

Book Review

Jossy Maria, *Fostering Feminine Genius: An Empowering Theology of Women from Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 7), Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2020, pp. xxxii + 294; ISBN: 978-81-946576-3-7.

In the traditional theological circles, feminist theology in general has been a bit considered as something too liberal or rebellious. It must be at the same time frankly admitted that feminist theology can also be part of an authentic Christian theology of liberation, in the spirit of the teachings of Jesus Christ. The above-mentioned book by Sr Dr Jossy Maria CMC, is a case in point. She has brought out in this work the vision of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871) on women. He was an Indian Carmelite religious priest from Kerala belonging to the Syro-Malabar Church, canonized on 23 November 2014. He was one of the founding fathers of the first indigenous religious congregation for men, the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) in 1831 and the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC) for women in 1866. He had pioneered a set of revolutionary changes to uplift the marginalized and the ostracised people of the society through educational and social activities. One among such activities is his attempts at promoting the dignity of women and fighting against discrimination and injustice towards them. This social uplift of women was an urgent need of the times in India in general and in Kerala (Malabar) in particular, then in the nineteenth century, just as it is still today in many parts of the globe. Although the Church in general is often unfairly/mistakenly and sweepingly accused of patriarchal hegemony and male chauvinism against women, Chavara emerges very clearly as a champion of feminism, as is evident from his contributions towards empowering the women genius, which is clearly demonstrated by the well written work of Sr Jossy.

In order to scientifically understand and present Chavara's vision on women Sr Jossy analyses his thoughts, writings, instructions and ministry, which contain his deep reflections upon the role and place of women in the whole economy of salvation. The book consists of five chapters. The first chapter gives us a glimpse of the biblical and recent magisterial/papal writings regarding feminine genius. To begin with, the author briefly touches upon the contributions of the Second Vatican

Council in this area and of the Pope St Paul VI and then elaborately discusses the valuable contributions of Pope St John Paul II, who authored two important documents about women, namely, the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988) and *Letter to Women* (1995). The author then gives us an interesting and eye-opening discussion on the theological anthropology contained in the creation stories of the book of *Genesis*. Here she highlights the new theological insights that speak for women vis-à-vis the traditional interpretation, which tended to uphold the inferior status of women.

The chapter has also a section about Jesus' attitude towards women and on St Paul's theology of women, with both the positive and negative aspects of St Paul's theology, although some of the texts selected to highlight the negative aspects could be actually understood positively in the light of a different interpretation, as for instance, 1 Cor 14:36 ("Or did the word of God originate with you?") as St Paul refuting the opinion (of some men) that women should be silent in the churches! In other words, verses 33b to 35 reflect the prevailing attitude of some men, and the verses from 36 as St Paul's own response to it! A comparable text is 1 Cor 8:1. Verse 1a ("all of us possess knowledge") is the opinion of a few, while verse 1b ("Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up") is St Paul's response to it. Again 1 Cor 11:10 can be seen as St Paul permitting women to have authority (*exousia*, meaning veil as a symbol of authority) over her head! In this connection it may also be observed that what is described in Gen 3 about man ruling over his wife has to be seen as speaking for women, for this situation of male domination is depicted there as a consequence of the *sin*, i.e., not as the ideal situation willed by God! Towards the close of the first chapter there is also a section on the pro-woman statements of Pope Francis, of the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (2020) and of the CBCI Gender Policy for India (2010).

Chapter 2 is the main chapter, in which the author elaborately discusses the feminine genius in the writings of St Chavara. She observes there that the integral formation Chavara received from his mother Thoppil Mariam and the powerful image of his mother "enabled him to see God as Mother" (p. 55). As an explicit text in support of this she cites the statement from *Atmanutapam* in which Chavara addresses Jesus Christ as "my father, my mother, my joy, my food and drink and everything in my life" (p. 61, foot note 1). In this poem *Atmanutapam* Chavara pens more than 100 lines directly on his mother and more than 300 lines on mothering experiences. Sr Jossy also observes that "while body-denying spirituality was praised in the Catholic tradition Chavara

has full praise for pregnancy, childbirth ... and thus, he developed a theology of women's body" p. 77). Although one may wonder here how this can be understood as developing a "theology of women's body", it is true that Chavara's above-mentioned writings implicitly contain a positive theology of woman's body, in that St Chavara had tried to break the taboos and myths of uncleanness attached to a woman's body and its processes. He pictured colourfully Blessed Virgin Mary's dominant life experiences such as pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, nurturing, care giving, etc., which were all experiences through her body. One may at the same time also remark that the body-hostile spirituality was not an essential and general feature of Catholic tradition as such, although in the West there was a time when such a negative view was prevalent reflecting the Gnostic-Manichean-Augustinian influence.

It is interesting to note that according to Sr Jossy "Chavara presents Mary of Magdala as a person who fell in love with Jesus" (p. 91). The close friendship Jesus had with Martha and Mary of Bethany, whom Chavara calls "my mothers" is another theme, which the author deals with in this connection. Another such mother of Chavara is Saint Teresa of Avila, whom he calls *Amma Thressia*. He has also another particular group of mother saints comprising of three Marys, namely, Saints Mary of Egypt, Mary of Cortona and Mary Magdalene, whom he calls "Penitent Mothers". He also joyfully accepted the contributions of women in completing his projects, allowed them to co-operate with him with his projects and made them his collaborators. The author further brings out that in Chavara's writings there are many stories on women to illustrate his teaching. The terms '*punya sthree*' (virtuous woman), '*punya kanya*' (virtuous virgin), etc., are often repeated to denote the nature of these women. These stories reveal Chavara's mind-set that women are generally more devoted and virtuous than men and that the women are closer to God and their prayers are more readily heard (p. 108). Also in his *Chavarul* the Saint often includes inspirational stories of widows. All this serves to bring to light Chavara's positive assessment of women.

