

THE *CHAVARUL* OF CHAVARA A Prophetic Voice for Christian Family

Cinderella Sequeira

Abstract: *Chavarul* is a prophetic voice for Christian family in the modern world. He stands as an outstanding apostle to a land plagued with various evils to which he brought the message of faith and social order. He believed that family was the source of all morality and spirituality and his own spirituality was rooted in his experience of the Holy Family at home. The need of the hour is to resort to the plan of God for families because a family is a community of a few people joined together in blood relation and bound together by a bond of love, which makes it the fertile ground for individuals to realize their full potential for the glory of God and the good of the neighbours. *Chavarul* instructs the families on devotion to the Lord, unity in the family and peace with neighbours, which include formation of faith, conscience, intellect and discipline.

Keywords: Chavara, caste system, slavery, illiteracy, female degradation, spirituality, Holy Family, formation, faith, conscience, *Chavarul*, discipline, parents, abortion, Trinity, heaven, salvation, peace, order, mission, worship, hospitality, justice, spiritual instructions, devotion, modesty, chastity, social instructions, psychological instructions, litigations, wealth, material instructions, personal property, apostolate, faith, confession, conscience, truth, justice, vanity, intellectual formation, Christian morality.

1. Introduction

On the occasion of the release of a commemorative postal stamp in honour of Kuriakose Elias Chavara by R. Venkataraman, the then President of India, P. Ramachandran, the then Governor of Kerala, observed: "If the test of true faith is the extent to which it transforms the individual and the social order, we must say that Father Chavara

and the generations of the dedicated band of missionaries he animated have stood this test with eminent success.”¹

Today, Father K. E. Chavara stands as an outstanding apostle of Jesus in India, which has embraced Christianity and heard the radical message of Christ. To a land plagued with the caste system, slavery, illiteracy, female degradation, Chavara brought the message of true faith and social order.

2. Chavara, a Prophetic Voice

“Realizing that his life was getting shorter, Chavara prepared an instruction manual for families in 1868, in the form of an epistle to the families of his own parish, as a ‘Testament of an Ideal Parent.’”² Chavara believed that family was the source of all morality and spirituality and was personally devoted to the Holy Family. “From the childhood experience in his own home and from his impeccable devotion towards the Holy Family he visualized the family as an image of heaven, an abode of affection, peace, charity and order on earth.”³

Chavara’s spirituality was rooted in his experience of the Holy Family within his home. Today, the sanctity of the family has become a thing of the past. Pope John Paul II, in the apostolic exhortation *On the Role of the Family in the Modern World (Familiaris Consortio)*, observes:

At a moment of history in which the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it, and aware that the well-being of society and her own good are intimately tied to the good of the family, the Church perceives in a more urgent and compelling way her mission of proclaiming to all people the plan of God for marriage and the family, ensuring their full vitality and human and Christian development, and thus contributing to the renewal of society and of the People of God.⁴

¹P. Ramachandran, “Blessed Chavara: A Man of Deep Vision,” *Herald of the East* 1, 2 (October 1991), 45-46, 45.

²Panthaplackal, “The Ecclesial Dimension,” 10 [online], 2014. See, http://www.chavarasecretariat.info/image.php?id=4&action=view&table=articles_photo&id_name=id; access 24/07/2016.

³Panthaplackal, “The Ecclesial Dimension,” 9 [online].

⁴Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, # 20: *Apostolic Exhortation*, 1981. See, also http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html; access 24/07/2016.

The Church recognizes the fact that the very foundation of Christian ethics is being endangered in toppling the Christian family. The wreckage of the traditional family which consisted of both the parents and children is now radicalized and re-defined to include single-parent family, gay/lesbian family, divorced and separated families, families that abandon aged parents, families that resort to abortion, honour killing and dowry that destroy the sanctity of the concept of family and family life.

2.1. The Church and the Testament

The need of the hour is to resort to 'the plan of God' for a family. The plan of God for a family is completely actualized in the birth of an individual into a family. This divine ordination leads us to participate in our Christian vocation of being in love with our family. The plan of God for a family therefore, as explained by Father Chavara, is "to be bound in love"⁵ in order to realize their full vitality. The plan of God for a Christian family is to love, live and walk in the light of Christ. In this way a Christian is oriented to become Christ in the world. According to Pope John Paul II, a family directs a society to the extent that the family environment is a fertile ground for individuals to nurture their creative energies and realize their full potential for the glorification of God and the good of their neighbours.

