

## Blessed Chavara: A Prophet for the Empowerment of Women

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### Introduction

An important characteristic of our society and of any society is that it is very slow and hesitant in understanding and appreciating the significance of the roles played by its great personalities. A scientist, theologian and mystic, Père Teilhard de Chardin, was considered almost as a heretic when he was alive during the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the official circles of the Church. But during Vatican II his theological insights were exerting tremendous influence on the theology of the Church so much so that the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* has drawn a lot of inspiration and orientation from the teleological and cosmic thinking of this great theologian. Teilhard de Chardin wrote about the world as something sacred. He saw everything in a divine milieu. For him Christ was the Omega point of an evolutionary process moving towards eschatological fulfillment.

When we think of Blessed Chavara and look at the kind of honour and admiration he gets today about a century and a half after his death in 1871, we can say that the same is true about him as well. The Church in Kerala has been, and, to a great extent, is very reluctant and slow in appreciating his personality as well as the many contributions he has made to the Church in Kerala during the nineteenth century, at a time when the Church in Kerala has been passing through a series of crises at the theological, spiritual and disciplinary levels. It took almost a century to start the canonization process of Fr. Chavara. There were many obstacles to be encountered. At last he was beatified in 1986. In this context it is fitting that a mention is made of a very positive and encouraging approach taken by the retired Archbishop Kuriakose Kunnachery on January 3, 2004 on the occasion of the inauguration of the bicentenary of the birth of Chavara. Archbishop Kunnachery compared Chavara with St. Benedict of the 5<sup>th</sup> century who is hailed as the father of European monasticism. It was in imitation of and drawing inspiration from the Rule of Benedictine monastic life started by him in Monte Casino in Italy that all European religious institutes, both

contemplative and active, of men and of women have their origin and inspiration. According to Archbishop Kuriakose it is also the same with the Kerala Carmelite Congregation and their activities, which Chavara founded in 1831 in collaboration with Fathers Thomas Palackal and Thomas Porukara, with the permission of the Latin bishop of the period, at a time when the St. Thomas Christians did not have a bishop or a diocese of their own. This event became the basis for the foundation of many religious congregations of both men and women in India during the succeeding years. Of special mention is the founding of the first religious congregation of women in 1866.

It is customary to narrate the many great things Chavara has accomplished during the sixty five years of his life in the complex and complicated history of Kerala during the nineteenth century. If all the various areas of his apostolic involvement were to be put into a nutshell, it could very well be understood as the articulations of a people oriented vision of the mission he had. Hence the various forms of apostolate which he had undertaken, such as the priestly and theological formation of the clergy, various forms of family apostolate, the apostolate of education, the print media apostolate, his conscientious and committed defense of the faith of the Church during the years of Roccas schism, his various projects of social apostolate were all ramifications of his total commitment to the cause of the Church, of which he was committed and consecrated religious priest. What distinguishes Chavara from many other social reformers is his prophetic personality which enabled him to fathom the depth and dimensions of the society, of which he was a member. He could never go for the average and the ordinary, because he wanted the best to be done for the holistic growth of his society. Only people who have such a prophetic personality and prophetic vision can accomplish anything worthwhile for the people. An important area to which Chavara wanted to pay close attention was the pathetic situation of women in his society in both public and private life. And he did it with determination and vision in such a manner that the impact of his prophetic involvement has gone a long way in empowering the women of our country.

### *The Plight of the Women of Kerala during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Kerala the women in general counted for very little both in the family and in the society. They had to avoid the company of men in public and hence women withdrew from public life as far as possible. In Kerala, where economy was exclusively based on agriculture, women had to depend entirely on men for everything, since women did not have any right to have any property or money in their name. They had no right to earn money or use money. It is said that women were not even allowed to take part in the retreats preached in their own parishes, in the parish festivals or in the family gatherings like anniversary celebrations and other important family get-together. They were marginalized to the maximum without anyone to protect them or to protest against such unjust treatments. In fact, during those days the womenfolk knew nothing except cleaning the pots and cooking in the kitchen. It was a time when women were deprived of even the basic rights of education, property inheritance and proper clothing. They had no

role in making policies and taking decisions in the family, in the Church and in the society. As a whole, women were extremely underprivileged, religiously, socially, economically and educationally. The lot of women in other religions also was nothing better. It was all part of the patriarchal traditions carried on from time immemorial.

