

SAINT CHAVARA IN THE ROLE OF SUPERIOR

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Abstract: This article presents Saint Chavara in the role of an exemplary superior. Chavara was almost all his life in the role of a superior. After the death of the *Malpāns* he became the undisputed leader of the monastery project and he spontaneously took charge as their superior and led the community to their profession of religious vows in 1855. As a humble and selfless man filled with the Holy Spirit, his credibility was his credential; hence, he was respected even by his opponents foreign and native alike. His prudence, practical wisdom, love of the Church, independent thinking, broadminded and farsighted nature, and accountability were outstanding. Since he had his clear positions but imposed them on no one, he is considered to be a role model. However, in his own eyes, Chavara was full of failures. He practised the advice of the Lord: "When you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are just unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Lk 17:10).

Keywords: Superior, seminarian, community, Palackal, priest, Mannanam, Kaniyanthara, monastery, vows, prior, congregation, profession, obedience, Carmelite, clergy, jurisdiction, credibility, testimony, Manjummel, Church, Roccas, Rite, parish, schism, consecration, bishop, patriarch, Chaldeans, obedience, Abdisho, Plasanal, Kurillos, Denha, Propaganda, Koonammavu, Syrian, convent, religious, discipline, hierarchy, provincial, Church, Carmelites, Eliswa, Leopold, Syriac, prudence, wisdom, Elthuruth, founder, providence, solitude, malaria, bishops, missionaries, Jacobites, confraternity, retreat, disciplinarian, transparency, accountability, documentation, chronicle, obedience, constitutions.

1. Life-Long Superior

As a matter of fact St Kuriakose Elias Chavara was almost all his life in the role of a superior. Even as a seminarian he was the leader of the student community and a trusted assistant to *Malpān* Thomas Palackal in running the seminary. As soon as the construction work of the monastery in Mannanam started in 1831 the young priest Chavara, as

directed by Palackal, took up its supervision. The senior priest Thomas Porukara who too was a resident in Mannanam was most of the time going about for collecting funds and matters related to government offices. Therefore, for all practical purposes Chavara, assisted by Brother Jacob Kaniyanthara, was in charge of the affairs in Mannanam. This situation continued even after the formation of the community with all the regular religious practices and ministries. After the death of *Malpāns* Palackal and Porukara in 1841 and 1846 respectively, nobody had any doubt regarding who was the next leader of the monastery project. As a natural course of events without any formality all recognized Chavara as their superior and he, too, spontaneously took charge as their superior.¹

Chavara then guided and led the community to the supreme moment of their profession of religious vows in 1855. With that he was canonically acknowledged as the prior of Mannanam Monastery, and later, when more monasteries were established, as the common prior

¹Guide to the Footnotes in this article: (1) *Ālocana*: (Record of the local synaxis of Mannanam Monastery). (2) AMSJ: Archives of the Monastery of St Joseph, Mannanam. (3) Beccaro 2003: *A Short Biography of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara* by Fr Leopold Beccaro OCD. (4) Bernard 1989: *Malayālattile Ka. Ni. Mū. Sa. Sabhayuṭe Caritra-saṃkṣepam* (A Short History of TOCD in Kerala) by Fr Bernard TOCD. (5) CKC: *The Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent* (2002). (6) CSK: *Cāvara-accante-saṃpūrṇa-kṛtikal*, 4 vols. (7) CWC: *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, 4 vols. (8) Kanyianthara: "History of the Foundation of Mannanam Monastery" by Jacob Kaniyanthara (Malayalam MS in AMSJ). (9) KMN: *Koonammavu Maṭham Nālāgamam* (1866-1870) (*The Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent*): 2009. (10) Kochumuttom 2014: *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara* by Fr Thomas Kochumuttom CMI. (11) Louis (Aloysius) 1923: "A Short History of the Last Years (1869-'71) of the First Prior Very Rev Fr Kuriakose Elias Chavara," (Malayalam MS) kept in the archives of CMI Generalate, Chavara Hills, Kakkannad. (12) Mundadan 1995: *The Syro-Malabar Church: an Over View* by Mathias Mundadan CMI. (13) Mundadan 2008: *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara* by Mathias Mundadan CMI, (14) NKM: *Nālāgamankal Koonammavu Maṭham* (1870-1909) II (*Chronicles of Koonammavu Convent [1870-1909]*) II: 2008. (15) Parappuram: *Diary [Nālāgamam] of Fr Varkey Parappuram CMI*, (Malayalam MS in ASJM). (16) *Positio*: "Positio super Introductione Cause et super Virtutibus ex Officio Concinnata," Vatican: 1977. (17) SP: *Sthāpaka Pitāḱkanmār* (*Founding Fathers*), Mannanam: 1995. (18) Valerian 1939: *Malankara Sabhā Mātāvinte Oru Vira Santānam athavā Vandya Divyā Śrī Cāvara Kuriakos Eliās Accan CMI* (Very Rev. Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara), by Fr Valerian Plathottam CMI: 1939. (19) Valerian 1953: *The Servant of God Cyriac Elias Chavara* by Valerian Plathottam CMI: 1953.

(*potu-śreṣṭhan*, which means the same as prior general) of all monasteries. People then onwards fondly called him *valia-prioraccan* (great prior).

However, when in 1860 the general council of the Order of Carmelites Discalced (OCD) with the connivance of the Vicar Apostolic Archbishop Bernardine Baccinelli highhandedly affiliated the new congregation as one of their third order institutes (TOCD) Chavara legally lost his position as the common prior. But, nobody, not even the vicar apostolic and missionaries, stopped addressing and respecting him by that title. On his part, too, he continued and went on doing his duties as the common prior. In other words, the legal loss of title did not affect his role as the common prior of the congregation. Till death he was the beloved *valia-prioraccan* for the entire people of Malabar and the undisputed common prior for formal matters.

It is interesting that Chavara was never given a letter of appointment as the superior of the congregation. It was rather always taken for granted that he was so. Even on the occasion of the profession of vows the vicar apostolic did not issue an order stating that Chavara was appointed prior. Instead we read that 'after his profession all others pronounced their vows before him [Chavara] whom the archbishop, who was the highest superior, had appointed their prior. After 4 pm they assembled in the sacristy when the prior made the solemn profession of faith.'² If at all the appointment was rather implicitly made by the prelate by the wording of the introductory sentence of the rules he had given the community: "We [Frere] Bernardine Baccinelli, by the grace of God, to the beloved sons Kuiakose Elias and other brethren under obedience to him in the monastery at Mannanam, greetings in the Lord Jesus and blessings of the Holy Spirit..." This is how Patriarch Albert, too, did in early 13th century. He recognized St Brocard to be the prior of the first Carmelite Community not by a patent letter but by the way he introduced the *First Rules*: "Albert,... to B[rocard] and other hermits under obedience to him, who live near the spring on Mt Carmel."³

There are, however, two instances of Chavara receiving patent letters of appointment to responsible positions in the Church. One was his appointment in 1844 by Vicar Apostolic Xavier Pescetto as "master [*mestre* in Portuguese, *malpān* in Syriac] of ecclesiastical sciences and

²CWC I (1990): 67-68; CSK I (1981): 78.

³Mundadan 2008: 149.

examiner of clergy of the Syrian Rite of our vicariate apostolic.”⁴ The second letter dated 8 June 1861 by Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli was to “nominate you [Chavara] vicar general so that you may administer, as regards the spiritual matters, the priests and laity of the Syro-Malabar Church under our jurisdiction...”⁵ In these two capacities Chavara was an ideal superior in the Syro-Malabar Church.

2. Credibility as Credential

The Jews questioned Jesus’ authority: “Where have you got this authority from?” (Mk 11:28). Jesus’ answer in effect was that he had it from his oneness with the Father. His authority was his authenticity based on his rootedness in his Father. This was the case with Chavara as well. His authority was his authenticity as a committed religious priest, always seeking God’s will and the good of the fellow humans. What qualified Chavara for the various posts of superior was not so much the academic qualifications or patent letters as his credibility. All his contemporaries are unanimous in this regard. We may recall the testimonies of some of them.⁶

A senior priest Fr Jacob Palakunnel says: “The Prior Chavara looked like an angel.” The same priest further says that to find the prior one had to “look either in front of the Bl. Sacrament in the church, or in the cemetery!” In the context of a quarrel between two rival groups in the parish of Anackal, the parish chiefs approached the ailing prior in Koonammavu and said: “It is enough that you just come, and peace shall be restored!” He went with them and peace was restored!

Mani Kurian, a very elderly parishioner of Muttuchira, says: “I have seen Fr Prior... He was indeed a man filled with the Holy Spirit!” Bp Mathew Athanasius, the founder of the Reformed Mar Thoma Church, was an intimate friend of St Chavara. His words have become proverbial: “In this country who else than Fr Prior is likely to go to heaven? Holding on to his leather belt I, too, shall endeavour to reach there!”

Fr Louis (Aloysius) of the monastery of Manjummel says: “Fr Prior was my spiritual director for several years. Among the virtues that were conspicuous in him were: insistence on the observance of the

⁴Its original in Portuguese, dated 16 November 1844 in preserved AMSJ. Fr Porukara also was appointed *malpān* on the same date.

⁵Its original in Malayalam is preserved in AMSJ.

⁶For most of them, see Valerian 1939: 229-243.

rules of the congregation, constant union with God, and commitment to the religious vows and so on. The whole one hour of evening meditation he would be on his knees shedding tears... He was very concerned about the priests' behaviour, dress etc. The priests in turn respected him as a god. When he arrives in Mannanam seminary the scholastics [out of respect] would invariably keep quiet! The Syrian priests not only respected him as a god but also paid him as much homage as they would to the archbishop."