The Church therefore, immerses herself into the prophetic process of *aggiornamento*, the updating of the Church, which was initiated way back in time by Chavara who with insight and foresight defined an ideal family in his work *A Testament of a Good Father*. The work "is a well-meditated practical theology on family with spiritual, moral, psychological and sociological characteristics, very valid even for today."⁶ Chavara describes the essence of the family in the following words:

A family is a community of a few people joined together in blood relation and bound together by a bond of love, where the members exhibit mutual respect and practice obedience to parents and walk in peace before the Lord and the people, and each one, according to his proper state of life seeks to attain eternal salvation and lives peacefully.⁷

⁵Chavara, *A Testament of a Good Father*, 102.

⁶Panthaplackal, "The Ecclesial Dimension," 10 [online].

⁷Chavara, *A Testament of a Good Father*, 102.

Recognizing the divinely ordained nature of the family, Chavara explains the “blood relation” as its life-giving element. It involves not merely living together under the same roof, rather bringing down the walls of inflexibilities between family members and establishing the bond of love. He clearly states that the concept of family involves “mutual respect and practice of obedience to parents” and that these define a family. The Church realizes the present society’s orientation of believing that it is almost impossible to live with a single individual for one’s entire life. In the world today, the lack of model families has made a Holy Family almost incomprehensible. Respect is a favour and obedience is an obstacle for many in the new generation. In the face of such bleak observations, one must be directed by Chavara towards the cause of these challenging demands, i.e., “to walk in peace before the Lord and the people.”

Peace as the family environment is unique to Chavara’s concept of family. Peace today, is often a monomania. People seek peace for its own sake. Chavara exhorts us to be in the peace of the Lord. The need is to seek peace within the family and not outside it. Each individual needs to seek one’s own peace in relationship with God and with the members of one’s family. That peace would lead one to eternal peace and eternal salvation. As John Paul II explains, “every family is called by the God of peace to have the joyous and renewing experience of “reconciliation,” that is, communion re-established, unity restored.”⁸

2.2. Christian Family as God’s Family

Chavara’s definition of family leads us to the ultimate plan of God, i.e., eternal peace. A beautiful way of looking at Chavara’s perspective on family is participation of human families in the family of God, which is the Trinity bound together in love in heaven.⁹ And as in the Trinity of persons, they (the members of the family) fulfil their mission by living together and respecting each other and ensuring their salvation. It is in this sense that a Christian family is an image of heaven, which is the family of God on earth.¹⁰ Making each family as God’s family on earth is the task of the Church, which invites us to renew our commitment to Christian faith. This dream of the Church was Chavara’s foundational teaching. The Christian family as an image of heaven is a call to each family to attain the Lord’s peace which makes a community peaceful.

⁸Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, §20.

⁹Panthaplackal, “The Ecclesial Dimension,” 10.

¹⁰Panthaplackal, “The Ecclesial Dimension,” 10.

When a society finds peace, then a nation is at peace and so is the world.

It would be a limitation on Chavara's definition of family to circumscribe it to the circle of a biological family. He points to the vocation of a Christian family to care for those who are not born into a family. A family is not limited to one's blood relations but extended to those bound together in the Lord sharing the same image and likeness of God. As a society, we need to follow Chavara's definition of a family, i.e., living in mutual respect and practicing obedience to the law for the sake of peace and order in society. In *A Testament of a Good Father*, Chavara points to the role of a family for a Christian way of life and chalks out necessary guidelines relevant for daily living in order to establish peace and order.

3. Understanding the Testament

The Testament covers all aspects of family life from birth to death. Chavara also warns about the possible dangers when affection, peace, justice, charity and order are not maintained in the family.¹¹ It would not be an exaggeration to say that the following excerpt from The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 19) is in fact a summary of Chavara's *A Testament of a Good Father*:

The mission of being the primary vital cell of society has been given to the family by God himself. The mission will be accomplished if the family, by mutual affection of its members and by family prayer, presents itself as domestic sanctuary of the Church; if the whole family takes part in the Church's liturgical worship; if, finally, it offers active hospitality, and practices justice and other good works for the benefit of all its brothers suffering from want.¹²

3.1. Instructions to the Families

The Testament of Chavara, which contains the rules set by him, can be divided into two sections. The first section consists of twenty four guidelines for an ideal family life and the second section consists of

¹¹Panthaplackal, "The Ecclesial Dimension," 10.

