

FATHER OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

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Abstract: Fathers of the Church and Doctors of the Church are charismatically gifted inspiring teachers, leaders and powerful builders of Christian tradition. They protected the Church from heretical teachings, schismatic developments, deviant human life patterns and thus edified the Church through the centuries. In this respect the life and mission of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara needs to be revisited in the context of the Thomas Christians of India. The mission of Christ was entrusted to the Church and that was fulfilled through her gifted teachers, leaders and powerful witnesses of Christian life from time to time. The mission of instructing, sanctifying and governing were based on the tripartite functioning of the priestly, prophetic and kingly (shepherding) faculties of the created humanity. These faculties and ministries were handled by the Church under the noble guidance of the Fathers, Doctors and Teachers of the Church in a faithful and discerning manner in the light of scriptures, tradition and the teachings of the Church. From those eminent teachers and preachers of the early Christian centuries emerged the 'Fathers of the Church', and later the 'Doctors of the Church', as builders of the Church.

Keywords: Fathers of the Church, Doctors of the Church, heretical teachings, schismatic developments, free will, word of God, living tradition, divine pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

Celebration of the contributions of the charismatically gifted inspiring teachers, leaders and powerful witnesses of Christian history is a noble legacy of the Catholic Church. Among such inspiring Christian personalities of the past, the 'Fathers of the Church' (*Patres ecclesiae*) and the 'Doctors of the Church' (*Doctores ecclesiae*) deserve primary attention in the Catholic Church. It is on account of their ongoing inspiration and enlightenment for the later generations of Christians in matters of faith and tradition.¹ During their life time the Doctors of the Church have attained salvific wisdom and through their powerful witnessing life enlightened the believers. By their teachings as well as Christian actions on the one hand they built up the Church and on the other remained vigilant so as to protect the Church from the disintegrating ways of life, heretical teachings, schismatic developments and deviant human life patterns of their times.

In quite realistic terms, the Christian ways of life are beset with misguiding tendencies, due to the leaning towards the materialistic and commercial concerns of the globalizing world. As a result, the value of human persons and human dignity are much disregarded or compromised in the social systems. In this regard Pope Francis has highlighted the need of vigilance against neo-gnostic (sufficiency of human knowledge alone for perfect life) and neo-pelagianist (sufficiency of human will power and actions for perfection) tendencies² emerging in world cultures. Much evil is emerging from human greed, false pride and arrogance. In all such deviant situations of human life, the inspiration and enlightenment from the life, teachings and mission of the 'Fathers of the Church' and 'Doctors of the Church' are becoming all the more relevant. It is in the background of these factors, the builders of each Christian tradition through the ethos of the same living communities have to be remembered. Based on these factors, the person and ministries of St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara need to be revisited and historically mapped, so as to have proper resourcing and updating for the current times of the Syro-Malabar Church, as an offshoot of Syriac Christianity in India and now spread abroad. St. Chavara, during his time, had to fight against schismatics (Rokos), traveled through the troubled waters of the Thomas Christians of India in the 19th century,

¹ Cf. Bernard McGinn, *The Doctors of the Church*, New York: Crossroad, 1999, 1-4.

² Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March, 2019; 35, 36, 38, 40, 43, 47, 48, 62.

was pulled between the *padroado* and the *propaganda* factions of the Western missionaries in India. For the sacramental and social unity of the Church, St. Chavara had to develop on the East Syrian liturgy and for social unity, many social reforms and educational endeavours were begun in the social life of his times. For spiritual progress and life of Christian perfection consecrated religious communities were established (CMI and CMC congregations). St. Chavara has left behind for the posterity a rich body of orthodox Christian writings on Christian spiritual life and perfection. He was vigilant to the challenges of his times as well as attentive to the developmental needs of the Christian communities of his period. He built up the Church by his life and dedicated mission.

