

KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA: A TRUE SON OF THE CHURCH

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Abstract: Narrating and reflecting on the immense contributions of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara for the Church and its unity and growth, Josy Maria presents him as a true son of the Church. In the present article, the author discusses the special situation of the Kerala church at the time of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara who believed that the society will 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. Therefore, all these four aspects are unfolded gradually. The present essay 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. This article has a second part which would appear in the next issue.

Keywords: St Thomas Christians, Eastern Church, Individual Church, Syro-Malabar Church, Roccas Schism, *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII, Just wages, Ecclesial Heritage, Indentity Consciousness, Fr Leopold Beccaro OCD, Carmelite Missionaries.

1. Introduction

Being a social reality, the Church is deeply involved in the day-to-day affairs of the people of God. She cannot distance herself from these realities, as she is concerned about the spiritual wellbeing of her children

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as well as their concerns and anxieties of daily living. *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII is the first great social encyclical letter in which the social commitment of the Church is articulated with clarity and focus. It reads: "It must not be supposed that the Church is so preoccupied with the spiritual concerns of her children as to neglect their temporal and earthly interests. Her desire is that the poor should rise above poverty and wretchedness and better their condition in life."¹ Here the specific and indispensable role of the Church in social change is very well expressed. The Pope was convinced that religion can avail itself to destroy the evil in the society at its roots. The key to reading Pope Leo's *Rerum Novarum* is the dignity of the worker and, therefore, the dignity of work, which he defines as "to exert oneself for the sake of procuring what is necessary for the various purposes of life."² Work is personal in as much as the energy expended is bound up with the personality and is exclusive property of him who acts. The social condition of the Church at the end of the nineteenth century to which *Rerum Novarum* addressed was entirely different from that of Kerala society which was far from the concept of the dignity of work and of the worker. Kerala's working class was mainly *Pulayas* and other lower caste people who were treated as animals; they were meant to work hard, but were considered to have no right for just wages and proper living conditions.

In the present paper, we analyze how did the social vision of Kuriakose Elias Chavara and the programs he initiated in Kerala led to the integral welfare of the Church and the society. As a true disciple of Christ, Chavara was committed to carry on the liberating mission of Jesus and, as a lover of the Church, he was guided by the social teachings of the Church. The state of affairs of the nineteenth century Kerala society challenged him to initiate various programmes for the less privileged and the marginalized of the society. His dedication opened up new ways of showing solidarity with the marginalized and working for their advancement. By doing this, he became a sign of contradiction of his time for the authorities or, in other words, he proved himself as a man ahead of his time. Chavara's capacity to respond meaningfully to the social issues of Kerala has brought forth integral development of the Church and society.

¹Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 15 May 1891, no. 23. AAS XI (1892), 97-144.

²Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 1891, no. 6.

2. Nineteenth Century Kerala Church of "Master and Slaves"

A clear understanding of the ecclesial situation of the Saint Thomas Christians of Kerala would be necessary to understand the circumstances in which Chavara had been working for the integral welfare of the Church and the society. According to a report of the vicariate of Varapuzha sent to the prefect of Propaganda Fide, Rome, on 25 March 1859, the Catholic population of Latin Christians was 10,000, and that of Syrians 160,000. Indigenous priests and seminarians of the Latin Church stood at 28 and 29 and that of Syrians amounted to 340 and 240 respectively. Parishes of the Latin community were numbered at 23 and along with 37 chapels; Syrians had 115 parishes and 120 chapels. The number of missionaries in Varapuzha was five. In the vicariate of Mangalore the number of Catholics was 40,000 and had 24 indigenous priests and six missionaries.³ This report clearly depicts the uniqueness of the vicariate of Varapuzha which was in an anomalous situation, since it was governed by a Latin bishop, although the Eastern Christians formed the vast majority of the faithful. In fact, more than two-thirds of the Christian faithful and parishes in the vicariate of Varapuzha belonged to the Eastern Church. They had every right to obtain a bishop of their own rite and nation.

Chavara was well aware that in India all the vicariates put together had less number of Christians than that of Saint Thomas Christians of Varapuzha vicariate. It pained him that this ancient apostolic church with 160,000 Catholics and 340 priests and 115 parish churches was combined with and treated as an appendix to a church of recent origin, with another Rite, that too with very few faithful and meager infrastructures.⁴ Chavara stated it in no uncertain terms: "Such discrepancy of the rites is not found anywhere in the world except

³ AGOCD., Plut. 444, *Registro delle Cose*, 362; 181c.