Fr Leopold in his short biography of St Chavara writes: "Fr Prior fulfilled his priestly and religious duties more by his good conduct and virtuous practices than his words and deeds. All are impressed by his deep humility, unparalleled charity and spirit of submission to authority. Therefore, they not only respect and love him, but also unquestioningly trust his words. Among his virtues the most notable ones are the devotion to and the love for the Mother Church and Holy Father."

A Hindu judge having dismissed a case against Chavara as a fraud, and after a personal conversation with him remarked: "Fr Prior indeed is a man of God. Those who complain against so great a man should be grossly wicked and deserves God's anger!"

The intruder Bp Thomas Roccas arrived in Kochi on 9 May 1861. Many laity and clergy went to meet him and some even joined him. Chavara thought that with the vicar apostolic's permission he should visit him personally and check his credentials and then give the people authentic information and correct instructions. Before doing so, however, he had to preach an already arranged retreat to the priests of the vicariate. In the course of preaching Chavara clearly explained the issue of Roccas so that the participants might do the retreat quietly. But they continued to be agitated, and used to assemble and discuss the matter during the intervals. So going out of his way the prior boldly declared that "he was ready to swear with his hand on the crucifix on the altar that this bishop had come without any order from the Pope, and that anyone who submitted to him would fall under the excommunication announced by the archbishop." This convinced most of the listeners because *they knew that he would not assert it so strongly unless he was sure of it.*⁷

As Roccas landed in Kochi, the Syrians, mostly misguided by some of their own leaders and out of their enthusiasm for getting a bishop of their own Rite, welcomed him. They refused to believe the vicar

⁷CWC I: 162-63; CSK I: 193.

apostolic when he said that Bishop Roccas had come without the Pope's permission. Instead, they blindly mistook the intruder for their lawful hierarch and declared allegiance to him. Very soon the Syrian parishes one after another went to his side. Out of the total 154 parishes 86 fully and 30 partially followed him! The vicar apostolic and the missionaries could only remain helplessly watching the situation going out of hand and leading to a disastrous schism. *The only solution they could think of was to appoint a Syrian Rite priest as the vicar general whom the Syrian community would trust and respect. Chavara was the person that they found able to meet the need of the hour.* Archbishop Baccinelli immediately made him the vicar general for the Syrians in his vicariate.⁸ Within nine months, in early March 1862, the prior assisted by his community in a truly Christian manner sent back Bp Roccas to his patriarch, and persuaded most of the strayed parishes to return home. "Holy Father Pope Pius IX, gloriously reigning, on hearing about the stability of Chavara's faith and about his zeal for saving the Christians from schism, wrote to him a letter of high praise and satisfaction."⁹

The same vicar apostolic recommended the consecration of Chavara as co-adjutor bishop. In his letter dated 15 June 1861, informing the Propaganda Congregation of the prior's appointment as vicar general, he wrote:

In these difficult and critical times, with the consent of my councillors, I have constituted as my vicar general the senior-most among the Tertiaries, the Prior of the principal monastery, and the head of the entire congregation, a man truly Christian, virtuous, most prudent, well-versed in Sacred Scripture, expert in Syriac language, who in the present circumstances has proved by facts most attached to the Catholic religion, and to the Holy See. Though the rebel group and the intruder bishop attempted by several ways to win over Fr Chavara to their side, even by offering him episcopacy, he did not succumb to any such temptations. Had he accepted their offer, no doubt, the whole Church would have followed him, because he enjoyed among all the people great esteem, respect and authority. Now I have an idea and I request Your Eminence to give serious consideration to it. In case the dignity of vicar general alone will not be enough to keep away the

⁸The original of the patent letter in Malayalam is kept in ASJM, and its Latin version is given in *Positio*: 216f.

⁹ Beccaro 2003: 11.

people from the intruder and from the Chaldean patriarch, will it not be better to consecrate the said prior as coadjutor bishop for the Syrians?¹⁰

The archbishop then reassures that with the support of the vicar apostolic and missionaries, Chavara will produce much more fruits than the Chaldeans because he is a good, prudent, and obedient person and a captivating preacher. He further says that having made a simple vow of humility Chavara would not accept the position unless commanded under obedience, as it was the case when he was appointed as vicar general.

When Roccas was sent back, the rebel leader Fr Antony Thondanat defiantly went to Babylon and got consecrated as Mar Abdisho by the Nestorian Patriarch Simon Ruben. But when he returned to Kerala nobody cared for him. Calling himself as "Archbishop of Malankara," for some time he stayed in Plasanal monastery, which was by then an abandoned building. With the little help from the Jacobite Bishop Kurillos and his people he just survived. In 1864 he was down with fever that was spreading there. One of his sisters, poor as she was, took care of him in her house. He was almost cured. Now what to do? He felt desperate! Fr Paulose Parampil advised him to get reconciled with the archbishop. But he was afraid to approach the latter. As a way out, Fr Paulose asked him to write to the prior who would certainly help him. Indeed, their trust in Chavara's mediation was not in vain. Thondanat wrote to him, and he responded sympathetically and eventually put things right.

3. Respected by Opponents

It is worth noting that Chavara's credibility was such that even the rebels counted much on his support. A little before the Roccas episode another Chaldean priest called Denha Bar Jona had without his patriarch's permission come to Kerala to collect funds. He pretended to be a bishop, and gathered some followers. He promised them that, if all the churches would sign a petition, he would take it to Rome and have their request for a Syrian bishop granted by the Pope. But they realized that for the success of the scheme, the support of Chavara and his community was necessary. Denha wrote to Mannanam that at least the prior Chavara should come and meet him. But Chavara and his community ignored it and did not deem it necessary to reply. But Denha and his group continued their efforts to influence the prior and

¹⁰Quoted in Mundadan 2008: 229.

community. Finally Denha personally paid a visit to Mannanam where the prior and community received him well and treated courteously. As it was too late to send him away they accommodated him overnight. But the prior refused to oblige him with his and his community's support for his wicked plan. He also denied him permission to offer Mass in the monastery chapel as he did not have the local ordinary's patent letter!

Roccas and his followers too were eager to secure Chavara's cooperation. Even before Roccas arrived in Kerala they wrote a letter to the prior offering him episcopacy. It was taken to him by Deacon Mekkattil. Having gone through it the prior said: "My child, I would rather save my soul than be made a bishop!" When Roccas arrived in Kochi Chavara was not among the people who had enthusiastically gathered to receive him, which worried Roccas and the entire rebel group. In a few days' time the rebel leader Fr Antony Thondanat sent a letter to the prior expressing concern about his and his community's indifference to Roccas, and pleading for cooperation. Still later *Malpān* Aipe with three others came to meet the prior in Mannanam and made a vain effort to win him to the Roccasian side.

4. Humble, Selfless Servant

It is obvious that Chavara never aspired to be a superior, but was ever content to be a humble servant of God and his people. It was his spirit of obedience and submission to God's wills that motivated him to accept higher positions. In order to make Chavara accept the appointment as vicar general Archbishop Baccinelli had to command him under obedience. The same archbishop, therefore, warns the Propaganda congregation that the prior, if considered for episcopacy, will not accept it unless commanded under obedience.

While recording his achievements, Chavara takes care to attribute them to God, and then to keep his co-workers in the limelight and himself almost in oblivion. This is clear in the case of the foundation of the convent in Koonammavu. Obviously the convent was the realization of the inspiration that Chavara had shared with Frs Palackal and Porukara. Regretting that the centuries old Syrian Community in Malabar did not yet have consecrated men and women, they wanted to found a religious congregation, first for men and then for women. Thus the women's congregation was part of the original inspiration, and Chavara assisted by Fr Leopold Beccaro realized it with the establishment of the first convent in 1866-1867. The prior then recorded that it was a blessing that the Almighty God showered on

them¹¹ in response to his prayers for a long time,¹² making him more indebted to the same God.¹³

Thus, for Chavara the convent was God's work. However, God did not do it himself directly but through his human agents. Among them Chavara, who had inherited the original inspiration, is certainly the most important one. Fr Leopold then coming to know about the inspiration wholeheartedly approved it and played an important role in its execution.¹⁴ Chavara, however, gives the credit to Leopold to whom he just plays the second fiddle:

Having lost the hope of starting a convent [in Puthanpally] we plunged into the same sad state of helplessness. Then the missionary, our present provincial delegate, Very Rev. Fr Leopold Maria of St Joseph, by his work and assistance brought this convent into existence. When we look back we can rightly think that God sent him here solely for the purpose of putting up these monasteries and convents...¹⁵

Again, while inaugurating the new convent building in 1867, the prior wrote: "Thus by the honesty and sagacity of Fr Delegate everything was completed."¹⁶ Thus it has been characteristic of the humble and selfless Chavara to underline others' role in his undertakings while making little mention of his own contributions. In the last analysis he would always say that all his achievements were nothing but the realization of God's will through him. In his good old age he made a self-evaluation:

Are all these things that God made me do within my power? How have you arrived so far? Who made you leave your family? How come you were ordained a priest? How did you join the monastery? Where did the religious congregation come from? Who appointed you as prior? How have you reached here? Are you worthy of anything of these? Not, certainly not! So what? God's will is done. It will always be done!¹⁷

¹¹CWC I (1990): 115; CSK I (1981): 138.

¹²CWC I (1990): 104; CSK I (1981): 126.

¹³CWC I (1990): 117; CSK I (1981): 139.

¹⁴See Kochumuttom 2014: 333-334.

¹⁵CWC I (1990): 194; CSK I (1981): 232; CKC: 22; KMN: 2.

¹⁶CWC I (1990): 116; CSK I (1981): 138.

¹⁷*Colloquies* in CWC III (1990): 1 and CSK III (1981): 1.

