

BOOK REVIEW

Josy Maria CMC, *Fostering Feminine Genius: An Empowering Theology of Women from Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 7), Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2020; Pages: lxxxii+294; ISBN: 978-81-946576-3-7; Price: Rs. 250; US\$ 25.

Christian discipleship is a collective and earnest effort to reclaim 'the original blessing' for the whole humanity in the form of the Kingdom of God. Various enlightened individual Christians as well as communities have been making persistent efforts in this regard. Although we may be forced to admit that there were a number of counterproductive events in the history of the Church, as a faith-based institution that has survived two millennia, Christian discipleship has contributed significantly towards the humanization process as well as in instilling a positive value consciousness in human minds across the globe. One of such pioneering efforts from the Indian Church is seen in the life and ministry of Kuriakose Elias Chavara of the Holy Family, the first indigenously consecrated religious person, who not only founded two indigenous religious congregations (CMC and CTC), but also spearheaded a series of programmes to uplift the ordinary and marginalized people in his capacities as the Prior of the monasteries and the Vicar General of the Marthoma Christians in the Vicariate of Varapuzha during the nineteenth century.

Along with many accomplishments of great pioneering merit, Chavara is also credited, first, with realizing and acknowledging the genius of the women faithful and, later, with developing programmes as well as the required infrastructure to support the blossoming of their feminine genius in such a way that not only the Christian community, but the entire society benefited out of their life of consecration and innovative and creative ministries. As these ground-breaking contributions of Chavara have not been systematically explored so far, it is unfortunate to state that even the Catholic Church in India does not recognize his ennobling vision and action plans that have paved the way for a positive transformation of the socio-cultural landscape of India in general, and Kerala in particular. It is against this backdrop that the present study, *Fostering Feminine Genius: An Empowering Theology of Women from Kuriakose Elias Chavara* by Josy Maria CMC, becomes very

significant and forward looking. As the author has observed, this exhaustive work convincingly reveals “how Saint Chavara valued, celebrated, and promoted the greatness of womanhood and motherhood in his life, writings, and ministry.”

Jossy Maria’s *Fostering Feminine Genius* succinctly navigates through the innovative vision of Chavara and arrives at the noble position that he was “a woman-friendly man, a Gospel-based feminist, and a liberator who empowered women through women.” As a young boy at home, or as an ordained priest who subsequently embraced religious life during his adult life, Chavara’s life was led in close spiritual proximity with women. The impact of his mother’s personality upon him was so unique that her image and impressions repeatedly occur in his writings; his unique devotion to Mother Mary could be seen as an extension of his love for his own mother, though Chavara’s Marian devotion scaled greater heights in his spiritual life and set a model for later generations. Further, his growth in spiritual life was inspired and sustained by women characters in the Bible as well as a number of Christian saints, particularly Saint Teresa of Avila, whom he addressed as ‘my mother’. Indeed, the feminine genius has a special affinity for spirituality, and Chavara spontaneously identified it among his own faithful, accompanied and animated them as a pastor, and cherished it as a seeker and as Christ’s disciple, and led others to its full blossoming as the founder, superior, and spiritual guide of religious communities.

As it is pointed out very clearly in this pioneering research study, Chavara made a consistent and deliberate use of women characters in his poetical works, chronicles, and letters also to make important theological points on the spirit of self-sacrifice of mothers and other women. It is significant to note that at no place in his writings were women depicted as inferior; instead, in Chavara’s inimitable style, he accorded women significant roles in the plots that he had constructed in his writings, especially in his plays and poems. It is important to note that he did not let any woman assume a demeaning, diminutive, or self-belittling position. As he was positively influenced by women in his own personal life, it was impossible for him to conceive that women could be treated without proper dignity. Hence, we find his actions and instructions consciously moving towards an imperative in the form of an on-going transformative process, both among women and men so that everybody would be awakened to the full humanity of women, as they were certainly created in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:28). Chavara, through his positive involvement, wanted to inculcate a new

consciousness among the people so that “without succumbing to the temptations of domination of woman on the part of man and of servitude to man on the part of woman,” a culture of mutual respect and equality could be cultivated, especially among Christians. Certainly for Chavara, his stature as an ordained priest, a consecrated religious, or a spiritual animator never meant that he could enforce and exercise his (male) authority upon the women faithful under his care, including the Sisters; instead of making them submissive to his authority, he loved and cared for them, and offered them the best of his services (and harnessed the support of as many as possible) to facilitate their humane and spiritual blossoming whether they lived in their homes, or in the convent.

