

SAINT KURIAKOSE ELIAS CHAVARA A PILLAR THAT SUPPORTED THE CHURCH

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Abstract: One of the strongest revolutions which brought about substantial change and held high the flag of mother Church, has been by St. Chavara. Mirroring the face of Christ, leading an exemplary life of complete obedience and profound love of God, Chavara became the fifth Gospel of his time. This study makes a humble attempt to look at him through the lens of progression, through the vistas of constructive growth, love and expansion. Chavara skillfully navigated the phases of the Church, understanding them and bringing about an uplift in any cause he set his hands to. As testified by Fr. Leopold Beccaro, his first biographer: He had an ardent desire to spread the light of the Holy Church in all directions; he was grieved to the point of shedding tears when he heard of the trials and persecutions of the Church and eagerly longed to see days of triumph. From fighting for justice, to bringing about essential facts to light, to the humble task of turning convents and monasteries into holy abodes of Christ, it was Chavara who took strength and received the grace to turn factual instances into the most worthy portals of Divine love.

Keywords: Koonammavu Convent, The pillar, the lamp and the mirror, Bishop Thomas Roccas, Propaganda Fide, *Lex orandi lex credendi*, *Jnanapiyusham*, Fr. Leopold Beccaro, Gerard Mooppachan, *Slamlekh*, *Nishkama karma*, *Chavarul*, *Alochana*, *Koodapirappukal*, *Punyasanketham*, *Malpan*, *Tukasa*, Abode of Virtues.

1. Introduction

"This father was a mirror and a lamp to all the Christians in Kerala. Moreover he was a strong pillar that supported the Holy Church in protecting its faith.

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With great zeal, he worked for its growth and expansion."¹ These touching and moving words by the sisters of Koonammavu Convent unveil the greatness of the person of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara. Their testimony stands as ever true and revealing a unique picture of Chavara, as their close, lived experience was more authentic and valid than any other. His personality, contributions, and his clear vision and mission of his life can be grouped into these three basic titles- *the pillar, the lamp and the mirror*- attributed by his daughters. Chavara, of course, realized the dream of God about him; to be the brave son of the Mother Church. In all that he did, his sole motive was that the Church should be the platform for every new beginning. She is to be flourished and spread out bearing the name of Christ, establishing his Kingdom. He was an epoch making a spiritual tower, a lead figure of his time.

The 19th century Kerala Church, saw a new phase, it was her re-birth, a new – Pentecost through which the flag of the Mother Church flew high. Treading through a novel path and inspiring many to follow, Chavara could become an initiator in many fields, bringing remarkable changes in the existence of Malabar Church. He could beautifully and systematically fulfil his role as the defender, builder and reformer of the Church, taking efforts and facing challenges in transforming her internal and external phases. Fighting tooth and nail against the storm that attacked her, he became the pillar of the Church that supported her. He became the light to enlighten all who were in the darkness of superstition, ignorance, false belief, etc. Mirroring the face of Christ, leading an exemplary life of complete obedience and profound love of God, Chavara became the fifth Gospel of his time. Thus his every initiation has its far reaching consequences that extent even today.

This study is a humble attempt to look at Chavara - as a pillar that supported the Church, a mirror and a lamp in the church, unfolding his tremendous love and great zeal with which he worked for its growth and expansion.

2. The Phases of the Church

2.1. The Internal Phase

Among the two phases of the Catholic Church the internal phase contains the mystery of the Holy Trinity, Sacraments, Saints, Angels, Word of God, etc. which are holy in themselves; nothing can make it contaminated or spoiled; never can it lose its holiness or purity, as a consequence of someone's failure to lead an authentic life, neither of a

¹ *The Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent (CKC)*, vol. II, p.23.

simple lay faithful nor of any who holds ecclesial power. This internal phase, which is holy in its very nature, forms the core of the Church. So, the Church by her very nature and existence stands ever holy, as her core is holy.

2.2. The External Phase

The other phase of the church, called the external phase contains the hierarchical and administrative set up, such as the Pope, bishops, the priests, religious, lay faithful, the institutions, the material and physical dimensions, etc.