¹²Pope John Paul II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, §11. See English translation "The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People" in Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, trans. J. Rodgers and ed. A. Flannery, 676-714. Mumbai: St. Pauls, 1975.

sixteen rules on parent-child relationship.¹³ The twenty-four guidelines in the first set of rules can be divided into the following four important groups based on the subject matter that is being dealt with:

3.1.1. Spiritual Instructions: Devotion to the Lord

- To observe Sunday as the Lord's day.
- The greatest good, piety and fear of God.
- Practice modesty and chastity.
- The days of your life that do not see some noble action done, may be counted as deleted from your life.
- In all suffering surrender yourself completely to God.
- Promote the reading of spiritual and philosophical books.
- Be regular in the observance of time allotted for family prayer and do not compromise with your spiritual duties.

3.1.2. Social Instructions: Unity in the Family and Peace with Neighbours

- Be charitable, forgiving and self-sacrificing.
- Love the God-fearing.

3.1.3. Psychological Instructions: Conscious Distancing from Evil

- Avoid court litigations.
- Avoid borrowing money except in dire circumstances.
- Hypocrisy of display of wealth.
- Do not befriend others for the sake of their riches; rather seek genuine friendship.
- Do not seek to interfere in concerns of other people.
- Avoid gossip.
- Profligacy and stinginess are evil.
- Do not wish to make many friends. Out of the thousands choose just one.

3.1.4. Material Instructions: Management of Personal Property

- Do not spend for festivities beyond one's capacity.

¹³“The Family Vision of Bl. Chavara” [online], 2014. See also <http://www.darsanawardha.org/Site%20Full/Useful%20Materials/Articles/On%20family%20vision%20of%20chavara.pdf>; access 24/07/2016.

- Endeavour to repair old things rather than buy new ones. A home is rich not because of its numerous possessions, but in the excellence of the few things owned.
- Do manual work as far as is permitted by your social status and do not be idle. Idleness leads to the habit of drinking.
- Engage in trade with great care and justice and do not seek to amass wealth through unjust means.
- Do not house stolen property and do not seek riches through evil means.
- Do not withhold just wages and do not insult the poor.
- One's employees should be few in number and God-fearing.

These four aspects unite the dimensions of human personality. Chavara had a comprehensive understanding of human life. He was able to envision an ideal family and through these means explore various strategies to attain God's plan of eternal peace. He delineates the duties of parents in the upbringing of their children. It is important to take note of the fact that the duties listed by Chavara is in fact an elaboration of the duties of families as stated in The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) which is as follows:

To give clear proof in their own lives of the indissolubility and the holiness of the marriage bond; to assert with vigour the right and duty of parents and guardians to give their children a Christian upbringing; to defend the dignity and legitimate autonomy of the family; this has always been the duty of married persons; today, however it has become the most important aspect of their apostolate.

3.2. Instructions on Ideal Upbringing of Children

The sixteen rules stated by Chavara for the ideal upbringing of children can be understood by dividing them into the following four groups:

3.2.1. Planting the Seeds of Faith

- Teach children to devoutly recite the name of Jesus as soon as they begin to talk.
- Teach children to pray, worship God and venerate the sacred images.
- At the age of eight they should be taught all about confession and parents should facilitate their first confession.

- They should be taught especially to be devout to our Mother (Blessed Virgin Mary).

3.2.2. Formation of Conscience

- If parents do not love and respect each other, the children cannot be expected to love and respect them.
- Do not teach the children to tell lies and to use cunning means under the excuse that this is the way of the world.
- Induce children to love truth and justice.
- Do not promote vanity.
- Give importance to good character and conduct.

3.2.3. Intellectual Formation

- As soon as the children come of age of reason they must be sent to school.
- When children are old enough they should be permitted to follow their own vocation according to their interests.

3.2.4. Discipline of Children

- Children should always be clothed.
- Children should not sleep in the same room with their parents and boys and girls should sleep in separate rooms.
- Children should play within the sight of their parents and should not be left alone even with relatives.
- Parents should be neither too lax nor scrupulous in disciplining children.
- Let sons live in separate establishments to avoid quarrels.

4. Conclusion

The unique contribution of Chavara to harness the faith of the Christian faithful of his time is remarkable. With Christ as the foundation of Christian morality, Chavara endeavoured to create a society in which each individual is trained to listen to the voice of God and obey it. His teachings help us to lead a life free from the plague of subjectivism and relativism and not to make compromises on Christian faith.