

CHAVARA'S VISION OF A RELIGIOUS PRIEST AND FORMATOR

Johnson Valiyakulathil CMI

Abstract: In this reflection, Chavara is presented as an established guru of great learning and a saintly disposition, a formator in the great Indian tradition of *gurukula* for whom people had great admiration. The *malpanate* system, which was typically Indian in nomenclature, was essentially a *gurukula* system of ecclesiastical education, was gradually replaced by the seminaries founded by the Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans and Carmelites, which offered a western system of education. Chavara established seminaries attached to several monasteries along with the one common seminary for the whole Church established at Puthenpally. The God-experience of Chavara made him so authentic that he taught his disciples both by words and example. He reformed the Church introducing annual retreats for priests in the monastery and the faithful in the parishes.

Keywords: *Gurukulam*, Indian spiritual tradition, guru, ashram, disciples, monastic way, spiritual experience, spiritual power, religious profession, spiritual awakening, community, priestly formation, *malpanate*, ecclesiastical education, reformer, Roccas Schism, liturgy, Eucharist, Blessed Sacrament

1. Introduction

“You my love, my joy and all my good fortune
If not with you, how could I live my life?
My very breath, my food my drink
What solace have I, save in you?”
(Chavara, *Compunction of Soul*, Vol. II. Stanza 144)

These lines from St Chavara clearly tell us how intense was his desire to be one with the Lord, with his soul and body. This desire constantly accompanied him as his breath, food, and drink and he left no stone unturned for the realization of this ideal no matter how much it cost.

2. The Indian Gurukula Tradition

With a clear vision of Christian life, Chavara worked towards the attainment of the goal that he had set for himself, the Church and the society. As an established guru in the Indian tradition, he spoke from his heart as well as from his head, for he was brought up in a *gurukula* tradition, a great intellectual and spiritual patrimony India has inherited. Hence, Chavara became a well-recognized formator/guru, who could guide his disciples with authority, the power that emerged from within, the spiritual power that came with the self-realization. This spiritual power that he wielded came from the way he maintained his relationship with God, which was also the source of power of Jesus, the great Guru about whom the Jews of his time wondered: "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" (Mk 11:28).

In India, there were ashrams, big and small which used to be headed by a person of extensive learning, spiritual experience, mastery of various arts and high intellectual acumen. These extraordinary persons attracted disciples who would want to learn the way of life followed by the guru until they learnt all that the guru had to teach them. In these ashrams, many disciples lived with the guru, turning it into a *gurukula*.

In a similar fashion, Chavara possessed a spiritual power that attracted people to him. They had great admiration for him; they looked at him both as a man of great learning and as a saintly person. They considered him to be an enlightened and spirit filled person that they spontaneously refer to him as 'a person filled with Holy Spirit.' Inspired by his masters Fr Thomas Palackal and Fr Thomas Porukara and guided by the wisdom of Chavara, there were about twenty one around him preparing to consecrate themselves. Among these, ten were priests who rallied around Chavara to step into a monastic way of life in the religious congregation which was not yet founded.

3. The Making of a Guru

The Catholic population in Kerala at large was greatly taken up by the vibrant spiritual power at work in Chavara. Groups of faithful from various regions came to Chavara with a request for the foundation of a new monastery in their region offering him the much needed land, money, labour, legal permissions from the civil government, etc. Their only request was to send two priests to live in the newly built religious house in their area when all construction work was over. The surprising

result was that after the profession of the first group of eleven Fathers in 1855, a new monastery was founded every year, until 1861.

The enormous cooperation Chavara received from people of his time and the deep trust they had in him led to the spiritual awakening of the people whom he carried in his heart. They received his direction and guidance and continued to receive it through the priests whom he formed in the community. However, before we see Chavara as a formator, we need look at the historical background of priestly formation in his time.

4. Evolution of Seminary Formation in India

The history of the formation of an indigenous religious congregation in India is inextricably bound with the names of three holy priests of outstanding personal integrity, worth and organizational talents. Those priests were Fr. Thomas Palackal, Fr. Thomas Porukara and Fr. Kuriakose Elias Chavara.¹ Priestly formation first started in Kerala, the Southern part of India, with the clergy of the Malabar Church.² However, it was not at a systematically organized institution as it is today. In those days, the general educational system that was prevalent in India was known as *gurukulavasam*.³ The seminary formation, by and large, was given in a similar manner. The candidate for the priesthood lived with the parish priest or with an elderly priest who guided him with instructions on various ecclesiastical disciplines mostly based on catechetical principles and ritual rubrics. This was commonly known as the *malpanate* system.⁴ Syriac language was used as medium of theological instructions. This system of ecclesiastical education gradually disappeared with the opening of religious seminaries by the Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans and Carmelites in the 19th century.

