

BOOK REVIEW

Thomas Kochumuttom CMI, *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (Theological Studies on Saint Chavara I), Kochi: Chavara Central Secretariat & Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 560 029, India, 2017, pp. xxxi + 431, ISBN: 978-93-8464-76-4, Price Rs. 360; US \$ 30.

Thomas Kochumuttom's book *Spirituality of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, is a sequel to his earlier one titled *Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara* (2014) in which the life story of the saint is dealt with, whereas the present one concentrates on discovering what may be called a Chavara spirituality by carefully examining more or less the same data of the life story but from a spiritual perspective. Moreover, this study is broader in scope with theological reflections, as it brings in some fresh data of his life bearing on his spirituality. Referring to sources like the different biographies of the saint, his writings, letters, prayers, circulars and relevant ecclesiastical documents, the author has brought to light various facets of the saint's spirituality.

The historical context, events and needs of the time play a great role in shaping the life-vision, attitude and also the spiritual outlook of a person. St Chavara who belonged to the Syro-Malabar Church of the 19th century, was part and parcel of the struggles and dreams of the Church and society of his time. God in his providence made use of these harsh realities in order to mould in the course of the century the magnificent image of Chavara the Saint, and Kochumuttom, the author has vividly captured this enchanting image and presented it beautifully in his present work (Foreword, p. xiii).

Apart from dexterously knitting together the different facets of the Saint's spirituality, the author offers also theological reflections on Christian spirituality, particularly of consecrated persons, priests and religious. Kochumuttom has based these reflections not only on the words, deeds and experiences of Chavara, but also on verses and texts from the Bible and from Scriptures of other religions, wherever relevant. His being a specialist in other major Indian religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, his long years of life in solitude and recollection at the Jeevan Dhara Ashram, Jaiharikhal, in the

Himalayas, as well as his strenuous study of Chavara's life and works, jointly make these reflections truly relevant and worth considering.

According to the author, the saint's spirituality may be identified in terms of a few virtues, events and incidents that stand out in his life and in his writings. We shall indicate some of them here, giving references to the pages of this volume, without going to their sources, quoted by the author. The saint's most outstanding virtue is identified as his love for the Mother Church. To establish this point, in chapters 2, 3 and 4, he discusses Chavara's ecclesial concerns, his undertakings for the renewal of the Church, his historic intervention in defence of Catholic unity, his many innovative contributions for the good of the Church and society at large. In discussing these events and incidents, the author re-iterates that "they were selfless, having in mind nothing but the benefit of the Church and society. Even in founding the two religious congregations, one for men and the other for women, their primary objective was to serve the Church and society." (p. xvii).

Another very important aspect of the spirituality of Chavara is presented as his community spirit. In order to affirm this point, the author, in chapters 5, 6 and 7, discusses that by establishing an institute for consecrated life, what was added to the life of Chavara and other founders was the community aspect. Prior to this, they were already practising the 'evangelical spirit' of poverty, chastity and obedience, though not in terms of professed vows. But now, that is, after the establishment of the institute, they began to live, work and pray together as a community, having no private possessions and programmes, but everything in common. The practice of real Christian love in its fullest sense, began to flourish, not merely among the community members, but extended to all people irrespective of caste, creed and class.

In the next few chapters the author outlines the contours of the saint's spirituality centred on his religious life. Thus in chapter 9, he strives to set forth the "Ideals of Religious Life", envisaged by Chavara and others, by analysing the terminology, used by them to describe their thoughts about the new way of life now in progress. One of the original expressions in this regard was "withdrawn life", uttered first by Thomas Porukara (p. 81). Here the word used for religious life, namely *vana-vāsa*, need not be taken in the literal sense, which is clear from the subsequent words and deeds of Porukara. What was really meant was "a life withdrawn from the worldly affairs so that he could serve God and his people without distraction. In those days the word

'*vana-vāsa*' might have been a common expression among the locals including Christians for religious life." (p. 82).

Another mutually complementary double expression referring to the kind of their spirituality is *darśana-viṭu* (a house of vision) and *tapasu-bhavanam* (house of austerity). According to Kochumuttom, the first expression means, "The religious should be people of clear vision (*darśana*) about life and the principles of life, regarding what to do and what not to do. They should be equally persons of austerity and ascetical practices (*tapas*), leading a life that is simple and austere." (p. 84).