⁴ AGOCD., *Stato delle Missioni Estere dell'Ordine de Carmelitani Scalzi* nel 1863, 448r, 448v. *Indie Orientali Costa Malabarica*. According to the report sent to Rome in 1863 the number of priests in Syrian Rite has been reduced to 300 and parishes 113. Is it because the statistics went wrong or because of the disturbance caused by Roccas schism many left their priesthood? There were 340 priests and 240 seminarians in 1859; within four years how is it possible to have considerable change in the number of priests? On 18 May 1876 when Monsignor Leo Meurine, apostolic visitor, wrote to Rome the number of priests 328, seminarians 124, parish churches 158 chapels 10. TOCD monasteries 6 in which priests 37, lay brothers 24, novices 33 (ACO, *Ponenze* 1876 ff. 725-730).

among the Syro-Malabarians.”⁵ In the Report of 1867 the vicar apostolic openly admitted that nine Syro-Malabar priests were appointed to serve in Quilon vicariate: “Because of great scarcity, with my permission nine priests serve the vicariate apostolic of Quilon as vicars or assistant vicars.”⁶ It means that vicariate of Quilon, which was exclusively for the Latins, was erected at the expense of another individual Church or Rite. A vicariate was installed even without having sufficient priests of their own. This is true about the vicariate of Varapuzha which could not provide Latin priests for the Latin parishes.⁷

Chavara saw the basic reason for the lack of identity consciousness, growth, unity, poor quality of priestly formation, and all other problems related with the Church was the difference of rites and the lack of local ecclesial leadership of their own rite. It saddened him that they were like fatherless generation and there existed no cordiality between the bishop and the priests. He expressed his views clearly:

In Malabar our priests know only the Syriac language which they use for liturgical purposes. Their bishops and missionaries use a different language and follow a different rite. This situation stands in the way of unity and the mutual understanding that should exist between the Father and his spiritual children which is entirely missing here... The language used by the bishop to ordain priests is not the same as the one used by the priests. Hence, there is lack of devotion and the existing bond between them is not that of father and children, but that of master and slaves. This gives rise to a slavish fear in the priests and in the common people...⁸

3. Sign of Contradiction for the Carmelite Missionaries

When Chavara had longed for the self-government for the Saint Thomas Christians, the Carmelite missionaries thought that it was an act of

⁵ Chavara, CWC., vol. 4, *Letters* VI:4.

⁶ Archives of the Congregation of the Oriental Churches (ACO), Rome, *Ponenze* 1873, 681-709. See also Paul Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly and the Saint Thomas Christians in 1867: Kuriakose Elias Chavara Unworthy of Episcopate?* Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2018, 71. Hereafter referred to as Baccinelli Report 1867. Q., 57. p. 71.

⁷ Persico report mentions about the lack of sufficient number of Latin priests for the Latin Parishes. Also, Persico says that Syrian priests are appointed in Latin parishes as assistants. ACO., *Ponenze* 1877 pp. 595-637. Persico Report, para. 54.

⁸ Chavara, CWC., vol. 4, *Letters* VI: 4.

usurpation, which was illogical and illegitimate; naturally, they could not digest the idea. In the course of time, Leonard Mellano, the vicar apostolic showed much dislike towards Chavara for his legitimate suggestion to have an exclusive ecclesial leadership for the Saint Thomas Christians, a church with a large number of Christians and better infrastructure and resources. Moreover, this Malabar church was a *swadeshi* church, a national church, a church rooted in Kerala, but the ecclesial authorities were Europeans. Unlike other vicariates of India this Church was not the fruit of the missionary work of European missionaries. Chavara's motivation was pure and determination strong. He took courage and persisted boldly to let the higher ecclesial authorities know the real situation of Malabar Church. He was clear about the apostolic origin and identity of Saint Thomas Christians. He wrote clearly to the Prefect of the Propaganda Fide: "We are Mar Thoma Christians who have received our faith from Saint Thomas. For the past many years we had no bishop of our own. But those who received faith in very recent times have bishops of their own."⁹ He offered his humble suggestion as to how they can overcome this handicap so that people will stay contented:

Hence, Your Eminence, I am placing before you a suggestion which I consider good. It is good to have two bishops here: one for the Latin Church and another for the Syrian Church. Then their longing to have a bishop of their own will cease.¹⁰

From the second half of the nineteenth century the Syrians got fed up with the Carmelite missionaries and their dissatisfaction grew in leaps and bounds. Realizing the sentiments of the people with regard to the lack of native leadership of this apostolic Church, Chavara joined with like-minded priests, informed the proper authority in the Church, namely, Propaganda Fide, through a letter sent on 22 July 1861. Realistically, but with genuine concern, he wrote: "Lastly we wish to inform you of one more fact. For quite some time now, our laity and priests have been alienating themselves from the Archbishop [Bernardine]. The reason for this alienation, according to them, is that his

⁹ Chavara, CWC., vol. 4, *Letters* II: 4. Letter to Alexander Barnabo, Prefect of Propaganda Fide.

