

BOOK REVIEW

Sophy Rose CMC, *A Pillar and Guiding Light: Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a Theologian of the Church* (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara 4), Kochi, Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2020; pages xlv + 162; ISBN: 978-81-944061-2-9; Price: Rs. 160; US\$ 15.

Although Saint Chavara had made unparalleled contributions in shaping up a theology existentially suitable to the Saint Thomas Christians through his relentless and overarching efforts to animate and strengthen the community of faithful, it is regrettable that no significant effort has been made so far to unravel his theological contributions, though there were innumerable attempts from various corners to bring out a number of popular publications highlighting his spiritual as well as socio-cultural and administrative contributions. Despite the great appreciation for the socially and administratively significant contributions made by Saint Chavara, it seems that no one took the trouble so far to study his writings to unearth his theology. Many trained Catholic theologians, whose teachings and writings are solely inspired by the methodology of western theologians, have never taken it upon themselves to study this key figure in the ecclesial spectrum of a vibrant Indian Church; even many others who take the native thinkers seriously seem to have bypassed Saint Chavara's contributions probably because he hailed from the southern-most state of India and belonged to the Syro-Malabar Church; the fact that most of his writings are in Malayalam also might have been a roadblock for some in exploring his pioneering efforts at theologizing for a native Christian community in India.

It is strange and unfortunate that although he had treaded a path unparalleled in many respects, even after his canonization on 23 November 2014, neither the ecclesiastical authorities nor members of the three congregations he had founded (namely, CMI for men and CMC and CTC for women) took the trouble to bring out his indigenous and pioneering contributions towards theologizing among the Saint Thomas Christians. It is in this context that *A Pillar and Guiding Light*, a well-organized scientific study by Sophy Rose, a member of the Congregation of Mother of Carmel which was founded by Saint Chavara himself, clearly delineating the unique as well as pioneering theological contributions of Chavara, gains its prominence both on the ecclesial horizons and within

the academia. The objective of this work, as the author puts it clearly in the introduction, is “to bring out and systematize his theological vision and insights in a systematic manner by making use of certain theological models and disciplines.”

A Pillar and Guiding Light, a well-argued out survey on the theological contributions of Saint Chavara, has successfully brought to the public light those significant theological insights offered by Saint Chavara during his lifetime, though they went undetected due to the fact that they were spread across the width and breath of his manifold writings. With a masterstroke, Sophy Rose has managed to pool and string them together to present a convincing argument that Saint Chavara was indeed a theologian of great merit, who could be placed alongside the great Fathers of the Church as far as the Saint Thomas Christians are concerned. After an extensive and focused analysis of the contributions of Saint Chavara, Sophy Rose takes a definitive position that “his writings contain the doctrines and dogmas of the Church in a vivid manner.” His uniqueness, according to Sophy, is that, in Saint Chavara, we find an integral synthesis of the teachings of the Fathers of the Church in the early centuries and the Second Vatican Council of the twentieth century.

True to his aspiration to be an agent of Christian synthesis, seen throughout his life, Saint Chavara’s theological contributions also bridged Catholic teachings from different epochs. Highlighting some of his key theological contributions, especially in the light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which came almost a century after his death, the author insightfully makes the following list about his achievements: “... he imbibed the centrality of liturgy for the renewal of the Church from within, the first and foremost duty of the pastors to preach the Word of God, the urgency of providing formation to the family, necessity of giving solid formation to the seminarians, the necessity of fostering religious life for the missionary endeavour of the Church, the need of giving catholic education to the children, offering all possible care to the poor and the needy, etc.” From an enlightened ecclesial administrative point of view, Saint Chavara is acclaimed to have “ascertained the need of protecting and promoting the apostolic heritage of the Church, acknowledged and asserted the apostolic succession and the ecclesiastical jurisdiction, demanded the shepherding of bishop for each Rite from their own Rite, defended the unity of the Church, promoted the communion with the Holy See, encouraged unity with diversity in the Church, and upheld the equality of churches.” In the light of the above, Sophy Rose minces no words to affirm that he was indeed “a man with divine wisdom and

pastoral prudence,” qualities that are essential to constitute a genuinely Christian theology.

In *A Pillar and Guiding Light: Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a Theologian of the Church*, we have a mystic theologian, a pastoral theologian, and an ecclesial theologian merging together perfectly in the person and writings of Saint Chavara. Although his writings may not be classified as theological treatises in modern theological parlance, the rich theological content that we come across in them is so compelling to confirm that Saint Chavara was indeed a theologian of great merit. This is more appealing when we also realize that he had no precursors in theologizing in his own land or in his own Syro-Malabar Church: practically, he had to start from the scratches, based on the limited access he had to some rudimentary sources; this, however, made his theological contributions more existential, which had great practical import for the whole Church of Saint Thomas Christians, especially when her faithful had no sound but native ecclesial leadership to animate them in their life of faith. In this regard, it is also clear that the theological acumen of Saint Chavara was instrumental in transforming the life of the Saint Thomas Christians and in guiding them to affirm that theirs is an apostolic church that should be accorded its legitimate administrative autonomy to see its full-flowering in Christian faith and charity. Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a pioneering theologian of the Saint Thomas Christians, an ecclesial theologian of great merit, indeed continues to be a trailblazer, a ‘pillar’ and a ‘guiding light’ in effectively navigating the Church of Saint Thomas Christians towards her providential destiny.

As this pioneering study on the theological contributions of Saint Chavara is brought to the public by the Chavara Central Secretariat (Kochi), which is a joint effort of the CMI and CMC religious congregations, as the fourth volume in a series of publications under the banner of Theological Studies on Saint Chavara, it is reasonable to hope that, on the one hand further researches will be undertaken by others interested in Indian theology, and to apply the theological insights of Saint Chavara in contemporary theological discourses, on the other.

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