

COMPUNCTION OF THE SOUL **The Song of a Penitent**

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Abstract: Jose Eroorikal looks at *The Compunction of the Soul*, a poem by Chavara as a song of a penitent. Since it is predominantly his own God-experiences that are being shared in this work, reflecting over its leitmotif, Eroorikal notes that *Atmanutapam* is an expression of the prayer experiences of Chavara. Autobiographical material is the salient feature of the poem and gratitude is the most frequent of the sentiments that Chavara expresses throughout the work. His mystical experiences are intertwined with a deep sense of sinfulness. The Characters in the poem are vibrant. His devotion to the holy couple enables him to consider Mary and Joseph, the greatest models of holiness. Along with the shepherds and the Magi, Chavara portrays other personalities involved in the scene of the nativity and brings some novelty to this scene. He goes on to dwell on the passion, death and burial of Jesus. He concludes the meditation with a note on Mary in the life of the Church.

Keywords: Compunction, dirge, Anastasia, devotion, *khandakavya*, remorse, *Atmanutapam*, angels, imperfection, experience, repentance, vision, incarnation, shepherd, contemplation, Magi, tribulations, Virgin Mary, Assumption, heaven, salvation, dignity, shepherds, repentance, thanksgiving, dormition, assumption, intercession passion.

1. Introduction

Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a great poet and a writer. His literary works and spiritual writings are considered as great sources of his teaching on mysticism in which most of his mystical thoughts are expressed. The poetic works of Chavara, which consist mainly of *Compunction of the Soul*, *Dirge* and the *Martyrdom of Anastasia*, elevated him to the level of one of the great poets (*mahakavi*) of 19th century Kerala. He is distinctive because he is the first poet to compose a poem in Malayalam in a new genre called *khandakavya* (minor epic). This was done even before A. R. Rajarajavarma's popularly accepted

work.¹ The structure, the style and the language used by Chavara highlight the richness of his gift of composing. The works are undoubtedly a treasure of inspiring and informative spiritual reflections. However, there are numerous outmoded usages that create difficulty for modern readers as he was writing at a time when the language was still in its infancy.² The verses abound in metaphors and similes, even long ones. Some readers consider the works not only as great literary contributions, but also as mystical ones.

2. Compunction of the Soul: The Poem

The "Compunction of the Soul" is the exact word used by the translator of Chavara's work commonly known in Malayalam as 'Atmanutapam'. Later, titles like 'Lamentations of a Soul' or 'Repentance of a Soul' came into use to convey the meaning of *Atmanutâpam*. Etymologically, the term compunction comes from the Latin word *compunctio*, from *cum-pungere*, meaning 'to puncture with':

¹*Malayavilasam* written in 1885 by A. R. Rajarajavarma is regarded as the first *Khandakâvya* in Malayalam literature according to the historical record. However, Chavara had composed the *Martyrdom of Anastasia* in 1862, 23 years before Rajarajavarma's work. Chavara's work remained limited to Christian circles and it was intended to help the Christian community during the crisis of faith. See Z. M. Moozhoor, "Anastasiayude raktasakshitoam," *Chavarayachan-Deepika Special*, 122; see S. Poonoly, "Writings of Chavara," P. Kalluveetil, and P. Kochappilly (eds), *The Lord of Heaven and Earth*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2004, 120.

²References began to be made of the work right from the start. First, Fr. Leopold Beccaro, his spiritual father, had published some parts of the poem along with "A Brief Life History of the Saintly Soul" of Chavara in 1871, the year of the poet's death. He describes Chavara in the biography as the one who had composed these devotional verses (see CWC, vol. II, xi.) Secondly, the chronicles of the time make several references to this poem as the work of Chavara. Authors like Rev. Fr. Zachariah Ephrem Kalathil, Fr. Mathai Mariam Palakunnel, Fr. Varkey Parappuram and others have referred to this work. For the date of composition of the poem we have a reliable piece of evidence in the editorial note written by Fr. Leopold. He writes that the book was composed in the evening of Chavara's life, probably in the year of 1869-70. He was bedridden in September in 1870. The original writing of *Atmanutapam*, which has come to us, is in twelve chapters of 143 pages (19x 12cms). The corrections seen here and there in the manuscript are in the poet's own handwriting. It is evident that the poet had the verses copied down by someone and, while reading through them, made his own corrections.

