clear articulation of this ideal. He instructs:

The only mark of a religious is that one totally giving up one's will and obeys as if one does not have eyes and ears. One who does so is a true religious. Those who practice perfect obedience [to ecclesiastical authorities, major superiors, local superiors, and one another] will enjoy heavenly peace already here in the monastery which is a miniature heaven.²⁸

Obedience, for Chavara, was not only a personal virtue but a foundational aspect of religious life. His adherence to this principle remained steadfast even during his final days, despite his declining health. When asked whether he would prefer to be transferred to Mannanam or remain in Koonammavu, he replied, "do I have a will of my own? I do not wish to do anything according to my own will. I am ready to do only what I am asked to do."²⁹ This response encapsulates Chavara's profound humility and spirit of submission. His example continues to

28 CWC, Vol. 4: *The Letters*, 6/3, 70–71; CSK, Vol. 4: *Kathukal*, 6/3, 99–100.

29 CKC, Vol. 1, 10. Another example of Chavara's obedience on his sickbed was marvellous. During his last illness, as insisted by Fr. Philip OCD, Pro-Vicar Apostolic in the absence of Vicar Apostolic Mellano, he was shifted from his living room to an out-house on the campus. Though it was painful for him, he quietly obeyed the order of his superiors. *Positio*, 546–547, Moolayil, Leonard. *Short Biography of the Last Years (from September 1869 to January 1871) of the Venerable Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the First Prior of the Congregation of the Carmelites of Malabar*, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 1923, 5; Mundadan, A. Mathias, *Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications & Chavara Central Secretariat, 2020, 142.

serve as a source of inspiration within religious life and offers a model of Christian virtue rooted in the Gospel.

From a biblical perspective, respect and obedience towards one's parents are rooted in the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue. Similar norms regarding filial respect and obedience are present across cultures and religions, underscoring the universal significance of the parent-child relationship, one of the most fundamental human experiences. Uniquely, this commandment includes a specific promise: "long life and general well-being" (Ex 20:12; Deut 5:16).³⁰ This promise highlights the profound importance of faithful observance and serves as a strong incentive for compliance.

Importantly, the obligation to honour parents extends beyond childhood. As Jesus affirms in Mark 7:9-12, this commandment also applies to adults, requiring them to support their parents physically, materially, and emotionally. It encompasses not only obedience but also ongoing respect, love, and care, especially in old age.³¹ Chavara advises children: "You are bound by the commandment of God to respect your parents and to ensure that their minds are not burdened or aggrieved. If you violate the fourth commandment of God, it would bring down God's curse not only in afterlife but also in the present."³²

The Book of Sirach similarly provides practical guidance for how children should care for their parents (Sir 3:1-16). To honour one's parents means to recognize their God-given role

30 Jones, David Clyde, *Biblical Christian Ethics*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994, 156.

31 Collins, Raymond F., "Ten Commandments," Pages 383-87 in vol. 6 of *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Edited by David Noel Freedman, New York: Doubleday, 1992, 385.

32 *Chavarul*, II:16, 41.

in the transmission of life and to respond with gratitude and reverence. This includes acknowledging the sacrifices made by parents in nurturing, educating, and providing for their children, both materially and spiritually. As children grow older, they are in turn obliged to care for their parents' material and spiritual needs, attend to them in times of illness or distress, ensure appropriate healthcare, and contribute to their emotional well-being and contentment.

3.5. Harmony with God and the People

The definition of the family, as articulated by Chavara, further emphasizes its purpose: that its members "walk in peace before the Lord and the people."³³ Chavara's personal longing for peace with God is evident in his meditations: "Here I come before you, O my Heavenly Father, with a heart full of repentance and firm purpose of amendment to feel your peace in my heart."³⁴ His concern for the lack of peace within families is poignantly expressed in his letters, where he laments the reality that some families have become sources of sin, dissension, conflict, destruction, and even death. The primary intention behind writing the *Chavarul* was to offer guidance to the families, leading them out of this turmoil and into a state of divinely inspired clarity and peace of mind.³⁵

In a letter to his confreres, Chavara asserts: "Those who practise perfect obedience will enjoy heavenly peace already here in the monastery, which is a miniature heaven."³⁶ This statement implies that submission to the will of God, and by

33 CWC, Vol. 4: *The Letters*, 9/6, 102.

34 CWC, Vol. 3: *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 3.

35 *Chavarul*, "Introduction," 184–85.

36 CWC, Vol. 4: *The Letters*, 6/3, 70–71; CSK, Vol. 4: *Kathukal*, 6/3, 99–100.

extension, to the will of parents and elders, leads to true peace within the family. Such families, according to Chavara, can become reflections of heaven on earth.

Chavara's own life exemplifies these ideals, making him a model worthy of emulation both in family and religious life. As a deeply peace-loving person, he took great care to preserve harmony within his community. Even when offering guidance or correction, he avoided an authoritarian tone, ensuring that each person felt genuinely loved and respected. His gentleness and kind disposition made him easily approachable. Chavara was compassionate especially to the sick and the oppressed, always mindful not to impose demands beyond a person's capacity. Through his affectionate, quiet, and humble nature, he won the hearts of many, embodying the very peace and harmony he preached.³⁷

When Chavara exhorts the families to maintain peace with both God and one another, he envisions a household where mutual respect, love, and understanding prevail. He calls for the family members to share one another's burdens, accept differences with patience, and offer guidance with gentleness. At the same time, he emphasizes the importance of maintaining a clear conscience and living a disciplined, orderly life, elements he views as essential to fostering peace and harmony within the home. In a world often marked by sorrow and disorder, Chavara envisions the family as an abode of sweet consolation, peace, and spiritual stability.

3.6. Seeking Eternal Salvation

In the *Chavarul*, Chavara emphasizes that each person should "seek eternal salvation according to one's own proper state of

37 Moozhoor, Z. M., *Blessed Chavara: The Star of the East*, Translated from Malayalam by Sheila Kannath, Kottayam, 1993, 105.

life."³⁸ He expresses deep sorrow over the lack of concern within families for this ultimate goal, writing: "It is most distressing for members to live in a family where no one is concerned about the service of God and their own eternal salvation."³⁹ Across Chavara's writings, it is evident that the salvation of souls was the primary motivation behind all his actions and initiatives. His spiritual director, Fr Leopold Beccaro, attested to this, stating that Chavara never hesitated to engage in any kind of labour, as he was always impelled by the desire for the salvation of souls.⁴⁰ Chavara's commitment to this mission is also reflected in his testament to his fellow priests, where he affirms that "God has willed to found this congregation for the salvation of our Christian brethren."⁴¹ In alignment with this goal, he established the Confraternity for a Happy Death, aiming to prepare the faithful for a holy and peaceful end, grounded in a life of grace.

Chavara's discourse on discernment further reveals his deep concern for the salvation of souls and the practical means to attain it. He writes:

The body is more precious than the clothes it wears; the soul is more precious than the body. If both the body and clothes are threatened with danger, save the body and let the clothes perish. If both the body and the soul are in danger, sacrifice the body and save the soul. The body will perish today or tomorrow, but the soul will live forever. Hence, all the work

38 *Chavarul*, "Introduction," 184.

39 *Chavarul*, "Introduction," 184.

40 Beccaro, Leopold, *A Short Biography of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Edited by Lucas Vithuvatical, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 2003, 12.

41 CWC, Vol. 4: *The Letters*, 6/3, 71.

done in the world should be directed towards the benefit of the soul.⁴²

Chavara reminds us to keep two important things in mind. First, we must never forget that death can come at the most unexpected moment, creeping upon us like a thief. Therefore, we must remember the words of our Lord: "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Mt 25:13). Second, we must avoid mortal sin, which gives rise to the fear of death. If we become aware that we have committed a mortal sin, we must immediately make a perfect act of contrition and seek forgiveness through confession before going to sleep.⁴³ Another quote from Chavara sheds further light on this understanding of salvation. No matter how great a sinner one may be, if a person repents sincerely at the moment of death—like the good thief who was crucified on the right side of the Lord—the gates of heaven will be opened to them. This, he says, is the greatest happiness a person can receive. Among all the help a person may receive in life, the greatest is the one given at the moment of death.⁴⁴

Chavara exhorts the faithful to entrust themselves entirely to God Almighty and to strive for salvation by preparing to receive the fruits of Christ's redemptive acts. Christ continues His mission in each individual soul through the working of the Holy Spirit in the Church, especially through the sacraments, the liturgical re-enactment of His sacrifice, the sacrament of confession, the preaching of His Word, and the personal inspirations of the Spirit in every human heart.⁴⁵ To attain salvation, one must respond

42 CWC, Vol. 4: *The Letters*, 9/7, 120.

43 CWC, Vol. 4: *The Letters*, 9/7, 119.

44 CWC, Vol. 4: *The Letters*, 9/7, 118–19.

45 Topmoeller, W. G., "Salvation," Pages 994–95 in vol. 12 of *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University

with faith and receive baptism (Mk 16:16), practice detachment (Mt 16:25), engage in good works (Jas 2:14), and cultivate the virtues (1 Thes 5:8). Chavara urges the parents to be role models for their children by practicing detachment, charity, kindness, and faith in God. By doing so, they can guide their children to lead virtuous lives. If not, the negligence of the parents may result in their children's eternal loss, and the parents themselves may be held accountable, with their own salvation placed in jeopardy.⁴⁶

In short, the *Chavarul* offers a profound and precise definition of family emphasizing the relationship with God, with others, and with oneself, that is, transpersonal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal relationships.

The *Chavarul* contains a detailed discussion on transforming families into theo-centric communities, implementing love-centred ethics within the family, and providing integral formation to children.

4. Theo-Centric Family

God created the families that they would not be overpowered by human problems and challenges. As Christians, we are called to discern how best to support and strengthen the families in accordance with the Scripture.⁴⁷ Chavara envisioned families as images of heaven, earthly paradises where mutual love and deep interpersonal relationships are nurtured and cherished.

of America, 1967, 995.

46 *Chavarul*, II:1, 196.

47 *Chavarul*, I:1, 185; Titus, "Families in God's Plan: Biblical Perspectives," 355.

Christian families receive both the call and the grace to live exemplary lives from the Most Blessed Trinity.⁴⁸ Chavara acknowledged the difficulty of imitating the Holy Trinity, yet he emphasized that modelling family life on the Holy Family – whose love and communion reflect the sublime mystery of the Trinity – offers us a way to glimpse and participate in the hidden mysteries of divine life.⁴⁹

In a theocentric family, the fear of God must be its foundation, the love of God its greatest treasure, and devotion to God the source of faith that sustains a peaceful family life. Such families, in turn, become the foundation of a civilization of love and life.

