

## **ROLE OF HIS MOTHER IN THE LIFE OF SAINT CHAVARA**

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**Abstract:** The role of a woman in the society is invaluable. Not only does she contribute to the physical nourishment of every new human being coming into the world, but also keeps the society healthy thanks to her contribution towards the upbringing of the children. Studying the role of his mother in the life of Chavara, the author claims that it was Thoppil Mariam, Chavara's mother, with the support of her husband, who shaped Chavara, the visionary, playing various roles in his life as a guide, giving him a value-based character formation. The vocation of St Chavara to be a man of care and concern for the society, and his positive response to the vocation was a Mother's Sacrifice! This sacrifice, however, paid off. A compassionate pastor, a caring prior, and a gentle father, the author has glorified the motherhood of all mothers through the depiction of Mariam as an ideal mother whose motherhood was fulfilled in her son who is a saint.

**Keywords:** motherhood, Chavara, family, literature, visionary, formation, religious life, parents, testament, vocation, pastor, monastery

### **1. Introduction**

Motherhood is a sign of God's action in the world and in some ways it manifests God's own self-giving. Motherhood is a symbol of love. In the Christian vision, motherhood is so glorified that God chooses to bless it by means of his incarnation. It is in human motherhood that God gives his greatest gift to human kind - Christ himself.<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II exhorts women:

Motherhood is woman's vocation. It is an eternal vocation, and it is also a contemporary vocation. "The mother who understands everything and embraces each of us with her heart"; these are the words of a song sung by young people in Poland... The song goes

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<sup>1</sup>Bhavya, *Indian Women in Religious Life: A Formative Approach*. Thrissur: Holy Family Publications, 2003, 120.

on to announce that today the world is particularly “hungry and thirsty” for that motherhood, which is woman’s vocation “physically” and “spiritually”, as it is Mary’s.<sup>2</sup>

Affirming the need for an effective campaign for the dignity and promotion of women in all areas of life, because this is “a part of God’s plan for humanity,”<sup>3</sup> the Pope points out that the vocation to motherhood makes women sensitive to the needs and sufferings of others. God has given women the ability to influence and along with this privilege comes a responsibility to use it for God’s glory.<sup>4</sup> Influence is the art of getting people to do things by appeal, suggestion or advice. An influential person is one who can get people to act by advising, appealing or instructing them to do something.<sup>5</sup> The ability to influence other people to act in the best interest of others and self is one of the most important skills one can ever develop to achieve happiness and success in life.<sup>6</sup> In Christianity, the consecrated people, especially women, are committed influencers who empower, persuade and convince others of the reality of Christ and his grace for the world. Women have the power to advise, persuade, captivate and so on.<sup>7</sup> Woman possesses a gift of love and often she loves so selflessly that she is forgetful of herself.

In this study, we make an attempt to explore the personality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara and the likely contribution that his mother may have made in developing such a saintly and humanitarian personality in the saint. In and through some of his writings, the saint has expressed his indebtedness towards his mother for exerting such positive and constructive influence in his life.

From what Chavara has recorded in his writings we conclude that Mariam Thoppil, his own mother was young Chavara’s first source of inspiration. Chavara must have developed his personality after the model of his mother. The bright vision about the dignity and greatness of women that Chavara had must have had its roots in her

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<sup>2</sup>John Paul II, “Vatican Address,” January 1979.

<sup>3</sup>John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 3 and 6.

<sup>4</sup>Erma Brown, accessed on 12 October 2009, “7 Qualities of Women Who Influence Nation,” The Home for Faith Writers, 2003 (Online).

<sup>5</sup>Paulipopo, accessed on 16 August 2010, <http://hubpages.com/hub/how-to-influence-people>.

<sup>6</sup>Joe Love and JLM and Associates, Inc., accessed on 14 October 2010, [joe@jlmassociates.com](mailto:joe@jlmassociates.com).

<sup>7</sup>Erma Brown, “7 Qualities of Women Who Influence Nation.”

influence. Subsequently, there were several great women who influenced him to form a personality that was at once noble and kind.