anxiety arising from awareness of guilt 'compunction of conscience' or distress of mind over an anticipated action or result.³ It is found in the works of the Fathers of the Church in a number of different patterns; compunction of fear, compunction of desire and compunction of heart. The first ecclesiastical usage is found toward the end of the second century, transposing the meaning to signify the pain of the spirit, a suffering due to the actual existence of sin and human concupiscence as a result of our desire for God. In *Atmanutapam*, we see the image of a soul praising and thanking God for all his graces. At the same time the soul repents over its drawbacks in cooperating with the grace of God. Thus Chavara who represents this soul expresses a desire for renewal and a cry of hope.

3. The Leitmotif of the Work

Atmanutapam is an expression of the prayer experiences of Chavara. The mystical thoughts are reminiscent of the canticle of St John of the Cross. Chavara experiences the merciful love of God as the greatest gift in his personal life. His work synthesizes biblical stories and events taken from the Scripture. Most of the events alluded to pertain to the life of Jesus and His Bl. Mother.

Some readers consider that *Atmanutapam* is indebted to the Spanish work *The Mystical City of God, Divine History of the Mother of God* by Maria de Agreda, written in 1665.⁴ It is very likely that Chavara knew

³See *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Microsoft Corp., 2000.

⁴Maria de Agreda was born of wealthy parents, in a castle at Agreda, Spain, on April 2, 1602. Her parents were Catherine and Francis Coronel who also had another daughter and two sons. Accepting the will of God, the wealth and castle were given to the Franciscan Order and the castle became the Convent of the Immaculate Conception. Her father and brothers became Franciscan monks and Maria, her mother, and her sister became nuns. In 1627, Sister Maria was elected Abbess of the convent and remained so until her death in 1665. She received apparitions from Our Lady who requested her to write her biography, which is called *The Mystical City of God* consists of eight books in three parts. Chavara was influenced by this particular work and certain thoughts in his poetry reflect this work. He composed his works based on its fourth and sixth books. The content of the book IV are: the journey to Bethlehem, Christ our Saviour is born of the virgin Mary in Bethlehem, the adoration of the shepherds, the circumcision, the adoration of the magi, the presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple, the flight to Egypt and the sweet and intimate communications. The content of book VI is: Mary accompanies Jesus on his journeys, the transfiguration and

the work of Agreda as it was a popular book in his time. Moreover, certain descriptions that Chavara gives in his work are similar to the work of Agreda. This similarity is mainly seen in the events of the life of Jesus and Blessed Mother that are narrated. However, it is predominantly his own God-experiences that are being shared in this work. First, Chavara narrates his own childhood events in a meditative way and often he loses himself in these remorseful reflections. He considers that it is his sins and imperfections that led the Son of God to the passion and the ignominious death on the cross. From these personal reflections we obtain a faint picture of his early life. Secondly, the work is written against the original cultural background of his native village Kuttanadu,⁵ showing that he took pride in his own people and valued the culture.

4. The Salient Features of the Poem

Atmanutapam consists of thirteen cantos; none with a title. As mentioned above, the poem contains autobiographical material especially the first section of the work. As a spiritual treatise the poem stands supreme. Strangely enough, it is not his grievous sins but negligible imperfections that send him into spasms of compunction. He is ever conscious of the ugliness of sin that pains the heart of his Heavenly Father: "Father, my loving father, I regret my offences", is his attitude expressed throughout the poem. The main features of the poem are Chavara's sincere repentance, conversion and gratitude in the perspective of the events related to the redemptive mission of Christ in the world. Given below is a short presentation of the salient features of *Atmanutapam*.

triumphal entry of our Lord into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the prayer in Gethsemane, Jesus before Annas and Caiaphas, Jesus before Pilate, the scourging and crowning with thorns, the way of the cross, the crucifixion, Mary the heiress of the merits of Christ, the victory of Christ over hell, the resurrection and the ascension of Christ. See *The Mystical City of God* containing the most intimate details about the Queen of Heaven. See <http://www.sacredheart.com/> (accessed 12 June 2006).