Still another expression, we get, throwing light onto the spirituality of consecrated life of saint Chavara and companions is *otungi-pārkkal*, literally meaning a withdrawn life, which in effect however would mean *a life in solitude*, keeping distance from the noisy and disturbing world, so that contact with God and prayerfulness becomes easier (p. 86).

Another ingredient of their spiritual life was 'involvement in the world' for the sake of the 'common good'. Bp. Stabilini, in his reply to the request of the founding fathers for permission to lead a withdrawn life, reminds them that such a life in solitude and silence can include also availability for pastoral ministry and other apostolates. Thus emerges the idea of a religious house in the midst of the people, *a monastery from which not only the members but others also may profit* (p. 88). In this development of the original charisma we find that Chavara lived and bequeathed to posterity the twin spirituality of contemplation and prophetic action.

Bes-rauma (house on hilltop) is yet another Syriac word, which they chose to christen the first monastery that was set up on mount Mannanam. It is indeed a significant expression pointing to the "elevated nature of the life that those in the monastery should live so that they become a symbol of Christian life for all others to look at and feel inspired and challenged." (p. 92). They were to be a city built on a hill that cannot be hid and a lighted lamp placed on a stand so that it gives light to all in the house (Mt 5:14-16).

In chapters 10 to 16, Kochumuttom discusses at length how Chavara and companions perceived and lived the evangelical counsels of chastity (*kanni-sukham/brama-cārityam*), poverty (*agatitvam*) and obedience (*col-vili*). The three counsels "refer respectively to bridal mysticism, childlike trust in God and complete dependence on his providence, and unconditional surrender to his will, made known mostly through human agents." (Preface, p. xviii). Later, in chapters 10

and 11, consecrated virginity, differentiated as priestly celibacy, consecrated widowhood and consecrated virginity as such (*brahmacharya*) is discussed at length, noting that "Among the three religious vows, the most basic one certainly is that of chastity in the sense that the other two spontaneously arise from it."

Kochumuttom describes clearly the "dynamic, steadfast and fruitful" nature of the vow of chastity, precisely because vow of consecrated virginity is a question of love-relationship between Jesus and the religious, man or woman and because love is a dynamic reality in the sense that it undergoes a gradual process of growth and maturing, until it is finally all pure and totally selfless (pp. 124f). Similarly, he describes the steadfast and enduring nature of love in consecrated virginity to be modelled on Yahweh's love for the people of God in the Old Testament. In this connection, the story of Anastasia's martyrdom is presented to illustrate that the consecrated virgin's love for her divine Spouse survives even death (pp. 126f).

Kochumuttom then explains the third character of consecrated virginity, namely fruitfulness. Virginity does not mean barrenness, inability to become a parent. Presenting the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, he argues that, because of her virginity she also became mother, greatest of all mothers, the Mother of God. If the vocation of a parent is to bring new life into the world, Mother Mary by her virginity brought life not of any particular individual, but the author of life itself, Jesus Christ. In a similar way, every consecrated person, by virtue of the vow of chastity must become a channel of God's love to flow to the people (pp. 130f). In this connection Kochumuttom also offers some relevant reflections on the signs of celibate life, based on the life experience of the late Swami Sadanand CMI, and holds that "solitude, silence, discipline, austerities, prayer and meditation, these indeed are the signs of celibacy for the people in India (p. 136).

In the next chapters 12, 13 and 14, Kochumuttom discusses at length Chavara's understanding and practice of the vow of poverty. He dwells meaningfully on the significant expression "*agatitvam*" (having no means to survive) to bring out the profundity of the kind of poverty they had practised. It means not only that they did not have any private or personal possessions, having owned everything in common, but also that even with regard to things in use, nobody would say "my pen" or "my umbrella" etc., but "the pen I use", "the room I use" etc. Moreover, Chavara, from the beginning of his seminary life, had adopted the motto, "The Lord is my portion" (Ps 16:5), which implied complete detachment from all that is not God. It

would appear that Providence offered him a chance to test his resolve when a deadly epidemic took away his parents and his only brother. By the grace of God he persevered in his resolve, and entrusting his family matters to his married sister, he renounced the family inheritance and pursued his priestly studies. We are at a loss to understand what made him to take these extreme steps in the practice of poverty, as we know that the idea of a professed religious life was nowhere in sight yet.