5. Role Model

Perhaps the most important factor that made Chavara an ideal superior was that he was a role model for his subjects. Jesus while instructing the disciples would frequently point to himself as the model: "Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Mt 11:29); "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet..." (Jn 13:14-15); "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (Jn 13:34). For the religious under Chavara, too, it was enough to look at him to learn how they should live and behave. In religious discipline including the practice of evangelical counsels, community life, prayer and meditation, and apostolic and priestly ministries their prior Chavara was a perfect model. Fr Louis, who was under Chavara's spiritual direction for many years, says:

He [Chavara] was very keen on observing the spirit of obedience, love of God and devotion to the rules of the congregation. He spent the whole time of meditation in the evenings on his knees, in tears and overpowered by emotions. He had to be reminded by others that the allotted time was over. Other priests held him in high esteem even as a superman; "the prior general appears as an angel," they used to say.¹⁸

From the very beginning till the very end Fr Chavara subjected himself to the Order with the interest and enthusiasm of a novice. He regarded the Order in such esteem as though it was his own mother. It was to him the paradise on earth, and he encouraged his disciples to hold it in similar high esteem. He would never willingly absolve any one including himself of the responsibility of conforming to the Order. Travel, old age, weakness and even infirmity hardly succeeded in making him relax much. He would relax when absolutely necessary, but only after taking permission from the spiritual director. He was ever anxious to have his meals with the community, frugal and austere as they were. Even while sick and laid up, he tried to manage with just the common meals.¹⁹

In superior-subject relationship the focal point generally is obedience. Chavara's understanding of it is radical, which he has clearly stated in his testament:

¹⁸Quoted by Fr Valerian 1953: 38.

¹⁹Quoted by Fr Valerian 1953: 51.

The only mark of a religious is total surrender of one's will and obedience as if one does not have one's own eyes and ears. One who practises it is a true religious. This is not a difficult task. Still we must admit that we have not yet practised it to perfection, and make a strenuous effort in this regard.²⁰

Whom should they obey? Chavara's unequivocal answer is that they should obey the ecclesiastical and religious superiors, as well as one another. Those days the former included the vicar apostolic who was on the one hand the representative of the Supreme Pontiff and on the other the provincial superior. The religious were to obey also the missionary appointed as the vicar apostolic's delegate and known as the provincial delegate. They owed obedience to other missionaries as well, because they were sent by the Holy See and as such were called missionaries apostolic. The subordinate superiors like the common prior and his vicars also were to be obeyed, and finally the members were to practise obedience to one another. In today's context it would mean that the religious should obey:

- a) the hierarchy (including the local ordinary and the parish priest), and the major superiors in the congregation,
- b) the local superiors, and
- c) one another.

Chavara, then, concludes: "He who practises obedience in all these three levels will enjoy heavenly peace already while in the monastery which is a miniature heaven. This is certain!"²¹

In this presentation, Chavara is obviously advocating *total surrender of one's will and obedience as if one does not have one's own eyes and ears*. The present-day readers may not find it quite palatable, for in practice it is a plea for what we traditionally called *blind obedience* that is no more appreciated but considered outdated. But Chavara would still say it holds good for all times! He would challenge us, invoking a life-time experience of his own. It is on the basis of his own practice of obedience, that just five months before his death he noted it down as his parting message. He wants his followers to obey as he did!

6. He Obeyed, God Exalted

'Christ Jesus obeyed unto death... Therefore, God highly exalted him so that every knee bowed before him' (Phil 2:8-9). This is the secret of

²⁰CWC IV (1990): 70; CSK IV (1986): 99-100.

²¹CWC IV (1990): 71; CSK IV (1986): 100.

Chavara's success in the role of superior: he was obedient unto death, therefore, being exalted as superior he succeeded in commanding everybody's obedience. We may recall some instances of Chavara's obedience.

In Chavara's own words, "from his early age he was resolved to live in accordance with the mind of his *malpān* Thomas Palackal."²² Immediately after his ordination and first Mass, *surrendering his interest* to go about doing pastoral ministries like retreat preaching, he obeyed his *malpān* Palackal's instruction to go to Mannanam. He writes: "Never again did I ever aimlessly roam about. Then onwards I was determined to be subject in all matters to the *malpān's* mind and views. He directed me to go and stay in Mannanam to look after the construction of monastery."²³ A little later the vicar apostolic Francis Xavier very unexpectedly appointed him as parish priest in Pallipuram, although his presence in Mannanam was badly required for the supervision of the work. There was reason to suspect that the archbishop's move was to stop the work. The senior priests instructed Chavara: 'You may represent the matter before His Grace and make a request not to insist on the transfer order; if he accepts it, well and good; otherwise unconditionally obey the order!' So Chavara went to the archbishop and humbly explained the situation. His Grace sternly said that the order should be obeyed. Chavara at once went and took charge as vicar of Pallipuram Parish.²⁴ There was still worse to come. Soon afterwards the archbishop appointed Fr Porukara as the vicar of some parishes like Kayamkulam and Pallithope in the diocese of Kollam. On receipt of the order he rushed to the *malpān*. After discussing the matter in detail Porukara concluded that the archbishop's order, even if it is issued to test their spirit of obedience, should be considered God's will, and, therefore, be obeyed forthwith without complaint. The *malpān* agreed, and Porukara left for Kollam in tears!²⁵

Pleased with the Fathers' spirit and practice of obedience the vicar apostolic before long permitted them to go back to Mannanam. Indeed, their obedience was tested and proved as that of Abraham in the Old Testament, and they 'learned obedience through suffering' as Jesus did (Heb 5:8). But it was only the beginning of their life of

²²CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 25.

²³CWC I (1990): 22; CSK I (1981): 25.

²⁴CWC I (1990): 24; CSK I (1981): 28-29.

²⁵CWC I (1990): 24-25; CSK I (1981): 29.

obedience. Gradually a very well organized community took shape with a good number of members who were prayerful, zealous and disciplined, committed to the pastoral ministries and other apostolic activities. All including the vicars apostolic, priests and the laity were happy about them, and highly appreciated their presence and service. Even the society at large admired their way of life and ideals. In short there was all that was required for consecrated life in the tradition of the Church.

But the most crucial factor, namely, the canonical approval was indefinitely delayed. The Fathers made repeated requests for it to the vicars apostolic that came and went one after another: Maurilius Stabilini, Francis Xavier, Ludovic Martini, and Bernardine Baccinelli. They all were happy with the community. But they would not readily give the canonical approval, probably because they were prejudiced against the Syrian Rite people's rootedness in matters related to faith and morals. It could certainly hurt the feelings of the community, and they could rightly feel that their basic rights as equal members of the Church were denied. But trusting in God's providence and in a spirit of obedience to and respect for the ecclesiastical authorities they patiently waited for God's time to come for their rights to be granted and dreams to be realized. It must be underlined that during this long period of uncertainty and a considerable amount of strain and stress they never refused to cooperate with and obey the hierarchy. There was never indeed even a trace of defiance of or protest against the authority. In the meantime two of the elders, Frs Palackal and Porukara, died, the former in 1841 and the latter in 1846, without seeing the fruition of their hard work just as Moses and Aaron were not permitted to enter the Promised Land!²⁶

Finally, it was in 1855, after almost a quarter of a century long waiting on the part of the Fathers, that Archbishop Baccinelli granted them permission to make the profession of religious vows. But subsequently many things occurred that tested further and proved beyond doubt the Fathers' spirit of faith in God's providence and submission to the authority. For example the archbishop imposed on them the rule of the contemplative Order of the Carmelites Discalced (OCD). He rejected the Fathers' request to adjust the rule to *their Syrian traditions, the local conditions and needs, and the original spirit and charism of the new congregation that combined the contemplative and apostolic dimensions of religious life*. This was again a denial of their basic rights

²⁶SP: 26-27.

and disregard of their ecclesial identity. But they under the guidance of St Chavara tolerated, forgave and generously cooperated. Eleven out of the twenty-two candidates fearing that they might not be able to stand the demands of the unduly strict rule at the last minute decided against making the profession. Chavara informed the archbishop of this unfortunate development, but his response was disgustingly cold: "Only those of good will and determination need to be admitted. Don't worry about the dropouts. I shall pray for the remaining few!" Fr Chavara gracefully bore the pain of the loss of so many members and the lack of understanding on the part of the ordinary!²⁷

Still later the OCD Superior General, most probably with the connivance of Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli, highhandedly affiliated the new congregation as their Third Order. Thereby the congregation lost its identity as an autonomous indigenous institute, and Fr Chavara stopped being its prior general, to say the least! It was clearly an unjust interference of the missionaries and a questionable appropriation of what did not belong to them. There must have been many of the members of the congregation who rightly objected to the entire episode. But Chavara, trusting that in the course of time God will put things right, kept his calm and cool, and pacified the disturbed members. He was tolerant, forgiving, obedient and generous!²⁸

7. Clear Positions but No Imposition²⁹

For Chavara even old age was not an excuse from obeying. Instead, his spirit of obedience was still more conspicuous and graceful in his advanced age. In his old age the way he accepted the archbishop's order of transfer from Mannanam to Koonammavu is an example. Ever since his ordination in 1829 he was in Mannanam for 35 years, deeply involved in and personally contributing to all the wonderful developments that took place there in the meantime. He had indeed become part of the landscape there. Remaining there in his good old age he could relish recalling with a sense of satisfaction the many past experiences of agonies and ecstasies. It would be quite understandable if he, therefore, wished to spend there the rest of his life, and finally be buried in that sacred soil! But no such natural aspirations would occur

²⁷Bernard 1989: 41-42; Valerian 1939: 104.

²⁸Kochumuttom 2014: 159-165.