⁵Kuttanadu is a region in Kerala and is of unique natural beauty. It is a very green land famous for its rice and coconut production. It is also famous for its boat race and the entertainment involved in this, the folk songs or *vanchippattu*. These songs are composed in the style and culture of the locality so that ordinary people can easily follow them. Chavara uses the tone of the *Vanchippattu* in his work.

4.1. Praise and Thanksgiving

Gratitude is the most frequent of the sentiments that Chavara expresses throughout the work. He enumerates a series of undeserved blessings which God in his boundless mercy showered upon him:

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.⁶

The blessings that he describes includes his own existence as a normal human being without any physical imperfection, the grace of sonship in God through baptism, and protection that he from grave dangers that he enjoys. He begins the first canto praising the Merciful Love of God,⁷ who formed him as the "son of Adam" "creating him as a human being" in this world, who "created him in the image of the divine glory" (canto I:2). He believes that one's status as a human being is a gracious gift of God due to His merciful love. This is an experience of God's love for each human being. Chavara praises the greatness of the gift of human nature he has received from God. This nature is God's own image shared by man.

Chavara reflects on the relationship between of man as a creature and God as the Creator. This relationship exists and is guaranteed as long as one is faithful to the will of God. In the second canto, his narration of the protection that he received from an epidemic and his birth without any deformity is a reflection on God's abundance of mercy. In addition, he describes how he was initiated into the devotion to Our Lady by recalling the moment that his mother dedicated him to her.⁸ On account of this special act, he began to grow under the care and protection of the Mother and his devotion to her increases in intensity.⁹ He received numerous graces from God, the Almighty, in spite of his unworthiness. Together with the Blessed Mother, who sang the Magnificat to the Lord, Chavara praises and thanks God for all His gracious gifts:

Me, you treated with kind predilection
 Wedded to your dear chosen people

⁶*Compunction of the Soul*, 1, lines 1-4.

⁷There are different concepts in his work that denote the mercy of God, namely, *Karunyanathan*, *Karunakaran*, *karunnyan* (Lord of Mercy), *karunanidhi* (Merciful Lord).

⁸See *Compunction of the Soul*, 6, lines 1-12.

⁹See *Compunction of the Soul*, 13-14, lines 245-78.

What thanks shall I render thee my Lord,
For this your kindness, so unlimited.¹⁰

Chavara sings hymns to God with Mary, who sang the Magnificat as a sign of her act of humility. "My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (Lk 1: 46-47). The praise of God that Chavara sings had the following air:

... 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 solace have I save in you.¹¹

God-experience of individuals is always unique. Chavara experienced God as his loving Father (*appan*) in whom he could trust in everything. This rich experience is recalled in every moment of their lives, no matter what the context. It is seen reflected mostly in his spiritual writings where he narrates the father-son relationship.¹² It is expressed in two ways, namely, his profound sense of gratitude to the Father who is the source of every good in and around him and the heartrending sense of sin born out of this love. At the end of this canto Chavara demonstrates sincere compunction for not having sufficiently fought against his temptations through mortification of his senses in his childhood.¹³

4.2. Expression of Remorse

Most of those with mystical experiences are also gifted with a deep sense of sinfulness. Chavara was not an exception. His laments and repentance are often reflected in his poems. As a creature, man has many intrinsic limitations and the relationship towards God, the Creator is hampered by sin. Man is distracted by feelings of guilt at having failed to fulfil the will of God, but with a repentant heart he can be united with God. Chavara, being conscious of his sinfulness, considers himself as the most ungrateful of creatures and least worthy of being called a human being,¹⁴ the least one,¹⁵ unworthy one,¹⁶ who

¹⁰*Compunction of the Soul*, 8, lines 73-76.

¹¹*Compunction of the Soul*, 10, lines 143-46.

¹²See *Compunction of the Soul*, 10, line 135.

¹³See *Compunction of the Soul*, 16, lines 361-64.