Far above the needed vigilance in Christian life, as mentioned by Pope Francis, we need to bear in mind the ever-ongoing challenges propping up in the social, psychological and spiritual levels of Christian life. There are new forms of social injustice, oppression, social marginalization, denial of human rights and dignity to humans in the context of commercial production, distribution and consumption in a market driven global economy. They are affecting the whole body of humanity and regarding these the social doctrines of the Church have to focus attention for a fruitful action plan.³ At the personal psychological level of humanity, both individually and communally, there are racial prejudices, gender discriminations, subjugation of groups and individuals in families, institutions and social sectors of the globalizing world that are amounting to psychological oppressions and suppressions.

Added to all these, at the level of spiritual realization, there are 'false teachers' and 'false prophets' in disguise. They pour out spiritual misguidance and manipulations of true Christian traditions for pecuniary gains, popularity, social prominence, etc. In the spiritual sphere, there are new forms of spiritual sicknesses. One must also take note of the ever-recurring malpractices and evil tendencies within the Christian hierarchy as well. In all these social, psychological and spiritual fields of human life, the Church needs to attend and extend pure services for salvation. The teaching of St Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 enlightens us: "may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our lord Jesus Christ."

³ II Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

2. The On-Going Incarnate Ministry of Christ in the Church

The great command of the risen Lord is: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:19-20). With this command, the disciples of Christ are appointed and empowered to carry on the mission of 'teaching all to observe' all that has been commanded. The ministry of Christ for the salvation of the whole creation (Mk 16:15) functions by a process of repentance and forgiveness of sins leading to salvation, starting from Jerusalem and spreading to the ends of the earth (inhabited world, *oikos*; Lk 24:47). This spreading from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth is more specified in terms of 'bearing witness to the Good News' as clarified in Acts 1:8, "... you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." The risen Lord has indicated the dynamics of the normative process of salvation.

The ministry of Christ is transferred to his disciples. The normative incarnate ministry of Christ has its retrospective and prospective dimensions. While the New Testament Church lives in and takes forward the prospective dimensions of the ministry of Christ, the Old Testament Church functioned fruitfully and reflects the retrospective dimensions of the ministry of Christ through many events and personalities of the Old Testament. The salvific instructions given there, were according to the progressive levels of divine revelations in accordance with the faith and response of humans in that First Covenant. The *sensus plenior* of the OT instructions are actualized in the incarnate Son.

2.1. Divine Instructions to the Human Free Will for Salvific Response

God set the first parents of humanity in the 'initial Paradise' with all potentialities of life for orienting towards their fuller growth. The divine design of humanity was in the 'image and likeness of God' as a covenantal promise to make humans grow in the likeness of God with human free will. While exercising the free will in freedom, God wanted humans to understand and accept the divine plan and economy. In this process, humans had to believe in God's promises and respond with understanding to that divine plan and economy for the fuller realization of the divinely planned human life. In order to exercise the free will of humans in a creative way, God instructed the first parents as to what had to be done and what should not be done (Gen 2:16-17). This initial instruction of God for the human race is continued in several versions in

the history of salvation through the leaders, teachers, prophets, apostles and later disciples of Christ, all through the history. The divine instruction is still on-going as part of that initial plan and economy to be fulfilled in Christ (Eph 1:10) and to be continued in the Church and in the world.

On account of the 'free will', humanity is co-responsible, under divine guidance, for the shaping of the human destiny. St. Ephrem the Syrian explains this factor of human responsibility as follows: Even though Adam and Eve were given all facilities of a well-furnished Paradise freely, the Lord did not wish to give them all the fruitfulness and perfection as a free gift. The first parents were given the noblest gift of 'free will' to know the loving Lord and the instructions given to them, as to how they should live in Paradise (*Hymns on Paradise*, 12:18; Gen 2:16-17).⁴ In order to attain the desired perfection, humans must make personal combat, exercising the 'free will'. In order to reconcile with the divine plan, humans must fight against selfishness and offer themselves completely to the divine designs rather than to personal designs. Living in the given Paradise, thus, involves proper exercise of 'free will', combat against selfishness, reconciliations to the divine designs, etc., that have personal and communitarian dimensions. In the communitarian life, the Christian leaders and teachers have a prominent role in instructing and guiding the people. This role is eminently played by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church.

