

## ANTIQUITY IN THE LIFE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHAVARA

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**Abstract:** This article explores Chavara's ecclesiastical, spiritual, literary and socio-cultural contributions and see how valuable they have been in the formative years of the autonomous Malabar Church. It further expounds how St Chavara fulfils the requirement of 'antiquity', which is one of the characteristic features of the Fathers of the universal Church. Though according to the western definition of Antiquity, Chavara of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cannot be a contender for the title of the Father of the Church. However, Syro Malabar Church need not be governed by this western parameter. Moreover, being a Church *sui iuris*, Syro Malabar Church does not have to be governed by the norms that were historically evolved in the western Church. Moreover, the Church in the East has not set such a limit since it did not have a candidate to think about.

**Keywords:** Fathers of the Church, Antiquity, holiness, orthodoxy, and ecclesiastical approval, Tradition, Ecclesiastical writers, Doctors of the Church, Synod of Udayamperur, Archdeacon of All-India, Church *sui iuris*.

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## **1. Introduction**

Charismatic individuals at the head of any movement have the potential to take the followers in their stride and have the charisma to keep them in their sway. They are the patriarchs and matriarchs who influence lives beyond their geographical and temporal horizon. An early Church Father is a title that was applied to a few leaders of the Church who were distinguished by their antiquity, holiness, orthodoxy, and ecclesiastical approval. Briefly considering the notion of the 'Fathers of the Church', we explore the principle of Antiquity applied to them. Exploring the various implications of Antiquity, we see how relative is the meaning of the term and how it has to be contextually defined. We also see the appropriateness of the universal application of the term. The purpose of this study is to see how St Chavara fulfils the requirement of 'antiquity', which is one of the characteristic features of the Fathers of the universal Church. In the following pages, we explore his ecclesiastical, spiritual, literary and socio-cultural contributions and see how valuable they have been in the formative years of the autonomous Malabar Church.

## **2. Progenitors in the Church**

Progenitors in any field, were persons who, on account of their popular appeal, originated a familial, spiritual, social, cultural or intellectual movement. Spearheading the movement, they were trailblazers, for they blazed a trail for others to follow through wilderness, desert or untreaded terrains of life. Trailblazers are fast in pace and they loathe mediocrity that turns people into trailers. They shape their fields of activities making them effective for decades and centuries to come. As innovators, in their fields of endeavour, they are the first to introduce and bring into reality something better than ever before. This introduction opens up new areas for others to follow.

As trendsetters, the Fathers are early adopters, who visualized and brought into existence, and further into use, a trend before most other people began to think of it. They were often unconventional but were so versatile that they offer enough flexibility that helped form a cushion between two generations. They worked and accomplished missions faster than their historical average. As pioneers, they launched popular movements for the sake of the society and the Church. Their place was in the heart of the society. Often they did only the fundamental works that spawned future innovations and set new trends. Often they took charge of the situation because they were people with high self-esteem and could influence others. They left a trail for others in the field. As inventors, they identified a need of the society and were bent on meeting

the need by finding a solution in remarkably novel ways. They were often immersed in projects, presenting the society with something new. They continued to seek and meet challenges. Versatility was their hallmark that their lives were characterized by variety in spiritual, literary, social, religious activities.

### **3. Church Fathers as Progenitors**

The "Church Fathers" are a group of foundational members of the early Christian Church, who often did not have a road to follow but they followed a vision. Although the historical evolution of the term "father" is not altogether clear, in ancient times, the title was given to teachers, with the underlying idea that a teacher is the procreator of a student's spiritual personality (cf. 1 Kgs 20:35; 1 Pt 5:13). In the New Testament, father is a teacher of spiritual realities, by whose means the soul of man is reborn into the likeness of Christ. This is a reflection of the Pauline 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" (1 Cor 4:15).

In the early ecclesial circles, the term "Father" was used to denote those spiritual "fathers" who nurtured the faith of the early Church maintaining what the Apostles taught. Originally, it was the bishops who were called Fathers, as religious leaders and chief teachers of the faith. 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*'. In the first Christian centuries a bishop was emphatically a father in Christ, not primarily because of the parallel between the leader of a community and the head of a family in Christ, but because he baptized his flock and was the chief teacher of his church. Over time this term became more focused and the Church defined specific people who qualified as "Fathers" and whose teaching greatly influenced the growth of Christianity. This included bishops from both the Western and Eastern Churches.