¹⁴*Compunction of the Soul*, 1:129, 2:242,361-70, 3:55, 5:142,144.

does not have any ability.¹⁷ All these expressions are similar to the cry of Isaiah at the sight of the holy God, "Woe to me! I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among the people of unclean lips" (Is 6:1-5). Chavara moves ahead with a contrite heart in the following lines:

Through Baptism you raised me to sublime sonship
 Ignorance drove me far from grace divine
 Severed me from that fountain of life
 Worse, Satan's slave had become!
 With suff'ring intense caused by sin
 My eyes sank in depth of despair and pain
 Severed from you, my God my only good
 What joy, peace or well-being can be mine?¹⁸

These words of repentance and contrition are not to be misunderstood as expressions of his despair, but reflect his confidence in the mercy of God. The awareness of guilt leads him to the awareness of God's providence, not to death but to life. He praises and thanks God for all His gifts:

What shall I render you, my Lord, my God,
 For all your wondrous gifts of mercy and love
 For cleansing my soul, so holy, spotless and fair
 At the very start of journey of life?¹⁹

The section concludes with the depiction of the exemplary life of his mother who guided and formed him as a child of God. He was nourished spiritually and was taught the lessons of prayer by his mother. Above all, she taught him to take refuge at the feet of the Blessed Mother. In his child-like simplicity, total dependence on Mother Mary and his intense devotion towards her helped him to seek her intercession:

Mother mine, alas, this picture so fills me
 With dread, O Lady, I shudder with fear
 I find my soul, O misery! Packed with vice
 Bitter agony unsettles my mind!²⁰
 You alone my hope, none else have I
 Behold your son gently on your bosom rests

¹⁵*Compunction of the Soul*, 3: appendix 39-40.

¹⁶*Compunction of the Soul*, 7:162.

¹⁷*Compunction of the Soul*, 2:278.

¹⁸*Compunction of the Soul*, 10, lines 139-42.

¹⁹*Compunction of the Soul*, 2, lines 37-40.

²⁰*Compunction of the Soul*, 42, lines 201-04.

Reclining quiet, sleeps in unmolested peace!

Breathe unto His ears, a word of prayer for me.²¹

This section indicates Chavara's ardent devotion and faith that the Blessed Mother will intercede for him with her son Jesus.

4.3. The Longing for the Divine Vision

In the third canto of *Atmanutapam*, we find an image of a great mystic. "I long to see" is a recurring expression which Chavara uses forty seven times in this section. The profound expression of a great desire for the divine is a characteristic feature of the Indian spiritual tradition, i.e., a quest for the Divine vision (*darsan*); craving for intense spiritual experience leading to God-realization. The 'longing' expressed by Chavara in *Atmanutapam* is a 'longing to see Christ'. It is his experience of Christ that is articulated in the whole work. He takes various events of the life of Jesus, the incarnate Word and subjects them to a poetic meditation. Chavara longs to see this God-with-us in all His spiritual endeavours.²²

The narration starts with the moment of the incarnation of the Word in the immaculate womb of Blessed Mother and the subsequent events relating to Mary's journey to Bethlehem.²³ This section covers also the flight to Egypt, the return the life in Nazareth and ends with the beginning of Jesus' public life with the miracle at Cana. He also creates a very memorable image of the Good Shepherd.²⁴ We find Chavara's mystical narration again in the eighth canto where he presents the union of the soul with God in a language of love, backed by an affectionate experience. Chavara espouses the Christian traditions in the style of Indian bhakti *sadhana*, as described by Mirabai;²⁵ comparing the God-man relationship to a spousal relationship.²⁶

There are many mystical writers who have compared the union of God and the human soul to that of the bride-groom. Like St John of the

²¹*Compunction of the Soul*, 42, lines 206-09.

²²See *Compunction of the Soul*, 17.

²³See *Compunction of the Soul*, 17-19.

²⁴See *Compunction of the Soul*, 19.

²⁵Mirabai is regarded as a great mystic in Hindu tradition *bhakti-sadhana* and is the way she expresses her mystical thoughts through her intense devotion towards lord Krishna.

²⁶See P. Kalluveetil, "Christian Portrait of a Bhakti Yogi," *Journal of St. Thomas Christians*16 (2005): 42.