For the correct behaviour and life in Paradise the Lord had instructed them, because their finite 'free will' needed instruction, unlike the absolute free will which God alone has. In fact, God the Father taught them how to live in the Paradise, which was their given world

⁴ Adam/humanity had to make a seasoned and mature behaviour in response to the divine instructions so as to gain meritoriously the crowns of knowledge and life. Adam/humanity has to make discerning choices, in the mode of a combat, in the light of the given instructions. In this respect the teaching of St. Ephrem is an inspiration:

The Just One did not wish to give Adam the crown quite free,
even though He had allowed him to enjoy Paradise without toil;
God knew that if Adam wanted he could win the prize.

The Just One ardently wished to enhance him,
for, although the rank of supernal beings is great through grace,
the crown for the proper use of free will is by no means paltry.

(*Hymns on Paradise*, 12:18; tr. S.P. Brock, *St Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise*, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990, 167).

environment. This was a unique gift given to humans to understand the divine plan and respond to that divine plan out of free will and attain meritoriously the promises of God in Paradise. So, it is the duty of humanity to learn and believe in the salvific instructions of the divine plan and the divine economy in the context of the given human 'free will'. In the history of salvation, according to the divine economy, stage by stage, instructions were given, based on humanity's personal and social growth. It is in such a developmental pattern the Old and New Testament instructions were given. All such instructions are made fully revealed and made perfectly active in Christ, the incarnate Son, through his teachings by words and deeds.

2.2. The Ongoing Tripartite Ministries for Salvation

For the ongoing economy of salvation, the Lord has anointed prophets, priests and kings in the Old Testament. These tripartite functions and institutions became social characteristics of the inlaid faculties of Adam/humans with prophetic, priestly and kingly (pastoral) powers in creation. These tripartite faculties have, at the same time, inner, personal and subjective functions for human perfection as well as outer, social institutional factors for the corporate human society (humanity) to attain its human, social and cultural/spiritual goals.

In Adam/humans, the functioning of the prophetic, priestly and kingly (pastoral) roles turned to disintegration due to the wrong exercise of human 'free will'. In the subsequent generations, this tendency brought deeper disintegration. It is against that disintegration that God the Son stands as the salvific Word Incarnate (fullness of prophetic Word), the High Priest of humanity (fullness of priesthood) and King of Kings (fullness of kingship/pastoral care). Wherever humanity stood in failure regarding the prophetic, priestly and kingly (pastoral) functions, Christ the Word Incarnate, High Priest and King of kings (Head Pastor) provided for all forms of insufficiencies in all; and that became tangible to all who have faith in the incarnate mission of the Son.

In the New Testament, the Lord anointed his apostles to continue the work of redemption and salvation, through the tripartite ministries that he has revealed in his own person and life. Above all, the risen Lord continues to work with them and through them in the world (Mt 28:20) for the fuller realization of the economy of salvation. It is the risen Lord, through the Holy Spirit, who guides and builds up his own body, the Church, the whole body of humanity, through the hands of the apostles/disciples of all times. For every age of the salvific growth of the Church through challenges, confusions, conflicts, etc., the Lord provides

certain men and women with specific wisdom and courage to lead the flock in their learning, doing and attaining the sanctification of the Christian goal of salvation. What one learns, believes and understands need to reach the level of observance (doing) as the flowering of Christian faith and learning/teaching and life patterns.

The Holy Spirit who was sent by the Lord is active through the eminent personalities (men and women) who are engaged in the timely building up of the Church in the right direction. The ecclesially declared 'Fathers of the Church' and 'Doctors of the Church' are preeminent among them. Such leaders of the Church have worked for the specific needs of different ages and the particular requirements of the peoples in diverse contexts in the pluralistic world of the believers in Christ. Basically, this is the continued work of the risen Lord among the people through the Holy Spirit who manifestly came upon the believing community on the day of Pentecost. That mystery of the Pentecostal indwelling of the Spirit continues in the world. In this process, the spiritually enlightened and empowered men and women of every generation serve as the continuation of the 'teaching words and deeds' of the risen Lord in the Church.

