

*Editorial*

**SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA,  
FATHER OR DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH?**

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The Fathers of the Church are mostly known by their saintly lives and faithfulness in receiving and imparting the deposit of the living faith to the generations. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they irrigated, built, fed, and directed the Church to the truth. At their vigilant and tireless service, the Christian practices have been shaped and the Church has been able to grow. Their lives and writings are treasures of immense spiritual value, and they are the vital source of inspiration. The study of the Fathers of the Church, their life and context helps us get acquainted with the Christian doctrine as it developed in the early centuries. We come to know the history of the Church in its formative years and the challenges it confronted. The study provides a comprehensive and integrated vision of the development of Christian theology and inspiring models of spiritual life.

The Doctors of the Church are saints whose writings or preaching are outstanding for guiding the faithful in all periods of the Church. Being open to the Spirit, they gave constant guidance to the Church and brought in renewal. They were catalysts of spiritual and ascetical life. Their lives were *classrooms* that instructed and explained the faith and traditions very vividly and witnessed the universal solidarity, reconciliation and renewal. On the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of “Metz Yeghern” and the proclamation of St Gregory Narek as a Doctor of the Church, Pope Francis in his message highlighted Gregory’s great sense of universal solidarity, and urged the whole humanity to take up again the path of reconciliation and peace. The current list of the Doctors of the Church up to 2019 has thirty-six of them who taught and

illuminated the minds of the faithful, guided the Church and brought in renewal.

In line with the Fathers of the Church who were the irrigators, builders and feeders of the Church, Kuriakose Elias Chavara with his apostolic zeal and pastoral vision was vigilant and prudent to nurture the faith and traditions of the Church in general and the Syro-Malabar Church in particular. His apostolic zeal and integral pastoral vision were evident as the founder of religious congregations, formator of priests, pioneer of Catholic print media, champion of education, social reformer, multi linguist, literary contributor, collaborator of women empowerment, guiding light to the families, defender of church unity, apostle of eucharist and Holy Family and above all a man of union with God who exemplified sanctity through his life.

As the author of many spiritual and liturgical works, Chavara's life and writings are priceless treasures of immense spiritual value for the generations. As the Chronicles that Chavara kept give the details of the contemporary historical details of the Church and the society, he could be compared to Eusebius of 4<sup>th</sup> century whose writings supplies the details of the writers and writings of the early centuries. Like Ephrem, the poet-theologian of 4<sup>th</sup> century, Chavara defended the orthodox faith through his poems; and he had written from an inner urge to build up the communities he founded and the Church at large. Hence, Chavara could be compared to St Paul who wrote letters to the fledgling congregations as a mechanism for further instructing and strengthening them in Christian faith.

With deep faith, he took refuge in the providence of God, and it enabled him to be creative in responding to the needs of the times with the intention of handing over the 'flame of faith' to the coming generations and thus attaining the, "sanctification of self and salvation of all". With a comprehensive pastoral vision, he was totally committed to revamp and transform the Church and the society, and he could involve in every aspect of Christian life, and the light he lit continues to shine through and beyond the ages. In all these, he gave top priority to obedience to and communion with Rome and cherished a filial attachment and great devotion to the Church as mother. In the words of Pope St John Paul II, "Today the Church solemnly recalls with love and gratitude all his efforts to resist threats of disunity and to encourage the clergy and faithful to maintain unity with the See of Peter and the

universal Church.”<sup>1</sup> His fidelity to the Lord, for sure, commensurated with his love for the Church, the mystical body of Christ.

With a firm sense of duty towards his mother Church, without ceding to any compromise to her faith and traditions, St Kuriakose Elias Chavara with deep prayer and apostolic zeal brought in renewal and revitalization in her. Chavara was called up and anointed by the Holy Spirit with specific charisms to build up, mold and reform the Church with his orthodox teaching and orthopraxis. As the Vicar General of the Catholic Thomas Christians at the time of Roccas Schism that caused the disunity of the community, Chavara could reestablish the lost unity and instill a sense of identity in them and promote and deepen their spirituality. Chavara who laid a firm foundation for the Syro-Malabar Church, which was still in its evolving phase, has a unique position in the history of the Syro-Malabar Church, and he continues to be an inspirational model for all the generations, for his contributions are vital and outstanding. He not only renewed the Church by many spiritual pursuits and enhanced the status of the society of his time by various humanitarian projects, but also could shape and give right direction to both by his many innovative ways and activities for the times to come.

The present issue of the *Herald of the East* investigates the possibility and criteria for declaring St Kuriakose Elias Chavara as a Father of the Syro-Malabar Church and a Doctor of the Universal Church. In all the entries, we make a journey through the immense and outstanding contributions of Chavara for the Church.