3. The Pillar that Supported the Church

When the sisters addressed Chavara as the pillar they were clear enough how he supported the Church. He became the pillar by strengthening the faith of the people of God and by fostering their unity. He protected the people in unity from the attack of the intruder bishop Thomas Roccas. Introducing programs for spiritual re-awakening such as Sunday homily, retreats for the priests and the laity, family renewal programs, and so on, he nurtured the growth of their faith life.

3.1. A Courageous Leader in the Open War

The years 1861-1862 can be called as an age of 'open war' for faith and unity in the history of the Malabar Church. The coming of the Chaldean bishop Thomas Roccas from Baghdad without the authorization from the Holy Father, on 9 May 1861 marks the beginning of the faith war. When the Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli felt the situation going out of his control, he found in Chavara, a shepherd after the heart of Jesus, to bring back the scattered sheep of the Church. He was sure that through Chavara God would act in time. In a letter appointing Chavara as the Vicar General, he writes:

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 the consequent exhaustion and indisposition, and more over, since through our administration we do not see spiritual fruits both among the priests and among the laity, in the present circumstances of things...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 Syro-Malabar churches under our jurisdiction. In fact, I am persuaded that

you have the fortitude (strength), skill, wisdom and the virtues which are necessary to fulfil this responsibility.²

In a letter to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, informing him of the appointment of Chavara as the vicar general bishop Bernardine highly appreciated his qualities, saying "...who is the prior of the 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 endeavoured to draw him to their side ... even promising to consecrate him bishop. If they have obtained his consecration, all or almost all would have followed him, since he enjoys great esteem, respect and authority among all. Now therefore, in order to divert the clergy and the people and to oppose the intruder I judged it (his appointment as vicar general) as the most appropriate means, and perhaps the only one."³

Chavara, who was all the more worried about the trouble and misfortune caused by the schism, took it as the plan of God and being ever submissive to the order, began acting immediately for its defence. The prudent and wise intervention of Chavara proved his very personality and his zeal in saving the Church from the clutches of the schismatic. He sent circulars to the priests and to the laity; he entrusted the worst situation of the Malabar Church to Mother Mary whose continuous and immediate maternal assistance always felt strongly in his life. The news that the tricks of Roccas and his party deceived many, made Chavara sad and restless. So he along with other priests sent letters to the Pope requesting clarification about the intruding bishop. Roccas splitted the Catholic Church into parts. Chavara couldn't bear seeing 86 of its churches had completely joined to the Roccasian group and 36 other churches partially. Because of Chavara's earnest efforts Roccas left for Babel.

The trouble caused by Roccas did not end up with his departure alone. Chavara acknowledged that the troubled task still lie ahead; that was to bring back the scattered churches, reuniting them to the Church. Thus he started mending the torn parts of her patiently by collecting

² Paul Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly and the St Thomas Christians in 1867*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publication, 2018, p.17.

³ Pallath, *Vicariate Apostolic of Verapoly*, p.20.

details of all who were ordained by Roccas, writing letters to the Holy See asking permission for absolution and to bring them back to the Catholic Church. He also knew clearly well, that it was the ardent longing of the St Thomas Christians to have native ecclesial leadership that invited Roccas schism. While animating and empowering the church to keep up its unity, he courageously informed the church authority the root cause of the problem and the remedy for it. After the departure of Roccas, Chavara wrote to the Propaganda Fide:

We are St Thomas Christians. Since several years we do not have a bishop of our own. But those who received faith recently have their own bishop.....hence Your Eminence, I would bring to your kind attention the following. It is good that we have two bishops here, one for the Latin church, and the other for the Syrian church. Thus the craving for own bishop would cease and the relationship with the Babel would end.⁴

3.2. Liturgical Celebration: An Expression of Faith

The celebration of the Sacramental and Liturgical life in faith by the faithful would add the internal beauty of the Church ever bright. Chavara believed the maxim, *Lex orandi lex credendi*, which is found in Prosper of Aquitaine's eighth book on the authority of the Apostolic See concerning the grace of God and free will - One prays what one believes, one believes what one experiences in truth. He worked hard for establishing uniformity in the celebration of the liturgical life with decorum and solemnity, preserving the age long liturgical traditions of St Thomas Christians, adopting many devotional practices which he believed would foster the spiritual life of all. So he aimed at an orderly devout celebration of public worship and good participation by the faithful in unity. He sent a circular to the priests⁵ informing them about the printing of the missal and the Order of Mass which contained all the rubrics; knowing that the rubrics together with the calendar would bring uniformity in the celebration of the Liturgy, thus cementing the unity among the members of the Church which indeed was his intention.