4.1. Fear of God as the Basis of the Christian Family

The *Chavarul* teaches that the most valuable possession of a family lies in its fear of God and piety. A God-fearing family will enjoy the fruit of divine blessings both in this life and in eternity.⁵⁰ Chavara urges the families to avoid forming relationships with those who lack order and reverence for God.⁵¹ He further instructs that not everyone should be welcomed into the home, but only those who are well-mannered and God-fearing.⁵²

He identifies two kinds of fear. The first is reverential fear, the kind of fear the citizens feel towards good rulers; and that we should have towards God. It is also the fear that right-minded children show towards their parents. The second type is the fear rooted in hatred or compulsion, such as the slaves might

48 *Chavarul*, "Introduction," 184; Eattaniai, John, "Families of the Postmodern Society: Relevance of Chavara's Vision on Family," *Herald of the East* 13, 2 (2017): 183–98, 184.

49 *Chavarul*, II:1, 196.

50 *Chavarul*, I:19, 192–93.

51 *Chavarul*, I:7, 188.

52 *Chavarul*, I:9, 188.

feel towards the harsh masters. When we speak of the fear of God, we refer to the former: reverential fear. Where there is true fear of God, there is also seriousness and a sense of honourable, thoughtful diligence.⁵³ This fear is a gift of the Holy Spirit. A soul moved by this gift is overwhelmed by God's greatness and clings more deeply to His goodness. It leads to a reverence that compels a person to avoid anything that would threaten the union with God the Father. This is filial fear, a loving reverence that causes the soul to shun not only sin but even the inclination to deny God in anything.⁵⁴

When Chavara advises cultivating the fear of God, associating only with those who share that reverence, and keeping company with God-fearing individuals, he envisions a community of people who respect both their own lives and the lives of others, striving not to offend either God or neighbour. When the fear of God diminishes, faith and moral values inevitably deteriorate.⁵⁵

Christian teaching holds that every human life, from the moment of conception, is a gift of God and possesses immeasurable value in His eyes.⁵⁶ When individuals lose their spiritual vision or fear of God, they are more likely to live without moral restraint. In the face of the overwhelming demands of daily life, the *Chavarul* calls the families to pause, reorient themselves spiritually, and rediscover the truth of their vocation as a divine

53 Bercot, David W., ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More Than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, 279.

54 Mulhern, P. F., "As a Gift of the Holy Spirit," Pages 864–65 in vol. 5 of *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America, 1967, 864–65.

55 David, *Sacredness of Human Life*, 33.

56 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, AAS 58 (1966): 1025–1115.

gift.⁵⁷ It urges them to protect and cherish the life at any cost. Such a faith perspective cannot be sustained without a spirit of prayer and meditation. Only through total surrender in love and obedience to God can we experience the happiness and peace for which we were created. Therefore, Chavara strongly encourages the parents to gather their families regularly for prayer, especially the family prayer.⁵⁸

According to Pope Francis, the transmission of faith within the family depends largely on the parents' own relationship with God, how sincerely they trust in Him, seek Him, and recognize their need for Him. They must understand that faith is a gift of God, yet one entrusted to their care. Through their faithful and creative commitment, they collaborate in God's saving plan. In this sense, parents become the primary agents of catechesis and evangelization within their own families.⁵⁹ Pope Benedict XVI also emphasized that education in the Christian faith is fundamentally about entering into a living relationship with Jesus Christ and the Father, a relationship that is nurtured through prayer and personal communion. Only those who truly know and love Jesus can introduce others to such a relationship.⁶⁰ It is from their parents that the children experience human and divine love in its most formative and profound way.

Pope Francis emphasizes, for faith education to be effective, parents must adopt methods appropriate to each stage of their children's development. For young children, this may include the use of symbols, actions, and stories. For adolescents, however,

57 *Chavarul*, I:1, 184.

58 *Chavarul*, I:24, 195–96.

59 Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 287 (AAS 108: 426).

60 Benedict XVI, "Address to the Participants in the Convention of the Diocese of Rome."

the approach must become more personal, encouraging them to explore and articulate their own experience of faith in a way that resonates with their maturity and individuality. In both cases, the compelling witness of the parents plays a vital role. They teach most convincingly not through theoretical instruction, but through the authenticity of their lives and example.⁶¹ Therefore, properly organizing moments of family prayer is essential to the transmission of faith. When faith is genuinely lived and faithfully passed on, its fruitfulness extends beyond the confines of the family. It naturally radiates outward, spreading the light of faith to the surrounding community. In this way, an evangelized family becomes an evangelizing family.

Accordingly, the *Chavarul* highlights the importance of cultivating transpersonal relationships within families and upholds the "fear of God" as the most precious possession. It advises the families to associate only with God-fearing individuals, to choose such people as friends, and to prefer them when hiring servants. Thus, it is highly fitting to use the maxims of the *Chavarul* as a guide for reshaping and renewing contemporary families, forming them into reflections of the heavenly ideal, true "heavens on earth."

4.2. Love of God as the Wealth of the Family

In the *Chavarul*, Chavara urges the families to love one another and to forgive each other's mistakes and shortcomings.⁶² The Christian family is the first school in which a person learns to love both God and the neighbour. To illustrate this, Chavara uses the parable of the miser, demonstrating charitable acts done

61 Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 288 (AAS 108: 427).

62 *Chavarul*, I:1, 185.

out of love for God are the true source of a family's wealth, while those who neglect such acts ultimately suffer the loss.⁶³

Love is the fulfilment and goal of the law and all divine Scripture.⁶⁴ Love of God and love of neighbour are intimately intertwined. Since God first loved us (1 Jn 4:10), love is no longer merely a command; it is our response to the gift of God's love, which draws us to Himself.⁶⁵ To love God more than we love others is, paradoxically, the most loving thing we can do for them because God's love is the true treasure of the family. It is this love that inspires and motivates the family to do good to others. Recognizing love as the family's true wealth compels them to acts of charity.

All dimensions of love are embraced in Chavara's teachings. He exhorts the spouses to love each other even when they have been hurt. This includes, to a certain extent, loving one's enemies, not in the sense of approving of wickedness or ungodliness, but in loving the ungodly and the wicked as persons. When someone loves God with all their heart, soul, and strength, they enter into communion with God, and God, in turn, fills them with His love.⁶⁶ Thus, parents who love God are empowered to love others and perform the acts of charity in the name of that divine love.

When the parents strive to live in harmony, righteousness, truth, and patience, their children are inspired to do the same. Likewise, children learn to practice charity, preserve fellowship, endure insults, show patience, hold no grudges, comfort the sick, respect the elderly, admonish sinners, and refrain from

63 Chavarul, I:15, 191.

64 Aquinas, Thomas, *Teaching Christianity*, I/II, Translated by Edmund Hill, New York: New City Press, 1996, 123.

65 Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1 (AAS 98: 217-18).

66 Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 409.

oppressing debtors or those in need.⁶⁷ In this way, they discover that true wealth lies in loving and serving God and others.

When the families realize God's love as the greatest treasure, couples are better able to resolve the challenges they face in their relationships, including those involving in the care of elderly parents.⁶⁸ Thus *Chavarul* presents the family as a school of mutual love and respect, a cradle of life and love, and affirms love as the key to all marital and familial relationships.

4.3. Devotion to God as the Strength of the Family

Chavara considered devotion to God the strength of the family. He exhorted that at least one member of the household should attend the Holy Eucharist daily to obtain blessings for the entire family.⁶⁹ Aware of this practice required sacrifice, Chavara nevertheless encouraged the families to embrace it, stressing that maintaining a close relationship with God demands commitment and dedication, but also brings abundant blessings.⁷⁰

The *Chavarul* urges the people to have genuine devotion to God which will strengthen them through life's trials and difficulties.⁷¹ Chavara emphasized that, alongside participation in the liturgy and sacraments, the reading and meditation of the Sacred Scripture are essential to authentic Christian living.⁷² Families are strengthened when the members are united in a

67 Holmes, Michael W., ed., *The Apostolic Fathers, Greek Texts and English Translation*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007, 531.

68 Which are discussed in section 4.2.1 Problems in Spousal Relationship and 4.2.5 Issues Confronted by Elderly Parents.

69 *Chavarul*, I:19, 192-93.

70 Mampra, "Chavarul of Chavara: A Precious Gift to Families," 11.

71 *Chavarul*, "Introduction," 184.

72 *Chavarul*, I:24, 195; I:3, 187.

shared relationship with God. This collective commitment to God's Word instils a sense of meaning and purpose, enabling the families to persevere through challenges and gain a right perspective on life.⁷³ It also offers practical guidance for daily living, shaping a household founded on faith and love.

In his apostolic exhortation, Pope John Paul II challenges the parents regarding the religious formation of their children. He affirms that parents teach life's most important lessons by their own example through honest thoughts, truthful actions, and shared prayer. They become acts of worship of singular value, bringing peace to the home and contributing to the building up of the Church.⁷⁴ These same principles are echoed in the *Chavarul*, where Chavara instructs the families to maintain a structured daily routine that gives priority to family prayer, honest labour, and spiritual reading. Such a lifestyle helps them to preserve a pure and vibrant relationship with both God and others.⁷⁵

Pope Francis also highlights the power of family prayer, affirming that it has a greater impact on faith formation than hundreds of sermons or catechetical lessons. Prayer becomes a beautiful moment of encounter with the living person of Jesus, an experience woven into the fabric of daily life. These vibrant moments of prayer transform the family into a domestic church that is open to the universal Church and becomes a true missionary presence.⁷⁶ Chavara further reminds the parents that as children grow older, they must be prepared for the sacraments and be instructed in devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

73 Raina, "Family Relationship-Importance and How to Build Healthy Relationship." [Online]

74 John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 60 (AAS 74: 152-53).

75 *Chavarul*, I:24, 195-96.

76 Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 289-290 (AAS 108: 427-28).

In transmitting devotion to God, the family becomes an agent of pastoral activity. It proclaims the Gospel not only in word but through a diversity of witness: solidarity with the poor, support for struggling families, stewardship of creation, promotion of the common good, transformation of unjust structures, and the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.⁷⁷ These acts are not merely expressions of human compassion but an "expression of profound Christian belief in the love of the Father who guides and sustains us."⁷⁸ Through such witness, families proclaim that the love of the Father revealed in the total self-gift of Jesus Christ remains present among them, empowering them to face life's storms with courage and hope. This is the Good News that must be heard and lived within every family, at every moment, a source of light and life that illumines their path.⁷⁹

This experience truly makes the family a domestic church and a leaven of evangelization in the society. Chavara's maxims and his insistence on sincere daily devotion to God, along with the spiritual practices he recommended, remain very significant and relevant for the contemporary families facing the erosion of faith and moral values.

5. Conclusion

In an era where the families often struggle with identity, purpose, and cohesion, the *Chavarul* offers a prophetic voice and a clear path towards spiritual renewal. It envisions the Christian home as a sacred space where divine love is lived, shared, and transmitted. Far from being a relic of the past, the *Chavarul* is a living guide, a spiritual compass that challenges the families

77 Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 290 (AAS 108: 428).

78 Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 290 (AAS 108: 428).