Chavara narrates the incidents that influenced his life, mainly in his writings. He claims that it was through his mother that he came to know about the Blessed Virgin Mary. *Atmanutapam*, an epic poem, is the best among the many literary works of Chavara. It contains 4021 verses in thirteen cantos written in Malayalam. It describes the life of Jesus from His nativity to the ascension and continues to narrate the life of the Blessed Mother after the ascension of Jesus. In addition to these narratives, the poem also contains autobiographical elements. These are the reflections on the memories of his own childhood. These special autobiographical references include the early memories about his mother, his sinfulness and the innumerable gifts he had received from God. The first two cantos deal clearly with his character formation under the loving gaze of Mariam his mother.

Chavara possessed many outstanding qualities, both inborn and cultivated, of mind and heart that enabled him to carry out his mission of life very successfully. The fact that he was born of a good family, of exemplary parents and had inherited many natural virtues such as goodness, piety, righteousness, integrity and honesty become highly significant in this respect. Even in his early childhood the virtues like love, humility, obedience, fortitude, trust in God and hope had been instilled in him. In the following pages, we explore first of all, the role of his mother in helping him cultivate such excellent qualities of life and then how these virtues prodded him on to an eventful social, ecclesial and spiritual life.

## **2. Thoppil Mariam, the Women Who Shaped the Visionary**

There are several saintly women who influenced Chavara in his formative days. Most likely it is because of this influence that he formed a lofty ideal on womanhood.<sup>8</sup> Mariam, his own mother was his first source of inspiration. In *Atmanuthapam* he reminisces about the events that left its notable mark his life. He also comments on the essential education he received from his mother in his childhood. Under the discerning guidance and direction of his mother, sincerely and wholeheartedly he responded to the divine call from God.

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<sup>8</sup>T. Kadankavil, "The Christian Family: A Prototype of Heaven on Earth in the Vision of Bl. Chavara" in *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, Paul Kalluveetil and Paulachan Kochappilly, eds., 210-230, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 223.

Childhood is the most important time for laying the foundation of an individual's personality. At this crucial period of his life, Chavara had the edifying example of his parents before him. According to Mundadan: "Kuriakose, was particularly fortunate to have a very pious and devout catholic family, a father well-grounded and firm in faith and devotion, and a mother exceptionally pious."<sup>9</sup> Young Chavara, naturally, owed a lot to his mother for the formation that he received in his early childhood. The spiritual formation of Chavara was the result of the training he received in the family, especially at the feet of his mother. He speaks highly about this kind of upbringing he received from his mother during his infancy and childhood:

A mother to feed me while yet a feeble babe  
To shield me from pain and sorrow and tend me soft  
To pour that tender love you filled her with,  
That nectar, unto my tiny blissful heart.<sup>10</sup>

His mother's religious fervour left indelible marks in the mind of young Kuriakose. Right from his infancy, his mother initiated him to the stories of Jesus and to the basic Christian values.

### 3. The Mother as the Guide

In the second Canto of *Atmanuthapam*, Chavara recalls how his devout mother guided his steps to God. He narrates that his mother dedicated him to the Blessed Mother in the church at Vechoor. In this act of dedication, the mother was following the popular devotional practice prevalent in South India, of dedicating a newly baptized child to the patronage and protection of the Blessed Mother at one or other of her celebrated shrines. He was taken there on the feast of the Nativity of Mary and was dedicated to her. Chavara describes the event:

My mother, when she was still suckling me, laid me at the feet of the Mother of God as her servant, praying: 'Holy Mother, Virgin Mary of God, I who am an impure handmaid, dedicate at your holy feet today, this fruit of my womb, so that you may protect him as

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<sup>9</sup>A. M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, 45.

<sup>10</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 45-48. *Chavarayachante Sampurna Kruthikal* Vol. II; *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 25-28. There are four volumes of *Chavarayachante Sampurna Kruthikal* – Malayalam - and each of them is subtitled as *Nalagamangal*, *Sahityakruthikal*, *Adhyathmika Kruthikal* and *Kathukal* respectively. Hereafter it will be referred to as CSK with the volume number. However, their English translations also are available, i.e., *Complete Works of Chavara* hereafter we refer to it as CWC with the volume number.

your servant.' Then the priest in charge took me and, in the name of the mother of God, put flower and water into the hands of my mother and holding my little hands entrusted me to her in the name of the Mother of God saying, 'carefully educate, protect and guard this one as a Servant of God; in truth he is not your son, but verily he is a servant of the Mother of God.'<sup>11</sup>

As demanded by the practice, this act of dedication of young Chavara to the Mother was renewed year after year at the same shrine for several years.