Francis Thonippara in his article delves on the criteria for declaring a saint as Father of the Syro-Malabar Church *sui iuris* and Doctor of the Universal Church and their application on St Kuriakose Elias Chavara. He presents Chavara as the second founder of the Syro-Malabar Church. He gives the details of the historical setting of the St Thomas Christians and thus provides a clearer understanding of the SMC in four periods of its development. Thonippara highlights the unique role and immense contributions of St Chavara in the SMC for its development and growth. He proves the eligibility of St Chavara to be proclaimed a ‘Father of the Syro-Malabar Church’, for he was a servant and strong pillar of the Church. Thonippara highlights the outstanding features of the Fathers of the Church in St Chavara. In his capacity as the Vicar General, he

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1986/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19860208\\_stadio-kattayam.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1986/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19860208_stadio-kattayam.html); accessed on 02.03.2023.

promoted indigenous ecclesial leadership, and emerged as a leader of spiritual and social renaissance in Kerala. His numerous literary works nurtured the spirituality of the Malabar Church. Section B of the article seeks the criteria for declaring a saint as Doctor of the Church in the Universal Church and how to proceed with it in the case of St Chavara. In all these, the author strongly emphasizes the role of the Synod of the Syro-Malabar Church and urges it to exercise its role fully.

Benny Thettayil, in his article, highlights the feature of 'antiquity' in the life and ecclesial contributions of Chavara. He expounds the role of Chavara in the ecclesial formative period by becoming an exponent of pastoral awakening and ecclesial revitalization when it needed a spiritual revival. His zeal for the Church made him a strong defender of the Church for he knew its apostolic faith, traditions and history. Chavara was convinced of the apostolicity of the Syro-Malabar Church and was proud of the antiquity of its faith and tradition, and as a patriarchal figure he defended the Church and protected it from possible divisions and disputes. Nothing thwarted him from accomplishing it. Delineating the immense contributions of Chavara in spiritual, educational, ecclesial and literary realms, Thettayil urges the Synod of the Syro-Malabar Church to declare Chavara a Father of the Syro-Malabar Church.

Thomas Kollamparampil depicts the Doctors of the Church as the persons guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the Church. Their vital contributions accelerated the organic growth of the Church in struggles and opportunities. As champions of divine wisdom and knowledge, they made the face of Christ visible at various times and places. Anointed by the Holy Spirit they transmitted the Christian faith and Tradition and built up and even reformed the Church with orthodox teachings and orthopraxis. The Doctors of the Church are the visible face of Christ to the world at all time and cultures and catalysts of spiritual and ascetical life, for they guided the faithful to Christ as the 'Star of Bethlehem' (Mt 2:9) guided the Magi to the Babe in the manger. Kollamparampil affirms the exemplary life and great contributions of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara in line with the Doctors of the Church, for through him, the Holy Spirit molded the Church in its turbulent times and kept the unity of the Church. Being open to the illuminating actions of the Holy Spirit, he taught and illuminated the minds of the faithful.

Jossy Maria makes a reflection on the immense contributions of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara for the Church and its unity and growth, and

she presents him as a true son of the Church. The author situates Chavara and his contributions for the integral welfare of the Church and the society in the nineteenth century ecclesial and social background. Jossy discusses the special situation of the Kerala church at the time of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara who believed that the society would become prosperous when the families are integrated, and women's welfare has been assured and those who are at the periphery are thoroughly motivated for development. This article forms the first part of her study, and it reflects on the social vision of Chavara and the ecclesial situation in the nineteenth century Kerala, his contributions as the Vicar General of Saint Thomas Christians, and Chavara as a man of wider ecclesial vision. The author expounds how well Chavara was accepted and recognized by the people as their valiant leader and understood what he was for the Church and what he did for its growth.

In his address before the thanksgiving Holy Qurbana at St Peter's Basilica on the following day of the canonization of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara and St Euphrasia Pope Francis said, "Kuriakose Elias was a religious, both active and contemplative, who generously gave his life for the Syro-Malabar Church, putting into action the maxim 'sanctification of oneself and the salvation of others.'"<sup>2</sup> St Chavara who walked ahead of his time, in great generosity of heart and with a spirit of love, *gave his life for the Syro-Malabar Church*. As he had become a true guide and a great reformer at her service, he could be called a Father of the Syro-Malabar Church. By his outstanding contributions for the spiritual, social, cultural and educational development of the local church of his time and the times to come, he is also worthy to be proclaimed a Doctor of the Universal Church.

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<sup>2</sup> *Footprints of Holiness, Souvenir of the Canonization of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara & St Euphrasia Eluvathingal (23 November 2014)*, Kakkannad: CMI Prior General House & Thaikattukara: Mount Carmel Generalate, 2015, 10.