Cross and Teresa of Avila, the human soul is the feminine character also here in the works of Chavara. The uniqueness of the groom in Chavara's imagination is expressed in his writings.²⁷ His contribution to the mystical espousal is found in his contemplation of the Calvary episode. In a detailed description of Jesus' journey to Calvary, he compares the royal procession of the Divine Bridegroom towards the marriage tent or *manapantal*.²⁸ The Divine bridegroom eagerly and impatiently waits the day of the nuptial procession and the bridal bed of the Cross.

4.4. Devotion to the Holy Couple

Cantos four to seven highlight Chavara's thoughts on the Nativity of Our Lord, particularly reflecting on the hardships of his parents. The poet illustrates the dignity of the holy couple and expresses his personal devotion to and sentiments for them. Chavara was an ardent devotee of Our Lady and St Joseph, the greatest models of holiness. In the fourth canto he reflects on the hardships and tribulations the Holy Family faced at Bethlehem in order to fulfil the will of God. They are presented as suffering with dignity in the midst of the greatest gift they received from God – the tedious journey, rejection and helplessness of a father and a mother! "Mother of benign, Crown of woman kind,"²⁹ "Woman blessed,"³⁰ "Child of Adam without the trace of sin and good Lady pure," "Woman who crushed the serpent's head,"³¹ "Blessed"³² and "Obedient wife"³³ are the epithets that Chavara used when he praises the greatness of the Virgin Mary.

After the annunciation, the Almighty allows Mary to suffer and she humbly accepts the will of God, facing several difficult situations to the full. By her loving cooperation with the will of God, the redemptive mission of God is fulfilled in Mary. Hence Chavara refers to her as "Blessed," "pure Lady of Mother" and "Ark of the Covenant."³⁴ Chavara narrates the untainted nature of Mary, her

²⁷See *Compunction of the Soul*, 67-68.

²⁸See *Compunction of the Soul*, 67; the word *Kalyanapantal* is another synonym he used in prose works to designate the marriage tent.

²⁹*Compunction of the Soul* IV, 1.

³⁰*Compunction of the Soul* 12.

³¹*Compunction of the Soul* 16.

³²*Compunction of the Soul* 12.

³³*Compunction of the Soul* 25.

³⁴*Compunction of the Soul* 53.

position as the Queen of Heaven, her blessed death, her Assumption, glory and her coronation, etc., at the end of this work. This lengthy narration reflects the poet's profound thoughts on her life.

Chavara also considers the "suffering person of St Joseph"³⁵ who was "Holy" and "prime among the just"³⁶ and his cooperation in fulfilling the mission of God together with, Mary his wife.³⁷ He describes the feelings of Joseph as those experienced by someone in a particularly difficult situation. He notes that despite all these inconveniences he did not murmur against God, instead cooperated with His will. However, Chavara considers that they underwent all these sufferings on account of his sins. Reflecting over his past life Chavara is overcome with repentance:

It pains me deep, on my sins to reflect
 My God, my Sire, I listless, made my foe
 How small their guilt, ungrateful me
 My sins many a fold, deeper so
 You, my loving Father, aware of my lot
 Draw me close to your beloved Son
 And by the prayers of your dear spouse
 Forgive the misdeeds, in my childhood I've done³⁸

On reaching the stable, while St Joseph waits in holy expectation, the Nativity of our Lord takes place. The angels sing their celestial praise and congratulate the couple. The poet with sincere feelings of love describes the scene of St Joseph fondling Child Jesus in his arms. After so many hardships, the holy parents find joyful moments, bringing to mind the Word of the Lord to his disciples: "your sorrow will be turned to joy" (Jn 14). However, there are more hardships on the way as they flee to Egypt to save the Child from the brutal acts of King Herod. Chavara reflects on his own past sins and asks pardon from the Lord who is in the manger. With full confidence in the Lord's mercy, Chavara believes a merciful look or gaze from the Infant Child Jesus will save him. Hence he prays:

When your bright visage I see
 My gloom effected, Love glows
 In your look of mercy I behold
 A gentle saviour, not a judge

³⁵*Compunction of the Soul* 72.