Family is the cradle of spirituality and devotion. In his childhood, sitting by the side of his mother, he listened to the vibrations of the family prayer so devoutly and later, he joined it in devotion. This devotional atmosphere in which he spent his childhood must have paved the way for him to become a virtuous man. He narrates his childhood experience:

Huddled close to her feet, I learnt aright  
Gentle, 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.<sup>12</sup>

Right from his childhood, he had developed a great zeal and enthusiasm for devotional practices. He joined the family at the prayers regularly and used to say several short prayers like a string of pious words to the Mother of God and to the Christ, King of Kings.<sup>13</sup> He made short repetitive prayers like 'Light Eternal, Jesus Christ, save us all' and 'Hail, Earth-born Flower, Lord Immortal' and several others.<sup>14</sup> When he was old enough to repeat the prayers of praise and petitions, his mother helped him to recite the prayers addressing Jesus, Mary and Joseph. He remembers:

And, when my infant tongue began to lisp,  
Up to the sky, her finger pointing oft

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<sup>11</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto II, 1-16.

<sup>12</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto I, 53-60.

<sup>13</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto II, 59-60.

<sup>14</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto II, 62-63.

The holy names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

She, my noble mother made me repeat.<sup>15</sup>

Mariam, by means of all these devotional practices, was sowing the seeds of the spirit of prayer in the tender heart of Kuriakose which was to grow and make him a man of prayer.<sup>16</sup> The mother initiated the child not only to prayer but also to the mysteries of faith in a form that was digestible to the young mind. She gradually presented to him the basic idea of the mysteries of faith such as the Trinity, the incarnation, the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Such early religious education at home and the good example of the parents naturally enkindled in the young Kuriakose a desire, perhaps unconsciously, to dedicate himself fully to God.

#### **4. Value-Based Character Formation**

Chavara, a social reformer and a holy man of vision, declared that he owed everything good in his life primarily to his mother who was an embodiment of all virtues.<sup>18</sup> As he notes, though she was frail<sup>19</sup> she had worked wonders in his life. He appreciated highly the early education and the childhood formation that he had received from his mother. She brought him up as a disciplined child. She had made it a point to correct his mistakes in a very constructive manner. He writes:

Never once did she use the rod to chastise

Nor with a harsh touch did she smite me

Her eyes, they wielded the mighty power to hit me

Or needs be, to fondle me, in approval.<sup>20</sup>

Chavara wrote these lines from his own experience and what he had seen in his own mother. He gratefully recalls that there was no shouting, no beating, no punishments, no curses; but the very looks in her eyes communicated more powerfully than words or any other corrective measure. To him, she was not only a mother but also a teacher. Her motherly corrections, not with stick or hand but by eloquent looks, left in his mind deep impressions, which gradually became an unconscious force in his life, inspiring him to lead an exemplary and virtuous life.

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<sup>15</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 67-70.

<sup>16</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto II, 2-16.

<sup>17</sup>Joseph Kanjiramattathil, *The Pastoral Vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1984, 10.

<sup>18</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 45-70.

<sup>19</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 25.

<sup>20</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 81-84.

In the eve of his life, at the age of sixty four, when Chavara reminisces his childhood and those who had influenced his life as a child, the first reference that he makes is to his mother.<sup>21</sup> If one has sweet memories of a person in one's old age, it is a proof that he/she has greatly influenced one's life. In *Atmanuthapam* Chavara speaks about his mother more than twenty times in relation to his childhood formation. She had given him a good formation, and had taught him how to be in touch with God through prayer.

## 5. The Father's Support

At this juncture, the reader of *Atmanutapam* naturally wonders why Chavara does not say anything about his father. Reading his biography, we infer that his family was 'an earthly replica of the heavenly kingdom.'<sup>22</sup> The entire family experienced the divine presence there and were led by the same faith vision. In the light of what Chavara tells us of his childhood, we conclude that his father was an honourable man.<sup>23</sup> From what Chavara says about his mother, we gather that his father had given ample freedom and due respect to her. As already noted, it was an age which demanded woman to remain unseen within the house and away from the public. She was expected only to work and do her duty as a wife and mother. Generally, she had no rights, no voice, either in the family or in the society. We assume that in spite of this condition, his father gave full freedom to his mother in matters related to the upbringing of Kuriakose. A close reading of the text tells us that without the help of his father, Mariam would not have been able to take her son to the church at Vechoor<sup>24</sup> every year for the renewal of the dedication she had made.