However, eventually the term broadened to include ecclesiastical writers who were not bishops. Several of the important early Christian teachers were laymen, deacons and priests, and it became customary from the fourth century to reckon these eminent teachers among 'the

Fathers'.<sup>1</sup> It is in harmony with this early evolution that the concept of the Fathers of the Church has emerged.

#### 4. What Makes the Church Fathers

In this part of the reflection, we explore the general theological and doctrinal norms on the basis of which a saint, recognized by the universal Church, is declared a 'Father of the Church'. There are specific requirements, the fulfilment of which qualifies an individual as a "Church Father." The Church looks for four major characteristic features in the life and works of an early Church leader who made his contribution in defending, expounding and developing Christian doctrines, in order to be considered a 'Father of the Church'.<sup>2</sup> These are *antiquity* (meaning that he lived within the early eight centuries during which the first Christian communities got themselves established)<sup>3</sup> *doctrinal orthodoxy*, *personal sanctity*, and *approval of the Church*.<sup>4</sup>

These features have to come together in a person in order to be found eligible for the title. Some influential writers of the early Church do not satisfy all these criteria perfectly. Origen, Tertullian and Eusebius of Caesarea are considered Fathers because of their great contributions to the Church. Indeed, some of these Fathers fell into doctrinal error. Origen's orthodoxy has been questioned and Tertullian seems to have abandoned the Church. But this was at a time when many doctrinal questions had not been definitively settled, and it was possible to hold to material (de facto) heresy while personally they were still committed to orthodoxy.

A partial list of the Fathers, including Prosper of Aquitaine, a layman, is found in the Gelasian Decree (not a product of Pope Gelasius, but perhaps a faithful reflection of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Roman Church), where the accent is on communion: According to the Decree, the Fathers are "those who have not swerved at any point from society with the holy Roman Church, and have not been severed from the faith and preaching that are hers, but by God's grace have shared her fellowship to the last day of their lives" (4.3).

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<sup>1</sup> J.H. Crehan, "Fathers of the Church", in *A Catholic Dictionary of Theology* Vol. 2, Melbourne: Nelson, 1967, 288-289, p. 289.

<sup>2</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church*, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 15 Jan 1990, pp. 8-15.

<sup>3</sup> *The death of St. John Damascene (cir. A.D. 750) is regarded as the close of the age of the Fathers.*

<sup>4</sup> J. Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. 1, Westminster: Christian Classics, 1984, p. 10.

## 5. Emergence of the Fathers

It is true that all early Christian pastors and catechists "fathered" their particular portion of the flock during their lifetime. However, only those 'Fathers' who put their teaching in writing could continue to serve as guides to the whole Church in every age. Eventually, the 'Fathers of the Church' came to refer to those important Christian writers after the New Testament era who, because of their closeness to the Apostles themselves, bore witness to the authentic apostolic way of interpreting the Scripture handed on to them by the Tradition.<sup>5</sup> These writers played a crucial role in articulating and transmitting the Christian doctrine and bringing them to more mature expressions, at least in their most fundamental features.

The primitive Church produced several scholars who were good at articulating various tenets of Christian faith. The early exegetes sought 'consensus of the Fathers' in support of their points of view when there were disputes about the interpretation of a Scriptural text. These 'Fathers' they referred to were the teachers who, on account of their theological acumen and clarity of articulation, demonstrated how the apostolic writings in the Scripture were applied by the Apostles and understood by their immediate successors. Similarly, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Christological controversies, the "proof from the fathers" was for the first time fully exploited, particularly in florilegia;<sup>6</sup> all contending parties, e.g., Cyril of Alexandria<sup>7</sup> and Theodoret of Cyrrhus<sup>8</sup> appealed to the authority of "the fathers."