2.3. Pilgrim Journey and Salvific Pedagogy

The process of redemption and salvation is ongoing. At present, the Church is the minister to continue the redemptive and salvific ministry of Christ, the risen Lord. Church has to lead the pilgrim journey of the people to the heavenly Jerusalem (the eschatological Paradise). In any true pilgrim journey, the people are always on the move and the scenario on the way keeps on changing, with its own hopes, doubts, confusions, anxieties and conflicts. In more concrete terms, the social, personal and spiritual realities of life on the road of pilgrimage have to undergo changes in the mode of salvific transformations. Even in the changing scenario there are unchanging 'foundational orientations', such as, faith, hope and charitable active life, that are guiding principles and 'peripheral orientations'. These are liable to change, such as, different levels of catechesis, ongoing doctrinal teachings, new modes of being Church in the world, etc.

Both types of orientations (foundational and peripheral) are important in their own roles. Peripheral orientations are like the shell of a seed that is very important till the time of the coming out of the germinating seed (the fruits of the Kingdom). When the sprout (foundational orientations) has come out, the shell of the seed, as peripheral orientation, would be left behind. Hence, in the transmission

of Christian traditions, the discerning of the 'foundational orientations' from the 'peripheral orientations', has to be successfully done. Tradition needs reform, and doctrinal teachings on the basic faith need progressive levels of understanding (development of dogma). All these are to be achieved by the Church from time to time through the pneumatically enlightened teachers, leaders and gifted witnesses of Christian life. Among such enlightened Christians, 'Fathers of the Church' and 'Doctors of the Church' are prominent.

The presence of Jesus (risen Lord) in all generations and tribes is assured. But this mystery is active through many faithful disciples of Jesus as teachers and guides as envisaged by the risen Lord. In the ever-changing scenario of the world, in all generations, there is the need of people who can explain the mysteries of Christ and his teachings most effectively for the building up of the Kingdom of God. Jesus left a living teaching authority.⁵ That living teaching ministry has to be continued and fulfilled. This ministry has to see that whatever is being taught has to reach the stage of maturity in the mode of 'observing all that has been commanded' by Jesus (Mt 28:20).

Jesus declared that when the Spirit comes, more understanding would be given from time to time (Jn 14:26). Hence, the disciples of Jesus have to experience the presence of the Spirit and bring in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit on the Christian community by their divinely inspired teaching and guidance through their active witnessing life. More and more Pentecostal experience of the coming of the Spirit has to be brought about. It is in such a process that the Christian way of life (tradition) and the doctrinal teachings have been evolved by the *Fathers of the Church* in the early centuries. Together with, and following that initial formation of the Christian observances and traditions by the Fathers of the Church, there emerged the life and ministry of the *Doctors of the Church*. The epithet 'Doctors of the Church' gradually evolved in the history of the Church, considering the enlightenment they provided by their life and ministry.⁶

2.4. Sacred Tradition, Scripture and the Current Living Tradition

The Word of God is multifaceted and provides various insights, instructions and specific guidance proper to every age and tradition. It is because the building up of the Kingdom or the Mystical Body of

⁵ Christopher Rengers, *The 33 Doctors of the Church*, Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 2000, xxii-xxiv.

⁶ Christopher Rengers, *The 33 Doctors of the Church*, p. xxiv.

Christ, is a dynamically unfolding mystery by the power of the Holy Spirit. This dynamic evolution is constantly guided and fulfilled by the power and energy of the Word in the world. A single individual cannot completely understand and explain the *sensus plenior* of the Word of God. The Word of God provides many nourishments from all sides.⁷ According to the need of each one and each society, the Word provides the teaching. This is a mediated ministry and it is fulfilled by the inspiring leaders and teachers. The 'Fathers of the Church' and 'Doctors of the Church' are bearers of Christ and his teachings. They interpret and guide the times and developments by their life and mission. So, in every age, there are interpreters of Christian life and traditions. By their preaching and teaching, they preserved the truth of the Word and propelled the power and energy of the Word among the faithful for the building up of the Church.