In his work on *Oru Nalla Appente Chavarul*<sup>25</sup> Chavara writes: "A mother should be a model for her children so that they shall learn how

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<sup>21</sup> CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 71-84.

<sup>22</sup> CSK, vol. IV: *Kathukal* IX/6, "Rule for a Family," No. 1.

<sup>23</sup> CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 4: "Gave me *parents* grounded in faith secure, And faith in me engraved full firm, besides." (Emphasis added). Here Chavara has used the word 'parents'.

<sup>24</sup> CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 1-16.

<sup>25</sup> There are two letters which Chavara wrote to the parishioners at Kainakary. The first one "*Chavarul*" or "*Kudumbachattom*" was written in 1868 and the second one in 1869. The former was published in 1910 under the title "*Nalla Appente Chavarul*." The second was published in 1944 under the title "*Oru Kath*." Kanjiramattathil, *The Pastoral Vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 67.

to show reverence to their father, and in the same way, a father should be a model for the children to learn how to show reverence to the mother.”<sup>26</sup> As Chavara had seen his father accepting and appreciating his mother as a noble woman, so he has learnt to look upon her as a virtuous woman. One can reasonably conclude that, like St Joseph at Nazareth, Chavara’s father respected, appreciated and cherished his wife as a noble treasure and went against the custom of his day to entrust her completely with the upbringing of the children as he would have concentrated on the external affairs of the family.<sup>27</sup>

As a Malpan of the seminary and Prior General of the religious congregation for men that Chavara co-founded, he must have been instrumental to the formation of many; yet at the eve of his life he reminisces that the formation that he had received from his mother was very precious and incomparable. Noteworthy is the fact that although he had received an excellent formation in the seminary, and he must have been one of the best students there, yet he considered his mother to be the best formator.<sup>28</sup>

## 6. The Son’s Vocation, a Mother’s Sacrifice

At the age of ten<sup>29</sup> Chavara responded to the divine vocation to priesthood. Recalling the precious moments of his vocation, he writes:

Ten long years passed riotously by  
And on that day of days, He called me back  
Sowed in me a sacred seed of wisdom  
A firm resolve, else what my fate had been  
No priest ordained among kinsfolk until then  
Welcome tidings it came to all and sundry.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup>CSK, vol. IV: *Kathukal IX/6*, “Upbringing of Children,” No. 9.

<sup>27</sup>J. Eroorikal, *Mystical and Missionary Spirituality of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 8-9.

<sup>28</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 78-84.

<sup>29</sup>There are different opinions about the age at which young Chavara joined the seminary. Some of the writers hold that he joined at the age of 13 and others are of the opinion that he was 11 at the time. However, *Atmanuthapam* presents him as a ten-year old boy when he left the home. Fr Valerian, speaking of the vocation of Kuriakose, note that he was 10 when he joined the seminary. *Malankara Sabha Mathavinte Oru Veera Santhanam* (Malayalam), Mannanam: St. Joseph’s Press, 1939, 14. In the *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, vol. I, 54, he writes: “That year though I was only eleven years old, I expressed my desire to study for priesthood... my paternal uncle to send me to the seminary.

<sup>30</sup>CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 113-120.

It must have been extremely difficult for Chavara to part with his parents, especially his mother at this tender age. Greater would have been the pain of the mother at the parting. However, she, an exemplary, devoted and courageous woman embraced him in tears and blessed him saying, "Hereafter your mother is the Blessed Mother and she will take care of you."<sup>31</sup> With these words, she entrusted the future of her son into the divine hands of God and the Blessed Mother. Chavara reminisces:

My mother's heart leaped with exultation  
That God did ear-mark me to be His possession  
Tear-dimmed eyes gleamed as sun amid clouds  
Could a heart maternal brave such parting?<sup>32</sup>

Even at the eve of his life when he turned back in memory, he remembered the real life experience of parting from his home. He recalls that his mother took his departure from home as the will of God:

Emotions twain 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.<sup>33</sup>

After the initial training under the guidance of the parish priest of the church at Chennamkary for one year, Kuriakose left for the Seminary at Pallipuram at the age of eleven.<sup>34</sup> Chennamkary was fairly close to home whereas Pallippuram was rather distant a place. His mother's faith that God had called her son helped her to conform her decision to the will of God. As a mother, though it was a painful moment to part with her boy, yet she sent him away in faith in the Providence and hope in the magnificent dedicated life ahead of him. It is also to be noted that a bit of persuasion from the part of Fr Palackal was also in place. Valerian, one of the early biographers of Chavara speaks about the latter's vocation: "Though the parents had some difficulty to send

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<sup>31</sup> CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto II, 13-16.