Almost all the seminaries founded in India by the European missionaries were attached to religious houses and monasteries. However, the missionaries were reluctant to accept candidates from

¹These are the three founding fathers of CMI Congregation. The first two passed away in 1841 and 1846, respectively. Chavara was the first Prior General of the Congregation. He passed away with the odour of sanctity on 3rd January 1871. Pope John Paul II beatified Fr. Chavara during his visit to Kerala in 1986.

²In India there are three particular Churches or rites: the Syro Malabar Church from the apostolic times, the Latin Church from the 16th century, and the Syro Malankara Church from 1932.

³*Gurukulavasam* is a Sanskrit word, which means live with teacher.

⁴*Malpan* is a Syriac word, synonymous with teacher and professor.

among the St Thomas Christians.⁵ The whole formation programme in these seminaries had a western orientation.⁶ On the contrary, although the *malpanate* system had its own drawbacks, it was thoroughly based on a typically Indian culture.

5. Beginning of a New Era

In 1833, Fr Thomas Palackal was the first Indian to establish a formal seminary at Mannanam for the training of priests. Fr Palackal had a prophetic vision and he saw that Chavara, whom he trained, as an exemplary force that would inspire and strengthen the priests of the Indian Church. This seminary became one of the landmarks in the history of the Church in India. Later, as he followed the footsteps of Fr Palackal, his teacher, the Vicar Apostolic of the Church in Malabar, having heard of the good training the priests received at Mannanam seminary, asked Chavara to establish seminaries attached to the other monasteries and suppressed all other domestic seminaries (*malpanates*). Thus seminaries were established at Vazhakulam in 1866, at Elthuruth in 1868 and at Pulinkunnu in 1872. All these seminaries continued until 1892, when a common seminary for the whole Church in Kerala was founded at Puthenpally under the vicariate of Verapolly. However, the seminary that was established at Mannanam continued to cater to the need of the local church until 1894.⁷

6. Chavara: A Model for Formators

Saint Chavara, a great sage born in Kerala, in the early 19th century, consecrated his energy, skills and life for the Indian Church. The God-experience of Chavara did not end with his personal encounter with God. He extended his experience to others as well. His spiritual life was a harmonious blend of love for God and concern for humankind. Chavara saw the divinity in himself and around him, in its humanness. He had the eye of a historian, the tongue of an honest man and the vision of a *sanyasi*. Above all, this holy man spent every moment of his life for the material and spiritual advancement of his people which would take place by means of the many spiritual leaders

⁵They trace their descent from the Palur Brahmins converted by St Thomas the Apostle, in 52 A.D.

⁶Mathew Vallipalam, *Priestly Formation in the Changing Society of India*, 13.

⁷CMI Prior General's House, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis*, Kochi: KCM Press, 2004, 80.

whom he trained. He was really a guru who loved his *sisya* keeping up the tradition of the Indian culture.

As a saint, prophet, humanist, spiritual leader, social activist and great visionary, Chavara imparted a new dynamism and model for contemporary formators. Although he did not take the initiative for starting the seminary at Mannanam, he played an important role in the formation of the seminarians as professor even before the death of Fr Palackal, the founder of the seminary. He taught the seminarians both at Mannanam and Pallipuram. Even as a deacon he had some experience of teaching and managing the seminary. As testified by his own companions, he inspired them to live and imitate his virtues of piety, simplicity, humility, obedience, modesty and brotherly love.⁸ Chavara was given the sacred tonsure in 1818, the year in which he joined the seminary. Fr. Leopold⁹ writes about this in the biography:

It sometimes happens that those who have a genuine vocation and possess priestly virtues and knowledge are raised to the sacred orders earlier in life, even though they may not ask for them. It was the case with Chavara. He was privileged to receive the sacred tonsure at the age of 13. His vocation was really tested after he had received the order of tonsure, as both his parents and his only brother fell victim to the epidemic, leaving his sister-in-law and her only daughter behind. His uncles and many relatives advised him to return to the family and continue the family heritage, but he stood firm in his decision and made arrangements to take care of the orphan family.¹⁰

Fr. Leopold continues in the same biography:

The young cleric realized that an uneducated priest was not only inefficient to do anything worthwhile in his pastoral work, but may even be detrimental to the salvation of souls. Therefore, after receiving the sacred tonsure he devoted himself entirely to his studies so that he may become a knowledgeable priest.¹¹

Chavara was officially given the title of *Malpan* only in 1844. As the *Malpan* and rector of the seminary at Mannanam, Chavara attended very carefully to the formation of the future pastors. As Marceline

⁸Prior General's House, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis*, 82.