Chavara was fully aware of this pathetic situation and the sad plight of the women of his society and also of his community, and he really wanted to do something to improve their lot. The in-depth and thorough religious formation he was given by his mother had made a profound impact on him and it resulted in his genuine esteem for the divine dimension of both motherhood and womanhood, in general. He realized that the spiritual and ethical stability of a society was very much based on the healthy manner in which women were treated. He also realized that an improvement of the situation of the women could be achieved only through the starting of a community of dedicated and spiritually oriented women, through whom he thought he could gradually attain that goal. Though he had launched several innovative projects and programmes for the improvement and development of the society from 1846 onwards, he could not take any concrete step towards a programme for the empowerment of women, precisely because of the social stigma that was attached to such attempts involving the women folk. In fact, he had started something along this line already in 1859 by buying a plot of land with a definite *"purpose of building and conducting a convent in the name of 'the Immaculate Holy Mother of Carmel'."* A two-storied building was constructed in Puthenpally for this purpose. But on account of the onslaught of the Roccas schism, this house was taken over for conducting a seminary and for the training of future priests. This decision to convert the convent building into a seminary for priests made him sad about which he wrote in the Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent:

With that, we lost all the hope we had [about opening a convent], and again got plunged into the same former sad state of helplessness.<sup>1</sup>

Chavara was, indeed, grieved by the decision, and humanly speaking felt hopeless and helpless because he was keenly interested and involved in the founding of a religious community for women. He was grieved because of the disappointment of those women who were anxiously waiting to enter into the solitude of a convent. He was grieved because, in this case also, the needs of men were preferred. In fact, throughout history women were by-passed. He had always observed the unequal treatment towards boys and girls in their own homes, in the church and in the society. He had recorded on the very first page of the Chronicles of the Convent of Koonammavu the privileges men enjoyed in the church:

...men had the privilege of priesthood; they could live a life of chastity. As for women, even those who desired to live a virginal life had no way of embracing such a way of life. They had no option. They had to accept marriage and live as worldly women. They were living in this sad plight a very long time.<sup>2</sup>

When Chavara left Mannanam to stay continuously in Koonammavu, he had some new opportunities and he also got the continuous assistance of the young Italian Carmelite missionary, Leopold Beccaro OCD, who had come to India in 1859. Together they started planning for the beginning of a community for women. God in his great providence arranged everything very favourably in such a way that within two years they could on February 13, 1866 start in Koonammavu a small community of four women, three belonging to the Roman Rite and one belonging to the Malabar Rite.

### *A Small Step towards a Great Leap*

The story of the first community in Koonammavu is not that of an upper class people, but of a lower class, of two widows and two young women. The educational, occupational, socio-economic and religious background of these four women was that of a lower middle class. They could not even read or write properly, they could not manage to construct a small house as convent for themselves. They had no money, no power, no initiative, except good will and a large heart. They were little people, farmers from their background. The Chronicles depicts their condition in these words:

These women had some land and paddy fields as their-own. Some loan had been drawn on the security of this property. The interest on the loan was mounting up and reaching a point when they would not only lose the land but also run into debt.<sup>3</sup> Chavara himself wrote about the life of the first members before the convent was started: "This poor old woman who is now the superior along with her daughter, had all along led a strenuous and hard life making coir ropes and mats, pounding paddy, washing the clothes herself, eating very meager food, such as bran and rice-washed water."<sup>4</sup>

Considering the sad plight of these holy women during those days, the humble bamboo-mat convent in Koonammavu was, in fact, the inauguration of a movement of far-reaching consequences for the future of the Kerala Church. Like a mustard seed it was sown in the fertile soil of Koonammavu. It is also something noteworthy that this first community consisted of both Roman Rite and Malabar Rite members. It is in this ecumenical approach of bringing together diverging ecclesial and ethnic communities that we see the broadminded vision and large-hearted approach of the great prophetic personality of Chavara. The presence and assistance of Leopold Beccaro was an encouraging factor for him and the onward growth of this small community was the net result of the continued support it got from both of these holy men of vision, courage and optimism.