²⁹This section and the section no. 10 below have been verbatim reproduced from my forthcoming book *Spirituality of Saint Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Bangalore: 2017): 204-208 and 199-201 respectively.

to the *karma-yogi* in Chavara. His ideal was selfless service (*niṣkāma-karma*) of God and people, which in the words of his *Guru* Jesus Christ means: "So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Lk 17:10). This is testified by the most edifying manner in which Chavara accepted the transfer to Koonammavu. We have it recorded by his successor in Mannanam Fr Kuriakose Porukara:

Mannanam is the place where Fr Prior lived from his younger age. There he worked hard to put up the monastery and then as the superior took good care of the community for all these years. In the meantime he also accomplished many good things there for the people. However, in 1864 most willingly obeying the order of the local ordinary he left Mannanam and went to stay in Koonammavu.³⁰

In Chavara's own words, "Under the order of Very Reverend Archbishop and in obedience to his mind at present I am staying in Koonammavu."³¹ The prelate must have been well-intentioned in ordering this transfer. He probably thought it would be helpful if Chavara, who was not only the common prior of the new congregation but also his vicar general (for the Syrians), stayed closer to the archbishop's house in Varapuzha. For the prior, however, it could not have been a pleasant experience except in the light of faith!

There is still another incident. February 13, 1866 was fixed for the inauguration of the first community of Sisters in Koonammavu. As directed by Chavara a widow called Eliswa (later her name was changed as Clara), aged 37, from the parish of Vaikom with all the necessary preparations and accompanied by her uncle arrived on 11 February to join them. But Fr Leopold said that he would not accept her without first interviewing and personally getting to know her. Thus being asked to wait, she and her uncle stayed in a house outside. The young priest Leopold certainly could have trusted the experience of the prior and respected his judgement. But he would not! "This caused much sorrow and disturbance. Yet they stayed and waited holding firmly on to obedience,"³² writes Chavara. It was obviously a humiliating experience for him; but he accepted it without any complaint and in a spirit of dignified obedience. The day after the

³⁰SP: 29.

³¹CWC IV (1990): 55; CSK IV (1986): 83. This is the opening statement of a letter that the prior wrote on 13 December 1864.

³²CWC I (1990): 107; CSK I (1981): 237; CKC: 26-27.

inauguration of the convent Fr Leopold called the lady to the confessional, interviewed and heard her confession, and then admitted her to the community.

In late December 1869 or early 1870, Chavara developed eye complaint and other complications. Physicians like Varkey and Eapen Muttathupadath tried their best to heal him, but they could not. The Fathers in Mannanam then suggested that he be shifted to Mannanam in view of cooler weather and Physician Eapen's easier accessibility. Vicar General Fr Philip and acting Provincial Delegate Fr Gerard in Koonammavu also consented.³³ The prior got ready to go to Mannanam and, God willing, to die there at the feet of his dearest patron St Joseph.³⁴ Then one of those days while visiting the Sisters in the convent he disclosed the plan to go to Mannanam. Sad at the thought of missing him they requested him not to go. His characteristic answer was:

Have I my own will? I desire neither to go there, nor to stay here. I am ready to do as I am told. I don't wish to do my will. I am ready to do whatever I am commanded to do.³⁵

As the prior returned to the monastery Fr Gerard inquired how he felt about going to Mannanam. His response again was:

Father, is my will different from yours? I am prepared to do whatever you wish me to do. I've no will of mine own to go there or not!³⁶

However, a little later, may be on second thoughts, he said to the Fathers that 'as he had come to Koonammavu at the command of the archbishop, it would not be proper that he returns to Mannanam when His Grace and the Provincial Delegate Fr Leopold were away in Rome, and that his conscience does not permit him to do so.'³⁷ Dr Guenther from Ernakulam had already warned them that Fr Prior's death would be at any unexpected moment. Further, they felt that at Mannanam the atmosphere would not be as healthy as that at Koonammavu, and that the European doctors or even good native physicians might not be

³³Louis (or Aloysius) 1823: 5-6.

³⁴He has expressed this desire in a letter he wrote to Fr Kuriakose Porukara. See fn 8 in Mundadan 2008: 384; *Positio*: 345.

³⁵NKM: 11; CKC: 203-204.

³⁶NKM: 12; CKC: 204.

³⁷Louis (Aloysius) 1823: 6.

readily available. Anyway in the end the Fathers gave up the plan to take him to Mannanam, and the Saint gladly accepted their decision.³⁸

On 2 January 1871 as desired by the prior they were getting ready to administer him the anointing of the sick. The Fathers asked him: "Whom do you like to administer the last sacraments?" There are different versions of his response.³⁹ Basically he was open as to who administers them and in which Rite. If at all his personal choice seems to have been between his spiritual director and vicar provincial Fr Leopold⁴⁰ and the vicar of Koonammavu Monastery Fr Joseph John of the Cross. The latter had the advantage of the knowledge of Syriac.⁴¹ Finally the prior said:

As you all will. If it is in my own [liturgical] language [i.e., Syriac], then I too can join in giving responses to the prayers. But I shall be quite satisfied with whatever you decide.⁴²

How amazing indeed was his spirit of resignation even in such innocent and Ritual matters! Fr Leopold was so overcome with sorrow that he could not even stand on his legs.⁴³ Therefore, Fr Gerard started administering the sacraments while Fr Joseph John conducted their main part in Syriac.⁴⁴

Nearer the end of his life, saying to Fr Gerard that he then had much peace and joy, a little scrupulously he added, "Father, I did not go to Mass last Sunday." Fr Gerard consoled him saying that it was not by his own will but in obedience to the superior's command that he had not gone to Mass, and that as such it should not worry him. That instantly settled his doubt, and he responded, "Yes, it is true. It is in obedience that I did not go to Mass. That is enough for me." Since then he was ever calm and serene. Noting down this incident the chronicler of the convent shares her reflections:

Ah! My dear Sisters, we have just now heard how our Father Prior was perfectly obedient during his lifetime, and that its thought brought him great peace and joy at the time of his death. If we

³⁸Mundadan 2008: 384; NKM: 12; *Positio*: 459.

³⁹For details see Mundadan 2008: 391-392.

⁴⁰Referring to the chronicle of St Philomena's Monastery, Koonammavu, *Positio*: 459 (see Mundadan 2008:391); also NKM: 18; CKC: 209.

⁴¹Moolayil in *Positio*: 548 (see Mundadan 2008: 391).

⁴²NKM: 18; CKC: 209.

⁴³Referring to the chronicle of St Philomena's Monastery, Koonammavu, *Positio*: 459 (see Mundadan 2008: 391).

⁴⁴NKM: 18 along with Mundadan 2008: 392; CKC: 209.

desire to experience such peace and joy at the time of our death, let us now try to be persons of blind obedience.⁴⁵

8. Prudence and Practical Wisdom

Chavara was a superior with *prudence and practical wisdom*. As Frs Palackal and Porukara died, "our young Fr Kuriakose [Chavara] who was among the pioneers in the new enterprise [of founding the religious congregation] was left alone. Fr Kuriakose, however, made up for his lack of age with prudence and exemplary conduct,"⁴⁶ says Fr Leopold. For example: i) In the events leading to the first group of members' profession of vows in 1855, for Chavara it was a matter extraordinary prudence to mediate between his community and the vicar apostolic regarding the nature of their constitutions. Again, when in 1860 the congregation was highhandedly affiliated as Third Order of Carmelites Discalced, it must have been his prudent leadership and words of practical wisdom that kept the community united and pacified. ii) When the Chaldean priest Denha under the guise of a bishop came to Mannanam seeking support of the prior and community, they on the one hand welcomed and treated him with courtesy, but, on the other, clearly refused him support for his dishonest plans and permission to say Mass in the monastery chapel. iii) When the intruder Bishop Roccas arrived in Kerala, Chavara, in order to give the people correct information and guidance, wanted to go to meet him personally. But he would not do so without first getting the vicar apostolic's permission. iv) Later on, when a meeting with Bishop Roccas was being arranged, the prior informed him that he preferred to meet him within closed doors, because he would not be kissing his ring which was a symbol of authority he had illegally gained. Kissing it would mean that he was party to his wrongdoings which would scandalize his people. Therefore, as an act of humility he would rather kiss his hand or foot, but not ever the ring. All the same, the prior did not want to humiliate him by refusing in public to kiss his ring! v) It was Chavara's prudent and pastorally concerned dealings that within just nine months persuaded Roccas to leave the country, and his supporters to give up the agitation. vi) Vicar Apostolic Baccinelli in his letter to Propaganda, dated 15 June 1861, with the information about Chavara's appointment as vicar general, qualifies him as "a man truly Christian, virtuous, most prudent..." vii)

⁴⁵For this quotation and the whole incident see NKM: 20; CKC: 210.

⁴⁶Beccaro 2003: 8-9.

The prudent superior in Chavara in his testament advises his followers: "Particular care should be taken not to interfere in the affairs of the convent and boarding house unless you are officially assigned to the work."⁴⁷

The prior personally was not in favour of admitting to the congregation candidates from the Latin Rite and Southist⁴⁸ communities, not because of any uncharitable feelings but for fear of the possible disturbances arising from their different perceptions and practices. However, he left the matter to the decision of the superiors and remained fully resigned to God's will. In 1864 at the instance of the archbishop two Latin Rite candidates were received and accommodated in Elthuruth monastery. In that context Chavara wrote:

I feel it is not advisable to admit candidates from the Latin Rite and Southist faithful. In saying so I am afraid of being uncharitable. But my intention is merely to avoid the possible disturbances in the community arising from their different way of doing things. I do not at all mean to deny them the benefit of being with us. Anyway, I leave the matter to the superiors; let them decide it according to their discretion and as God inspires them. It is our duty always to submit ourselves to the will of our superiors. They will guide everything for our good.⁴⁹

As he says elsewhere,⁵⁰ he was convinced that the cause of the centuries old restlessness and dissatisfaction among the Syrians was that they did not have bishops and pastors of their own Rite and language. The missionary bishops and priests who were looking after them did not know the local language and do the liturgical ceremonies in the people's Syrian Rite. This caused lack of mutual understanding and trust between the pastors and faithful, resulting in disunion, schismatic movements and weakening of faith. The prior did not want such a situation to arise in his congregation. Hence as a matter of

⁴⁷CWC IV (1990): 73; CSK IV (1986): 102.