79 Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 290 (AAS 108: 428).

to rediscover their God-given vocation. By fostering God-centeredness, reverential fear of God, and faithful witness to Christ, Chavara's spiritual legacy calls for the Christian families to become evangelizing communities, homes where faith is lived in love, and love is expressed through action. It is a clarion call to reform our homes, not only for personal sanctity but also for the transformation of the society through the families that are truly images of heaven on earth.

KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA

A Patron and Spiritual Companion of Penitents

Jojo Pareckattil CMI

1. Introduction

Kuriakose Elias Chavara regarded the sacrament of confession as a vital practice for personal holiness and for strengthening communal bonds. He advocated for regular confession, seeing it as a means to purify the soul and deepen one's relationship with God and others. His own life exemplified this devotion, marked by profound self-examination—an example he encouraged others to follow.

This study explores the life and spiritual writings of Chavara, emphasizing how his teachings offer comfort and guidance to penitents. Through his unwavering commitment to holiness, he stands as an inspiring model for those who approach the confessional with contrite hearts. By examining his insights on repentance and grace, this article highlights his enduring relevance in the spiritual lives of the penitents.

2. 'A Question Mark to the Modern World'

In a message delivered by Cardinal Peter Palazzini, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, during the Beatification of Blessed Chavara, said, "Even though he [Chavara] could declare on his deathbed that he had always kept his baptismal

innocence, he had a deep awareness of sin. To a world that is losing the sense of sin, he is a question mark."¹

These words capture the sanctity of Kuriakose Elias Chavara and his relevance to the modern world. Cardinal Palazzini's assertion that Chavara is a 'question mark to the world' is a striking reflection on contemporary society. Today, moral relativism and secularism have led many to lose the sense of sin. Ethical boundaries have become subjective, and the call to holiness is often drowned out by worldly distractions.

Chavara's life challenges this erosion of moral sanctity. His example compels us to reflect on our own spiritual state and reconsider the significance of sin and grace. Throughout his life, he remained steadfast in faith and purity. From his early years to his final moments, he exemplified Gospel virtues, proving that it is possible to lead a life of holiness amidst the trials of the world. The claim that he preserved his baptismal innocence until death is an extraordinary testament to his commitment to holiness and moral integrity.

3. *Ātmanutāpam*: A Confessional Guide to Transformation

Chavara, in his writings, urged the faithful—especially priests and religious—to approach the sacrament of confession with sincerity and true repentance. His mystical poem *Ātmanutāpam* (*Compunction of the Soul*) stands as one of the most profound literary expressions of contrition and divine mercy. In the words of Thomas Kochumuttom, "Its content is more or less the biographies of Jesus, Mary and the author placed parallel to one another. At every stage of the lives of the former two, Chavara looks into himself and laments his own shortcomings

1 Thomas Panthaplackal, *Chavarayachan Oru Rekhachitram*, Ernakulam: CMI General Secretariat, 2004, 81.

and offences, minor as they are, that caused them suffering.”² The poem offers deep reflections on sin, repentance, and divine mercy, echoing the biblical sentiment of Psalm 51:3— “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.”

Ātmanutāpam is a deeply introspective work that serves as Chavara’s spiritual autobiography, reflecting his self-perception and inner struggles. The poem reveals an autogenic self-image of Chavara, portraying his journey of faith, repentance, and divine longing. Through heartfelt lamentations and expressions of unworthiness, he acknowledges human frailty while embracing God’s boundless mercy. This self-reflective composition not only illustrates his personal spiritual transformation but also resonates with universal themes of sin, redemption, and divine grace. By tracing his inner conflicts and aspirations, *Ātmanutāpam* stands as a testament to his unwavering devotion and serves as a guide for spiritual renewal.

For example, in the second chapter of the poem, while reflecting on his Baptism, Chavara portrays the soul’s agony over its failures, making it an ideal meditation for those preparing for confession:

The spotless garment, Baptism bestowed on me
That I a beacon light would shine for those
In my wake, who walked, a sot that I am,
I rudely sailed and turned all virtue to vice (II 349-352)

In these touching verses, Chavara expresses deep regret for having wasted the grace of his Baptism. The ‘spotless garment’ he refers to symbolizes the purity and sanctity bestowed upon him at Baptism—a divine gift meant to make him a beacon of light

2 Thomas Kochumuttom, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mumbai: The Bombay Saint Paul Society, 2014, 261.

for others. However, in his humility, he laments that instead of fulfilling this calling, he fell into sin, corrupting virtue into vice.

This sorrowful acknowledgment reflects the universal human struggle with weakness and failure. Even those chosen for great holiness experience moments of frailty. Yet, rather than despair, Chavara's words invite us to recognize our shortcomings, seek divine mercy, and renew our commitment to the Christian path. His deep contrition is not self-condemnation but a heartfelt realization of the need for God's grace.

Despite acknowledging the weight of sin, *Ātmanutāpam* emphasizes God's infinite mercy. When we fall, repentance allows us to regain our spiritual wellbeing. Like Chavara, we are called not only to recognize our failings but also to embrace the redeeming power of God's love, transforming our lives back into a light for others. Ultimately, the poem is not merely a lament but a journey of conversion. It invites us to reflect on our own spiritual lives—where have we turned virtue into vice? How can we return to the purity of our Baptismal calling? The saint's words encourage us to seek God's mercy and continue striving toward holiness, trusting that even after failure, grace can restore us.

4. The Testament as a Legacy of Sanctity

Beyond his literary contributions, Chavara's life itself exemplifies the themes of repentance and renewal. His final words, written in October 1870 as he lay bedridden and preparing for death, reflect a profound theological depth rooted in the Gospel values of repentance, fraternity, and the mystical unity of the Church.

Lastly, to the Very Rev. Vicar Apostolic, the Very Rev. Delegate, the Very Rev. Missionary Fathers, and all the members of the monasteries, I humbly beg pardon. I ask

them, before God, to forgive all my shortcomings and lapses in the performance of my duties. Once again, I implore my fellow religious to pray for me. I took my vows here as the first member and was appointed the first Prior. However, I have not fully satisfied my obligation to observe and enforce the constitutions. I failed to set a good example. Please forgive me for the scandal I have caused, and pray that I may make reparation for my failings and that you may grow in greater fervour.³

This spiritual testament that he left behind resonates deeply with the virtues of humility, self-examination, and communal responsibility.

4.1. Spirituality of Repentance and Humility

One of the most striking aspects of Chavara's testament is his profound humility. He, who was a pioneer in establishing religious life in India, does not attribute any merit to himself but instead laments his perceived shortcomings in the observance of the constitutions and his failure to provide a good example to his fellow religious. This echoes the biblical sentiment found in Luke 17:10: "So you also, when you have done everything, you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

Chavara's words exemplify the virtue of *kenosis*—self-emptying—as seen in Philippians 2:7, where Christ "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." His acknowledgment of failures is not merely a personal lament but a testament to the understanding that holiness does not lie in one's achievements but in one's continual turning towards God in humility.

3 *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara, IV: The Letters, 74.*

4.2. Ecclesial and Communal Dimensions of Forgiveness

Chavara's plea for forgiveness extends beyond his personal relationship with God to the broader religious and ecclesial community. His request for pardon from the Vicar Apostolic, the clergy, and his fellow religious underscores the interconnectedness of the Christian community life. The sacramental nature of reconciliation is deeply rooted in his request, reflecting James 5:16: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."

Chavara's words also reveal a profound understanding of the mystical body of Christ (1 Cor 12:26): "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it." He acknowledges that his actions, or lack thereof, affect the spiritual life of the community, emphasizing that leadership in religious life carries not only authority but the grave responsibility of sanctity. His statement not only serves as a personal act of contrition but also reinforces collective responsibility within the religious community. Social psychology research supports the idea that public acknowledgment of faults strengthens trust and group cohesion. By admitting his failure to enforce religious constitutions effectively, he models humility, reinforcing the principles of communal support and shared moral responsibility.

4.3. Theology of Example and Witness

As the first Prior and a founder, Chavara's reflection on his role highlights the spiritual weight of Christian witness. The model of Christ as the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11) is one of leadership through example. Chavara's lamentation that he did not offer a 'good example' reflects a deeply biblical concern, echoing Jesus' words in Matthew 5:16: "Let your light shine before others,

that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Chavara's admission of failure is not an expression of despair but an exhortation for his fellow religious to strive for greater fervour. This is a moment of *pedagogy in humility* – where a saint teaches, even in his final moments, that holiness is a journey of constant striving rather than a state of personal accomplishment.

Chavara's final request is twofold: that his fellow religious pray for him and that they themselves grow in fervour. His desire for reparation is rooted in the understanding of purification and penance, which is deeply linked to the doctrine of purgation (2 Macc 12:46). His words reflect a Christocentric spirituality where suffering and atonement are embraced in union with Christ's redemptive suffering (Col 1:24). At the same time, his exhortation to the religious to 'become more fervent' is a pastoral charge. Like St Paul's warning to Timothy (2 Tim 1:6), he urges them to rekindle the fire of their vocation. Chavara's concern is not for his own legacy but for the spiritual vitality of the community he founded.

4.4. Role of Leadership in Ethical Frameworks

From a communitarian perspective, leaders play a crucial role in setting ethical standards. Chavara's admission that he failed to provide a good example underscores the challenges of leadership in moral and spiritual contexts. Leadership theories, particularly transformational leadership, emphasize that true leaders inspire followers not by projecting infallibility but by demonstrating self-awareness and accountability. His statement reflects the essence of servant leadership, where humility and a commitment to communal growth are paramount.

The final words of Chavara stand as a beacon of true Christian discipleship. His humility, communal consciousness,

acknowledgment of his imperfections, and concern for the spiritual growth of his brethren all mark him as a saint who understood deeply the call to holiness. His testament is not merely a farewell but a theological reflection on leadership, repentance, and the journey towards God.

Ultimately, Chavara's final plea is a call for all of us to live with an awareness of our own frailty while entrusting ourselves to divine mercy. His words continue to inspire not only his religious community but also all who seek to walk the path of Christ with humility and zeal.

5. Message to Priests and Religious

Chavara emphasized the spiritual discipline of priests as essential for their holiness and effectiveness in ministry. Among his many teachings, he strongly advocated for weekly confession and daily spiritual exercises as vital means of personal sanctification and pastoral fruitfulness: "Has not the Lord in your heart silently admonished to reform your life by daily meditation, examination of conscience and weekly confession and spiritual reading."⁴

Further, in a common circular written jointly by saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara and Fr Leopold Beccaro, they lamented about the infrequent reception of the sacrament of penance. "All do their duties without reaping any spiritual benefit. Some of them receive the sacrament of penance only very occasionally."⁵ Their critique remains relevant today, urging religious individuals to cultivate a deeper, more intentional spiritual life. Addressing the underlying causes of laxity can enhance personal sanctification and the collective strength of religious communities. Chavara

4 *Complete Works of BL. Chavara Vol III: Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 33.