The initial push given and the continued and consistent efforts made by Chavara made it possible to give to these women a clear road map for the healthy growth of this community. Although these women, in general, could read something, they did not know how to write on a paper or on palm leaves. So the first steps taken by Chavara and Leopold were to make the sisters read and write and then to empower them to engage themselves in

teaching other girls to become literate. On the very first day of the inauguration of the convent Chavara wrote in his diary:

The two young sisters –Anna and Teresa took to writing on paper, playing on instruments and needle work.<sup>5</sup>

Very soon the first members launched a programme for about 100 girls to train them in reading and writing and also in making handicrafts, such as rosary, flowers, candles and Mass vestments. Being an educationist himself, Chavara knew very well that education is the sure step towards the growth of a community, whether it is of men or of women. Consequently, he insisted on every aspect of learning and writing for the first members of the community, and he even instructed them to write the chronicles of the community in view of later reference. Chavara gave clear directives about such practices in such a way that he left no aspect of their community life as insignificant:

I had urged sister Anna to note down every detail in the chronicle. I think she has realized it now. If she notes down everything without being lazy I am sure you will all enjoy it while reading after some time.<sup>6</sup>

He instructed the sisters that they should never waste their time in idle talk and become newsmongers. It was his clear policy that all the members should spend some time in meditative reading. Love of reading would lead them to love of solitude and inner growth. Strange and unusual it may seem, Chavara wanted that the sisters learn the Latin language, and he took the first steps towards it so that they could understand those things written in that ancient and powerful language and inherit the spiritual heritage of the church. Moreover, Latin was understood as the official language of the Church. The sisters have recorded gratefully his efforts to teach them Latin:

To learn Latin without a teacher, our father prior got four Latin books printed with its transliteration and translation in Malayalam and gave one copy to the senior girls of the boarding house and three copies to us. And we have begun to learn slowly.<sup>7</sup>

In this manner Chavara encouraged these first members to have a positive and healthy attitude towards the new style of life they had inaugurated. Chavara had made it a point to get for them as many good books as possible so that by reading them he could enable and encourage these sisters to grow into better consecrated persons. From the very beginning it was all very clear to Chavara and also to Leopold that this new community must always hold on to the twin purpose of the starting of this new community life. When they defined the purpose of this community they gave the first place for the spiritual realization of the members who joined the convent. As a man of God, for him, spiritual empowerment comes first. This had to enable a woman to accept and appreciate her womanhood as the image of God, insofar as she has equal inheritance of the divine grace. Chavara often made these women

aware of the greatness of their state of life and their privileged interior life. Even as they strove towards their own spiritual realization, they had to bear in mind that they have an equally important task of educating and empowering the women to become better citizens of this country. In view of this latter task Chavara searched for skilled ladies who could teach the sisters embroidery, sewing and needle work. Vocational training was given much importance. This also gave opportunities to the first members to have these girls on the premises of the convent so that they could be given value education and character formation. He instilled into them a bright vision for the future.

### **Chavara: "A Motherly Father"**

There is a beautiful blending of the paternal and maternal dimensions in the person of Chavara. He acknowledges the strong bond of love existed between himself and the community of sisters. His biographer and contemporary Fr. Kuriakose Porukara, who succeeded Chavara as the prior general of the congregation observes:

Just as Patriarch Jacob had a greater love for his youngest son Benjamin so he [Chavara] loved them [the 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>8</sup>

The sisters had recorded their sense of overflowing gratitude towards Chavara who toiled for them even ignoring his own health and comforts:

Our very Rev. Fr. Prior has suffered a lot in his old age on our account. So all of us have an obligation to remember him and pray for him at all times.<sup>9</sup>

In all these attempts what prompted Chavara was the clean and clear discipline he had received from his beloved mother. This fact made a tremendous influence on him to stand and work for the empowerment of women. A clear example of this love and respect of women is found in his story of Anastasia who risked her life in bearing witness to Christ. She was depicted as a courageous woman who could instill faith and courage into the life of the St. Thomas Christians during the time of Roccas schism.