¹⁰ Chavara, CWC., vol. 4, *Letters* II:5. Letter to Alexander Barnabo, Prefect of Propaganda Fide.

orders are harsh to accept and his directions are excessive.”¹¹ From the time of the appointment of Latin bishops in 1599 the St Thomas Christians ardently desired bishops of their own rite, because they wanted sacred ordinations and other Episcopal ceremonies in their own rite and liturgical language. If they had been given a bishop of their own rite and nation even according to the provisions of Fourth Lateran Council as a vicar general of the vicariate of Varapuzha, Roccas schism would not have taken place.¹²

Chavara was aware of the ecclesial identity of this individual Church and feared that the seminarians and deacons who were trained and ordained by a foreign bishop will gradually lose their ecclesial heritage and identity consciousness. He saw the need to have bishops of their own rite and to have liturgical celebrations in Syriac language in view of an ecumenical outlook. Hence, he wrote: “This would be very opportune and useful. There are also many non-Catholics in our midst who are our own kith and kin, now known as Jacobites. The above solution will help them renounce schism and to return to the unity of the Catholic fold.”¹³ He experienced an agony; his agony was to be alive to the mission of the Lord in his time. We could see in him a keen search for the vision for the Indian Church that would enhance her being as a true local church.

Chavara wrote to Rome for getting a bishop of our own on another occasion, which was carried by Fr Leopold Beccaro OCD who accompanied Monsignor Mellano to Italy on 10 September 1869.¹⁴ Along with Chavara many other priests had put their signature in that letter. When Monsignor Mellano came to know about this letter in which Saint Chavara also has put his signature, he was displeased with Chavara and he complained to Rome against Chavara regarding this matter.¹⁵ When Chavara died on 3 January 1871 Monsignor Mellano did not make himself available for his funeral ceremonies.¹⁶ The priests and faithful

¹¹Chavara, CWC., vol. 4, *Letters* II:1. Letter to Alexander Cardinal Barnabo on 22 July 1861.

¹² Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly*, p. 120.

¹³Chavara, CWC., vol. 4, *Letters* II:5. Letter to Alexander Cardinal Barnabo.

¹⁴Parappuram, *Nalagamangal*, p. 1380-81 [MSS, Malayalam]. The Chronicler gives a detailed explanation regarding this letter and what happened to it later. Cf. also Jossy Maria, *Malabarinte Manassarinja Mahamissionary, Fr Leopold Beccaro, OCD*, Aluva: CMC Publications, 2023, p. 183.

¹⁵ Letter written by Monsignor Mellano to Propaganda on 19 September 1875.

¹⁶ *The Chronicle of Mannanam Monastery*, vol. 3, p. 138 [MSS, Malayalam]

looked at his absence as an expression of his dislike for the person of Chavara for standing for self-government and they feared dire consequences in the future.

Another cause of grief for Chavara was lack of theological treatises or other systematic books. He lamented, "Greeks and Latins have excellent theological books and good treatises, and when we ask ourselves why we, the Syrians, have not produced so far good books or treatises and how this situation can be improved, the answer we find is that all nations and people have their own bishops and missionaries who are well-versed in sacred sciences and that they have produced in the course of years good literary works and theological treatises."¹⁷

In the report sent by Monsignor Baccinelli to Rome in 1867, Question 57 read: "Whether amongst the priests there are alumni of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, or of Saint Athanasius College in Rome ... whether they accomplish their work satisfactorily?" To this, Baccinelli gave the following answer: "There are not any."¹⁸ When the above-mentioned report asked about convoking provincial and diocesan synod, the vicar apostolic openly admitted that the Carmelites never convoked any synod.¹⁹ Saint Thomas Christians felt the disregard of the Carmelite missionaries that they did not work for the growth of the local church so that they did not send any priest for higher studies. Moreover, they did not show interest even to teach them Syriac and Latin language; they did not show respect for their local culture and they had many other grievances.