5 *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara, IV: The Letters*, 64.

laments that many do their duties but fail to reap spiritual benefits, an observation that warns against the danger of external religiosity devoid of interior conversion. His call for authentic devotion serves as a timeless guide for sustaining true spiritual fervour. The Sacrament of Penance is not merely an obligation but a divine gift through which the mercy of God is tangibly experienced.

5.1. The Spiritual Danger of Neglecting Confession

When confession is approached only occasionally, the soul becomes vulnerable to spiritual complacency. Holy Scripture repeatedly calls us to repentance and renewal. Psalm 51:10 pleads, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." This renewal is made possible through confession, wherein the penitent encounters Christ, the Divine Physician, who heals and restores. Neglecting this sacrament leaves one spiritually weak, susceptible to habitual sin, and distant from the transforming power of grace.

The priest, as an *alter Christus* (another Christ), is called to imitate Christ in all things. Yet, unlike Christ, who was without sin (Heb 4:15), every priest remains a frail human being, susceptible to temptation and sin. The Church, in her wisdom, obliges priests to receive the sacrament of reconciliation regularly because they too are in need of grace and continual conversion. If a priest does not confess his own sins but continues to hear the confessions of others, he risks falling into a form of spiritual hypocrisy. If priests are not personally engaging in the sacrament, their preaching on the importance of repentance and confession may lose its authenticity and fervour. Just as a physician must care for his own health to effectively heal others, a priest must first seek healing through confession to faithfully administer it to others. Just as the faithful are encouraged to make frequent use

of the sacrament to remain in a state of grace, how much more necessary is it for those who stand in *persona Christi* to do the same? It is in receiving mercy that they are better able to extend it to the souls entrusted to their care.

In an era marked by increasing pastoral challenges and spiritual distractions, Chavara's exhortation remains profoundly relevant. Priests and religious today, like those in his time, face pressures that can lead to spiritual complacency. Weekly confession and daily spiritual exercises serve as safeguards, preventing stagnation and nurturing a vibrant spiritual life that radiates grace to the faithful. Chavara's message reminds priests that their vocation is not merely administrative but profoundly spiritual. By embracing confession and daily prayer, they draw closer to Christ, who is their model and strength. In doing so, they also become effective instruments of God's mercy and love in a world that desperately needs both. Weekly confession and daily spiritual exercises are not burdens but lifelines, sustaining them in their mission to sanctify themselves and their people.

5.2. Confession as a Means of Ongoing Conversion

Chavara's message serves as an invitation to frequent and sincere confession. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that, although venial sins do not sever our relationship with God as mortal sins do, regular confession of even venial sins helps to form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, and grow in holiness. "Indeed, the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father's mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful: [Cf. Lk 6:36] (CCC 1458). Thus, confession should not be viewed as a mere obligation but as a necessary step in

deepening one's relationship with Christ. Frequent confession fosters humility, strengthens virtue, and restores the joy of salvation.

For priests, who serve as spiritual shepherds, frequent confession is not only a means of personal purification but also a model for their flock. As saintly Pope John Paul II taught,

I particularly wish to speak of one final consideration, one which concerns all of us priests, who are the ministers of the sacrament of penance. The priest's celebration of the eucharist and administration of the other sacraments, his pastoral zeal, his relationship with the faithful his communion with his brother priests, his collaboration with his bishop, his life of prayer - in a word, the whole of his priestly existence, suffers an inexorable decline if by negligence or for some other reason he fails to receive the sacrament of penance at regular intervals and in a spirit of genuine faith and devotion. If a priest were no longer to go to confession or properly confess his sins, his priestly being and his priestly action would feel its effects very soon and this would also be noticed by the community of which he was the pastor (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 31).⁶

Chavara's insistence on weekly confession echoes this understanding, reinforcing that priests are not exempt from sin and must regularly experience God's healing love to remain spiritually vigilant. By frequently confessing their sins, priests cultivate humility and deepen their awareness of their dependence on divine grace. This sacrament also fosters accountability, ensuring that priests remain aligned with their

⁶ https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html; accessed on 29.04.2025.

sacred calling and are strengthened to resist temptations that could weaken their spiritual integrity. Chavara understood that a priest's effectiveness in ministry is directly linked to his interior life. Without daily spiritual discipline, the priest risks becoming a mere functionary rather than a true shepherd of souls.

6 Letter to the Nuns of Koonammavu: A Spiritual Roadmap for Transforming Physical Ailments

Chavara's letter, written to the nuns at Koonammavu on April 4, 1870, from his deathbed, reveals profound insights into suffering, repentance, and sanctification.

You and I suffer from the same ailment at present, and so both of us need the same treatment. In order to make amends for the sins of our past lives and the faults we continue to commit, we need virtues. However, we are unable to cultivate them.

For such people, there is an easy method, which I will explain below:

Offer up to God every pulse beat of our veins, every blink of our eyes, every breath we take, and even the little chirping of birds—yes, everything—as our prayers.

Offer all these in union with the works of our Lord, which are of infinite merit.

In this way, we will wash away all our sins while also acquiring an abundance of merit.

These merits can be further multiplied. For example, when I move my left leg, I say:

'Lord, with the precious blood that flowed from the sacred wound of Your left leg, wash away all the sins and misdeeds I am guilty of.'

Secondly, by this movement, I desire to perform all the good works ever done by Your saints.

Thirdly, I give this movement the same meaning and significance that You assigned to it when You moved Your leg.⁷

His wisdom provides a spiritual roadmap for transforming physical ailments and the limitations of human weakness into a pathway of divine grace. Rooted in deep penitence and faith, his words embody a theology of redemptive suffering, unceasing prayer, and mystical union with Christ.

6.1. Suffering as Redemptive and Transformative

Chavara speaks out of personal experience, acknowledging his physical ailment and extending it as a shared reality with the nuns. This shared suffering becomes an invitation to repentance and purification. In Christian theology, suffering has often been understood as a means of sanctification when united with Christ's own passion. St Paul affirms this when he writes, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24). Chavara echoes this sentiment, presenting suffering not as mere affliction but as an opportunity for spiritual purification and merit.

6.2. Prayer in Every Breath: The Sanctification of the Ordinary

Chavara proposes an extraordinary yet simple method of prayer: offering every action, every movement, every natural process of the body, and even the sounds of nature as prayer. This echoes the spiritual principle of continuous prayer, deeply rooted in mystical tradition. The Desert Fathers and Mothers practiced the

7 *Complete Works of Blessed Chavara, IV: The Letters*, 78-79.

Jesus Prayer, continuously invoking the name of Jesus with each breath. St Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thess 5:17), which finds resonance in Chavara's advice.

By sanctifying every moment and every movement, Chavara makes holiness accessible to all. He removes the dichotomy between the sacred and the mundane, illustrating that everything—down to a heartbeat—can be an act of prayer and offering to God.

6.3. Union with Christ's Redemptive Act

Perhaps the most profound aspect of Chavara's reflection is his method of uniting each physical movement with Christ's redemptive suffering. By aligning his steps, breaths, and even the blinking of his eyes with Christ's actions and merits, he enters into a mystical participation in the life of Christ. This is a deeply Eucharistic spirituality, reflecting the Catholic understanding of offering one's sufferings in union with the sufferings of Christ.

This act of uniting human suffering and action with Christ's work is not merely symbolic; it has real spiritual efficacy. It recalls the sacrificial priesthood of the faithful, where every baptized Christian is invited to offer their lives as a 'living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God' (Rom 12:1). Chavara's practice is a form of spiritual communion, where every movement becomes an extension of Christ's own redemptive work.

6.4. The Multiplication of Merit

Chavara also introduces a theological insight into the multiplication of merit. By offering a simple movement—such as moving one's leg—with three intentions (repentance, imitation of the saints, and participation in Christ's meaning), he reveals the depth of divine generosity. In this way, a small human action is magnified into an offering of infinite value, precisely because it is united with Christ's infinite merits. This principle aligns with

St Therese of Lisieux's *Little Way*, where small acts done with great love become powerful means of holiness. Theologically, it demonstrates that merit is not about the grandeur of the action but about the depth of the union with Christ in the action.

In short, Chavara's advice to the nuns serves as an enduring invitation to sanctify every moment. In a world where suffering is often seen as meaningless, his words offer a counter-narrative—one where pain, limitations, and even the most ordinary actions can become pathways to holiness. This is the heart of Christian spirituality: the belief that through Christ, every human experience can be transformed into an offering of love. His words challenge us to reevaluate how we view suffering and the mundane aspects of daily life. They invite us to embrace a spirituality that sees every heartbeat, every step, and every breath as an opportunity to glorify God. In doing so, we participate more fully in the mystery of Christ's redemptive love, making our very existence a continuous prayer and sacrifice to God.

7. Neglect of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Penance

The Holy Spirit, as the sanctifier and guide, plays a crucial role in the process of repentance, forgiveness, and transformation. The sacrament of penance is not merely a juridical act but a profound encounter with divine mercy, facilitated by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit convicts individuals of sin (Jn 16:8), grants the grace of contrition, and works through the priest to administer absolution and spiritual healing. In a talk given on 'Conversion and mission' in connection with the celebration of the Year of Priests, by Cardinal Joachim Meisner, said, "One of the most tragic failings that the Church has suffered in the second half of the twentieth century is to have neglected the gift of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of penance. In us priests this has caused

a tremendous loss of spiritual profile." Cardinal Meisner's assertion highlights a critical issue within the contemporary Church's sacramental practice. The neglect of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of penance has had profound theological and pastoral implications. By reinvigorating the understanding of the Spirit's role in reconciliation, the Church can restore the sacrament's vitality and efficacy in the spiritual lives of the faithful.

It is true that the second half of the twentieth century saw significant shifts in Catholic liturgical and pastoral practice, particularly following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). While Vatican II emphasized the communal and reconciliatory aspects of penance, there was also a notable decline in individual confessions, attributed to changing theological perspectives, diminished catechesis, and cultural shifts. The reduced emphasis on the sacramental role of the Holy Spirit may have contributed to the crisis in the sacrament's practice. The rise of secular thought and moral relativism weakened the sense of personal sin and the need for sacramental confession. The consequences of this neglect include decreased participation in the sacrament, a weakened sense of sin, and a reduced appreciation for the Spirit's sanctifying work.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation plays a significant role in shaping the moral conscience, emotional well-being, and social behaviour of us. It serves both spiritual and psychological functions, acting as a mechanism for moral guidance, emotional relief, personal transformation and renewal. From a psychological perspective, confession provides a structured environment for self-examination, guilt alleviation, and moral accountability. Studies in psychology indicate that verbalizing sins and receiving forgiveness contribute to mental relief and emotional catharsis. Confession can alleviate anxiety, reduce stress, and foster self-acceptance by addressing unresolved guilt and ethical dilemmas.

The Catholic confessional remains a powerful instrument for shaping the minds and hearts of the faithful. Through its theological significance, psychological benefits, and social implications, confession influences moral consciousness and personal transformation. While challenges exist, its role in fostering ethical integrity and spiritual renewal continues to be a cornerstone of Catholic practice. This creates an unparalleled level of sacramental, spiritual and psychological trust between the confessors and the penitents.