3.3. Spiritual Welfare of the people

Bishop Ludvic encouraged Chavara and granted him permission to translate books from Tamil to Malayalam.⁶ The first printed book from Mannanam Press called '*Jnanapiyusham*' which could be used for the

⁴ Chavara CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters*, II:5.

⁵ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters*, IX:7.

⁶ See Parappuram, *Chronicles* 1472-1474.

faithful individually and collectively, contains many prayers that also could be used as family prayer such as 15 decades of Rosary, all the minor and major feasts of the Church, Holy Mass in simple form both in Latin Rite and in Syrian for the use of the faithful, etc. He also made effort to translate the Holy Saturday Service in to Syriac, forty hours adoration ceremonies, and various benedictions from Latin Liturgical books. It was Chavara who introduced the Sunday homily, by which the faithful were enriched in their faith, breaking of the Word along with the breaking of the Bread drew all to one in faith. He preached retreats for the laity in all the parishes, helped them live their faith life. He was sure that the catholic family which is known to be the domestic church is the base of every individual's faith journey. 'The Testament of a loving father' gives precious directives and guideline for an authentic Christian family and worthy Christian manner of rearing the children. Great and incredible were his efforts to promote and foster faith in the Church.

4. Mirroring the Face of Christ

"I feel that by the grace of God, the sanctifying grace I received in the holy baptism has never been lost to me at any time."⁷ It is in this pure conscience, the fellow beings of Chavara saw him as the one who mirrored Christ. He had in his mind that the convents and the monasteries are established to remain as "the mirror of virtues" and "abode of saints".⁸ His life itself was quiet an insight and inspiration for this. By his very life, he lived and shown to all the aim of founding the religious Congregation. All who approached him felt him to be a man of virtues. He helped his brothers and sisters in their faith journey seeking for sanctity and holiness. He was an ideal religious who walked his talk. By his own upright life he persuaded others to live their call following the discipline of life. Thus the credibility of his words and the authenticity of his deeds proved him to be the mirror of the face of Christ. He was bathed in the love of Christ, each of his steps became the milestone, the words that he uttered were the gem of great wisdom to be pondered and lived upon. Jesus Himself says 'learn from me for I am humble in spirit' (Mt 11:29). Following the Lord, this perfect disciple of the Master, accepted this challenge, to reflect the virtues of the Lord throughout his life. So seeing the life of Chavara, others could address him as 'the mirror'. For in him they saw the Christian values and virtues.

⁷ CKC, Vol. II, p.13.

⁸ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters*, 6.2.

Some of his outstanding virtues such as love for the Church, Obedience to the hierarchy, fraternal love are taken here for discussion.

4.1. Ardent Lover of the Church

Chavara being enflamed by great love towards Christ and the Holy Catholic Church, the mystical body, was concerned always about the matters of the Church. In all that he did, his sole aim was the growth and unity of the Church. All his activities, renewal programs, and establishment of different organizations got directed towards this single motive – to extend the Kingdom of God to the ends of the world. The missionaries were surprised to see this man of God, burning with the love for the Church. Fr. Leopold Beccaro, his first biographer testifies:

Among his virtues the most outstanding was his ardent faith in and devotion to the Holy Catholic Church and to the Holy Father. He had an ardent desire to spread the light of the Holy Church in all directions; he was grieved to the point of shedding tears when he heard of the trials and persecutions of the Church and eagerly longed to see days of triumph. Whenever he happened to hear the news about the Pope, he was always moved to tears, either of sorrows or of joy.⁹

Chavara lived a perfect life in his local church. His concern for the universal Church was marvelous. It could never cease to amaze me, how he managed to collect the news and incidents of Europe, at a time when the communication facilities were absolutely not in progress. Chavara's tremendous love for the Church, compelled him to collect the details about her, about the Pope, about the struggles faced, about the first Vatican Council, declaration of the decree of infallibility, the abrupt close of the council as the Franco-Prussian war broke out, the flee of the cardinals, such traumatic experiences were known to him¹⁰. All these news were his concern and it pained him. With due reverence and anguish he responded to them, accepting them as his own family issue. Through his letters he informed the fathers and the sisters in the monastery and in the convent and requested them to pray for the Pope and the Church.