The divine economy is active in diverse ways through the ministry of the inspiring people among the faithful. That is the mode of the incarnation of the Word, in concrete, in every Christian and in the world. Thus, the power, energy and action of the Word Incarnate in the world is expanding as the ripples in a pond and travels to the outer horizons according to the divine plan. The Church is travelling to the shore of salvation, carrying the whole world. In that process there might occur wrong understanding and actions, which are to be corrected and guided. The written Word was initially a living Word in the living tradition of the believers. Then that 'living Word' became written down to enrich all nations. Now that 'written Word' has to be translated into 'living Word' in the Christian living actions. By the preaching, teaching and exemplary life of the enlightened people, the Word of God would be made living and active in the community as living tradition. The ancient tradition and the written Word and the present living tradition form a corporate

⁷ St. Ephrem, "Who is able to understand, Lord, all the richness of even one of your words? There is more that eludes us than what we can understand. We are like the thirsty drinking from a fountain. Your word has as many aspects as the perspectives of those who study it. The Lord has coloured his word with diverse beauties, so that those who study it can contemplate what stirs them. He has hidden in his word all treasures, so that each of us may find a richness in what he or she contemplates" (*Commentary on the Diatessaron*, I, 18; cf. Aphrahat, *Demonstrations*, XXII, 26; cf. Pope Francis, *Motu Proprio, Aperuit Illis*, 2).

body of revelation and salvation to the world in the form of a single continuum.⁸

The advanced horizons of the Word of God are emerging into the world and they need to be identified, understood and responded to in an adequate manner. The Doctors of the Church are faithful servants in this regard. They remain champions of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, indicating the sure path at times of change, needed transformation, and above all clearing the clouds of confusions and disintegration in Christian life. They are Scribes trained for the Kingdom, as Jesus defined, “therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Mt 13:52). They are sure guides according to the heart of Jesus. Their love of humanity is the manifestation of the love of Christ for the whole humanity, as they have become configured and identified with Christ.

3. Fathers of the Church

This section explores the factors and doctrinal norms, on the basis of which, a saint, recognized by the universal Church, is declared a ‘Father of the Church’.

The Christian way of life with its teachings and practices, started by Jesus, had been entrusted to the Church to be carried on in the history, so as to be made tangible and fruitful to all generations of humankind. This duty of the Church is fulfilled, in fact, by the work of the hierarchical leaders and charismatic members together with the believing community, in a synodal way. It was during the time of the Fathers of the Church many Christian teachings and practices became consolidated and got recognized. This process of consolidation and recognition passed through controversies, corrections in the teachings (orthodoxy), periodic complementing of the understanding of revelation and practices (orthopraxis), etc.

⁸ Cf. Pope Francis, *Motu Proprio, Aperuit Illis*, Instituting the Sunday of the Word of God, 30 September, 2019, no. 11: “We frequently risk separating sacred Scripture and sacred Tradition, without understanding that together they are the one source of Revelation. The written character of the former takes nothing away from its being fully a living word; in the same way, the Church’s living Tradition, which continually hands that word down over the centuries from one generation to the next, possesses that sacred book as the ‘supreme rule of her faith’” (cf. *Dei Verbum* 13).

During the pre-Nicene and post-Nicene periods (Council of Nicaea in 325 AD) we find the establishment of the foundations of Christian theology: canon of the scriptures, Christian meaning of Old Testament, essential teachings on the mystery of Christ and the Church, norms for distinguishing orthodox teaching and practices, formation of liturgical families, evolution of various Christian traditions, emergence of ascetical and monastic spiritual ideals and practices, encounter of the Christian way of life with various political, social and cultural forces of the times, etc. The hierarchical leaders and charismatic members of the Church, by their study and reflections on the revealed scriptures, addressed the pastoral needs and challenges of the times. They began to do systematic and scientific modes of theological reflection so as to describe and define essential matters of faith and to promote a more profound understanding of the history of salvation through its past, present and the possible future courses of development.