## 6. The Contributions of the Fathers

The Fathers are considered pillars of the Church as they formulated and articulated the early tenets of faith and their writings are inspirational. In the Church, this title is also applied to certain ecclesiastical writers of Christian antiquity because of their literary contributions to early

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<sup>5</sup> J. Chapman, "Fathers of the Church", in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* Vol. VI, New York: Gilmary Society, 1913, 1-18, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Florilegia are systematic collections of copious excerpts from the works of the Fathers and other ecclesiastical writers of the early period, compiled with a view to serve dogmatic or ethical purposes. These encyclopedic compilations, which are Patristic anthologies, are a characteristic product of the later Byzantine theological school.

<sup>7</sup> J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, 31 v. [Florence-Venice 1757-98].

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodoret-of-Cyrrhus>, accessed on 19.12.2019.

theology. In addition to the New Testament and the documents of various Church councils and liturgical sources, our main ways of knowing about the early Church are the writings of the Fathers of the Church. And as mentioned above, they were cited as authoritative witnesses to the Church's tradition.

These Fathers of the Church have been extremely influential on a personal level. In their writings, the reader gains a unique insight into the early followers of Christianity and their thoughts. In particular, their writings confirm what the Church has always taught and continues to teach today. The Fathers stand as foundational pillars who always pointed back to Jesus Christ through the Apostles and show with their life and example, what it means to be a Christian.

Some of the Fathers are recognized as the "Great Church Fathers" or the original "Doctors of the Church" for their great and invaluable contributions: *Ambrose (340–397)*, *Jerome (347–420)*, *Augustine (354–430)*, *Gregory the Great (540–604)*, *Basil the Great (329–379)*, *Athanasius (296–373)*, *Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389)* and *John Chrysostom (347–407)* have made outstanding doctrinal contributions. The vitality of the contribution of these individuals to the universal Church can be surmised from the fact that four of these Fathers are depicted in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. They are seen carrying the great Chair of St. Peter in the apse of the church. Besides these eight Fathers, there are many other influential spiritual figures of the Church in antiquity.

## **7. Demarcation of the Temporal Boundaries**

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 teachings that appeared in the early Church based on the gospel taught to them by the Apostles.

In our discussion, it is important to demarcate the boundaries of the time in which the Fathers of the Church lived and worked. The age of the Early Church Fathers, begins with the fourth century and closes with Isidore of Seville in the West (who worked until 636), John Damascene in the Greek Church (who worked until 749). When we come to think of

some of the Eastern Church, no such clear limit is assigned to the Syriac Fathers.<sup>9</sup>

## 8. Antiquity of the Fathers

The "Fathers of the Church" inevitably belonged to the Christian antiquity and are distinguished for orthodoxy of doctrine and holiness of life and have therefore been approved by the Church as witnesses to its faith. In the following discussion, we look at the various ways in which the notion of antiquity could be considered.

### 8.1. The Secular Notion of Antiquity

Antiquity generally denotes the distant past, that is, a long time ago. The Age of Antiquity, which is also known as the Ancient Era, spanned from the beginning of recorded human history, about 3000 BC, to approximately the mid 400's, which is the Early Middle Ages. However, according to some estimation, antiquity refers to any period before the Middle Ages, which dates from around 476 with the collapse of Rome to 1492 with the discovery of the new world.

The history of the Western civilization has periods of antiquity like the *Classical Antiquity*, which is the period in which Greek and Roman literature (such as Aeschylus, Ovid, and others) flourished. By convention, the period starts with the works of Homer, (8<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century BC), and ends with the arrival of Christianity and the decline of the Roman Empire (5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century AD). *Late Antiquity* is the period of European and Mediterranean history between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. The period starts with the end of the Crisis of the Third Century and the reforms of Diocletian. Late antiquity is a periodization used by historians to describe the time of transition from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages in mainland Europe, the Mediterranean world, and the Near East.

### 8.2. The Ecclesial Notion of Antiquity

The patristic era, as a literary period, opens with the first extant piece of extracanonical literature: in the present state of the evidence, Clement of Rome's *Letter to the Corinthians* (Pope Clement I, c. 96), unless one assigns an earlier date to the *Didache*. More difficult is the problem of when the age of the Fathers closes. Since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Christian antiquity has generally been distinguished from the Middle Ages.