On his sick bed, when he was unable to offer the Holy Mass due to the severity of his infirmities, his thoughts were linked with the universal Church. He united himself with the holy priests who offer the

⁹ Leopold Beccaro, *A Short Biography of K.E Chavara*, Mannanam: St Joseph Monastery, 2003, p.12.

¹⁰ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters*, V:6,15.

blood of the Lamb of God to the Heavenly Father, incessantly, in all the four continents like Asia, America.¹¹ This most touching words uttered on his death bed weigh high his deep passion and reverence towards the Church, pointing to the very nature of the fire that ignited his whole life as a priest - the fire of love towards the universal Church.

Chavara's pilgrimage of faith began with his baptism on 18 February 1805, in Chennamkary, an interior and less known parish and reached its climax at St. Philomina's Church at Koonammavu. What we notice in his faith journey is its gradual growth and expansion accepting Jesus as the Cosmic Christ. This map of faith became so broad that it could hold the whole universal Church, all the continents of the entire world.

4.2. An Obedient Son of the Mother Church

Obedience is the reflection of Love. A kind of reciprocity lies between obedience and love. The intensity of one's love is measured in the keenness and willingness of the person's obedience. In Phil 2:8, St Paul presents Jesus as an *Obedient Son* par excellence in *Love*. Being filled with the love towards His father, Jesus accepted even the death on the Cross, as it was inevitable to fulfill the mission entrusted to him by the Father.

The life of Chavara was a saga of heroic obedience. According to him obedience is to experience heavenly peace in the monastery, in the convent, which is a small heaven, by obeying the hierarchy of the Church, the superiors, even one another. The proof of a true religious is obedience without seeing and hearing, total renunciation of one's will.¹² For him obedience was part of his very being, not for a stipulated time. It was his conscience that directed him, even during his last days when he was suggested to be taken to Mannanam for a change, his reply would astonish every one. He said that as the Excellency the Bishop and Fr. Leopold told him to stay at Koonammavu, his conscience did not permit him to leave that place in their absence.¹³ He was ever ready to do what he was asked to do. Obedience was a leading principle of this holy man. It's very clear from the words of the sisters when they said of him that their very Reverend father used to obey like a child. This good example which he has shown even at the moment of his death was something that everyone marveled at.¹⁴ For the reception of the Sacrament of anointing the sick, Chavara left the desire and decision to

¹¹ *Chronicles of Mannanam Monastery*, Vol 3, (1864- 71), p.134 (Malayalam MSS)

¹² Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters*, VI:5.

¹³ CKC, Vol. II, p.13.

¹⁴ CKC, Vol. II, p.20.

others. As an answer to the question asked by Gerard Mooppachan, 'In which Rite do you wish to receive the last Sacrament and indulgences?' Chavara could answer like this, 'As you all will it, if it is in my own language, I too can give the response to the prayers, but I shall be quite satisfied with whatever you decide.'¹⁵ As Leopold Beccaro testifies his obedience towards the ecclesial authorities could never be paralleled to anyone else.¹⁶

4.3. A Man of Tender Love

Chavara was fascinated by the supreme love of God, which forced him to flow the tender love towards his brothers and sisters. Fr. Kuriakose Eliseus Porukara writes about the way Chavara loved the sisters. "Just as Patriarch Jacob had a greater love for his youngest son Benjamin, so Chavara loved the sisters most deeply, and brought them up most carefully, providing them with all the needs even as a hen took care of the chicks."¹⁷

Chavara looked into every minute detail of the Koonmmavu convent as a loving father. His heart was full of love for everyone. In everything Chavara had a thought about his children. See how affectionately he sent the chillies and the mangoes to the convent for the sisters, instructing them to keep the seed for the future.¹⁸ He used to call the sisters as 'loving children'. Chavara approached them with the dignity of the status of their life, addressing them as "O! Glorious royal ladies! O queens of the Lord and God! How great and praiseworthy is the state of life to which you have ascended."¹⁹

The paternal heart of Chavara was with full of affection and concern for them. The last three visits that he made to the convent were the manifestation of his love for them. *The Chronicles of the Koonammavu Convent* records the incident as the expression of his tender and fervent love for them. On 15 October 1870 out of his great love he went there; even though he was very weak he made a visit again in the afternoon. Without being able to walk by himself, he reached there, with the help of another person. During that visit he made them sing *slamlekh* (Hail holy Queen). Since they did not know where exactly the pauses where

¹⁵ CKC, Vol. II, p.15.