Through various patristic authors and their texts one finds the way in which the preachers, teachers, ascetics, thinkers and above all the faithful, conceived and practiced theological reflection and action for the betterment of their Christian life. They reflected on their faith in the light of the scriptures so as to make scriptures the soul of their theology (cf. DV 24). Their reflections integrated their human experiences, scientific findings, and found answers to the challenges put forward by the thinking people of their times, the pastoral challenges and needs of the times and so on. In this process of reflection, they were making use of the then accepted categories and modes of thinking, or in other words, making use of the accepted philosophical and social categories of the times. All these do amount to say that they were knowingly or unknowingly developing their theological method and Christian traditions.

3.1. Process of Declaring the Fathers of the Church in History

Today, the Catholic Church is blessed with many Fathers of the Church and 36 officially declared Doctors of the Church. 'Father of the Church' is not an officially conferred title and there is no definitive list as is the case with those who are honoured with the title 'Doctor of the Church'. In fact the title, 'Father of the Church', is a title that gradually began to be applied to certain Christian leaders who were distinguished by their antiquity, holiness, orthodoxy of doctrines, and ecclesiastical approval.

For understanding the title 'Fathers of the Church' a note, that is provided by St. Clement of Alexandria, is very helpful: "Words are the

progeny of the soul; hence we call those that instructed us 'fathers'."⁹ Since the principal teacher of any early Christian community was its bishop, the title 'Father' was first applied to them. In fact, the bishops who gathered in the various councils of the Church were referred to as 'council fathers'. This is a reflection of the Pauline New Testament tradition: "For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel" (1Cor 4:15). However, since many of the important early Christian teachers were laymen (e.g., St. Justin), deacons (e.g., St. Ephrem) and priests (e.g., St. Jerome), it became customary from the fourth century to reckon these eminent teachers among 'the Fathers'.¹⁰ Later, when there were disputes about the interpretation of the Scripture, all the early exegetes sought 'consensus of the Fathers' in support of their points of view. The 'Fathers' here denoted the teachers of an earlier era who demonstrated how the apostolic writings in the Scripture were applied by the apostles and understood by their immediate successors. While all early Christian pastors and catechists "fathered" their particular portion of the flock during their lifetime, only those 'Fathers' who put their teaching in writing could continue to serve as guides to the whole Church in every age.

Hence, the title, 'Fathers of the Church' began to refer to those important Christian writers after the New Testament era, who, because of their closeness to that era, bore witness to the authentic apostolic way of interpreting the Scripture handed on to them by the Apostolic Tradition.¹¹ Such writers played a crucial role in articulating, consolidating and transmitting the Christian doctrines and bringing them to more mature expressions, at least in their most fundamental features. While the Church's understanding of revelation would continue to deepen until the Lord returns, the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation, which stand at the centre of the "Hierarchy of Truths" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 11), were defined during the period of the Fathers (the patristic era). It is significant that the age of the Early Church Fathers, commonly regarded as closing with Isidore of Seville in the West (+636), St. John Damascene in the Greek Church (+749), is roughly co-terminus with the period of the first seven great Ecumenical Councils

⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.1.2-2.1; cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.41.2

¹⁰ J.H. Crehan, "Fathers of the Church", in *A Catholic Dictionary of Theology* Vol. 2, Melbourne: Nelson, 1967, 288-289, p. 289.