For Chavara women are a storehouse of inner power and energy. The tradition of their being marginalized and of their being deprived of their initiatives was something which he could never tolerate. So he took the initiatives towards their holistic empowerment by making it possible for them to have a community of dedicated persons and thereby grow into dynamic agents for the empowerment of the tens and thousands of young women in Kerala. The founding of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel, which now has a membership of more than seven thousand sisters, should challenge them to look back to its beginnings both with gratitude and also with a sense of challenge for the greater task that is laid on it by its spiritual

architect and founding father. "Forgetting the roots while enjoying the fruits" is a danger, to which individuals, families and communities, including religious communities are exposed. Moses had warned against this problem in his farewell discourse to the community of the people of Israel (Deut 8:11-19). Chavara does the same thing pointing to the hundreds and thousands of CMC sisters who are spread all over the world and are engaging themselves in all sorts of apostolic works.

### **The CMC and Empowerment of Women in our Times**

In the Book of Numbers we read the story of the daughters of Zelophehad who stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and the entire congregation at the entrance of the tent of meeting and asked for the inheritance of their father's property. Moses brought their case before the Lord. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying. (Num 27: 1-11). The courage of those five women brought forth some privileges for the posterity. We read another story in the Book of Numbers, that Moses exclaiming before his people: "Would that all these Lord's people were prophets, and that the lord would put his Spirit on them!" (Num 11:29. It would also be the prayer of Chavara, as he looks at and sees his thousands of daughters spread far and wide in India and abroad, that they all be prophetic persons like him, that they also display a prophetic vision in their life and activities, that they give voice courageously to the voiceless women to claim for their rights, and carry out a prophetic mission in the world and in the society of their times, that they think and act in the present with a sense of the past and a vision into the future, that they do not remain satisfied with the given and the established, but rather that they transcend the limitations of the present and move into the future, that they develop a broad vision about their mission and become available everywhere and to everyone in this vast world in order to transform it into the kingdom of God. In particular, the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel has to recall from time to time the specific charism that was instilled into its first members, namely, an authentic Christian life practiced by the members of this community and also their constant concern about the cause of the women and their total commitment to their empowerment, which is to be deciphered within the concrete context of the society in which they live and work. It is true that the situation of women during the nineteenth century has been radically changed and improved in our times. But new challenges and new opportunities are emerging. It is not only a question of providing education and other skills, but of giving a coherent and healthy orientation in life which both men and women are very much in need of in our times.

The CMC Congregation has to be fully aware of the complex challenge it has received from its founder Chavara and his associate, Leopold Beccaro, namely, the authentic spiritual realization of its thousands of members spread all over the world and the up-to-date empowerment of women who are committed to the care of the CMC. It is not only a question of conducting some schools and colleges or some centres for social action. It is exploring opportunities to find out new vistas of social engagements and social

transformation. During its earlier history the Congregation with much less resources and with much lesser number of members the CMC could do more for the women. Unfortunately, this Religious Congregation has within it an inbuilt inertia and a tendency to hold on to the status quo because it is safer and more comfortable.

One hundred and fifty years back Chavara dreamt of improving the life situation of the less-privileged women of the society. Today we look up to Blessed Chavara and admire him for his noble vision about the greatness and nobility of womanhood which he started imbibing from his own mother from his early childhood. In fact, he has written a lot about his mother's ways of moulding his character from his early days. In his turn, he has entrusted this noble legacy to the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel and to its more than seven thousand members so that they remain convinced of their charism and mission and that take up the noble task and responsibility of forming and transforming the thousands and millions of women in India and all over the world. What they all need to make their service fruitful in love is a prophetic sense with a close intimacy with God, a profound sense of history with its past, present and future dynamics, and a total involvement for the holistic empowerment of the women.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>CKC, p.22 ( *The Chronicles of Koonammavu convent*)

<sup>2</sup>CWC, I, p. 193; CKC, p 1 (*Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, 4 vols.*)

<sup>3</sup>CKC, I, P. 23.

<sup>4</sup>CWC, Vol. IV, p.36.

<sup>5</sup>CWC, Vol. 1, p.107.

<sup>6</sup>CWC. Vol. IV, p.76.

<sup>7</sup>CKC, p. 152.

<sup>8</sup>Kuriakose Porukara, *Short Biography of most Rev. father Prior of Monasteries...*, Mannanam, 1871, p.35.

<sup>9</sup>CKC., P. 92.