¹⁶ Leopold Beccaro, *A Short Biography of K.E Chavara*, p.12.

¹⁷ Sebastian Palathara, ed. *Stapakapithakanmar*, Mannanam: St Josephs Monastery, 1995, p.29.

¹⁸ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters* VII:8.

¹⁹ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters* VII:2.

he showed them the places where to stop and marked it.²⁰ The sisters marveled at his interest to teach them handicrafts. "They recorded in their Chronicle their words of indebtedness and gratitude. Besides this he taught us, what thread to use for sewing, how to dye the thread the process to be followed and the color to be used, etc."²¹ Nothing bothered him, even his own sickness and weakness of the body. Heart touching was his last visits, even his eye sight was not proper, with the help of the superior; he went to the convent just to see the sisters and the girls in the boarding house. His physical ailments couldn't stop him from visiting them as an expression of his love and concern.

4.4. Nishkama Karma Yogi

The desire to have position, power, and prestige was kept away from the life of Chavara. He was a man of '*nishkama karma*'. He loved and served the Church with the pure intention of serving the souls, keeping up the bond of mother-son relationship. Ecclesiastical offices or its dignified position never bothered him. Even when the intruder, bishop Thomas Roccas offered him the chance of becoming a bishop, his answer was, "my desire is not to become the bishop, but to save souls."²² His humility held him back, to be known only as the prior of the monasteries, never he desired for the position of the vicar general. We never find any letter signed by Chavara as vicar general.

4.5. A Hand for the Art of Writing

As any earthly father, Chavara wanted his spiritual daughters to be equipped, with all that they were needed to develop their talents. He took special interest to give them training in the art of writing which could be the best means for their self-expression. He reminded the superior to encourage Sr. Anna to write down all the details of the daily events.²³ On the day of the inauguration of the bamboo-mat convent, on 13 February 1866 Chavara wrote in his diary that Sr. Anna and Sr. Thresia began to write on the paper.²⁴ He added that Sr. Anna learns the things faster than others. He himself showed them how to write. The first sixteen pages of the Chronicle are in his hand writing. He corrected the

²⁰ CKC, Vol. II p.11.

²¹ CKC, Vol. II p.12.

²² A. M. Mundadan, *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2008, p.229.

²³ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters* VII.1.

²⁴ Chavara, CWC, Vol. I: *Chronicles*

rest of the pages of the first volume and gave them necessary corrections to improve their articulation.

4.6. A Man with a Family Heart

Chavara had a big and broad heart that he could accommodate everyone accepting all, as the members of his own family. His affection towards the sisters was praiseworthy. Acknowledging the strong bond of relationship that existed between the sisters and himself he said: "What reason is behind this that now more than your blood relations, you love me and I love you?"²⁵ Wherever he lived he considered the community his own family. He insisted the members of his congregation to live in unity as '*koodapirappukal*' – children born of and nursed by same mother.²⁶ He testified that it was true in his life: "I renounced my home and relations for God's sake. See I am writing this sitting at Arnattukara. My brethren here love me more than my family members, brothers, children and others. Tomorrow at Koonammavu, then at Carmel Vazhakulam and at Mannanam, whichever monastery I may go, I am loved equally."²⁷ Chavara couldn't but love all, none left unloved, uncared. Chavara's life was engaged in making bridges with all who came to his life. Fraternal love, union of hearts, universality of prayer and all these were something precious to Chavara.

5. To be the Lamp

Chavara was a burning light in the darkened Kerala of nineteenth century. He was a pioneer in many respects, a man with far sightedness, who walked ahead of his time. Never was he scared of taking initiative. He understood that formation of good leaders for the society and for the Church was a felt and inevitable need of the time. With the introduction of religious houses for men and women, renewal of formation of clergy, printing press and the education system he dispelled the darkness of faith and ignorance. Thus he became a lamp to lead the people from darkness to light.

5.1. Forming the Leaders

"The priests have to keep wisdom on his lips; the people would approach him seeking his instructions. He is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts" (Malachi 2:7). The priests are the backbone of the Church. In and through them the Church guides her flock and administers her task.