8. Conclusion

Kuriakose Elias Chavara remains an enduring symbol of sanctity, moral clarity, and divine awareness. His life was a testament to the power of faith and the importance of preserving one's spiritual integrity. In a world that increasingly disregards the concept of sin, his legacy serves as a beacon of truth, urging believers to strive for holiness. His very existence poses a profound question to humanity: Are we mindful of our spiritual state, or have we become indifferent to the call of holiness?

Chavara's deep devotion to the Sacrament of Confession continues to inspire us today. His teachings foster a renewed appreciation for confession as a means of spiritual purification, healing, and strengthening one's relationship with God. By embracing this sacrament with sincerity and faith, we can follow the path of holiness that Chavara so ardently lived and preached. Given the profound spiritual introspection found in *Ātmanutāpam*, along with his personal sanctity, it is fitting to consider him a patron for those seeking confession. His life and writings serve as a guide for penitents, helping them approach the sacrament with true contrition and a sincere desire for transformation.

FEATURES OF PRAYER IN THE COLLOQUIES WITH THE HEAVENLY FATHER

Peter Kochalumkal CMI

1. Introduction

Life attains true success when we embrace it as an opportunity to leave a meaningful and positive imprint on the world. The renowned spiritual guide, Fulgence Meyer, insightfully observed that prayer guides us towards this positive direction, for prayer is often described as the very breath of the soul. Just as the quality of a person's breathing reveals the state of his/her physical health, so too does the quality of our prayer reflect the health of our soul.¹ Nurturing the spiritual health paves the way for a richer and more meaningful life. Through sincere prayer, we cultivate the habits that nourish the soul, foster spiritual growth, transform our burdens into joy and our anxieties into peace. Prayer helps us to lighten our burdens and worries by surrendering ourselves to God, for prayer has a healing and transformative power.

Kuriakose Elias Chavara is renowned for his great contributions to the Church and the society, which brought about a profound transformation in the social and spiritual spheres. Among his spiritual writings, the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, a collection of meditations and prayers, stands out as a significant one as it explains the true nature and characteristics of prayer. Prayer, according to Chavara, is not mere recitation of words at designated times; rather, it is an attitude, a way of life,

1 Fulgence Meyer, *Uni Una: To the One God My One Soul*, Ohio, Cincinnati: St Francis books, 1926, 437.

and a transformative tool to experience God. Prayer becomes meaningful when it is accompanied by the practice of virtues in daily lives. It is an occasion to experience the love and mercy of God. It becomes effective when it fosters genuine communion and communication with God. In the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, Chavara highlights the essential attitudes a devotee must cultivate in prayer, and he outlines the fundamental characteristics of authentic prayer. In the following paragraphs, an attempt is made to explore the essential characteristics of prayer portrayed in the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*.

2. God's Kindness and Justice:

The Heart of the Prayer Life of Chavara

As created beings, human beings long to experience God. St Augustine passionately said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you" (1:1).² We are created out of the abundance of God's love. Life out of God's love is the most valuable gift that we receive from God, for God wanted us to be his children. As St John affirms, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him have eternal life (Jn 3:16), and the verse summarizes the message of salvation and God's love of the humanity. St Paul in his letter to Titus presents a concise summary of the Gospel message that highlights the grace, mercy and love of God as the foundation of salvation: "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the

2 Augustine, *The Confessions of St Augustine*, Translated by Sheed FJ, London: Sheed and Ward, 1943.

hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:4-7). Such is the kindness of God for human beings, and it is the centre of spirituality.

Chavara's concept of prayer was centred on the 'loving kindness' of the Father. He was sure of the virtue of kindness as a humble giving of oneself in love and mercy to others who may not be able to give anything in return. Human beings are not able to render thanks to God in the same degree and manner in return for all the graces and blessings received from God. God's steadfast kindness is such that the humans are neither worthy to receive nor able to return it, for only God can be so kind to his creatures. Chavara insisted himself to be grateful to God's kindness. He asks himself in *Meditation on Vocation*:

Servant of God, think carefully about your actions and your path. Like a traveller who checks his way to avoid getting lost, you must make sure your journey leads to heaven and not to destruction. During the annual retreat, God calls you to review your life honestly and plan to improve it. Ask yourself why you left your family, friends, and possessions. Why did you choose a difficult life of sacrifice instead of living easily and comfortably in the world? Did you come here just for a comfortable and respected life, or to follow Jesus in sacrifice, self-denial, and hard work for your own holiness and the holiness of others? Remember, Christ paid for your soul and the souls of others with His precious blood. The real purpose of religious life is to love God completely, follow Him, and help bring others to Him. Now ask yourself: have you truly followed Christ with all your effort? Have you worked hard to grow in virtue, as your vocation requires?³

3 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, Mannanam: The Committee for the Causes of Blessed Chavara, 1990, 25.

As Chavara reflected on the blessings he had received, especially the priesthood and religious life, he was ever grateful to the Lord. Reflection on the kindness of God is an easy way to grow in prayer.

God's kindness and love are greater and broader than what human mind can comprehend. As the Scripture testifies, the Ninevites were living in the peak of their sinful conditions. God sent Jonah to proclaim them the painful days of their destruction. But at their repentance God showed compassion to them. When God sees the tears of the penitent, He 'forgets' the past and the heart of a mother dominates in Him! "Lord, if you kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?" (Ps 130:3). Chavara always reflected on the kindness of God, and his every word and action revealed the deep and abiding presence of God's love in his life. Isaiah says: "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you" (Is 54:10). Still Chavara cautioned his soul to remain vigilant against sin. According to him, kindness and justice are inseparable as the two sides of the same coin, and hence, he emphasized the need of sincere growth in the fear of God and adherence to the Gospel. Constantly mindful of the graces he had received, he taught that our response to God must be measured by the generosity of His gifts. The priests and religious who are privileged with a special call and graces, bear an even greater responsibility to foster a sincere and faithful relationship with the Lord. Therefore, he says:

If the Lord should show His justice now, as of old, who would dare to ascend His altar? But now, He shows kindness and not justice. Yet, dear brother, be mindful of His sentence of justice - until the hour of justice, He will remain silent. He will not argue or protest. He is at your command; He will allow you to touch

Him, He will come to your heart, He will go wherever you take Him. Oh, my dear brother, He will not mind now in whatever manner you and I ascend the altar. He will not be angry – He is patient and full of forgiveness. But remember, there is a limit to His patience. Long-suffering as His patience is, His wrath will be severe. Therefore, examine yourself carefully to see whether you have lived up to your sacred calling.⁴

Chavara firmly believed that God is both just and kind. Thus, it is our duty to remain constantly vigilant, staying close to God, who abounds in love and compassion.

3. Sincerity of a Pure Heart: Chavara's Humility

Chavara was always very genuine in his life and during the moments of prayer. Before every prayer, he acknowledged himself as a sinner, and confessed to God, the Heavenly Father, that he was unworthy to stand in His presence, and sought pardon for all the sins committed knowingly and unknowingly. All his writings, especially the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, frequently highlight his conviction as a sinner, unworthy to approach God: "I deem not myself worthy to reach high degrees of prayer and sanctity. As I am a great sinner with a heart impure and opaque without virtues of cleanliness and modesty. I realize that I am not worthy to receive the spirit of contemplation and attain perfection."⁵ It expresses the sincerity of a pure heart. The Pharisee who went the temple to pray was not justified (Lk 18:11-14), for he lacked the sincerity of heart in his approach to God, the neighbour, and even to himself. He did not give an opportunity to God to justify him, instead he justified himself (Lk 18:9-11).

4 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, Meditation on Vocation*, 26.

5 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 1.

Chavara humbly acknowledged his part in the passion and the crucifixion of Jesus, who came to the world to save the humanity. In deep reflection, Chavara with a sincere and repentant heart, admitted his sins and failures, and believed that they were the cause of the Lord's sufferings. Chavara mourned for having forgotten God's goodness:

O Lord, your holy eyes - once brighter than the stars - are dimmed by the cruel, blood-spilling blows to your head. Your lips, once vivid and red like ripe apples, are now darkened. These changes on your sacred face are all because of my sins, and the thought pierces my heart with deeper sorrow. You are like the noble father and his son in an ancient tale - a king decreed to remove both eyes of the son who committed a serious offence. Yet, moved by compassion, the king decreed that only one eye from each - father and son - be taken. But the loving father chose instead to lose both his eyes, willingly bearing the full pain out of love for his child.⁶

In meditation, Chavara sees the Lord's passion directly, and experiences God's unconditional love for him. Chavara continues to meditate on the painful results of his great failures in doing good to God, humanity and himself. He had the sincerity to acknowledge his shortcomings, especially as a human being and even more as a priest.

4. Prayer Rooted in Gratitude: Path to True Surrender

Chavara always wished to render thanks to the Lord, for he regarded thanksgiving as the most sincere way of praising God. God, out of His infinite love and will, created us and everything in the universe, and we express our gratitude to the Creator in prayer, for thanksgiving is the sublime form of prayer. True

⁶ *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 12.

thanksgiving involves recognition and personal experience of God's power leading to the glorification of God (Ps 107:1). The blind man who is depicted in the Gospel (Lk 18:35-43) thanked and glorified Jesus and became his follower. The prayer enables one to follow Jesus and to surrender to him unconditionally. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus endured immense pain and isolation, and prayed earnestly for relief but ultimately submitted himself to the Father's will (Mt 26:39, 42). The garden of Gethsemane thus reflects the supreme moment of Jesus' prayer: complete and unconditional acceptance of God's will. The trustful surrender to God in thanksgiving as taught by Jesus makes the prayer effective and meaningful.

As a priest, Chavara was fully conscious of his duty to give thanks to the Heavenly Father, who had chosen him, despite his unworthiness, to stand at the altar of the Lord. He understood his vocation as a gratuitous gift of God, bestowed upon him, a sinner. With deep humility, Chavara confessed his unworthiness in receiving the sublime gift of priesthood. Throughout his life, he devoted himself to remain faithful to God, continually offering gratitude and glory to Him. Reflecting on his vocation, Chavara exhorted his soul: "Therefore, O my soul, hasten to Him and thank Him for His great mercy. You are now in the sanctuary of the Lord, where He is surrounded by His angels. Here, He is not hidden by clouds as He was when He revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai. With no covering of clouds, He stands before you as an affectionate Father, ready to welcome you most lovingly. He says to you, 'I am your loving Father. Do not hesitate to come to Me.'"⁷ Living with gratitude was a joyful experience for Chavara, for God is the only source of joy of a priest.

7 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 10.