<sup>32</sup> CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1,120-124.

<sup>33</sup> CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1,124-128.

<sup>34</sup> In order to prepare the boy for a permanent separation from the family the parents arranged for his stay at his parish presbytery for some time and there he assisted in the sacred ministry. "The priest there brought me up and taught me to participate in and assist at Mass and to practice virtues and to avoid whatever is evil." CSK, vol. II: *Atmanuthapam*, Canto 1, 136-140.

him, as Fr Palackal insisted, they consented and he was taken to the seminary."<sup>35</sup>

In the seminary he enjoyed the life. His routine consisted of studies and spiritual exercises like prayer, meditation, liturgy, spiritual reading and rosary and manual work. For Kuriakose, the strict but gentle formation which he received in the seminary from kind and loving formators was pleasant because from his childhood onwards he had been receiving the same from his dignified mother.

### **7. Saint Chavara, a Man of Care and Concern**

Motherhood is a sign of God's creative action in the world and manifests God's own self-giving.<sup>36</sup> Being motherly means being capable of unconditional love, loving the child for the sheer joy of loving, helping the child to grow for the sheer joy of seeing him/her grow. In the process of bringing the child up, conscientious mothers give this value of selfless love to the ones they help grow. Kuriakose showed unconditional love towards his people and worked for their uplift in spiritual, mental and material spheres. He tinted his life in different ways as a pastor in the Church, as a Prior of a religious community and as a founding father of a religious congregation for men and another for women. Behind all these various activities, one can find the mark that his mother had left in him. The qualities of care and concern for others which he imbibed from his mother was later put in the service of the society and the brethren around him.

### **8. A Compassionate Pastor**

The activities that Chavara undertook were unique and authentic. His services and achievements were multifaceted and pioneering for the development of all members of the society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, all these activities were natural expressions of his inner divine experience. Wherever he went and whatever he did, he remained basically a man of compassionate heart.

Chavara was basically a contemplative in action. His concern and his enthusiasm to render maximum services to the society around him did not block his basic orientation to God.<sup>37</sup> Wherever he went and got

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<sup>35</sup>Valerian. *Malankara Sabha Mathavinnte oru Veera Santhanam*, 14.

<sup>36</sup>John Paul II. "Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women" (19), *Origins* 18, 17 (October 1988), 261-283.

<sup>37</sup>Mathew Kaniamparambil, "Blessed Chavara and His Unique Contributions to the Church in India" 1-7. *Herald of the East* 6, 2 (December 2004), 6.

involved in the affairs of the people, he was burning with zeal for God and for the Church. There was a divine fire burning deep within him that prompted to respond to the needs of the people and empowered him to initiate appropriate action to meet them.

Chavara ever kept in mind the directive given by St John in his letter. "He who says that he loves God and then hates his brother, is a liar" (1Jn 4: 20). He loved God and expressed that love for his fellow people in whom he saw God reflected.<sup>38</sup> In *Oru Nalla Appante Chavarul*, his testament to his home parishioners Chavara writes: "The days in which you have not done a service to someone will not be counted among the days of your life."<sup>39</sup> The *Chavarul* as a whole is a song of love for his people. As a father gives advice to his children, so does Chavara writes to the parishioners and sets forth ideals for a Christian family. Making a study of the *Chavarul*, Kanjiramattathil states:

The main subjects treated are love and forgiveness, observance of the days of obligation, spending of money on different family celebrations, incurring debts, acquiring properties, marriage relations, contact with people, keeping away from calumnies, love for work, charity to others... morning and night prayers.<sup>40</sup>

The entire life of Chavara was dedicated for the good of his people, particularly for the salvation of their soul and the sustenance of their body.