²⁵ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters* VII.6.

²⁶ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters* VI.5.

²⁷ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters* IX.11.

Chavara was well aware of the greatness of the status of the priests in the Church. Admiring his own call to priesthood and the duty as a shepherd to the flock of Christ, he knew well that the Church would grow well with the presence of wise and prudent priests: the desired renewal in the whole Church depends to a greater extent upon the priestly ministry; an uneducated priest is not only insufficient to do anything worthwhile in his pastoral work, but may be even detrimental to the salvation of souls.²⁸

The existence of the universal Church is to lead all her children to the shore of salvation. The priests are anointed and commissioned to serve her with this purpose. Chavara decided to renew the system of formation of the clergy in Kerala. Along with the monasteries he started the seminaries: at Vazhakulam (1866), at Elthuruthu (1868), and already Mannanam had a Seminary attached to it from 1833 on. He considered the formation and renewal of priests his most important duty.

While in the seminary itself, the charism of Chavara in priestly formation was noticed and recognized by Malpan Palackal. So then, Chavara was entrusted with the coaching of other brothers who were weak in studies. Also, it was Chavara who had to look in to the seminary matters, whenever Malpan went out. Chavara dedicated himself for the priestly formation for more than three decades. Bishop Francis Xavier on 16 February 1844 appointed him the '*Malpan*' as a mark of appreciation and recognition of his service to priestly formation. He was awarded with the title '*the examiner*' of all priests of the Syrian Rite and the '*Malpan*' of all theological faculties of the priests.²⁹ The priests who had the training in the seminary stood along with Chavara taking daring step with brave heart and with unfailing faith to confront unanimously the Roccas schism. These priests under the guidance of Chavara went around strengthening the faithful in their Christian living.

In order to foster their bond with Jesus the eternal high priest, Chavara initiated the renewal of canonical prayer, and *Tukasa* (order of the Holy Mass) and special retreats were preached for them. Spiritual books and other reading materials were made available to them. We get an echo of his motivating force to work for liturgical renewal in Vatican Council's 'Decree on Priests': "No Christian community can be built unless it has its basis and centre in the celebration of the Most Holy

²⁸ Leopold Beccaro, *A Short Biography of K.E Chavara*, p.6

²⁹ Chavara, CWC, Vol. I: *Chronicles*, p. 44.

Eucharist. It is here that all education in the spirit of community must originate."³⁰

5.2. An Abode of Virtues

The Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent begins with Chavara's distress and disappointment in not having monasteries or convent in the land of Malayalam though the true Christian religion was in practice from early times. Being the vicar general, he knew that there were many women, who desired to live a chaste life, but they had no way out to lead such a life. He was aware that men enjoyed the privileges of the church whereas women's cries were not heard. Men could live the life of chastity but women had to accept marriage and live as worldly women and they were living in this sad plight for a long time.³¹

The religious are in the heart of the Church. They have the duty of working for the implanting and strengthening of the Kingdom of Christ in souls and for spreading it to the four corners of the earth³² Chavara was grieved of the absence of canonized saints in the Malabar church, who, he believed, will add beauty to its internal phase. Chavara not only desired for the convent but toiled hard and prayed earnestly for establishing one in Kerala. '*Alochana*' introduces Chavara's interest in accomplishing his desire for establishing the convent. It reads, "Because frailty and weakness is seen to be doubled, but earnestness, piety, fraternal love, interest on the convent have increased than before. Simplicity is also increased."³³ From this earnestness he set out for the building up of the convent about which his biographer says, "It was his great desire to start a religious house (*punyasanketham*) for women with the main intention of making it a safe place for the girls of Malabar to live their religion as good Christians and to learn spiritual things..."³⁴

5.3. The Spark of Knowledge

The nineteenth century Kerala underwent a strong and intense discrimination of caste, creed, gender, etc. Though the proclamation of the Gospel was not prohibited or chained, there was delay in getting into the life of the '*dalits*'. Chavara who had the spirit of St Paul who underwent labour pain until Christ was formed in the people, worried

³⁰ *Decree on Priests*, 7.

³¹ CKC, Vol. I, p.1

³² *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

³³ *Alochana*, 1865, December, p.92. It is the report book of the Council meeting (1864-1870) Malayalam MSS.