Chapter 3 deals with the different means St Chavara adopted to foster feminine genius, to encourage women and to develop their skills. He did this mostly through the first indigenous religious institute he co-founded for women at Koonammavu, Kerala. He intended thereby a thorough reform of the Kerala Church of the nineteenth century. He did his best to develop the artistic and literary talents and skills of the

candidates and sisters in the convent and the girls in the boarding house. They were trained in flower setting, embroidery, singing, writing poems, playing musical instruments, etc. In order to encourage the girls their artistic works were exhibited when prominent guests visited the convent and boarding house. The chapter illustrates beautifully how St Chavara tried to uplift the women of Kerala by promoting their skills in dramatics through Eclogues (shepherd dramas), teaching Tamil and also some hymns in Latin and Syriac, imparting vocational training and higher education for girls, inculcating in them the reading habits, training in accounts keeping, and introducing rosary making as cottage industry.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Blessed Virgin Mary, as the highest expression of feminine genius. The author observes in the opening pages of the chapter that "Chavara's Mary of Nazareth, as he had presented in the *Atmanutapam*, while completely devoted to the will of God, was far from being a timidly submissive woman; on the contrary, she was a woman who courageously stood at the foot of the cross when her son was disowned and deserted even by his closest disciples" (p. 203). Sr Jossy makes a very important observation that "Chavara presented Mary's relationship with God and humans as rooted in her womanly experiences" (p. 204). The chapter offers an analysis of Chavara's relationship with Mary. Here Sr Jossy gives us some glimpses of Chavara's first relationship with Mother Mary; the event of his being offered at her feet at Vechoor Church; his celebration of the feast of her nativity as "a day of grace"; his understanding of the Rosary as an important item of the family prayer (*sandhya namaskaram*). In the *Dhyanasallapangal* Chavara makes many references to Mary, about her relationship to Joseph and her sufferings. Sr Jossy also highlights that Chavara presented Mary as the "Woman promised", who lived her womanhood as "daughter, wife, leader, and mother of the community" (p. 210). He addressed her as "supreme lady", "crown of womankind", "my mistress", etc. At the same time Chavara views Mary also as a true disciple and constant follower of Jesus (pp. 225-229). He considered Mary also the first consecrated person and the model of perfect consecration to God and the mother of consecrated persons. Sr Jossy elaborates on this point in pages 230 to 239. Chavara portrays Mary also as a courageous woman. This was shown at the foot of the cross and when the dead body of Jesus was brought down from the cross to her. In Chavara's poetic imaginations, Mary is also depicted as a merciful mother who filled with compassion justifies the actions of the disciples

saying to herself “that it was because of their fear of death that the disciples deserted Jesus, their master” (p. 242).

Chavara depicts Mary also as a privileged mother, in that he portrays a unique scene of Jesus’ appearance to her after his resurrection. A unique encounter! Graced by divine power she was privileged to see then the godly scene and rejoiced. The further epithets of Mary according to Saint Chavara are: a caring mother of Christ’s disciples, protector of women, mother of the church, loving daughter of the heavenly Father, beloved mother of Jesus and the lovely bride of the Holy Spirit.

It is also noteworthy that Sr Jossy has a very interesting section 7 with the subtitle “Mary: in Harmony with Mother Earth” in chapter 4. There the author deals with what St Chavara wrote in the twelfth Canto of the *Atmanutapam* about what happened when it was time for Mary to depart from this earth. Sr Jossy mentions there that according to Chavara the first title of Mary was ‘Mother of the Creator’, and now she gets the titles of ‘Mother of all humanity’ as well as ‘Mother of the universe’. Chavara venerated her as the mother of all the living. In the above poem he also envisages that Mary had prepared her Testament, asking permission from her Son.

The words of Sr Jossy on Chavara’s poem *Atmanutapam* are insightful and deep in meaning. She writes: “Looked at from a Marian perspective, *Atmanutapam* was “Her-story, story of Mary. ... It was Jesus’ story seen through the eyes of Mary; it is also Chavara’s story, meditated by and intertwined with the lives of Jesus and Mary. It was the story of every woman who looked up to Mary” (p. 266).

The concluding chapter 5 deals with Christian anthropology regarding the promotion of women’s equal dignity and presents St Chavara as a model after the “Jesus’ model” of empowerment. In this context Sr Jossy speaks of “Chavara Model” of Empowering and “Koonammavu Model” of Empowerment. The author then pleads for a Gospel-based feminism. She is full praise for Chavara, for he initiated social feminism in the nineteenth century and he was the supporter of feminine holiness; he had personal relationship with women in deep interior freedom. As Sr Jossy has beautifully demonstrated and rightly concludes, Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara’s “person and contributions affirm the fundamental dignity [of women] and their equality with men in being persons” (p. 286).

We hope that the work of Sr Jossy would be an incentive to promote women empowerment in the society and the church on the one hand and as an appeal and reminder to all those, who work or tend to work against the empowerment of women by encroaching upon and disregarding the rights of women/women religious guaranteed to them by civil law and canon law, as the case may be, on the other. At the ecclesiastical level, many of the superiors of women religious institutes are apparently either not aware of their rights or are frightened to protest against their violations, fearing eventual (although unlawful) reprisals from the authorities concerned.

I sincerely congratulate the author Sr Dr Jossy on this admirable work and wish this volume would get wide circulation and attract a large readership.

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