⁹Fr Leopold Maria Beccaro was an Italian Carmelite who came to Malabar in 1860. He was the confessor and spiritual director of Chavara from 1864 till the death of the latter in 1871 and was also the Delegate of the Vicar Provincial for the Syro Malabar Carmelites from 1861 to 1873.

¹⁰Prior General's House, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis*, 83.

¹¹Prior General's House, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis*, 84.

Berardi observes, "He took great pains in teaching the students with exhortation and examples."¹²

7. Model in Words and Deeds

Chavara taught his disciples both by words and example. His zeal for the salvation of others and the different pastoral activities ensuing from it, such as preaching and administering the sacraments certainly influenced the seminarians under his care. Lessons were most effective as words were followed by deeds. Highly demanding was his responsibility as the *Malpan*, which he carried out in the midst of his other positions as the superior of a nascent religious congregation.

The worth of the seminary at Mannanam was proved on the occasion of the Roccisian schism. A good number of the priests along with the faithful of the Church in Malabar subjected themselves to the jurisdiction of the Chaldean bishop, Thomas Roccas,¹³ against the clear decree of the Pope and the Vicar Apostolic. The priests who had been trained at the seminary at Mannanam remained loyal to the Church in spite of having to face many trials and inconveniences. Msgr Bernardine Baccinelli, the Vicar Apostolic, pleased with the training given at Mannanam, suppressed all the other centres of priestly training except the one at Mannanam and asked Chavara in 1872 to start seminaries attached to other monasteries as well, in the model of the seminary at Mannanam.

8. Chavara: A Spiritual Reformer

Chavara, while forming the future priests in the seminary, also felt the need of the continued spiritual renewal of the priests engaged in pastoral activities. Along with the running of the seminary at Mannanam he also organized annual retreats for priests in the monastery. He paid special attention to the ongoing formation and renewal of priests after the event of the Roccisian schism. Fr Plathottam summarises his efforts as follows:

The first and most important concern of Chavara was to bring about a renewal of the priestly community, the shepherds of souls.

¹²Marceline Berardi was a Carmelite (OCD) missionary and was mentoring the first members of the CMI Congregation. It was he who, as the delegate of the Vicar Apostolic, received the religious profession of Chavara in 1855.

¹³Thomas Roccas was a Chaldean bishop who came visiting the Church in Malabar in 1861 and subsequently began to exercise jurisdiction over the Malabar Church.

To achieve this he made special arrangements through the seminaries that he founded attached to the monasteries. The majority of the priests who stood by him and fought during the schism were those who were trained in the monastery seminary. In order to ensure the presence of such brave soldiers in the future, he made timely revisions of the seminary rules. He arranged retreats for priests. He made a book of the divine office for himself for daily recital and wanted to see that all priests prayed the divine office regularly to nourish their spiritual life. With the permission of the Vicar Apostolic, he revised and abridged the books of the divine office for the purpose.¹⁴

Fr Kuriakose Porukara summarises the lifestyle of the first fathers in the following words:

They prayed continuously for a long time in meditation and vigils and offered Holy Mass with such devotion as to cause tears in the participants. Through their sermons on Sundays and feast days, and through their continuous counselling, they stirred this region and removing the spiritual darkness, spread the divine light.¹⁵

9. Chavara and the Liturgical Life

The liturgical life of Chavara is a model for the contemporary formators, to live for themselves and to lead the candidates for religious life. Chavara was a formator who had really understood the importance of liturgy and lived it. He drew the power for his zealous apostolic work from the central mystery of the liturgy, the Eucharist. His devotion and care in offering the Eucharistic sacrifice moved the participants to fervour. He was very careful to preserve the Church and other sacred things with due care. His zeal in administering the sacraments to the sick sometimes went to the extent of risking his own life.

On Chavara's Eucharistic devotion, Fr. Kuriakose Porukara writes: The devotion to the Eucharist was shining in him [Chavara] throughout his life. In offering the Eucharistic sacrifice he showed great devotion and faith and participants were moved to greater devotion and piety. Besides the visits to the Blessed Sacrament

¹⁴Valerian Plathottam, *Vannya Divya Sree Chavara Kuriakos Elias Achan* (Mal.), Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 1939, 203.