In case of sick-calls in connection with people suffering even from contagious diseases, Chavara would readily oblige. It was very common in those days for priests to legitimately refuse to attend to these spiritual needs for self-preservation. Chavara was always ready to visit those people, administer sacraments to them, and offer them consolation.<sup>41</sup> He founded in the vicinity of his parish church a house for sheltering and caring for the aged destitute, at a time when such institutions were unheard of in this country. The purpose of the house was to protect the destitute, the aged and the sick beggars.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>K. C. Chacko, *Blessed Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mannanam: The Vice Postulator, 1986, 91.

<sup>39</sup>CSK, vol. IV: *Kathukal*, IX/6, "Kudumbachattom," No. 13.

<sup>40</sup>Kanjiramattathil, *The Pastoral Vision of Kuriakos Elias Chavara*, 68.

<sup>41</sup>G. Canicius, *The Servant of God Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 27.

<sup>42</sup>Towards the end of 1869, Chavara started a house of Charity (*upavisala*) for the destitute of Kainakary. Kainakary was not a parish at that time. It was only a chapel under Chennamkary parish. He did not wish to do it by himself; instead he wished it to be established by his parishioners. CSK, vol. IV: *Kathukal*, IX/7.

For Chavara, the highest form of love was charity towards those people who were themselves uncharitable. Hence he not only did not have any ill will for those from whom he had received ingratitude and injuries, but he cherished a special love for them, looked upon them as his benefactors, and exhorted the members of his community through his last testament to do good to such people and their families.

We read in the pages of the chronicle of the monastery at Mannanam how his dealings with the intruder Bishop Roccas were full of kindness and cordiality, and how his attitude was highly helpful for the partisans who supported Roccas to go back to the authority of their legitimate pastor, after the departure of Roccas, on account of which the unhappy schism left no scar whatsoever.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps it is thanks to this cordiality that he carried in his person that Chavara was able to develop a friendly relationship with any person and get his or her cooperation for his endeavours for the people.

## 9. A Caring Prior

Chavara's role in the building up of a new religious community for men became more prominent after the death of the other two co-founders. The whole responsibility of nurturing the young community fell on his shoulders. Trusting in the divine providence and getting support from all people he had come into contact with, he discharged his duties very efficiently and led those communities along the path of success. His spiritual outlook and pleasant nature helped him get the support of everyone.<sup>44</sup> He animated the congregation for men for sixteen years as their Prior.

Chavara's care was extended to almost all the members of the community. In 1866 Chavara, as the Prior, wrote to Fr Kuriakose Porukara, Vicar of the Monastery at Mannanam, instructing him how to take care of the sick members of the community:

I have anxiety about a monastery, in which no one is sick. If on the contrary, there is a sick person in a monastery, that too continuously, it is the house, in St. Teresa's view the most pleasing to Jesus Christ. Thomman [probably a male servant appointed to look after the sick and the aged at Mannanam] says that you do not show much love for our *valliachan* (elderly priest), that bread and

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<sup>43</sup>Canicius, *The Servant of God Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 28.

<sup>44</sup>Z. M. Moozhoor, *Blessed Chavara: The Star of the East*, Kottayam: Deepika Book House, 1993, 45-46.

milk are not served to him properly. Hence he seems very weak now.<sup>45</sup>

Chavara encouraged the youngsters to take care of the sick and the weak members of the community. He used to spend a lot of time attending to the needs of the sick members of the community and consoling them.<sup>46</sup> As the head of the congregation, he loved the members and made the community aware of the greatness of their call. Chavara reminds them:

Dearly beloved brethren and children, none of us has entered the religious life for want of means for subsistence in the world. There we could have enjoyed many things. But it is for the love of God that we have left parents and possessions. And how sad, and foolish it would be if now we forsake God by our slothfulness in the practice of virtue.<sup>47</sup>

The care and love of the Prior for the members of the congregation is evident in many instances such as sending the special sweet mango he had received from someone as a gift to various monasteries. References to this are found in a letter he wrote to Fr Kuriakose Porukkara in 1870. He wanted the seeds of this rare variety of mango to be planted in every monastery compound and be called a memorial tree: "I would wish that you plant at least one sapling of this sweet mango in each of our monastery. So I have sent them to a few places and I call it by the name *Dukhran* (in memory)."<sup>48</sup> The monasteries complied with his desire and the fruit of these trees eventually came to be called *Prior Mango*.