³⁶*Compunction of the Soul* 71.

³⁷*Compunction of the Soul* 72.

³⁸*Compunction of the Soul*, 29, lines 197-04.

.....

Abide with me, save me from troubles
 Guard me, O Your grace draw me
 Devoutly I pray, in the words of David
 Your blessed ancestor thus
 The sins of my youth, remember not
 By your mercy, infant save me.³⁹

At the end, Chavara asks the Mother of God to intercede and save him from the wrath of God. His confidence in the Mother is expressed when he prays to her for a happy death and salvation.⁴⁰

4.5. Dignity of Shepherds and Magi

With his special poetic skill, Chavara describes other personalities involved in the scene of the Nativity – the Shepherds and the Magi. The good news of the birth of the Saviour is announced to the shepherds by an angel. Chavara muses on the dignity of the shepherds and the poor to whom the good news was announced before it was announced to the wise and the rich. He offers us a beautiful image of the shepherds zealously rushing to the Manger of Bethlehem.

The young and old, children and mighty men
 Wives and dames came to see the babe
 Little lambs some, others milk to drink
 To the Baby Shepherd they gave
 Fruits of trees, garlands of blossoms sweet
 Babes in glee, tiny birdies they bring
 Off 'ring these before His Sacred Feet
 To the infant bright as the Sun, they bow!⁴¹

The lines describing the image of the new-born baby seen by the shepherds are extraordinary:

the beautiful red lotus is on the lap of Mary,
 the pure and white water lily.⁴²

Chavara brings some novelty to this scene by narrating the conversation between Our Lady and a Shepherdess, Shanti by name.⁴³ The subject of their conversation is the life and mission of Jesus. For

³⁹*Compunction of the Soul*, 35, lines 163-66, 179-83.

⁴⁰*Compunction of the Soul*, 29, lines 205-09.

⁴¹*Compunction of the Soul*, 36-37, lines 21-28.

⁴²See *Compunction of the Soul*, 37, lines 33-36.

⁴³See *Compunction of the Soul*, 37, line 37.

Shanti, as for others, it is unbelievable that the Messiah is born in such poor surroundings. The Blessed Mother clears the doubts that Shanti has about various aspects of Christ's life, explaining the two objectives of God's coming into to this world. First, the Word becomes flesh in his first coming to redeem the world. Second, the *parousia*; the second coming of the Lord to judge the world. In this perspective, Chavara pictures the role of the Mother of God in the redemptive mission of her Son.

The next canto begins with the description of the visit of the Magi, their offering of gifts, the presentation of the holy infant in the temple and the prophecies of Simeon and Anna. This is followed by a solemn meditation on the sorrows and passions foretold by Simeon, to be endured by Our Lady and then a solemn confession of the fact that it was the poet's own innumerable sins and failures that caused these pains. With his sincere repentance, Chavara finally makes a heart-felt prayer that he may be converted and sanctified. He also refers to the converted life of St Andrew Corsini.⁴⁴

4.6. The Passion and Death of Christ

The eighth canto is set apart for the meditations the passion of the Lord. The willing acceptance of the cross by Jesus, his being led to the summit of Mount Calvary, Simon being enjoined to help him bear the Cross, our Blessed Mother and John bearing witness to the painful

⁴⁴Saint Andrew Corsini was born in Florence in 1301 of the illustrious Corsini family. It is said that Andrew was a wayward, bad-tempered youth, though he was the fruit of his parents' prayers and was consecrated by solemn vows to God before his birth. He spent his money on vice and carousing with evil friends. One day his grieving mother, Peregrina, told Andrew of her deepest fears. Just before his birth, she had dreamed that she was giving birth to a wolf and Andrew realized that he was indeed living like a wild animal. She also revealed that he was dedicated to God's service under the protection of the Blessed Virgin while he was still in her womb. He hurried to a church to pray, and became a new man while praying at Our Lady's altar. He was so touched by God that he entered the Carmelite Order. Later, he was elected provincial of Tuscany at the general chapter of Metz in 1348. He was made bishop of Fiesole on 13 October 1349, and gave the Church a wonderful example of love, apostolic zeal, prudence and love of the poor. He died on January 6, 1373 and was canonized in 1629 by Pope Urban VI. See <http://www.saintpatrickdc.org/ss/0204.shtml>. (Accessed 6 September 2006). Chavara does not give any details of the saint's life, but knew well of him and other such saints through his Carmelite friends.

journey and the Crucifixion on reaching Calvary are the highlights of this section. The canto concludes enumerating the Seven Sacred Utterances of Jesus on the Cross.