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<sup>9</sup> J.H. Crehan, "Fathers of the Church", in *A Catholic Dictionary of Theology* Vol. 2, Melbourne: Nelson, 1967, 288-289, p. 288.

The problem is insoluble, for a solution presupposes answers to questions intimately linked with the periodization of history: which factor – the doctrinal or the literary or the cultural or the historical – ought to predominate in delimiting the age of the Fathers? When do the Middle Ages begin? Is the patristic era co-terminus with Greco-Roman culture? How are individual countries and different areas affected in this matter by, for example, the Aryan invasion of ancient India, Byzantinism, the Chaldean ecclesial connection, the iconoclast controversy, the Arab conquest, the “discovery” of America, the Mogul invasion...?

### 8.3. The Periods of Western Antiquity

The criterion of antiquity is somewhat flexible. The patristic era is conventionally divided into three periods. *The first period* is that of the *origins of Christianity*, critically important because of the presence of early Christian witnesses. This is the period to which one must look in order to weigh the claims of the various Christian denominations that theirs is the faith practiced by the earliest Christians. It includes the non-canonical writings of the Apostolic Fathers, men who knew the Apostles or their direct successors personally, and extends into the third century AD.

*The second period*, considered the patristic golden age, begins in 300 with St. Athanasius and ends with the death of St. Augustine in 430.<sup>10</sup> This was a great period of doctrinal development, in which the great Christian thinkers clashed with various heresies and settled important questions on topics such as grace and the Trinity.

It is significant to note that most of the early heresies were only erroneous teachings, which were proved wrong and were rejected by the official teaching authority of the Church. It would be unjust on our part to condemn any of the proponents of these erroneous teachings because they were theologians who were genuinely concerned with faith and the

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<sup>10</sup> The bulk of the Fathers are divided into Latin and Greek Fathers after the two major languages of ecclesiastical writing in this period of the Church's history. There are also writings in Syriac, Armenian and Coptic. Both Western and Eastern Christianity have four figures called the “Great Church Fathers.” These are Sts. Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory the Great in the West, and Basil the Great, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus (Nazianzen) and John Chrysostom in the East. The Roman Catholic Church calls these the “Eight Doctors of the Church,” to which more have been added in the past few centuries.



way in which people understood and explained them.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, even the heretics who were caught on the opposite side of orthodoxy, which was only emerging, also contributed to the development of the doctrines. At least in some cases, the orthodox teaching developed in response to a theological position that was later found to be erroneous.

*The third period* and last period has no clearly defined end, but is generally considered to have ended in the West with the death of St. Isidore of Seville in 636, and in the East with the death of St. John Damascene in 749. In addition to the reference made to the Christological controversies that played great role in the beginning of this period, Patrick J. Hamell writes: "The authors of this age formed a link between the falling ancient world and the coming new world, and reached out to the men who were to enlighten the barbarians, to St. Gregory the Great in Italy, St. Gregory of Tours in Gaul, St. Isidore in Spain, the Venerable Bede in England."<sup>12</sup>

#### **8.4. Indian Ecclesial Antiquity and Historical Phases**

The Malabar Church is an ancient apostolic Church founded by St. Thomas the Apostle. So far nobody from the Malabar Church has been formally declared either 'Father' or 'Doctor' of this Church. Hence, we contemplate, explore and analyse the possibility of declaring Chavara Father of the Malabar Church in the wider context of the tradition of the universal Church. We look at the possibility of adaptations of the same that could be made in the context of the unique history of the Malabar Church.

In this section, we briefly consider the particular context of the Malabar Church and its ecclesial developments in various periods. In order to enumerate the norms for declaring somebody a Father of the Syro-Malabar Church, we need a clear understanding of the Malabar Church and its unique history of development in the following four periods:

##### **8.4.1. The Apostolic Grey Phase**

As in the western history of the Church, the Apostolic period comprises of the time between the first and the fourth century when St Thomas the

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<sup>11</sup> See Francis Thonippara, "Challenges in Contextual Theological Thinking: A Historical Appraisal of Heresies", in Benny Thettayil (ed.), *Fragmented Cross: Expendable Theological Visions*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2020, 84-104, making a historical evaluation of heresies as contextual theological responses to faith.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick J. Hamell, *Handbook of Patrology*, New York: Alba House, 1968, p. 11.