⁴⁸Southists or *Knanites* are an endogamous community among the St Thomas Christians. They claim to be the descendants of the East-Syrian (Chaldean) Christians who migrated from Persia (the present Iran and Iraq) along with Knai Thomman (Thomas of Cana) in 345AD. In contrast, the descendants of the original community of St Thomas Christians are called Northists. Pope Pius X in 1911 erected the vicariate (the present diocese) of Kottayam for the Southists. Mundadan 1995: 31-32.

⁴⁹CWC IV (1990): 56; CSK IV (1986): 84.

⁵⁰CWC IV (1990): 57-59; CSK IV (1986): 85-87. See also the section below entitled "Independent Thinking."

practical wisdom he was apprehensive of admitting candidates from other communities.

9. The Love of the Church and Cooperation with the Hierarchy

The prior in all his undertakings was motivated by the *love of the Church and cooperation with the hierarchy*.

During his time he carried out a number of projects under the orders of the bishop. Never did he hold himself back from any work, nor fight shy of any difficulty, as he was always prompted by two motives: obedience to the bishop and salvation of souls... Those who came to know him were convinced of his... unqualified obedience and submissiveness to the ordinary... Among his virtues the most outstanding one was his ardent faith in and devotion to the holy Catholic Church and the Holy Father...⁵¹

Even in starting the religious congregations the founders' primary objective was to make available for the members of their Syro-Malabar Church the blessing of consecrated life, which till then they were denied. They hoped that with the establishment of a religious congregation they would be able to do the many good things that were otherwise left undone. They also welcomed the then vicar apostolic bishop Maurilius Stabilini's advice that their religious life should be such that from it not only a few of them but the entire Church and society should benefit.

The founding fathers always acted in subordination and submission to the vicar apostolic and his delegate. Obedience to the ecclesiastical superiors that Chavara emphasises in his testament was a praiseworthy practice right from the beginning of the congregation. They clearly understood and acknowledged that the religious are not outside or above the Church. They are very much part of the Church and subject to the hierarchy through whom her divine authority is exercised. There may be differences of opinions between the religious and the hierarchy, and the members of the hierarchy may have human frailties, make mistakes and adopt unacceptable policies. But that is no reason for the religious not to obey and cooperate with them. As prophets in the New Testament the religious through sharing of ideas, positive suggestions and creative criticism, and in a spirit of faith in God's providence should tolerate and assist them. This was Chavara's and other founders' way of dealing with the hierarchy. In all matters they would consult the authorities, make their positions clear, share

⁵¹Beccaro 2003: 12-13.

their feelings, and clearly express their opinions, but always accept the superiors' decisions; they would then keep their cool, leaving the rest of the matter to God's providence. Their approach was reconciliatory, and never confrontational. If ever they had any complaint or difference of opinion, they would take it directly to the vicar apostolic or his delegate, explain their views, and would in all submission ask for changes, and then accept their final decision. We have already mentioned many such instances. We may presently mention a few more of them.

As Frs Palackal and Porukara approached the bishop for permission "to live somewhere in solitude" he suggested that instead of totally withdrawing from the society "you may establish a monastery so that all may benefit from it." Although the idea was acceptable, they expressed their helplessness that they did not have the means for it. However, they readily obeyed the bishop's instruction to go to the people and seek their contributions, and proceeded.⁵² When they had to make a choice between the two sites – Pullarikunnu and Mannanam – for the monastery they sought the bishop's advice.⁵³ Once the government permission for building the monastery on mount Mannanam was obtained, the bishop directed the Fathers immediately to erect there a wooden cross in the presence of the public in order to avoid any further dispute. They obeyed without delay.⁵⁴ While the construction work was going on, the Fathers desired to put up a temporary tent on the site in which they could say Mass and stay, and thus save themselves the trouble of daily going up and down the mountain. But the bishop refused permission saying that it would not be proper to say Mass in a make-shift tent, and asked them immediately to construct a well-built chapel. They did so.⁵⁵

The monastery in Plasanal started by the rebel Fr Antony Kudakkachira was eventually abandoned by his followers. Then in 1858 Vicar Apostolic Bernardine asked Chavara to go to Plasanal with two or three members and take over the house as a monastery of the congregation. But the prior first personally went and made a study of its condition. He found the place to be malaria-infected and the building not fit for living. The prelate was not happy when he came to know that Chavara, instead of immediately starting the community,

⁵²Kaniyanthara: 6-7.

⁵³CWC I (1990): 13; CSK I (1981): 17.

⁵⁴CWC I (1990): 19; CSK I (1981): 23.

⁵⁵CWC I (1990): 17-18; CSK I (1981): 21-22.

first went to inspect the place. He, therefore, sent a stricter order that the community be immediately started. The prior then personally went to the archbishop in Varapuzha and explained the situation in detail. Still the latter insisted on taking over the place. Chavara obeyed, and sent a few members to Plasanal to form the first community. Within two years the superior Mathew Kalapurackal died of malaria on 22 June 1860. The vicar apostolic then permitted the winding up of the house.⁵⁶

Similarly, in 1857, Fr Prior readily obliged when Vicar Apostolic Bernardine asked him to accept as a house of the congregation St Philomena's Monastery at Koonammavu, which was originally meant for a Latin Rite religious community.⁵⁷

Once the missionary Fr Marceline, who perhaps was the provincial delegate then, got the wrong impression that there was some indiscipline in Mannanam. He, therefore, called the prior to Koonammavu and scolded him. The latter, however, calmly explained the truth and pacified the missionary.⁵⁸

Once being invited the prior went to Lalam to preach a sermon on the occasion of the parish feast. On arriving there he learned that the vicar apostolic had stayed the celebration of feast until the parish settled certain pending money matters. Chavara refused to preach and left the place. Only later when the parish complied or agreed to comply with the prelate's order Chavara participated in the celebrations.⁵⁹

10. Independent Thinking

The Fathers thus were obedient servants of the Church. But it is already pretty clear that in all matters they had independent thinking and stand which they would appropriately and in a spirit of charity make known to the right persons and at the right time. It was evident with regard to the policy matters and administrative set-up in the Church. Regarding the people's cry for Syrian bishops of their own, the Fathers would always caution them not to be carried away by passions and emotions, but to be reasonable. They should avoid

⁵⁶CWC I (1990): 74-76, 78-79; CSK I (1981): 86-88, 91-92.

⁵⁷CWC I (1990): 73; CSK I (1981): 84-85.

⁵⁸Parappuram: 241-247.

⁵⁹Mundadan 2008: 155, referring to CSK IV (1982): 44f. See also Fr Thomas Panthaplackal CMI and Sr Jossy CMC (Eds), *Cāvara-accanṭe Kattukal [Letters of Fr Chavara]*, (Kakkanad, Kochi: 2011), 79-80.

excessive dependence on the Chaldeans. Fr Palackal's wise advice to his disciples was: "Do not use opium, do not consume toddy, and do not bring Syrian bishops!"⁶⁰ According to him Paremakkal's *Varttamāna-pustakam* is too emotionally charged a work that its indiscriminate and unguided reading can destructively arouse your passions and make you blind regarding the right course of action. "It is, therefore, not to be read but burned!"⁶¹ he said.

True to the teaching of his *malpān*, Chavara wrote that the obsession for Syrian bishops had led his people in Kerala to break away from the communion of the Holy Church and endangered their salvation.⁶² Their liking for these bishops is understandable because they share with them the same Ritual practices and liturgical language while they do not experience such an affinity with the European missionaries. But they fail to see that the Syrians are weak in faith, greedy for money, and practise simony.⁶³ European missionaries on the contrary have the power of endurance, generosity, devotion, readiness to work for the glory of God and other virtues. But of course they are handicapped in matters of language and Ritual practices which alienates them from the people and stands in the way of unity. The sad thing is that most of them never care to learn the local language and do the liturgical ministry in the Syrian Rite!⁶⁴

According to Chavara, the only remedy was that the European missionaries learn the local language or at least the Syriac language and adopt the Syro-Malabar Rite for the liturgical services. They would then have a combination of learning, spirituality as well as familiarity with the local or/and Syriac language and Syrian Rite. The next bishops and their vicars in the parishes should be from such missionaries. This would also facilitate the reunion of the Jacobites who often complain that the Syrian Catholics do not have bishops of their own Rite.⁶⁵

The prior later on thought out a still more lasting solution that he hoped would not only prevent future dissensions but also hasten the

⁶⁰This is the testimony of one of Palackal's disciples and a close relative Fr Geevarghese Konnankara as recorded in Parappuram: 704f.

⁶¹CWC I (1990): 149; CSK I (1981): 176.

⁶²CWC I (1990): 146; CSK I (1981): 173.

⁶³CWC IV (1990): 57; CSK IV (1986): 85.

⁶⁴CWC IV (1990): 57-59; CSK IV (1986): 85-87.

⁶⁵For these thoughts of Chavara, including the two quotations above, see CWC IV: 57-59 and CSK IV (1986): 85-87.

reunion of Jacobites. In a letter to Barnabo, Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, he warns that the “calm” that followed the Roccas episode might not last for long as any little provocation would again prompt his people to resort to Babel to get a bishop of their own Rite. To avoid it he suggested that there be two bishops here: one for the Latin community and another for the Syrian one. Then the Syrians’ longing to have a bishop of their own will cease, and gradually their relationship with Babylon, too, will end. This would encourage the Jacobites to renounce the schism and return to the unity of the Catholic fold.⁶⁶ It is believed that this letter influenced the Sacred Congregation later on to appoint native bishops for the Syrians.