Speaking of the ceaseless effort to be made in pursuit of religious perfection and commitment Chavara wrote to the members of the community:

The strength of the monasteries is measured not by the thickness of the walls but by the virtues and devotional attitude of the inmates. In many places there were much bigger monasteries. God knows how, they are now forests infested with wild animals! We founded these monasteries. We are their corner-stones. Fifty years from now, our children in religion will cite our example as authority and do

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<sup>45</sup>CWC, vol. IV: *The Letters*, V/9.

<sup>46</sup>SCPCS, *Changanacherren Seu Verapolitana, Beatificationis et Canonozationis Servi Dei Cyriaci Eliae Chavara, Sacerdotis Confundatoris Congregationis Fratrum Carmelitarum Mariae Immaculatae. Positio: Super Introductione Causae et Super Virtutibus*, Romae: 1977, 347.

<sup>47</sup>Canicius, *The Servant of God Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 30.

<sup>48</sup>CWC, vol. IV: *The Letters*, V/8.

much less than what we are doing. It is impossible that they do better...<sup>49</sup>

A man of such delicate sense of responsibility, Chavara never made his position as the prior and the Prior General a burden for the community. Chavara's sincere and true love for the members is manifest in the esteem in which he held them and in the generosity with which he appreciated their good examples and achievements.<sup>50</sup> He did not respect the rule for the sake of the rule. He had loved everything and by this inspiration he led the community as the superior. God was the centre of all his activities.

### 10. A Gentle Father

Chavara founded the first religious congregation for women in Kerala in 1866. It had a very humble beginning. The enclosure he put up for the convent at Koonammavu was mostly of bamboo mats and timber obtained from coconut palms. However, Chavara was not satisfied with such a temporary shed for the nuns. His paternal care for them made him tour the southern districts of Kerala to raise funds to put up a permanent house for them and a school building and a boarding house for young girls. This tireless work caused a severe attack of rheumatic fever and he went into a coma for two days. He also developed a swelling on one of his legs. Nevertheless, in the course of eight months the fund he raised amounted to Rs 8000/- The amount was sufficient for him to complete the new building.<sup>51</sup> His biography describes: "It is a fact well known to all how much he laboured for the orderly progress of the institute and the formation of its first members."<sup>52</sup> Mundadan, juxtaposing Chavara with Leopold, the European missionary who was both his companion and spiritual director, writes: "If Fr. Leopold manifests a father figure, Chavara's is its counterpart, the image of a mother. Fr. Leopold is the western type strict disciplinarian, and Chavara the human and compassionate Indian type personality."<sup>53</sup>

Chavara's fatherly concern for the new community is evident from the arrangements that he made on the inaugural day of the convent [the bamboo-mat house] with Fr. Leopold. He writes about how they

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<sup>49</sup>CWC, vol. IV: *The Letters*, VI/1.

<sup>50</sup>Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 159.

<sup>51</sup>Valerian, *The Servant of God Fr. Cyriac Elias Chavara*, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Monastery, 1939, 33-34.

<sup>52</sup>Canicius, *The Servant of God Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 24.

<sup>53</sup>Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, 325.

went about supervising the furnishing of the house: "What the many things were... cannot all be written here. Yet we list a few things: A clock that strikes the hours and sounds the alarm...in the rooms apportioned for each one, there was a cot with a mat spread out on it and covered with a black sheet."<sup>54</sup>

Some of Chavara's letters to the sisters always contained a thoughtful exhortation on spiritual life; certain others were about religious ceremonies and still others were about cultivation of land and book-keeping. Once he wrote to the sisters at the convent that they should remain united with a supernatural love that goes beyond blood relationship: "Just imagine: was there any relation between us. Where do you stand? Where am I? Did I know you? Did you know who I am? Why do I love you more than your own people..."<sup>55</sup> Chavara had loved the sisters as his own daughters. Once he sent two mangoes and some chilies to the convent of sister's with the following letter:

I am sending you this gift in honour of the Mother of God. These chilies are from the plant that grows in the pot kept at my window. I was thinking it won't yield any more... The mangoes I am sending to you were given me as a gift by our Parayee. The two red ones are of a different variety. They are the best I have found in India... Slightly peel off the outer rind, then slice it into pieces and let everyone there taste of it.<sup>56</sup>

Chavara showed great interest in the spiritual and intellectual development of the members of the young community of sisters. At a time when education was not given to women, he took initiatives for the intellectual development of the community of sisters. Once he got a book and he sent it to the sisters saying:

I found a small book in Tamil in the room. The book deals with the good conduct of religious sisters. I am sure God had left it there for you. So immediately I translated the book into Malayalam. All of you must go through it at least once, by way of spiritual reading. Since the children have learnt Tamil now, they could read the Tamil book as well and learn more words if the translation is read side by side with it. So I am sending both the books to you. Use them with care.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>*The Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent*, vol.1, Aluva: CMC Publications, 2002, 27-29.