In the Old Testament, God remained hidden from the patriarchs and the prophets, but in the New Testament, He revealed Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ and, continues to be present and visible to His people through the Eucharist. Chavara regarded this as the supreme gift granted to the New Testament people, and as a priest, he considered himself specially blessed. Chavara committed himself to a life of perpetual thanksgiving to the Heavenly Father, which he esteemed as the highest form of prayer. Chavara had personal reasons to praise God without ceasing, and even he felt the need to spend more time in praising God for His innumerable and immeasurable blessings. Chavara in his meditations, made a comparison between the greatness of God who is the creator of all universe and the worthless being like him. He reflected on his life that was of no special benefit but to hurt the sanctity of all God's creations. Therefore, he asks God the reason for the great deeds He had done for him:

O my Lord, what love compelled You to suffer for a worm like me? How could I betray You, knowing the agony Your love endured? If You loved me so completely, how could my heart long for anything but You? Grant me, Lord, to love You with a devotion as deep as the wounds I caused. You poured out Your blood for me, as a beast drains the life from its prey. My sin opened Your sacred side, spilling every drop. O Father, your love surpasses every measure and floods beyond all bounds.⁸

The above prayer of Chavara expresses pure repentance, yet at its core, a hymn of gratitude to God for His paternal love. Sophy Rose comments on Chavara's *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, "Chavara expresses the deepest feelings in spiritual life: gratitude to a loving God for the abundant blessings showered upon him and sorrow for the smallest lapses in his personal

8 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 8.

life. His most intimate feelings reveal his childlike innocence.⁹ Acknowledging our shortcomings and humbling ourselves before the Lord, in essence, is an act of gratitude towards Him.

5. Speaking Heart to Heart: True Prayer as Intimacy with God

Prayer, for Chavara, includes not only the vocal prayer but also mental prayer, and every form of communication and communion with God grounded in love. For the one who loves God, never lacks time and opportunity for prayer. In his *colloquies*, Chavara highlights the need of a deep and personal friendship or intimacy with God.

True and genuine friends converse freely, without interruption. In fact, it becomes a joy for them to listen each other. Chavara notes that when we are with a close friend, we don't feel tired or bored; instead, we remain active and engaged, with a lot to share each other. This, according to Chavara, is what prayer ought to be: a loving and never-tiring conversation with God. If we possess such an intimacy with God, we eagerly converse with Him, and God listens and responds to us. Therefore, Chavara often emphasized the importance of cultivating a deep and abiding intimacy with the One who holds our lives in His hands. Chavara reminded himself: "Meditation is a free and friendly colloquy with God. If meditation is a conversation with God, it presupposes a deep friendship with Him. When friends sit close together, they find endless topics to talk about. If there is love, the conversation knows no bounds. Neither friend needs to be taught how to continue the dialogue."¹⁰ For Chavara, prayer

9 Sophy Rose, *A Pillar and Guiding Light: Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a Theologian of the Church*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore; Dharmaram Publications, 2020, 35.

10 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 2.

was a joyful, unceasing conversation with God in deep love, complete trust and true faith.

6. Self-Awareness and Humility:

Foundations of Authentic Prayer

In the Gospel, we come across the blind man who cried aloud as he realized that Jesus was passing through. Hearing his cry, Jesus stopped and asked the people to bring the man to Him. Jesus asked the blind man, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk 10:51). The blind man replied that he wanted his sight back, and Jesus granted his request. The man was well aware of his need; he knew he was blind. Awareness of our limitations and presenting them before the Lord is an essential aspect of prayer. According to the great masters of spirituality, one of the essential requisits for prayer is the awareness of God's great power and human limitations.

Chavara examines his conscience and reflects on his state of mind and his unworthiness to experience God's love through meditations. He had the awareness of the greatness of God's gift and his unworthiness. Therefore, he acknowledges, all that he is and has, coming from God: "For is it because of my power and skill that I did things whatsoever? How is it that you came hither? Who called me from home? How did I become a Priest? How could I join the community and become a member of the Congregation? Why should anyone address me as Prior? Do you think I deserve any one of these favors? Not at all, to sure."¹¹ Prayer arises from the awareness of a person who realizes that he/she has limitations in life. They humble themselves before God and unconditionally allow God to lead them in life. Prayer is a total surrender to God, and the awareness of one's unworthiness

11. *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 1.

leads one closer to Him. Humility is the basic virtue that enables one to realise one's unworthiness, and to rely on God. Humility led Chavara to the realization of his lowliness and brokenness, and he pleaded God to help him experience His infinite love.

7. Abba Consciousness:

Living in the Light of God's Forgiveness

Faith in the forgiveness of God is an important characteristic of prayer. Chavara never failed to understand and experience the fatherhood of God in his life. One significant theme we find in his writings is the *Abba consciousness*, which became the driving force of his spiritual journey. His meditations highlight his total dependence on God acknowledging Him as *Abba*. For Chavara, no other relationship was so great and significant as the Father-Son relationship. It was a profound joy for him to call God as *Abba*, and the *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father* reveals his unconditional trust in God the Father. Chavara addresses Jesus also as 'Father', and it indicates the deep rooted *Abba consciousness* in him.

The deep trust in God the Father led Chavara to look at himself as the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-31). He had great confidence in the loving and forgiving God, and he was not ashamed to acknowledge the broken condition of his soul:

Oh, it has been so long since I last beheld my heavenly Father's face! Much like the prodigal son, I have squandered all the blessings that were so generously bestowed upon me. Now, I find myself in servitude to a harsh master, tending to his swine. My hunger has become so acute that I long even for the pods upon which the swine feed. The fine garments my Father once provided have been ruined, and I am now clothed in rags. Nevertheless, I recognize that any further delay would be self-destructive. Therefore, despite my present state, I must begin

my journey homeward, equipped only with my humble cap and walking stick, resolved to return to my Father's house.¹²

Chavara humbly expresses his trust in God's forgiveness and unconditional love. For him, God the Father is generous in forgiving and forgetting his ingratitude and all the sins. He makes his soul conscious of it, saying, "You are sure to be reinstated to your former filial status and privileges. Oh, I have a look at my Father's palace and the mansions therein with their graceful high walls."¹³ Chavara is sure of the Heavenly Father's love for him. He reflects on his life and realizes that he is not better than the prodigal son. But Chavara has trust in God and tells his soul with confidence, "Yes, that's true indeed. Still my Father is so generous and full of love that I needn't entertain any fear."¹⁴ It is the unshakable trust in God that enabled him to persevere during the tough moments. Through prayer and steadfast faith and confidence in God, he confronted every challenge. Prayer is keeping the doors of our hearts open at all times, allowing God to enter whenever He wishes. The openness to God with clear conscience is the result of the unreserved trust in Him.

8. Sin: A Barrier to Experiencing God's Mercy

Chavara firmly believed that human sins offend God and are the root cause of all the problems the humanity faces. His meditations on mortal sin reflect on the sin as a grievous wound by which we separate ourselves from God. As a priest, he was greatly sensitive even to the slightest transgressions, fully aware of their impact on himself and others. Sin, he taught, is a perilous path that distances us from God. Thus, Chavara remained ever

12 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 4.

13 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 4.

14 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 4.

vigilant in examining his conscience. According to Chavara, the improper thoughts, imaginations, and actions offend God. A priest, as a shepherd of the community, must maintain a pure and clear conscience. Chavara was unwavering in fulfilling his priestly responsibilities with utmost sincerity. For him, sin was a destructive force that draws humanity away from God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "Sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become 'like gods,' knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus 'love of oneself even to contempt of God.'"¹⁵

Chavara reminds his soul to be cautious of even the smallest tendency to offend God by disobeying the divine law. To him, all sins, regardless of the size, bring about the same harmful effects on the human soul. As one sins, one makes a false attempt to stand on his/her own, but in reality, he/she is nothing without God's grace. Chavara asks, "O privileged priest of God, countless saints and holy souls have chosen to endure every kind of suffering - even to the end of time - rather than commit the smallest offense against God. You deceive yourself if you consider sin, especially mortal sin, to be something minor. How can you think that offending and denying Jesus is a simple matter? Such a belief shows that you have not fully grasped the deep horror and seriousness of sin."¹⁶ When we are careless in obeying God's will, we are open to be trapped by the evil.

9. Urgency of a Sinless Life

Chavara reflects on the reasons that compel us not to commit sin against God. According to him, sin arises from an unawareness

15 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1849-1850), Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1994.

16 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, Meditation on Mortal Sin*, 29.

of God's invaluable blessings. Life itself is the greatest sign of God's love. Chavara warns his soul with a beautiful example:

O priest, your life is a blessing through Him; you live because He gave His own life for you. Do you believe that the sin of a priest and the sin of a simple, uneducated person will be judged equally? Certainly not. God, who is perfectly just, rewards and punishes each according to their position and responsibility. His justice is flawless and never errs. Just as a king may excuse a stain on a comedian's garment but would be angered to find one on his son's or queen's robe, so too does God show greater patience toward the laity. But when a priest commits even a small venial sin, it is a grave offense. God holds priests to a higher standard of responsibility, and their failings are judged more severely.¹⁷

The priests must vigilantly safeguard their souls, avoiding even the slightest venial sins. When we repeatedly commit venial sins without listening to our conscience, believing them to be insignificant, we gradually succumb to the temptation of mortal sin. Chavara advises: "Avoid even the smallest sin in your priestly life, for you are appointed to lead souls to salvation through sacrifice, prayer, and penance. Failure to do so may cause the grace of God to be withdrawn, ultimately resulting in spiritual ruin."¹⁸ We must firmly resist the wickedness of evil and always submit ourselves to the will of God.

Chavara continually examined his conscience in prayer, reflecting on how faithfully he lived the holiness demanded of the priests. He earnestly scrutinized whether he had neglected any opportunity to serve God and his fellow human beings. Chavara called upon the people of God, especially the priests, to exercise great care and vigilance in dedicating themselves to

17 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, Meditations on Mortal Sin*, 31.

18 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father, Meditations on Mortal Sin*, 31.

the divine mission entrusted to them by God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

10. Repentance: The Foundation of Sincere Confession

According to Chavara, confession of sins is the first step to enter into prayer effectively and experience God's mercy. Our sins block the path to God. In his meditations, Chavara emphasized the sincere confession of even the smallest of the venial sins. He explained, "Meditation requires that one be united in love with God. But a sinful heart is incompatible with God. Therefore, on the very first day of my meditation, I must come to my Saviour, Jesus Christ, my beloved Bridegroom, to beg pardon for my sins."¹⁹ The Spirit of the Lord must guide us into meditation, for without His help, we are unable to experience God's loving care.

Chavara was convinced that without true repentance and sincere confession, no one could draw near to God. In prayer, he declares, "I come to You, my Heavenly Father, with a heart full of sorrow and a firm desire to change, seeking the peace only You can give. Though my sorrow is far less than the weight of my many sins, I offer it to You with deep grief and a spirit of penance."²⁰ To approach God was a painful task for Chavara, for his heart ached over the faults that had tarnished the image of God. He was filled with deep remorse for his grave negligence in doing good, despite the blessings he had received. His conscience would pierce him every time as he looked at the crucifix, recognizing the countless wounds borne by Christ due to his sins. Therefore, he was prepared to endure any punishment, even for a lifetime, in atonement for his wrongdoings. In complete humility, he surrendered himself to God saying, "O merciful Father! I am

19 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 3.