³⁴ Leopold Beccaro, *A Short Biography of K.E Chavara*, p.12.

about the faith of all, including the marginalized. He found education as the best means to bring forth '*the seed and the sprouts of holiness*'.³⁵ His prime aim of establishing educational institutions was to increase the strength of the Church, in number, in quality, in faith, and in knowledge. As the vicar general, he sent a letter to all the parishes exhorting them to begin a school along with all the parishes.

St Ephrem teaches us that the second means for vision is education. Just as we cannot see things without vision in the eyes, without knowledge we will not be able to see Heaven and God who dwells in it. Those who cannot see are blind. Similarly, those who are not educated are spiritually blind. It is because of this blindness that the Christians of Malabar, although they are followers of Jesus of Nazareth from the very beginning, are without the seed and sprout of holiness.³⁶

The spreading of light of faith and knowledge through education was not an inclusive matter for Catholics alone. Believing that the *pulayas* and the casteless masses of *dalits* are dearest to God, on 9 October 1864, he opened a school for them in Mannanam. By starting a school for the lower castes, he proved to the world, that in the heart of the Church there is place for all, who are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:28). Chavara was in haste to begin the schools for them in different places. In the meeting of August 1869, the '*Alochana*' explains the exhortations he made for the development of the education system. Through his circular letters, the priests were encouraged, instructing them the different ways to go ahead along with the plan.

Each monastery was entrusted to open new schools in their respective areas, to bring more children of the less privileged who were denied the right to education and to inspect the schools regularly and they gathered the students of four or five schools together and conducted retreats for them at Mannanam.³⁷ TOCD Fathers took care of 42 such schools in the central Travancore in 1866.³⁸ This intervention and interference of the priests in the schools slowly paved the path for conducting retreats for school children. Schools were opened in Elthuruth and Ambazhakadu as well. When all the parish priests gathered for their annual retreats, the Prior of Mannanam Monastery

³⁵ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters* IX.2.

³⁶ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters* IX.2.

³⁷ *Alochana* (May 1868), p.195.

³⁸ *Alochana*, p.111.

reminded them of their greater responsibility to educate the children of their locality.³⁹

He not only established the schools and envisaged systematic education, but also reminded the parents about their responsibility in giving good education to their children and accompanying them. In his *Chavarul* he says, "As soon as the children come of age, they should be sent to school. From time to time, parents should enquire about their progress in studies and also about the type of friendship they cultivate. Every Sunday, parents must review what they have studied."⁴⁰

As the schools were opened for all, Chavara got engaged in bringing those lower casts to the light of faith. Restraints and restrictions were many, but this zealous son of the Church went ahead of the mission. The Fathers took keen interest to gather them on Sundays to care for the pastoral needs of the new Christians; their number reached 100 in 1866,⁴¹ and 250 in 1870 in different places of Kuttanad (Pulincunnu, Edathua, Changanassery, Kalloorkadu, etc.).⁴²

5.4. Printing Press: A Light to Enlighten

Chavara knew well that knowledge is the powerful weapon to fight against evil and corruption. He wished all to be learned and literate in order to withstand the enemies of the Church, and of the society. He thought that the starting of the printing press was the best and powerful means for the learning process, to bring them to the light of faith, knowledge, and truth from the darkness of ignorance, curse, false belief, etc. He wanted all, specially the children of the Church to be educated. For this, he equipped himself to be the role model for his fellow beings and followers, becoming a versatile linguist, for he mastered more than eight languages (Malayalam, Tamil, Syriac, Sanskrit, Latin, Portuguese, Italian and English). Till the printing press started functioning at Mannanam, only a very few individuals had in their possession some prayer books printed in Tamil and manuscripts in Malayalam. It was to facilitate the imparting of religious knowledge among the people and provide them with devotional literature that Chavara thought of starting a press at Mannanam.

At the time of Chavara there was no Catholic Printing Press in Kerala. The Protestants at Tharangampadi, were on a large scale printing and

³⁹ *Chronicles of Mannanam Monastery*, vol. 3, p.122.

⁴⁰ Chavara, CWC, Vol. IV: *Letters IX:10*.

⁴¹ *Alochana*, p.129.