<sup>55</sup>CWC, vol. IV: *The Letters*, VII/6.

<sup>56</sup>CWC, vol. IV: *The Letters*, VII/8.

<sup>57</sup>CWC, vol. IV: *The Letters*, VII/11.

The love and gentleness of Chavara was experienced not only by the sisters in the newly founded convent but also by the girls in the *edukkamthat* - boarding-house that he established for girls. Many of these girls joined the convent and became religious sisters and others went into family life and brought up their children in Christian values.

Chavara's spirituality becomes ever deeper and his personality meeker as he advanced in age. This change is consistently expressed in all his writings, including his letters towards the end of his life. He shared his thoughts about his own life with his religious sisters:

I am afraid my days are coming to an end. So I request you to pray for me to the Father, and especially during these days of 40 hour adoration. Pray for me in a special way that I may be forgiven the scandal which I have caused you by my way of life... Pray that I may be forgiven all these short-comings and that I may spend the rest of my life accomplishing always His will in all things, and finally die a happy death.<sup>58</sup>

By his words and deeds Chavara tried to lead the flock of Christ in the right path and to nourish them with the spiritual food.

Fr Kuriakose Eliseus Porukkara notes that it was the hand of the almighty God that had brought the first indigenous religious communities for men and women into existence. He also underlined the kind of love that existed especially between Chavara and the sisters, and the special interest that he had in the formation of the community. He notes his love for them as that of a mother: "Just as Patriarch Jacob had a greater love for his youngest son Benjamin, so he loved them (sisters) most deeply, and brought them up most carefully, providing them with all the needs even as a hen takes care of the chicks."<sup>59</sup>

## 11. Conclusion

In the history, we see many eminent women who rose in time to renew the Church as well as in the world. St Teresa of Avila, St Catherine of Sienna, both Doctors of the Church, were prominent in their time and after it. Women possess great powers of advice, tolerance, care, concern, attraction and so on. Their unique contact with the mystery of

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<sup>58</sup>CWC, vol. IV: *The Letters*, VII/2.

<sup>59</sup>Kuriakose Eliseus Porukkara, "A Short Biography of Our Most Reverend Father Chavara Kuriakose, Prior of the Monasteries of the Third Order of the Discalced Carmelites" in Alexander Joseph, ed., *Stapakapithakkanmar*, Mannanam: St. Joseph's Press, 1905, 24-31, 35.

life in its beginning makes them "more capable than men of paying attention to another person."<sup>60</sup>

Human beings are social beings. The society in which they live moulds them. Chavara was not an exception to this general principle. His personality was moulded by many persons. As we have analysed, his own writings are proof of this fact. He records the sweet memories of his childhood in the pages of *Compunction of the Soul*. It is true that the family and the social environment contributed significantly to the development of his personality from childhood. However, even in that environment, Mariam, his mother, a noble and simple woman, played an influential role in his life from the early childhood.

There was a time in Kerala, when the position of woman had declined and she was virtually a slave or chattel; her only function was to minister to man's physical pleasures and wants. She was considered incapable of developing any of those higher mental qualities which would make her more worthy of consideration and more capable of playing a useful role in life. The doors of education were shut before them and hence, the doors to other significant activities.

In spite of all these, his loving mother had given young Chavara a good formation from his childhood. She being a virtuous woman, taught him to be devoted to God and to put his trust in the interceding power of the Blessed Mother at all times. Her inspiration helped him inculcate in his personality virtues like concern, compassion, love and sharing. These were imprinted in the mind of young Chavara and became a source of strength as he matured. These, in turn, made his religious formation and ascetic life easier. The sole aim of Chavara was to preach the salvific message to the people of God in word and deed and lead them to sanctification of self and others and his mother's role was significant in developing this aim. In her, motherhood is more blessed than ever before.

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<sup>60</sup>John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30.