¹¹ J. Chapman, "Fathers of the Church", in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* Vol. VI, New York: Gilmary Society, 1913, 1-18, p. 1.

which defined these two central mysteries of faith and drew out their most important implications. However, no such clear limit is assigned to the Syriac Fathers of the Eastern Christianity.¹²

The Church looks into the four major characteristic features in the life and works of an early Church leader who had made contributions in defending, expounding, and developing Christian doctrines, in order to be considered as a 'Father of the Church'. These are antiquity (*antiquitas*, meaning that the person lived within the early eight centuries during which the first Christian communities got themselves established), doctrinal orthodoxy (*orthodoxa doctrina*), personal sanctity (*sanctitas*), and approval of the Church (*ecclesiae declaratio*).¹³

3.2. Basic Categories of the Fathers in the Early Church

The early Church Fathers fall into three basic categories: Apostolic Fathers, ante-Nicene Church Fathers, and post-Nicene Church Fathers. The Apostolic Church Fathers, like Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch, were the immediate successors of the Apostles and were probably taught by them. They were concerned about the proclamation of the Gospel just as the Apostles themselves proclaimed it. Although most of them were not bent on formulating theological doctrines, they were zealous in rooting out and exposing any false doctrine, that cropped up in the early Church, based on the gospel taught to them by the Apostles.

The ante-Nicene Fathers also remained true to the gospel, but they had an additional concern for the initiation of doctrinal teachings. In the early centuries, several spurious writings were in circulation claiming to have the same authority as the established writings of Peter, Paul and Luke. Many of the Fathers in that era, spent their time in defending the Christian faith against false doctrines that were in vogue. Through several of these defences, we have the beginnings of the doctrines of the Church.

The post-Nicene Fathers carried out the mission of defending the gospel against all kinds of doctrinal heresies. They articulated the tenets of faith based on the Scripture and the Apostolic Tradition. However, the Fathers of that era were engaged more in developing methods of defending the Gospel and less in transmitting the same in its true and pure form.

¹² Crehan, "Fathers of the Church", p. 288.

¹³ J. Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. 1, Westminster: Christian Classics, 1984, p. 10.

3.3. Outstanding Features of the Fathers/Doctors of the Church¹⁴

The Scripture and the Tradition are the foundations of Christian theology. The Tradition is rooted in the activities of the Apostles and ancient Christian teachers, who set up models of exegesis, theologizing and pastoral guidelines for their own communities as well as for the future generations. In this respect, the ancient Christian writers in general, and the Fathers of the Church in particular stand as foundation and models for posterity.

3.3.1. Privileged Testimonies of the Tradition

The Fathers handed down faithfully what they had received, learned and practised to the subsequent generations either in their oral or written teachings. In the early Church, the Bishops were called 'Fathers' (cf. 1Cor 4:15) as successors of the Apostles, on account of their teaching authority, which is the *Magisterium* of the Church to which is given the official duty to interpret the Word of God (*Dei Verbum*, 10).¹⁵

3.3.2. Love of the Scripture and the Tradition

The Fathers of the Church represent the true interrelationship between the Scripture and the Tradition.¹⁶ According to them, the Sacred Scripture represented the ultimate source of religious truth. They venerated, studied, explained and defended it with loving submission to it in faith. It became the foundation of their faith, subject of their preaching, nutrition for their piety and the soul of their theological undertakings.

3.3.3. Divine Originality of Christianity

The Fathers of the Church were convinced of the fundamental transformation, that occurred and was occurring in the world, brought about by the Christ event. Christ event and the consequent transformation of the world occurred through the divine intervention rather than human creativity. This transformation was something initiated by the divine power, in giving a new vision of the reality, a new hermeneutic of humanity, world and God. The Fathers of the Church have reinterpreted all good achievements of humanity with their new Christian vision.¹⁷

¹⁴ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church*, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition (English), 15 January 1990, 8-15.

¹⁵ *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers*, p. 9.

¹⁶ *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers*, p. 9.

¹⁷ *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers*, p. 10.

3.3.4. Masters and Promoters of Dogmatic Development

The Fathers of the Church, while defending the truth against heresies, formulated and established the basic dogmatic teachings of the Church. From these basic teachings, the Church began to make her dogmatic progress.¹⁸ It was the Fathers who with their intuition of faith propounded the formula for various articles of faith as guidance for the growth of faith and dogmatic teachings.