⁴² *Alochana*, p. 269.

publishing books harmful to the Catholics, much more than those at Kottayam were doing. To respond to this urgent issue, Chavara daringly stepped out, in spite of all the struggles and hardships. The scarcity of good and devotional books was something that affected the Catholic Church very badly. He himself experienced this when he was a seminarian, due to the lack of theological books. Catholics were prohibited to use the books published by the Protestants. In order to seek a remedy Chavara got in to the revolution of letters.

Along with the social uplift of the people, Chavara being a unique pastor brought the spiritual renewal in their lives. Monthly devotions, prayers to be used during Mass, and other prayers were printed and were published. He has written in the *Chronicles of the Mannanam Monastery* in detail the hardship endured in establishing the printing press and the tiresome journey he had to tread related to it. The money gave by a benefactor of Mannanam Monastery called Mrs. Mariyathumma Kappamavumoottil, became the capital fund for the press. Imported products from Europe like the printing machine, ink and paper were not affordable for him. On one occasion he wrote, even when he reached the monastery, there was no money to pay for the labourers. With no way out, as he was praying to St Joseph and to Guardian angels, miraculously a parishioner of Cherppunkal came with 500 'chakram' as donation, then promising him another 500 more that would be sent by someone. Those words made him relaxed and he breathed a sigh of relief.⁴³ Such were the crucial financial situations that Chavara had to face at many a times, but this man of God, trusting in His providence with strong determination went ahead in spite of all the blocks and hindrances.

Recognizing the value of knowledge, the urgent need of making the members of the Church rich in knowledge which in turn, he knew, would make them rich in faith, he started printing the books and leaflets, and made them available to the people. He collected books from all possible sources, which soon evolved into a Library. Mannanam Press became a busy publishing hub of religious, social, and cultural works. Slowly this became a power house of knowledge, and of faith. Malayalam translation of the *Holy Bible*, the innumerable prayer books, monthly devotions, etc., were the products of this printing press. The first Daily newspaper of Kerala called '*Deepika*' came out from this press.

⁴³ Chavara, CWC, Vol. I: *Chronicles*, p.136.

6. Conclusion

This brilliant and multi-faceted man of God always kept burning the fire in his heart, and worked tirelessly for the mission of the Church. He accepted himself to be the son of the Mother Church, which he knew well that could never be replaced by any. So then the issues of the Mother became his, her sons and daughters were his own brothers and sisters too. His earnest love for the Church made him a staunch and brave son, which reinforced him to face the struggles and misfortunes, keeping away himself from mediocrity and lukewarmness. The world came to know him to be the personification of the values, qualities of Christ himself. He was successful in bringing out the values and teachings of Christ to the people. His efforts to foster unity in the Church proved his true and genuine spirit in fulfilling his *dharma* as the son. Chavara being the son never allowed the Mother Church to be broken or shattered, but defended her as a pillar, that supported. "God created me to do some unique and definite service. He has entrusted some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission" (John Henry Newman). These words of Newman were true in the life of Chavara.

Chavara wished always to remain as the daring son of the Church. He was quite sure of his 'dharma' as a son. He dedicated himself totally to the Church, his mother, by serving and defending her. He believed that the Church exists as a channel of salvation for her children. She stands in the world as a sign of unity. Chavara knowing well off his duty in keeping her united, in faith and in love, set out burning with fire. His sole intention was to bring about the name of Christ glorified and known. Chavara was very much conscious about the holiness of the Church. To keep up her purity and holiness he introduced renewal in her life of faith, in the sacramental life and in the celebration of the liturgy.

When Fr. Kappil made the striking and ever memorable remark in the funeral oration of St Chavara that the flag of Malayalam has fallen today, the mission of his very life was affirmed and made known to all. Becoming himself a lamp for the people of the 19th century, Chavara was flying high the ensign of the prestige and honor of the Church, raising all her children without the discrimination of caste, creed and color, to the breed of spiritual, educated and cultured society. He could re-write the destiny and fate of millions. Truly Chavara was a bright burning lamp that dispelled the darkness of all kind. For him, discipleship was a radical following of Christ, a way of resembling him to the world, mirroring the values shone in the Master. His words, actions, all his

initiatives and even his dreams resembled that of the Lord. He mirrored the One whom he followed. Thus Chavara lived in letter and spirit his life as the *Brave Son of the Mother Church, the pillar that supported her, by being the lamp and the mirror.*