Apostle and his immediate disciples were active and were animating the Church in India. Academically, this phase is grey because we possess no written documents regarding the history of this period. Not many scholars nor Church historians seem to be concerned about this period in history. However, a faint historical information on this period is derived from the oral traditions, which are associated with places, families, customs, and celebrations that are extant.

#### **8.4.2. The Archdeaconate Autonomous Phase**

The Archdeaconate phase spans between the fourth and the sixteenth centuries. In this period, the Church, especially in south India, was spiritually animated by the bishops who came from Persia. However, the temporal administration of the Church was done by the Archdeacon chosen from the native priests by the Church Assembly. He was the common head of the community and his title was Archdeacon of All-India. It was a period of autonomy and a rather peaceful ecclesial existence.

#### **8.4.3. Phase of Western Missionary Patronage**

In 1498, the Indian Christians came in contact with the Latin Church with the arrival of the Latin missionaries from Europe, especially the Jesuits and the Carmelites. They took up the leadership of the Church in Malabar. The cordial relationship that the missionaries had fostered in the beginning with the native Church gradually vanished. Conflicts emerged due to the high handed interferences of the European missionaries in the day-to-day affairs of the Indian Church. The culmination of this intrusion is seen in the synod of Udayamperur in 1599 and the subsequent Coonan Cross Oath in 1653. It led to the division of the Church. This period would come to an end in 1896.

#### **8.4.4. Phase of Rebirthing of Malabar Church**

The identity, individuality and autonomy of the Apostolic Church of India were jeopardized by the consequences of the synod of Diamper. The prominent developments in this period includes the saga of efforts and struggles for protecting and living the apostolic and liturgical heritage and protest against the high-handedness of the European missionaries. There were efforts to obtain bishops from Malabar, part of which was the unsuccessful efforts of Joseph Cariattil, the first native Indian to be appointed bishop of the Catholics of Malabar who died in Goa in 1786. The demand for local leadership and hierarchy continued until 1861, when Chavara was appointed the first Vicar General of the Church of Malabar after the time of Archdeacons whose service was

disrupted when the European ecclesial leadership took charge of the Malabar Church.

The appointment of a Vicar General exclusively for the St Thomas Christians of Malabar,<sup>13</sup> is the most crucial turning point in the ecclesial development of the Malabar Church. P. Podipara notes in this regard: "The great uplift Malabar witnessed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is mainly to be attributed to the zeal of Msgr Bernardine and his Vicar General Fr Cyriac Elias (Chavara)."<sup>14</sup> This appointment of Chavara eventually led to the autonomy and expansion of the Malabar Church. It is in this context that the seminal but significant contributions of St. Chavara, the first Vicar General of the Malabar Church, in view of regaining autonomy, identity and the overall unity of the Malabar Christians become vital.<sup>15</sup>

#### **8.4.5. Autonomous Syro-Malabar Phase**

The time span from 1896 to the present day is the period under discussion in this section. The two Vicariates of Trichur and Kottayam were erected by the Holy See in 1887 exclusively for the St Thomas Christians of Malabar, but were administered by the Latin bishops. This jurisdictional arrangement was altered by the subsequent establishment of the vicariates of Trichur, Ernakulam and Changanassery in 1896 and the complete administration was given the native bishops. Furthermore, in 1923, the Syro-Malabar hierarchy was re-established in view of the autonomy of Thomas Christians of India.

#### **8.4.6. National Ecclesial Expansion**

The life of the Church in Malabar was revitalized by the foundations of numerous religious congregations both for men and for women. This led

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<sup>13</sup> Cyriac Elia Chavara, *Positio*, Vatican: Typis Polyglotis, MCMLXXVII, 491ff.; CWC (Complete Works of Chavara) Vol IV, Chavara, *Alochanakal (Reflections)*, 1982 edition, pp. 83-85; 1990: p. 57; Mundadan, *Chavara*, p. 182.

<sup>14</sup> P. Podipara, ed., *The Carmelite Congregation of Malabar 1831-1931*, Trichinopoly, 1932, pp. 58-59. See also, Mundadan, *Chavara*, pp. 245-246. Thus, the members of the congregation, directed by Fr Cyriac Elias (Chavara), visited, from the beginning, all the Churches of Malabar, preached retreats and missions, corrected abuses, and even discharged parochial work, when the peculiar circumstances of a parish required it.