4. Chavara, Vicar General of Saint Thomas Christians

On 8 June 1861, within a month after the arrival of the intruder bishop Thomas Roccas in Kerala from Baghdad, Chavara was appointed vicar general. Being aware of the magnitude and the seriousness of the problem caused by the arrival of bishop Roccas, Baccinelli openly admitted his inability to have control over the situation. And he explained the reason for this appointment in the following words:

On account of the difficulties which we experience in the administration of churches under our jurisdiction for a long time, because of our advanced age and subsequent exhaustion and indisposition, and moreover, since through our administration we do

¹⁷Chavara, CWC., vol. 4, *Letters* VI: 4.

¹⁸ Baccinelli Report 1867. Q. 57.

¹⁹ Baccinelli Report 1867, Q.14, 59.

not see spiritual fruits both among the priests and among the laity, in the present circumstances of things, according to the decree of the council of Trent, it is necessary to constitute a vicar general. Hence we appoint you as vicar general, so that you govern, as regards spiritual affairs, priests and lay people in the parishes of Syro-Malabar Church under our jurisdiction.²⁰

On 15 June 1861, Baccinelli wrote to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide informing him of the appointment of Chavara as the vicar general, in which he listed very many good qualities of Chavara: "The Prior of the old and principal monastery, and head of the whole congregation, a man truly Christian, virtuous, very prudent, very well-versed in Sacred Scriptures, most proficient in Syriac language, who in this circumstance with his deeds proved himself to be very faithful to the Catholic religion and to the Holy See, even though the Intruder and his seditious group from Baghdad itself endeavored to draw him to their side...²¹

Here it is worthwhile to recall that Baccinelli had even contemplated consecrating Chavara a bishop in order to satisfy the people in the context of the then Roccas schism!²² With all these great expectations and blessings Chavara was appointed as vicar general. But we do not see any document signed by Chavara as vicar general. It was ten days after his appointment as vicar general that Chavara wrote letters to the Holy Father to know the truth about bishop Thomas Roccas; even in those letters he did not introduce himself as vicar general; instead he signed as the Prior of the TOCD.²³ This was true about his five letters to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide and to other bishops, priests, and lay people.

One year after his appointment, in 1862, in the second and third weeks of September (12-22 September), the three vicars apostolic of Varapuzha, Mangalore, and Kollam and their respective vicars general assembled at Varapuzha to discuss and determine important

²⁰ ACO, Ponenze 1865, 687-690. See also Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly*, 17-18.

²¹ ACO, Ponenze 1865, 687-690. See also Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly*, 18-21.

²² ACO, Ponenze 1865, 687-690. See also Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly*, 18-21.

²³ Even then he knew that his position as the Prior of the monasteries was far higher than that of a vicar general of a vicariate! Moreover, I am also glad that this little 'political' appointment did not affect him much.

disciplinary laws of their vicariates.²⁴ The decisions taken at the Conference were sent to the Propaganda Fide on 5 October 1862, under the signatures of the vicars apostolic and their respective vicars general. Father Philip of Saint Joseph, a Carmelite missionary, represented the vicariate of Varapuzha as vicar general.²⁵ Though Chavara was the vicar general, his signature is found missing in the report and, accordingly, we do not have any evidence for his participation in the Conference while many discussions and deliberations of the Conference were regarding the Saint Thomas Christians. It leads us to think that when the immediate problem of the arrival of bishop Roccas was settled and Roccas went back to his country, Chavara was forgotten within one year by the bishop himself who appointed him as vicar general for the Syrian Christians. But his convictions and his inner tranquility remained the same as before. During his tenure he gave the vicariate a firm foundation with seminary and houses of formation where he guided his charges with kindness, firmness and patience. He wrote to his priests: "The priest who is not united to God is a stream that is disjointed from its source."

5. Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara Unworthy of Episcopate?

We see another anomaly in the question of consecrating him as bishop. In the letter informing the prefect of the Propaganda Fide the appointment of Chavara as the vicar general, Baccinelli had made a request to consecrate Chavara as bishop. "... my opinion, my request to Your Eminence (is to consider), whether it will be convenient to consecrate him as coadjutor bishop for the Surianis, in case the sole dignity of vicar general is not enough to hold back (arrest) the multitude from following the Intruder, and to divert them from him and from the Chaldean Patriarch." Baccinelli also informed Rome: "If they [Roccas party] could have obtained his consecration, all or almost all would have followed him, since he enjoys great esteem, respect, and authority among all."²⁶

But, in 1865, when the Propaganda Fide considered the question of his Episcopal consecration, Monsignor Baccinelli and his missionaries were not in favor of it and according to them all Syrian priests were

²⁴ACO, *Scritt. rif. nei congressi Chaldei* (1862-1866) f. 114.