The events that followed the crucifixion form the theme of the subsequent canto. It describes how, after breaking the legs of the thieves suspended on the Cross with Jesus, the blind Centurion Longinus thrust his lance right through the heart of Jesus, and then how Jesus' sacred body was brought down and laid in the lap of His blessed Mother and then placed in the tomb. The canto also contains the Hymn of thanksgiving sung by Longinus, whose vision was miraculously restored and the lament of the Blessed Mother over the body of her son placed in her lap, lips sealed in silence. Peter, the repentant disciple, consoling the Blessed Mother, add to the charm of the canto. The poet narrates the inner feeling of a mother whose son was brutally killed.

4.7. Mary in the Church and Its Life

In cantos ten to twelve Chavara highlights the relationship between Mary and the Church. The initial parts of this section pertain to the events in the life of Our Lady immediately after the death of Jesus. She makes the first Way of the Cross, visiting the places through which her Son was taken to be crucified. Then she consoles and helps the dear disciples. Following this narration, we have the detailed poetic presentation to the stories of the Resurrection of Jesus and his visit to His Mother, and his glorious ascension into Heaven in the tenth canto. The poet then describes the event of Pentecost, the growth of the Church, the role of the Mother in the conversion of Saul, the assembly in Jerusalem in her presence and her presence at the scene of martyrdom of the apostle James. Her parting message before the Assumption, her submission to Peter, the Vicar of the Church and the counsels she imparts to him are poetically and elaborately narrated. Chavara's devotion to Mary as the Mother of the Church is comes to the fore as he describes the moment God the Father along with his Son Jesus entrusts Our Lady with the care of the Church. "O, daughter, you may protect the believers in the newly built Church founded by Your Son and my Son Jesus when he was in the world."⁴⁵

Chavara describes the dormition and assumption of the Virgin Mother as a profound experience. Knowing that it was time for her to depart this world, she visits Peter, the Head of the Church, and seeks

⁴⁵See *Compunction of the Soul*, 87, lines 79-84.

his apostolic blessing. After describing the Assumption of our Lady, Chavara, moved by genuine devotion to her, seeks her blessings. Then he goes on to refer to the dormition of the Mother and certain graces he had obtained through her intercession. There are references to the efficaciousness of our Lady's intercessory prayer. In Chavara's view, Mary is a mediator as well as a Mother. Always remaining in prayer, the Holy Mother fights against evil and protects the sheep of Christ.⁴⁶ Again in another instance the Church is symbolized as a ship sailing through the oceans of the world. During periods of darkness and struggle the Holy Mother extends her tender help to the Church.⁴⁷ At the end of *Atmanutapam* Chavara prays for Our lady's blessings to obtain solace from the attacks of the devil.

5. Conclusion

The poem is a window to the soul of Chavara who lived ever so close to the Eucharistic presence of the Lord. The saint, often in ecstasy, longed for more of this kind of otherworldly experience. The closer he got to the divine, the stronger was the introspection that he made. The result of this spiritual process is found in the sentiments that he expresses in the poem. In the communication of the mystical experience, Chavara would take recourse to a melange of media to give vent to his thoughts. Joseph and Mary, the holy couple to whom he has a special devotion, the Shepherds and the wise men whose dignity he is fascinated with, were fortunate to have the *darsan* of the Lord. With them he wants to have the same grace. The attitudes of praise and thanksgiving, expression of deep remorse are some of the examples of the outpouring of his heart. Each experience of the divine made him long for more. His ardent longing for the divine vision is a feature that leaves a lasting ring in the hearts of the readers of the poem.

⁴⁶See *Compunction of the Soul*, 89, lines 137-140.

⁴⁷See *Compunction of the Soul*, 91, line 221.