Quoting excerpts from the *Testament* of the saint, written to the members of the congregation towards the end of his life (1870), Kochumuttom affirms that these excerpts bear testimony to Chavara's understanding of religious obedience as the unconditional and total surrender of one's will to God's which in turn is the identity mark of a consecrated person (p. 96). In the next two chapters 15 and 16, Kochumuttom elaborates on this point under two significant headings "Obedience through Suffering" and "Obedience: the only Mark of a Religious". With regard to the former title, the author reminds us of the unfortunate incidents during the tenure of Archbishop Francis Xavier, the Vicar Apostolic who, under the instigation of Ezhunnuttikar, the so-called 'high class' families, became suspicious about the monastery project and decided to block its construction, by ordering a sudden transfer of Chavara from Mannanam as the Vicar of Pallipuram parish, and appointment of Porukara as the vicar of some parishes in the diocese of Kollam etc. In the case of Chavara's transfer, though the matter was presented to the Archbishop by Chavara for his kind re-consideration so that the construction works may smoothly continue, he turned it down and rebuked Chavara who then "with fear and trembling withdrew and at once obeyed the order, taking charge of the Pallipuram parish" (p. 180). As for the appointment of Porukara, "after discussing the matter in detail [with *malpan* Palackal who was ill] 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 *malpan* agreed and Porukara left for Kollam in tears." (p. 180). These two incidents caused untold suffering to the founding fathers, which were indeed test cases to prove the quality of their obedience, because later the Archbishop relented and took corrective measures to help construction of the monastery.

Moreover, the saint's encounter with the Archbishop with a request to relieve him free for the construction work and to appoint in his place Fr Varkey, a new priest of the same Pallipuram parish

brought him great shame, pain and suffering at the hands of the Archbishop, although the high quality of his obedience here again brought matters to a happy finale (p. 183).

More crucial tests and trials against obedience were on their way: The most difficult of them was the canonical approval of consecrated life in the tradition of the Malabar Church, which was delayed indefinitely for almost a quarter of a century (1831-1855). The Vicars apostolic came and went one after another – Maurilius Stabilini, Francis Xavier, Ludovic Martini and Bernardine Baccinelli. All of them were happy with the community, but would not readily give canonical approval, probably because they were prejudiced against the depth and rootedness in matters of faith and morals of the Syrian Rite people, including saint Chavara, as it would appear from some of the official letters, written to Rome by the Archbishop and missionaries in connection with an enquiry from Rome regarding the possibility of the prior's consecration as bishop. Certainly it could 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 and respect for ecclesiastical authorities they patiently waited for God's time to redress their complaints and realize their dreams.

Finally, after a long waiting, when the approval came, the Archbishop unilaterally imposed on them the rule of the OCD Order, totally rejecting their request to adapt the rule to their Syrian and local traditions on the one hand, and not to destroy the original spirit and charism of the new congregation. This action was again a denial of their basic rights and disregard for their ecclesial identity. But they, under the guidance of Chavara, did not react, but decided to cooperate, in spite of the unfortunate incident of the withdrawal of 11 out of 22 candidates who were getting ready for professed life for fear of their inability to observe the unduly strict rule. Chavara gracefully bore the pain of the loss of so many members and the disgustingly cold response of the Archbishop, who said: "Only those of good will and determination need to be admitted. Don't worry about the dropouts. I shall pray for the remaining few." (p. 186).

To cap it all, now comes the senseless action of the OCD Superior General, who, most probably with the connivance of Baccinelli, the Vicar Apostolic, highhandedly, without any consultation, affiliated the new congregation as their Third Order (TOCD), thereby destroying its identity as an indigenous institute, depriving the saint of his position as prior general, thus throwing to the winds its autonomous character.

Surely many members must have risen protesting against the entire episode. But Chavara, trusting that in the course of time, God will put things right, kept his cool, and pacified his brethren. He was prudent, taking the whole situation into account, hence tolerant, forgiving and generously obedient (pp. 183-188).

In chapter 16, the author continues discussing Chavara's obedience under the title "The only Mark of a Religious". The bitter experiences and harsh treatment at the hands of persons in authority must have led him to conclude that obedience is the only mark of a religious. The author, while explaining the kind of "obedience as if one does not have one's own eyes and ears", advocated by Chavara, tries to situate it in the present-day understanding of what is called "responsible and creative versus blind obedience." While concluding the discussion, the author, interpreting the mind of the saint adds that, far from being authoritarian, the superiors must involve the subjects in the decision-making process, promoting among them responsible and creative obedience. In support of this, he quotes Chavara's code of conduct for superiors in a letter written to Fr. Kuriakose Porukara, vicar of Mannanam monastery (pp. 189-208).