3.3.5. Sense of Mystery and Experience of the Divine

The sense of the Mystery among the Fathers and their awareness of the Divine Economy overshadowed their theological reasoning and led them to cultivate an attitude of piety, asceticism, humble and deep faith, as well as assiduous prayer and contemplation. These attitudes of the Fathers gave them the facility to experience the Divine in their life of faith and practice. They synthesized their mystical experience and the luminosity of theological activity. The result of this synthesis was a happy blend of faith and reason, knowledge and charity that enhanced the Christian life of faith in them and in their communities.¹⁹

3.3.6. Pastors and Interpreters of Salvation History

The theological articulations of the Fathers were aimed at the pastoral care of the faithful. Their writings were responses to the questions of their times, be it, catechism for the instruction of the faithful, homilies for the nourishment of life, exposition of the scripture, confrontation of the errors, exhortations for perfection or defence of the identity as Christians. They approached the realities of life in the light of the history of salvation.²⁰ At the same time, they defended orthodoxy and promoted orthopraxis. In their understanding these two were inseparable.

Fathers of the Church recognized the centrality of the mystery of Christ. All other mysteries within the salvation history are subsumed into this central mystery, the mystery of Christ. They exposed the mystery of salvation by stressing the unity of the present, in the activity of the Holy Spirit, with the tradition of the past and pointing to the expectation of the eschatological future.

¹⁸ *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers*, p. 9.

¹⁹ *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers*, pp. 10-11.

²⁰ *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers*, p. 9.

3.4. Specific Services in the Life and Mission of the Fathers/Doctors of the Church

1. The Fathers of the Church had a deep-rooted consciousness of the foundation of Christianity and its apostolic origin.²¹ This gave them a new vision of reality, a new hermeneutic of humanity, Church and God.
2. The main responsibilities of the Fathers of the Church were expounding, transmitting and defending the Gospel in its true and pure form.
3. They handed down faithfully the person and message of Christ, which they had received, learned and practised in their Christian discipleship to the later generations in their writings.
4. They defended the faith of the Church against false doctrines and stood for the unity of the Church.
5. They had a sense of the Mystery and experience of the Divine, which led them to cultivate an attitude of piety, asceticism, humble and deep faith, as well as assiduous prayer and contemplation.
6. Their zeal for the salvation of souls was seen in their lives, teachings, and activities.

3.5. Criteria and Norms

1. The title 'Fathers of the Church' was not applied to any one based on a canonical process or a set of previously approved norms.
2. The fourfold criterion of Fathers of the Church (antiquity, orthodoxy, holiness, and ecclesiastical approval) does not reflect any previously approved norm, but evolved through what had happened in the history of the Church and through her lived faith.
3. The universal Church considers only those persons who lived during the formative period of Christianity (i.e., until the eighth century). They contributed to the spiritual, doctrinal theological and pastoral building up of the Church.
4. The most important set of norms based on which one is canonically recognised 'Father of the Church' are based on the holiness and doctrinal orthodoxy of the person.

4. Conclusion

The Fathers and Doctors of the Church are still active paradigms, guides and inspiring disciples of Christ for the later periods for meeting the challenges and threatening developments in the history of salvation. The history of salvation is ever progressing, as envisaged by the risen Lord,

²¹ *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers*, p. 10.

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit is ever coming upon the believers from time to time, in a mediated manner, through the gifts and charisms showered on humanity, precisely through the gifted ministers of the Holy Spirit in the history, in the personalities of the 'Fathers of the Church'.

The uninterrupted living tradition of Thomas Christians in India and abroad testifies to the working of the Spirit and the enduring presence of the risen Lord in the Church. In the unique history of the Thomas Christians and in the wider history of Christianity in India, St. Chavara stands as a prophetic visionary, holy apostle and committed pastor of the Church. His personality and contribution to the growth of Christianity in India needs to be recognized. The pastoral/kingly faculties of St. Chavara were generously spent for edifying the Church and the society as a powerful Christian witness in India.