11. Concerned and Paternal

Chavara was a *concerned and paternal superior*. In a letter to Kuriakose Porukara, the then vicar of Mannanam Monastery,⁶⁷ he says that the superior of the community is called to be a partner with God in tending His sheep, and that as such he should love the sheep and be concerned about their wellbeing.⁶⁸

Chavara was himself a very concerned, understanding and paternal superior, loved and respected by all. Fr Scaria Kalathil’s uncle priest while on his deathbed wanted to see him. Fr Leopold’s opinion was that Fr Scaria should not make a visit to his dying uncle. Fr Prior, however, felt the other way round. It was the time when all the superiors were having a gathering at Koonammavu. Fr Leopold suggested that they might take a decision by secret vote. Accordingly they met and were about to cast votes. Then Fr Leopold held a black (negative) pellet between his fingers and raised it for all to see. Fr Prior then held between his fingers a white (positive) pellet and showed it up. The superiors were in a predicament! They pleaded that the two major superiors – Leopold and Chavara – take an appropriate decision in the matter. But Fr Leopold was insistent on voting. Reluctantly all obliged. Alas! When the ballot box was opened, all pellets except one were white! Fr Leopold’s displeasure reflected on his face.⁶⁹

Chavara was full of respect and consideration for the opinions and suggestions of all the members of his community, and even obeyed

⁶⁶CWC IV (1990): 14; CSK IV (1986): 35.

⁶⁷Valerian (1939): 373-374.

⁶⁸For the relevant part of this letter see below section 17 entitled “Chavara’s Portrait of an Ideal Superior.”

⁶⁹Parappuram: 1430-1432.

them, practising what he preached: 'obey one another.' At the initiative of Fr Porukara the seminarians in Mannanam were divided into two groups: candidates for religious priesthood and others for diocesan priesthood. While the former were accommodated upstairs, the latter were left downstairs as before. Some of the diocesan candidates under the leadership of Antony Kudakkachira resented and going to Pallipuram complained to *Malpān* Palackal that being kept downstairs they felt humiliated and discriminated against! A little later Chavara also happened to meet Palackal, and during the conversion he got the impression that the *malpān* was not quite happy about the new arrangement in the seminary. Therefore, making up his mind to restore the original system he returned to Mannanam. Fr Porukara had gone on a long journey. Chavara was then prudent and humble enough to discuss the matter with Fr Geevarghese Thoppil and Br Jacob Kaniyanthara. They expressed concern and advised him: 'The new set-up is Fr Porukara's innovation, and to change it without consulting him would rightly offend him. You must, therefore, wait till he returns.' They were words of wisdom which Fr Chavara readily accepted. Quite characteristically he blamed himself: "Fool that I was! Only when they said it, reason dawned on me."⁷⁰ Indeed, he respected and obeyed everybody: the superior Palackal, senior priest Porukara, younger members Thoppil and Kaniyanthara, and even the trainees!

Once a candidate, as it was discerned that he did not have vocation, was sent back home. His parents naturally were annoyed and felt offended. Coming to know of it the prior personally went to meet them and explained the matter. Realizing the truth they were consoled and pacified.⁷¹

Chavara's long letter, known as *The Testament of a Loving Father*, to the Kainakari parishioners is famous. Given below are few relevant clauses:

A day that you pass without doing some good work for others will not be counted in your book of life. Desire that others should love you rather than fear. Do not allow beggars to leave your house empty-handed. Whenever possible make sure that you give as much as you can by way of charity.⁷²

Never fail to pay just wages to the labourers or delay their payment, because that is an offence crying to God for justice. Do not

⁷⁰CWC I: 31; CSK I: 36-37. For details see Kochumuttom 2014: 97-100.

⁷¹Quoted from *Ālocana*: 91 by Valerian 1939: 290.

⁷²CWC IV (1990): 108; CSK IV (1986): 139.

insult the poor or harass them, because God, if he sees them weeping, will surely wreak vengeance on you.⁷³

These are the rules of life that the prior himself followed. It is said that there was hardly any poor person who had not received one or another help from him. It was his instruction that every monastery within its means should help the poor around it. Once while visiting the Mannanam community he directed them to purchase and distribute clothe worth 1000 *cakrams* to the poor women and children in the locality. Writing to his rich friends he used get donations in order to help the poor, and the rich would as well readily oblige him with generous contributions.⁷⁴ His initiatives to open catechetical and other regular schools for poor children are well known. In them he also provided the students with *kaññi* (rice gruel) for lunch, and dress. He also used to distribute Marian rosaries and scapulars among them. The regular source of funds for them was the system of *piṭiyari*.⁷⁵ For more money he would contact the parishes and other benefactors.⁷⁶

We have already mentioned how before taking over the Plasanal Monastery the prior out of his concern for the health and wellbeing of its would be inhabitants personally went and studied the situation there. Once when he received a special kind of deliciously sweet mangoes, he sent them to the monasteries with the instruction that their seedlings be planted in every monastery compound. This variety of mangoes eventually came to be called *pioru-mānga* (prior-mango).⁷⁷ Another time he sent to the Sisters some mangoes of two different varieties that he had received from Parayi Tharakan, and some small chillies from a plant that he had grown.⁷⁸ He thoughtfully used to send to them other things like spiritual books, some of which he himself had copied for them; it is interesting that once he sent to them some tobacco powder in a bottle which was perhaps meant especially for the

⁷³CWC IV (1990): 109; CSK IV (1986): 140.

⁷⁴Referring to *Ālocana* : 44, Valerian 1939: 288.

⁷⁵*Piṭiyari* means 'a handful of rice.' Each family every time they take rice to cook a meal, put away a handful of it as a means of raising funds for a special purpose.

⁷⁶Quoting Parappuram, Valerian 1939: 288-89.

⁷⁷CWC IV (1990): 45; CSK IV (1986): 72-73: The prior adds a spiritual thought here: "These trees besides yielding sweet fruits will live longer than I. Hence they remind us of human weakness and unsteadiness. Therefore, let us name them *Dukrān* [a Syriac word meaning 'memorial']".

⁷⁸CWC IV (1990): 84; CSK IV (1986): 113-114.

use of the mother superior.⁷⁹ He was generous in appreciating the good examples and achievements of the members. For example, he praises the good works of Fr Jacob Valiyara,⁸⁰ and the virtuous life and acceptance of sufferings of Fr Thomas Nellissery.⁸¹

Chavara's compassionate heart comes out in his care and concern for the poor, sick, suffering and dying. His letter to the Kainakari parishioners, dated 15 October 1869, asking them to start a Confraternity of Happy Death and a House of Charity to take care of the destitute, aged and the street beggars, speak volumes about his compassionate love.⁸² In it he cites the example of saints and others including his confrere Fr Valiyara. The latter, the prior says, previously was not leading an edifying life for which he had corrected him several times. Then there was in Mannanam Monastery a domestic helper called Geevarghese from Koyilmukku who was suffering from very loathsome piles. Valiyara rendered him heroic service and saw him dying a happy death. This led to a spiritual change in him. He became a good retreat preacher, and never again he needed any correction! "See how pleasing to God is caring for the sick," the prior concludes.⁸³

In his letter dated 2 September 1870 to the vicar of Mannanam Monastery Fr Kuriakose Eliseus the prior writes:

I feel concerned about a monastery in which no one is sick. St Teresa of Avila believed that God showers more blessings on monasteries in which there are always some sick members. Thomman [*perhaps a servant appointed to look after the sick and the aged*] says that you do not show enough interest in caring for the *vallyaccan* [elderly priest], and that you do not provide him with enough bread and milk. Is it not the reason why he is so weak? Don't you feel sorry about it? Let me know.⁸⁴

As a pastor the prior was a good shepherd after the model of Jesus Christ who laid down his life for the sheep.

One day when Fr Kuriakose [Chavara] was getting ready to visit a parishioner, severely affected by small pox, the people tried to dissuade him for fear of contagion. But he said: "This is my duty,

⁷⁹CWC IV (1990): 73-74; CSK IV (1986): 105-106.

⁸⁰CWC I (1990): 68-69; CSK I (1081): 78-79.

⁸¹CWC I (1990): 71-72; CSK I (1081): 82-84.

⁸²CWC IV (1990): 117-127; CSK IV (1986): 150-161.

⁸³CWC IV (1990): 125-126; CSK IV (1986): 158.

⁸⁴CWC IV (1990): 46; CSK IV (1986): 74.

and God will be at my side,” and boldly went to the sick man’s house. Not only did he administer the sacrament to the sick man, but also, with appropriate counsels, helped him to die a peaceful death.⁸⁵

To the offenders he was like the father of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32). We have already mentioned how in his desperate condition the rebel Fr Antony Thondanat took refuge in Fr Prior.⁸⁶ As soon as he received Thondanat’s letter showing signs of repentance and pleading for reconciliation, Chavara, with the archbishop’s permission, arranged for a meeting with him in a church in Fort Kochi. On the appointed day the prior reached there at 11 am and patiently waited till 5 pm when the man arrived rather stealthily! The prior went forward and bade him peace! Sitting on the veranda of the church they talked. Fr Prior assured the poor man that mediating with the archbishop he would have him reinstated as a priest in the vicariate. In the meantime Chavara accommodated him in Mannanam monastery, helped him to make a good retreat and confession. Eventually with all the formalities completed the archbishop received him.⁸⁷

The steward of Mannanam Monastery called Mathan unjustly appropriated some property of the monastery for which he was punished by the civil court. Later he filed a complaint against Chavara in the criminal court of Alapuzha. The case was dismissed as fraud. Chavara sincerely forgave Mathan, and made vain efforts to have him reconciled with the monastery. Still he continued generously to help Mathan in his financial needs. He then justly wants his followers also to emulate his example. So he exhorts them through his testament: “The monastery of Mannanam must render as much help as possible to the family of Mathan Manjooran Kalapurackal of the parish of Muttuchira. In so doing you will be imitating the disciples of Christ and setting a model.”⁸⁸

Chavara’s love and concern for the community of Sisters in Koonammavu was obvious. Fr Kuriakose Porukara says: “Just as Patriarch Jacob had a greater love for his younger son Benjamin, so he [Chavara] loved them [the Sisters] most deeply, and brought them up most carefully, providing for all their needs, even as a mother takes

⁸⁵Beccaro 2003: 8; SP: 26.

