

Editorial

**SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA
and
THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH**

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The Fathers of the Church were the saintly ones who lived under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who directed the Church to the truth. Saint John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Patres Ecclesiae* wrote: "Those saints are rightly called Fathers of the Church, who with the power of their faith and the depth and richness of their teachings, engendered and formed her during her early centuries." He further stated that "the Church never ceases returning to the writings of the Fathers, with their deep wisdom and perennial youth, and continually renewing their memory." They all lived between the 1st and 6th centuries, and contributed in a decisive way to a deeper understanding of Christian doctrine. In ancient times, the word "father" was used for a teacher, and in both Scripture and in the life of the early Church, teachers were viewed as fathers of their students. Since the teaching of the faith was entrusted to bishops, many of them came to be called "Fathers," a title extended to other Church writers during the first six centuries of Christianity. According to Irenaeus "For when any person has been taught from the mouth of another he is termed the son of him who instructs him, and the latter is called his father."¹ The Fathers of the Church are teachers who strengthen Christians in their faith in Christ. Their theological insights and pastoral vision have played a significant role in shaping and guarding the faith of the early Church. They were nourished by Sacred Scripture, the letters of the first Christians, and the tradition of the nascent Church; and "it is the ecclesiastical doctrine of

¹ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4, 41,2; Johannes Quastern, *Patrology I*, Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc., 1986, 9.

Tradition as a source of faith which makes the writings and opinions of the Fathers so important.”²

The Fathers of the Church played a very significant role in nourishing and defending the faith against the theological controversies and heretical teachings. Through their profound prayer life, resolute commitment to the orthodoxy of faith, they have laid foundations for theological development, for as the immediate inheritors of the deposit of faith from the apostles, the Fathers of the Church had exposed and expounded the truth hidden in the Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. Their works are genuine sources of Christian faith and doctrine. Hence they deepen our faith.

The study of the fathers and their writings helps us to grow in prayer life and delve more deeply into the spiritual riches of the first centuries of the Church and draw inspirations for the life and mission in the present context. The present issue of *Herald of the East* attempts to shed light on the Fathers of the Church in general highlighting the characteristic features of their lives and mission in the early Church and sees how Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara with his varying ministries in the Church played a very significant role in defending the faith in line with the Fathers of the Church. A closer and critical study of Chavara’s writings underscores that he was a great defender of true and genuine faith of the Church, for in his writings we find sound theological vision and insights. His writings further substantiate his pastoral concern, a significant character that urges us to place him alongside the great Fathers of the Church.

Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara was faithful to the mission conferred on him in the Church and was committed to it to build up the people of God. Through the volumes written, he ventured to reimagine and reinterpret the bond between the divine and the human in convincing narratives and metaphors. He figured out God as the ‘*appan*’, for it textured in a profound faith and trust in the Lord of mercy and compassion. He engaged in various spiritual and welfare activities, like starting a Sanskrit school at Mannanam for the educational development of the area, establishing the first wooden press in Kerala, renewing the Order of the Liturgy, popularising Sunday sermons and organizing annual retreats in parishes to facilitate the spiritual renewal of the people. Chavara walked on unbeaten paths to sustain the faith of the

² J. Quastern, *Patrology* I, 11.

people, was successful in responding creatively to the crisis of his time and turning it to a cradle of new initiatives.

He was one among the founders and the first Prior General of the first religious congregation for men in the Syro-Malabar Church known as Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), and a religious congregation for women known as Congregation of the Mother of Carmel (CMC). As a pioneer in many fields and true shepherd of souls after the model and example of Christ, Chavara's life and ministry was an expression of the love of the Church he cherished, for he coordinated various ministries with pastoral care of the souls in view. In all these and throughout his life time, the passion that Jesus felt to do the will of his Father (Mt 26:39; Jn 4:34) and for the humanity (Jn 3:14ff; 10:18) was evident. His leadership was not power but service as in the case of Jesus of Nazareth; not goal oriented but God and His people oriented.

Thomas Kollampampil in his article enumerates the characteristics of the Fathers of the Universal Church and affirms that as charismatically gifted inspiring teachers, Fathers of the Church and Doctors of the Church are powerful builders of Christian tradition. They were the strong protectors of the Church from heretical teachings, schismatic developments, deviant human life patterns and edified the Church through the centuries. In this respect, Kollampampil revisits the life, mission and contribution of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a prophetic visionary, holy apostle and committed pastor of the Church in the context of the Thomas Christians of India. Benny Thettayil in his paper explores Chavara's ecclesiastical, spiritual, literary and socio-cultural contributions in the formative years of the Syro-Malabar Church, and expounds how St Chavara fulfils the requirement of 'antiquity', which is one of the characteristic features of the Fathers of the universal Church. Thettayil holds that the Eastern Churches in general and the Syro-Malabar Church in particular need not follow the western parameters to consider one as the Father of the Church. Alex Sebastian Kollamkalam makes a close evaluation of the life and ministries of St Chavara and presents him as a saintly Father and an Orthodox teacher. He observes that Chavara was very much saddened by the absence of saints among the Thomas Christians in India. As a man of God and man of the Church he fostered holiness and even the purpose of the religious congregations he founded was to foster holiness. Kollamkalam affirms that Chavara with his sanctity and orthodox teaching could be counted as a Father of the Church.

Mathew Maniampra in his article makes a portrayal of the pastoral personality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara and how he continued the mission of Jesus. Chavara was a pastor and his ministries were the expressions and overflow of his relationship with God. Maniampra delineates the holistic reformations that Chavara had undertaken to bring changes in the Church from within and the society. As a rich depository of the compassion and forgiveness, he was a blessing to the Church and the society, and now challenges us to enhance the pastoral attitude and continue the mission of Jesus. Reflecting on the testimony of the sisters of Koonammavu Convent on Chavara, Susmitha presents how he became the pillar that supported the Church, mirrored the face of Christ and became the lamp in Kerala of the nineteenth century. The personality, contributions and vision and mission of this illustrious son of the Church are grouped into three titles, i.e., the pillar, the mirror and the lamp. Susmitha underscores that it was Chavara's commitment to radical following of Christ strengthened him to make substantial changes in view of genuine growth of the Church and society. John Ollukaran in his article expounds the trinitarian dimension of CMI way of life. He begins recalling the great commission of the Lord (Mt 28:16-20), and affirms that every human is consecrated to reflect the Trinitarian life of unity and every family is to be the mirror of Trinitarian family wherein the Holy Family is a model par excellence. Substantiated by the CMI constitutions, Ollukaran affirms that the Congregation as a *Darshana Kuttumbam* is a reflection of Trinitarian life with each of the three Persons in the Trinity, for the CMI formula of profession of vows is a radical commitment to the Most Holy Trinity.

In line with the Fathers of the Church, Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara with the quest to love God and neighbour in Christ and his Spirit, dedicated his entire life for the same and bequeathed to us a tremendously rich patrimony of evangelical vitality, spiritual profundity and uncompromising love of God.

Herald of the East registers the indebtedness and gratitude to Benny Paul Thettayil, the former Editor-in Chief, for his tireless efforts and hardwork to bring out its several issues on diverse themes.