In chapters 17, 18 and 19 the author discusses the theme of prayer and prayerfulness, austerity and other virtues practised by saint Chavara and other founding members of the community. In this connection, Chavara's mystical leanings and insights as well as some kind of mystical phenomena (pp. 227-229) reported by some eyewitnesses are also brought out. Chavara's intense devotion to the Eucharistic Lord is the theme of chapter 20, which the author has rightly titled as "Apostle of the Holy Eucharist". The author has devoted the next 4 chapters 21, 22, 23 and 24 to discuss Chavara's great devotion to Mother Mary, considering himself as Mariadas (servant of Mary), his conviction that she is an essential part of the Christian community and life as portrayed in his *Ātmānutāpam* (pp. 286f). The author presents Chavara in chapters 25, 26, 27 as a grateful as well as penitent saint, and deal with his instructions about common pitfalls in the life of the religious and priests; there are also practical reflections on confession and spiritual direction.

In the final three chapters 28, 29 and 30, the author by way of concluding the whole discussion, briefly mentions that the characteristic mark of Chavara's spirituality is his ability to be a contemplative in action (*karma-yogi*). This great ideal of spirituality is the key concept in Bhagavad-Gita, a spiritual classic of India, which Chavara, true to his rootedness in Indian, Carmelite and Eastern

traditions of spirituality realized in his person. The rest of chapter 28 is a summing up of what made him an 'Active Chavara' and a 'Contemplative Chavara'. Chapter 29 succinctly puts before us the story of the smooth transition from the initial Dominican ideal of "*contemplata predicare*" (to preach what is experienced in meditation) to becoming "Servants of Mary Immaculate of Carmel", when they made their profession of vows in 1855. Kochumuttom notes "that the change from being Dominicans to Carmelites was rather natural and inevitable." (p. 378). In the final chapter, he gathers up some "Practicalities of Chavara Spirituality."

While focussing on the spirituality of Chavara, the author has also considered that of the other founders and the founding communities of both CMI and CMC congregations. Hence, this work will be of interest to members of both the communities. Moreover, it is common knowledge that the Trio - Frs Palackal, Porukara and Chavara, are the progenitors of indigenous religious life in Kerala by founding the twin congregations for men and women, which in turn have inspired the emergence of so many congregations, especially women congregations after them. Therefore the present work of the author is very likely to be beneficial for them also, and even for all those who are committed to consecrated life, precisely because this study outlines broadly the contours of consecrated life as such.

In the Preface, Kochumuttom has already apologized, "I am aware of some repetitions of texts and narratives of events..." (p. xx), giving two reasons for it, one, that the same data when "viewed from different angles would yield different nuances of meaning relevant to different aspects of spiritual life", and two, that he wanted to spare the reader turning pages back and forth. Though the reasons may be valid, in point of fact, appearance of the same data (event/incident/story) again and again not only makes the book more voluminous, but also reduces its value for the reader who is already acquainted with such data. Similarly, while the saint's spirit and practice of poverty has been beautifully brought out, taking his expression *agatitoam* (having no means of survival) and his motto, "Lord is my portion" (Ps 16:5), the attempt to connect the motto also to the vow of chastity to make it the most basic of all the evangelical counsels, could have been avoided, because the connection seems to be too farfetched.

These are only some minor drawbacks, as indicated above which are not at all significant. The author's study has certainly brought out the predominant characteristics of the spirituality of Chavara. Focussing mainly on the important features of religious life. He has

shown that 'spousal love' blooms in the vow of chastity, the vow of poverty is an experience that the "Lord is my portion", and that 'obedience is the only mark of a religious'. Dwelling deeply on the original (Malayalam) words and expressions of Chavara, the author has highlighted the fundamentals of religious life, especially in the Indian context - solitude, silence, austerity, community life, prayer and prayerfulness, custody of senses, etc. Moreover, he has picked up Chavara's own words to qualify religious house as 'abode of clear vision' (*darsana-vidu*), 'house of penance' (*tapasu-bhavanam*), 'mirror of virtuous life' (*punnyattinte kannādi*) and a 'house built on hilltop' (*bes-rauma*). The author has also discovered Chavara as a person with deep mystical experiences. His unflinching love for the Church, heroic charity, unwavering trust in God's providence, filial devotion to Mother Mary, intense devotion to the Eucharistic Lord are the features of the saint's spirituality, well presented in this volume. The work has been a valuable contribution to the field of spiritual theology and to the promotion of spirituality of consecrated life at large.

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