⁸⁶See above under the section entitled “Credibility as Credential.”

⁸⁷For details see Kochumuttom 2014: 199-203.

⁸⁸CWC IV (1990): 79; CSK IV (1986): 102.

care of her children."⁸⁹ His love for them indeed was both paternal and maternal, the former symbolized by the love of Patriarch Jacob and the latter by that of a mother. In fact especially as he advanced in age his parental feelings were deeper and deeper. "Thus in all things, small or big, spiritual or temporal, our prior, by the grace of God, did [for us] all that was necessary in spite of the old age and ill health."⁹⁰ His usual way of addressing his confreres was *sahodarankal* or *kūṭappirappukal* (those born of the same womb/mother). But in his testament he calls them *priyamuḷḷa-kuñṇunkal* (beloved little children)!⁹¹ In many of his letters to the Sisters he addresses them, too, likewise.⁹² In the letter to his parishioners of Kainakari he fondly calls them as *sahodarankal* (those born of the same womb) and *makkal* (children)!⁹³

12. Broadminded and Farsighted

It is needless to say that the superior is the point of unity in the community. In this regard, according to Chavara, a superior – major or local – should be concerned not merely about those under his care and about matters during his term of office. He should take interest also in matters related to other communities and to times ahead of his term. Let him be broadminded and farsighted as Chavara himself was. This is the ideal he sets forth in his testament:

It is the duty of the vicars of monasteries to foster genuine love and bond among all members of the congregation. No matter how numerous the monasteries are, all the members should be like children of the same family, born of the same mother and grown up by drinking her milk. Such sincere love should never diminish but keep ever increasing. Consider it to be my most important advice. In order that this love may never lose its fervour, the vicars should show more care in granting the requests of the vicars of other monasteries than in looking after the needs of their own respective monasteries. When they meet to discuss various issues they must remember to settle all the pending accounts. The vicars should ensure that the warmth of fraternal love is ever maintained. For it,

⁸⁹SP: 29.

⁹⁰CKC: 170-171; KMN: 175. This is an entry of April 1870. For more details see Kochumuttom 2014: 340-345.

⁹¹CWC IV (1990): 70; CSK IV (1986): 99.

⁹²For example, Letters VII,2; VII,6; VII,7; and VII,11 in CWC IV 1990) and CSK IV (1986).

⁹³ Letter IX,7 in CWC IV (1990): 117 and CSK IV (1986): 150.

even if there is nothing special to communicate, they should frequently correspond and keep mutually informed of the community matters and help in meeting the needs of one another.⁹⁴ The superiors should similarly be farsighted so that in their planning of matters they should take into account not only the present but also the future needs of the congregation and monasteries. The prior obviously was such a farsighted superior, and he has clearly stated his concerns about the future:

It is for the salvation of our Christian brethren that Almighty God has willed to found this congregation. However, due to the shortage of members we are not able to render the help they need in this regard. In order to remedy this situation you must request our archbishop for permission to establish yet another novitiate at Mannanam and to have missionary Fr Gerard as another novice master. If so, the two novice masters—Leopold and his brother Gerard—can do everything with mutual accord. That is, during the year they can by turn according to their convenience stay and look after the affairs in Mannanam and Koonammavu. Thus Koonammavu will be the novitiate for the monasteries to the north of Koonammavu, and Mannanam for those to the south of Koonammavu. God willing these two regions may be eventually developed as two provinces.

It is necessary that more monasteries and convents be opened in the south, that is, one monastery each to the east and west of Mannanam and some convents with boarding houses. All these could be easily achieved and managed if one of these missionaries is put in charge of the novitiate at Mannanam. There could be a monastery at Thathampally and another at Mavelikara and two others to the east and west of them. This will help us very much to render necessary and useful spiritual ministry to the faithful of the two vicariates of Varapuzha and Kollam. It is equally necessary to have two convents of Sisters, one at Mutholy and another at Mannanam, with boarding houses attached. A little effort and diligence on your part would suffice to accomplish all these things.⁹⁵

Chavara's farsightedness makes him look back to the past as well, and he wants his followers also to do so. He gratefully recalls the many people, especially the missionaries as well as the locals, who have

⁹⁴CWC IV (1990): 71; CSK IV (1986): 100.

⁹⁵CWC IV (1990): 71-72; CSK IV (1986): 100-101.

contributed to the foundation and growth of the congregation, and commends them to the prayer of the present and future generations.

13. Disciplined and Disciplinarian

The prior was *disciplined as well as a disciplinarian*. It is already obvious that he was a well-disciplined person so that his life was a silent exhortation for all. He also took care to enforce the rules among the community members, and not to tolerate laxity and indiscipline. He dutifully used to correct the erring members. For example, several times he sternly warned and corrected Fr Jacob Valiyara who in his early life was not leading an edifying life.⁹⁶ In his circulars to the members of the congregation⁹⁷ the prior strongly corrects them in matters related to religious discipline, practice of humility, obedience, charity, religious modesty, genuine piety, community life, poverty, penance, silence and recollection, familiarity with lay persons, and duties of religious vocation.

After mentioning the lapses in the communities he deplores: "A thing that is most saddening and ruining our monasteries is that now-a-days in our communities the members tend to see the superior as their subordinate, and themselves as his superiors...The superiors on their part feel compelled to give orders not in accordance with God's will and our rules, but considering the liking and interests of the members."⁹⁸ He then reminds the superiors of their serious responsibility to give the members timely corrections and directions, and not to relax the religious disciple. He further observes:

I feel the root of all the above mentioned evils is undue indulgence on the part of the superiors. They neither endeavour to root out the evil tendencies in the subordinates, nor to correct their mistakes and give punishments when necessary; instead, for reasons that are not honest before God they allow them to have their way; and when there are differences of opinion they allow the youngsters to carry on with their points of view. The youngsters, on their part, are not keen to have recourse to the superior even when they are not sure of their course of action. Let the superiors remember that they shall be responsible before God for the endless evils that result from their negligence. So let all the superiors take care that they shall not

⁹⁶CWC IV (1990): 125; CSK IV (1986): 158.

⁹⁷There are three such circulars published in CWC IV (1990): 60-69; CSK IV (1986): 88-98.

⁹⁸CWC IV (1990): 63; CSK IV (1986): 92.

be punished for the misbehaviour of the subordinates; that they shall not be found guilty of having ruined our congregation, which is the work of God, through their indulgence leading to lax practices and their reluctance in giving timely corrections. Therefore, let it be known to all that the indiscipline and evil tendencies shall not be tolerated, and that those who through their scandalous practices bring disgrace and disturbance to the community shall be duly and according to the rules punished.⁹⁹

14. Expertise and Care in Temporalities

Obviously the founding fathers had pretty good expertise in temporalities like real estate, agriculture, construction works, and money matters. Palackal first as secretary to the vicar apostolic and then as consultant to him was a great help in the administration of the vicariate's temporalities.¹⁰⁰ In the context of the search for the site for and the building of Mannanam monastery their insights about landed property and construction works were amazing. While selecting the land they insisted on certain criteria: it should be large, reasonably elevated, open and fertile, having a good source of water, and accessible by land and river.¹⁰¹ It was mostly Chavara who supervised the construction works in Mannanam. His practical wisdom and engineering skill were marvellous in the work of the press, the convent in Koonammavu and so on. While discussing the proposal for the monastery at Chethipuzha the prior gave in writing the specification that the land should have:

1. The land should be registered in the name of the common prior of the monasteries of Mannanam and other places.
2. The place should be sufficiently distant so that the noise of the market may not disturb the life in the monastery.
3. There should be a source of good water. There should be a river close by so that people can conveniently reach the place by boat.
4. The place should be sufficiently large with big trees around in order to moderate the heat. Besides the space for the construction of the monastery, there should be place also for gardens and leisurely walk.¹⁰²

⁹⁹CWC IV (1990): 65; CSK IV (1986): 94.

¹⁰⁰CWC I (1990): 62-63; CSK I (1986): 70-71.

¹⁰¹For details see CWC I (1990): 5ff.; CSK I (1986): 8ff.

¹⁰²The letter is reproduced in CWC IV: 89-90 and CSK IV (1986): 119-120.

The prior used to give instructions to the vicars of monasteries about property transactions, farming and so on.¹⁰³ In one of his letters to the Sisters he gives detailed directions regarding construction works and farming:

Make an earnest request to the mason to come on Friday, too, and complete the work. Let the Sister-procurator speak to them. Both the [wooden] granaries, the large one and the smaller one, have to be set on pillars built on a granite foundation so that termites may not eat [the wood and grains]. There should be a veranda [around the granaries]. Its floor should be beaten hard and plastered with cow-dung so that on it paddy or other grains can be collected and measured.

The soil at the ground around the coconut saplings inside and outside [the enclosure walls] must be tilled and the fibre-roots must be removed. Channels should be dug around them and packed with compost. Experts must be employed to clear the top of the young coconut-trees of dry leaves etc. Only when the base and the top of the coconut-trees are thus cleaned, they will yield abundant fruit. On the one hand it will be good for the trees, and on the other you will get plenty of firewood as well. Ask the procurator to do all this. Let her not worry about the money to pay the workers. Our task is only to arrange for the work to be done. God will give us money. The property is not ours, but God's. Our competence here is only to work.¹⁰⁴

15. Transparency and Accountability

In money matters the prior and other founders were utterly transparent and honest, and he kept detailed accounts. We have still with us the detailed records of almost all the money received and spent right from the day when the permission for setting up the monastery was obtained. On 18 June 1840, when they began living as a community in *bes-rauma* (Mannanam), they opened a common account as well of all incomes and expenses in detail.¹⁰⁵ The prior through his letters used to remind the local superiors of the duty of keeping proper

¹⁰³For example, see his letter to Fr Kuriakose Porukara in CWC IV (1990): 34-35; CSK (1986): 61-62.