20 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 3.

unable to raise my eyes and look upon Your face. Lord, as I gaze upon Your holy head, I am filled with fear at the thought of how it came to be pierced with thorns. How many times have I pierced Your head through my pride and impure thoughts! O Lord, place Your crown of thorns upon my head, so that I may be strengthened to maintain the spirit of repentance until my death and keep my mind free from any thought displeasing to You."²¹ True repentance and confession transform a person's attitude and actions, bringing them into harmony with the will of God.

11. Conclusion

Chavara was a man of God, who tirelessly devoted himself to the well-being of the Church and the humanity. His commitment to protect the Church cannot be fully understood without appreciating spirit of prayer and his profound experience of God through a life of unwavering devotion. His literary works consistently reflect the love and mercy of God, emphasizing above all the need to fulfil God's will, regardless of the difficulties encountered on the way. His own life, marked by turmoil and trials, stands as a testament to his unshakable faith in God's protection. Prayer was the only means and method for him to discern and fulfil God's will. He humbly opened his heart to the Lord, recognizing his own unworthiness even to stand before the tabernacle. Another major focus of his spirituality was sincere repentance; he believed that confession of failures purified the soul, making one worthy to approach God. This deep conviction is well-explained in his *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, a work that continues to inspire the readers on their journey towards spiritual perfection.

21 *Colloquies with the Heavenly Father*, 6-7.

KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA - GOD'S WORK OF ART

Sebastian Elavathingal CMI

1. Conforming to the Image of Christ

The result of prayer is our gradual "conformity" with Jesus Christ. "Conformity" with Jesus Christ means becoming the image of Christ, who is the ultimate form for our imitation and assimilation. It takes place in the life of discipleship. Imitating Christ is a process by which we put on the features of Christ and become another Christ (*Alter Christus*). St Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 13:14). Clothing does not mean a superficial change. It is a change of identity of the person. St Paul demands a radical change of life, being liberated from the attractions to sin and renewed in the attitudes of the mind. To the Ephesians, he writes: "Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires" and "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22-24). The life of discipleship is a process of conversion and transformation at all levels of experience - physical, mental, and emotional until the disciple becomes the spiritual image of Christ adorned with "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience" (Col 3:12).

2. God the Artist - Maker, Inspirer, and Model

Imitation of Christ is essentially a creative process. The creative nature of an activity is seen in its procedure. To be creative, it must be a conscious and purposeful activity. Its result is not accidental or casual, but planned and intentional. Hence, artworks are not mere mechanical productions but meaningful creations. They

are expressions of the knowledge and freedom of the maker. The imitation of Christ and the transformation of a disciple are considered successful when the disciple attains perfection as a "work of art."

God has a crucial and decisive role to play in the creative transformation of a disciple into a "work of art" after the model of Christ. God's role in this artistic process can be seen as His three "Trinitarian" functions of the "Maker," the "Inspirer," and the "Model." The Father is the "Maker," the Holy Spirit the "Inspirer," and the Son the "Model." God as the Father is the supreme Maker of everything. In the Book of Isaiah, we read: "Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay; you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Is 64:8; See also, Is 29:16). The Father has called us to existence and provided us with all the physical, mental, and emotional resources we possess. It is with these resources that we undergo the process of transformation for which Jesus is the model or the mould. Already in creation, he is present as the Image of God who is the cause and destiny of every created thing in the universe. "He is the Image of the invisible God ... by him all things were created...all things were created by him and for him" (Col 1:15-16). In the letter to the Philippians, Jesus Christ is said to transform our bodies into his glorious body, suggesting his role as the ultimate form or model according to which everyone is moulded and transformed. Jesus the Son "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil 3:21). But ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who begins and brings to completion the work of transformation in us. "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). The agency of the Holy Spirit in our conformation with the Image of Jesus Christ according to the plan of God is affirmed in the letter to the Romans: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For, we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit

himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ... We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom 8:26-29). The Holy Spirit accompanies us with consistent inspiration and help in all the struggles that our transformation demands.

Everyone who successfully imitates Christ and reaches spiritual perfection is a "masterpiece of God." The agency of our transformation is attributed to God because it is God who, through the Holy Spirit, performs the work. He knows, calls, and predestines all to their final goal. "For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29). Human beings collaborate in the work by making their physical resources available for transformation. The ultimate goal of the imitation of Christ in discipleship is the transformation of the physical, mental, and emotional resources of the disciples into a spiritual or a transfigured body after the model of Jesus Christ. Prayer stands for the entire gamut of the transforming process in which all faculties of a person are involved.

3. The Art of Prayer in Chavara's Life

Chavara became a "masterpiece of God" through the "art" of prayer. He actualized in his life the words of St Paul: "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). His transformation as a work the divine Artist was planned, designed and visualized by God already in advance. Chavara recounts in *Atmanuthapam*¹

1 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Compunction of the Soul (Atmanuthapam)*, 1.1-4.

how he was chosen by God at different stages of his life. On his part, he cooperated with the choice of God through prayer. He considered himself to be a humble creature like a worm. But as a miracle wrought by God, he was raised to the status of a child of God. Prayer was for him nothing but making himself available to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit with all his heart, all his soul, and all his mind (Cf. Mt 22:37). The divine design and inspiration on the one hand and the human resources on the other make prayer a spiritual-material experience rather than a purely spiritual or a merely material event.

Sometimes the result of prayer is thought of simply as an inner experience within the "closed doors" (Mt 6:6). But prayer is also expressive; it produces outward effects. The external visible effect of prayer is the transformation of the person. The body of the praying person becomes the visible witness of the invisible spiritual experience. In prayer, the spiritual and physical aspects, the soul and the body of a praying person communicate in such a way that the inner spiritual experience is manifested as a corresponding physical expression. In authentic prayer, the body of the praying person becomes a symbol, a witness of the experience of the soul. The body gives an eloquent testimony to the spiritual experience of the person. It accounts for the various expressions of faith, praise, and gratitude in prayer. The lack of correspondence between the inner experience and the outer expressions, be it in prayer or social conduct, is condemned by Jesus as hypocrisy. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 7:21). "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence" (Mt 23:25). Prayer transforms the whole person, as in the case of the "Transfiguration" of the Lord on Mount Tabor. "There he was transfigured before them. His face shone

like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (Mt 17:1-8). It is a physical-spiritual event impelled by the Spirit of God.

There is a material as well as a spiritual dimension in the transformation that takes place in prayer. As the face and the clothes became as bright as the sun, the materials underwent a striking change, becoming the effective expressions of the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is true also of an artistic work. The materials of art, such as wood, metal, or clay, are transformed physically by the hands of the artists. But the transformation is not merely physical; it is simultaneously spiritual. Thus, an artwork is meaningful to the mind as it is beautiful to the eyes.

The meaningfulness of an artwork is due to the concept or design of the work in the mind of the artist. Before setting out to do the physical operation, sculpting, or moulding, the artist has to conceive a design of the work to be done. The artist goes through a meditation in which the hidden potential of the given materials is discovered. It is essentially a spiritual process in which the design of the work to be done is imagined and conceived. According to the traditional principle of Indian art, it is "*dr̥ṣṭva dhyāyēt, dhyātva kuryāt*,"² meaning that artists have to move from "observation to reflection and then from reflection to action." The physical action of making must be preceded by a spiritual preparation of study and reflection. An awareness process is essential in art. That is why it is said that "art without science is nothing." Art is also defined as the "right knowledge of making things."

The personal transformation of Chavara took place through his intense study, reflection, and prayer. He subdued his

2 Sebastian Elavathingal, *Inculturation and Christian Art – An Indian Perspective*, Rome: Urbanian University Press, 1990, 147.

physical resources, heart, mind, and body to the will of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We can find in his person a union (*yoga*) of material aspects and spiritual energies by which his life became a testimony before the world to God's presence and work.

4. "Method" of Prayer or "Art" of Prayer?

How did Chavara pray? This question naturally refers to the "method" he followed in his journey of prayer. But considering prayer as an experience of personal transformation, the "method" employed in prayer is to be understood as the "art" of prayer. We consider here two words – "method" and "art." They have some similarities and some differences. Both words have more or less the same meaning of the "technique" of making something. But the term art refers to the "subject" who is the maker, while the method refers only to the "object" that is made. In other words, a method is a scientific approach to the making of something. It is impersonal and task-oriented. It may eventually become "mechanical" or "habitual," lacking in awareness and freedom. In industrial productions, for example, the production belt stands for efficiency and the quality of production. Art, on the other hand, displays the awareness and the freedom of the artist. Artworks are the artists' "self-expression," their vision, inspiration, and imagination.

The transformation of materials like clay or marble into an artwork - a pot or a statue - corresponds also to an inner transformation of their makers. Artworks are simultaneously the witnesses of the artists' spiritual conversion. In other words, the making of an artwork signifies the "becoming" (the evolving) of the artist as well.

When we consider the methods employed in prayer, we have to emphasize the "artistic" character of those methods.

Without the sense of art, all prayer methods run the risk of being mechanical and habitual. The relationship of the praying persons to the methods is often limited to an objective level, in which their aim is limited to some material gain rather than the praying person's spiritual realization. They overlook the spiritual transformation of the person. But when understood in the artistic sense, the various steps of prayer and their outward expressions correspond to the inner, spiritual conversion of the praying person. In the same way that the artistic process is a "material-spiritual" experience, the various exercises or *sādhana*s of prayer are transformative experiences for the whole person - body and soul. It is a wilful and conscious process, not mechanical or habitual actions. We can, therefore, speak of artworks as products that witness the three basic experiences in all artists: Inspiration, Imagination, and Transformation.

5. The Four Steps of Chavara's Art of Prayer

Whatever we speak of artistic creativity can be applied to prayer. Prayer is not a mechanical activity but a creative, artistic activity. It is against this background we speak of the "art of prayer" of St Chavara. He has taught us a creative method of prayer. There are four steps in it: Reading, Solitude, Meditation, and Contemplation.³ Evidently, we can discern in Chavara's prayer method the various steps of an artistic procedure. They are observing, remembering, visualizing, and making. The four steps of prayer - reading, solitude, meditation, and contemplation taught by Chavara are aimed at the transformation of the praying

3 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, 7.8, Vol 4 of *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat, 2020, 135. See also *St. Chavara and the Servant of God Fr. Canisius (Vishudha Chavarayachanum Daivadasan Kanisiyusachanum)*, published by Davis Panackal, Kottamuri, Kottackal: Canisius Publications, 2019, 169-181.

person into a work of art. It can be compared to the moulding and fashioning of an artwork by the hands of the divine Artist.