²⁵ACO, *Scritt. rif. nei congressi Chaldei* (1862-1866) f. 118.

²⁶ ACO., *Ponenze* 1865, 687-690. See also Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly*, 18-21.

unworthy of episcopate.²⁷ Studying the Roman documents of that period Paul Pallath made the following observation. If Chavara had been consecrated bishop and the permanent office of a native vicar general with Episcopal character had been established as desired by Propaganda Fide the Mellus schism and its consequences could have been avoided. History proves that the Western missionaries always strived their best, utilizing the entire arsenal at their disposal, to jealously preserve the episcopacy and jurisdictional power for themselves and this was the main cause of troubles, divisions and schisms among the St Thomas Christians in India, whose forefathers had embraced Christianity even before the Christianization of Europe.²⁸ We see Chavara's reflections were on the same line that he evaluated the reason for the Syrian Christians turning to Babel to get bishops of their own rite.²⁹

6. A Man of Wider Ecclesial Vision

Although Chavara had no authority he worked for the integral growth of the Church. His timely intervention saved the Church from division. He nurtured the faith of the people by conducting retreats in the parishes, by introducing forty hours adoration, by making several books available for them, by introducing liturgical reforms and many other renewal programs. The conviction, that only the learned and saintly priests can effectively lead the people of God, was very deeply inscribed in him that enabled him to focus his attention on forming the leaders; he focused his attention on the priestly formation from 1833 onwards, namely, roughly two years after the foundation of the CMI at Mannanam. Valuing his contribution in the field of seminary formation on 16 February 1844, Monsignor Francis Xavier, the vicar apostolic of Varapuzha appointed him as the 'Examiner of all the priests of Syro-Malabar Church' and the Malpan. He was authorized to give sanction to priests to preach and hear confession, and recommendation to the deacons for priesthood. He continued this service till his death.

Monsignor Baccinelli entrusted him with the responsibility of settling disputes of the parishes, priests and individuals from the time he was appointed as the vicar apostolic of Malabar. His predecessor Monsignor Ludvic also was confident of Chavara's creative problem solving method. The ten letters that he wrote to the bishops, during the period

²⁷ACO, Ponenze 1873, 668-669. See also Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly*, 39-52.

²⁸ Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly*, 120.

²⁹ Chavara, CWC, vol. 4, *Letters*, VI: 4.

of 1848-1856, tell of the stories of his wise method of reconciling people by bringing peace in the parishes. In those letters he put his signature as Chavara *Kathanar*; he was simply a priest of the Syro-Malabar Church and the Prior of TOCD monasteries.³⁰ What he was proud of was his priestly identity. He saw the hand of God in everything that happened in his life.³¹

Chavara was the recognized leader of his time. On certain occasions people thought Chavara's interventions were necessary. For an example, in the month of November 1869 when some problems occurred in Anakallunkal parish, though Chavara was sick and unable to travel, people wanted him to be present to solve the matter amicably and he reached there.³²

People rightly understood what he was for the Church and what he did. Getting the news of his death the sisters of Koonammavu convent wrote in their chronicle, "This father was a mirror and lamp to all the Christians in Kerala. Moreover, he was a strong pillar that supported the holy Church in protecting its faith. With zeal, he worked for its growth and expansion."³³ He could hold the whole universe in his heart; at the moment of his death he made a touching prayer joining with the priests of the whole world, especially with the Church in Asia and America:

"... Even though I was not able to celebrate Holy Mass after my illness increased, I remain one in spirit with the priests, who offer to God the Father the divine lamb every hour continuously during day and night in the four parts of the world, in Asia and America, etc."³⁴

He instructed the members of his congregation to open up monasteries, convents and boarding houses for girls in the vicariates of Kollam and Varapuzha. Although Kollam vicariate was exclusively for Latin Christians he was concerned about their growth and development as well. He was a man beyond geographical, liturgical or any other boundaries. When he printed the first book from the Mannanam press, *Jnanapiusham*, in 1847 he printed 'the rite of the Holy Mass' of both the Latin Church and of the Syrian Church.

...To be concluded

³⁰ Chavara, CWC., vol. 4, *Letters*, III:1-10.

³¹ Chavara, CWC, vol. 3, *Dhyanasallapangal*, p. 13 [1981].

³² CKC., 1:152-53.

³³ CKC., II:23.

³⁴ *Mannanam Nalagamam*, vol. 3 [MSS] (1864-72), p. 133.