<sup>15</sup> Parampil Chandy Metran (Mar Alexander De Campo) became the first indigenous bishop of the whole of India. He was ordained bishop on first February 1663 by Mar Sebastany a foreign bishop. Mar Alexander was staying at Kuravilangad till his death, 2 January 1687. Mar Joseph Kariattil (5 May 1742 – 10 September 1786) was the first native Indian to be appointed as Archbishop of the Syrian Catholics in the territory now comprising Kerala.

to the missionary expansion of the Malabar Church, into other states of India where Syro-Malabar dioceses were eventually established. The life of the Church in this period was marked by enhanced liturgical renewal, pastoral apostolates, expansion of the mission, educational services, charismatic renewal, theological developments, social ministries, etc. In 1992, the Syro-Malabar Church was raised to Major Archiepiscopal status with the Synodal structure.

Furthermore, the migration of the St Thomas Christians in the national level necessitated arrangements for pastoral care for them resulting in the establishment of Syro-Malabar dioceses in various parts of India. Moreover, of late, the grant of a quasi all-India jurisdiction has enthused the Church.

#### **8.4.7. International Ecclesial Extension**

Various religious congregations for men and women sent their members to the developed countries for pastoral service and to the developing countries for evangelization. In addition to this, taking the international migration of the members of the Syro-Malabar Church into consideration, pastoral care was extended to them in various countries resulting in the consequent establishment of Syro-Malabar dioceses abroad.

#### **8.5. Qualified Antiquity of the Malabar Church**

The division of the entire Malabar Church into four zones by Chavara, who was the first Vicar General of the Malabar Church, and the appointment of separate priests as plenipotentiaries for the overall administrative and pastoral care of each area, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is a ground-breaking development considering the state of the Church at the time. Reviewing the further major developments at the time in the context of the Malabar Church, Chavara's rudimentary pastoral, ecumenical and administrative steps are considered to be the foundations of the future Syro-Malabar Church, which continues to evolve. It is by taking these critical, significant, and creative ecclesial developments into consideration that we identify the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the formative period of the autonomous Syro-Malabar Church as we have it today, with the Synodal structure and the Major Archiepiscopal status.

In the light of all these developments in the Syro-Malabar Church, and in comparison with the universal Church, we deduce that just as the universal Church considers only those persons during the formative period of the early Church as Fathers, the Syro-Malabar Church also might consider those persons of crucial importance throughout its

formative period as the *Father of the Church Sui Iuris* because the formative period is the *antiquity* as far as the particular Church is concerned.

### 9. Fluidity of Antiquity

Antiquity is always understood relative to the time frame that is in question. When we consider the aeons in the history of the earth, measured with the Geologic Time Scale, and divide the whole time into four periods of the Hadean, Archean, Proterozoic, and the current aeon Phanerozoic, the consideration of antiquity is in one way. Although the term aeon may be used in reference to a period of a billion years, especially in geology, cosmology or astronomy, its more common usage is for any long, indefinite period. When we speak of the fossils and their studies, the time-frame of Lower Palaeolithic to Iron Age comprises the time between ca. 2,500,000 to 1000 BC. The ages such as Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic/Neolithic, Bronze Age are the intervening ages, antiquity is calculated in a slightly different way.

Antiquity in terms of human evolution would be considered differently too. Charles Darwin, the British naturalist published his monumental books *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) and referred to *Homo sapiens* that first evolved in Africa about 315,000 years ago. We are now the only living members of the human tribe that consisted of *Ardipithecus*, *Australopithecus* and other species of *Homo* like the Neanderthals. The antiquity in reference to three lakh years of history would be different from the 2000 years of the history of the Church. In all these three scenarios the place of the needle of antiquity-dial is relative to the span of the time frame but always closer to the beginning of the period in question.

Analogically, in comparison with the universal Church, as far as the Malabar Church is concerned, antiquity has to refer to the time when the Malabar Church began to enjoy an autonomy, which was marked by the appointment of Chavara as the Vicar General of the Malabar Church. This period also is considered to be the formative period of the autonomous Malabar Church.