In *Fostering Feminine Genius*, Jossy Maria has brilliantly pooled together Chavara’s extensive contributions for the empowerment of women in a coherent whole. She has successfully explored the theme, aiming it at the theological landscape within which Chavara’s inspiring Christian insights and practical intelligence were blended together to create a new ethos of respecting women and according them their rightful place in the Church and the society. Long years of close proximity with Chavara and his writings have enabled the author to make a beautiful but logically-laid out matrix of the viewpoints and activities of Chavara that facilitated his unique pastoral outreach especially focusing on an integral and all-inclusive blossoming of women within the portals of the Church, which, in turn, made it possible for them to claim their own merit-based space in the civil society. In fact, his staunch faith in women and their inherent capabilities came from his conviction that they share the same creative DNA, cultural patrimony, civilizational benefits, and potential for establishing the Kingdom of God, as possessed by men; in addition, he was also convinced of the power of the feminine genius that each of them is uniquely blessed with. Hence, it was natural for Chavara not to “regard women as impure or powerless. Instead, he depicted them as models of great faith and dignity and launched a civilization of equality.”

Chavara, imbued with his deep spirituality of *Appa* experience, opened up the avenues for women to stand up in the social sphere and to stamp their own unique signature in strengthening the spiritual and cultural fabric of the society. Jossy Maria captures it in substance: “According to Chavara, women are not a sub-species of men. They share a common humanity and common baptism with men, and should, therefore, share the opportunity in decision-making processes and take

up leadership roles in the institutional Church. Chavara saw and recognized women as qualified, independent, capable, and worthy persons, who should be integrated into the Church and society as equal partners, overcoming the prejudices of their traditionally assigned gender roles." Supported by various pieces of evidence, the author affirms her conviction: "When the society kept women inside their homes, Chavara encouraged them to extend their presence and services unto unfamiliar and faraway places." At least a century prior to the Vatican Council II, we find that one of its forward-looking statements had already come true in the life and ministry of Chavara: "The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling" (The Council's Message to Women on 8 December 1965: AAS 58 (1966), 13-14).

Although Jossy Maria's project involves a lot of historical research, the output made available to us in the form of *Fostering Feminine Genius* puts up a challenge to everyone, a challenge which becomes so significant in the twenty-first century, as the Church as a whole and the humanity at large seem to be still faltering in positively according women their legitimate place in the Church and the society. She agrees with Pope Francis in admitting that "the role of service of woman slides towards a role of servitude" (Falasca, "Francis and Women," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 29 December 2019, 1) and insists that such a position contradicts the Gospel paradigm. Infused with biblical wisdom and armed with the practical steps prescribed by Chavara for the empowerment of women, the author brilliantly poses the challenge that both women and men should face squarely: "... for women, it challenges them to live up to their God-given dignity and equality with men; for men, it calls upon them to take the side of the 'vulnerable human beings' in the periphery and to shed their hard-heartedness and arrogance in the treatment of women. For Chavara, taking the side of God meant simply taking the side of the defenceless human beings, to empower them, and bring them to the mainstream of the society."

The ecclesial communion faces serious hurdles in the chauvinistic attitude traditionally adopted by our male-dominated society, in which the Church finds herself existing and operating. Chavara, modelling himself along the attitude of Jesus Christ himself (John Paul II, *Mulieris*

dignitatem, 25), made room for women within the ministry of the Church, offered them opportunities to reclaim their God-given dignity and autonomy, worked on a strategy to heal the wounds that humanity has bequeathed from the time of 'original sin' (that which distorted the equilibrium of human community and the whole creation), and instilled in everyone the hope that the 'original blessing' can be redeemed provided those who have been subjugated could be brought back to their original status of equity by walking the 'Kingdom way'.

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