¹⁰⁴CWC IV (1990): 81; CSK IV (1986): 111.

¹⁰⁵As statement to this effect in Chavara's hand, found in the diary of Fr Kuriakose Eliseus Porukara, is reproduced in CWC I (1990): 175-76; CSK I (1981): 208-209.

accounts. In his testament he says: "When you the superiors assemble periodically to discuss different matters, take care to settle your mutual financial accounts till that date."¹⁰⁶ He taught and strongly advised the Sisters, too, to maintain proper accounts. "You must be very accurate in writing the accounts," he writes to them, and then gives a set of model entries of items as well.¹⁰⁷

Chavara's moral sensitivity regarding money matters was remarkably deep. While the construction works of the convent in Koonammavu were going on, once they ran out of money. In order to meet an urgent need Chavara sent Fr Geevarghese Thoppil to parishes to appeal to the people for help. He returned with Rs 400 that he received as donations from different persons. With just half of that amount the need was met. "What could we do with the remaining Rs 200?" they enquired of the prior. With no hesitation he replied: "Return it immediately to the donors!"

There is still another incident that similarly bears testimony to the Fathers' sense of honesty in handling money. This too is related to the money they spent for the construction of the convent in Koonammavu. Chavara writes:

As we planned to construct the convent we had no money with us. But God inspired good people to contribute money. Thus we received as donations Rs 8000/- with which the work was completed. Apart from it, there was an amount of Rs 100/- which according to the conscience of the missionary Fr Leopold was not honest money. Hence we refused to use it for the construction works. Instead, with the archbishop's permission we distributed it among the poor as alms.¹⁰⁸

The accurate accounts that they maintained later on proved to be very helpful. For example, when eventually the Latin Rite and Syrian Rite Sisters were separated to form respectively the CTC and CMC Congregations, a dispute arose with regard to whose property was the convent in Koonammavu. It was resolved in favour of the Syrian CMC group because the accounts clearly showed that the amount Rs 8000/- that was spent for the construction works was contributed by the Syrian people and parishes.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶CWC IV (1990): 71; CSK IV (1986): 100.

¹⁰⁷CWC IV (1990): 83-84; CSK IV (1986): 113-114.

¹⁰⁸CWC I (1990): 115-116; CSK I (1981): 138.

¹⁰⁹CKC: 297.

16. Documentation

Chavara's insistence on making and keeping detailed records of everything is admirable. As a result we have got an almost exhaustive collection of reliable documents about his life and contributions, and the beginnings of the two congregations. When we consider the climatic hazards and poor storage facilities of those days, it is next to a miracle that most of the records have come down to us in a pretty good shape. We must really appreciate and be grateful to the past generations for the pains they have taken to preserve them. Ultimately the credit of course goes to the founder Chavara. He not only regularly noted down everything but also trained and instructed the members of both the congregations to do so. He wrote to the Sisters: "You must urge [the chronicler] Sr Anna to note down every detail. Overcoming laziness she must without fail record even things that may appear insignificant. After some time you will yourselves enjoy reading it."¹¹⁰ It is a matter of legitimate pride that all the local houses have kept up the practice of chronicle-writing and maintenance of documents, which certainly should be continued in a more scientific manner.

Chavara's *Nālāgamangal/The Chronicles*¹¹¹ is an excellent case of responsible and conscientious recording of events. The author is particular "to write only what I have personally seen and heard from credible persons."¹¹² While beginning to write about the rebel Kudakkachira he says:

I must write something about him [Kudakkachira] so that people may be aware of his character. He has especially been the cause of what I am going to describe. But here my heart and the hand that holds the quill tremble. For, though I will be writing only what I have heard and seen, it would affect his reputation. Some people may even read into my words more than what I intend. Still I feel obliged to write about him, because his mischievous work has caused spiritual harm to many people and is likely to cause more. My only intention is to warn my brethren against the great danger of being deprived of the protection of our blessed and beloved Mother, the Church of Rome. So I pray to my guardian angel to

¹¹⁰CWC IV (1990): 76; CSK IV (1986): 106.

¹¹¹This is published as the first volume of *Cāvara Accaṇṭe Sampūṇa Kṛtikal* (CSK) / *Complete Works of Chavara* (CWC).

¹¹²CWC I (1990): 53; CSK I (1981): 60.

keep me from committing the mistake of slipping to the left or right out of human weakness.¹¹³

The Chronicles has turned out to be a rare document of the history of the Church and society of the 19th century Kerala for which we should ever feel indebted to St Chavara. Let me repeat an observation I made elsewhere:

The events described [in *The Chronicles*] are not merely those pertaining to the new religious congregations but to the Church of Kerala at large, and are presented as well in the wider ecclesial perspective and that too with details concerning dates, places and persons. Therefore, the book is of unique value for the students of history. It gives a lot of information about the history of that period that is not available elsewhere... The author also quotes original documents which add to the authenticity of the book. Chavara's own personality, too, is clearly reflected in it: his sense of obedience and humility, zeal for the orthodox faith and unity of the Church, loyalty and attachment to the Holy See, prudence in judging persons and situations, ability in taking practical decisions, popularity and influence in the society, etc.¹¹⁴

17. Chavara's Portrait of an Ideal Superior

Chavara, even as he is uncompromising about the practice of obedience, expects the superiors to be humble and democratic in the manner of functioning while making decisions related to the community and individual members. Far from being authoritarian and unilateral they must involve the subjects in the process of decision making and thus promote among them responsible and creative obedience. Chavara has clearly spelt out a code of conduct for the superiors:

1. A good superior should consider himself as a servant of all others in the community. He must have as his model Jesus Christ who having washed His disciples' feet said: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:14).

The monastery and the community are not for the sake of the superior, but he is for their sake. Therefore, he must love them as his own children. As a loving mother is, so he must be more concerned about meeting their spiritual and bodily needs than

¹¹³CWC I: 154-155; CSK I (1981): 183-184.

¹¹⁴Kochumuttom 2014: 260.

his own. He should not let any of his religious to be sad even for a moment. God is not pleased with a service rendered in sadness. During the allotted times all must together recreate with religious moderation.

2. The superior is appointed by God to observe the rules as well as to enforce them among the members. He should not relax them. Many great religious congregations have perished because of the superiors' carelessness in this regard. On the contrary, the continuance of a congregation in its spiritual vigour and vitality will invariably depend on its superiors' care and vigilance.
3. The superior should not wait for the members to approach him with their needs. Instead, he should anticipate their needs and meet them. If so, they will be ever so happy and seek permission only for genuine needs.
4. While giving an order to the subjects, the superior must do it as if he is lovingly making a request of them. However, in case they refuse to respect such sweet and gentle words, he should not hesitate sternly to exercise his authority.
5. As the rules demand, the superior should be an example for others in all matters. His task is not a pleasant one, indeed. However, when he does it in a spirit of charity in accordance with God's will, He will render it a matter of delight.¹¹⁵

These are indeed the rules the Saint himself as a concerned superior faithfully observed so that his subjects considered it a privilege to live under him. As a matter of fact there is hardly any instance of people complaining about his way of functioning as a superior.

18. Chavara in His Own Eyes

Anybody going through the biography of Chavara will say that he was an ideal superior. One should be a pessimist to find any serious fault in him in the role of superior. But Chavara in his own eyes is full of failures! That is of course characteristic of the penitent saint that he honestly was. For example, in 1869 during the days when the 40-hour adoration of the Blessed Sacrament was going on in the Monastery Chapel, Koonammavu, he wrote to the Sisters, begging pardon for his lapses:

¹¹⁵Chavara gave these instructions in a letter he wrote to Fr Kuriakose Porukara who was the then vicar of Mannanam Monastery, and are reproduced in Valerian 1939: 373-374.

My dear children,... I am afraid my days are coming to an end. So I request you to pray for me to God the Father, especially during these days of the 40-hour adoration. Please pardon me for my bad examples, scandalous words, and disorderly behaviour. By my negligence I have caused scandals for the innocent little souls [in the boarding house] who are entrusted to my care, and also for you the brides of the Lord. Please pray to God that He may kindly forgive them and spare me the terrible punishment I justly deserve. Intercede with Him that I may spend the rest of my life doing always His will in all things and finally die a happy death.¹¹⁶

Another clear instance is the words of apology included in his testament, written in August 1870, just six months before his death:

Finally, I beg pardon of the Very Rev. Vicar Apostolic, the Very Rev. Provincial Delegate and the Very Rev. Missionary Fathers, and all the members of the monasteries. I beg of them before God to pardon me for all my shortcomings in fulfilling the duties and services that I owed each of them. Again, I entreat my confreres to pray for me. I professed my religious vows as the first member of our congregation; and I was made the first prior. But I have not fulfilled to satisfaction my obligation in observing our *Constitutions* and enforcing the same. I did not give you good example. You must kindly forgive the scandals I have given you. Instead of following my bad example, by living still more zealously you must make reparation for my failures, too.¹¹⁷

We may rightly conclude that Saint Chavara practised in spirit and letter the advice of the Lord: "When you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are just unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Lk 17:10). Still more, he in all sincerity sang and continues to sing with Mother Mary: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden... he who is mighty has done great things in me, and holy is his name" (Lk 1:47-49).

¹¹⁶CWC IV (1990): 77; CSK (1986): 107.

¹¹⁷CWC IV (1990): 74; CSK (1986): 103.