¹⁵Joseph Kanjiramattathil, *The Pastoral Vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, (Doctoral Dissertation), Rome: Pontifical University Lateranense, 1984, 66.

according to the rule, he spent a lot of time daily, praying on his knees before the Eucharist.¹⁶

As Chavara led a life centred on the liturgy, he also wished that others too, experience it in the same way. He desired very much that the candidates as well as the priests would actively and with devotion, participate in the divine worship and draw much fruit from it. Hence he laboured much to put the liturgical practices of the Church of Malabar in order and enrich them with necessary additions. What motivated Chavara to put so much effort into the field of liturgy was his pastoral zeal for the spiritual renovation of the faithful as well as that of the priests and the glory of God. "The various endeavours he had undertaken during his life give evidence to his deep interest and zeal in the proper conducting of the Divine Service," says his biographer Fr Leopold Beccaro.¹⁷

10. Pastoral Awareness of Oneself

Only those who are aware of their duties and dignity as the shepherd of God's flock will be zealous enough to lead the sheep to good pastures and waters and find ways for their better future. Some of the writings of Chavara bear witness to the fact that he was conscious of his duty as a shepherd, of walking through the right path and of responding to God's gift of vocation to religious priesthood. Pointing to the necessity of holiness in the life of a priest, he asks himself: "if you, who are specially chosen by God for his service, serve the world joining with the sons of the world without loving and serving him, who will walk on the path of virtues? It is certain that if the shepherd does not walk on the right path he will not be able to lead the flock rightly."¹⁸

Many of Chavara's writings are, on the one hand, reflections of his own awareness of his priestly existence and its duties, and on the other hand, a call to priests and aspirants to reflect on priestly life and to renew it and thereby be worthy of their vocation. For the success of the holy endeavour of forming the future Church, the humility and patience he showed, the difficulties he suffered and the journeys he made were really unimaginable. His love for the people of God led to the heroic and virtuous life he practiced. The contributions that he

¹⁶Kanjiramattathil, *Pastoral Vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 76.

¹⁷CMI Prior General's House, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis*, 89.

¹⁸Mary Leo (trans.), *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Volume. II, *The Compunction of the Soul*, Mannanam: K.E.C. Publications, 1989, 68.

made to erect *darsanaveedu*¹⁹ for God's glory and charitable works, the labour that he put in for its realization, the difficulties that he endured, the paths that he travelled and prayers that he offered, point to him as the real model for those formators who have dedicated their lives to handle the future of the Church in those who are being formed under their care.

Chavara led a religious life sanctifying himself by prayer and meditation without however, neglecting his apostolic duties. His life is a source of inspiration both for the formators and those under formation. The following observation of a scholar shows that Chavara is a model for the contemporary formator:

Father Kuriakose was a great Christian, a very holy monk and a successful founder and builder of many institutions. He lived his religious life, dedicated to the love of God; the same love inspired him to devote himself, as much as he could, to the love and service of men. It is a long and most praiseworthy record, his varied enterprises and activities for the religious, social, cultural and educational advancement of his fellowmen. The life of Chavara, a monk of extraordinary sanctity, a man of dynamic personality with broad vision, and powerful push, ever remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration to all those who care to look at it.²⁰

11. Conclusion

Chavara was a man who possessed an integrated personality. His life was a synthesis of emotional, spiritual and intellectual realms. As a person of concordance in thoughts, words, and deeds, he discerned the cultural tendencies of the time and responded to them adequately. The ecclesial, liturgical, pastoral, spiritual, financial, educational, administrative, social, religious, and cultural life of the time grabbed Chavara's attention. His outlook was much above and wider than that of his contemporaries and had its foundation in his strong faith in the providence of God. He found confidence in the thought that our task is only to arrange for the work to be done, God will provide the means for it, because all this is God's work.²¹ It was quite natural for him to find the divine hand in all the events of his life, both great and small. Similarly, his devotion and trust in the aid of the Blessed Mother often

¹⁹ It means house of contemplation.

²⁰ Joseph Kanjiramattathil, *The Pastoral Vision of Kuriakos Elias Chavara*, 26.

²¹ P. J. Thomas (ed.) *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Volume III, *The Letters*, Mannanam: K.E.C. Publications, 1989, 33.

came to his rescue. He confesses that he never had cast the net in vain, after invoking the Bl. Mother, rather he had miraculous catches.²² He experienced God not only in his thoughts and words, but also in his movements and in every breath. He was very much a man of God who brought along with him to this intense God-experience everyone who travelled with him in the journey of life.²³ He served the divine love without missing the warmth of humanity, in every relationship especially when he prepared a generation of religious for a brighter future of the Church. The contemporary formators are invited to have this intense God experience and to share it with the younger generation. Chavara's personality is an inspiration, to recognize the greatness in every aspirant and to fill their lives with the colour and flavour of healthy, human sentiments in which blooms the divine experience.

²²*Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Volume III, The Letters, 55.

²³Paul Kalluveetil, *The Lord of Heaven and Earth: Chavara Studies*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 322.