Reading plays an important role in forming the imagination of the person. Reading spiritual books like the Sacred Scripture, the lives of the saints, and motivational literature helps us to enrich our imagination and purge it of all negative thoughts and ideas. By reading good and inspiring books, the ground is prepared for removing the unwanted weeds and sowing the seeds of virtues. Saint Teresa of Avila writes about the initial steps of prayer: "A beginner must look upon himself as one setting out to make a garden for his Lord's pleasure, on the most unfruitful soil which abounds in weeds."⁴ Removing the unwanted weeds and nurturing the desired plants in the garden of imagination is a necessary process in the preparation for prayer. We cannot sustain our concentration in prayer due to the invasion of unwanted thoughts and images that have already corrupted our imagination. Reading spiritual and inspirational books nurtures a healthy imagination while weaning off the harmful weeds. This process settles our mind to experience significant silence and peaceful reflection. Chavara always took great interest in providing his spiritual children with good books. For that purpose, he started a printing press that produced prayer books and spiritual books.

4 Saint Teresa began to write *The Book of Her Life* in 1562 and completed it in 1565. The centrepiece of the book (Chapters 11–22) is a treatise on prayer. St Teresa speaks of different kinds of prayer as different ways of drawing water for the garden of the soul, where virtues grow.

See "Four Waters of Prayer from the Life of St Teresa by Herself", Penguin, 1957, at <https://catholiccharitiesatlanta.org/wp-content/uploads/7-four-waters-of-prayer-by-st.-teresa-of-avila.pdf>, accessed on 19-08-2023.

Chavara had not only written books but also considered the Book of Nature a veritable source of information and learning. In Nature, we find God's marvels revealed, enriching our imagination. It is true that there is nothing in the mind that is not in the senses. It shows the importance of sense perception in shaping our knowledge.

Solitude leads to silence, and silence makes a person reflective. In the silence of solitude, one reflects on oneself and the world. Self-awareness may lead a person to gratitude for the gifts received, repentance for the sins committed, and zeal to attain future possibilities. A praying person reflects in the silence of solitude on his/her physical, mental, and emotional strengths and weaknesses to know where he/she needs change and rectification. Knowledge of the self helps to adopt appropriate methods and to do exercises needed for correction and improvement. Chavara's books *Atmānuthāpam* and *Dhyānasallāpangal* are replete with prayerful reflections on his life experiences.

Chavara seems to have understood meditation as setting ablaze the memories of the Saviour – his words and actions. The intense desire to "see" the Lord constantly moves the soul. It craves the vision of the Lord.⁵ The Image of the Lord becomes clearer in the imagination of the praying person, revealing itself as an imitable form. In the practice of art, the "visualization"⁶ of the image is an important creative phase. The artist visualizes the image that is purified from selfish or transitory interests and emotions. According to the traditional principles of art, the artist is supposed to depict the ideal, not the actual image.

5 Paul Kalluveettil, *A Mystic's Metaphorical World*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 64-71.

6 Sebastian Elavathingal, *Inculturation and Christian Art*, 145-146.

The artist strives to create the possible perfection, not the actual imperfection. Traditional theories of art prescribe rigorous physical disciplines to "see" the image that is to be depicted by the artist.

Contemplation consists of being conformed to Jesus and identifying with him, sharing in his consciousness of the Son praying to the "Father-Abba."⁷ A contemplative person has a constant disposition of living and moving in God. St Chavara always breathed "Abba" in his words and actions. He said that his heart did not permit him to call God any other name than "Abba." Filled with the Holy Spirit, he realized himself as a child of God, conformed to the Son Jesus. It is the Spirit of the Son who prayed from within him. 'Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father"' (Gal 4:6).

6. Conformity with the Image of God, Jesus Christ

It is the Holy Spirit who impels a person to be conformed to the Lord, putting on his attitude and mentality. Prayer creates in the person a kind and compassionate heart similar to that of Jesus. The impact of imaginative vision is manifested in his/her physical, mental, and emotional behaviour in day-to-day life. It is the spiritual transformation through 'dying and resurrecting.' The person is 'reborn' as a child of God. The Holy Spirit begins and brings to completion the work of transformation in every praying person.

The goal of Christian discipleship and religious formation is "conformity" with Jesus Christ. In the letter to the Romans, we read: "Those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom 8:29). Our conformity

7 Paul Kalluveettil, *A Mystic's Metaphorical World*, 117-121.

with the Image of Jesus Christ is already in the plan and design of God. God has its pre-knowledge. Hence it is a vocation, a divine call given to us. God has also predestined us to be conformed to Jesus Christ.

To be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ means to undergo a purposeful and creative process of conversion and transformation. Every disciple has to undergo this process. It affects all levels of his/her experience - physical, mental, and emotional until he/she becomes a spiritual image of Christ.

The image of the Son Jesus Christ is the rallying point of all disciples who follow him. The challenge before them is to transform their "clay", earthly body into a glorious heavenly body. St Paul writes to the Corinthians: "As we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor 15:49). Man of dust is Adam, and the man of heaven is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is given to us as the ideal or supreme model for our imitation. His way of life shows the process or the method of imitation. It is the way of death and resurrection like a grain of wheat fallen in the ground, dying and living again with renewed life. As we progress in imitating the given model, we have to undergo a moulding process in our human person, assimilating more and more to the Christ-Image.

The "Exemplar" role of the Christ-Image in relation to the created world is emphasized by St Paul in his letter to the Colossians. "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). According to Saint Augustine, Jesus Christ is the 'Art of God' in creation. He is the "Word" or "Design" of creation. In other words, Jesus Christ is the right "measure," "proportion," and "mould" of every perfect work created by God. It also means that in Jesus Christ, we can find the "method" and "process" through which God created and redeemed the world. St Paul uses another expression in the letter to the Romans to

indicate the primacy of Jesus Christ in relation to the redeemed creation. He is the "firstborn" of the new humanity through his resurrection (Rom 8:28-29).

7. We are God's Masterpieces

Everyone who successfully imitates Christ and reaches spiritual perfection is a "work of art." In the letter to the Ephesians, St Paul writes: "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph 2:10). It means that we are God's works of art, His masterpieces, created after the model of Jesus Christ. The entire human person is involved in this transformation. He/she becomes an "artwork" by transforming his/her physical materials of body, mind, and heart into a spiritual or a transfigured image. "The Lord Jesus Christ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil 3:21). The transformation from the earthly to the divine is the end result of a painful struggle. St Paul speaks of it as the pain of childbirth. "The whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now" (Rom 8:22).

While a person undergoes a painful process to become a "work of art," God plays His crucial and decisive role as the Artist. The obedient collaboration of the human person must accompany God's work. In the Book of Isaiah, we read: "Lord, we are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Is 64:8). The clay needs flexibility and pliability to receive the shape given to it. The attitude of receptivity to new forms is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In every creative experience in human life, there is the presence and work of the Holy Spirit from inspiration to its completion. In the letter to the Philippians, Jesus Christ is said to transform our bodies into his glorious body. But ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who begins and brings to completion the work of transformation in every praying person. "I am sure of this, that

he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6).

The agency of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of every believer and his/her conformity to the Image of Jesus Christ according to the plan of God is affirmed in the letter to the Romans: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom 8:28-29).

8. Art in Chavara's Method of Prayer

It is against the background of this Biblical view of the creative imitation of Jesus Christ that we try to understand the teaching of prayer laid out by St Chavara in his writings. The four steps of prayer⁸ - reading, solitude, meditation, and contemplation - taught by Chavara are aimed at the transformation of a praying person, which can be compared to the formation of artwork by the hands of the divine Artist. We can see Chavara himself as an "artwork" that has attained spiritual perfection passing through various formative phases of life. We can observe the process of making an artwork in the experiences of prayer practiced and proposed by Chavara.

Reading good books prepares the mind to develop a proper imaginative vision of the model image with its contours, forms, and colours. It has two functions: 1) purging the mind of negative images and 2) filling the mind with noble thoughts and ideas. According to traditional practices of art, artists are supposed to perform some ascetical exercises to free the mind from all transitory images. They include fasting and *yoga*. The unbridled

8 Kuriakose Elias Chavara, *Letters*, 7.8, Vol 4 of *Complete Works of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 135.

images of sense perception are to be “yoked” and controlled as a preparation for delineating the image to be portrayed. Observation and study of nature are to be complemented by the knowledge of the traditional canons of art from the masters or canonical books. The artist has to achieve the harmony of physical and mental faculties, body and mind, dexterity, and knowledge before he/she sets to work. Chavara’s instruction to read good books in preparation for the prayer is to be understood as a means to deepen the awareness of oneself and the world around.

Solitude and silence are necessary for the “visualization” of the image. The observed data are not organized or defined. They are chaotic and unintelligible. Only through a reflective process, the observed and studied forms, patterns, and colours can be developed into an imitable idea. The traditional principle of art is *dr̥ṣṭva dhyāyeṭ* (the perceived data is to be meditated). Knowledge of the traditional canons of art is helpful in the process.

In spiritual life, the given materials to work with are the body, mind, and emotions of the person with their limitations and possibilities. A praying person reflectively assesses them before he/she visualizes the image to be depicted. The image often lies hidden as a possibility in the actual conditions of life. Silence and solitude help to awaken and animate it.

Meditation or *yoga-dhyāna* is the process of visualizing an image with clarity of all its features. It takes place through a mental activity inspired by the Spirit. The artist in a state of the Spirit’s possession transforms the given materials into an imitable idea. It is a spiritual vision that reveals the possibilities hidden in the materials. The inspiration, the working of the Spirit in the artist is so intense that sometimes it is said that the artist has the vision directly from heaven, from God.

In spiritual life, meditation leads to the vision of the Lord. His glorious image of Jesus is revealed through the events

of his suffering, death, and resurrection. Hence, the spiritual understanding of the image is as a dynamic reality, not as a static object. It is endowed with the energy to be revealed with infinite possibilities.

Artistic operation consists of realizing in materials the visualized image. The materials are transformed according to the vision of the artist. The materials become meaningful, and the vision becomes effective. Every artistic expression is a continued witnessing and proclamation of the inner vision of the artist. Every image is, therefore, considered an event rather than an object.

Contemplative life makes the life of a person a constant witness and an eloquent proclamation of the Lord, even in the moments of silence. He/she actualizes the presence of the Lord through gestures, words, and actions. His/her life becomes an uninterrupted memory, an aspiratory prayer of repentance, gratitude, praise, and joy. Chavara's life of prayer is an example of this spiritual perfection. Prayer transformed him into a work of art by the hands of God. There is God's signature on him, on all his actions and words. That is the beauty of his holiness. The beauty of holiness is the transcendence of truth captivated by its various spatial and temporal limitations. Holiness liberates truth from the actual conditions of human life, pain, agony, and ugliness. On the cross of Christ, we can find the truth of suffering and death. It is this truth that is transcended by the resurrection and glorified by the beauty of life. Beauty is, therefore, the revelation (*aletheia*)⁹ and the transparency of truth. It is through prayer that Chavara confronted the reality of life and attained the beauty of holiness.

9 See Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, New York: Harper and Row, 1972, 69-70.

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