### 10. The Great Indian Ecclesial Slumber

The Thomas Christians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and prior to it, lived in a caste ridden society of Kerala, where social freedom and equality did not have a place. Untouchability, marginalization of women, economic inequality and illiteracy were rampant both in the society and religion.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> N. Maria, *Empowered Womanhood*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2014, pp. 89-156.

Church in Malabar, being an indigenous church, was no exception. The eighteen centuries of its existence under animation, first from the Chaldeans and then from the Europeans could be characterised by the deep slumber. It is towards the end of these times that the prophetic social reform activities of Chavara made waves in the society of Malabar.

Indeed, the Church in Malabar had an apostolic origin. However, for 19 centuries, she had made no significant progress in establishing her individuality. The reasons, according to Chavara are:

- 1 Unfortunate status of the Malabar church deprived of bishops of their own Rite or nationality to lead their priests and the people in accordance with their own apostolic faith and tradition.<sup>17</sup>
2. Lack of consecrated men and women who practised religious virtues and the absence of monasteries and convents that caused the omission of immense good.
3. Spiritual blindness and lack of committed personnel to impart education. This caused barrenness in the Church of Malabar which produced no canonized saints like some other Churches that received faith much later.<sup>18</sup>

Chavara responded to this critical state of the Church proactively. Like St Paul, in the formative days of the early Church, he prayed, planned, wrote, travelled extensively and laboured day and night zealously not for her spiritual welfare alone, but also for her temporal prosperity.<sup>19</sup>

#### 14. Conclusion

When we take the notion of antiquity as one of the criteria for declaring a saint as a 'Fathers of the Church', what needs also to be taken into consideration, first of all, is that this title was not given to anyone based on a canonical process or a set of previously approved norms. Secondly, the fourfold criterion for recognition of the Fathers of the Church (antiquity, holiness, orthodoxy, and ecclesiastical approval) does not reflect any previously approved norms; they evolved *a posteriori* through what had happened in history of the Church and in and through her lived faith. Finally, the universal Church considers only those persons

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<sup>17</sup> CWC, *Chronicle*, 1990, 146.

<sup>18</sup> CWC, *Chronicle*, 1990, 146.

<sup>19</sup> There have been sporadic activities like that of Parampil Chandy Metran and Mar Joseph Kariattil in history that give us signs of life in the Malabar Church, but they are scanty. Similarly, even prior to Chavara, we find writings of Paremmakkal Thoma Kathanar but though extensive, it is limited to a travelogue.

who lived during the formative period of Christianity (i.e., until the eighth century), as they contributed to the spiritual, doctrinal theological and pastoral building up of the Church. When we focus on the formative period of a Church *Sui Iuris*, the definition and the demarcations must be different.

In the European Antiquity, the Fathers of the Church were convinced of the fundamental transformation that occurred and was occurring in the world was brought about by the Christ event. This conviction regarding the transformation gave them a new vision of the reality, a new hermeneutic of humanity, world and God. They reinterpreted all good achievements of humanity with their new Christian vision.<sup>20</sup> It is this vision at a given time that gave formation to the community.<sup>21</sup> In a temporal consideration, as we have discussed above, European ecclesial antiquity does not coincide with Indian ecclesial antiquity.

As concluding remarks, the following point needs to be considered: It is true that according to the Western definition of Antiquity, the demarcation of the terminal limit is Isidore of Seville in the West (+636) and John Damascene in the Greek Church (+749). And by this parameter, Chavara of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cannot be a contender for the title of the Father of the Church. However, Syro Malabar Church need not be governed by this Western parameter. Moreover, being a Church *sui iuris*, Syro Malabar Church does not have to be governed by the norms that were historically evolved in the western Church. Moreover, the Church in the East has not set such a limit since it did not have a candidate to think about.

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<sup>20</sup> *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> In this scheme of thought, if the Malankara Church thinks of Mar Baselios, who was as the helm of the reunion movement, as a result of which it became a Church *sui iuris*, he could be considered worthy of the title *mutatis mutandis*, i.e., without prejudice to the other three requirements.